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| **Literature Paper 2 Section B: Anthology Poetry****Learning compendium****‘My Last Duchess’ Browning** |
| Key ideas\*The Duke of Ferrara is talking to a servant/messenger from a different count, whose daughter he is trying to arrange a marriage with. He shows the messenger/envoy a painting of his ‘last’ Duchess, and it becomes clear he may have arranged to have her killed.Basic outline of the poem1. The Duke points out a portrait of his former wife in which he invites the implied listener to admire its lifelike quality.
2. The Duke implies that his wife may have been flirting with Fra Pandolf, the painter (who may have also been a monk), and it quickly becomes clear that the Duke believed his wife was too friendly or flirtatious with everyone and did not appreciate her husband enough.
3. The Duke expresses the belief that the power conferred/ passed on to her through the marriage was of great value. He feels she should have been grateful for this gift. He also makes it clear that he did not feel able to explain this to her as it would have been beneath him.
4. The Duke hints that he had his wife killed and then discusses meeting the listener’s master- a count- whose daughter the Duke hopes to marry.

\*The poem is based on the real life Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara. The Duke was thought to have poisoned his wife.\*Browning was a 19th century poet and the son of a wealthy bank clerk. He didn’t fit in well in London and he left the country to move to Italy to marry fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett.  |
| Form and structureThe poem is a dramatic monologue. The Duke dominants the conversation and the messenger does not speak. The poet has used iambic pentameter to mimic the style of speech/ conversational tone. ‘That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall/Looking as if she were alive. I call…’The use of rhyming couplets could show the Duke’s desire for control/ his despotic nature and/or are used to show how articulate and refined a speaker he is.The use of first person narrative gives the reader a clear insight and complete comprehension into the controlling and narcissistic (excessive admiration of oneself) nature of the Duke. The poet also uses enjambment at several points when the Duke is speaking.‘…She hadA heart- how shall I say?- too soon made glad,’The use of enjambment here reflects the Duke seeming to consider how to put forward his irritation of the Duchess’ behaviour. It could also show his dominating control of the ‘conversation’. Enjambment is also used to show the frustration and anger he felt because of the Duchess.‘The bough of cherries some officious foolBroke in the orchard for her…’In this example, the tone of the Duke becomes rambling. He has an extensive list of grievances against his last wife.The poet uses dramatic irony as the reader is able to read between the lines and detect the sinister undertone of the Duke’s comments. Some comments relate to the Duchess’s behaviour.‘…t’was notHer husband’s presence only, called the spotOf joy onto the Duchess’ cheek’And‘…her looks went everywhere’Both quotations suggest that the Duke was suspicious of the Duchess and believed she was unfaithful.Another use of dramatic irony is to hint at the murder of the Duchess.‘PaintMust never hope to reproduce the faintHalf-flush that dies along her throat’The use of the verb ‘dies’ gives a sinister undertone to the quotation. |
| LanguageRepresentation of the Duke The Duke is presented as extremely controlling.‘(since none puts byThe curtain I have drawn for you, but I’)Repetition of first person singular ‘I’ and pronoun ‘none’ reinforces the Duke’s excessive use of control. The curtain may also be a reference to death as bodies are often covered when they are dead.The Duke values possessions which are a symbol of his wealth over everything else.‘…I callThat piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s handsWorked busily a day.’This is one example where the Duke refers to the name of a famous artist. He also does this later in the poem to brag about the possessions he owns.He may have been extremely jealous and paranoid.‘…she liked whate’erShe looked on, and her looks went everywhere.’The use of pronouns such as ‘she’ and ‘her’ could suggest his lack of respect for her. The use of the adverb ‘everywhere’ suggests she was frequently unfaithful in the eyes of the Duke.And‘She thanked men- good!but thankedSomehow- I know not- as if she rankedMy gift of a nine-hundred-years-old nameWith anybody’s gift’The Duke feels that the Duchess does not value his status and class. She was also below him in status and because of this he found her behaviour even more insulting and disrespectful. The use of the pronoun ‘my’ juxtaposed with the pronoun ‘anybody’ clearly reveals the Duke’s narcissistic nature. He views himself as superior to all and believes he should be worshipped, especially by his wife. The connotations of the noun ‘gift’ are usually associated with something that would give the receiver happiness or pleasure. However, here it seems sinister and something that would become unwanted. The Duchess could never meet the Duke’s relentless expectations and demands. He intends to marry again.