My Last Duchess Study Guide

My Last Duchess by Robert Browning

BOOKRAGS

Contents

My Last Duchess Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Poem Text....5

Plot Summary....7

Themes....10

Style....12

Historical Context....13

Critical Overview....15

Criticism....16

Critical Essay #1....17

Critical Essay #2....20

Critical Essay #3....22

Topics for Further Study....25

Compare and Contrast....26

What Do I Read Next?....27

Further Study....28

Bibliography....29

Copyright Information....30

Introduction

First published in the collection *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, "My Last Duchess" is an excellent example of Browning's use of dramatic monologue. Browning's psychological portrait of a powerful Renaissance aristocrat is presented to the reader as if he or she were simply "eavesdropping" on a slice of casual conversation. As the poem unfolds, the reader learns the speaker of the poem, Duke Ferrara, is talking to a representative of his fiancée's family. Standing in front of a portrait of the Duke's last wife, now dead, the Duke talks about the woman's failings and imperfections. The irony of the poem surfaces as the reader discovers that the young woman's "faults" were qualities like compassion, modesty, humility, delight in simple pleasures, and courtesy to those who served her.

Using abundant detail, Browning leads the reader to conclude that the Duke found fault with his former wife because she did not reserve her attentions for him, his rank, and his power. More importantly, the Duke's long list of complaints presents a thinly veiled threat about the behavior he will and will not tolerate in his new wife. The lines "I gave commands; / smiles stopped together" suggest that the Duke somehow, directly or indirectly, brought about the death of the last Duchess. In this dramatic monologue, Browning has not only depicted the inner workings of his speaker, but has in fact allowed the speaker to reveal his own failings and imperfections to the reader.

Author Biography

Browning was born in 1812 in Camberwell, a sub urb of London, to middle-class parents. His father Robert Browning, Sr., a clerk for the Bank of England, possessed cultivated artistic and literary tastes; his mother, Sarah Anne Wiedemann, was a devout Christian who pursued interests in music and nature. Browning was an intellectually precocious child who read at the age of five and composed his first poetry at six. He read widely from his father's extensive rare book collection, acquiring an abundant, if unsystematic, knowledge of a broad range of different literatures. At ten Browning began Peckam School, where he remained for four years. In 1828 he entered London University but quit school after less than a year, determined to pursue a career as a poet. Browning lived with his parents until 1846 and so was able to devote his entire energies to his art.

His literary career began in 1833 with the anonymous publication of the long poem *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession.* This was followed by *Paracelsus* (1835) and *Sordello* (1840). All three of these early works met with mostly negative reviews. Beginning in 1841 Browning published a series of eight pamphlets collectively titled *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-45). The series contains narrative poems, including *Pippa Passes* (1841); verse dramas; and two collections of shorter pieces, *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). Although Browning had to this point failed to win either popular or critical esteem, his work did gain the admiration of Elizabeth Barrett, who was a respected and popular poet in her own right. In 1844 she praised Browning in one of her works and received a grateful letter from him in response. They met the following year, fell in love, and in 1846, ignoring the disapproval of her father, eloped to Italy, where they spent the remainder of their life together. Their son Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning was born in 1849.

In Italy Browning continued to write, and though public success still eluded him, his works attracted increasing respect from critics. Following Elizabeth's death in 1861, he and his son returned to England. The appearance in 1864 of the collection *Dramatis Personae* finally brought Browning his first significant critical and popular acclaim. In 1868-69 he published *The Ring and the Book,* a series of dramatic monologues in which various speakers relate different perspectives on an actual seventeenth-century Italian murder case. Tremendously popular, *The Ring and the Book* firmly established Browning's reputation. From 1868 on, Browning was generally regarded as one of England's greatest living poets. He remained highly productive, and the publication of his *Dramatic Idyls* (1879-80) and other works brought him worldwide fame. In 1881 the Browning Society was established in London for the purpose of studying his poems. Near the end of his life he was the recipient of various honors, including a degree from Oxford University and an audience with Queen Victoria. Following his death in 1889 during a stay in Venice, he was buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

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 "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 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!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2:

The beginning note is meant to explain to that the speaker of the poem is the Duke of Ferrara; this provides the reader with location (Italy) and class environment (aristocratic). In the opening lines Browning sets the scene for the poem, focusing the reader's imagination on the painting on the wall. The central premise of the poem is put in place: the dead wife will appear to come back to life only through the artistry of the picture. Through this, Browning allows the reader to begin to think *of* the woman as a real person, once very much alive, and initiates a "relationship" between the dead woman and the reader. Once the reader begins to feel sympathy for the woman, then the subsequent "reasons" given by the Duke concerning her "imperfections" will seem all the more outrageous.

Lines 3-4:

Here, Browning accomplishes two things: a) an emphasis on the mastery *of* the artist, "Fra Pando if," who created a work *of* art that makes the dead woman seem so animated; and b) an introduction to the Duke's subtle, mocking tone with the phrases "piece *of* wonder" and "busily a day". These words seem to be heavy with ridicule and scorn for both woman and artist. At this point the reader might begin to think the Duke was jealous *of* the man who "fussed" over his wife but who, ultimately created-not a masterpiece-but just a portion *of* one. It should be noted that, unlike some other figures in Browning's work, Fra Pando If-and later, Claus *of* Innsbruck-is an imaginary, not historical, figure.

