The convent’s friends and gives them a long day,
And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
The man of Uz (and Us without the z,
Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
Secured at their devotion, up shall come
Out of a corner when you least expect,
As one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but Lippo! I —
Mazed, motionless and moonstruck — I’m the man!

Back I shrink — what is this I see and hear?
I, caught up with my monk’s-things by mistake,
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
I, in this presence, this pure company!
Where’s a hole, where’s a corner for escape?

Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
Forward, puts out a soft palm — ‘Not so fast!’
— Addresses the celestial presence, ‘nay —
He made you and devised you, after all,
Though he’s none of you! Could Saint John
there draw —

His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?
We come to brother Lippo for all that,
Iste perfecit opus!” So, all smile —
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
Under the cover of a hundred wings

Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you’re gay
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go

The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior’s niece... Saint Lucy, I would say.
And so all’s saved for me, and for the church

A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!
The street’s hushed, and I know my own way back,
Don’t fear me! There’s the grey beginning. Zooks!

‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’

(See Edgar’s song in Lear)

I

My first thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

II

What else should he be set for, with his staff?
What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare
All travellers who might find him posted there,
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
Would break, what crutch ’gin write my epitaph
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

III

If at his counsel I should turn aside
Into that ominous tract which, all agree,
Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly
I did turn as he pointed: neither pride
speaker blows his horn and Browning returns the reader to the simple statement that forms the title of the poem. Childe Roland is now Dauntless (203) at the culmination of his quest; even if he has been daunted many times along the way, he has not faltered and it is this attribute that is celebrated, not success or any meaning attached to the finding of the Dark Tower. What remains is simply the human determination to push beyond limits and embrace challenges.

In the poem Apparent Failure, Browning chooses to reverse the reader’s expected response and to demonstrate that an attitude we take for granted – in this case, our ideas about the victims of suicide – may fail to take sufficient account of life’s complexities. The title itself alerts the reader to Browning’s view, and he builds a case not only for accepting the choice the suicides have made, but of seeing them as blessed.

Activity
In what ways does Browning explore in Apparent Failure the true meaning of success in human lives?

Discussion
In this poem, as elsewhere, Browning confronts the reader with the paradox that the consciousness of failure is in fact a measure of success. In Apparent Failure we are offered tableaux of the possible histories of the three men who now lie cold and lifeless on the copper couch (25). The speaker directly addresses the dead bodies he sees before him and imagines the contrast between the reality of their lives, perhaps living under Some arch, where twelve such slept abreast (35), and the hopes and dreams of their imaginations. Perhaps they had had grand ambitions; the speaker imagines that the first man had wanted to be Buonaparte/ And have the Tuileries for toy (38–39). He then engages with the imagined quest of the second dead man to fight for equality and justice as a socialist and leveller (42, 43), but clearly life has defeated this man also. The final portrait is of a man who has been trapped by the need for money to allow him to satisfy his desire for women.

In all three portraits we see individuals who have struggled to attain the unattainable. They are all men whom God made (28) and each one had a personal quest (see the next page for a discussion of the importance of this idea in Browning’s poetry). Browning celebrates the value of each of them and suggests that their death is only an apparent failure because they were men who had a vision of what their lives should be and refused to accept a lesser reality; the fact that they rejected a life of failed dreams can be seen as evidence of strength of purpose. It is from this philosophical viewpoint that Browning expresses a hope (58) that value can be recovered even from such tragedies, That, after Last, returns the First (60), and That what began best, can’t end worst (62).

As the poem concludes, the reader is left with a sense of Browning’s refusal to measure people by conventional standards of achievement. He seems to suggest that people may have merits of a kind that the world does not recognize, and what is to be valued is not worldly success but the perpetual struggle and hopeful fight. Thus he concludes that what God blessed once, the creation of humanity, cannot prove to be accurst (63).

The quest
The concept of the quest is a traditional one in medieval courtly tales of men proving themselves through fulfilling daunting tasks and persevering through adversity as fearless warriors, usually to win the love of a beautiful woman. The protagonists are usually driven by the idea of conquest, either of an enemy or of monsters that are symbolically depriving them of freedom or of a woman’s love; often they journey in search of a precious object, place or person. Browning appropriates this tradition and explores it in different guises in his poetry.

In ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’, as we have seen, Browning deals specifically with one aspect of the quest: the perilous journey through a wasteland to find something that is hidden. However, Childe Roland’s quest seems less concerned with his apparent object than with seeking some kind of spiritual fulfilment or regeneration. Throughout the poem he expresses concern over his fitness for the task in hand, and his fitness even to fail in a heroic way. Clearly this links with Browning’s philosophy of the imperfect (see page 175) as well as engaging the reader with the psychology of the speaker. This quest, then, is primarily a journey into the self. The wasteland can be seen as symbolizing the horrors within Childe Roland’s mind, and when he reflects on the sins of Cuthbert and Giles, whom he is now representing, he identifies with them. In this poem Browning presents the