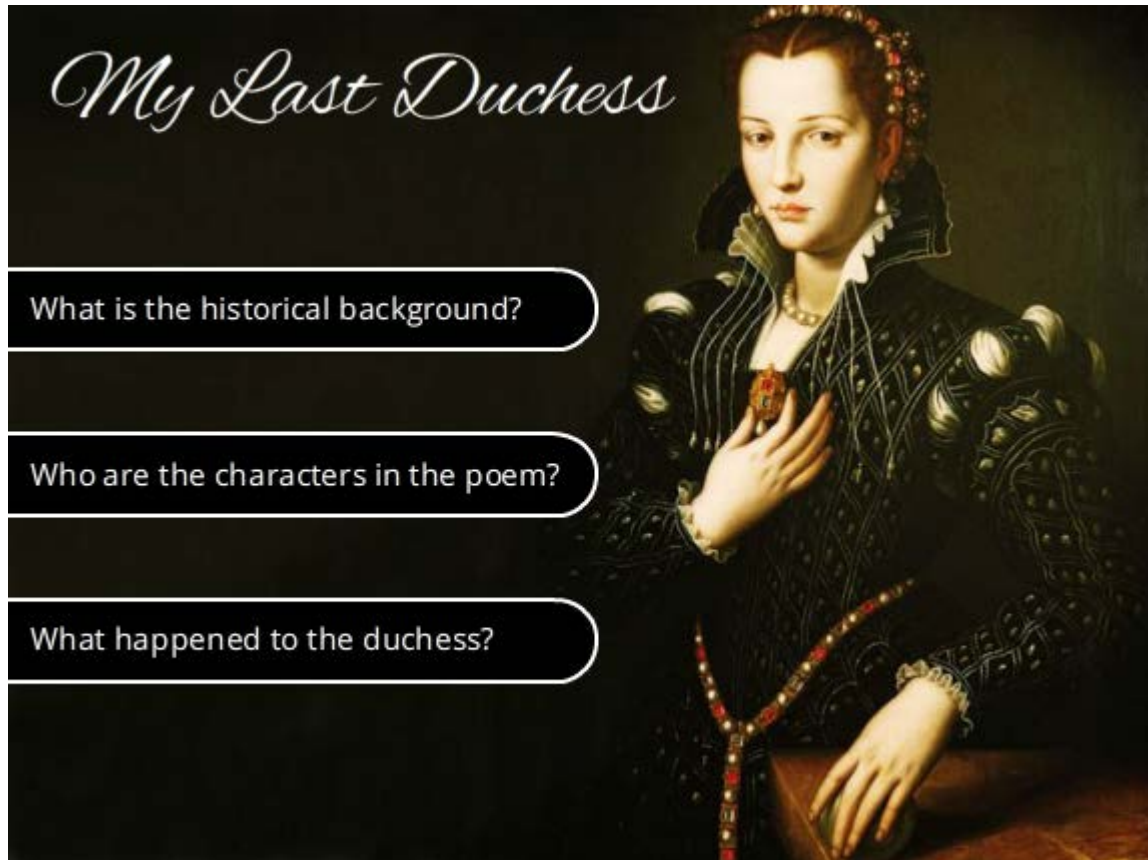


## Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society

### Topic 4 Content: "My Last Duchess" Analysis

#### Introduction



*My Last Duchess*

What is the historical background?

Who are the characters in the poem?