Line 5:

The use *of* the word "you" informs the reader that there is an immediate addressee within the fiction *of* the poem; the speaker is not addressing the reader, but another character. More specifically, it indicates that the speaker *of* the poem, the Duke, is now addressing the emissary directly, asking him to sit and gaze upon picture *of* the dead woman. The reader may imagine the emissary sitting in a chair while the Duke stands and delivers his speech. In *ef* fect, the emissary is now in a subordinate position.

Lines 6-9:

The words "by design" imply that the artist is well-known and has some prestige attached to his name. The Duke may want to advertise that it was his own talent for hiring the right artist that was responsible for the "life-like quality" *of* the picture. The Duke also stresses that all *of* the painting's viewers- "strangers like you"-remark upon the painting's lifelike look. In addition, the Duke appears more taken with the painting

than with the real woman the picture represents. The image *of* emotion-the "passion" in the "glance"-seems more valuable to him than genuine emotion. The use *of* the word "its" instead *of* "her" suggests that the Duke has more *of* a relationship with the painting than he did with his dead wife. With these details, Browning begins to interject the notion *of* the Duke's jealousy. That "passionate glance" might have been placed there by the painter, whom the Duke probably sees as a rival for his dead wife's affection.

Lines 10-13:

These lines suggest just how striking the depth and passion of the image are, since apparently all previous viewers have wanted to know what excited the Duchess enough to inspire that look in her eyes. The Duke also betrays his possessiveness and desire for control when he comments that "none puts by / The curtain... but I."

Lines 14-15:

At this point, Browning suggests more of the Duke's possessiveness, as he tells the emissary that it wasn't his presence alone that made his wife happy or caused the "spot of joy," which may literally have been a blush. The Duke insinuates that this blush must have come to her face from either being in the company of a lover or from her far too impressionable and undiscriminating nature.

Lines 16-21:

The Duke begins to offer his guesses at what, aside from some illicit pleasure, might have caused the Duchess to blush. Two readings are possible, turning on the reader's sense of how seriously the Duke believes in the monk's vows of celibacy. If the painter was not the Duchess' lover, then her nature was simply too susceptible to flattery for the Duke's liking.

Lines 22-34:

This section of the poem begins the Duke's long list of complaints against the Duchess. First and foremost, she was innocent, too easily pleased and impressed. He blames her for not seeing any difference between being the wife of a "great man" and: being able to see the sunset; receiving a bouquet from someone of status below the Duke's; or riding a white mule. While he thinks it's fine to be courteous ("She thanked men,-good!"), she gave all men the kind of respect that only a man wi.th his family's rank and distinction deserves.

Lines 35-43:

Having recounted the Duchess's imperfections, the Duke announces that, even though her faults were many, he would not lower himself"stoop"-by telling her what bothered him. Note how the Duke tries to paint himself as a "plain-spoken" man, one who has no "skill" in "speech." At this point in the poem, the reader may realize the Duke is well-skilled in the uses of language. The Duke explains that, even if he had the skill to tell the Duchess just how much she disgusted him, he would not have explained to her how and why her actions bothered him. On one hand, he betrays a fear that she would have argued with him: "plainly set / Her wits to yours." On the other hand, he explains that the very process of having to explain his feelings to her would have constituted a compromise (or "stoop") to his authority.

Lines 44-48:

These lines contain the speaker's final judgement on the Duchess. The Duke recalls his dead wife's smile, and how she never reserved her smile for him. The lines "gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" tell us that the Duke used his power to curb his wife's friendliness, but the words also leave the details ambiguous. At best, he may have restricted her behavior in a way that dampened her ardor for life; at worst, he may have ordered her assassination. The next lines, with the emphasis on "as if alive," underscore her death.

Lines 49-53:

As the poem draws to a close, the Duke redirects his attention to his upcoming marriage. He tells the emissary that he is certain his future bride's father will give him a generous dowry. The Duke, however, wants to be seen as a man who is more interested in his fiancée than in any money she might bring to their union. At this point, the reader is unlikely to trust these declarations and is likely to fear for this young woman's welfare.

Lines 54-56:

The poem concludes with the final image of a god, "Neptune ," taming a sea-horse. The image of the powerful god taking control over a creature like a sea-horse demonstrates the relationship between the Duke (Neptune) and the last Duchess (seahorse). It is as if, by pointing out this sculpture to the emissary, the Duke is restating his power over his future bride, as well as his more general power in the world. The final lines emphasize another aspect of that power, showing not just the Duke's desire to possess rare objects of beauty, but also his ability to do so.

Themes

Pride

The speaker's overbearing pride-or in moral terms, his hubris-is incorporated into the very situation of Browning's monologue. In it, the Duke addresses an inferior, the emissary of a nobleman ("the Count, your master") whose daughter he intends to make his second wife. There are financial negotiations at stake-the matter of a dowry that the Duke intends to collect from the Count. In fact, the Duke seems in the process of acquiring in the next Duchess an "object," to use his own word. But the actual amount of money is not the real issue. The Duke suggests that among noblemen, whose behaviors are governed by "just pretense," no reasonable monetary request would be denied; the negotiations, then, are in one sense a mere formality. In a second sense, however, money functions symbolically, both in the Duke's mind and for the reader trying to understand the Duke's motives. In his world, after all, people can be bought and sold, and the terms of their existence can determined by those like the Duke who possess all the power in a hierarchical society. Thus, the negotiations are really about the conditions under which the Count's daughter will become the Duke's wife-conditions that amount to, the Duke suggests, absolute submission to his pride.

