


# 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning



## Learning objectives:

- **AO1:** respond to texts critically and imaginatively, select and evaluate textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.
- **AO2:** explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

## Pre-reading

 Read the title, 'My Last Duchess'. What do the words 'my' and 'last' imply? Consider **both words** from as many possible angles as you can.

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## Did you know?

 The poem is written in **iambic pentameter**. This means that there are five feet in each line. Each foot contains two syllables. Traditionally, iambic pentameter is written in the following pattern of **unstressed** and **stressed** syllables.

da	<b>dum</b>	da	<b>dum</b>	da	<b>dum</b>	da	<b>dum</b>	da	<b>dum</b>
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 Iambic pentameter often follows the **natural rhythm of speech**, a little like a **heartbeat**. If we apply this to pattern to Browning's opening line, it would be as follows.

That's **my** last **duch**<sup>ess</sup> **paint**<sup>ed</sup> **on** the **wall**


 Try reading it aloud a few times, sticking closely to the pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables as marked above.


**?** Does the above **rhythm sound natural**? Does it seem to capture the **meaning** of the words in the line?

## Reading for meaning

 What you should have decided is that the traditional pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables in the above line of iambic pentameter did not really sound natural. Also, it didn't really seem to capture the meaning of the words in the line.

## So, what's going on?

 What this means is that poets often played with the form of the iambic line. Though they tend to stick to the same basic pattern, they allowed themselves, and therefore their readers, some freedom in the reading of the lines.

 Try reading the line yourself. Make a note of possible alternative patterns of unstressed and stressed syllables. As you do this, think about:

- the natural rhythms of speech;
- the meaning of the words in the line.

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### **PAIR**

Share your ideas with a partner. Agree on the best way to deliver the line aloud.

### **IMPORTANT**


Some of the lines in the poem **DO** sound best when the traditional stress pattern of iambic pentameter is followed.

## What is the poem about?

 The poem is a **dramatic monologue**. This means the poem is written in the **voice** of a character, a male narrator - an imaginary Italian Duke.


**When?** Browning wrote the poem in 1842. However, it seems likely that his idea for the poem was based on Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, whose first wife died after three years of marriage in 1561. The subject matter of the poem – the ‘marriage market’ - would have ensured that the poem was topical in 1850s Britain.

**What?** The Duke now wants to marry the Count’s daughter. He is discussing this with the Count’s representative. As he does so, he shows his guest around his palace. During the conversation and tour, he reveals a portrait of his previous wife – his ‘last duchess’.

 Read or listen to a copy of the poem.

## First impressions

 On your own, read the poem again. What are your first impressions?

Make a note of your ideas. 

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## **The Duchess**

**“... She had / A heart – how shall  
I say? – too soon made glad.”**

**“... spot / Of joy ...”**

**“Sir, ‘twas all one!”**

**“ ... spot of joy.”**

**“... all and each / Would draw  
from her alike the approving  
speech, / Or blush, ...”**




# The Duchess

 There are a number of **word sets** and / or **phrases** within the poem.

Work in small groups to collate evidence linked to the following areas:

- **The Duchess' beauty:** There is considerable evidence within the poem to suggest that the Duchess was beautiful, and that the Duke loved and admired her for this. Look for descriptions of her physical appearance. Identify the one aspect of her physical appearance that causes him annoyance?
- **The Duchess - alive or dead:** The poem is extremely ambiguous about the Duchess' fate. Is she alive or dead? Consider the tense of verbs at certain points in the poem. Did the Duke have her murdered?
- **The Duchess as art:** Calder and Goodman have stated: "... the Duchess's translation into valuable 'art' confirms her status as a possessed 'object'." This will also link to:
- **Looking:** There are many references to, or words associated with, looking.
- **Uncertainty:** The Duke reveals uncertainty - with regard to himself and his wife - on a number of occasions within the monologue.

# Fra Pandolf

 The artist who painted the fresco of the Duchess was called Fra Pandolf. The Duke seems particularly jealous and angered by the possible relationship that developed between the artist and the Duchess. What is the Duke's attitude to Fra Pandolf? Look at:

- lines 3 – 4;
- lines 5 – 7;
- lines 15 – 21.

**“ ... This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.”**

## The Duke

? Initial readings of the poem reveal the Duke's character in an extremely negative light, and, to an extent, as one-dimensional. However, as you may recall from earlier, the freedom of Browning's **iambic pentameter** does allow many different emphases and, therefore, many **different interpretations** of his character. Further, the **content (the diction)** of the lines also hint at **different aspects** of his character.

“That’s my last duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were  
alive.”

“I call / That piece a wonder, now.”

