



My Last Duchess

Robert Browning (1845)

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ILVCREPIA MED. COS. MED. FLOR. ET SEN. DVCS I

Read the Poem



What is it about?

- Based on the life of Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, Italy
- The Duke's first wife died in 1561 after 3 years of marriage
- We learn about the Duke by what he says about her and how he says it
- We also learn about their relationship; what was expected; how she responded

Subject

- The speaker (the Duke of Ferrara) talks to the representative of a Count whose daughter he wishes to marry.
- He shows this man a portrait of his previous wife. The portrait is usually kept behind a curtain.
- He describes what his “last duchess” was like.

The Duke of Ferrara was a real person..

He was Duke of Ferrara (in Italy) from 1559 to 1597.

He was married three times and his first wife's death was treated suspiciously – poisoning

Important points

- The Duke is possessive – he chooses who does or does not see the Duchess – something he could not achieve when she was alive.
- The Duke actually sees women as possessions – this is highlighted when he refers to the sculpture of Neptune which “Claus of Insbruck cast in bronze for me.” He also tells the messenger that “beauty is my object.”
- The Duke did not tell the Duchess that he was displeased with her behaviour – he thinks that he would have been “stooping” or lowering his standards.

The background is a painting of a woman in a dark, patterned dress. She has a white spot on her cheek, which is the 'spot of joy' mentioned in the text. The painting is dark and moody, with a focus on the woman's face and the texture of her dress. The text 'Questions' is overlaid on a dark, semi-transparent rectangular area at the top of the image.

Questions

- Why is the Duchess not smiling in the painting
- What do you think caused the Duchess to blush forming a “spot of joy?”
- Why do you think, the Duchess is described as having a passionate glance?



