A Face

POEM TEXT

If one could have that little head of hers
Painted upon a background of pale gold,
Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!
No shade encroaching on the matchless mould
Of those two lips, which should be opening soft
In the pure profile; not as when she laughs,
For that spoils all: but rather as if aloft
Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's
Burthen of honey-coloured buds to kiss
And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.
Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,
How it should waver on the pale gold ground,
Up to the fruit-shaped, perfect chin it lifts!
I know, Correggio loves to mass, in rifts
Of heaven, his angel faces, orb on orb
Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb:
But these are only massed there, I should think,
Waiting to see some wonder momently
Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky
(That's the pale ground you'd see this sweet face by),
All heaven, meanwhile, condensed into one eye
Which fears to lose the wonder, should it wink.

SUMMARY

If you could have her sweet little head painted against a pale, gilded background, like the Italian Renaissance painters used to do! She'd have no shadow intruding on the incomparable beauty of her lips, which would be softly opening in her elegant profile. Not opening the way they do when she laughs—that would spoil everything!—but as if above her head a blooming hyacinth, the flower she loves so much, had leaned its stem of honey-gold blossoms down to kiss her and catch between her parted, waiting lips. And her slender neck, so fine I could encircle it with just three fingers: it would look frail and lovely on the pale gold background as it rose up to a chin as exquisite as a freshly-plucked fruit. I know that the painter Correggio likes to fill the cracks in his painted heavens with the faces of angels, circle upon circle, bursting the boundaries of the skies, bright with flaming shadows. But I think that in this picture, those faces would only be waiting there to see something miraculous emerging, coming to maturity, slowly fading against the sky (the pale gold background against which you'd see this lovely face). Meanwhile, heaven itself would become like one giant eye, too afraid to blink in case it missed this glorious sight.

THEMES

FEMALE BEAUTY AND MALE MISOGYNY

The speaker of "A Face" admires a lady's beauty: she's so lovely, he declares, that she should have been painted by the Italian Renaissance master Correggio. But his obsessively detailed description of what her imaginary portrait would look like has a sinister edge. In his vision of female perfection, the speaker reduces this lady to nothing *but* "A Face,' and one whose only purpose is to please those who see it. Men's fascination with women's beauty, this poem subtly suggests, sometimes barely masks an impulse to overlook—or even to destroy—women's humanity.

On the one hand, this speaker sounds outright worshipful as he describes the lady. No one short of Correggio, he gushes, could capture her delicate, "matchless" beauty, her "fruit-shaped," perfect chin. To him, she looks like an idealized Renaissance angel, and he's lost in admiration for her.

But that admiration is couched in demands and restrictions. Imagining the Old Master portrait that can never be, the speaker insists that the painted lady hold her lips in a pretty pout, as if (in an absurdly sentimental vision) she were about to deeply kiss a flower. If she were to "laugh[]," however, it would "spoil[] all." In this vision, the ideal lady has no feelings or expressions beyond a vague, dreamy sensuality. The imaginary painted version of her captures her physical beauty while keeping her silent and still: perfect, if you ask this speaker.

Ominously, the speaker's admiration even seems to conceal violent impulses. The speaker begins the poem by thinking how lovely it would be if he "could have that little head of hers"—in the form of a painting, of course, he hastens to add, but there's a distinct and startling image of decapitation in that first moment. Later, describing her exquisite neck, he points out that it would take only "three fingers" to "surround" it, an image at once of feminine fragility and of male hands, throttling.

The speaker's impulse to worship this woman's beauty, in other words, is also an impulse to choke her, possess her, and control her. The "Face" he claims to adore is also one whose humanity he semi-secretly longs to master or erase, and his fascination is a demand that the lady be just as he would like her to be: under his control.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

ART AND IMMORTALITY

Gazing upon a lovely woman's face, this poem's speaker wishes that he "could have that little head of hers" for himself. The way to do that, of course, would be to have it "painted upon a background of pale gold"—to take her head not with an axe, but with a brush. The best part? Such a painting wouldn't be subject to aging and decay, as the real-life lady is. Art, to this speaker, is a way of capturing, possessing, and immortalizing otherwise fragile and fleeting beauties.

If the Italian Renaissance artist Correggio had painted this lovely lady, the speaker says, he'd have been sure to include a host of admiring angels in the background. Those divine faces would make seem as if "all heaven" were "condensed into one eye," watching intently in fear that it will "lose the wonder, should it wink." The imagined bug-eyed angels embody the speaker's own fascination with the beautiful face he wishes he could preserve in paint—and his anxieties about that face. Blink, and its beauty might vanish: human loveliness is fleeting.