To stress this point, the Duke describes the fate of his former wife, his "last duchess." It is here that we see the juxtaposition of the Duke's corrupt pride and the Duchess' pureness. Though he describes her affronts to his arrogant nature, she comes across as a warm and lively woman, one loved by everybody for her ability to enjoy life. Yet her pleasant demeanor evoked jealousy in the Duke: she was "too soon made glad, / too easily impressed: she liked whate'er / she looked on, and her looks went everywhere." He found it insulting that she equated his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name" with "anybody's gift." Clinging to his pride, however, he considered it a form of "trifling" to display his resentment or to discuss his feelings with the Duchess-it would have amounted to "stooping," and the Duke "chose never to stoop." Instead, he "gave commands," and the Duchess' "looks stopped altogether." Thus, the Duke felt it was better to dispense with the Duchess altogether than to live with a woman whose devotion was not--he believed-focused entirely upon him.

Art and Experience

The Duke's monologue both begins and concludes with the Duke drawing his listener's attention to works of art: first, the painting of the "last Duchess," his former wife; in the final lines, a sculpture of the sea-god Neptune taming a "seahorse." Because of this, the entire monologue-ostensibly about the failings of the late Duchess-is actually couched in the aesthetic terms the Duke applies to human relationships. But precisely what are those terms? On one level, they seem wrapped in the same corrupt arrogance that led to the demise of his first wife. As he exhibits the painting and sculpture, it is clear he wants the listener to admire not so much the works themselves as him. If they are

beautiful, such beauty exists as proof of the Duke's excellent taste and his connections with the best artists of his day. His aesthetic sense, then, is equal to his ambition: he is obsessed with the ownership and control of beauty itself. This is evident in the way he describes the shortcomings of the former Duchess, who was beautiful but refused to be "owned" in such a way, and in his commentary on the Neptune sculpture, which he admires less for its intrinsic value than for the fact it is "thought a rarity" and has been cast by a famous artist "for me."

On a second level, it becomes clear the Duke's refined taste as a collector bears no relation to the humanistic qualities of the art itself. In the sculpture, he misses the irony we perceive: that Neptune, "taming" a creature of natural beauty and freedom, is in fact symbolic of the Duke himself. He also fails to understand that his appreciation for the skill with which the Duchess has been rendered on canvas is incongruous with his lack of appreciation for the painting's real-life subject. In this way, he has not only assigned art a higher place than life-he has also credited to art the qualities it draws from life. Thus, he is able to replace a living wife with a portrait of one: 'That's my last Duchess painted on the wall," he says, "looking as if she were alive." While he reproaches the woman herself, he deems the painting "a wonder"-a fonn of perfection that, in his opinion at least, life itself cannot approach.

Style

"My Last Duchess" is written in rhymed iambic pentameter, which maintains an even beat throughout the poem.

Iambic pentameter has been said to be the most natural cadence of the English language. It consists of an iamb, which is two syllables: an unstressed followed by a stressed. An example of an iamb might be the words "a heart," drawn from the lines: "A heart-how shall I say? too soon made glad." The rhythm of the first two words can be scanned with emphasis indicating a stressed syllable, and an unstressed syllable:

a heart.

Pentameter means that there are five groups of iambs in a line of poetry; each group is called a foot.

"My Last Duchess" also uses rhymed couplets, meaning that every two lines end with a rhyme. For example, the first two lines of the poem end with the words "wall" and "call." The poetic device of the rhymed couplet, however, is balanced by the use of enjambment, which creates the more natural cadence of a conversation. This technique also helps to keep the even rhythm of iambic pentameter from sounding too monotonous. The poem interrupts itself-much as the speaker of the poem interrupts himself-by inserting a question here ("how shall I say?") or a parenthetical comment there "(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)". This device also helps to illustrate how the Duke's true motivations are breaking through the surface of his everyday language.

Historical Context

Browning's poem, which is set in Renaissance Italy, may tell us less about the Renaissance itself than about Victorian views toward the period. The incident the poem dramatizes comes from the life of Alfonso II, a nobleman of Spanish origin who was Duke of Ferrara in Italy during the sixteenth century. Alfonso's first wife was Lucrezia, a member of the Italian Medici family and the daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Although she died only two years into the marriage - to be replaced, as the poem suggests, by the daughter of the Count of Tyrol - Lucrezia transformed the court of Ferrara into a gathering place for Renaissance artists, including the famous Venetian painter Titian. As a result, Ferrara became exemplary of the aesthetic awakening that was taking place throughout Italy.

The term Renaissance, from the French word, actually means "rebirth," and the time to which it refers is characterized by cultural and intellectual developments as much as by political events. During the Renaissance, which is generally defined as the period 1350 to 1700, Europeans experienced the resurrection of classical Greek and Roman ideals that had remained dormant since the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. Artists and thinkers of the Renaissance believed that classical art, science, philosophy, and literature had been lost during the "dark ages" that followed the fall of Rome. They held that these ideals waited to be rediscovered, and Italians in particular believed themselves to be the true heirs to Roman achievement. For this reason, it was natural that the Rel1aissance should begin in Italy, where the ruins of ancient civilization provided a continual reminder of the classical past and where other artistic movements-the Gothic, for instance-had never taken firm hold.

