

Decision Education Foundation English Curriculum

“My Last Duchess”

by Robert Browning

Unit Snapshot

<i>Designed For</i>	High School Students
<i>Essential Questions</i>	Can decisions control life? Can art control life? How is <i>what I want</i> related to <i>what I know</i> and <i>what I see</i> ? How is decision making related to matters of the heart such as love, dating, and marriage?
<i>Content and Skill Focus</i>	Decision Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• frames, values, alternatives, information• values can alter frames• frames help develop values English Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• dramatic monologue• how to read a poem well (line and sentence)• speaker’s role in a narrative poem• purpose defines form and style in writing
<i>Expected Outcomes</i>	Ability to define and apply framing, values, alternatives, and information in decision situations Ability to understand a character’s decision through actions and speech Ability to understand a poem using both lines and sentences Ability to recognize and describe narrative voice, dramatic and internal monologue
<i>Kinds of Assessment</i>	Exercises on decision quality, values, and reasoning Decision assessment table Original monologue Marriage counselor’s report
<i>Time Required</i>	A minimum of four class periods
<i>Comments</i>	“My Last Duchess” is a fifty-six line dramatic monologue spoken by a narrator who is both intriguing and horrifying. This engaging murder mystery and psychological sketch is an ideal text for examining selected best practices for reading poetry and making decisions.

(Version 7)

Overview

General Description: The text for this unit is Robert Browning’s poem, “My Last Duchess,” and the goal of the lessons is to have students explore essential elements of good decision making while improving poetry reading skills. The unit also includes two performance tasks that give students the opportunity to look at decision making from different angles and to practice two kinds of writing: an original monologue and a marriage counselor’s report.

Duration: This unit lasts four class periods and requires additional independent time for writing. There is flexibility in the duration of the unit depending on how teachers decide to assign the performance tasks. While the plan is designed to have all students complete both, teachers can let the students choose one.

Summary and Decision Perspective: “My Last Duchess,” Robert Browning’s most widely known dramatic monologue (a speech given by one character in a scene), provides students with a challenging and engaging murder mystery and psychological study in fifty-six lines. As we read and reread the poem, we realize that the speaker, the Duke of Ferrara, is more than an art connoisseur: clues in his speech reveal him to be a proud, unbending man who instead of “stooping,” chooses to murder.

The context of the story: A Count (lower in rank than a Duke) has come to negotiate the marriage (dowry) of his daughter to the Duke of Ferrara. The poem captures a conversation between the Count’s messenger and the Duke as they pause in their descent, presumably on a large staircase landing adorned with artwork, to meet with the Count who waits below. Behind a curtain, which only the Duke is allowed to open, is a painting of the Duke’s “last Duchess.” He opens the curtain for the messenger and invites (commands?) him to sit and look at the painting while the Duke talks about it. In very few lines we learn about the wife’s friendly, outgoing nature, the husband-wife relationship, and the Duke’s arrogance. The poem concludes with the Duke pointing out another piece of his art collection—a statue of Neptune—as the two men continue their descent.

The poem lends itself to an exploration of four links in good decision making: *framing*, *values*, *alternatives*, and *information*. As students work backwards from the Duke’s decision to murder his wife, they can see how the details of both his and the Duchess’s actions reveal dramatically different values and perspectives.

“My Last Duchess” Unit Contents

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1. Learning Plan

First Class: How to Read a Poem

Materials

“Introduction to Poetry” by Billy Collins (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>)
Students Handout 1—“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning
Student Handout 2—Highlighted Versions of the Poem (Sentences and Shifts)
Student Handout 3—The Clues?
Copies of the Performance Tasks

Procedures

- Project or hand out Billy Collins’s poem, “Introduction to Poetry” (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>) and ask students to read it once. Write the following question on the board:

Do we read poetry *differently* than we read prose?

After noting student responses, introduce and explain the following three ideas for reading poetry accurately, and use the Collins poem for illustration.