That's part of why the speaker prefers to imagine the lady as a painting, not a flesh-and-blood woman. As a human being, she's doomed to fade; as a painting, "that little head of hers" can last forever, as the poem's allusion to the deathless art of the long-dead Correggio implies. The speaker's fascination with Italian Renaissance portraiture in particular underscores his longing for a beauty that can last all down the centuries. In a painting, there need be no ominous "shade encroaching on the matchless mould / Of those two lips": the movement of the sun (and thus of time itself) couldn't touch the lovely lady.

Art, in this poem, is not just a loving response to beauty, but an anxious response to the threat of death and decay. A "fruit-shaped, perfect chin," like actual fruit, won't stay ideally ripe forever—but a painted one will keep indefinitely.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

If one could have that little head of hers
Painted upon a background of pale gold,
Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!

"A Face" begins with a daydream. The poem's speaker longs for a painting that never existed: an Italian Renaissance portrait of a woman whose beauty he finds irresistible.

He's clearly a guy who knows something about Italian art. He desires, not just any Old Master, but a work in the style of the "Tuscan's early art"—that is, in the style of a master from old Florence, the greatest city-state in Tuscany and the nerve center of the Renaissance. He may even be thinking of one Tuscan in particular: Giotto, whose unprecedentedly naturalistic religious paintings were often said to have marked the dawn of the Renaissance. Giotto frequently used the "background of pale gold" the speaker desires, a fine layer of gilding meant to gleam mysteriously by church candlelight.

The imagery of that pale gold background suggests that the speaker sees the lady's "little head" as something almost sacred. Her beauty, he specifies, should be framed like a venerated saint's. For that matter, her face is worthy of depiction by an immortal artist, a long-dead great whose work lives on. The speaker romanticizes not just this lady's beauty, but the art of the Renaissance, an era that many 19th-century European thinkers (like this speaker) admired.

The tone here isn't pure awe and delight, however. Pay careful attention to the enjambment in the first lines:

> If one could have that little head of **hers**
> **Painted** upon a background of pale gold,

For a split second, the line break makes it sound as if the speaker wants to have this lady's head in a more Henry VIII sort of way—a way that might involve not a paintbrush, but an axe. Even the simple word "have" feels a little uneasy in that light. The speaker longs not just for a record of this lady's beauty, but a way to *possess* her beauty. And the rather condescending tone of "that little head of hers" suggests that he might not have thought too much about what the lady herself might feel. The dear, she shouldn't worry her pretty little head about anything.

All in all, these first lines suggest that this erudite, aesthetically sensitive speaker loves this lady's *beauty*, not the lady herself. To him, in fact, her feelings, her independence, even her identity might not matter much: she's "A Face," not a person. As this dramatic monologue develops, this speaker will subtly, sinisterly join Browning's catalogue of dangerous men, admirers who want to possess and control what they claim they love.

The speaker will expound on his imagined, ideal painting of this lady's face in 22 lines of iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "If **one** | could **have** | that **lit**- | tle **head** | of **hers**." This form makes him sound as if he's delivering a Shakespearean soliloquy—a suitably Renaissance-y tone for a man with Renaissance-y tastes.

LINES 4-7

No shade encroaching on the matchless mould
Of those two lips, which should be opening soft
In the pure profile; not as when she laughs,

For that spoils all:

Drifting further into his dreams of this Renaissance portrait, the speaker specifies not just the lady's proper pose—in "pure profile," to show off the exquisite lines of her face—but her proper attitude.

First, it's important that no "shade" should intrude on the "matchless mould" (that is, the incomparably lovely shape) of her slightly parted lips. (Notice the mumming /m/ alliteration in "matchless mould.") All will be light and airy in this portrait: not a single shadow will fall across that face or that pale gold background.

There's something a little "don't think of an elephant" about this line. In rejecting shadow from the portrait, the speaker summons just such shadows up. He also betrays his discomfort with the shadowy imperfections of the real world—and this real human lady. Shadows fall as the sun moves; as the sun moves, time passes. A shadow on the lady's lips might thus uncomfortably remind the speaker that her perfect beauty won't stay perfect forever. Like any other mortal, this lady will age.