Especially in Italy, the artistic achievement of the Renaissance was facilitated by a system of patronage: wealthy individuals commissioned paintings, sculptures, and buildings to glorify their own achievements. The works of such artists as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello come to us as a direct result of such patronage, and their visions reflect the ideals of the period. Foremost among Renaissance ideals was that of humanism. Like the ancient Greeks and Ro mans, Renaissance artists and thinkers valued the condition of earthly life, glorified man's nature, and celebrated individual achievement. These attitudes combined to form a new spirit of optimism-the belief that man was capable of accomplishing great things.

But there was a dark side to the Renaissance, and people of Browning's era often took a dim view toward the era as a whole. In some ways, this view was a subtle acknowledgment of the Victorians' own shortcomings and fears. For instance, just as Renaissance humanism seemed to elevate man at the expense of God, the Victorians found themselves puzzling over God's existence in light of Darwinism. Similarly, the Victorians' own experience demonstrated that the high points of civilization and progress do not necessarily coincide with moral virtues. As England was fighting colonial wars and grappling with mass poverty in its factory towns, Victorians looked at the Renaissance for a sense of moral superiority. And they had certain justification to do so. For all its cultural achievement, the Renaissance was rife with corruption, perversity,

and violence. The same power that allowed wealthy families to commission great art also enabled them to crush rival individuals or even cities, and nearly all the noble art patrons-including the Borgia family, of whom the historical "last Duchess" was a member-had murders to answer for.

Critical Overview

In general, critics have agreed on many basic interpretive issues about "My Last Duchess." William DeVane appears to voice common opinion when he characterizes the last Duchess as an obvious victim-as "outraged innocence" trapped in an age when "no god came to the rescue." Readers also easily agree that the dramatic monologue works ironically, presenting a meaning at odds with the speaker's intention: that is, the more the Duke says, the more he loses the reader's sympathy. Critics also concur that "My Last Duchess" exemplifies two important elements of Browning's talent for dramatic monologue: his ability to evoke the unconstrained reaction of a person in a particular situation or crisis and his use of history to provide the appropriate historical context.

In support of the first element, William O. Raymond, writing for *Studies in Philology* suggests that "My Last Duchess" is a "masterpiece" because it "fuses character and incident, thought and emotion." Raymond, as other critics have also argued, suggests that the poet uses dramatic monologue to create or isolate a single moment in which the character reveals himself most starkly. In 1982 Clyde de L. Ryals extended this assertion a little further, arguing that the Duke not only "tells all" in this unguarded moment, but further that he "attempts to justify it," revealing even more of himself in the process.

Many readers have also noted that the poet creates an important historical context for the Duke, and the values he reveals, by setting the poem in Renaissance Italy. Values that might strike us today and may even have struck Browning's nineteenth-century readers as unacceptable-possessiveness, haughtiness, love of power--could have been expected in a Renaissance aristocrat, thus accounting for at least some of the Duke's self-importance. Along these lines, several critics have praised the poem for its historical accuracy. Robert Langbaum, in his 1957 book *The Poetry of Experience; The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition,* contends that "we accept the combination of villainy with taste and manners as a phenomenon of the Renaissance and of the old aristocratic order generally."

Langbaum introduces a less evident point when he asserts that Browning's poem takes the reader beyond acceptance to actual sympathy with or admiration for the Duke. Langbaum acknowledges that the Duchess is the first object of reader sympathy-"no summary or paraphrase would indicate that condemnation is not our principle response "but also proposes that the form of dramatic monologue disposes the reader to suspend moral judgement and possibly to identify with the Duke. Not only do we admire the Duke's power and taste, according to Langbaum, but we also have no choice but to be "overwhelmed" by his speech, just as the envoy is. Ryals echoes this reading in 1982 when he contends that, because the Duke "is a fascinating character, bigger than life," the reader must hold "two conflicting views of the same individual."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Arnold Markley is *a freelance writer who has contributed essays and reviews to* Approaches to Teaching D. H. Lawrence's Fiction *and* The Jour nal of the History of Sexuality. He is currently an Assistant Professor in English at Penn State University, Media, PA. In the following essay, Markley describes how Browning uses the form of the dramatic monologue to let the poem's subject tell a story while, at the same time, unintentionally revealing some unflattering personality traits.

Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" is a splendid example of the irony that a poet can achieve within the format of the dramatic monologue, a poetic form in which there is only one speaker. When there is only one speaker, we necessarily have to weigh carefully what he or she is telling us, and we often have to "read between the lines" in keeping an objective perspective on the story or incidents that the speaker describes to us. We can gather from this poem's setting, "Ferrara," a town in Italy, as well as from the speaker's reference to his "last Duchess," that the speaker in this poem is the Duke of Ferrara. Twentieth-century scholars have found a viable prototype upon whom Browning may have based this characterization in the figure of Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the sixteenth century, and whose first wife died under mysterious circumstances. But what kind of person is this Duke, and what exactly is the story of his last duchess? To find out, let's take a closer look at what he tells us.

First of all, it is evident that the Duke is speaking to someone, and that he is showing his auditor a painting. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall," he says, and then explains that the painter, Fra Pandolf, "worked busily a day, and there she stands." The Duke then describes the usual reaction that people have to viewing this painting-a reaction specifically to the Duchess' "earnest glance." He says that strangers often turn to him as if to ask "How such a glance came there," and then tells his auditor, "so, not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus." But has his auditor actually asked the Duke a question, or is the Duke simply making an assumption, based upon a look on his guest's face, that he is reacting to the painting as every other viewer has reacted to it') If he is jumping to a conclusion in the case of this latest viewer, then how do we know that he is right about other peopie's reactions to the painting'? Perhaps he sees in other people's looks what he wants to see. We will need to remember this possible aspect of the Duke's character as we continue to listen to his story.

