

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE English Literature Paper 1 Lesson Plan

Alignment with Pearson Edexcel Anthology: 'My Last Duchess', Robert Browning p69

Resources: Anthology, web link

Learning Objectives: to decode a text drawing on a range of analytical skills and strategies.

Success Criteria: We can –

Explore language at a connotative level and develop a range of interpretations

Understand poetic terminology/ paralanguage

Consider the importance of genre in a text (dramatic monologue)

Assess the importance of structural features in deciphering meaning

Assessment Objectives:

AO1 – Demonstrate a close knowledge and understanding of texts, maintaining a critical style and presenting an informed personal engagement.

AO2 - Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects.

AO4 - Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

Framework/ Transferable skills: You may wish to talk your students through the skills that they will acquire in this lesson, to enable them to draw on and demonstrate these skills in the future.

- Ethics
- Interpretation
- Critical thinking
- Analysis
- Initiative

Possible Misconceptions and Barriers: The language in this poem is complex and archaic in places and yet needs detailed understanding in order for students to have a confident grasp of the work.

However, certain elements provide clear support, such as comparisons with crimes of passion and obsessive or jealous individuals today. Browning as a writer was a master of the dramatic monologue and seeks to involve readers on a psychological level. If students can understand the true nature of the speaker they are likely to find the poem interesting and compelling. There are excellent analytical notes on this poem available in many sources, for example here:

<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/browning/section3.rhtml>

Starter activities:

Create a hand out with the following ethical conundrum on it:

Who is most guilty?

1. *A man who murders his wife*
2. *A man who gives orders for his wife to be killed but doesn't actually carry it out himself*
3. *A woman who flirts with another man although she is married*
4. *A man who suspects that another man has murdered his wife yet does nothing about it*
5. *A wife who doesn't show gratitude or respect towards her husband for marrying her*
6. *A man who treats his wife as a possession*
7. *A woman who enjoys trivial things in life - like a sunset - because they make her happy*
8. *A father who allows his daughter to marry a man who is suspected of murdering a previous wife*

Students number 1-3 in order of most guilty and also identify their least guilty example. This should generate good class discussion. (Ethics)

Main teaching:

Ask students to look up the following key terms (if online access permits; or provide them with definitions/information):

- Dramatic Monologue
- Unreliable Narrator
- Duke of Ferrara (his marital history)
- Patriarchy
- Iambic (metre)
- Enjambment
- Diction

Contextualise the poem with students and explain the fascination Browning and many other Victorian poets had with the Renaissance and Italy.

Read the poem with students or play an audio version. Students may need to hear the poem and read it twice before beginning to understand the narrative. Before reading, explain the initial setting, a wealthy Duke is speaking with an envoy and arranging a marriage with the daughter of another prominent nobleman.

In this poem we learn about four characters:

The Duke

The Duchess

The Envoy

Fra Pandolf

Ask students to make notes about their first impressions/ understandings of these characters.

(Interpretation)

Next: In pairs, instruct students to highlight aspects of the text where the Duke reveals more about himself and his behaviour/ personality. Elicit examples such as his *“gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.”* Also that *“[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.”*

Discuss the nature of the Duke’s character, what he expected from his wife and find adjectives to describe the Duke’s personality (e.g. controlling, arrogant, insecure, rich, entitled, psychotic, weak).

Again in pairs ask students to dissect the following quotations, commenting on language and any other techniques, relating this to what it reveals about the Duke and the Duchess. These could be presented on a chart with a column for analysis.

