

My last Duchess by Robert Browning

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
"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)
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
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, '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 pretense
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!

Note: Artists typically carried out numerous detailed sketches of their subjects in preparation for painting. These sketches were called 'cartoons'. Once completed, the wall on which the painting was to be displayed was plastered. The cartoon was outlined on to the wet plaster and the painting was completed in one day, causing the paint to be absorbed by the plaster. The two compounds would dry within a day, with the painting becoming part of the wall. It is therefore the drawing, rather than the painting which takes most time.

Look at the title of the poem. What can you find out from the three words chosen by Browning?

Look at the rhyme scheme and discuss the reasons for Browning's choice.

What do Browning's choice of narrative perspective and use of the dramatic monologue show?

The content of the poem begins with a description of the painting. It is 'painted on the wall'. What do these words imply about the time the poem is set in?

The second line explains the Duchess is dead. Discuss how she was entrapped in the plaster.

Time is referred to in line 4: 'Fra Pandolf's hands/Worked busily a day' which reinforces the speed with which the artist had to work, but undermines the Duke's claims to jealousy. Find examples of the things that have raised the Duke's jealousy.

Enumerate all the gifts given to the Duchess, and say who gave these gifts.

These gifts give an insight into the character of the Duchess. How do people feel about her, and how does she respond to their gifts?

At line 32, the Duke refers to his gift to his wife. What is his complaint regarding the way she accepted it?

What can be inferred about the way he spoke to his wife? Look at words such as 'trifling', 'disgusts', 'such a one'.

Lines 46–7 show the effect of the Duke's words had on the behaviour of his wife, and are immediately followed by the statement, 'There she stands as if alive.' Examine the tone of voice in which these words are spoken, and comment on what they show about the Duke's feelings towards his last Duchess.

How does the Duke talk about the next Duchess? Identify the aspects of his next marriage which interest him, and any areas which he does not enquire about. What do the omissions indicate about his feelings towards his future wife?

The use of the word 'dowry' in line 51 is particularly revealing about the attitude of the Duke and Italian society towards women. Find an accurate definition of the word. Which societies use the dowry, and what does it indicate about the status of women?

The Duke refers to his works of art by the names of the artists. What does this reveal about his true attitude to marriage and art?