Next the Duke elaborates on his last Duchess' glance in the portrait, and calls it a "spot of joy." But it was not his presence only that caused her to smile in such a way, he says. The painter, Fra Pandolf, may have said anything from the simple" 'Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much,'" to the much more flattering" 'Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat,'" and the lady's reaction would be this same, blushing "spot of joy." The Duke then tells us more about his lady's likes. She had a heart "too soon made glad," he says, and she was too easily pleased by everything she looked on. "Sir, 'twas all one!" he says to his listener, listing the things that pleased her: the Duke's own favor, a beautiful sunset in the west, a bough of ripe cherries from the orchard, a white mule she loved to ride--each of these things she

enjoyed to the same degree, and each brought the same blush of pleasure to her cheek.

Finally we get to the heart of the Duke's problem with his former wife. She thanked people who pleased her, which was all well and good in theory, but she thanked them all with equal affection, "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift.:' The Duke seems to have been offended that she did not single him out among the others who pleased her, and underrated his gift of a well-established name and proud family heritage. She smiled, he says, whenever he passed her, "but who passed without / Much the same smile'?" And how did the Duke react to this'? "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?" he asks his auditor. The whole business is beneath him. Even if he had "skill / In speech," it would be stooping to address such a situation, and he tells his listener that he indeed does not have skill in speech. This statement is ironic, for the Duke actually seems to be quite a polished speaker, although he may be telling us a great deal about his personality and history that he may not have intended to reveal. So what became of this seemingly kind and happy lady, who evidently enjoyed whatever she experienced? "I gave commands," the Duke says, "Then all smiles stopped together." He says for a second time, "There she stands / As if alive," suggesting that the lady is no more. And yet, strangely, he shows no compunction for his actions.

As we make this discovery about the fate of his last wife, the Duke changes the direction of his speech to his auditor. "Will't please you rise?" he asks, and suggests that they go below to meet other guests, dismissing the difference in his and his guest's ranks by stating generously, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir." The Duke then provides us with a hint as to the identity of his auditor. He speaks to the man of "the Count your master," and hints that this Count's reputed wealth will surely provide the Duke with an ample dowry, a sum of money given by a bride's father to her new husband. These details indicate, ironically, that the Duke's guest is a messenger from a Count, and that his mission is to arrange a marriage between the Duke and the Count's daughter. At this point, do we believe the Duke when he assures us that it is not the money, but the Count's "fair daughter's self' that is his "object?" Or perhaps it is both, for the word "object" seems to be an important one in making a final assessment of the Duke's character. He is a collector of art objects, after all, and he seems to enjoy showing off his rich collection. After all, the whole occasion of his speech has been an explanation of the origin of a portrait of his former wife. Moreover, on the way out of his art gallery, he takes the time to point out one final art object to his guest: "Notice Neptune, though / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" Once again the Duke takes the opportunity to show off a piece of art that he is proud of and to drop the name of the artist, hoping to impress his guest. The subject of the sculpture adds to our reaction to the Duke's story; here a powerful god subdues a wild seahorse, much as the Duke has subdued his former Duchess. And as Claus of Innsbruck has caught this image for him in bronze, he has had Fra Pandolf catch his wife's "spot of joy" in a painting which can handily be hidden behind a curtain, at last giving the Duke complete control over whom his wife smiles at ("since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I"). The final two words seem to say It all in summing up what the Duke values: after all, the sculpture of Neptune was cast "for me!"

Ironically, despite the fact that the Duke simply tells us the story of his first wife and how her portrait came to be painted, he manages to tell us a great deal more about his own personality. We can judge that he is a vain man who is quite proud of his heritage and his "nine-hundred-years-old name," and that he is quite proud of his art collection. As Neptune tames the sea-horse, he has tamed a former wife, transforming her uncontrollable spirit into an object of art and preserving her loveliness-"as if she were alive"-into a medium over which he can exert complete control. He is no longer subject to the "trifling" situation of her constant smiling, and he can now control whom she smiles at and who is exposed to her beauty. Much of the dramatic irony in the poem, however, lies in the identity of the auditor. The Duke has given all of this information about his personality and the history of his former marriage to an envoy who has been sent to arrange a new marriage. Some critics have even suggested that in this speech made to the man sent to negotiate his second marriage, the Duke is cleverly indicating what kind of behavior he will expect in his new wife. Nevertheless, knowing what we now know about this Duke, who would lead another unsuspecting young girl into such a situation?

Despite his wish to impress us with himself and to detract from his last Duchess' qualities, Browning's self-satisfied Duke ironically manages instead to paint her as a gentle and lovely person and himself as somewhat of a monster. He is truly a paradoxical, yet not entirely unappealing, character despite one's reaction to his morality by the end of the poem. It is hard not to be drawn into his skillful speech, which is carefully designed to impress his guest with his name and possessions and flatter the envoy into representing him favorably with his potential father-in-law. His pride in .his painting, his willingness to dwell on the loveliness and virtues of his earlier wife despite his feelings about her, his generosity toward his guest, and his enthusiasm for his collection-stopping to comment on one last object before going down to "collect" one more wife-keep the reader guessing throughout the poem and constantly caught off guard by the revelation of one surprising personality trait after another.