“Sir, ‘twas not / Her husband’s presence only, called that spot / Of joy  
into the Duchess’ cheek”

“she liked whate’er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.”

“Who’d stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?”

“ – as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With  
anybody’s gift.”

“ ... and I choose / Never to stoop.”

“Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene’er I passed her;”

“ ... but who passed without / Much the same smile?”

“ ... This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.”

“There she stands / As if alive.”

🗨️ Work in small groups to prepare a number of readings of the above quotations. For each quote, try to present at least **three** different **interpretations** and **aspects** of the Duke’s character. Take it in turns to present your work to the rest of the class.



# The Duke



✂ Read and then cut out the following statements about the Duke.

❓ Work in pairs to try and rank the statements. Place the most appropriate at the top and the least appropriate at the bottom. You might decide to give some statements equal weighting.

✍ Together, select ten statements that you feel really capture the character of the Duke within the poem. Find a quotation to support each of the ten statements.

🗣 Team up with another pair. Take it in turns to explain and prove your choices.

The Duke was jealous and angry about his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf.

The Duke was jealous and angry about his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf, and therefore, he had her murdered.

The Duke was jealous and angry about his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf, and therefore, he had them both murdered.

The Duke was saddened by his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf.

The Duke was saddened by his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf, and he had her murdered.

The Duke was saddened by his wife's relationship with the artist, Fra Pandolf, and he had them both murdered.

The Duke loved his wife dearly.

The Duke loathed his wife and resents even the memory of her.

The Duke misses his wife.

The Duke views his wife as an object, a piece of art, something he owns.

The Duchess died and the Duke is still in mourning.

The Duke is furious because the Duchess left him and ran away with the artist, Fra Pandolf.

The Duke is sad because the Duchess left him and ran away with the artist, Fra Pandolf.

The Duke loves his wife but loathes the artist, Fra Pandolf.

The Duke loves art but Fra Pandolf's intimate fresco of his wife has soured his enjoyment.

The Duke uses art in an attempt to control the uncontrollable within his own life – particularly his wife, whose smile and image he now has complete command over.

The Duke's jealousy and anger was completely unjustified and unfounded but this is something that he's come to understand – too late.

Instead of discussing his concerns with his wife, the Duke ordered her to stop her behaviour. Instead of obeying him, she left him.

Instead of discussing his concerns with his wife, the Duke has her (and perhaps Fra Pandolf?) imprisoned.

The Duke flaunts his taste in art.

During his monologue, the Duke feels that he has revealed too much information to the Count's envoy and quickly changes the subject.

During his monologue, the Duke feels that he has been too open with his feelings to the Count's envoy - and quickly changes the subject.

The Duke feels that his status puts him above having to discuss his concerns.

The Duke only feels secure if he has complete control.


The Duke becomes emotional during this viewing of the fresco.


The Duke is adamant that his next wife will have to be in his complete control.

The only thing of importance to the Duke is his own name and status.

The Duke's jealousies were often petty and ridiculous.


# The Duke paints a picture – of himself


 As he discusses his wife, the Duke also reveals a lot about **himself**. This is true throughout the poem. However, in **lines 32 – 43** the Duke talks about himself directly. Read the lines carefully.

 Discuss the following questions in small groups. Feed back your ideas to your teacher and the rest of the class.

- ➔ What does the Duke reveal about himself?
- ➔ What aspects of his personality are revealed in this section of the poem?
- ➔ The Duke imagines an example line of dialogue he has spoken to his wife. What does this reveal? How would he speak these lines?
- ➔ There is some movement in this section of the poem from first to second person narration. Why is this significant?

# Putting words in Fra Pandolf's mouth

 In **lines 15 – 19**, the Duke speaks what he imagines Fra Pandolf has said to his wife, the Duchess, during the sitting for the fresco. Read the lines carefully.

 Discuss the following questions in small groups. Feed back your ideas to your teacher and the rest of the class.

- ➔ Which words make it clear that the Duke is guessing at what might have happened (or not) between the Duchess and Fra Pandolf?
- ➔ What is significant about the two lines of dialogue that the Duke gives Fra Pandolf. Consider the tone and content. How would the Duke speak these lines?
- ➔ What do you make of the use of the possessive pronoun 'her' in this section?

## Let's take a closer look

The portrait of the last Duchess is behind a curtain. The Duke states in lines 9-10: **“(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn from you but I)”**

- Does the Duke let many people see his last Duchess?
- Why or why not?
- What does that tell us about the Duke?
- Why is this in brackets?

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What do the following lines imply?

**“Sir, ’twas not  
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek”**

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When people gave the Duchess compliments, the Duke says:

**“such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy.”**

What does that imply about both the Duchess and the Duke?

