



# 'My Last Duchess'

by Robert Browning

How are CONFLICT and VIOLENCE presented?

LO: To be able to explain how the language, form and structure of 'My Last Duchess' reveals the Duke's intentions

LO: To be able to infer information about character using evidence from the text

LO: To explore how the theme of conflict is presented in the poem

# Duchess



\* What does this woman's facial expression tell us?

\* What do her clothes reveal?

\* Does she look happy?

\* Is this a natural portrait?

# The Duke

- \* What does this man's facial expression tell us?
- \* What do his clothes reveal about his status in society?
- \* Does he look happy?
- \* Why is he stood this way?



# Putting the poem in context

An Italian Duke is talking to a messenger from a wealthy Count. The messenger has come to bring an offer of marriage between the Count's daughter and the Duke. The Duke spends most of the Dramatic Monologue bragging about his wealth.

More disturbingly, he calmly relates how his previous wife ("my last Duchess") was ***disposed of*** because, basically, she had offended his vanity.

# Putting the poem in context

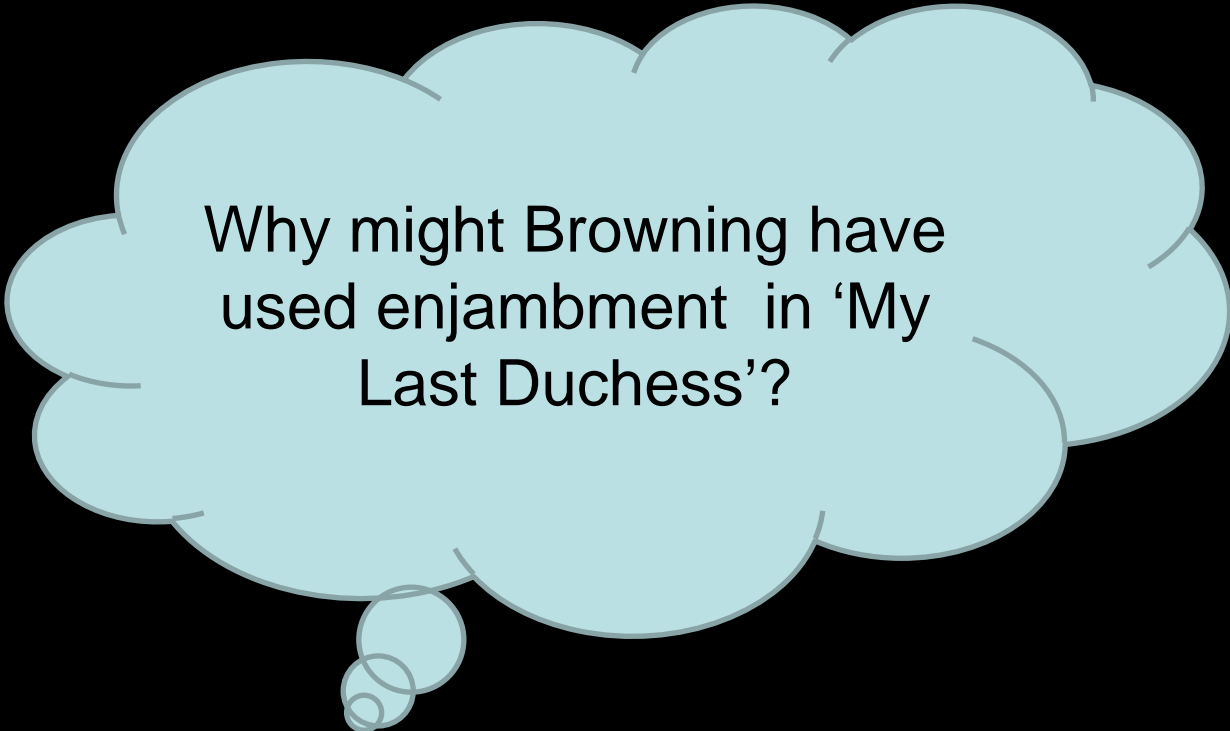
The poem is a DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE in which we learn about the character of the Duke – not only through *what* is said but through *the way* it has been spoken because it allows us to focus solely on the speaker.

His last Duchess is never referred to by name, signifying the way she was a mere possession for him. Also, the word “last” could just mean “previous” but it could imply “last” in a *long line* of previous wives! This is ironic given that the conversation is about arranging for a new wife!

# Summary of the poem

- Based loosely on the life of Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, Italy.
- The Duke's first wife died in 1561 after three years of marriage.
- The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining a messenger who has come to negotiate the Duke's next marriage to the daughter of a powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl.
- We learn about the character of the Duke through what he says about her and how this reveals his true feelings.
- We also learn about their relationship; what was expected, and how she responded.
- The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. He claims she was quite a flirt and did not appreciate his "gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name."
- As his monologue continues, the reader chillingly realises that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess's early death.
- Having revealed this, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging another marriage, with another young girl.