- a. While poetry is written in lines or verses, combinations of lines often make up sentences. To comprehend a poem, we must read sentence by sentence (as well as line by line). Knowledge of grammar and punctuation helps here: locate verbs and subjects and pay attention to semi-colons, colons, and end marks (periods, question marks, etc.)--they help us make sense (sentences) of the poem.
 - b. To understand any story it is essential to know who is speaking. The same idea is true for reading a poem. We must always ask ourselves who is speaking (the poet? narrator the poet creates? various other voices or characters?), and because it is a dramatic monologue, identifying the speaker is especially important for understanding the poem you are about to read.
 - c. Look for shifts in the poem, places where the poem takes a new turn, a new character enters, or the narrator addresses a different subject or idea. When we see the shifts and ask ourselves why they happen, we begin to see important patterns in the poem. Shifts often happen with the beginning of a new stanza, but they also occur within stanzas.
- Hand out copies of “My Last Duchess” (**Student Handout 1**), and give students time to read it and to use the guidance above. Ask them to read with a pencil and note the following: who is speaking; where sentences end; and where shifts occur.
 - Once students have had the chance to look at the poem on their own, project **Student Handout 2** (handouts alone will work if projection is not possible) and use it to read and discuss the poem with the class.

- At the end of class, once students understand the basic facts of the poem, introduce the *Performance Tasks* for this unit of study.

Next Steps

Homework: Students should complete **Student Handout 3** to prepare for the next class.

Student Handout 1

My Last Duchess

FERRARA

1 That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
2 Looking as if she were alive. I call
3 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
4 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
5 Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
6 "Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
7 Strangers like you that pictured Countenance,
8 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
9 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
11 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
12 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
13 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
14 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
16 Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
17 Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
18 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
19 Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff
20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
21 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
22 A heart . . . how shall I say? . . . too soon made glad,
23 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
24 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
26 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
27 The bough of cherries some officious fool
28 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
29 She rode with round the terrace—all and each
30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
31 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked
32 Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked
33 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
34 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
36 In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
37 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
38 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
39 Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
41 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
42 --E'en then would be some stooping; and I chuse
43 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
44 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
46 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
47 As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
48 The company below, then. I repeat,
49 The Count your Master's known munificence
50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
51 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
52 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
53 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
54 Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
56 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

Student Handout 2. Notice the different sentence lengths. What is the effect of short, choppy sentences vs. the longer thoughts? Significance?

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This version demonstrates places where the poem *shifts* in idea, focus, or action. Describe each shift.

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Student Handout 3. The Clues? We learn that the Duke executed the former Duchess when he says to the messenger (line 45),

*This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.*

(While it is *possible* that the Duke has exiled his wife or sent her to a convent, the phrase “As if alive” suggests that he ended “all smiles” by taking her life. Why do you suppose that Browning repeats that the Duchess looks “as if alive”?)

What are the Duke’s reasons for killing the Duchess? List reasons and evidence from the poem in the table below...

REASON	EVIDENCE (include line numbers for reference)
<p><i>Example:</i> The fact that the Duchess did not give him her <i>undivided</i> attention</p>	<p>Lines 13-14: the Duke points out the “spot of joy” on the Duchess’s face and complains that he was not the source of that joy the artist captured Line 23: the Duke is disturbed by the fact that the Duchess indiscriminately “liked whate’er she looked on.”</p>

SAMPLE RESPONSES (For Teachers): What are the Duke’s reasons for killing the Duchess? List reasons and evidence from the poem in the table below...

REASON	EVIDENCE (include line numbers for reference)
<p><i>Example:</i> The fact that the Duchess did not give him <i>undivided</i> attention</p>	<p>Lines 13-14: the Duke points out the “spot of joy” on the Duchess’s face and complains that he was not the source of that joy the artist captured Line 23: the Duke in disturbed by the fact that the Duchess indiscriminately “liked what’re she looked on.”</p>
<p>The Duchess’s lack of interest in the Duke’s standing in society—his “name”; her gratitude to all people who are kind to her and her enjoyment of the world around her</p>	<p>Lines 25-34: according to the Duke the Duchess values all gifts equally—his pin or broach (“favor at her breast” broach) is the same to her as the joy of a sunset or cherry blossom; and most infuriating to him is that his gift of a “nine-hundred-years-old name” is no more important to her than the other gifts.</p>
<p>Duke’s refusal to “stoop”—to act in a way that he believes is beneath him</p>	<p>Line 34: Duke sees confronting—or even talking to the Duchess about his concern as demeaning to himself. 35-43: Duke says even if he chose to, he does not have the “skill in speech” to address the situation verbally; and even if the Duchess changed, it would involve the Duke’s descending to her level: he would be treating her as an equal.</p>
<p>Duke’s obsession to control and own people and things</p>	<p>Lines 9-10: has reduced his wife to a painting covered by a curtain that only he opens for others to see. Line 5: Duke commands the messenger to sit and look at the painting, and thus keeps the Count waiting below. Lines 45-47: gives commands and stops his wife’s smiles forever Line 53: calls prospective fiancée his “object” as if he were acquiring his next piece of art Lines 54-56: the way the Duke casually points out the bronze statue he and the messenger pass on their descent is a fitting final image: the all powerful Neptune taming a sea horse is “cast in bronze” for the Duke, echoing other lives turned into art (painting of Duchess and the next Duchess).</p>
<p>Other reasons?</p>	

