

**“MY LAST DUCHESS”: AN EXPLICATION**

**Gassim H. DOHAL**

*Independent Researcher, Gizan, Saudi Arabia*

E-mail: [dr\\_waitme@hotmail.com](mailto:dr_waitme@hotmail.com)

**Abstract**

In his poem “My Last duchess,” Robert Browning uses the dramatic monologue to present the Duke to his readers. This monologue is about the Duke’s last wife, addressed to the expected new duchess. Apparently, the hero of this poem is using his experience to shape his future life; this is a good way to continue the life and at the same time to avoid one’s previous mistakes. Moreover, reflections on what has happened might be inspiring for an individual to model his/her future and to help others learn and manipulate their present for the sake of their future. This article will present the inspiring pictorial scene Browning has provided us with in this poem.

**Key Words:** Browning; “My Last Duchess”; Duke; monologue.

**Introduction**

In “My Last duchess,” Robert Browning presents the Duke of Ferrara in his complete authority, commanding others to fulfill his wish. He has an envoy of a nobleman to listen to him and convey his message to that nobleman in question whose daughter the Duke is soon to marry. He prefers this long way to deliver his message though he is able to tell the would-be wife in a direct way. In the method he uses, no one knows to what extent the message will correctly and precisely be conveyed; the envoy may misunderstand or forget some necessary points. If the envoy succeeds in his job, what about the father?

Uruk (2021) addresses masculinity and tackles the treatment of women as victims in the Victorian period. On the other hand, Atosay (2020) applies the reader-response theory. Shahin (2007) discusses the topic of cruelty as depicted in the poem. Recently, Sulaiman (2021) tries to explore the human psyche through the Duke’s character. All these studies and others have tried to focus on one topic at a time. A general and comprehensive method is

required for the popularity of the poem and due to the fact that it is usually taught to literature students who should put their hands on something that will push them and give them a chance to apply their studies, explore their understanding, and expand their knowledge beyond what they have. The poem represents the Victorian period and conveys different aspects that might be considered. Various literary theories might be applied while studying this poem besides its structure and language. In addition to the tone, here we talk about a poem and performance; these elements are influenced by power, class, education, etc. All these elements should be juxtaposed in order to reflect upon such a great poem.

In this article, the text of the poem will be analyzed in a way that will help readers understand the poem and its implications. This analysis will go beyond words and sentences to explore the general meaning conveyed in its context.

### **Text and Argument**

Each reading of a literary text produces different interpretations, and each reader from a specific interpretive community or repertoire gives a different response. (Atasoy, 2020, p. 208)

In “My Last Duchess,” Robert Browning uses the dramatic monologue that enables him to portray the Duke through his speech. The Duke's speech concerns his last wife, but its real purpose is to list to his commands and demands for the future duchess. It is the Duke's method of manipulating the past in order to crystallize his future.

The dramatic monologue of the poem has rhymed iambic pentameter lines. Browning's poem consists of rhymed couplets to affirm order, concord and harmony of the speech; indeed, this indicates the impression the Duke wants to appear with (Lawrence et al., 1992, pp. 162-63). Yet, this harmony and concord are disturbed by some enjambments as in (all quotations from the poem are cited by referring to line numbers):

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? (lines 46-47)

And

The Count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed; (lines 49-51)

Such enjambments denote the Duke's changing and unsettling life. Although a reader may see in those enjambments a way the Duke does on purpose to show that everything is in control, yet they reflect his inability to end lines in harmony with their poetic rhyme. Such inability may indicate an internal conflict the Duke does not want others to see and/or know. Probably this is the reason he prefers to talk to an envoy rather than the would-be duchess or her father. Apparently, he is afraid to get exposed in front of the nobleman or would-be wife. He also uses the painting and controls the setting in order to impose his authority as a duke.