Source: Arnold Markley, in an essay *for Poetry for Stu dents,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Miller discusses how the Duke reveals his enormous ego as he describes the painting of his last Duchess.

Few teachers of Browning's "My Last Duchess" fail to encounter a common undergraduate assessment of the Duchess as at best a flirt, at worst a faithless wife. Usually unaccompanied by evidence, this assessment is easily dismissed by a practiced reader, especially inasmuch as received opinion enshrines the Duchess as a model of spontaneity and innocent joy and a victim of her egomaniacal husband. While I believe the Duchess's character to be almost precisely what received opinion holds it to be, I would like to assert that the vague appraisal of the Duchess as flirtatious or unfaithful is a misappraisal only because incomplete. In fact, because the Duke is the source of this misrepresentation, ignoring it robs us of another example of his cunningly disavowed skill in speech and obscures Browning's art.

The misrepresentation of the Duchess begins when the Duke, anticipating the emissary's question of how the "spot of joy" in Fra Pandolf's portrait of the Duchess came to be on her cheek, readily explains its presence. Quickly he admits "'t was not / Her husband's presence only" that caused the blush, a statement superficially correct but whose negative phrasing forces a misconception. When he later reveals that a white mule or a calm sunset are presences that could stir his lady, one can see that "not her husband's presence only" has as its positive statement "The presence of many delightful things." But the positive rendering can also be understood as "The presence of men *other than* her husband," an implication accentuated when the Duke in the next line attributes the blush to Fra Pandolf's remarks. And it is these remarks-the way now prepared for them-that do most to taint the Duchess. While the first of these comments appears innocent enough-merely posing instructions to the lady-its syntax, as will be seen shortly, provides a telling complication. But the next remark from Fra Pandolf, that" 'Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat,'" is an utterance no man could make directly to a woman without clear intention; if made directly, it can hardly be characterized as "courtesy," as the Duke quickly does. In fact, given the poem's social milieu, such verbal liberties with a Duke's wife would be unthinkable unless some encouragement prompted them. Thus artfully informed-and misguided-the emissary (and the naive reader) can respond in only one way to later remarks by the Duke that "she liked what' er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" or that she ranked the gift of a cherry bough from some officious fool with her lord's "favour at her breast."

The truth of the situation is apparent when the portrait-painting scene is properly visualized. It contains not Fra Pandolf and his subject alone, but is presided over by the Duke, keeping a close watch over his Duchess as well as a sharp eye on the manufacture by a hireling artist of yet another object for his collection.

The Duke's presence there, fully in keeping with his character as revealed throughout the poem, accounts for the ambiguous syntax of his direct quotation of Fra Pandolf. In

the first comment the Duke attributes to him, Fra Pandolf apparently speaks to the Duchess in the third person ("Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much"), a familiar convention of formality by which nobility is often addressed. This convention prepares the emissary to assume the recipient of the second comment also to be the Duchess, and to do so because of the continued employment of the third person. Moreover, because the Duke is relating Fra Pandolf's comment to the emissary, his words may be taken not as direct quotation, which they are, but as paraphrase, whereby the "her" is understood to be reportorial substitution for an original "your." Through such verbal legerdemain the emissary is doubly misled and, carried onward by the Duke's eloquence, is left with the uneasy, half-apprehended sense that Fra Pandolf's second remark was, as previously argued, a seductive compliment, likely welcomed and perhaps even encouraged.

But with the Duke present at the portrait painting, the compliment on the Duchess's appearance is addressed by Fra Pandolf to him and becomes a sycophant's flattery of his patron's choice in women. As such, it is flattery emptied of the sexual implications that the Duke supplies in his reporting. In fact, returning to the utterance, "Sir, 't was not / Her husband's presence only," one sees that the artistry of the Duke's admission stems from its being larded with innuendo and at the same time accurate: his presence *at the painting of the portrait* was not the sole cause of the Duchess's spot of joy, but even Fra Pandolf's fawning remarks contributed.

There is no need to think that the Duke is conscious of his implications: given his excessive pride, his refusal ever to stoop, he could hardly tolerate allowing another to believe his Duchess unfaithful to him, especially through his own revelation, however subtle. Yet the implications are not entirely accidental on his part and can be seen as one of the poem's great strengths. What are the snares of language in the service of the thwarted human will? As he believes is only his right, the Duke attempts to acquire another Duchess who will respond solely to him, and to that end he tells his last Duchess's story. In so doing he reveals a colossal ego. But through his very skill in speech he betrays that ego, for his subtle and unconscious slander of his last victim exposes at bottom an instinctive self-justifier, or at least a man predictably insecure behind a tyrant's swagger. All in all, the Duke's account of the presence of the spot of joy in the portrait does not condemn his Duchess to a moral position tending to excuse his actions toward her, but instead reinforces the poem's greatest achievement: the delineation of an ego sustained by use of language both subtle and audacious. Paradoxically, it is an ego exposed and undercut by the medium with which it seeks to dominate its world.

Source: Michael G. Miller "Browning's My Last Duchess'" in *The Explicator,* Vol. 47, No.4, Summer, 1989 pp. 32-34.

Critical Essay #3

Millet discusses the reality of the Duke's description of his Duchess.