Second Class: The Duke's Decision

Materials

Student Handout 4—The Duke's Decision
Student Handout 5—The Duke and Duchess's Values

Procedures

- In either small groups or whole class discussion, ask students to review their findings from the homework assignment.
- Once you are satisfied that they have a sound comprehension of the details of the poem, give students copies of **Student Handout 4** so that they can explore the Duke's decision further. This exercise will work for small groups or individuals.

Next Steps

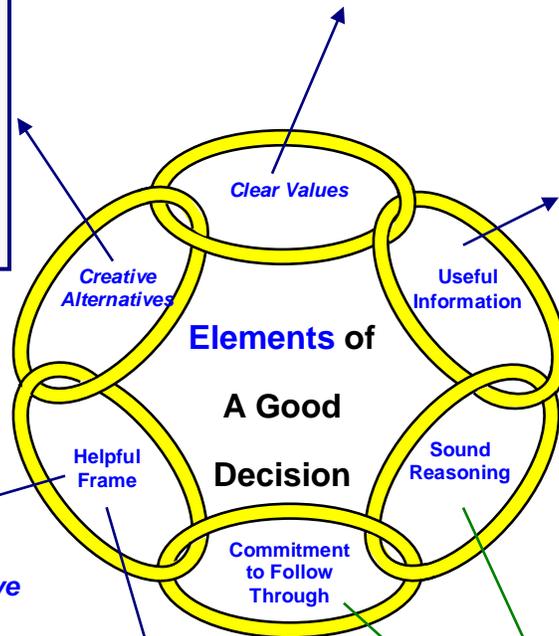
Homework: Assign **Student Handout 5** to help students look closely at the situation from the Duchess's point of view. Ask them to begin **Performance Task 1** by choosing which character they will use and listing some of the topics they will have the character address in the monologue.

Student Handout 4. Use the evidence you gathered to explore the Duke's decision. Respond to the questions in the spaces provided or on a separate sheet.

What choices does the Duke consider? What are other alternatives he could consider?

What does the Duke care about (want)?

What information does the Duke use and what does he ignore (about both the late and future Duchesses)?



How does the Duke define his decision? From what perspective does he look at his "problem"?

What are other perspectives the Duke could consider?

The Duke appears to have no trouble committing himself to action. That said, does the language he uses and the way he speaks suggest that he is experiencing some uncertainty about his reasoning and action. Why would one who is so proud reveal such personal information to a messenger?

TEACHER NOTES / SAMPLE RESPONSES

What choices does the Duke consider? What are other alternatives he could consider?

Considers (1) the option of discussing the situation with his wife and (2) murder.

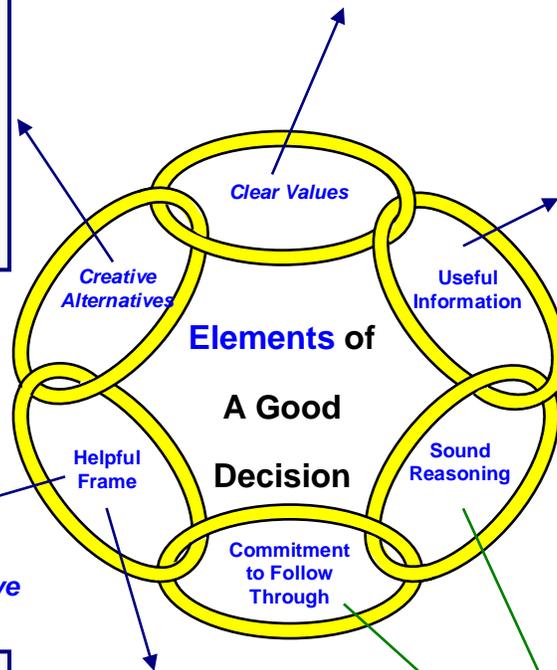
Other possible alternatives:
divorce
separation
change own attitude

What does the Duke care about (want)?

owning art
control
his name and level of society it represents
large dowry
obedience
recognition from others

What information does the Duke use and what does he ignore (about both the late and future Duchesses)?

