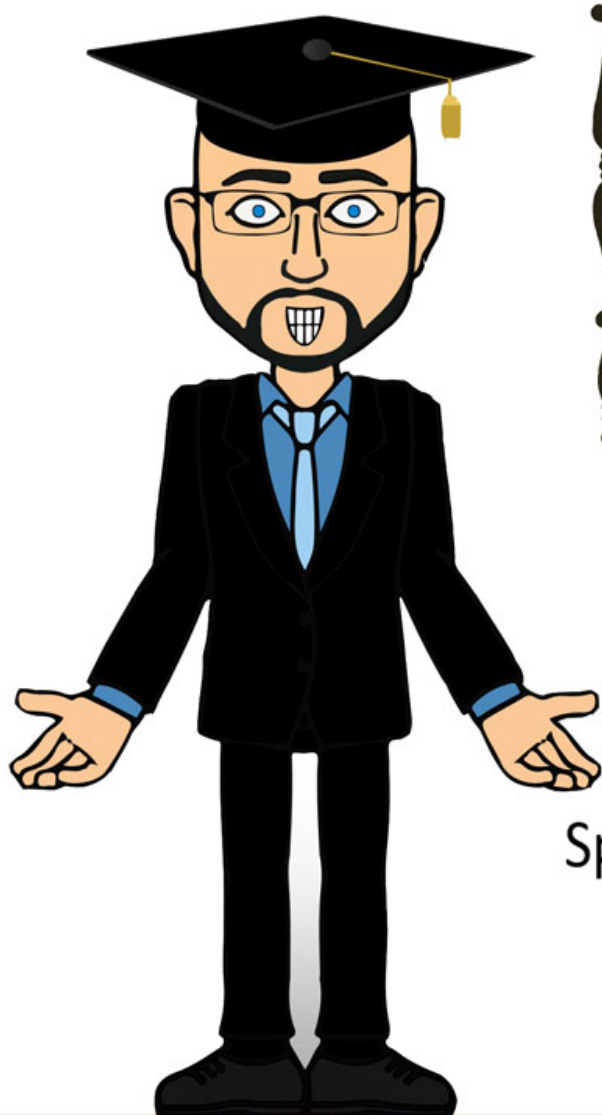


Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR Bruff's Guide To

My Last Duchess and other poems



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SAMPLE

ROBERT BROWNING'S 'MY LAST DUCHESS'

Based on the video: https://youtu.be/T9h_csKEwxg

THE POET:

When analysing any poem, it is important to only study those biographical details of the poet's life which seem key to understanding the poem itself. With 'My Last Duchess' this poses quite a challenge: Browning's dramatic monologue was not written from his own point of view but that of a fictional character. 'My Last Duchess' is set in the Italian Renaissance and focuses on a controlling and possibly insane Duke - how can that possibly link to the poet's own life?

Nevertheless, there are some biographical details worth looking at which might help us understand the poem a little better:

1. Browning was born in 1812 in London. He died in 1889 in Venice.
2. Browning didn't enjoy school much, and ended up being home-schooled by tutors who educated him using his father's collection of 6,000 books. This brave move paid off: by the age of fourteen, he was fluent in Latin, Greek, French and Italian. Aged twelve, Robert wrote his first book of poetry.
3. In 1845, Browning married Elizabeth Barret. Barret is a famous poet herself. However, the marriage was kept secret to begin with, as Elizabeth's father was domineering and controlling.
4. In 1838 Browning visited Italy for the first time. He would live there for much of his adult life. In his poem 'De Gustibus', he wrote 'open my heart and you will see graved inside of it, Italy'.
5. 'My Last Duchess' was published in 1842.

What can we conclude from these details? Well, firstly we can see that the poet lived during the Victorian era. I will look at the importance of this in the next section of this eBook.

Secondly, the details of Barret's controlling attitude towards his daughter pose a striking resemblance to the Duke in 'My Last Duchess'. However, this is a red herring: Browning did not meet Barret until 1846, four years after the publication of the poem. As much as it might seem a nice comparison, the character of the Duke is clearly not based on Browning's father in law!

The fact that Browning visited Italy shortly before the publication of the poem would suggest that it might be based on a story he heard whilst travelling (more on that later).