‘I repeat,The Count your master’s known munificenceIs ample warrant that no just pretenseOf mine for dowry will be disallowed;Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowedAt starting, is my object.’The use of the noun ‘object’ shows how he seeks his next wife to be another of his possessions.Representation of the Duchess in the view of the DukeThe main view the Duke presents of the Duchess is as duplicitous (deceitful).‘Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,Whene’er I passed her; but who passed withoutMuch the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;Then all smiled stopped together.’As well as believing she was unfaithful, the Duke may also be suggesting that the Duchess was insincere and her behaviour towards him was feigned. This idea is illustrated through the use of sibilance in ‘same smile’ which suggestions her affections for the Duke were not real and she was deceiving him. The use of the imperative sentence ‘I gave commands’ shows how the Duke used his power over the Duchess to arrange her murder. He is callous and shows no remorse.How others/ the reader may view the DuchessThe descriptions of the Duchess could also reveal a kind and gracious woman, which makes us sympathetic towards her. The use of first person narrative means we only receive the Duke’s viewpoint. From various clues in the poem, we could describe him as an unreliable narrator.‘She had a heart…too soon made glad,Too easily impressed’The use of metaphor could portray the Duchess as caring and full of empathy towards others. The use of ‘glad’ may also suggest she was grateful towards others (but not sufficiently enough towards the Duke, in his view). |
| Feelings and attitudesIn the poem the poet presents the Duke’s feelings and attitudes in the following ways.Pride- The Duke is proud of his possessions and his status.Jealously- He couldn’t stand the way the Duchess treated him the same as everyone else.Power- The Duke enjoys the control he has over the painting: he is the only one who is allowed to move the curtain (lines 9-10). He wasn’t able to have the same amount of power over the Duchess when she was alive. |
| ThemesSocial structure and class- the poem is told through the voice of an upper-class character. The poet guides the reader to see that the Duke’s interpretation of the Duchess’ behaviour is unreasonable. The statement “I choose/ Never to stoop” (lines 41-42) casts him in a negative light as someone who is excessively focussed on the power he holds in society above all else. The Duke also used his power to get rid of the Duchess.Art- The poem is about a painting that shows an image of the Duchess that the Duke can be happy with, since he became disappointed with the live woman, when he found he had less power over her than he would have liked. The reference to “Neptune…cast in bronze” (lines 54-56) shows the Duke’s taste for art that demonstrates masculine power, as Neptune is depicted as “taming a sea-horse” (line 55)Jealously and pride- The Duke was jealous of the attention his wife gave to others and wanted to be the only person in her favour. His own jealously led him to suspect her of infidelity. |
| Compare with… ‘Ozymandias’ Tyranny and a figure of power.‘London’ Tyrannical control over others.‘The Prelude’ Power of nature over humans.‘Remains’ Power of a first person narrator/ monologue and reaction to death. |
| Key quotations ‘PaintMust never hope to reproduce the faintHalf-flush that dies along her throat’‘as if she rankedMy gift of a nine-hundred-years-old nameWith anybody’s gift’‘…but who passed withoutMuch the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;Then all smiled stopped together.’ |
| GlossaryCountenance **–** appearance; facial expression Durst **–** dare Presence **–** company; being in the immediate area Reproduce **–** copy; duplicate Half-flush **–** blush Courtesy **–** respectful; well-mannered Bough– branch of a tree Officious **–** interfering; obliging (ready to serve) Mule **–** sterile offspring of a female horse and a male donkey; valued as a work animal; (informal) stubborn personTrifling **–** idle or frivolous (playful) conductForsooth– indeed Stoop **–** curtsey; descend from one’s level of dignity Count **–** nobleman equivalent rank to English earl Munificence **–** showing unusual generosity Dowry **–** ancient custom; money transferred to the man, by the bride’s family, when they marry. Demanded as a condition to accept a marriage proposal, in some parts of the world. Avowed **–** said Neptune **–** god of freshwater/sea in Roman religion. Counterpart of the Greek god Poseidon |