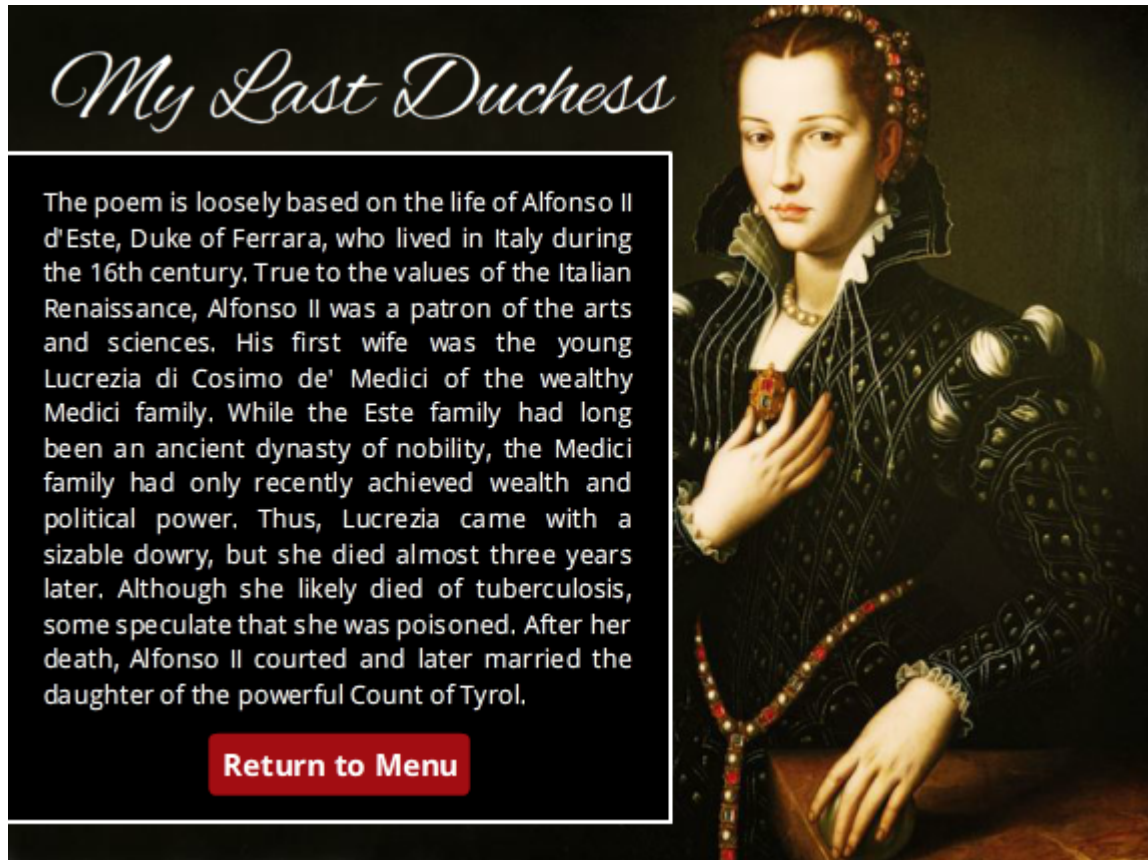
What happened to the duchess?

The poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning is a compelling example of dramatic monologue. The speaker of Browning's poem is talking aloud to a silent listener, creating the effect of listening to a one-sided conversation. The speaker of this poem almost seems to be thinking aloud, revealing some of his inner thoughts and emotions not only to his silent listener but also to you as the reader. Learn more about this poem by clicking each of the questions from the menu provided.

## Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society

### Topic 4 Content: "My Last Duchess" Analysis

#### What Is the Historical Background?



*My Last Duchess*

The poem is loosely based on the life of Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who lived in Italy during the 16th century. True to the values of the Italian Renaissance, Alfonso II was a patron of the arts and sciences. His first wife was the young Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici of the wealthy Medici family. While the Este family had long been an ancient dynasty of nobility, the Medici family had only recently achieved wealth and political power. Thus, Lucrezia came with a sizable dowry, but she died almost three years later. Although she likely died of tuberculosis, some speculate that she was poisoned. After her death, Alfonso II courted and later married the daughter of the powerful Count of Tyrol.