Not in this portrait, though! Both by imagining a shadowless vision and by imagining that this vision should have been painted by an old Italian master, the speaker does his best to fight against the inevitability of change and decline. The ladies in Renaissance paintings are as beautiful now as they were 500 years ago; this lady's picture should be just as durable.

The picture should also represent the lady as the speaker likes her best:

> [...] those two lips, which should be opening soft
> In the pure profile; not as when she laughs,
> For that spoils all: [...]

The lady, in other words, must be posed in a kind of sensual pout, open-mouthed and dreamy, but not obviously emotive. When she laughs—when she has a reaction of her own—it "spoils all."

The lady's amusement, that is, ruins the effect of her beauty for the speaker, an idea he tosses off casually, as if everyone should of course understands why. His dislike of her laughter makes it clear exactly how little he cares about her happiness. Perhaps these lines even subtly suggest that a lovely lady's laughter might give a guy a bit of anxiety: after all, what if she were laughing *at him*?

LINES 7-10

but rather as if aloft
Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's
Burthen of honey-coloured buds to kiss
And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.

In the imagined portrait, the speaker has just specified, the lady's lips should be parted—but certainly not as if she's laughing. No, they must part as if she were about to kiss a flower. Here, the speaker paints a sensuous picture that again insists the ideal lady should remain still and passive. He imagines that the lady's lips should be poised as if waiting for a "hyacinth," a spring flower with clusters of bell-shaped blossoms, to bend down and kiss *her*—or even "capture" itself between her parted lips.

This vision feels more than a little suggestive. The hyacinth here doesn't have a stem, but a sturdy "staff[]." (Perhaps it's also worth noting that Hyacinthus, the figure in Greek mythology who gives the flower its name, was the god Apollo's impossibly handsome boyfriend.) And its buds are "honey-coloured," a bit of imagery that calls up not just golden blossoms but a sweet, clinging taste. In other words, the lady should ideally be waiting receptively for a sensuous male figure to press itself on (and between) her parted, unresisting lips.

This flowery deflowering is at once feverishly sexual and absurdly sentimental. The speaker absolutely doesn't want the lady to look as if she's panting with lust. No, she should be waiting for an innocent *flower* to meet her lips, like a sweet little fairy quaffing nectar. There's an impossible male double standard here. For the lady's beauty to be perfect, she has to be at once passively sexually available and demure as a spring blossom.

LINES 11-13

Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,
How it should waver on the pale gold ground,
Up to the fruit-shaped, perfect chin it lifts!

Managing to drag himself away from the lady's sexy pout, the speaker looks elsewhere in the imagined portrait: to her neck. The imagery here becomes downright sinister:

> Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,

In this vision, the lady's neck is impossibly tiny. It's also perilously fragile. Imagining measuring the lady's neck with his fingers, the speaker also raises the specter of a throttling. He could measure her *or* choke her with one hand tied behind his back.

Now, the poem isn't flatfootedly suggesting that the speaker wants to murder this lady. But he certainly wants to freeze her beauty in space and time, and he certainly wants to *possess* her, to have her at his command, posed just as he likes her, passive and inert and unlaughing. Such a desire, the poem hints, is in its way a murderous one. The speaker's worship of this lady's beauty is a very different thing from a love of the lady herself. His admiration for her face chokes off her humanity.

For that matter, his desire to preserve her without a single "shade" has a murderous edge. Art and death are the only two

ways to stop a person aging, after all. The speaker's image of the lady's chin as "fruit-shaped" both suggests the perfect rounded, juicy ripeness of a plump peach and reminds readers that fruit and flesh both rot—unless you paint them. Portraiture might also be a means, not just of preservation, but of control and possession.

The poem also isn't saying there's something inherently sinister about portraiture—though it certainly suggests that portraiture has its dangers! (See Christina Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio" for another dark Victorian remark on the matter.) What's really the problem here is the combination of the power of art with the speaker's view of this lady. To him, she's simply a desirable "Face" he'd like to preserve and control, and his imagined portrait becomes a way of enacting that misogynistic desire.

Perhaps even his vision of her tiny, grippable neck suggests that the speaker is conflating the lady and her portrait, the person and the object. An exquisite half-scale portrait might have a neck that small—and might trap the lady at an even more manageable, controllable size.

LINES 14-16

I know, Correggio loves to mass, in rifts
Of heaven, his angel faces, orb on orb
Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb:

All of a sudden, the speaker seems to change the subject. He's been constructing an exquisite, delectable portrait of the lady in the style of the early Florentine Renaissance. Now he looks elsewhere: to the later artist Correggio, a guy known for his sensual mythological paintings and fleshy, lifelike Madonnas.

