Robert Browning – Robert Browning (1812-1889) was an English poet and playwright whose position as one of the foremost Victorian poets was characterised by his use of the dramatic monologue. Many of his poems utilise satire and dark humour, coupled with his extensive knowledge of historical settings. Browning had a love of history and European culture, and it is said that he could read, write, and converse in Latin, Greek, and French by the age of 14!

Browning’s Love Life – Robert Browning married fellow successful poet Elizabeth Barrett, who was six years his elder. He had been transfixed by her ‘exquisite poetry’ which led him to write to her. She had been married to George Barrett, but his death in 1846 allowed her to marry Robert. They had a child together, but George’s mother, Elizabeth, moved back to London. Browning and Elizabeth married in 1846.

The Italian Renaissance – The Italian Renaissance was the earliest form of great European Renaissance, a period of great achievement and change which began in Italy in the 14th Century and spread to all medieval times and modern Europe. The ‘renaissance’ word means ‘rebirth.’ Of the art and literature produced at the time remains some of the most self-reflecting in the world. Furthermore, the people and events of the time have influenced a vast body of future works.

Irony – Browning uses irony to get across the true meaning of the poem. Despite the Duke’s harangue of the Duchess’s character traits, this is not a poem lamenting her, but rather the Duke’s own tyranny, ego-centric, and jealous. Several language features create this, for example the rhetorical questions ‘Would you have her painted?’, an enjambment which is immediately contradicted by the command (a verb reflecting his oppressive nature) to have her killed.

Context – My Last Duchess was written by Robert Browning, and was first published in January 1842.

My Last Duchess

Language/Special Structures

Irony – Browning uses irony to get across the true meaning of the poem. Despite the Duke’s harangue of the Duchess’s character traits, this is not a poem lamenting her, but rather the Duke’s own tyranny, ego-centric, and jealous. Several language features create this, for example the rhetorical questions ‘Would you have her painted?’, an enjambment which is immediately contradicted by the command (a verb reflecting his oppressive nature) to have her killed.

Spoken Language Features – In order to keep the poem conversation-like in terms of its vocabulary and tone, Browning used many spoken features through the voice of the Duke. For example, a number of words are used in their contracted forms, for example ‘that’s’, ‘thee’, ‘thine’ instead of ‘that is’, ‘thee’, ‘thine’. Many of these are also used, as occur naturally in speech and to lessen the impact of statements. Examples are ‘I said’, and ‘I repeat’.

Enjambment – Enjambment is used throughout the entirety of the poem, as sentences run across lines of poetry. The effect of this is two-fold. Primarily, it reflects the long, rambling sentences of the conversation lovingly, egotistical Duke. Secondly, it makes the poem difficult to read, disrupting the flow to create a stop-start rhythm – representative of the awkward nature of the conversation.

Form – The poem is one of Browning’s best known dramatic monologues, as fictional characters play out a scenario, and a monologue in that there is only one (mono) speaker. It is written in one long speech, presented as a conversation, although the reader only ever hears the Duke’s viewpoint. This is reflective of the Duke’s need for power.

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Poems for Comparison

Camilla Culturne writes of Browning’s influence in creating the poems: The Duchess’s portrait is thought to be modeled after a painting of Lucrezia di Cosimo de’ Medici (1533-1597), she came with a big dowry and was abandoned and deserted at the age of 21 by her husband. However, she brought a sizeable dowry. After his death, she married the 13th Duke of Florence. He poisoned her. It was rumoured that he poisoned her. No one knows the truth.

My Last Duchess

Influences of the Poet

Line-by-line Analysis

Lines 1-19 – The opening two lines alert the reader to the fact that the speaker is a Duke (his wife was a Duchess) and that she is most likely dead. The rest of the word ‘last’ suggests that he has likely had other duchesses before. The Duke chooses to disparage the work of the painter (Froissart) before asking (as it is more like an order) his guest to look upon the painting in more detail. He suggests that someone ask about how the painter put so much depth and expression into the painting, but do not dive. This, alongside the fact that the Duke refers to the curtain to observe the portrait, shows him as a somewhat imperious and cold figure.