In the poem, the Duke is talking to an emissary from the Count for whose daughter's hand the Duke is asking. Spencer (2010) argues that the Duke “diverts both the intercourse and interest of the fictitious listener towards the painting, and strives to show off his supremacy over his last duchess through verbal expression” (p. 136). This listener has no role in the poem; he is just to listen and later to inform his sender about the message. Indeed, the Duke's speech is addressed to three intended audience; the envoy, who is to say what he has heard, the nobleman, who sends the envoy, and the future duchess, who is to carry out the Duke's orders. Such a speech is immortalized by Browning to reach a fourth person; i.e. the reader. Anyhow, the effect of these demands may not be conveyed in the way the Duke wishes to have on the would-be wife; we talk here about the tone, performance, the version of the message, the way of acting, etc. All these elements depend on knowledge, understanding, and position of the person in question. There is no doubt that the Duke, the envoy, the father, and the daughter differ concerning these elements. Accordingly, no one guarantees that the message will get to the would-be wife in the frame the Duke intends to have it delivered in because of their differences regarding position, gender, and all the elements that have been mentioned earlier. For me, the envoy represents the weakest link; for him, it is a job he should do. Hence, he is passive; he is sent to represent the nobleman-this is what we have learnt from the context. He is directed by the Duke all the time: “Will't please you sit and look at her” (L. 5) at the beginning of the poem, and at the end of their meeting, the Duke tells the guest, “We'll go / Together down” (L. 53-54). Indeed, the Duke should articulate his commands directly to the woman in question if he intends for his message to be received in an appropriate and right way, but the question is whether she is in a status where she can receive and understand the Duke's “commands.” It appears she is not in a good position due to the social structure she belongs to; she is represented by a male. Moreover, her father sends an envoy to listen for the authority the Duke has; he orders and imposes his instructions

and there is no space left here for anyone. Indeed, the last Duchess's painting has more presence and influence on the scene more than the intended audience.

The Duke exposes his last duchess' painting to the emissary. She has been painted on the wall looking as if she is alive. The painter draws her in a pose that will tell a lot about her character not only for the Duke, but also for anyone who has a chance to look at that painting which Uruk (2021) sees as "as an ekphrastic material, which stands for the last duchess, becomes a silent object to gaze on and a passive entity" (p. 211). This attitude apparently gives a kind of wonder for the Duke, who believes that the painter is one of her flatterer.

. . . Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands. (lines 3-4)

The painter is Fra Pandolf, who "has worked busily a day" (line 4). This affirms his appreciation of art and beauty; he is a designer; he is an artist. It is not clear whether he is asked to finish the picture within a day or not. He might be the person who likes his job and prefers to get himself busy while working. Also, it might be that this painter feels involved while dealing with the duchess's painting. Indeed, the Duke "strives to fulfill his constant need to praise his own honor and maleness as the possessor of power and wealth through an expensive painting reproduced by Fra Pandolf" (Uruk, 2021, p. 212).

Then, some kind of generosity appears when he asks the envoy to "sit and look" (L. 5). The Duke asks the envoy to look at the picture of his previous duchess. Her picture is kept away from sights behind the curtains because he wants to possess it; he wants something for himself. In addition, he wants to show his control and power so he shows the envoy the painting. In an authoritative way, he compares himself to a god; everything is under his control, and he orders. Thus, he sees things in a different way, so to speak. The passion of the Duchess' glance portrayed in the painting indicates some sort of "joy" as depicted in the following lines:

Her husband's presence only called that spot of joy  
into the Duchess' cheek . . . (lines 14-15)  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough for  
calling up that spot of joy. (lines 20-21)

The above lines show that the Duke believes that the painter is one of the Duchess' flatterers (Martin, 1985, pp. 96-113). According to Sulaiman (2021), "the Duke was troubled by the reason of 'the depth and passion' in the Duchess 'earnest glance', which the painter had

successfully reproduced in his painting” (205). Clearly, he has no attention to give the envoy a chance to interpret or think about the “joy” the last Duchess has had; it is the Duke who has the right to interpret and talk about the painting he possesses.

Moreover, the curtain used to cover the painting reflects the Duke’s possession; he wants something for himself. He is not the only one who has “called that spot of joy,” but also “Fra Pandolf [has] chanced to say” so. Moreover, the Duke believes in opportunities; i.e. he might have a successful marriage in the future. However, he talks about her goodness that indeed bothers him a lot;

. . . she had  
A heart-how shall I say?- too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er  
She looked on . . . (lines 21-24)

This portrayal indicates that he recognizes the impression she has owned. Yet, he uses expressions like “too soon,” “too easily,” and “whate’er” in order to belittle her goodness and show how silly she is. Further, it is clear that he appreciates Beauty and values Art. In the poem, he is pleased with the work of Fra Pandolf and thinks highly of the carving of Claus of Innsbruck. Hence, he keeps the painting behind the curtain as a way of appreciation and also as a method of showing his power and control. It is not a mere painting; it concerns beauty, art, and a woman with whom he has had a relationship.

When the Duke says, “The dropping of the daylight in the West” (line 26), he indicates that she is no longer alive because of her faults as readers can infer from the context. It is sun that sets in the West. For “the dropping of the daylight” means the end of the day; it is a literary way of telling readers about the duchess’s death. Also, he has given “commands” (L. 45) to stop all her “smiles” (L. 46).