Correggio, the speaker says, has a habit in his paintings of introducing "rifts / Of heaven"—cracks in the skies—through which crowds of "angel faces" peer. (Here's an example of what he might be picturing.) The tone becomes suddenly mystical:

> [...] Correggio loves to mass, in rifts
> Of heaven, his angel faces, orb on orb
> Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb:

The words "orb on orb" might suggest the round faces of the angels breaking through the "outline" of the heavens. Or they might suggest the heavenly spheres themselves, the concentric, crystalline globes that were once believed to contain the stars and planets. Either way, there's an image here of something otherworldly bursting into the scene.

The speaker also returns the word "shade" here. But this is a repetition with a difference. Before, shades and shadows were banished from the lady's lips. Here, the "angel faces" *soak up* "burning shades"; they "absorb" a kind of shade that is also a kind of light. The shadows of time work differently in these intruding heavens; even the shade flames.

This is an intense, emotive, almost transcendent response to a Renaissance vision of the divine, and might seem out of tune with the speaker's rather sweaty images of pouting lips and throttling. Perhaps this moment complicates the poem, then. This speaker *does* sincerely respond to timeless beauty; Correggio's angels are truly beautiful, and the lady is truly beautiful, too. He's not wrong.

LINES 17-22

But these are only massed there, I should think,
Waiting to see some wonder momently
Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky
(That's the pale ground you'd see this sweet face by),
All heaven, meanwhile, condensed into one eye
Which fears to lose the wonder, should it wink.

The speaker now brings his image of Correggio's angels back around to his imagined portrait. Such angels, he says, are there for exactly the same reason he's there: to stare at the beauty before them. In a Correggio, that wondrous beauty might be the Virgin Mary dandling the baby Jesus, or perhaps Mary Magdalene getting out of the shower (apparently). In the imaginary portrait, the angels must be gazing at the lady.

More precisely, the angels in their burning shades are there to watch the lady *change*. Listen to the parallelism here:

> But these are only massed there, I should think,
> Waiting to see some wonder momently
> Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky

The strong, repetitive structure of these lines suggests that these steps follow swiftly on each other's heels, one after the other. The lady's beauty gathers, brightens, and fades, glowing briefly "against the sky," like a comet. For the last time, the speaker returns to the "pale ground" of gold here, the repetition suggesting that the color burns quietly on like an eternal flame in the background.

The imagined portrait doesn't just preserve the lady's beauty in amber, in other words. To paint a picture of mortal beauty is also to invite reflections on decay. The point of this imagined picture isn't *only* to keep the lady in a state of perfect fruit-like ripeness forever. That preserved loveliness, in its way, only gestures toward the fact that the real lady *can't* look just like this eternally. A 500-year-old portrait might depict an eternally youthful lady, but it might also remind its viewers that she is probably a minimum of 450 years dead.

In the speaker's vision, the sight of the lovely, transient lady overpowers even the heavens themselves:

> All heaven, meanwhile, condensed into one eye
> Which fears to lose the wonder, should it wink.

The angels, in other words, stare so intently at the lady that it's as if they've all turned into one big staring eyeball. In a quiet

pun, perhaps the angels are also "condensed into one **I**." they become the speaker's in-painting representatives, doing exactly what he's doing: gazing.

Angels and speaker alike are thus made into a single eyeball with a single feeling: it "fears to lose the wonder, should it wink." Blink, and you'll miss this lady's ravishing beauty. The imagined picture is thus a picture not just of that beauty, but of the sadness that it can't last forever. Paradoxically, it timelessly preserves both the lady's loveliness and the speaker's fear of loss.

The end of this complicated, subtle poem is thus sadder and wiser than its beginning. In dreaming up this imagined portrait, the speaker certainly dehumanizes its subject. He also paints an unwittingly truthful portrait of *himself*—both as a callow misogynist and a true aesthete, a man who loves beauty so much that he can't bear its fading. Those who reduce women to pure aesthetic objects, this poem suggests, commit metaphorical murder. But that doesn't mean that human loveliness has no value, or its passing no poignancy.

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery summons up the dreamy, "pale gold" perfection of Renaissance art and the ripe, "fruit-like" loveliness of a young woman—fragile visions of beauty cracked around the edges by hints of violence.

