

**(My Last Duchess): A Poem about  
Relationships between the Colonizers and  
the Colonized\***

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(دوقتي الأخيرة): قصيدة عن العلاقة ما بين  
المستعمرين والمستعمرين

## ملخص

عندما نأخذ بعين الاعتبار التأويلات الكثيرة لقصيدة روبرت براونينج (دوقتي الأخيرة)، فإن معظمها يقدم ويُعطي أفكاراً تتعلّق بشخصيّة الدوق والدوقة إما من منظور نفسي أو من منظور الدراسات الانثوية. هذه الورقة البحثية هي رؤية جديدة في قراءة هذه القصيدة وفهمها، وهي متعلقة بالعلاقة ما بين المستعمرين والذين يمثلهم الدوق والمستعمرين والذين تمثلهم الدوقة، بالإضافة إلى علاقة المستعمرين بالفن. هذه الأفكار تواردت إلى ذهن الباحث لأن براونينج ألف هذه القصيدة في القرن التاسع عشر حيث تجذر الاستعمار، وقامت الدول القوية والغنية باستغلال الأمم الضعيفة والفقيرة. هذه الحقائق هي موجودة في أعماق العقل الباطن للشاعر، وتجلّت في القصيدة تحت قناع، ويستطيع القراء من خلال التدبر في هذه المناجاة الدرامية تلمس أن الشاعر يشجب بطريقة لاشعورية أعمال المستعمرين من خلال قصيدته.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: المستعمرين، المستعمرين، المنولوج، الدوق، دوقتي الأخيرة، روبرت براوننج.

## Abstract:

When we take into consideration the numerous interpretations of Robert Browning's «My Last Duchess» poem we notice that most of them present and give ideas about the personalities of the Duke and the Duchess either from a psychological perspective or from a feminist perspective. This paper presents a new way of reading and understanding the poem as concerning the relationship between the colonizers, represented by the Duke, and the colonized, represented by the Duchess, as well as the colonizers' relationship with art. These ideas came into the researcher's mind because Browning composed the poem in the 19th century, when colonization started, and powerful, rich countries exploited weak, poor nations. These realities were deeply embedded in the poet's subconscious and emerged in the poem in disguise. Readers can

speculate that through composing this dramatic monologue, the poet unconsciously denounced the acts of the colonizers.

**Keywords:** colonizers, colonized, dramatic monologue, Duke, My Last Duchess, Robert Browning.

## 1. Introduction

(My Last Duchess,) published in 1842, still ranks among the best known and most widely anthologized of Robert Browning's works due to its great profundity and subtle, mental complexity. The Duke, the single speaker in this dramatic monologue, is aware of the presence of another person and distorts facts to try to conceal what he thinks and feels. The Duke uses his dramatic monologue (Eliot, 1953, 104) as (a mask) for his true beliefs, and the sake of expressing his wish to dominate others. He presents (Everett, 2003) (a second self) and shows us how his mind works. The poem reveals the Duke's real character and (Johnson, 1990, 3) (the essence) of his relationship with the addressee and the Duchess. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to understand what is within the speaker and what he represents, which are (Woolford, 1996, 41) (inferred from what the speaker says, although they are not stated directly.) Browning exhibits his skill as in this dramatic monologue (Greenblatt, 2012, 1275) as he (separates the speaker from the poet in such a way that the reader must work through the words of the speaker to discover the meanings of the poet.)

Most critics use one of two major approaches to interpret the poem: first, a psychological approach due to the nature of the dramatic monologue as an argument within the self, and second, a feminist approach due to the discrepancy between the Duchess's innocence and the Duke's malice. Readers can find in Stefan Hawlin's book *The Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning* a useful survey of the major critical debates surrounding Browning and his works.

However, unlike previous studies, this interpretation presumes that the poem has a hidden topic: colonialization. Browning was a child of his age and acknowledged (Shelley, 1852, 138) that the dramatic monologue is the (radiance and

aroma) of the poet's (personality,) and the poet (is impelled to embody the thing he perceives) in it. This paper, therefore, shows that the poem embodies relations between powerful colonizers in the Duke and weak, colonized countries in the Duchess. Even the poem title, with its possessive pronoun (My,) indicates the importance of the relations between the possessor and the possessed. The poem demands an intelligent reading, and readers must (Levine, 2003, 80) (come back to it again and again, until it has become intelligible.)

