

## New Exam Task

Compare how poets present the effects of power on the individual in 'My Last Duchess' and in **one** other poem from 'Power and conflict'.

[30 marks]

### **My Last Duchess**

*Ferrara*

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.  
5 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  
10 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, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
15 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  
20 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.  
25 Sir, 'twas 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  
30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

**Commented [J1]:** Possible gloss words from poem:  
Countenance: face, or facial expression  
Earnest: showing sincere belief  
Durst: archaic version of 'dare'  
Mantle: a loose cloak or shawl  
Officious: interfering  
Trifling: to act thoughtlessly  
Forsooth: indeed (used to imply contempt or doubt)  
Munificence: the quality of being extremely generous  
Warrant: guarantee? Justification?  
Dowry: a price paid to a husband when he marries a particular woman

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  
 35 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  
 40 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  
 45 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  
 50 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,  
 55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

### Sample Answer 2

Both 'My Last Duchess' and 'London' show the effects of power and how it corrupts. The Duke in 'My Last Duchess' is concerned with his own power and status. Essentially, he appears to be a man who has murdered his wife in order to control her and excise the jealousy he feels towards her supposed flirtatious qualities and lack of gratitude. Although the reader doesn't become aware of the truth of the situation until later in the text, his opening line presents his late wife as a kind of trophy who is 'painted on the wall'. The voice chosen by Browning seems to be that of a sociopath who couldn't bear that it was not 'his presence only, called that spot of joy into her cheek'. Crucially, he is a man of status - a Duke - who believes his position allows him to do as he wishes. Here Browning shows the effect of power on the individual: it corrupts and for the Duchess, leads to death. Clearly, the poem reveals how power in the hands of the wrong person leads to disaster.

Blake's 'London' also explores the effect of power upon the individual, drawing attention to the experiences of the powerless in the capital city and suggests that society's vulnerable people are exploited by the larger power structures of the world they live in. Blake shows how powerful entities own the city – it is 'chartered' – and that the social and economic power is concentrated in the hands of those institutions which should help rather than exploit people. The word 'chartered' suggests that the capital has been mapped, but it also implies control – that every part of the ground is owned by someone. The streets of London, and even the river, are owned and controlled by some unnamed power. Blake is suggesting that the ordinary people who live in London do not have the freedom of their own city.

The structural and linguistic choices in both poems show the effects of power. The ~~term~~ title 'Duchess' suggests that she has power, but as we find out later she has little control over her life. The narrator's use of 'my' sounds possessive – as if he owns her. By having a painting of her, it suggests he has her in a passive form – her beauty can be owned to please the Duke. The use of 'last' also diminishes her, implying she is someone who can be replaced. By using a narrator who is shown to be controlling and possibly insane, Browning invites you to think about how powerful people misuse their power. The Duke clearly thinks that his former wife misbehaved. She is powerless and made a victim by his desire to control her.

In 'London', the poem's central image which symbolises repression as 'mind-forged manacles' adds a complexity, suggesting that powerless people are shackled not physically, but rather through the beliefs they have come to accept as normal, as if they are unwittingly complicit in their own powerlessness. Both poets are concerned with the effects of power and how in the wrong hands it corrupts. The Duke is shown to be misguided as Browning uses imagery to hint at the Duchess' kindness and gentle spirit (the white pony reference) to prove that she is innocent and has been killed for nothing. It could be argued that the Duke has also been left with nothing: he has a statue of 'Neptune' which is made of cold bronze. He doesn't realise this himself however, as he cares nothing for human relationships and is far more concerned with his pride and reputation.

Ultimately those with power are shown by the poets to be corrupt: power in the wrong hands has devastating consequences on the innocent. Both poets present narratives where powerful institutions and people exercise their authority with no obvious understanding of how their victims are affected. Both writers seem to be alerting the reader to the misuse of power.

#### Sample Answer 2 Commentary

This is a highly competent answer which says many useful things. It begins by making a very sensible choice of comparison poem in 'London' which allows the student to make valid points in relation to the task set. The first paragraph also make sensible choices in terms of references from Browning's poem and advances a central idea, that the misuse of power by some individual has terrifying effects.

As the response progresses, the student develops ideas about Blake's text, choosing wisely to focus on a key image which suggests the effect of power. Notice how the student doesn't only focus upon small aspects of language, but also is aware of how structural decisions, such as voice, are central to meaning. All the way through this essay is a sense of the question being answered directly and a range of relevant supporting quotations and points about authorial method being offered. There is enough quality here to suggest that this response would enter Level 6. Below is a student-friendly mark scheme.

- Level 1 (0-5 marks) – SIMPLE ANSWERS  
These are brief answers which don't really answer the question in any depth. They might be re-tellings of the stories. Often poorly phrased.
- Level 2 (6-10 marks) – RELEVANT ANSWERS  
These are answers which do answer the question in a basic way. They are often 'PE' answers – ie, there are several POINTS made, followed by EXAMPLES, but not much in the way of discussion or detail.
- Level 3 (11-15 marks) – EXPLAINED ANSWERS  
These are straightforward answers which make sense and have some detail. They are often a collection of PEE paragraphs (POINT-EVIDENCE-EXPLANATION).
- Level 4 (16-20 marks) – CLEAR ANSWERS  
These are essays which have some detail where several sensible points are being made. There is a bit more depth in the explanation of points. The phrasing makes clear sense.
- Level 5 (21-25 marks) – THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS  
These types of answer show the examiner that once or twice there are moments of genuine thought, where a really good point is being made. Phrasing is clear.
- Level 6 (26-30 marks) – DETAILED/PERCEPTIVE ANSWERS  
These answers have one or two moments of impressive points. They are conceptual – they link to the wider ideas of the text and argue points convincingly. Phrasing is fluent.