- ‘my last Duchess’ – suggests most recent; what therefore happened to the others? (relate to the real life Duke of Ferrara)
- ‘she liked whate’er/ She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.’ – suggests she is unfaithful in his view; but also that he is paranoid and paradoxically she is an innocent who values all equally (play on words ‘look’)
- ‘Even had you skill/ In speech—which I have not’ – implies the Duke is not a confident or articulate man; or suggests that he is being overly modest here since he ‘charms’ the envoy.
- ‘Let/ Herself be lessoned’ – use of the passive here suggests her powerlessness and builds the growing sense of the Duke as a domineering, controlling presence.
- ‘I choose/ Never to stoop’ – lexis ‘stoop’ suggests a man without humility who has a fragile ego
- ‘who passed without/ Much the same smile?’ – indicates the Duchess had a kind nature and was friendly to all; the envoy is meant to infer she flirted with others but the real implication from the poet is that she was simply good hearted.
- ‘Then all smiles stopped together.’ – use of the sibilant ‘s’ sounds and the plosives or harsh ‘t’ sounds implies her life has been brutally ended.

- 'Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed /At starting, is my object.' – a chilling reference to the Duke's future bride since the same fate could befall her; the lexis 'object' is revealing, since the Duke is very much concerned with art, beauty and objects that he owns. **(Critical thinking)**

Arrange students into groups – you may need two lots of each group as there are three focuses for this task. Ask students to examine the poem and prepare notes/ presentation on each focus to present to the class. The Form/ Structure focus is complex and can be given to a group for stretch and challenge. Each focus should have some prompts as follows:

TASKS:

Group 1 – Diction: How does the Duke's diction and syntax contribute to narrative voice?

How do vocabulary choices and sentence structure create a representation of a conflicted persona?

Consider:

- The repetition of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives
- The juxtaposition of 'My favour at her breast' and 'My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name' with
 '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'
- The use of power lexis such as 'will', 'ranked', 'durst', 'stoop', 'I gave commands'

Group 2 – Form and Structure: How do form and structural features contribute to narrative voice?

What impression do we gain of the speaker? Think about the way he wants to present himself and explore:

- The use of the monologue form. What does it suggest about the Duke's persona?
- the choice of regular iambic pentameter heroic couplets. Is this a regular, controlled or a free form?
- the performance he gives and the way he 'voices' others?

How do the above suggest a sense of control?

The way the monologue betrays sub-textual emotion. Comment on:

- use of enjambment to disrupt a sense of control and balance
- use of caesura to disrupt the iambic rhythm

How do these aspects of structure suggest that the Duke is not as calm and controlled as he would like to think?

In what ways is the Duke a good example of an unreliable narrator?

Group 3 - Imagery and symbolism

Many of Browning's poems try to explore the relationship between art and life/ death and often feature artworks.

What impression do we gain of the speaker from his references to the art works in his collection?

Consider:

- The relationship between the living wife and her portrait. The Duke has substituted the living woman for a passive artwork, hidden behind a curtain that only he can draw. What does this tell you about his attitude? What is Browning suggesting about male attitudes to women?
- The statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse. How is this symbolic of the Duke's attitude?
- Aesthetic attitudes. Can people love art more than human beings? What are the reasons for this? Is this a dangerous attitude?
- How does the aesthetic symbolism convey the poem's presentation of the relationship between men and women?

Each group should present back although it's possible that in order to complete their notes, students may need some further notes from the teacher. **(Analysis; Initiative)**

Differentiation: The starter task obliquely references many of the elements of the poem's rather hidden narrative, which should support students in understanding the text; the keywords research task should help students with the more complex elements of the poem and the group task, which uses poetic terminology to frame questions. The focus on specific quotations directs students' attention to key elements of the

narrative. The group task is designed to challenge students and promote more detailed understanding of the poem whilst providing a supportive format through which to ask these complex questions.

Plenary:

Quotation hunter bingo game; the first to find all seven shouts bingo - students have to find quotations to show:

The Duchess was kind to others

The Duke is from an old family

The Duke ordered her death

The Duke sees women as possessions

The Duke's speech shows he is conflicted

The Duke is a controlling man

The Duke's taste in art shows his love of power

Etc.

Homework/ Development:

Using notes developed in the lesson, students make notes about the representation of Romantic love/ marriage in the poem. This is with a view to comparison with Sonnet 116 and building to an essay. See further lesson plan.

Self-audit

Which of the framework skills did students use in these lessons?

Ask them to plot out on the chart which skills they used and when.