THE CONTEXT

By the term 'context' we essentially mean 'what was going on at the time the poem was written?' Although 'My Last Duchess' is set in the Italian Renaissance (14th-16th century), it was written and published during the Victorian era in 1842. We should therefore examine the Victorian era to see if there is anything which seems important to our understanding of the poem.

Some exams do not award any marks for analysing context, and some exams do. For example, the 2015 AQA GCSE in English Literature does not assess context, but the 2017+ AQA GCSE English Literature does. If you are studying this poem for an exam or essay, check whether context is awarded by your exam board. If it is not, you should not write anything about Victorian England in your exam. However, just because an exam doesn't reward it, that doesn't mean we shouldn't look at context in our own studies.

One of the major issues with studying context is that it can take hundreds of hours of study, much of which might revolve around topics which are irrelevant to the poem being studied. My advice is to look at the general contextual topics and think carefully about which you should study further. Let's try that with the poem 'My Last Duchess':

1842 was the early part of the Victorian Era. During this period of time there was an array of changes in society, including:

1. Industrialisation saw mass migration from the country to the city. In 1837, 80% of the population lived in the countryside. Most people worked on farms or spun wool etc. With the Industrial Revolution came machines which could complete this work in a fraction of the time. As a result, people began moving to the cities to get work. and within a dozen or so years, 50% of the population lived in the city. As interesting as this is, industrialisation doesn't seem to be a relevant factor in 'My Last Duchess'.
2. Attitudes to religion were being challenged due to the theory of evolution and Scientific developments which seemingly disproved some Biblical passages. There are some minor ways in which religion can be linked to the poem, but mostly in terms of the treatment of women which is a topic in its own right.

3. Attitudes to women were changing. A woman's role as the 'angel of the house' who existed to serve and entertain her husband was beginning to be challenged. Women were not given the same education as men, but the suffrage movement was growing and the battle for equality was growing fast.

Firstly, let me give you a few brief notes on the treatment of women in 1800s England:

- When a woman married, she became the legal property of her husband
- Women could not testify in court
- Women could not vote
- It was believed that women were incapable of rational thought
- Many female writers published their works anonymously or under male pseudonyms in order to boost book sales (Jane Austen published all of her novels anonymously). Although women could publish, women's literature was not taken as seriously as that written by men. In order to be taken seriously, many women published anonymously.

This topic of attitudes to women seems to be the relevant contextual factor in the poem - the whole poem explores attitudes to women. Could it be that Browning uses the poem to explore his opinion on this topic? I think so!

It is possible to see the poem as a criticism of Victorian attitudes to women and their effort to suppress female sexuality. It can be argued that the Duke's obsession with fixing the behaviour of his wife links to Victorian society's obsession with the reputation of women remaining perfect.

A feminist interpretation of the poem would suggest that Victorian men are weakened by their dependency on the power they have over women. The way in which Victorian men are obsessed with their power over women certainly links with the poem. Men in Victorian England saw their wives as a reflection of themselves.

CONTEXT 2: THE ITALIAN LINK

The historical basis of the poem has been speculated about since the poem was first published. There are many ideas about the poem but nothing which is actually known for sure other than the following details:

Many of Browning's poems, including 'My Last Duchess', were set in Ferrara, a town in Italy. Browning seemed obsessed with the place, researching the medieval history of the area. It seems likely that 'My Last Duchess' was based on the true story of Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara. Alfonso's first wife died in suspicious circumstances, so there is a strong case for the poem being based on this Duke. However, this kind of detail should never be mentioned in an exam - it's not at all relevant to the poem's use of language, structure or form, which is all you should ever write about. Whether it's a true story or not is irrelevant to our understanding of the poem.

Browning is not the first poet to focus his work on the lives of despotic Italian. Dante's inferno recounts a number of stories of various cruel Italians. John Keats was another poet who focused on a similar topic in his poem 'Isabella'.

THE LITERAL MEANING

Once we understand the important details about the poet and the context we should look at the poem itself. All poems that are studied for exams have a simple literal meaning and at least one hidden deeper meaning. Our starting point should be to make sure we understand the basic meaning of the poem. It's a useful exercise to translate the poem into simple, understandable English. Where a line is ambiguous or has different meanings, you should aim to give the simplest at this point. Here is my translation of the poem, with the original version in italics.

LINES 1-4

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

That's a painting of my last wife on the wall there,

It looks lifelike / like she is still alive. I would say
That painting is a very realistic portrait. A famous artist
Worked hard all day painting it, and there she is.