**Enjambment** is the continuation of a sentence over a line-break. It can be used to create the feel of a stream of consciousness and continuous stream of thought and ideas.



Why might Browning have used enjambment in 'My Last Duchess'?



*That's my last Duchess  
painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive.*



**As we listen to the poem, note down which characters are mentioned/ introduced and what we learn about them**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZxq3r7TIHo>



**Fra Pandolf**  
The painter



**The Duke**  
Narrator of the poem



**The Count's messenger**  
Visiting the Duke to arrange his next marriage to a Count's daughter



**The Duchess**  
Was killed by the Duke for flirting with other men

## Who's who?

**Irony** : in fictional dramatic irony, the author makes a character speak in a way that may be the opposite to the truth. This technique highlights the facts to the reader.

What is ironic about the Duke's descriptions of the late Duchess's character?

**F**orm/structure

**L**anguage

**I**magery

**R**hyme/rhythm

**T**one

**S**yle

-Enjambment  
-The Duke is polite, sophisticated and controlled in his speech all the way through and this makes it even more chilling.

-There are no stanza breaks – suggesting the Duke like's the sound of his own voice and is full of self-importance.

**Irony**

# The Duke

- He treats women as “objects” – a revealing word because he collects objects and he treated his previous wife as a material possession
- In fact he has turned her into a possession hung on the wall which only he can view!

# Finding evidence

1. Find evidence: (words, phrases) that tell us how the Duke feels about the picture of his last Duchess.
2. What might have happened to her?
3. Why do you think Browning used enjambment in the monologue— what effect did he try to achieve?
4. What impression do we get of the character of the Duke?
5. What are the key themes of the monologue?

# Task Cards

## Pronouns/Names

- Create a tally chart of all the pronouns in MLD
- Who else features in MLD? List them and explain who they are.
- What does this tell you?

## Imagery

- Identify all of the images created
- Draw them to create a simple storyboard for the MLD (It does not have to be arty!)

## Death/Violence

- Identify all of the words that link to death/violence
- What do they reveal about the Duke?
- Which phrase shows the Duke had the Duchess killed?

## Body/Actions

- Identify all of the words linked with body parts or actions
- What themes emerge?
- What do these words reveal?

## Rhythm

- Look at the last words of every line – what do you notice?
- Read each line aloud in turns – how many beats are in each line?
- Why is the monologue structured in this way?

**The Duke is very possessive**

## 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: Fra Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will 't please you to sit and look at her? I said  
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to my self they turned (since none puts by  
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, 't was not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

**An imaginary artist, the Duke is name dropping: everything has monetary value**

**He likes beautiful things**

**There is a reason for drawing the curtain, it's so the person can see his prized possession**

**The Duke is suggesting it is other men that made the Duchess 'happy' and brought colour to her cheek.**



Fra 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  
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.  
Sir, 't was all one! My favor at her breast,  
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  
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

Perhaps she was a  
modest person  
who got  
embarrassed by  
compliments

She enjoyed  
life. He  
suggests that  
in doing so  
she did not  
respect his  
rank/title

The Duke's  
jealousy; he  
starts to reveal  
more than he  
planned

His only pride  
is in his  
wealthy family  
name

Contrast: genuine  
romance or a posh title,  
he expects her to value  
the title more

With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech--(which I have not)--to make your will

He accidentally reveals more of his weaknesses

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

What kind of man expects his wife to be rude like this?

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

Jealousy

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. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,

Makes monologue feel like conversation

HE KILLED HER?  
Catholic renaissance Italy...

The simplicity of these words is disturbing; there is a lack of emotion that is frightening.

The Count your master's known munificence  
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,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

**Money for  
marrying his  
daughter**

**He is talking to an  
emissary of his  
future wife's father**

**The Duke doesn't realise how  
much of himself he has given  
away in his criticism of his former  
wife**

**He returns to material  
things.**

**Name dropping once  
again: 'Claus of  
Innsbruck'.**

**The young woman's "faults" were qualities like compassion, modesty,  
humility, delight in simple pleasures, and courtesy to those who served her.**

# An example PEE paragraph

**Point:** Browning uses the words of the Duke to reveal information about character.

**Evidence:** For example, ‘the bough of cherries some officious fool broke in the orchard for her...all and each would draw from her alike the approving speech, or blush, at least.’

**Explanation:** This suggests that the Duchess was a polite and courteous woman who enjoyed life and took pleasure in small things. It reveals the extent of the Duke’s jealousy and disapproval of his last Duchess’s behaviour, and highlights the conflict that caused him to ‘command’ an end to these blushes.

# Homework: storyboard

Create a storyboard of the poem  
(8-10 sections)

Add an appropriate quotation for  
each section

EXT – make a link to conflict –  
how is conflict being presented?

# Starter Activity:

- Write the alphabet in your books

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

O

P

Q

R

S

T

U

V

W

X

Y

Z

- Try to think of a word that links to MLD for each letter!