

Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842)

Attitudes to poetry? Thoughts on Browning's poem?

1. Reading

We'll read the poem aloud

ALWAYS read poetry aloud where possible. This is a dramatic monologue, so pretend you are on stage!

You are the actor playing *FERRARA*.

What do we know about the speaker's character? How does his voice sound?

*Tip for reading aloud: Pause where the punctuation falls (read with sentences in mind not individual lines) → read with the **rhythm**, not the **metre***

TO DO: Practice in pairs: read the first 13 lines (until 'and ask thus').

(For home) two audio recordings <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43768/my-last-duchess>

2. Art & Ekphrasis

The poem employs **ekphrasis** (when a work of literature describes a piece of visual art, such as a painting, be it real or imagined)

TO DO: In pairs, look at some of the portraits in this room. Reflect on the following questions:

What ideas do paintings (especially portraits) convey?

What power does Art hold? Does Art represent, or conflict with, reality?

Why do you think Browning employs ekphrasis, choosing to focus his poem on a painting?

Does his poem perhaps reflect some of the same themes as this exhibition?



3. Perspective, interpretation & the big picture

Great works of art, be they literary and visual, work by opening up meanings and allowing the reader/viewer room to bring their own perspective and interpretation to that work. There is no wrong answer as long as you have **evidence** (the 'how') to support what you are saying.

TO DO: In pairs, find a portrait in this room. You might wish to choose one that reminds you of Browning's Duchess in some way!

Step one – On your own (at first), write down your initial thoughts on what the 'bigger picture' (overall meaning/message) is. Try to stick to one or two sentences.

Try to reflect not only on **what** is shown but also **why** the artist has chosen to show it in this way.

Step two – Now compare your ideas. Consider ideas of **perspective** and **interpretation**. Did you view the painting in the same way, or did you see and understand it differently?

Step three – Now focus on more details in the portrait and keep exploring it. Write a list describing these details:

Step four – Now return to each of your interpretations of the 'bigger picture'. Has your assessment of this changed or developed now that you have studied further details and shared your ideas? Write a new sentence to describe the 'bigger picture'.

How can we apply this approach to Browning's poem?

What is the poem about overall? So **what** does Browning show us, and **why** does he choose to do it in this particular way?



Is Browning's poem chiefly describing a portrait of the late duchess, or is it showing us a portrait of someone and something else? Think about the details of what we are shown, and how it is presented to us.

(For home) You might want to apply some of the questions above to Shelley's *Ozymandias*. This also uses ekphrasis as it is a poem written to describe a statue. Ask yourself: what is Shelley saying through his description of the statue, and what might he be saying about Art, time and power more broadly?

My Last Duchess, by Robert Browning

FERRARA

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 sit and look at her? I said 5
"Fra 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) 10
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 15
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 20
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, 25
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, 30
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 35
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 40
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; 45
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 pretense 50
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, 55
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.



Agnolo Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia de Medici,
b.1546, d.1561 (aged 16)