*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;*

Will you please sit down and look at the painting? I name dropped
The famous artist on purpose, because people never look at it without wanting to
ask me how the passionate look on her face was arrived at. They always ask this
question to me, because I am the only one who pulls back the curtain which
covers the painting.

You are not the first person to ask (how the look was arrived at).

*so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was 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.*

No, it was not only me (her husband) who could make her look so happy.
It might be that the artist flattered her in some way, perhaps saying that her shawl was too long (and should be pulled up a bit),
Or maybe he told her it would be impossible for paint to reproduce such a beautiful woman. She was delighted to hear this and blushed.

*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, 't was 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 was a woman who was too easily impressed by things.

She liked everything she looked at, and she looked at everything.

It was all the same - the effect I had on her was the same effect as the sunset, or some cherries an admire brought to her, or her horse - everything impressed her and made her happy, blushing with delight.

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.

She thanked people, which was good, but she thanked people in such a way that it made me feel like she wasn't sufficiently grateful for the ancient and honoured surname which became hers when we married.

Who would lower themselves to argue with her? Even if I was a good enough communicator to do it (and I am not) I would not do it. It would mean that I had

to lower myself, and I never lower myself if I were to tell her that this or that in you disgusts me, or here you are going too far etc.

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.

Oh, sir, she smiled whenever I passed her, but she gave the same smile to everyone! This continued, and I gave commands.

Then there were no more smiles. But in this painting she looks 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!

Will you please stand up? We'll meet the other downstairs.

I repeat, the Count, your boss, is so rich that I'm sure he will give me a nice financial incentive for his daughter,

But what I want is the daughter, not the money.

See this statue? It's of Neptune, taming a sea-horse. It's a rare statue by another famous artist.

THEME:

Now we understand the basics of the poem, it's important to consider the major themes - what is this poem trying to say? We need to move beyond what happens in the poem (the subject) to what the poem is trying to say (it's theme).

'My Last Duchess' has a number of themes, but all of them revolve around one major theme: power.

There are many types of power demonstrated in the poem:

Political power - the Duke's political power is demonstrated through the ambiguous line 'I gave commands'. The reader is left wondering who these commands were given to - no doubt a social inferior / servant of some kind.

Domestic power - the Duke asserts his power over his former wife, linking to themes of gender roles and sexism.

Now we have the major theme defined, we shall look at how the poem explores that theme through the three poetic study areas of language, structure and form:

'Language' refers to the words which are used by the poet. This is the simplest type of analysis, and the one which most students write about first. Whether you are picking out language devices such as similes and metaphors, or just picking out words/phrases which seem important, it's all language analysis.

'Structure' refers to the organisation of a poem. Analysis of structure should consider where the verses break (if at all) and why, variations in verse length, use of enjambment, repetition, rhythm, changes in stress patterns, use of rhyme scheme, free verse and punctuation. However, it's not just a case of identifying these features - they need to be linked to the theme of the poem. So, we only want to analyse that exclamation mark at the end of the poem if we

can somehow link it to the theme of power (or the exam question you are answering).

'Form' refers to the times when poets follow particular rules about the organisation of a text. For example, is the poem a sonnet, a dramatic monologue, a ballad etc.? Again, this needs to be linked to the theme of the poem (or exam answer). With 'My Last Duchess', the question would be 'how does the use of the dramatic monologue form help explore the theme of power?'

LANGUAGE:

Let's begin by establishing whether or not the Duke had any cause for concern with his last wife. When the Duke explains that "her looks went everywhere", the reader is left wondering if he is implying that his wife was promiscuous. However, the doubts he has about the artist (more on that in a moment) should help the reader decide that this was not the case.

It is clear that the Duke was disgusted with his previous wife, the Duchess. However, it is ironic to note that the Duchess' faults were actually to exhibit qualities such as humility, gratitude and humility. It seems the Duchess was pleased by the simple things in life such as 'the dropping of the daylight'. In fact, the Duchess seems to have a childlike innocence to her, but this is not as positive as it may seem. The 19th Century feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft once wrote that while 'children...should be innocent...when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness'. In other words, the wife is presented by the Duke as weak and undeserving of such an amazing husband!