It is important to note that the 19th century was characterized by men's dominance over women, so masculinity was associated with strength, and femininity with weakness. It, therefore, is not logical to associate the colonizers with the Duke and the colonized with the Duchess. Following Efrid (2010), the 19th century (was characterized) by the (hegemonic parameters of patriarchy) and the (Sussman, 1995, 78) (normative bourgeois masculinity." The poem describes the relations between the Duke and the Duchess as husband and wife to reveal how the colonizers violated humanitarian values, leading to the catastrophic consequences of colonialism. The colonizers were restless, reflected in the Duke's speech peppered with questions ("Will't please you sit and look at her? l. 5), 1 hesitations (how shall I say? l. 22), and interjections ("Oh", l. 43). The Duke, the representative of the colonizers, reveals his true character in (Martin, 1985, 96) (a sequential and fragmentary) way, so readers must build a picture of him gradually.

## 2. The Title and the Beginning of the Poem

The possessive pronoun (My) in the poem title suggests a primary characteristic of the colonizers who tried with all their might to possess everything in the colonized countries. The repetition of the personal pronoun "I" in the poem mirrors the colonizers' self-obsession, as expressed by the arrogant, self-centered Duke. These people were willing to commit any evil action to satisfy themselves.

In the first line of the poem, the Duke uses the word (last) to describe his wife: (that's my last Duchess painted on the wall) (l. 1). Hoad (1966,

259) argues that this word is derived from the word *latost*, which means the (the latest) or (the newest.) The Duchess, or the colonized, is not the final victim of the Duke, or the colonizers. The word *last* perhaps indicates instead that this last Duchess is not the only one who will be persecuted by the Duke, or the colonizers; other countries may yet fall victims in the future.

However, at the same time, the Duchess looks (as if she were alive) (l. 2), and the Duke considers her to be, to use a Coleridgean term, in a state of death-in-life. The Duchess thus still has deep influence on the Duke, has transcended death, and (Kay, 2004, 167) (appears to have crossed the limit) of the (physical life) to spiritual steadfastness. Accordingly, she represents the essence of the will of the colonized, suppressed but never subjugated because of, let us say, their innate ontological immunity against the tyrannical colonizers. The colonized exhibited such steadfastness despite their complete vulnerability to the colonizers, who used their power to exploit the colonized. The Duke's comment on the painting of the Duchess suggests this quality: (there she stands) (l. 4), indicating that this is a full-length portrait of her entire body.

The Duchess's portrait seems to have an influence on the Duke, and he politely asks his listener to stop and examine it: (will't please you sit and look at her?) (l. 5). This politeness, though, is superficial, mirroring the pretext the colonizers used to camouflage their domination of other countries. Thus, the (depth and passion of) the Duchess's (earnest glance) (l. 8) represent the natural resources that attracted the colonizers to invade other countries and exploit them for their own benefit.

## 3. Art and the Colonizers

The name of the portrait artist, Frà Pandolf, is introduced in line three and repeated in lines six and sixteen, indicating the important role of art as propaganda for the Duke. Although Pandolf is an imaginary artist, we understand from his name and capacities that he is a great Italian artist who has managed to capture not only the beauty of the Duchess but also the essence of her qualities. The Duke says, (But to myself they turned (since

none puts by / the curtain I have drawn for you, but I)) (ll. 9–10) in an assertion of his complete dominance over the production of art. This statement also indicates that no one can know anything about the Duchess but through the Duke. This was precisely how the colonizers looked at and treat the colonized: as private property.