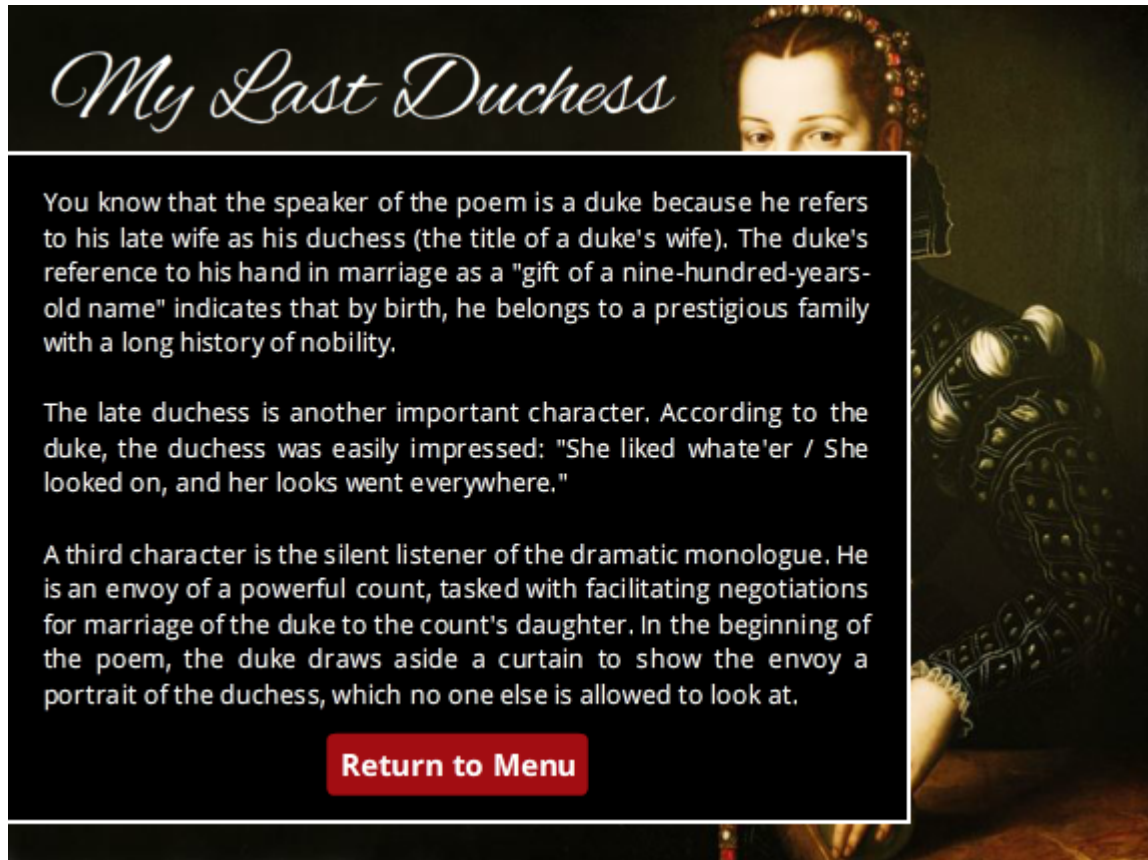
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## Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society

### Topic 4 Content: "My Last Duchess" Analysis

#### Who Are the Characters in the Poem?



*My Last Duchess*

You know that the speaker of the poem is a duke because he refers to his late wife as his duchess (the title of a duke's wife). The duke's reference to his hand in marriage as a "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name" indicates that by birth, he belongs to a prestigious family with a long history of nobility.

The late duchess is another important character. According to the duke, the duchess was easily impressed: "She liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere."

A third character is the silent listener of the dramatic monologue. He is an envoy of a powerful count, tasked with facilitating negotiations for marriage of the duke to the count's daughter. In the beginning of the poem, the duke draws aside a curtain to show the envoy a portrait of the duchess, which no one else is allowed to look at.

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## Module 7: Balancing the Individual and Society

### Topic 4 Content: "My Last Duchess" Analysis

#### What Happened to the Duchess?



*My Last Duchess*

As the duke and the count's envoy admire the portrait, the duke reveals that the late duchess not only smiled at her husband, but she smiled at everyone else, too. The duke never directly states what happened to the duchess, but you as the reader, along with the envoy, can infer that the duke was responsible for ordering her death from his words "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." What would you be thinking or feeling if you were the count's envoy silently listening to the duke? What motive does the duke have for hiding exactly what happened to the late duchess?

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