No, it seems that the Duke had no valid reason to dislike his last wife, and so we must examine his character further to discover just what kind of maniac he is. Let's take a closer look at the characterisation of the Duke:

I shall now go through the poem, annotating language points which tell the reader something important about the Duke.

My Last Duchess

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

The pronoun 'my' is repeated throughout the poem, showing how possessive the Duke is. It also highlights how he objectifies women.

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**, 't was 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

The Duke 'name drops' two famous artists: Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck, demonstrating that he is a **vain person**.

The title 'Fra' means 'brother' (as in a religious figure). The suggestion here is that the poem was painted by a monk or similar religious figure. Why is this important? Well, it seems that Browning wanted to make it clear that the artist was not at all sexually involved in the Duchess - there is no possibility that they were flirting or even having an affair, which makes it more clear that the Duke had no reason to be so jealous of his wife.

Browning uses language to highlight issues of power in the poem. The manner in which the Duke speaks to the envoy is through the terms 'sir' and 'you'. These are formal terms of address which clarify the Duke's superiority over the envoy. The more personal terms of 'thou' and 'thee' are not used. The Duke is keen to point out that the envoy is socially inferior to him. This behaviour is **condescending**.

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, 't was 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

The Duke is **proud**, feeling that his wife should be grateful to join in his family heritage and take his surname which is so ancient and esteemed.

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,

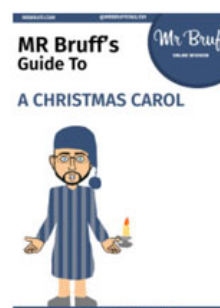
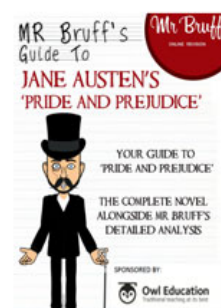
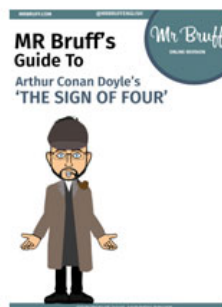
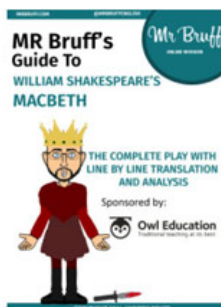
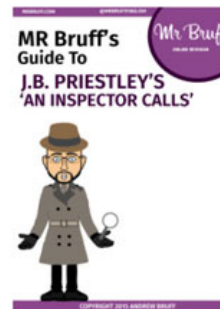
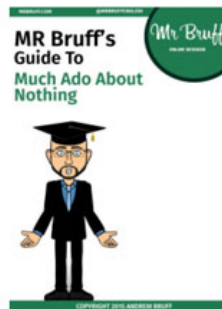
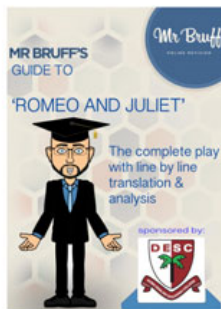
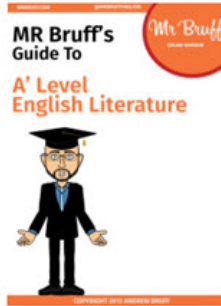
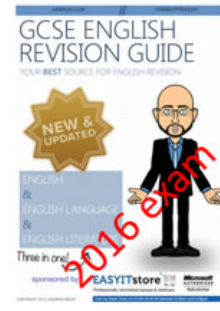
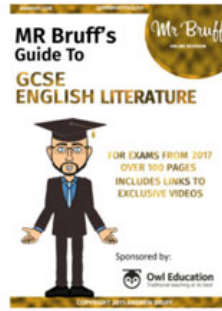
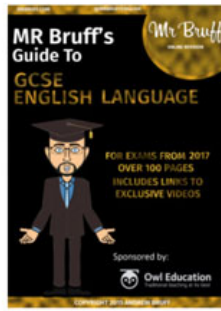
The Duke is **disingenuous** in this moment. He tells the envoy that he does not possess skill in speaking, whilst at the time using perfect iambic pentameter.

The Duke is **self obsessed**, seen through the repetition of the pronoun 'I' – it's all about him!

What the Duke wants from the envoy is presented as a question: 'Will't please you sit?' and 'Will't please you rise', but these are not questions at all – they are demands. The Duke frames his demands as questions but make no mistake - this is a social superior demanding something from an inferior. He is a **controlling** character.

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

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