



**Overview:** This lesson is intended to be a kind of “plug and play” support for teachers new to close reading in the classroom. It focuses on the importance of grounding an interpretation in evidence from the text. (Lesson Duration: 2-3 hours, depending on final writing activity)

**Standards:**

- **RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **RL.11-12.4:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.

**Objectives:**

- Students will learn the importance of using evidence to substantiate an opinion or reading of a literary text.
- Students will practice working with ambiguous texts and using evidence to make a determinative reading and reliable interpretation.

**Materials:**

Classroom copies of the poem “[My Last Duchess](#),” by Robert Browning  
Access to one or more print or online dictionaries

**Procedure:**

**Before the Lesson**

Students should have received copies of the poem for individual perusal.

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**Activity 1: Prereading**

**Purpose:**

- Students will consider the meaning of ambiguous words in the title.
- Students will discuss ambiguous gestures in the poem.
- Students will understand necessary background and context about the situation of the dramatic monologue.



### Individual Reflection

Before students begin to read the story, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper or on the work itself.

- What are at least two definitions of the word *last*?
- In the sentence *There's my last car*, what are two different ways in which the sentence could be interpreted according to your two different definitions?
- Situation: Your friend discusses a previous relationship with you. Is your friend's account of the relationship necessarily truthful? What are some circumstances in which what you heard from your friend about his or her previous relationship might not be entirely accurate?

### Pair/Small Group Discussion

After students have had sufficient time to digest these questions, have students meet in pairs or small groups to compare and contrast answers. Remind students that they should press their peers for evidence or explanations about the definition of the word *last*, particularly since it will change how they read the title of the poem. Also discuss the issue of truth-telling, particularly about previous relationships. Under what circumstances might someone shade or alter the truth about a prior relationship?

#### A Brief Note About Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially for more reticent students, the opportunity to “test-drive” their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those “Mount Rushmore moments” in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, “Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we’ll reconvene as a class and see what you think.” This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to



understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.

### Whole-Class Discussion

The class discussion should continue the insights shared about the word *last*. At this point, students probably have developed two primary definitions of the word *last*: it can mean *previous* or it can mean *final*.

### Prereading

With the definition of the word in mind, students need to be introduced to the poem. Explain the following:

- The poem is told as a **dramatic monologue** -- essentially like a one-speech mini-play in which the character reveals significant aspects of his personality (sometimes unintentionally)
- A nobleman, the Duke of Ferrara, tells the poem. The Duke is speaking to the male secretary of a count whose daughter the Duke wishes to marry.
- Before the poem begins, the Duke has been giving the grand tour of his house to the secretary.
- They have paused before a mysterious painting. It is covered with a curtain.
- The Duke uncovers the curtain to reveal a picture of his last duchess.
- Fra Pandolf did the painting, the Duke mentions. Fra Pandolf is a monk or religious man who painted the Duchess' painting. Note: Pandolf is a fictional painter. However, his name evidently has "cachet" in the world of the poem. For the Duke to "name-drop" here would be the equivalent of saying, "Yes, Leonardo da Vinci painted this."

### Reflection

Pause at this point and ask the students to reflect on the character of the Duke thus far. Students should answer questions individually before sharing in conversation with their peers. After small-group discussion has occurred, whole-class discussion can track the students' responses and ideas.

- What does the phrase "My last duchess" suggest? What are two different ways in which that phrase can be read?
- What might have happened to the duchess?
- What does the Duke's decision to cover up the picture of his wife with a curtain possibly suggest about his character? Why might one cover up the picture of a previous wife?

**Whole-Class Discussion**

Students should share as a group their answers to the questions above. Discuss possible answers, urging students to substantiate their answers either with evidence drawn from the text (so far) or from literature, film, current events, history, or other source.

**A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion**

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

**WHY?**

- Why do you think so?
- Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point?
- Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word?

**WHERE?**

- Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information?
- Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point?

**WHAT?**

- What do you mean when you say "\_\_\_"?
- What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it?
- What else could the author have said here?
- What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do?

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one "right answer," there are better and worse ones – and the better ones *are* better because they are supported by the words of the author.**



## Activity 2: Whodunit?

**Purpose:** Students should explore the poem closely for an explanation of the Duchess' death, which the poem does not reveal directly. Using the textual evidence to support their reading, students should offer a reasonable, text-based explanation for the Duchess' death.

### Reading

Have students read [the full poem](#) along with an oral performance of the work by the teacher or a particularly adept student reader.