As Browning explained to a literary group, the Duke's "design" in mentioning Fra Pandolf at the beginning of "My Last Duchess" is "To have some occasion for telling the story, and illustrating part of it." Although accurate when fully understood, his explanation is subtly misleading in that it permits commentators to dismiss the Duke's reference to the painter as an unimportant conversational gambit. A typical example is B. R. Jerman's recent suggestion that the "first mention of the artist is, as it were, bait. The envoy may have exclaimed, 'What a beautiful portrait! Who on earth did it? "Picasso, of course!' the Duke replies. The bait is out, and the Duke knows, from having stalked other prey, what questions such a man as the envoy would ask."

I contend that the Duke's reference to the painter is part of his answer to a definite aesthetic question with which he is directly concerned in all but the last few lines of his monologue, and that if one simply dismisses it, he fails to appreciate (I) the Duke's ironic misunderstanding of the proper relationship between reality and art, (2) the rationale of his attack on the Duchess, and (3) the degree to which, as W. C. DeVane says, he "reduces his Duchess to an object of art."

In the first place, whether he actually states it or simply implies it by his reaction, the envoy apparently poses his question after the Duke's first mention of Fra Pandolf, not before. The Duke and his visitor, on a tour of the palace, pause in one of the upper galleries while the Duke draws a curtain to reveal the fresco portrait of a woman. Identifying it as his "last Duchess," he remarks that he considers it "a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands." Either at this point or immediately after he has been invited to "sit and look at her," the envoy asks "How such a glance came there." If he questions the glance before the Duke begins to speak, the first four lines of the poem would be almost garrulously beside the point, but if he does so after the brief introductory remarks, the Duke's next sentence is perfectly apposite. "I mentioned Fra Pandolf on purpose," he says, "because every stranger who has been permitted to see this portrait has asked me (at least by the implications of his attitude) precisely the same question which you have just asked." What Mr. Jerman calls "the bait," then, would seem to be the portrait itself, and the identification of the painter a part of the Duke's answer to a question which he has fully anticipated and is perhaps eager to discuss.

But the question is not "Who painted it'?" It is "What accounts for this expression?" We must recognize that no matter what our conception of the living Duchess may be, the Duchess of the portrait is not laughing or even smiling. Her expression is specifically described as an "earnest" (i.e., serious) look revealing "depth and passion" set off by only a "spot / Of joy" in the "cheek." And it is as the Duke describes it. Phelps' argument that his description is "intense irony, in ridicule of the conventional remarks made by previous visitors" is clearly contradicted by the evidence. Every stranger who had seen the portrait was moved not merely to comment on it, but to question it, and always in the

same way. If they were all merely uttering conventional praise or inquiring about the painter, why should they be afraid to speak, as the Duke says they were'? There must be something in the Duchess' glance which infallibly calls forth a question about its sources, and it seems doubtful that a simple smile, or indeed anything less than the complex expression which the Duke describes, would be sufficient to do so in every instance. Even if one were to argue that the question is a strategic one manufactured by the Duke and imputed by him to the strangers and the envoy, the fact remains that he, at least, considers the glance remarkable enough to justify explanation.

As the Duke fully understands, the question stimulated by this intriguing glance involves not only the relationship between the portrait and the living woman, but certain conscious or unconscious assumptions about that relationship. In asking "How such a glance came there," the strangers and the envoy show that they take the portrait to be a reflection of the Duchess' total personality, of her reaction to some specific circumstance, or of both at once. They further reveal that they do not consider the portrait an end in itself: they assume (since they are, significantly, strangers who did not know her) that the living Duchess was more interesting and perhaps even more complex than her portrait suggests. Having anticipated this question, the Duke had begun in his first remarks to the envoy to expound what he apparently considers a remarkable irony: there was nothing in the situation nor in the living Duchess' personality to correspond to the complexity of her painted expression. He mentioned Fra Pandolf because the painter was solely responsible for whatever is of interest in the Duchess' expression. That is why he considers the portrait "a wonder."

What has heretofore escaped notice is that his entire indictment of the Duchess is not a gratuitous attack, but the logical, fully developed continuation of this answer. Sexual jealousy and fierce, even psychotic possessiveness may well be his fundamental motivation, but his primary, conscious motive is to explain the contrast between the portrait and the living model. To argue that he denounces the Duchess *because* of "the depth and passion of her earnest glance" is to obscure the richest irony of his lecture. He is able to maintain his tone of chillingly casual objectivity because he is convinced that the living Duchess was quite unlike the portrait. The situation to which she was reacting was no more than a few trivial compliments ("stuff') uttered by the painter. She was not "deep" but excessively shallow and undiscriminating: "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!" This is proved to his satisfaction by her ranking of art, "My favour at her breast," with what he considers trivial natural delights-sunset, a "bough of cherries," a ride on a white mule. And he is perhaps more contemptuous of her taste than jealous of her person when he remarks that "she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift." As for her "earnest glance" in the portrait, that too was Fra Pandolf's work: the living Duchess, he insists, was a fatuously good natured woman who smiled at everyone who passed. She missed and exceeded "the mark" in so many ways that the Duke found her, as he says, disgusting.