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The Duke states that: “**her looks went everywhere**” and that it: “**’twas all one!**”

Why is he so angry? What didn't she do?

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Why would the Duke's “**nine-hundred-years-old name**” be important, and why is he angry that the Duchess did not rank it?

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Read lines 34-43. What does the Duke think would have happened if he confronted the Duchess about his issue? Why didn't he speak to her?

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Throughout the poem, there are **rhyming couplets**. What kind of **pace** and **rhythm** does this lend to the poem? Circle three.

steady	galloping	stately
faltering	regular	monotonous

The **pace** and **rhythm** of the **couplets** is appropriate and effective because:

- it gives the poem a lively, musical feel;
- the structured form is elegant, and suits the Duke's status;
- it gives the poem a chant-like beat;
- the structured form echoes the Duke's masculine need to control;
- it shows that the Duke is trying to order his confused and complex thoughts about his wife;
- it makes the content of each line very predictable and boring.

Select three.

**Enjambment** is used throughout the poem. The effects of this are detailed below.

1. It creates a more natural-sounding, flowing voice.
  2. It causes deliberate and significant pauses at key moments within the poem.
  3. It sometimes signals a change in tone of voice.
- When the poem's **enjambment** is considered alongside the poem's use of **rhyming couplets** and **iambic pentameter**, it suggests 'breaks' in the Duke's train of thought, and his thoughts about his wife. In this way, the Duchess' playfulness and free spirit permeates the form and structure – not just the content – of the poem.

**rhyming couplets + iambic pentameter = heroic couplets**

Find an example of each from within the poem.

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## The fresco and the bronze

 Look at the two pieces of art below. One is an example of a **fresco**. Another is an example of a **bronze**. (The latter is a bronze of Neptune.) What are your responses? What words come to mind to describe each art form? Consider the references to both art forms within the poem. Make a note of your ideas.




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 Read the poem's closing lines.

**“... Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”**

**?** Why does the poem end with these lines? What is being suggested about the Duke, the Duchess and their relationship? What might it suggest to the Count's envoy?



## Half rhyme

 There are two **half rhymes** within the poem. The first comes from lines 27 – 28 and the second from lines 41 – 42.

“Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious **fool**  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white **mule**  
She rode with round the terrace - ...”


**fool**

**mule**

“ - and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made **excuse**,  
- E’en then would be some stooping; and I **choose**  
Never to stoop.”

**excuse**

**choose**

 Poets often use **half rhymes** in order to drawn attention to the lines, or in order to create a particular effect.

**?** Consider the **content** of these lines. Why might these half rhymes be significant? Work in pairs and make a note of your ideas.

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## It’s all about me, me, me!

“...(since none puts **by**  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but **I**)”

 The above lines (9 – 10) **rhyme perfectly**. However, if the lines were **grammatically perfect** then line ten should end in ‘me’ rather than ‘I’. Why might Browning have chosen to do this? Look at the lines just before and after this section – as well as the rest of the poem.

# Speaking and Listening: Jerry

## Springer

It is obvious that the Duke held a lot of anger towards his wife. He also felt that he was 'too good' to talk to her about his concerns. However, we all know that a good vent is therapeutic, and perhaps if the Duke had expressed himself, his Duchess might still be with him.

So, imagine that the Duke and Duchess are still together. Create a script for the following roles. Think about **what** they are going to say, and also **how** they will speak and how they will **act**. You can modernise the language; however, try to use some of Browning's language as well.

### For example:

Duke: She always gets so excited about the daylight dropping in the west. Excited about a sunset!

## Roles


- The Duke
- The Duchess
- Jerry Springer
- Audience members / bodyguard

## Suggested structure

- ➔ The Duke speaks about his issues with his wife. The Duchess is 'backstage' - not able to hear what he has to say.
- ➔ The Duchess enters and explains her side of the story.
- ➔ The Duke and the Duchess argue. The Duke may accuse her of foul play.
- ➔ Both of their reactions.
- ➔ Jerry Springer's 'advice' to the couple about love and relationships.




