My Last Duchess by Robert Browning

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said

'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

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, 't was not

Her husband's presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

Frà Pandolf chanced to say, 'Her mantle laps

Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff

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, 't was 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!

**Questions About Language and Communication**

1. The Duke claims that he doesn’t have "skill in speech" to make his "will clear" to the Duchess. Is he right? Does he display any evidence of rhetorical skill in the poem itself? If so, then why couldn’t he communicate with the Duchess?
2. Why does the Duke think that it would be "stooping" to communicate his thoughts and feelings to the Duchess? Why doesn’t telling the story to his listener count as "stooping," too? What makes retelling the story to a third party different?
3. What is the Duke really hoping to communicate by telling the story of his "last Duchess" to the Count’s servant? Who is meant to receive the message?
4. What does the Duke communicate about himself unintentionally by retelling the story of his murder of the Duchess? How do these unintended meanings slip through the language of the poem?

## Questions About Art and Culture

1. Why does the Duke have a private art gallery? To whom do you think he usually shows the objects in his collection?
2. Why is there a curtain over the portrait of the "last Duchess"? (Hint: can the portrait be moved?)
3. Why is it so important that the portrait of the Duchess is full-length and extremely lifelike? How does the replacement of the real Duchess with her portrait work? What does the Duke gain by this replacement? What does he lose?
4. How does the bronze statue of Neptune taming a seahorse relate to the portrait of the Duchess? Why does the Duke make a point of showing this second object to the Count’s servant?