

'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning

1. Spend some time researching aspects of Italian Renaissance society e.g. who the most powerful art patrons were, corruption in the law and Church, popular types of art, famous families such as the Borgias and the Medicis.
2. Look at the title of the poem. What can you find out from the three words chosen by Browning?
3. Look at the rhyme scheme and discuss the reasons for Browning's choice.
4. What do Browning's choice of narrative perspective and use of the dramatic monologue show?
5. The content of the poem begins with a description of the painting. It is 'painted on the wall'. What do these words imply about the time the poem is set in?

Note: Artists typically carried out numerous detailed sketches of their subjects in preparation for painting. These sketches were called 'cartoons'. Once completed, the wall on which the painting was to be displayed was plastered. The cartoon was outlined on to the wet plaster and the painting was completed in one day, causing the paint to be absorbed by the plaster. The two compounds would dry within a day, with the painting becoming part of the wall. It is therefore the drawing, rather than the painting which takes most time.

6. The second line explains the Duchess is dead. Discuss how she was entrapped in the plaster.
7. Time is referred to in line 4: 'Fra Pandolf's hands/Worked busily a day' which reinforces the speed with which the artist had to work, but undermines the Duke's claims to jealousy. Find examples of the things that have raised the Duke's jealousy.
8. Enumerate all the gifts given to the Duchess, and say who gave these gifts.
9. These gifts give an insight into the character of the Duchess. How do people feel about her, and how does she respond to their gifts?
10. At line 32, the Duke refers to his gift to his wife. What is his complaint regarding the way she accepted it?
11. Analyse the Duke's complaints about his wife, and work out whether they are well-founded.
12. What can be inferred about the way he spoke to his wife? Look at words such as 'trifling', 'disgusts', 'such a one'.

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- 13.** Find other examples where the Duke's tone of voice is apparent. How does Browning vary the tone of voice to suit the Duke's purpose and mood? Where do these variations occur?
- 14.** As his mood changes, the Duke seeks to entrap his wife, by blaming her and seeking to modify her behaviour. Identify where and how he does this.
- 15.** Lines 46–7 show the effect of the Duke's words had on the behaviour of his wife, and are immediately followed by the statement, 'There she stands as if alive.' Examine the tone of voice in which these words are spoken, and comment on what they show about the Duke's feelings towards his last Duchess.
- 16.** How does the Duke talk about the next Duchess? Identify the aspects of his next marriage which interest him, and any areas which he does not enquire about. What do the omissions indicate about his feelings towards his future wife?
- 17.** Use your research into Italian Renaissance life to find probable reasons to explain how the Duke can get away with his behaviour towards his wife/wives, and why he encounters no opposition from the Count or legal processes.
- 18.** The use of the word 'dowry' in line 51 is particularly revealing about the attitude of the Duke and Italian society towards women. Find an accurate definition of the word. Which societies use the dowry, and what does it indicate about the status of women?
- 19.** The Duke refers to his works of art by the names of the artists. What does this reveal about his true attitude to marriage and art?