

“Do Now” Work

How does Browning present his ideas in 'My Last Duchess'?

Be able to identify techniques and explore the effect on the reader.

Task:

Answer the following questions:

- What is the effect of the title 'Ozymandias'?
- What is the effect of the adjective "antique" in line one?

In Silence Please

 **BOURNVILLE**
SCHOOL

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'My Last Duchess'

This poem is based on historical events. Browning creates a dramatic monologue for Duke Alfonso II of Modena and Ferrara (in Italy) (1559–1597). The Duke married Lucrezia de Doctors in June 1558. She was the first of his three wives and is believed to be 'the last duchess' of the poem. She died four years after her wedding in suspicious circumstances. In the poem, there are strong hints that the Duke killed his wife.

Browning's technique of allowing a character a voice involves the reader by drawing us into the conversation – we feel as if we are being addressed directly. This directness, as well as the matter of fact way in which the Duke reveals his thoughts, makes the poem all the more compelling.

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Key Words

- 'Ferrara' – the home of an Italian duke from the sixteenth century suspected of poisoning his wife
- 'countenance' – face or facial expression
- 'Fra Pandolf' – a fictional painter
- 'munificence' – the quality of being generous
- 'dowry' – a gift or sum of money that was traditionally brought by a bride to her new husband

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My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. o call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
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
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
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
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, '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
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
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
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
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
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

rhyming couplets
+
iambic pentameter
↓
tight control
reflects Duke's
controlling nature.

However, this is
undermined by
the use of
enjambment.

Although he is
controlling, he
doesn't have
control of his own
emotions.

One stanza -
in control,
not interrupted
- envy doesn't
speak.

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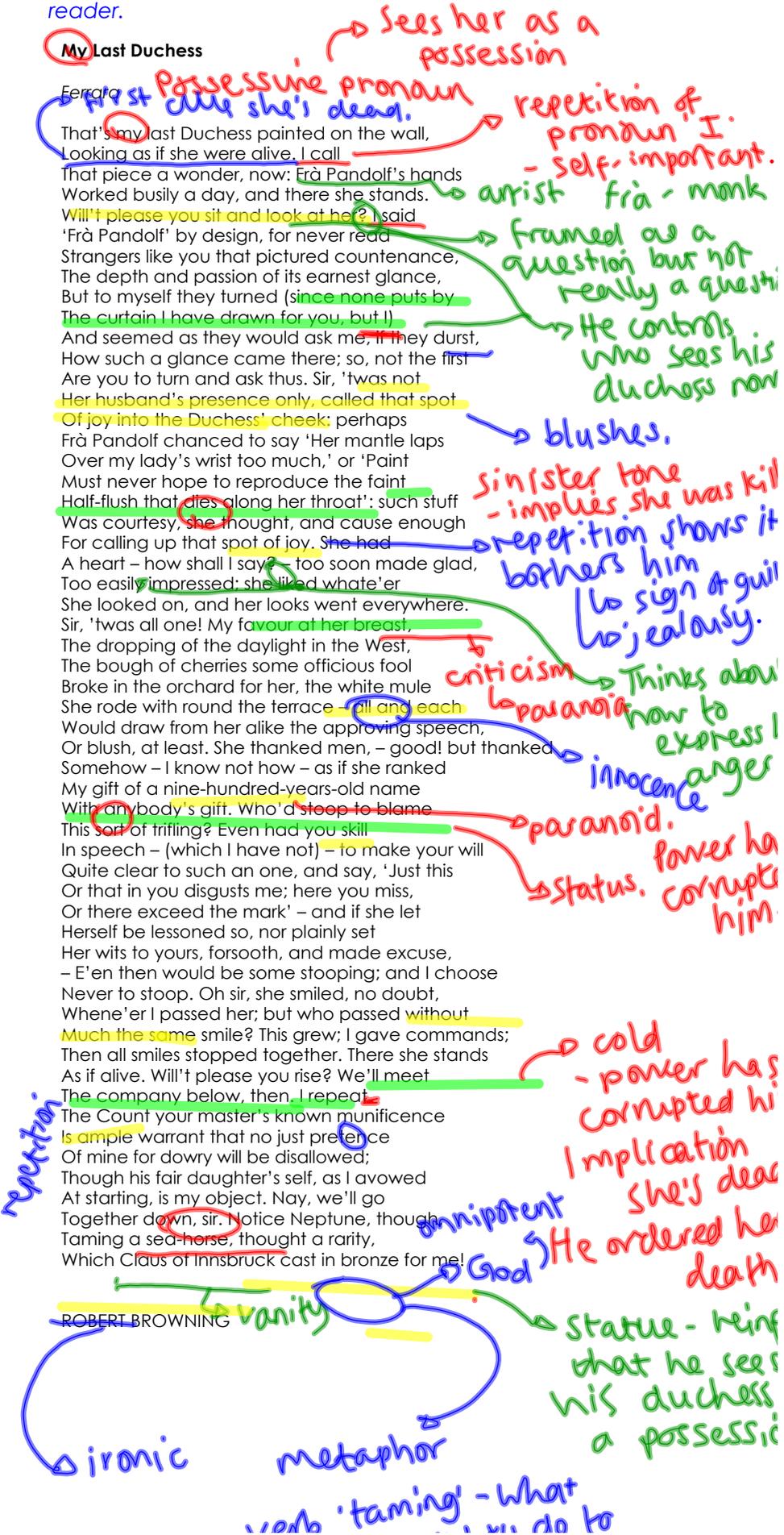
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 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, 'If they durst,
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 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
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 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 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
 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
 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,
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 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
 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,
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ROBERT BROWNING