The speaker's imagined portrait of the lady draws on a thorough knowledge of Italian Renaissance art. He returns and returns to the idea that all her beauty should be displayed against a "background of pale gold"—words that might evoke the otherworldly gilded backdrop of a painting by the Renaissance artist Giotto or the "pale ground" of a Botticelli sky. This ethereal color frames the lady as if she were a saint, suggesting that there's something transcendent about her loveliness. She can't appear against any old landscape: her beauty must look as if it's part of another, better world.

In his imagination, the speaker experiences the lady's beauty not just as a sight, but as the hint of a delectable flavor. His vision of "honey-coloured" hyacinth buds pressing themselves against the lady's mouth doesn't just paint a picture of golden blossoms but also of a sweet, nectar-scented kiss. Similarly, her "fruit-shaped" chin is round, soft, and ripe—and ripe for the plucking, too. Clearly, the speaker would love to take a bite out of this lady, to devour her with his mouth, not just his eyes.

He's fascinated by her delicacy, too. When he pictures her "lithe neck," suggesting it's so small that "three fingers might surround" it, he's clearly exaggerating, as the reader who tries making a circle with their first three fingers can see—one couldn't encompass a baby's neck that way, let alone even the most petite of adult women's. This image thus does several things at once. It suggests that the speaker has an impossibly idealized vision of this lady; it conjures up an exquisitely small *portrait*, in which three fingers might actually encircle the painted neck; and it introduces an unnerving hint of violence. An easy neck to grip is an easy neck to throttle.

These images suggest that the speaker's worshipful fascination—the lady is a perfect saint, a virginal Madonna, a dainty angel—goes hand in hand with a barely contained desire to gobble her up.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a background of pale gold,"
- **Lines 4-5:** "No shade encroaching on the matchless mould / Of those two lips"
- **Lines 5-6:** "soft / In the pure profile"
- **Lines 8-10:** "Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's / Burthen of honey-coloured buds to kiss / And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this."
- **Line 11:** "her lithe neck, three fingers might surround"
- **Lines 12-13:** "How it should waver on the pale gold ground, / Up to the fruit-shaped, perfect chin it lifts!"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky / (That's the pale ground you'd see this sweet face by)"

ALLUSION

Daydreaming about an idealized portrait of a beautiful lady, the poem's speaker turns to the Italian Renaissance for inspiration. His allusions to the art of that era help readers to envision the picture right along with him.

The right way to paint this lady's lovely "little head," the speaker says, would be in the style of the "Tuscan's early art"—that is, the style used in long-ago Florence, the greatest city-state in Renaissance Tuscany and the hub of the era's art and culture. He may well be thinking of one Tuscan in particular here: Giotto, the most famous painter of the early Renaissance, known for his unprecedentedly naturalistic depiction of religious subjects. His paintings often used the background of "pale gold" the speaker specifies, a fine layer of gilding meant to make the pictures gleam in church candlelight. This lady, the speaker feels, should be depicted with as much luminous reverence as the Virgin Mary herself.

But the speaker's vision doesn't stick to a single artist or a single century as he puts his dream portrait together. He also reaches into the later Renaissance, and to a named artist: Correggio. Correggio's sensual, fleshy women feel like a good match for the speaker's vision of his lady's parted lips poised to smooch a hyacinth. The speaker wants Correggio's religious sensibility too, though, with crowds of worshipful angels bursting from the sky in the background.

In imagining the lady in a Renaissance portrait, then, the speaker wants to capture the perfect union of reverence and sexiness, spirit and flesh. He idealizes both the art of the Renaissance and the feminine beauty that he feels could only be captured in a Renaissance style.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!"
- **Lines 14-16:** "Correggio loves to mass, in rifts / Of heaven, his angel faces, orb on orb / Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb:"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments capture the speaker's rapturous fascination with the lady's beauty—and frame some sinister jokes.

Consider, for instance, the poem's first lines:

> If one could have that little head of **hers**
> **Painted** upon a background of pale gold,

For a split second, before the enjambed first sentence carries on, it seems as if the speaker is about to cry: *Off with her head!* The speaker's not-quite-conscious desire to *possess* the lady's lovely head will inform the whole poem.

Elsewhere, the rhythm of an enjambment evokes a speaker lost in a vision of idealized female sexuality:

> [...] as if aloft
> Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's
> Burthen of honey-coloured buds to kiss
> And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.

