

INTRO TO HAMLET

Lesson 5: My Last Duchess

Introduction

In this lesson, students read and analyze lines 43–56 of “My Last Duchess” (from “Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene’er I passed her” to “Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”), in which the Duke explains why the Duchess is no longer with him and suggests that he will soon take the Count’s daughter as his new wife. Working with a new standard, RL.9-10.2, students analyze how Browning develops central ideas such as power and status, jealousy, voice, and madness. Student learning is assessed via a Quick Write at the end of the lesson: How does Browning’s choice of speaker impact the development of central ideas in the poem?

For homework, students respond briefly in writing to the following prompt: Why is the bronze statue described in lines 54–56 important to the Duke? Students also review and expand their annotations about how Browning introduces and develops the poem’s narrator (and main character), the Duke.

Standards

| Assessed Standard(s) | |
|-----------------------|---|
| RL.9-10.2 | Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| RL.11-12.6 | Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature. |
| Addressed Standard(s) | |
| W.9-10.9.a | Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. Apply <i>grades 9-10 Reading standards</i> to literature (e.g., “Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work [e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare]”). |
| L.9-10.4.d | Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases |

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| | <p>based on <i>grades 9-10 reading and content</i>, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.</p> <p>d. Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).</p> |
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Assessment

| Assessment(s) |
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| <p>Student learning is assessed via a Quick Write at the end of the lesson. Students respond to the following prompt, citing textual evidence to support analysis and inferences drawn from the text.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does Browning's choice of speaker impact the development of central ideas in the poem? |
| High Performance Response(s) |
| <p>A High Performance Response should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine that the poem is written from the Duke's point of view. Identify one or more central ideas of the poem (e.g., power and status, voice, jealousy, and madness). Explain how writing the poem from the Duke's point of view contributes to the development of one or more central idea (e.g., Browning's choice to write the poem in the voice of the Duke contributes to the development of central ideas including power and voice. The final lines of the poem confirm the Duke's obsession with power: He is a possessive, controlling man. Because the Duchess "smiled" (line 43) at others, the Duke "gave commands" (line 45) so that "all smiles stopped together" (line 46), which may be a euphemism for having the Duchess killed or at least silenced. The Duke preventing the Duchess from smiling at others develops the central ideas of power and voice by showing how a man uses his power over a woman to establish himself as an authority figure and to take away a woman's ability to express herself.). |

Vocabulary

| Vocabulary to provide directly (will not include extended instruction) |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> munificence (n.) – the quality or action of giving or bestowing liberally ample (adj.) – fully sufficient or more than adequate for the purpose or needs; plentiful; enough warrant (n.) – something that serves to give reliable or formal assurance of something; guarantee, pledge, or security just (adj.) – guided by truth, reason, justice, and fairness pretence (n.) – a claim made or implied |

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> dowry (n.) – the money, goods, or estate that a wife brings to her husband at marriage |
| Vocabulary to teach (may include direct word work and/or questions) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> object (n.) – the end to which effort or action is directed; goal; purpose |
| Additional vocabulary to support English Language Learners (to provide directly) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> whene'er (contraction) – whenever disallowed (v.) – decided that (something) is not acceptable or valid avowed (v.) – openly declared cast (v.) – to form (something, such as a sculpture) by casting metal, plaster, etc. |

Lesson Agenda/Overview

| Student-Facing Agenda | % of Lesson |
|--|---|
| Standards & Text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards: RL.9-10.2, RL. 9-10.6, W. 9-10.9.a, L. 9-10.4.d Text: “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning, lines 43–56 | |
| Learning Sequence: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of Lesson Agenda Masterful Reading Reading and Discussion Quick Write Closing | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10% 5% 65% 15% 5% |

Materials

- Student copies of the 11.1 Common Core Learning Standards Tool (refer to 11.1.1 Lesson 1)
- Free Audio Resource: <https://archive.org/> (Google search terms: My Last Duchess, Zachariah Wells)
- Student copies of the Short Response Rubric and Checklist (refer to 11.1.1 Lesson 1)

Learning Sequence

| How to Use the Learning Sequence | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Symbol | Type of Text & Interpretation of the Symbol |