sees the duchess as a possession

possessive pronoun

I is repeated - self-important. He is in control.

artist Frà monk

framed as a question but it is a command

He controls who looks at her. controlling and possessive. objectifies her.

blushed

sinister tone

emphasises his jealousy

repeated bother him

innocence. jealousy.

status is important to him power corrupts.

jealousy/paranoia.

He ordered her death. implied

couldn't control her.

statue. Sees the duchess in the same way - another possession.

metaphors

tried to 'tame' his duchess - but couldn't

omnipotent

ironic

vain/vanity

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Comprehension Questions

1. Who painted the duchess?
2. What does 'Ferrara' mean?
3. Who is the duke talking to?
4. What did the duchess ride around the terrace?
5. How old is the duke's name?
6. Who gets to draw the curtain on the duchess' portrait?
7. What did Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze?

Deeper Thinking Questions

1. How does the duke assert his power?
2. How does Browning present the duke?
3. How is this poem relevant to a modern reader?
4. How do the themes of power and conflict appear in this poem?

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Look again at 'My Last Duchess'.

- What does the rhetorical question: "- how shall I say? -" on line 22 suggest?
- What does the punctuation in: "She thanked men, – good! but thanked Somehow – I know not how –" on lines 31-32 suggest?
- What is the effect of the repetition of "stoop" on lines 34 and 42-43?

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This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
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Compare the ways poets present powerful characters in 'My Last Duchess' and in one other poem from 'Power and Conflict'.

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Look at these similarities between 'Ozymandias' and 'My Last Duchess':

- both have a **hubristic** character: Ozymandias and the Duke.
- both are about using art to try to maintain power: statue and painting.
- both struggle to have the power they want.

Can you think of any others?

Can you think of any differences?

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'Ozymandias'	'My Last Duchess'
Iambic pentameter - disrupted to show human power can be destroyed.	Iambic pentameter - undermined by enjambment which shows the Duke isn't in control of his own emotions.
"King of Kings / Look on my works, ye mighty and despair."	"Notice Neptune, though, taming a sea-horse"
"sneer of cold command."	"I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together."
"I met a traveller... who said"	"(since not puts by this curtain I have drawn for you, but I)"
"Round the decay of that colossal wreck."	"half-flush that dies along her throat."

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Compare the ways poets present powerful characters in 'My Last Duchess' and in one other poem from 'Power and Conflict'.

Both Browning and Shelley show their readers that power can corrupt an individual through the hubristic characters the Duke and Ozymandias. However, Browning focuses on the power a controlling, jealous, paranoid Duke has over his Duchess whereas Shelley focuses on the arrogance of the pharaoh Ozymandias and the insignificance of human power when compared to the power of time and nature.

Both... However... whereas...

Write the first PETERCETER paragraph. Use the question to help you to start writing.

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Sample paragraphs:

Both *Ozymandias* and *My Last Duchess* show the effects of power and how it corrupts. Shelley describes *Ozymandias*' 'sneer of cold command' as if to suggest that he is a cruel and heartless leader, only concerned with his own power and the immortality it will bring. The Duke in *My Last Duchess* is **similarly** concerned with his own power and status. Although the monologue is supposed to replicate a conversation, there is no opportunity for his listener to speak – Browning writes the monologue to show the Duke's self-obsession and that he is not interested in anyone's views other than his own.