Details he mentions about his wife suggest that the Duke carefully observes her interactions with others, but at a distance—as if he were looking at piece of art in a museum: he mentions no conversation or personal interaction with her. Ignores all information the Duchess or Fra Pandolph might have to offer.



How does the Duke define his decision? From what perspective does he look at his "problem"?

The Duke's frame is a narrow and rigid one defined by his unbending belief that his standing in society requires that his wife show joy and gratitude to him and only him. We begin to recognize his insanity as we compare her seemingly insignificant actions with the Duke's ultimate judgment of death.

What other perspectives could the Duke consider?

Other possible perspectives to consider before making his decision:

his wife's viewpoint
those who pay her respect
his marriage vows

The Duke appears to have no trouble committing himself to action. That said, does the language he uses and the way he speaks suggest that he is experiencing some uncertainty about his reasoning and action. Why would one who is so proud reveal such personal information to a messenger?

Student Handout 5. **The Duke and Duchess's Values**

While the poem is primarily about the speaker and we only know the Duchess through the Duke's eyes, if we read carefully we learn significant details about her. Use the details that appear in the lines listed below to draw some conclusions about what the Duchess's *values* (what she wants and cares about). First list the detail you notice and then the value it might represent.

LINES	CHARACTERISTIC	VALUE SUGGESTED
5-21		
22-31		
31-47		

Sample Responses (For Teachers): *The Duke and Duchess's Values*

While the poem is primarily about the speaker and we only know the Duchess through the Duke's eyes, if we read carefully we learn significant details about her. Use the details that appear in the lines listed below to draw some conclusions about what the Duchess's *values* (what she wants and cares about). First list the detail you notice and then the value it might represent.

LINES	DETAIL	VALUE SUGGESTED
5-21	"depth of passion" and "spot of joy" in possible reaction to artists compliments ("courtesy")	These details suggest that the Duchess values the opinion of others and responds to their kindness.
22-31	She has a "glad" heart and according to the Duke is "too easily impressed." Enjoys her husband's gift, the sunset, a present of cherries, and her mule all equally.	Cares about interaction with all people around her; likes the natural world.
31-47	Her attitude towards the Duke's "nine-hundred-years-old name" indicates that the Duchess sees no special consequence of the station she has as a result of her marriage.	Recognizes value in all humanity, not just in high society. No special regard for her traditional upper class standing as a member of the Duke's family which has a 900 years old name. Values the present interaction with others equally with her connection to aristocracy.

Third Class: Writing Workshop

Materials

Student Handout 6—Decision Assessment Table

Procedures

- Review and discuss student homework responses to **Student Handout 5**.
- Give the class copies of **Student Handout 6** and explain that this exercise is intended to help them complete the original monologue performance task.
- Use the rest of class as a writing workshop: give students time to begin writing their monologues and to ask questions/receive feedback in either whole class or small group formats.

Next Steps

Assign due dates for both performance tasks. Use a **final class period(s)** to give students the opportunity to present one of their products. Consider having students share their work in other venues (i.e. an assembly, bulletin board display, presentation to another class or section of the same class, etc.).

Note: The two performance tasks provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of *purpose* in writing. In the monologue students can write with strong emotion as they imagine and demonstrate the way their character feels. The second task, however, requires a more objective and analytic style because the purpose is to create an official report.

Student Handout 6. Decision Assessment Table to Accompany Performance Task 1

How well does your character use the following decision elements? List details from your monologue in the second column and in the third column discuss what those details suggest.

DECISION ELEMENT	EVIDENCE FROM MONOLOGUE	ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION
FRAME		
INFORMATION		
ALTERNATIVES		
VALUES		

2. Assessment Evidence

Performance Task 1: ORIGINAL MONOLOGUE

Goal: Write, deliver, and analyze a monologue that demonstrates your understanding of *frame*, *values*, and *information* in decision making.

Role: The speaker of your monologue is EITHER the last Duchess OR the Count waiting to speak to the Duke about a potential next Duchess.

Audience: The monologue can be either *internal* (one spoken only in the speaker's mind—his or her unspoken thought) or *dramatic* (spoken out loud to someone else).