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|------------|--|
| 10% | Percentage indicates the percentage of lesson time each activity should take. |
| no symbol | Plain text indicates teacher action. |
| | Bold text indicates questions for the teacher to ask students. |
| | <i>Italicized text indicates a vocabulary word.</i> |
| ▶ | Indicates student action(s). |
| 💬 | Indicates possible student response(s) to teacher questions. |
| ❗ | Indicates instructional notes for the teacher. |

Activity 1: Introduction of Lesson Agenda

10%

Begin by reviewing the agenda and the assessed standards for this lesson: RL. 9-10.2 and RL. 9-10.6. In this lesson, students consider how Browning introduces and develops central ideas in the poem.

- ▶ Students look at the agenda.

Instruct students to take out their copies of the 11.1 Common Core Learning Standards Tool. Inform students that in this lesson they begin to work with a new standard: RL. 9-10.2. Instruct students to individually read the standard on their tools and assess their familiarity with and mastery of it.

- ▶ Students read and assess their familiarity with standard RL. 9-10.2.

Instruct students to talk in pairs about what they think standard RL. 9-10.2 means. Lead a brief discussion about this standard.

💬 Student responses may include:

- Students must determine and analyze more than one central idea in a text.
- Students analyze how authors develop central ideas throughout a whole text.
- Students determine how central ideas affect other central ideas in a text.
- Students summarize a text clearly and without their own opinions.

Check student understanding by asking students to clarify the meaning of the term *central idea*.

💬 Student responses may include:

- An idea that is important to the text
- A big idea in a text
- A theme
- An idea that is repeated throughout a text

Remind students that they will work with this standard as they read in this lesson. Instruct students to look for central ideas, paying attention to how the author develops the ideas and how the ideas relate to one another.

- ① In 11.1.1 Lesson 3, students may have begun to identify emerging central ideas informally, including jealousy, possessiveness, power and status, voice, etc. If so, remind students to note the continued development of these ideas and the emergence of new ideas in the text.

Activity 2: Masterful Reading

5%

Have students listen to a masterful reading of “My Last Duchess,” lines 43–56 (from “Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene’er I passed her” to “Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”). Ask students to pay attention to how the Duke reports what happened to the Duchess.

- ▶ Students follow along, reading silently.

- ① **Differentiation Consideration:** Consider posting or projecting the following guiding question to support students in their reading throughout this lesson:

What central ideas does Browning develop at the end of the poem?

Activity 3: Reading and Discussion

65%

Instruct students to form pairs. Post or project each set of questions below for students to discuss. Instruct students to continue to annotate the text as they read and discuss, using the code CI where they notice a central idea in the text.

Remind students that annotating helps them keep track of evidence they use later in the lesson assessment as well as the 11.1 Performance Assessment, which focuses on the development of similar central ideas in multiple texts.

- ① This annotation exercise supports students’ engagement with W.9-10.9.a, which addresses the use of textual evidence in writing.

Instruct student pairs to read lines 43–47 (from “Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene’er I passed her” to “Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive”) and answer the following questions before sharing out with the class.

- ① **Differentiation Consideration:** Consider providing students with the following definition: *whene’er* means “whenever.”

- ▶ Students write the definition of *whene’er* on their copies of the text or in a vocabulary journal.

What does the rhetorical question in lines 44–45 suggest about the Duke?

- ☞ The Duke acknowledges that the Duchess smiled “no doubt” (line 43) whenever she passed him. However, the Duke perceives that other people also received “[m]uch the same smile” (line 45). The Duke’s desire to be the only one who receives the Duchess’s smiles suggests that he is jealous and possessive.

① **Differentiation Consideration:** To support comprehension, consider posing the following question:

What does the Duke mean by the question, “who passed without / Much the same smile?” in lines 44–45?

- ☞ The Duchess smiled at other people just as she smiled at the Duke.

To what does the phrase “This grew” (line 45) refer?

- ☞ The phrase “This grew” refers to the Duchess’s smiles for the Duke and others: “she smiled, no doubt, / Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile?” (lines 43–45). With the phrase “This grew” (line 45), the Duke suggests that the Duchess began to smile at even more people or to smile at him and others more often.