The logic of this sentence takes a moment to untangle; the odd use of the verb "capture," for instance, seems to suggest that the hyacinth's buds capture *themselves* between the lady's passive lips. (The ideal painted lady of course would not do anything so wilful as kiss a flower on *purpose*.) By enjambing these lines, Browning suggests that this speaker is making perfect sense to *himself*: the sentence might be syntactically confusing, but its words flow out in an entranced and continuous stream.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "hers / Painted"
- **Lines 4-5:** "mould / Of"
- **Lines 5-6:** "soft / In"
- **Lines 7-8:** "aloft / Yon"
- **Lines 8-9:** "staff's / Burthen"
- **Lines 9-10:** "kiss / And"
- **Lines 14-15:** "rifts / Of"
- **Lines 15-16:** "orb / Breaking"
- **Lines 18-19:** "momently / Grow"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions capture the speaker's obsession with the lady's loveliness and the power of his imaginative vision.

The speaker is sure that if an old Italian master painted this lady, he would have posed her against a "pale gold ground," a gleaming, otherworldly backdrop. Small variations on those words reappear all across the poem: it's a "back**ground** of **pale gold**," then a "**pale gold ground**," then just a "**pale ground**." This insistence on a luminous, gilded *paleness* doesn't just conjure up the backdrop. It also indirectly suggests that the painted lady herself is pale and shining: paleness and goldenness become the central features of this imagined painting.

At the end of the poem, meanwhile, repetitions help the speaker to build to an intense crescendo:

> I know, Correggio loves to **mass**, in rifts
> Of heaven, his angel faces, **orb** on **orb**
> Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb:
> But these are only **massed** there, I should think,
> Waiting to see some wonder momently
> Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky

First, the diacope of "orb on orb" paints a grand picture of the heavens: the orbs of the angels' sweet round faces stare from the concentric orbs of the heavenly spheres (the transparent globes once thought to contain the planets and the stars). Both of those images also anticipate the idea of all heaven turned into one big staring eyeball gazing at the lady.

Then, the polyptoton of "mass" and "massed" presents a revised idea: the speaker has seen how Correggio likes to pose angels in the sky, but thinks those faces would be gathered for a different reason in this imagined picture.

Finally, the parallelism of "Grow out, stand full, fade slow" tracks the lady's imagined rise to perfect beauty—and her imminent fall. In this painting, the language here suggests, she's arrested at her prime: the unwinking angels lean down to catch her in a state of utmost perfection.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a background of pale gold"
- **Line 4:** "shade"
- **Line 12:** "the pale gold ground"
- **Line 14:** "mass"
- **Line 16:** "shades"
- **Line 17:** "massed"

- **Line 19:** "Grow out, stand full, fade slow"
- **Line 20:** "the pale ground"

ALLITERATION

This poem catches the speaker in a moment of hypnotized (and rather lascivious) fascination. Pronounced alliteration gives his voice a fittingly heightened and romantic tone.

Listen, for instance, to the alliteration in this description of the lady's profile:

> No shade encroaching on the matchless mould
> Of those two lips, which should be opening soft
> In the pure profile; [...]

The "matchless mould" of the lady's lips contains an *mmm* of delicious satisfaction. And the round /p/ alliteration of "pure profile" delicately evokes that profile's ripe, plump loveliness.

Later on, the speaker describes the lady in a kind of floral clinch:

> Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's
> Burthen of honey-coloured buds to kiss
> And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.

The interplay of breathy /h/, luxurious /l/, ripe /b/, and light /k/ sounds here evoke the sensations and sounds of this faintly absurd scene: the delicate bump and graze of soft blossoms against parted, passive lips. The speaker sounds fully and sensuously absorbed in his veiled sexual fantasy.

And listen to the sounds at the end of the poem, as the speaker imagines a host of angels staring unblinkingly at the lady's beauty:

> All heaven, meanwhile, condensed into one eye
> Which fears to lose the wonder, should it wink.

Those three /w/ sounds in a row end the poem on a note of heightened drama: the sounds feel as intent as the angels (and the speaker).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "head," "hers"
- **Line 2:** "Painted," "pale"
- **Line 3:** "prefers"
- **Line 4:** "matchless mould"
- **Line 6:** "pure profile"
- **Line 8:** "hyacinth," "loves," "leaned"
- **Line 9:** "Burthen," "honey," "coloured," "buds," "kiss"
- **Line 10:** "capture," "lips"
- **Line 11:** "lithe"
- **Line 12:** "gold ground"
- **Line 16:** "Breaking," "burning"
- **Line 18:** "Waiting," "wonder"
- **Line 19:** "stand," "full," "fade," "slow," "sky"
- **Line 22:** "Which," "wonder," "wink"

VOCABULARY

The Tuscan (Line 3) - Here, the speaker may be alluding to the artists of Renaissance Florence (in Tuscany) in general or to a Tuscan painter in particular—likely Giotto, who was famous for naturalistic religious paintings on gilded backgrounds.