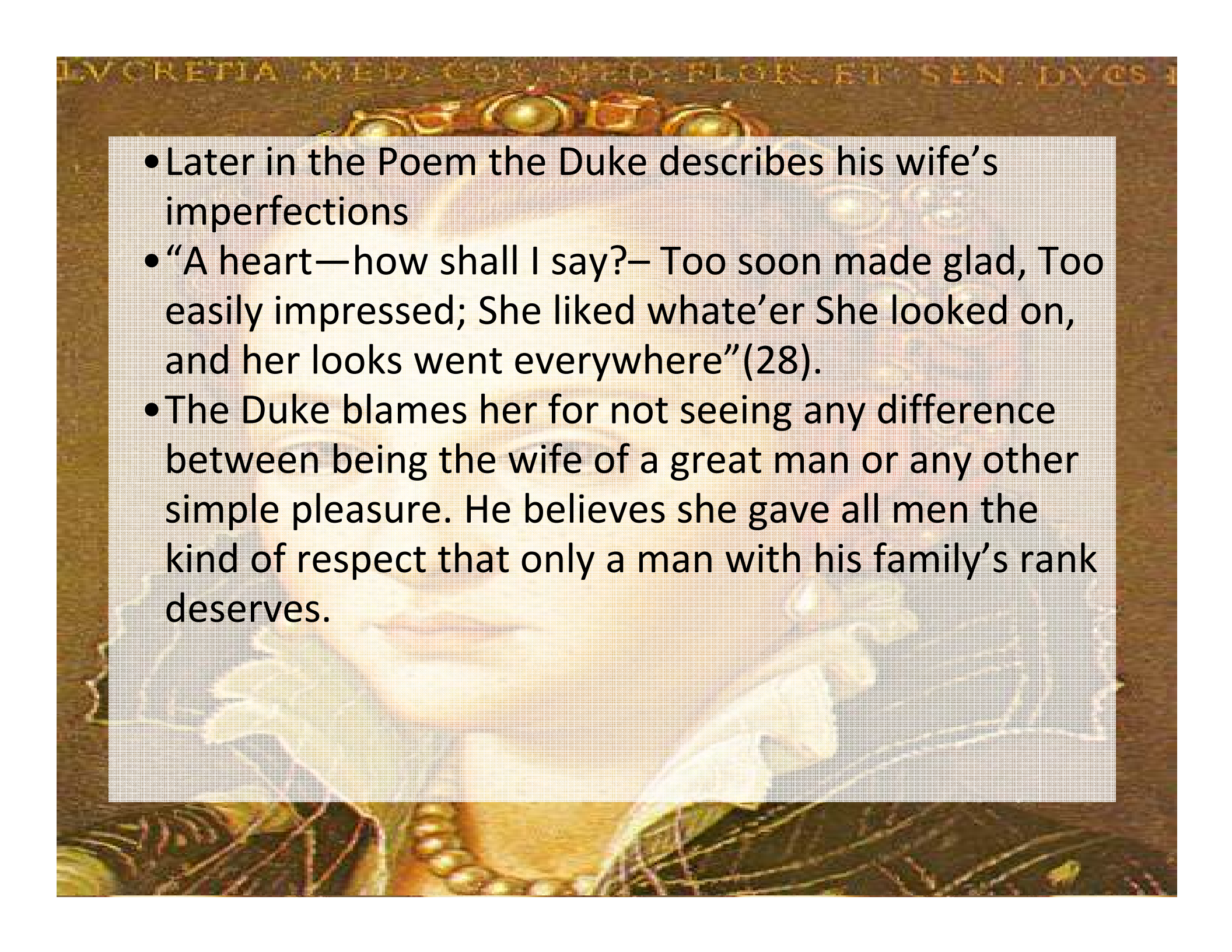
Answers

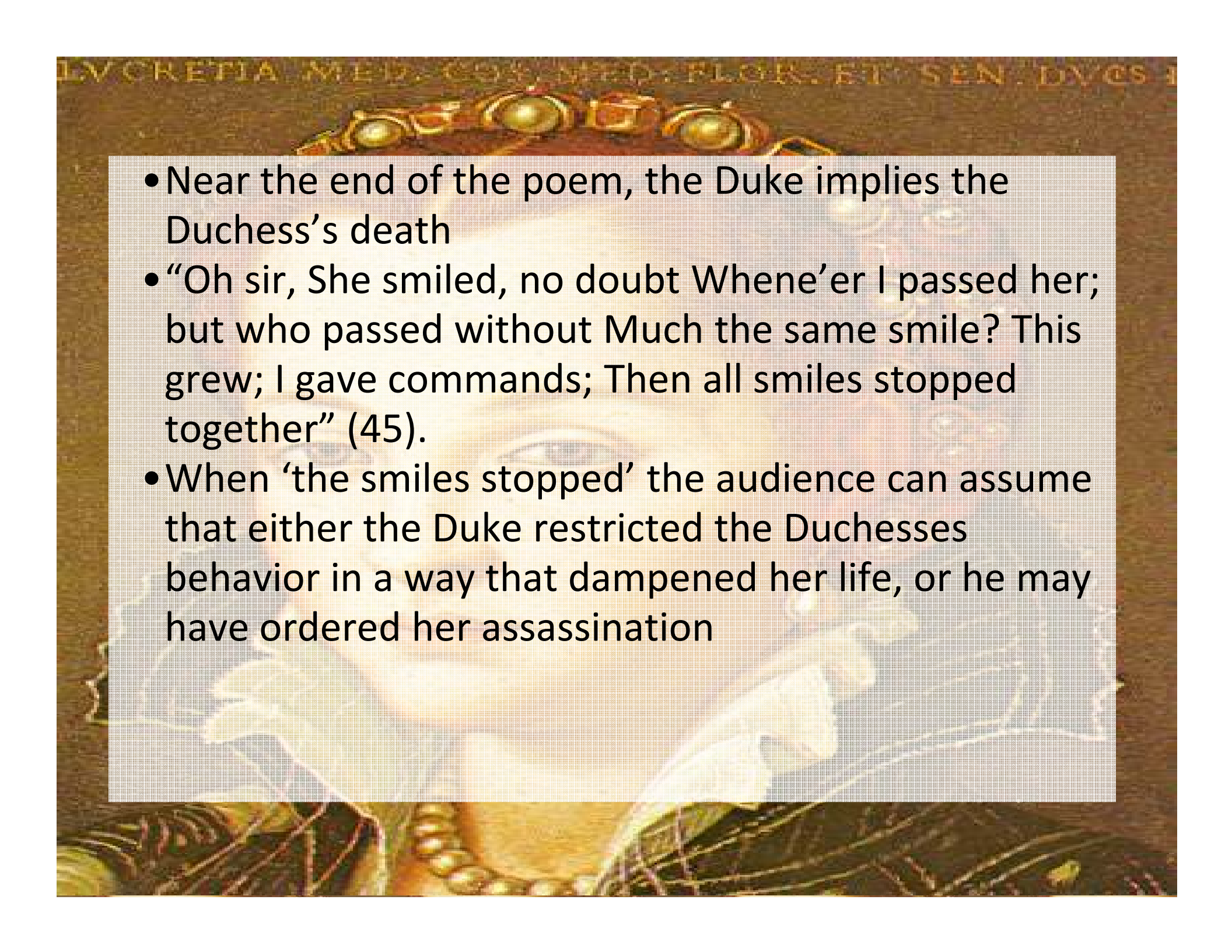
- She is not smiling because, the Duke stole her smiles away
- The poem insinuates the Duchess is blushing because she is in the company of her lover. Her passionate glance might have been in result of the painter who is a rival for her love.