What might the Duke mean when he states, “I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” in lines 45–46?

- ☞ The Duke might have had the Duchess killed, silenced in some way, or sent away.
- ① Student responses may vary because Browning does not specify what the orders were. Draw students’ attention to their application of RL.9-10.1 as they consider where the text leaves matters uncertain.

How does the repetition of the phrase “as if alive” in lines 2 and 47 affect the meaning of the poem?

- ☞ Student responses may include:
 - The repetition reminds readers that the Duchess is no longer there and that the Duke might have killed her.
 - It makes it seem as though the Duke is more pleased with the picture of the Duchess than the Duchess herself. The portrait “as if alive” is better than the living Duchess.

Lead a brief whole-class discussion of student responses.

Instruct student pairs to read lines 47–53 (from “Will ’t please you rise? We’ll meet / The company below” to “as I avowed / At starting, is my object”) and answer the following question before sharing out with the class..

What action happens in lines 47–48, after the Duke finishes talking about the Duchess and her picture?

- 🗨 The Duke and the listener go downstairs to “[t]he company below” (line 48).

Lead a brief whole-class discussion of student responses.

Instruct student pairs to read lines 49–56 (from “The Count your master’s known munificence / Is ample warrant” to “Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”) and answer the following questions before sharing out with the class.

Provide students with the following definitions: *munificence* means “the quality or action of giving or bestowing liberally,” *ample* means “fully sufficient or more than adequate for the purpose or needs; plentiful; enough,” *warrant* means “something that serves to give reliable or formal assurance of something; guarantee, pledge, or security,” *just* means “guided by truth, reason, justice, and fairness,” *pretence* means “a claim made or implied,” and *dowry* means “the money, goods, or estate that a wife brings to her husband at marriage.”

- ① Students may be familiar with this word. Consider asking students to volunteer the definition before providing it to the class.
 - ▶ Students write the definitions of *munificence*, *ample*, *warrant*, *just*, *pretence*, and *dowry* on their copies of the text or in a vocabulary journal.
- ① Some students may notice the British spelling of *pretence*. Explain that, in British spelling, *c* is sometimes used instead of the *s* used in American spelling.
- ① **Differentiation Consideration:** Consider providing students with the following definitions: *disallowed* means “decided that (something) is not acceptable or valid,” *avowed* means “openly declared,” and *cast* means “to form (something, such as a sculpture) by casting metal, plaster, etc.”
 - ▶ Students write the definitions of *disallowed*, *avowed*, and *cast* on their copies of the text or in a vocabulary journal.

What are the Duke and the listener discussing in lines 49–53?

- 🗨 The Duke’s plans to marry the Count’s daughter.

What is the connection between the Count’s “known munificence” and a “dowry” in lines 49–51 (“The Count your master’s known munificence” to “no just pretence / Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”)?

- 🗨 Since the Count is known for his generosity, the Duke is sure that he can get a big dowry.

What does the word *object* mean in line 53?

💬 In this context, the word *object* means “goal or desire.”

What other meaning does the word *object* have?

💬 The word *object* can also mean “thing.”

What is the impact of Browning’s choice to use the word *object* in this line?

💬 Student responses may include:

- The use of the word *object* suggests that the Duke cares more about things than he does about people.
- The use of the word *object* suggests that the Duke will view his next wife as another object or possession.

① Consider drawing students’ attention to their application of standard L.9-10.4.d through the process of verifying preliminary and multiple meanings of a word.

How do the final three lines of the poem contribute to the development of the Duke’s character?

💬 Student responses may include:

- Browning’s choice to end the poem with the Duke’s description of a statute reinforces the idea that the Duke is materialistic. The final words, “cast in bronze for me” (line 56), connect the Duke’s description of the Duchess painting to the bronze statue—both objects of art that he had created for himself.
- Before the Duke takes his visitor downstairs, he tells the visitor to “notice” a bronze sculpture of “Neptune ... / Taming a sea-horse” (lines 54–55). The Duke’s pride and attention to the sculpture reflect the Duke’s words about the painting of the Duchess. The similarity between the sculpture and the Duchess highlights how the Duke views women as possessions or objects.