Then, the Duke goes on talking about the Duchess’ life when a fool in the garden holds her mule that she will ride. This picture expresses motion; that is life. The Duke suggests that this behavior, i.e. her inclination towards the fool, is his wife's fault. He is jealous when he discusses her thanking of others, her smile to others. Apparently, it is a human nature; the Duke’s behavior reminds us of Shakespeare’s Othello and the way he has taken with Desdemona. The Duke wants to possess the Duchess for himself alone. Here he treats her as an object, denying her any right as a human being. At that time, “the male is thought to be subject and active, but the female is object and other” (Edwards, 1987, p. 16).

Yet we have to realize that this Duke represents a patriarchal society. Marsh (1987) states that the portrayal of the Duchess “symbolizes both social commentary on the repressive and strict norms corresponding to the Victorian women and the consequences born out of the rebellious acts of them” (p. 152). Moreover, his representation of patriarchy is worse because he has power and he exploits his authority to achieve his interests and tendencies. After her death, he insists on controlling her by having her painting hidden and used as a personal property. That is selfishness and cruelty. For him, he is not going to stoop; he is the Duke, who gives commands and possesses “a nine-hundred-years-old name” (line 33).

. . . I gave commands;

Then all smile stopped together. (lines 45-46)

It is clear that the Duke knows the way of her death; it might be the Duke who kills her; she has died of oppression and cruelty. There are many possibilities of how she has died. Indeed, Robert Browning adds to the horror of her death by leaving all possibilities open; he has not revealed whether he has killed her in a direct way or indirectly. What is clear is that he has given “commands” (L. 45) to stop her life.

Then, the Duke shifts the subject to the future duchess. While talking about the dowry which is his main “object[ive]” (L. 53), it seems that the two sides have agreed on that issue because he is talking about the Count's “munificence” (L. 59), and as usual, the envoy does not talk about anything relevant. Indeed, the painting has more influence on the Duke's speech than the envoy does. The Duke wants to emphasize that agreement; it is one-side conversation. This will make it clear that his goal is dowry itself not the Count's daughter. Talking about dowry means he is miserly, and giving orders means he is cruel. Cruelty and avarice will make it so impossible for the envoy that he will flee or the Duke himself thinks so. As a result, he says, “Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir!” (Lines 53-54). The last word suggests that the Duke is a learned man; he knows how to address people. Metaphorically, he wants to absorb the envoy's fear; the latter may regret becoming a mediator in this deal of marriage. The Duke wants to remove his worry and lets him continue his role as a mediator so he invites him to go downstairs.

We notice that the beginning of the poem is about something that has happened in the past. Toward the end of the poem, he talks about the future wife and dowry. He wants his last wife's mistakes not to be repeated, so he talks first about what has happened in the past, then

moves to his present subject; i.e. his next marriage. His topics are arranged and addressed accordingly.

At the end, he talks about Innsbruck's carving of Neptune "taming a sea—horse" (line 55). Neptune is a god; the question here is whether the Duke believes he is a god or semi-god. It seems that he believes he is like a god at least; he is the one who gives commands and orders and expects obedience from people. He is the one who has the authority. On the other hand, the word "taming" indicates, in the Duke's opinion, the necessity of taming women in general and wife in particular, who, in turn, is compared with a vigorous animal; i.e. a horse. Additionally, in this comparison he tries to justify the Duchess' end; she deserves death. As mentioned earlier, the Duke appreciates Art and Beauty, so he talks about Innsbruck's carving of Neptune here.

The Duke believes he is superior, so he doesn't pay attention to other human beings. As a result, he misunderstands them. One of these human beings is his last wife whom he has recognized the qualities she has had. The qualities he dislikes in her personage are in fact accepted and valued as virtues:

Her modest blush..., her appreciation of a servant's gifts, her delight in sunsets and even in animals all suggest a woman of breeding, kindness, and sensitivity (Lawrence et al., 1992, p. 161).

### **Conclusion**

Generally speaking, as Fra Pandolf manages to immortalize the last Duchess with minute details through his artistic painting, Robert Browning, as a poet, succeeds to draw a wonderful, expressive, and poetic chef d'oeuvre for the story of the Duke. In "My Last Duchess," the Duke expresses his characteristics. His speech reflects that he is cruel, selfish, careless, and jealous. Yet, he is clever and educated. His qualities are reflected in his demands; the one, who accepts to marry him, should accept these demands. With no doubt, his demands require from others demeaning the self and ignoring their natural rights. He looks for possessing a woman as a chef d'oeuvre; probably this is why he values Art and owns some prominent artists' works.

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