At points, the task is beyond Frà Pandolf's capacity, as seen in "the faint/ half-flush that dies along her throat" (ll. 18-19). However, in general throughout the poem, the artist produces propaganda justifying the exploitation of others by the rich, strong colonizers for their own benefit. This intent is clear when the Duke says that he mentions the artist Pandolf "by design" (l. 6), on purpose. This perhaps indicates the colonizers' use of art to persuade the citizens of the colonized countries to submit to their policies. From how the envoy looks at the painting, the Duke understands that he wants to ask how the painter put so much "depth and passion" (l. 8) into the painting. This shows that everything in this poem occurs under the Duke's supervision, and he is in full control. No one even dares ask him about the expression on the Duchess's "countenance" (l. 7). This beautiful expression may represent the beautiful aspects of the cultures and societies of the colonized.

Despite the Duke's attempts, the painting also signals his defeat by the Duchess. He cannot possess all her affections, as he desires, so he seeks to possess her as a painting, that is, (Paulson, 1989, 5) as an "object." This, ironically, is the Duke's "dispossession" of the Duchess for which he tries to compensate through Pandolf's painting. The Duke tries hard to transform the Duchess from an independent entity into an object, no more than (Zizek, 2005, 89) a "Thing," but he fails. In reality, (Martin, 1985, p. 97) he does "not esteem the painting," seeing it as no more than a tool to propagate what he desires and what he thinks about the Duchess. Readers can easily deduce that the Duke holds an attitude toward art contrary to Renaissance and Romantic principles. For him, the function of art and its message is to serve his evil aims, as seen clearly at the end of the poem and the last three lines naming a second artist, Claus of Innsbruck.

#### 4. The Spot of Joy on the Duchess's Cheeks

Sir, 'twas not

Her husband's presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek. (ll. 13-15)

This spot of joy on the Duchess's cheeks is pivotal in the poem because it is the direct cause for the Duke to give orders for her murder. Although he uses the word "seemed" (l. 11), suggesting uncertainty about her "glance" (l. 12), he expresses sureness about her treacherous glances and consequently commands her to be murdered. This murdering is a symbol of the colonizers' policy toward the colonized who were punished based on suspicion. Unlike the judicial system in the colonizers' homeland, those they established in their colonies were designed to give legal protection to themselves and their exploitation of the colonized, whom they treated as no more than objects. Although it might appear strange that this spot of joy destabilizes the Duke, it can be understood to represent the colonizers' continuous attempts to kill what was good in the colonized people, which they considered to threaten their security.

The Duke seeks to control his wife completely, the colonized, shown in his angry reaction to any spot of joy on her face except in "her husband's presence" (l. 14). Problematically for the Duke, her spot of joy can emerge in the presence of anyone, not only him. This symbolizes the free will of the colonized and the defiance of the colonizer's dominance. The Duke considers this spot of joy and happiness to be the Duchess's hamartia. The colonizers fought to keep the colonized from seeing any ray of hope that exceeded "the mark" (l. 39) of their tolerance. Ironically, the artist, under the Duke's orders, immortalizes the Duchess's smile and spot of joy, the cause of his command to murder her. The Duke's hateful attitude toward her happiness and spot of joy reflects the colonizers' attitude toward the colonized countries, persecuted, controlled, and murdered as the Duchess. In this context, murder not only killed physical life but also deprived the colonized of living normal lives or benefiting from their own natural resources. The colonizers clearly revealed

their position in the same way as that of the Duke, who “gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (ll. 45–46).

The Duke not only suspects the Duchess’s smiles and spot of joy but also imagines ways Pandolf might have caused that “spot of joy” on her face (ll. 15-21). The artist might have told the Duchess that her “mantle laps” covered her wrist too much and that “paint / Must never hope to reproduce” (ll. 17-18) the beautiful effect of her skin and coloring. The artist, the propagandist, would like her to look more beautiful; that is, he would like to do something good for the colonized for the sake of his master, but the Duke objects to even this. For the Duke, the artistic portrait (Fox, 2011, 463) “embodies the culmination of his desire for control.” However, these imagined words—“Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat” (ll. 17-19)—uttered by the painter praise the Duchess’s beauty that cannot be captured by his brush. These words come from the Duke’s imagination, not the painter’s mouth.