Ozymandias might have had 'cold command' of his 'lands', just **like** the Duke 'gave commands'. **Both** poets are concerned with the effects of power and how in the wrong hands it corrupts. The Duke is shown to be misguided as Browning uses imagery to hint at the Duchess' kindness and gentle spirit ("white mule") to prove that she is innocent and has been killed for nothing. *Ozymandias* is shown to **also** be cruel: 'sneer of cold command' – however he has been left with nothing: 'the lone and level sands stretch far away'. It could be argued that the Duke has **also** been left with nothing: he has a statue of 'Neptune' which is made of cold bronze. He doesn't realise this himself however, as he cares nothing for human relationships and is far more concerned, **like** *Ozymandias*, with his pride and reputation.

Ultimately **both** leaders are shown by the poets to be corrupt. **Both** poets feel that power in the wrong hands has devastating consequences on the innocent. However, although both poets show that this corruption is punished in the end, perhaps it is the Duke who is shown more clearly to be the true despot as Browning uses the dramatic monologue to show first hand how completely self absorbed he is.

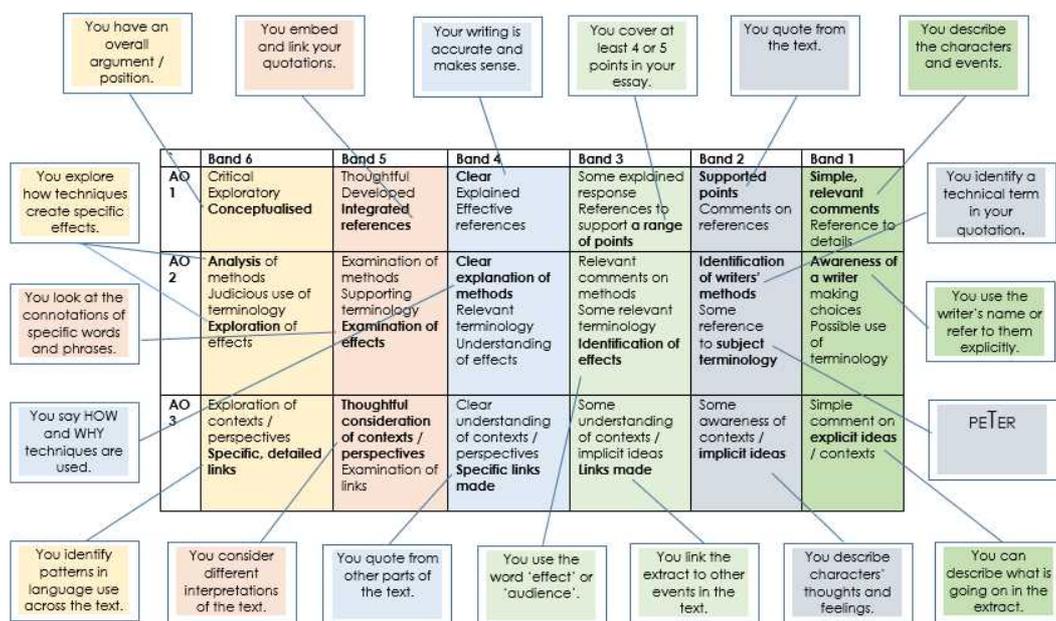
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Examiner's commentary:

A thoughtful comparison which becomes exploratory as it develops. The student holds both poems together which enables a considered comparison to be made as to the extent to which both poems deal with ideas about power. By the end, this comparison becomes evaluative as there is a judgement made as to which poem demonstrates the effects of power more strongly. There are clear explanations of the effect of form on meaning, and the ideas about the corruption of power, and the poets' attitudes towards this, are very well explained.

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'My Last Duchess' Browning

Context:

In 1561, the Duke of Ferrera's wife, Lucrezia, died in suspicious circumstances. Browning was probably inspired by this event when writing this poem. In the poem, the duke talks to a messenger about a dowry for his next wife.

Themes:

Power of humans
Pride
Jealousy

S The poem is written in rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter reflecting the Duke's attempts to control everything. However, the enjambment undermines this, implying the Duke can't control his own emotions.

P 'spot of joy' is repeated to imply that the Duchess' blushes bothered the Duke, highlighting his jealousy.

L 'I gave commands; then all smiles stopped' - the Duke seems cold and heartless. This could be a euphemism for her murder. It shows his power over her.

I 'Notice Neptune, though, Taming a sea-horse' - metaphor - he sees himself as God-like, controlling his wife. Also, he sees his duchess as a piece of art, like this statue. It's ironic though as he couldn't 'tame' his Duchess.

T 'none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you but I' - He is in control. He decides who can see the painting; he couldn't control his wife when she was alive, but he can control her now. The pronoun 'I' reflects the Duke's self-importance.