### Individual Reflection: The Duchess

Before students begin small-group discussion, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper or on the work itself, if possible.

1. How would you describe the Duchess' personality (as revealed by the Duke)?
2. Give your best piece of evidence from the text -- the one moment that really seems to "sum up" the essence of the Duchess' character for you.
3. Many people are mentioned in this poem: the painter Fra Pandolf (a monk who painted the Duchess' portrait), a person who broke off a bough of cherries as a treat for the Duchess, the Duke himself. How does the Duchess treat each of these people?
4. What conclusions does the evidence you came up with to answer #4 tell you or suggest about the Duchess' character or personality?
5. Do you like her? Why or why not?

### Pair/Small Group Discussion

Have students explain their answers together. Remind students that they should press their peers for evidence – have students substantiate their responses with reasons from the text. "It's just my opinion" does not really help.

### Whole-Class Discussion

The whole-class discussion should go through the answers. Generally, some students will believe the Duchess was incredibly sweet. Others will believe she was too flirtatious. Test students against their reality: Would *you* be flirtatious for having your mantle lap over your wrist, or for accepting a bough of cherries? Would you find your girlfriend flirtatious for doing those same actions?



### Individual Reflection: The Duke

Before students begin small-group discussion, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper or on the work itself, if possible.

1. How would you describe the Duke's personality?
2. Give your best piece of evidence from the text -- the one moment that really seems to "sum up" the essence of the Duke's character for you.
3. What conclusions does the evidence you came up with to answer #3 tell you or suggest about the Duke's character or personality?
4. Do you like him? Why or why not?

### Pair/Small Group Discussion

Have students explain their answers together. Remind students that they should press their peers for evidence – have students substantiate their responses with reasons from the text. "It's just my opinion" does not really help.

### Whole-Class Discussion

The whole-class discussion should go through the answers. Student responses will vary, with some students finding the Duke to be a pompous, status-conscious, possessive name-dropper, and others finding the Duke to be rational, reasonable, or even a victim of adultery.

### Activity: CSI Italy

Now comes the big question: **Why did the Duchess die?**

Explain to students that they need to examine the text for evidence. Pretend that this dramatic monologue was recorded under warrant and that the Duke's words will be examined in court.

Does he reveal his innocence or his guilt? Did the Duchess die of natural causes or not? If so, what causes? If not, for what reasons was her life taken?

As before, students need to answer questions:

1. Where in the text does the Duchess die?
2. What specific proof do you have?
3. What are the reasons for her death?
4. What specific proof do you have?
5. Why does your proof prove what you are proving?



### Consensus

Students should be urged to work in groups until they come to consensus. Consensus means that everyone agrees -- no dissenters! Students who believe the Duke is innocent or guilty should use persuasion and reliance on evidence to prove to their peers that their opinion is correct.

Students can then share their opinions (substantiated by evidence) with the whole class, which should also attempt to achieve consensus. Generally, students tend to feel that the Duke murdered his wife because she did not treat him as “special” -- she was friendly, but she was friendly to everyone, making no distinctions between the fool that broke a bough of cherries for her and the Duke himself. She appreciated everything equally -- sunsets, the mule, or the Duke’s 400 year-old name, all with equal enthusiasm. She smiled at everyone exactly the same - - including him. For this cause, the Duke “gave commands” and then “all smiles stopped together.”

### Closure

Reinforce the importance of using evidence to support a point. Point out that texts -- like people -- do not always tell the whole truth or the whole story, or if they do, the truth is sometimes hidden between the lines. Words can mean more than one thing; people can have more than one motive or (apparent) reason for performing particular actions.

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### Assessment

There are a variety of ways in which these activities may be assessed. Simple class participation points for relevant, engaged contributions to the conversation would be one method, or the insights gained during class discussion may be used as prompts for a shorter or longer writing assignment in which students substantiate their insights about the poem with specific reference to the text. One such writing prompt occurs below and should take place after the students have had time to read and analyze the poem as a whole. Please note that if this assignment will be used, the specific syntax in question should NOT be discussed at any length in class so as to avoid “lecture recap” papers: papers which merely repeat or paraphrase the whole-class insights without genuinely analyzing the material individually.

**Prompt:** Examine the “brand names” and status objects in this poem: Fra Pandolf, Claus of Innsbruck, the statue of Neptune taming a seahorse. How do these status objects or brand names shed new light on the Duke’s character -- and the reason for killing the Duchess? (Hint: Really look at the Neptune statue and its implications.)

**Prompt 2:** Why did the Duke have the Duchess’ portrait painted?