Thus, this spot of joy, its cause, and the Duke’s thoughts about it reflect the colonizers’ determination to dominate the colonized completely. He considers the spot of joy caused by others or any other thing to interfere in his affairs, so he rejects it and fights against it. He feels that he is the only one entitled to dominate the Duchess and allows no one to interact with her without his permission. Similarly, if the colonized people showed any hint of life, even a smile, they were severely punished.

## 5. The Colonizers’ Arrogance and Selfishness

The Duke describes the Duchess as simple, “too soon made glad” (l. 22), and “too easily impressed” (l. 23). The simplicity of the colonized was a major limitation and prevented them from initially seeing the danger of the colonizers. Before describing the Duchess’s heart, the Duke hesitates, asking, “How shall I say?” (l. 22). He forces himself to continue and state his belief that the Duchess’s heart is:

too soon made glad.

Too easily impressed: she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. (ll. 22-24)

The Duchess, thus, does not believe in discrimination but likes everything she sees. The Duke, in contrast, believes that he is superior to others and cannot comprehend the Duchess’s simplicity and equal appreciation for things around her. Unlike the Duke, the Duchess is not corrupted by arrogance and materialism. In addition to her belief in equality, the Duke is puzzled by the natural and simple things that make her happy:

Sir, ’twas all one! My favor 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

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. (ll. 25-31)

The Duke becomes infuriated by the Duchess’s happiness in nature, such as “the daylight in the West.” She believes in equality and tends to see every pleasant thing as pretty, whether they are from the Duke or others: “’twas all one!” The Duchess does not belong to the Duke’s materialistic world but has a spirit of romanticism and humanitarianism within her. If he gives her a “favor at her breast” (l. 25), a piece of jewelry to wear, she is happy for it in the same way that she is for a pretty sunset, a branch of cherries, or riding her white mule around the terrace. The Duke claims that she treats him and others equally and sometimes does not say anything, but only blushes in her way. The Duke’s arrogance prevents him from comprehending the Duchess’s heart. He does not believe that people are equal; therefore, he is disturbed not merely because the Duchess likes such things as a «bough of cherries» but that it is that some «officious fool» (l. 27) who brings them to her.

The pompous colonizers thought that the colonized benefited from their suppressors and should be grateful for their suppressors. Likewise,

the Duke reminds his listener of what he bestows on the Duchess from his presumed superiority to her and others: «My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name» (l. 33). This sentiment clearly expresses the arrogance of the colonizers whose gift was their rule, which, in fact, brought destruction to the colonized countries. The colonizers considered themselves the saviors of the colonized, who should appreciate them and no one else. In this poem, the Duke thinks the victim, the Duchess, should be grateful to him as her sole benefactor. Nothing could be equal to the «gift» (l. 34) the colonizers bestowed upon the colonized. The Duke associates himself with power and prestige, and likewise, the colonizers perceived themselves as superior to the low-status colonized, like the Duchess.

The Duke asks a rhetorical question, «Who'd stoop to blame / this sort of trifling?» (ll. 34-35), indicating both his arrogance and indignation at the Duchess's behavior. He asks who among the colonizers would lower themselves to rebuke the Duchess for her indiscriminate behavior. The Duke imagines an answer, which seems to satisfy his arrogance, that is, no one and no body. However, the reality is that the Duchess displays the bright side of the colonized. The Duke cannot understand her behavior, so he refers to her humanistic attitude toward others as «trifling» (l. 35). This outlook is self-destructive because it leads to the incurable disease of personal vanity. Gerson (2013, 16) describes the Duke as a sociopath who «manifests a diffuse lack of impulse control that results in frequent irresponsible and thoughtless» ideas and behaviors.

The Duke proceeds to mention the obstacles related to the Duchess's behavior that prevent him from talking to her directly (ll. 35-43). Ironically, he claims that he does not have the «skill / in speech» (ll. 35-36) to explain what he wants from her, but readers are aware that the contrary is the truth. This situation alludes to the colonizers' propaganda intended to reverse the truth about the victims, the colonized. The Duke's arrogance reaches its climax when he considers talking to the Duchess to lower his status, and he determines «Never to stoop» (l. 43) to her level.

