

## 1. Explain the following lines.

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.

The above lines are quoted from Robert Browning's dramatic monologue 'My Last Duchess'. The title gives no clear indication of what is to follow, and the addition of 'Ferrara', without any date, says little more. However, it does set the scene in Italy, which is of some importance, since when it was first published (in *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842) the poem was called 'Italy' and bracketed with 'France' (now known as 'Count Gismond'), and it seems likely that Browning intended the two as expressions of certain national characteristics. We may speculate about the date, but Ferrara and the duke's absolute power suggest some time in the early Renaissance. Various Italian dukes, including one from Ferrara, Alfonso II, have been put forward as the originals of the speaker in 'My Last Duchess', and Browning was certainly familiar with the highways and by-ways of Italian history. He liked to allow his imagination to play upon some historical event; and in this case something which he had read may have led him directly towards one of his most insistent preoccupations, the institution of marriage and the tyranny of one partner over the other. Since it takes most of the poem for the full relationship between the duke and his last duchess to be revealed, we should not be surprised at the neutral beginning. The first lines are equable, assured, urbane; the speaker seems to have no particular sadness at the thought of his late wife, but no remorse either. The rhythm of the first line is smooth and untroubled; the ensuing 'Looking as if she were alive' and 'and there she stands' also suggest an absence of guilt and regret, even a kind of complacency. Fra Pandolf's quick work has become a pleasant memory, and his piece or work a wonder. We may perhaps feel some unease at the lack of regret shown by the duke, and at his appreciation of the painting rather than its subject; but it is too early to judge, and Browning is too clever to make him immediately available as a man lacking in humanity who prefers art to life. It is worth noticing, however, how subtly the rhythm and movement of these first lines contribute to our initial awareness of the speaker; we are meeting him for the first time, anxious to catch, through every nuance of tone and attitude, some clues to his character. Almost at once the picture which we had begun to form is blurred, as the sentence becomes more complex.