Situation: The character you choose is facing an important decision and the monologue reveals how the character is thinking and feeling about that situation.

The Last Duchess is concerned because the Duke has recently become distant in his relationship with her, and she is wondering whether or not to discuss the situation with him. As she considers the decision, what issues concern the Duchess the most, and how does she view her husband?

The Count is considering whether or not to give his daughter in marriage to the Duke. What topics does he consider and which ones concern him the most as he ponders the decision (amount of dowry, daughter's happiness, social status, love, security)?

Products:

- (1) A written monologue in prose (1-2 pages) or poetry (20-30 lines).
- (2) Performance of the monologue to the class or small group.
- (3) Decision assessment table—**Student Handout 6**: an analysis of the character's *values*, *frame*, and use of *information* in choosing an *alternative*.

Standards for Success:

- **Creativity and Imagination.** While it is important to keep the monologues as consistent as possible with the information we have from Browning's poem, there is much room for creativity here: we do not know the Duchess as well as we know the Duke (and we know her only from his frame) and we know even less about the Count. Feel free to use your imagination in creating the situation and other characters addressed. (For example, in whom might the Duchess confide other than her husband? What would the Count say to his wife and how would his monologue be different if he were speaking to his daughter? brother? servant? good friend?)
- **Specific Detail.** Use convincing details that are consistent with the information we have from the poem.
- **Engaging Delivery.** Memorize your monologue and practice it, allowing your phrasing and gestures to support what the character says. The monologue should be lively, honest, and believable.
- **Thoughtful Analysis.** The Decision Assessment Table (Student Handout 6) should draw clear and specific conclusions—according to the details you include in the monologue—about your character's values, frame, alternatives, and use of information in facing the decision situation.

2. Assessment Evidence (continued)

Performance Task 2: Marriage Counselor's Report

Goal: Write a report that (1) describes the Duke and Duchess's values and perspectives and (2) gives them advice about their relationship.

Role: You are a marriage counselor.

Audience: The Duke and the Duchess (who at the time of the report is his fiancé).

Situation: We are imagining the time just before the Duke marries his last Duchess. He has recently proposed to this beautiful (and rich) woman, and the woman's parents are nervous about the union. They have heard rumors about the Duke, and they are not sure he is a good match for their daughter. They are also a bit concerned about the large dowry the Duke has requested.

To calm her parents' anxiety, the young woman agrees to undergo marriage counseling with her fiancé before they marry. You have met with the man and woman for a series of counseling sessions, you have gathered all the information you need, and you are ready to write your final report.

Product: A one-two page report that (1) summarizes your findings from the series of counseling sessions and that (2) provides some guidance for these two to help them make their relationship a strong and healthy one. The report should have three sections, one focused on the Duke, one on his fiancé (the last Duchess), and a conclusion that focuses on the couple and includes suggestions for their future together.

Standards for Success:

- **Creativity and Imagination.** As in *Performance Task 1*, it is important to keep your report as consistent as possible with the information we have from Browning's poem. However, there is much room for creativity: feel free to imagine what happened during the counseling sessions, and to refer to (create) the actions and comments of the two characters during their meetings with you.
- **Specific Detail.** Use convincing details in your report that are consistent with the character descriptions we have in the poem.
- **Appropriate Style and Content.** While the characters might show strong feeling or opinion in their responses, as a counselor you need to write your report from an objective, non-judgmental perspective. You should describe the characters' emotional reactions, and your comments need to include carefully selected examples written in an objective, fair voice that will engage the couple.
- **Thoughtful Analysis.** Use your knowledge of the poem, class notes, and The Decision Assessment Table (Student Handout 6) to analyze the characters' values and perspectives (frames) and to give them advice that makes sense and feels right.

Evidence of Decision Skill Mastery

1. Students are able to identify and discuss a character's decision using the following concepts: *frame, information, values, and alternatives* (see *Decision Assessment Table*)
2. Students can describe the similarities and differences between two characters' *frames* and *values*.

3. Resources on the Web

--Representative Poetry Online

<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/288.html>

Electronic version of the poem with helpful commentary for teachers.

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html>

Poetry 180—A Poem a Day for American High Schools

-- The Victorian Web

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/Duchess.html>

Electronic version of the poem.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/pva115.html>

Background and discussion questions—useful information about the poem.