# My Itchy Toes Smell Loads

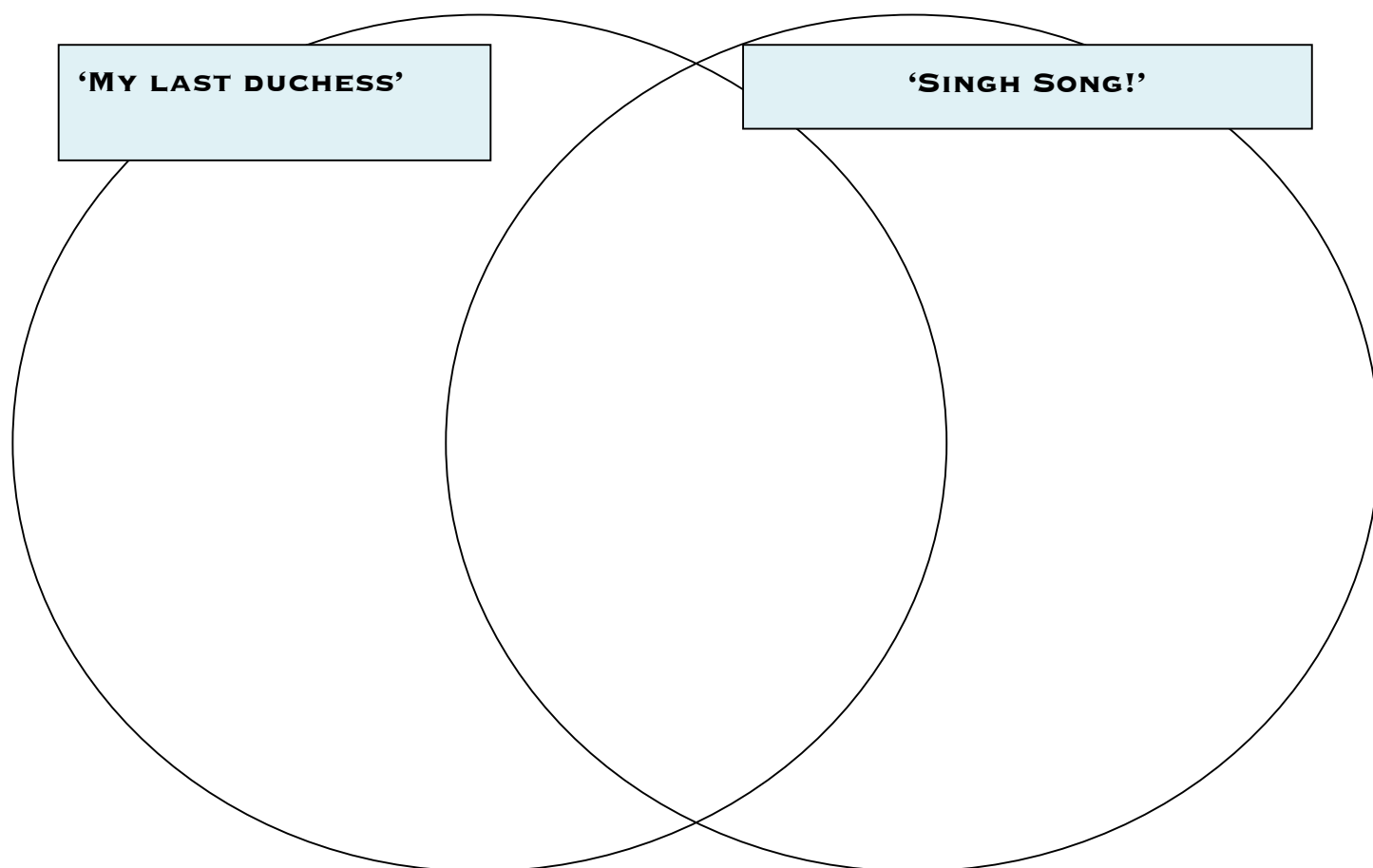
 Complete the table below with what you consider to be the most important **quotes** and **poetic devices** within each category.

<i>Meaning</i>	
<b>imagery</b>	
TONE	
Structure and Form	
<b>language</b>	

## Comparing poems

- **AO3:** Make comparisons and explain links between texts, evaluating writers' different ways of expressing meaning and achieving effects

 Use the Venn diagram to find the **differences** and **similarities** between the two poems.



## Sample exam questions

- Compare the ways that the relationship between husband and wife is presented in 'My Last Duchess' and 'Singh Song!'
- Compare the ways that character and voice is created in 'My Last Duchess' and 'Singh Song!'



## My Last Duchess

- That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
 Looking as if she were alive. I call  
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
- 5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
 'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read  
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
- 10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
- 15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
 Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps  
 Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint  
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
 Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff
- 20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
 A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,  
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
- 25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace – all and each
- 30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked

Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let  
40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
– E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master's known munificence  
50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

**Robert Browning**

# Acknowledgments and thanks

Written by Chantel Mathias

Introduction and copy by Karen Bishop

Audio file scripts and recordings by Barrie McDermid - [www.podcastrevision.co.uk](http://www.podcastrevision.co.uk)

Interactive resources and design by David Riley - [www.triptico.co.uk](http://www.triptico.co.uk)

Images:

- Duchess image: Wiki
- Duke image: Wiki
- Fresco: Google images
- Bronze: [virginia.org](http://virginia.org)

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