Analysis of “My last Duchess”

- At the beginning of the poem when the Duke is first introducing the painting he states: “Strangers like you that pictured countenance, the depth and passion of **its** earnest glance”(7).
- By the Duke referring to the painting as, **it**, it is implied that the Duke has developed more of a relationship with the painting, than the woman this painting represents.

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- Later in the Poem the Duke describes his wife's imperfections
- “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” (28).
- The Duke blames her for not seeing any difference between being the wife of a great man or any other simple pleasure. He believes she gave all men the kind of respect that only a man with his family's rank deserves.

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- Near the end of the poem, the Duke implies the Duchess's death
 - “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” (45).
 - When ‘the smiles stopped’ the audience can assume that either the Duke restricted the Duchesses behavior in a way that dampened her life, or he may have ordered her assassination

The Duke is very possessive

Dramatic monologue

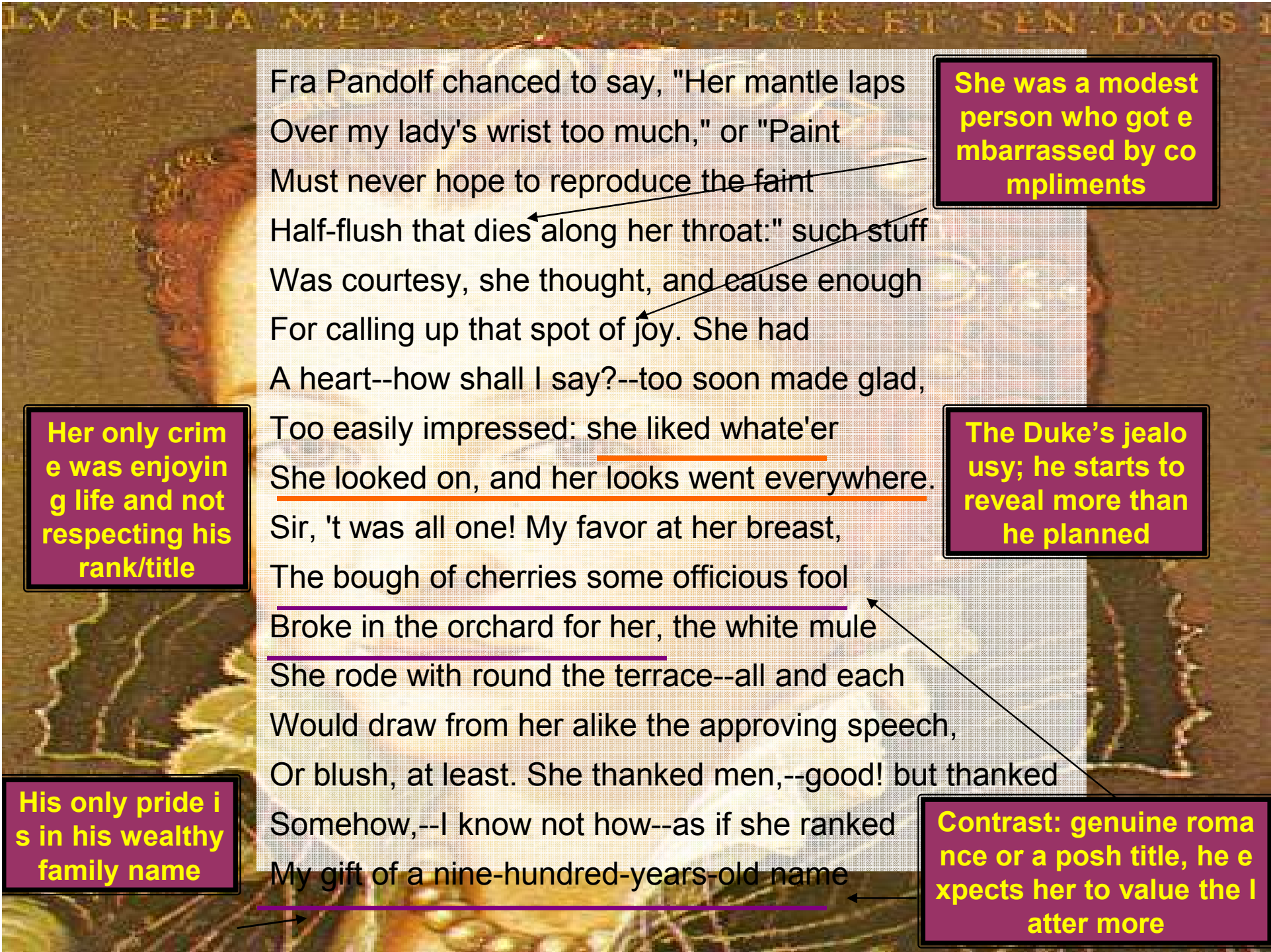
My Last Duchess

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.
Will 't please you to sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to my self 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

An imaginary artist, name dropping: everything has monetary value

He likes beautiful things

There is a reason for drawing the curtain, it's so the person can see his prized possession



Fra 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 favor at her breast,
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

