

ASSIGNMENT 40

Read Discussion 40 below.

Read Robert Browning's poems "My Last Duchess," "Love Among the Ruins," and the excerpt from "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*" on textbook pages 235–241.  Track 20
Do Self-Check Test 40, which follows the discussion.

DISCUSSION 40 Robert Browning

In the last section, we noted that Victorian poets were often less certain or definite than their Romantic predecessors. Rather than making triumphant statements, for example, Tennyson wrote poems in which action resulted in death, or else he wrote poems that circled back on themselves, never coming to any final conclusion.



Robert Browning

Robert Browning, like Tennyson, was wary of making definite or final statements. Originally, in fact, Browning wanted to be a playwright—he liked the idea of writing different characters, who could contradict each other and express different viewpoints in a single work.

Browning's plays were flops, however, and he eventually settled into being a poet. But he always retained a sense of the dramatic in his writing. Almost all of his poems are spoken by someone else; Browning created a particular character, and then that character would speak the poem. This kind of poem is called a **dramatic monologue**.

You have actually read some dramatic monologues already in this course. One example is Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." In this poem, Marlowe has created a character, "the passionate shepherd," who is then treated as the speaker of the poem. The poem also imagines a listener (the "love") to whom the shepherd speaks. Thus, the poem is similar to a very brief stage play, in which the poet has created a dramatic situation, and written lines for a particular character to speak.

Though Browning did not invent the dramatic monologue, it has become identified with him, because he used it so frequently and so skillfully. The three poems you will read here are all dramatic monologues, and you can start to see the variety of ways in which Browning used the form.

The first piece you will read, "My Last Duchess," is probably Browning's single most famous dramatic monologue. The poem is set in Ferrara, an Italian city, during the Renaissance. The speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. Like many Renaissance nobles, the Duke is a cultured man, and during the monologue, he is showing off his collection of paintings to another man (who is never named.) In particular, the Duke is discussing a picture of his "last Duchess." The man to whom the Duke is speaking had asked the Duke why the Duchess looks so joyful, and the Duke explains that she always looked that way. He goes on to complain, because he feels that his wife should have been joyful only when he (the Duke) was around. She was full of love, where she should have loved only him. So, the Duke says, he "gave commands" and his wife ceased to be happy—the implication being that the Duke had her killed. He keeps her portrait, however, which he likes to show off. When his wife was a human being, with likes and loves of her own, he hated her, but now she is only a work of art, which he can show or hide at will. At the poem's end, it turns out that the man the Duke has been talking to is an emissary from a Count, whose daughter the Duke plans to wed.

Obviously, the Duke is a very unpleasant character—a stage villain. Part of the enjoyment of the poem is recognizing his evil and condemning it, just as you would condemn a villain on a TV

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Robert Browning

1812–1889

My Last Duchess¹

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's² hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 5 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
 10 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
 15 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
 20 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.
 25 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
 30 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
 35 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

1. The speaker is modeled on Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, who married the 14-year-old Lucrezia de Medici in 1558. When she died three years later, poisoning was suspected. In 1565 the Duke married the daughter of Ferdinand I, Count of Tyrol.

2. Brother Pandolf, the imaginary painter of the duchess's portrait.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

1806–1861

*from Sonnets from the Portuguese*¹

38

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
 The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
 And ever since, it grew more clean and white,
 Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list,"
 5 When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
 I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
 Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
 The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
 Half falling on the hair. O beyond need!^o
 10 That was the chrism² of love, which love's own crown,
 With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
 The third upon my lips was folded down
 In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,
 I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

listen

deserving

43

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
 5 I love thee to the level of everyday's
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
 I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
 I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 10 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints,—I love with the breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death.

1845–1847

1850

1. These very personal poems chronicle Elizabeth Barrett's courtship with Robert Browning. She did not show them to him until after they were married, when he pronounced them "the finest sonnets written in any lan-

guage since Shakespeare's." He overcame her reluctance to publish them by proposing the somewhat cryptic title implying that they are merely translations.

2. Consecrated oil used to anoint during a coronation.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

1844–1889

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;¹

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.² Why do men then now not heed³ his rod?

heed

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for⁴ all this, nature is never spent;

despite

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

1895

The Windhover:¹*To Christ Our Lord*

I caught this morning morning's minion,² king-
dom of daylight's dauphin,³ dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein⁴ of a wimpling wing

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion⁵
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall⁶ themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

1918

1. I mean foil in its sense of leaf or tinsel. . . . Shaken goldfoil gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and also, and this is true of nothing else, owing to its zigzag dints and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too [Hopkins's note].

2. Oil made by crushing seeds or olives.

3. Kestrel falcon—a small hawk—that appears to hover in the air.

2. Darling, from the French *mignon*.

3. The dauphin was the heir to the French throne.

4. In falconry, a bird rings when it rises in spirals (like a horse circling at the end of a tether or rein). Wimpling means rippling.

5. The furrows of a plowed field.

6. Break their surfaces.