



Smiles, Status and Silence - “My Last Duchess” as a Critique of Modern Social Control

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Received: 14 May 2026; Received in revised form: 11 Jun 2026; Accepted: 15 Jun 2026; Available online: 18 Jun 2026

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Abstract— Robert Browning’s dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess”, though rooted in the Victorian era and set in Renaissance Italy functions as a powerful mirror to modern society. The poem foregrounds themes of patriarchal dominance, aristocratic power and the social importance of power and hierarchy, all embodied in the figure of the Duke. Browning exposes the unequal dynamics of marital relationships, highlighting the dominance of the husband and the enforced subservience of women. The Duchess’ reduction to an object - valued for obedience and controlled visibility reveals patterns of female objectification and silencing that persist beyond the poem’s historical context. These themes find clear reflection in contemporary social realities including gender inequality, domestic violence, power politics and the continued marginalization of vulnerable groups. By dramatizing the abuse of authority within private and public spheres “My Last Duchess” transcends its temporal setting and invites modern readers to confront enduring structures of oppression. The poem thus remains relevant as a critique of unchecked power and systemic inequality in present day.



Keywords— monologue, dominance, power, objectification, oppression

Introduction

Robert Browning is widely regarded as the poet who perfected the dramatic monologue, transforming it into a powerful literary form for the psychological exploration of the human mind. Through this technique Browning allows the inner turmoil, moral contradictions and subconscious impulses of his speakers to emerge gradually through their own words. His poetry thus becomes not merely a narrative device, but a psychological study of human behaviour and motivation. In “My Last Duchess”, Browning presents a complex portrayal of the speaker’s psyche, revealing how power, insecurity and obsession operates beneath the surface of aristocratic refinement.

The poem is structured around a seemingly polite interaction in which the Duke of Ferrara displays the portrait of his late Duchess to an envoy negotiating a new marriage alliance. However as the Duke speaks his possessiveness and commanding nature is steadily exposed. His obsessive concern with control, reputation and social status reflects not only individual pathology but also the

broader values of Victorian society, particularly its rigid hierarchies and patriarchal norms. The Duchess, silenced and objectified, exists only through the Duke’s controlling gaze, underscores the unequal power dynamics embedded within marital relationships.

Browning’s representation of gender relations extends beyond its historical context, offering striking modern parallels. The Duke’s expectations of female behaviour - obedience, exclusivity and emotional restraint - resonates with contemporary debates surrounding gender discrimination, patriarchal dominance and the social policing of women’s conduct. By merging psychological insight with social critique, “My Last Duchess” continues to function as a revealing study of both the Victorian psyche and enduring structures of power in modern society, controlling her actions, expressions and even her silences. This control persists beyond her death symbolized by his power to draw or remove the curtain.

Authoritarian Power, Subjugation and Marginalization of the Downtrodden

The Duke's insistence that his late Duchess follow only in his footsteps and reserve her smiles exclusively for him reflects an intense desire for absolute possession and control. She is reduced to a silent object - an ornamental presence, a lovely toy shaped and reshaped according to his whims and fancies - rather than acknowledging as an autonomous individual. This attitude mirrors the conduct of modern power hungry leaders who extend their authority beyond ethical and moral limits to satisfy personal ambition. Such a selfish, manipulative approach to power is rooted in egoism and self-centered human motives, where the desire to command and dominate eclipses empathy, equality and mutual respect. The Duke thus becomes emblematic of an authoritarian figure whose obsession with control transforms relationships into hierarchies of subjugation, revealing how unchecked power dehumanizes both the ruler and the ruled.

The Duke's intense pride in his eight hundred year old aristocratic title underscores his deep-seated obsession with lineage, social status and hierarchy. He demands unquestioning respect to this inherited honour and is profoundly infuriated by his wife's apparent tendency to regard his noble title and the ordinary courtesies extended by others as equal in value. Such an attitude exposes his rigid belief in social stratification where worth is determined by rank rather than humanity. This craving for status, human and societal validation fuels his authoritarian impulse to command and rule, reinforcing a culture of exclusion and domination. Consequently the downtrodden and socially powerless are rendered voiceless, subjected to disregard and inhuman treatment. The Duke thus becomes a representative figure of social snobbery illustrating how entrenched hierarchies perpetuate disrespect toward the weak and normalize inequality as a social order.