Lines 14-24 – The Duke then imagines some of the ways that Froissart may have encouraged the Duchess to achieve the ‘spot of joy’ that he lists. He suggests the portrait is a trivial or flirtatious or complimentary comments from the painter would have been enough to make her blush. The Duke is judgemental about the ease at which the Duchess would blush or be pleased by something – lamenting it as though it were a voluntary reaction (‘too soon’, ‘too easily’). His disserve continues as he accuses her of liking ‘whate’er’ and looking ‘everywhere’ – clearly a jibe at what he views as promiscuous/flirtatious behaviour.

Lines 25-34 – The Duke then elaborates on the Duchess’s shallow nature – her tendency to see the same pleasure in everything – no matter how small. What seems to be of greater concern to him, however, is who she directs her pleasure towards. For example, she suggests that his gift of a nine-hundred-year-old name is ‘worth the loss of all the World’, and a ‘long, long’ a figure to be blamed. This sort of trivialising? Even had she skill in which she has no skill to make you odious’ and ‘to mislead the world’.

Lines 35-46 – It becomes clear that the Duke and Duchess were not in an open and honest relationship. He lists the reasons that he chose to have ‘sent her’ – and then to have ‘led her’, even if she was a voluntary reaction (‘too soon’, ‘too easily’). He does this in a jibe at the ‘command’ (most likely to give commands – most likely to have her killed) of the ‘smiles stopped altogether’.

Lines 47-53 – With a chilling calmness, the Duke then rebukes his own earlier statement regarding the picture. As the Duke suggests joining the party boat downwards, it is revealed that the Duchess’s family owned the picture. The Duke is the husband of the portrait’s model, and he is attempting to win over theCount your master’s known munificence

Power and Oppression – The Duke is fixated with power – both the social and political power that he holds, and the power that he wields over his wife. He wants to oppress her and dominate her. He is particularly bitter about the death of his wife. His rare art collection demonstrates the power that he wields over his wife. His vast collection of art is a sign of his wealth and political power. The Duke is a tyrant, and he uses his power to dominate his wife. He wants to oppress her and control her. He is particularly bitter about the death of his wife.

Madness – Through all of his courtesies and indulgences towards his guest, the speaker attempts to thinly-conceal what is apparently some form insanity. Whilst he speaks of variously, his face, the reader cannot help but note that they may be (in fact, are likely to) be entirely innocent. The speed at which the Duke switches back into trivial conversation after very heavily implying that he had her murdered confirms the reader’s suspicion that he is in fact mad.

Ozymandias

Khamzat/ People

The Italian Renaissance

The theme of power and oppression, and the theme of madness, are both explored through the poem. The theme of power and oppression is the most prominent theme in the poem. The Duke is a tyrant, and he uses his power to dominate his wife. He wants to oppress her and control her. He is particularly bitter about the death of his wife.

The theme of madness is also explored through the poem. The Duke is fixated with power – both the social and political power that he holds, and the power that he wields over his wife. He wants to oppress her and dominate her. He is particularly bitter about the death of his wife. His rare art collection demonstrates the power that he wields over his wife. His vast collection of art is a sign of his wealth and political power. The Duke is a tyrant, and he uses his power to dominate his wife. He wants to oppress her and control her. He is particularly bitter about the death of his wife.

My Last Duchess

STANZA LINE POEM ANALYSIS

1 That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
2 Looking as if she were alive. I call
3 Her husband’s voice, and SS and D’s hand;
4 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

5 Why please you sit and look at her? I said
6 ‘Pria Pandolf’ by design, for never read
7 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
8 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
9 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
10 She smiled, no doubt, (for why she said)
11 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
12 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘twas not
13 Of joy into the Duchess’ cheeks; perhaps
14 In, under her power. His rare art collection demonstrates the power that he
15 wielded over his wife. His vast collection of art is a sign of his wealth and
16 political power. The Duke is a tyrant, and he uses his power to dominate his
17 wife. He wants to oppress her and control her. He is particularly bitter about
18 the death of his wife.

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