Encroaching (Line 4) - Intruding, imposing itself.

Matchless mould (Line 4) - That is, the incomparably beautiful shape.

Yon (Line 8) - That one, over there.

Hyacinth (Line 8) - A kind of spring flower with clusters of bell-shaped blossoms.

Burthen (Line 9) - An alternate spelling of "burden."

'Twixt (Line 10) - A contraction of "betwixt," or between.

Lithe (Line 11) - Slender and graceful.

Correggio (Line 14) - An Italian Renaissance painter noted for his sensual pictures of women from classical mythology and his fleshy, lifelike Madonnas.

Mass (Line 14) - Gather in a mass, collect.

Rifts (Line 14) - Cracks, crevices, gaps.

Orb (Line 15) - Sphere, globe. The speaker might be picturing rounded angelic faces or the angels leaning down from the heavenly spheres (the concentric transparent globes once believed to contain the stars and planets).

Momently (Line 18) - Any moment.

Wink (Line 22) - Blink. The idea here is that the heavens are afraid to close their eyes even for a second in case the lovely face disappears—not that they're afraid to give her a flirty wink.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Face" is one of Robert Browning's trademark dramatic monologues: poems written in the voice of a particular character, like monologues from a play. Many of Browning's speakers are out-and-out villains; this speaker is more subtly dangerous, a quietly misogynistic guy who feels the perfect woman is an ageless and silent one.

His reflections on female beauty and deathless art take the form of a single long stanza. Its 22 lines of iambic pentameter (that is, lines of five da-DUMs in a row: "If one | could have |

that lit- | tle head | of hers") make it sound rather like a speech from Shakespeare, giving the speaker's voice some appropriately Renaissance-y gravitas. An unpredictable rhyme scheme cuts across that tone a little, however; the changing patterns of the rhymes follow the swell of the speaker's feelings rather than sticking to any inherited form. The poem's shape thus combines classic grandeur with wild emotion.

METER

"A Face" is written in iambic pentameter: that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But as in a lot of iambic poetry, the speaker doesn't stick to perfect iambs all the way down. Here's how the meter sounds in the first three lines:

> If one | could have | that lit- | tle head | of hers
> Painted | upon | a back- | ground of | pale gold,
> Such as | the Tus- | can's ear- | ly art | prefers!

The first line here is perfect iambic pentameter; the next two switch things up for the sake of emphasis, drama, and naturalism. Both lines 2 and 3 start with a front-loaded trochee (the opposite foot of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm). And line 2 pushes its last two stresses into one foot to create a spondee, two strong beats in a row (DUM-DUM), giving slow, reverent weight to that "pale gold" background.

This familiar rhythm might raise echoes of a Shakespeare soliloquy or a passage from Milton—and thus feels like an appropriately Renaissance-y meter for a speaker fascinated by the old Italian masters.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's strange rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABABCDCDEEFFGGHHIJJJJI

This impulsive, unpredictable pattern cuts across the poem's iambic pentameter. There's neither the grandeur of blank verse nor the lulling music of a regular pattern here.

At first, the scheme sounds a lot like the alternating rhymes of an English sonnet's first stanzas—perhaps wrong-footing readers, leading them to expect that a familiar pattern will emerge. Then, the speaker jumps into energetic couplets—*lots* of couplets, eight lines' worth. Finally, as the poem builds to a crescendo with the speaker's vision of painted angels gazing at the lady's face, there's that strange IJJJJI sequence, as focused as heaven's unwinking stare.

The rhyme scheme, in other words, is more emotive than it is formal, moving with the speaker's feelings as he gets lost in his imaginary portrait.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an aesthete (or beauty-lover) well-versed in the art of the Renaissance, with a particular taste for the luminous golden visions of Correggio. His allusions to the eras and techniques of Renaissance art suggest he's an erudite fellow who knows his Giotto from his Cimabue.

He's also, quietly, a bit of a misogynist. He sees the woman whose beauty he ostensibly celebrates more as a decorative object than a human being; she'd be more perfect as a deathless picture than a mortal person, he suggests. All through the poem, he talks *about* her, not *to* her.