Gender Inequality: Historical Pattern of Women's Marginalisation

The Duke's criticism of the Duchess' innocence reveals his obsessive need to define and elevate her identity. He assumes the authority to 'paint' her character for controlling her actions, emotions and even her silences. This control persists beyond her death, symbolized by his power to draw or remove the curtain from her portrait at will, reducing her existence to an object of display. What he disguises as love is in reality, an exercise of absolute authority and possessiveness. When the Duchess's smiles fail to conform to his rigid expectations, she is metaphorically silenced, her voice and agency erased. The Duke's behaviour thus exposes a patriarchal impulse to discipline women who deviate from prescribed norms, presenting control not as oppression but as affection.

This portrayal resonates strongly with contemporary society where women continue to be denied equal status and are frequently treated as second-class citizens. Their identities are often defined through male figures - known by their father's or husband's names rather than as autonomous individuals. Limited access to education, confinement to domestic roles and the prioritization of physical body over intellect contribute to their systematic subjugation. Women are excluded from major decision-making roles, subjected to unequal wages, and frequently endure mental abuse, domestic violence and physical and psychological torture. Treated as possessions rather than as persons, they face objectification, possessiveness and gender-based discrimination that normalise inequality. The Duke's treatment of the Duchess thus becomes a powerful metaphor for entrenched gender hierarchies exposing how patriarchal power structures continue to marginalize women both within the household and across society.

Possessiveness and Toxic Masculinity: The Persistent Inequality of Women

The Duke's possessiveness reduces his wife to an object rather than acknowledging her as an autonomous individual. She is treated like a doll, something to be displayed, controlled and manipulated at his will - drawing a clear parallel to Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Like Nora, the Duchess is denied the freedom to think, choose or exist beyond the expectations imposed upon her. When she fails to conform to the Duke's rigid standards she is silenced and ultimately destroyed, revealing how patriarchal power punishes female authority. Her death does not mark the end of his dominance, instead the Duke swiftly seeks another alliance, emphasizing his persistent need to control a woman, a trait deeply rooted in toxic masculinity and Victorian male dominance.

This dynamic reflects a broader patriarchal structure that continues to shape both historical and modern societies. Women's meekness is normalized, while inequality shadows them at every phase of life - within families, relationships and social institutions. Toxic relationships manifest through emotional manipulation, domestic violence and the systematic silencing of the weak. Art itself becomes a tool of power, reinforcing male contemporary mechanism of control, shaping identities and dictating behavior. Through these parallels the text exposes how patriarchal dominance persists across time, revealing that the manipulation and the marginalization of women remains a central feature of social power structures today.

Power and Dominance: Democracy as a Modern Myth

Modern democracy often presents itself as a system of equality, yet in practice it frequently mirrors the

hierarchical power structures of royalty. Power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, driven by megalomania, an obsessive desire for respect, and an insatiable hunger for control. Social status becomes a weapon through which the elite assert dominance, while the marginalized are silenced and tormented. The recurring rise of the same powerful individuals to positions of authority exposes democracy as a myth for the lower classes who remain excluded from genuine participation. Wealth and influence ensure that the rich are perpetually revered, reinforcing a cycle where privilege sustains itself and the powerless are denied agency.

This imbalance is reflected in the figure of the Duke, whose authority persists even beyond death. The woman he dominates is reduced to a silent presence, veiled and concealed, her individuality erased both in life and in memory. The curtain that hides her becomes a metaphor for control – dismantled only at the Duke's will – illustrating how her existence is dictated entirely by his commands. She obeys unquestioningly, deprived of voice and autonomy much like the oppressed classes in modern society. Even after her death she remains trapped within his narrative emphasizing how entrenched power structures continue to suppress the marginalized long after resistance is no longer possible.

CONCLUSION

The poem ultimately holds a mirror to modern society transcending its Victorian setting to expose enduring social realities. As a classic work by Robert Browning, it explores eternal themes of power, domination, possessiveness and the persistent inequality faced by women. Through the Duke's psyche Browning unveils the inner workings of a male mind shaped by entitlement and authority - traits that remain disturbingly familiar in contemporary contexts. The Duke's narcissism and need for absolute control lead to objectification of women, reducing human relationships to displays of ownership rather than mutual respect.

In this way the poem resonates powerfully with modern experiences of toxic relationships, where control and dominance are often masked as love or social propriety. Browning's dramatic monologue allows readers to witness how unchecked power corrodes empathy and morality, making the Duke not merely a historical figure, but a representation of modern masculinity at its most destructive. The poem's lasting relevance lies in its ability to confront readers with uncomfortable truths about gender relations and societal hierarchies, affirming its place as a timeless critique of human arrogance and abuse of power.

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