① **Differentiation Consideration:** To support comprehension, consider posing the following question:

What does the Duke ask the listener to “notice” (line 54) as they go downstairs?

💬 The Duke wants the listener to “notice” a bronze sculpture of “Neptune ... / Taming a sea-horse” (lines 54–55).

① Students further consider the significance of this imagery later in the homework assignment.

Lead a brief whole-class discussion of student responses.

Instruct student pairs to review their annotations for lines 43–56 and share the central ideas and supporting evidence they identified in these lines.

🗨️ Student responses may include:

- Jealousy: The Duke is jealous because the Duchess gave “much the same smile” (line 45) to everyone.
- Power/Voice: The Duke “gave commands” that caused the Duchess’s smiles to stop (lines 45–46), thus ending her ability to speak for herself through her smiles and interactions with him and with others. The Duke directs the listener when it is time to go downstairs (lines 47–48).
- Power (Possessiveness/Objectification): The Duke seems happier with the picture of the Duchess where “she stands / As if alive” than with the living Duchess (lines 46–47). The Duke refers to the Count’s daughter as his “object” (line 53).
- Madness: The Duke might have had the Duchess killed because of his obsessive jealousy.
- Materialism/Power and Status: The Duke is negotiating for a dowry and says the Count’s generosity means that “no just pretence” (line 50) of the Duke for dowry will be “disallowed” (line 51). The Duke refers to the Count’s daughter as his “object” and the Duke ends the conversation by showing off the bronze statue, another of his “object[s]” (lines 53–56).

Lead a brief whole-class discussion of student responses. Instruct students to note central ideas identified by their classmates for possible use in the Quick Write.

- ① To build upon these and other central ideas students may have identified in 11.1.1 Lesson 3, if time permits, consider a masterful reading of the entire poem to give students the opportunity to reflect on the development of central ideas over the course of the text.
- ① The ideas of voice and power and the relationship between them will be important in students’ study of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the excerpt from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in 11.1.2 and 11.1.3. If students raise the issue of the Duchess’s silence and powerlessness in relation to the Duke’s power and “skill in speech,” consider offering students the term *voice* as a tool for discussing the relationship between self-expression and power.

Activity 5: Quick Write

15%

Instruct students to review their annotations and notes from today’s lesson and earlier lessons in 11.1.1 in order to gather text evidence to support their responses.

Instruct students to respond briefly in writing to the following prompt:

How does Browning's choice of speaker impact the development of central ideas in the poem?

Ask students to use this lesson's vocabulary wherever possible in their written responses. Remind students to use the Short Response Rubric and Checklist to guide their written responses.

- ▶ Students listen and read the Quick Write prompt.
- ① Display the prompt for students to see, or provide the prompt in hard copy.
- ① Depending upon students' level of engagement with central ideas prior to this lesson, consider explaining to students that they may focus their analysis on lines 43–56 or on the poem as a whole.

Transition to the independent Quick Write.

- ▶ Students independently answer the prompt using evidence from the text.
- 🗨 See the High Performance Response at the beginning of this lesson.

Activity 6: Closing**5%**

Display and distribute the homework assignment. For homework, instruct students to respond briefly in writing to the following prompt:

Why is the bronze statue described in lines 54–56 important to the Duke?

Ask students to use this lesson's vocabulary wherever possible in their written responses. Remind students to use the Short Response Rubric and Checklist to guide their written responses.

In addition, instruct students to prepare for the 11.1.1 End-of-Unit Assessment by reviewing and expanding on their annotations about how Browning introduces and develops the poem's narrator (and main character), the Duke.

Homework

Respond briefly in writing to the following prompt:

Why is the bronze statue described in lines 54–56 important to the Duke?

Use this lesson's vocabulary wherever possible in your written response. Use the Short Response Rubric and Checklist to guide your written response.

In addition, prepare for the 11.1.1 End-of-Unit Assessment by reviewing and expanding on your annotations about how Browning introduces and develops the poem's narrator (and main character), the Duke.