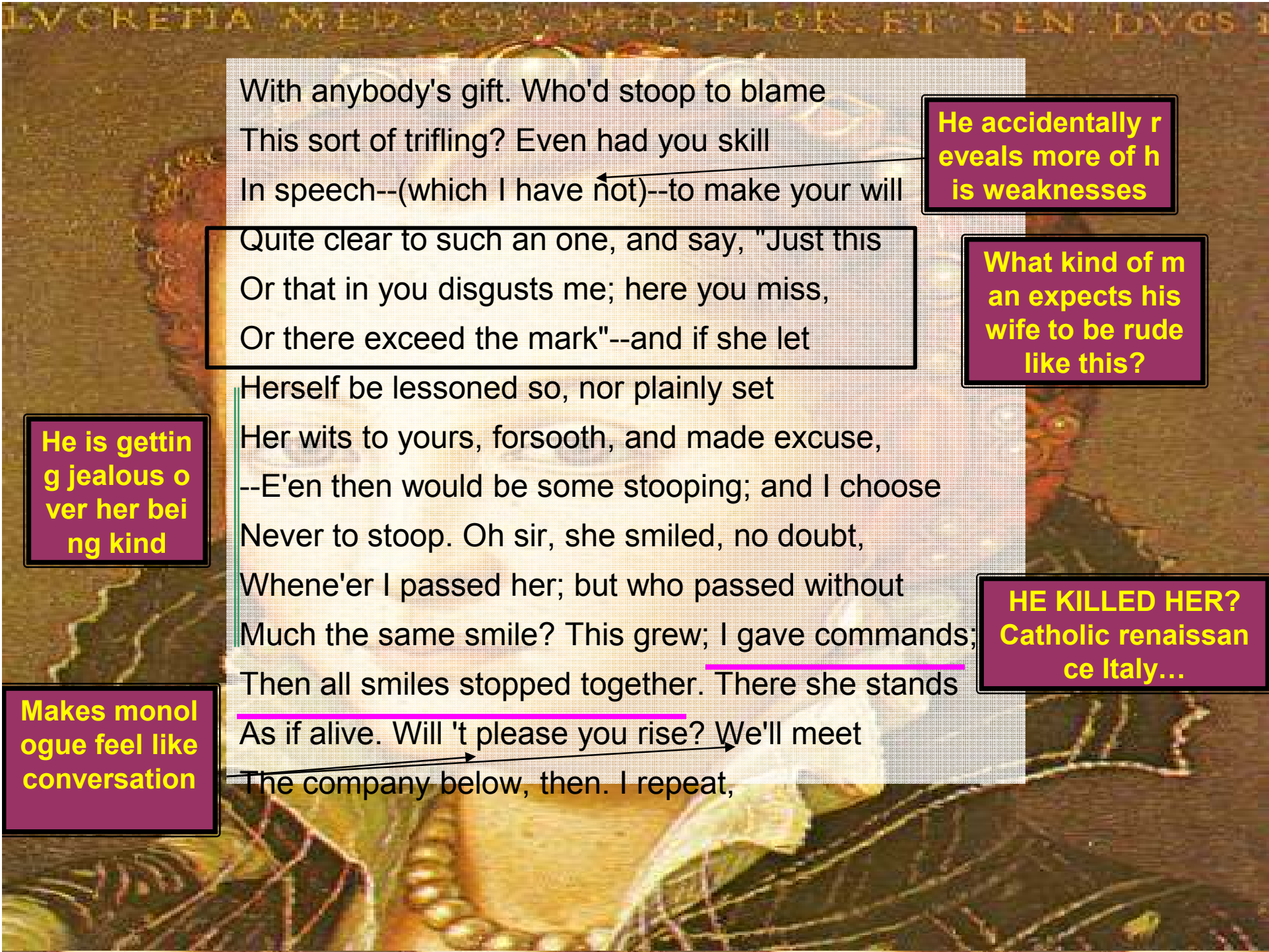
She was a modest person who got embarrassed by compliments

Her only crime was enjoying life and not respecting his rank/title

The Duke's jealousy; he starts to reveal more than he planned

His only pride is in his wealthy family name

Contrast: genuine romance or a posh title, he expects her to value the latter more



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

He accidentally reveals more of his weaknesses

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

What kind of man expects his wife to be rude like this?