It is needless to comment on the more obvious irony of this indictment. For most readers, the Duchess emerges as an innocent, admirable woman while the Duke

unconsciously reveals his own shocking arrogance, cruelty, and emptiness. Not so obvious is the bearing of his answer on the problem of possessiveness itself-the degree to which he is successful in reducing the Duchess (or as he seems to think, elevating her) to the level of a work of art. The key to this question, kept by Fra Pandolf opens up two alternative answers. While we cannot know the portrait except in the Duke's description of it, we can legitimately ask whether it is a "good" or a "bad" likeness on the same grounds that we ask about the true nature of the Duchess. That is, has Fra Pandolf given the admirably ingenuous Duchess a conventional "depth and passion"? Or has he perceived in her a depth which was really there but which the Duke was unaware of?

If we accept the first hypothesis, arguing that the work is a typical court painting cynically calculated to please the Duke and perhaps flatter the Duchess, then the Duke's possession of her is more complete than anyone has realized. Since he has given "commands" which apparently led to her death, she continues to exist only as an artifact which he controls with a curtain. But most important, he (or at least his agent Fra Pandolf) has altered her nature to make her conform to the characteristics which the Duke values. In this, his taste is less than admirable: he places a higher valuation on an essentially unrealistic court painting than he does on living reality, and he regards a painting as "a wonder" simply because it flatters his prejudices. The other alternative, that Fra Pandolf perceived and caught the Duchess' true "depth and passion," may have equal support in the poem. In the course of the Duke's remarks, we become convinced that the Duchess was not really shallow and fatuous, and it is not difficult to believe her capable of the depth which the portrait reveals. At least one "officious fool" admired her, and it may be that Fra Pandolf also admired and meant it when he said that art could never hope to do justice to her beauty. Above all, the painting is apparently good enough to call forth an intense reaction from everyone who sees it. If it is indeed a true likeness in this sense, the Duchess escapes the Duke in the painting as she escapes the charges of his indictment. Her real depth of soul, caught in the portrait, is revealed to everyone but the Duke, and he, admiring the painting for its expression but failing to see that art in this instance truly reflects reality, is again convicted of tastelessness and lack of discrimination.

In "My Last Duchess," then, the Duke's reference to Fra Pandolf is "an occasion for telling the story" in that it introduces a topic which the Duke wants to expound, and it is a means of "illustrating" his thesis that reality, the living Duchess, was infinitely less admirable and less complicated than the Duchess "painted on the wall." Others, particularly Hiram Corson, have noticed that "the Duke values his wife's picture wholly as a picture, not as the... reminder of a sweet and lovely woman," but they have failed to perceive either the full implications and rationale of this choice or the extent of its contribution to the characterization and structure of the poem. Whatever else the monologue may reveal about character, motive, and action, it is presented as the Duke's fluent answer to an aesthetic question involving the relationship between art and reality.

Source: Stanton Millet "Art and Reality in 'My Last Duchess'" in *The Victorian Newsletter,* No. 17, Spring, 1960, pp. 25-27.

Topics for Further Study

Much has been said about the Duke's account of his former wife's fate: "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." What precisely does the Duke mean by these lines? How can we tell? Why do you think Browning lets the Duke express the most dramatic part of his story in such brief and cryptic terms?

The Duke reproaches the late Duchess' character, but the reader might come away from the poem with an entirely different view of her. What can we tell about the Duchess from the Duke's own account of her? What does his description of her "shortcomings" tell us about her, and what do they tell us about the Duke?

Part of the poem's impact comes from the Duke's certainty that he has behaved properly. As an exercise, write a two-page monologue in which someone confesses to a crime for which he feels no remorse. Before you begin, consider your approach. What tone will your speaker adopt? What words will he choose to describe the crime itself? What justification can he offer for what he has done?

Compare and Contrast

1842: English social reformer Edwin Chadwick publishes "Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain." The report, which exposes the poor conditions and high disease rate among England's factory workers, shocks the public and raises the need for reform.

Today: While the living conditions of workers in advanced nations remain acceptable, annual United Nations reports on conditions in Third World countries show workers experience ongoing poverty, disease, and occupational danger.

1843: A British force of 2,800 men under Sir Charles Napier defeats a 30,000-man Baluch Army, forcing India's Muslim emirs of Sind to surrender their independence to the East India Company.

Today: Great Britain relinquishes Hong Kong, the jewel of its remaining Asian colonial possessions, to the Republic of China. To many, the event symbolizes the increasing transfer of European power to other parts of the world.

1846: After a series of crop failures, Parliament repeals the Corn Laws, reducing tariff duties on imported goods and opening the door to free trade.

Today: Britain's political debate centers on whether the country should relinquish the pound in favor of the Euro. The single multinational currency is favored by the European Union, which proposes to make Europe a single economic entity.

What Do I Read Next?

Robert Browning: Robert Brainard Pearsall gives a substantive look at Browning's life and ideas, with continual reference to the poems themselves.

Maisie Ward presents a colorful and readable account of Browning's life and times in *Robert Browning and His World.*

Further Study

Atlick, Richard D., *Victorian People and Ideas,* New York: Norton, 1973.

An overview of Victorian culture and history, presented thematically as a companion to the literature of the age.

McCarthy, Mary, *The Stones of Florence,* New York: Harvest Books, 1963.

Writing about its most significant city, McCarthy paints a compelling picture of the Renaissance in all its glory and corruption.

Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance,* Chicago: Pandora Books, 1978.

A Victorian, Pater resurrects the great figures of the Renaissance. His biographical sketches tell not only of the period about which he writes but also about his nineteenth-century audience, which had grown skeptical of its Renaissance legacy.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

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We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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