His desire for her to hold still and be pretty (and to stop laughing, for heaven's sake, that "spoils all"!) even leads him to some veiled fantasies of murder: he measures out the lady's delicate neck with his fingers as if preparing to do some throttling, and he daydreams about what it would be like to possess "that little head of hers" in a way that at first sounds more like a longing to decapitate than to paint.

Like more than one of Browning's dangerous male speakers, then, this fellow seems tempted to destroy what he claims he loves. Death and art, after all, are the only two forces that can arrest aging and decline.

SETTING

"A Face" doesn't have a clear setting. Readers can guess that the speaker, a connoisseur of Renaissance art, is probably meant to be a 19th-century contemporary of Browning's. (Lots of Victorians were Renaissance enthusiasts; the era was in fashion.) But the poem takes place less in his world than in his imagination.

Picturing how a painter of the Italian Renaissance would have depicted the beautiful lady at whom he aims this poem, the speaker gets lost in a vision of her imagined portrait, dreaming up a "pale gold" background and a host of worshipful angels looking on. The "Face" of the title becomes less the face of the living lady and more the idealized, deathless version of her that might appear in an old master's dreamworld.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) was most famous in his time for not sounding much like a poet. His contemporaries were confused by his most distinctive works: his dramatic monologues, in which he inhabited a character like an actor playing a part. Even Oscar Wilde, a big Browning fan, famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Victorian literary world was much more at ease with the melancholy lyricism of Tennyson or the elegance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Browning's wife, and a much more famous poet at the time) than with the novelistic

storytelling of Browning's work.

But it's on his earthy, vibrant dramatic monologues that Browning's enduring reputation rests. His best-known poems form a veritable rogues' gallery, with narrators from a corrupt bishop to a murderous Italian duke to an equally murderous lover. By allowing these hideous men to speak for themselves, Browning explored the darker corners of human nature—and took a particular interest in the ways that people justify their terrible deeds. Villains, Browning's monologues suggest, don't tend to think that they're villains. Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though; he also wrote tenderly about heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

"A Face" was first published in the 1864 collection *Dramatis Personae*, a collection whose great dramatic monologues would go on to influence writers from Henry James to Jorge Luis Borges to A.S. Byatt. Its speaker, though more subtly villainous than, say, Porphyria's lover, is nonetheless another dangerous man for Browning's collection: a guy whose admiration for a woman's beauty interweaves with a denial of her humanity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's learned evocations of Italian Renaissance art draw on Browning's long relationship with Italy. He traveled extensively there as a young man, and in 1846 he outright moved to Florence so he could marry his beloved Elizabeth Barrett. (The couple couldn't marry in England because Elizabeth's tyrannical father was not a fan of the match; he would have preferred to keep Elizabeth and her famous, increasingly lucrative poetry under his own roof.)

In its portrait of a man whose apparent worship is a subtle kind of misogyny, "A Face" also responds to a big Victorian issue: what was known as the Woman Question. During the 19th century, a sentimental and oppressive ideal of womanhood dominated British culture. Women were meant to be pious, self-sacrificing, sweet-faced wives and mothers—and if they weren't that, they must be either burdensome spinsters (also expected to live exclusively for others) or fallen women.

As the century wore on, a tide of early feminism rose up against these reductive and oppressive ideals. Women began to demand education, independence, and political power. And woman artists of the era, from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to George Eliot to the Brontë sisters, became famous both for their great art and for their portraits of thinking, capable women.

Both of the Brownings would comment on the Woman Question in their art. Robert wrote psychologically subtle dramatic monologues in which men oppress women in the guise of "loving" them; Elizabeth wrote a book-length epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, about a woman fighting to become an artist.

Perhaps rather pointedly, Browning inscribed a copy of this poem to Emily Patmore, the wife of the poet Coventry Patmore and the inspiration for "The Angel in the House"—Coventry's poem of the same name, which depicted an idealized Victorian wife.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Paintings by Correggio — Get an idea of the kind of sensual Renaissance portraiture the speaker imagines in this overview of Correggio's work. (https://www.theartstory.org/artist/correggio/)
- Dramatis Personae — See images of the poem as it first appeared in Browning's important 1864 collection Dramatis Personae. (https://archive.org/details/dramatispersonae00browrich/page/161/mode/1up)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- More on Browning — Visit the Victorian Web to learn more about Browning. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Among the Rocks
- A Toccata of Galuppi's
- Confessions
- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Laboratory
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot
- The Pied Piper of Hamelin

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