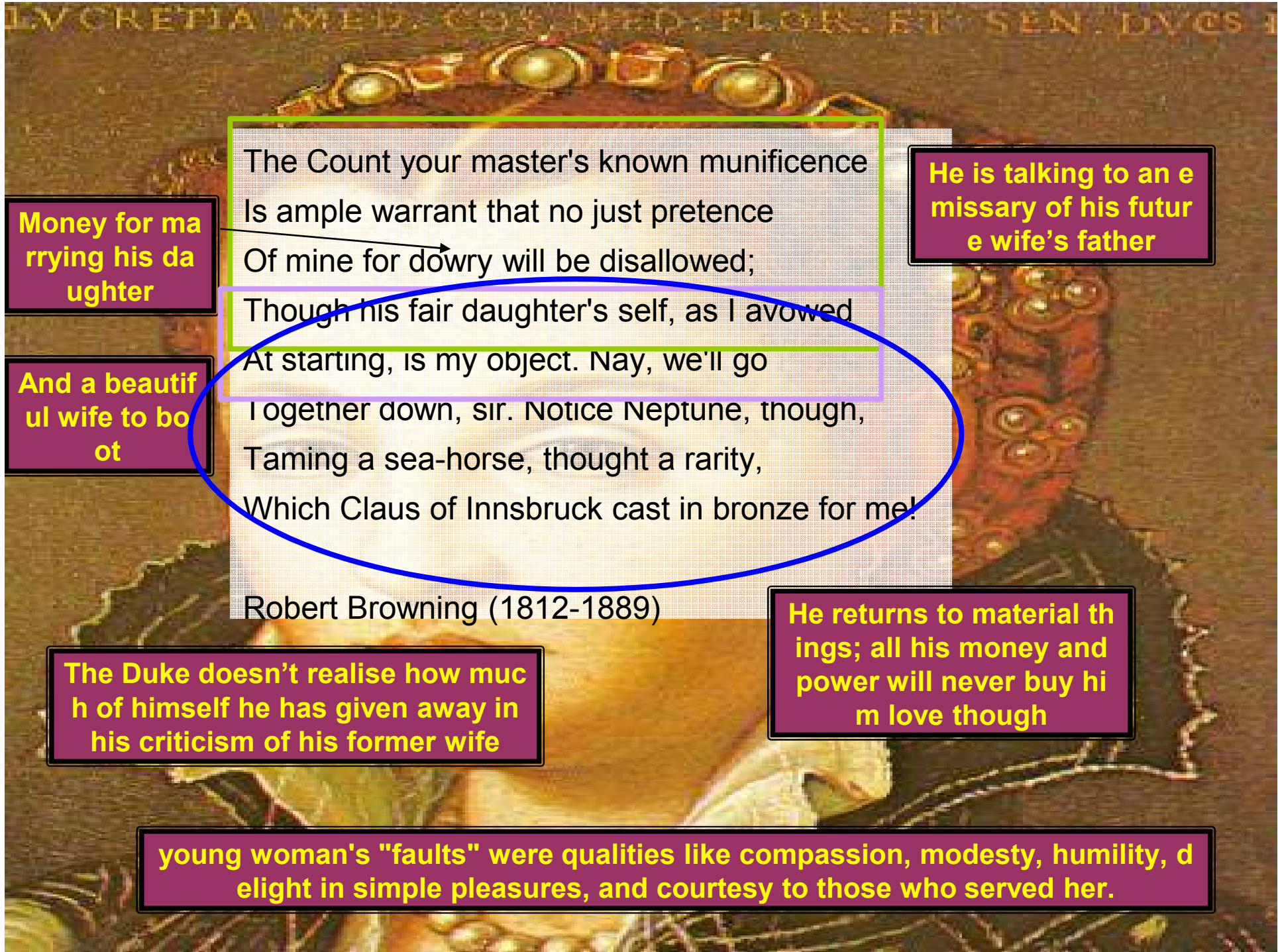
He is getting jealous over her being kind

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

HE KILLED HER? Catholic renaissance Italy...

Makes monologue feel like conversation

The company below, then. I repeat,



Money for marrying his daughter

And a beautiful wife to boot

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!

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

He is talking to an emissary of his future wife's father

The Duke doesn't realise how much of himself he has given away in his criticism of his former wife

He returns to material things; all his money and power will never buy him love though

young woman's "faults" were qualities like compassion, modesty, humility, delight in simple pleasures, and courtesy to those who served her.



Common Themes

- Pride- throughout the poem it is understood that in this hierachial society- people can be seen as objects which can be bought and owned.
- Art- Twice in this poem art is mentioned: the picture itself, and the statue of Neptune taming the see horses.

Key Questions

1. Find clues about how the Duke feels about the picture of his last Duchess.
2. Find clues which tell you about the personality of the woman.
3. How did the Duke feel about her behaviour?
4. What might have happened to her?
5. What does the Duke say about how people react to the portrait?
6. Why do you think Browning used enjambement in this poem – what effect did he try to achieve?
7. What impression do we get of the character of the Duke?
8. Themes: What are the key themes here?
9. How can this poem be linked to other poems you have looked at so far?



Thank you all