Despite the Duke's arrogance, he admits that

the Duchess is gentle to him, always greeting him with a smile when he passes: «Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her» (ll. 43-44). However, her smiles anger him, and cannot tolerate them because they are not special to him. She smiles to everyone in the same way: «but who passed without / Much the same smile?» (ll. 44-45). The Duke's thinking mirrors the colonizers' selfishness and refusal to allow any other powers to share in their exploitation of the colonized, demonstrating their greed and their view of the colonized as their property. Moreover, the Duke bluntly expresses his arrogance (ll. 42-43), when he says that whether the Duchess agrees or disagrees with his interpretation of her smile, considering her opinion beneath his status. This viewpoint represents the colonizers' outlook toward the colonized, treating them with disdain and seeking to humiliate them.

Given the Duke's arrogance, selfishness, and treatment of the Duchess as an object, his murder of her is not strange: «This grew; I gave commands; / then all smiles stopped together» (ll. 45-46). The Duke, the colonizers' representative, cannot tolerate any type of happiness in the lives of the colonized, here seen in the Duchess's kindness and appreciation of everything and everyone, which, in the Duke's opinion, «grew» (l. 45) to exceed the acceptable limits. Thus, he «gave commands» (l. 45), and «All smiles stopped together» (l. 46); that is, he kills her. This is the colonizer's destruction of a particular colonized country, which becomes his last victim. Very likely, others would face the same fate as the last Duchess as the colonizers attempted to destroy the colonized.

## 6. The Listener and His Role

The interlocutor is addressed in the fifth line, and the readers understand that there is an addressee. In the fifty-first line, we deduce that the addressee is a silent envoy sent by a father to negotiate the marriage of his daughter to the Duke to succeed the last Duchess. The addressee acts as a mediator between the Duke and the Count, that is, between two colonial powers. The Count whom the envoy represents may collaborate with the Duke in negotiating his new marriage that is, colonizing a new country. The envoy follows the

Duke's commands when he orders him, "Will't please you rise? (l. 47)" to join others, the club of colonizers, awaiting "below" (l. 48). Through this negotiator, the Duke arranges with other colonizers to bring more countries under his domination. Thus, he tells his listener, "We'll meet / The company below" (ll. 47-48). The Duke expects the other colonizers to cooperate, so in courtly language, he tells the envoy that he anticipates a good dowry from the generous Count:

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

In this context, the daughter whom the Duke woos represents collaboration between two colonial powers. The Duke is more powerful than the Count because he expects to get a reasonable dowry or more benefits (l. 51), although he claims that his main "object" (l. 53) in the negotiations is the daughter herself, not money; that is, he is interested in forming a friendship and mutual collaboration. The Duke seems to understand a gesture from his addressee as attempting to get away from him. Saying, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir" (ll. 53-54), the Duke stops the envoy, showing that the deal between the two colonizers is not fair in the envoy's opinion. The Duke exercises his power and insists that they go together to meet the others waiting downstairs.

## 7. The Last Three Lines

Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (ll. 54-56)

The poem's last three lines are like the ending couplet in a Shakespearian sonnet that recapitulates its theme. These lines conclude the poem and express its main idea: the domination and taming of the colonized. These lines can be interpreted universally to comment on the domination of weak by the powerful and on the colonizers' constant attempts to tame weak countries to make them accept slavery and give up

the desire for freedom and respectable, honorable lives.

The Duke expresses this idea by pointing out another of his art objects, a bronze statue of Neptune, the god of the sea, taming a sea-horse. The artist who makes this statue is Claus of Innsbruck, the second artist mentioned in the poem and a representative of the propagandists. The Duke orders for the artist to carve a statue of Neptune emphasize the taming of a sea-horse. The poem seems to flow to reach this conclusion, which expresses the Duke's desire to control others. At the end of the poem, there is, to use Shaw's words (1999, 16-17), a turn from «conscious» persuasion of the audience to «unconscious» persuasion as the Duke considers his suppression and controlling of others to be taming. Both the Duchess and the sea horse face their fate and their fight for freedom alone. Thus, the Duchess is a symbol of resistance against the Duke's (Knoepfmacher, 1984, 111) «narcissistic desire» to dominate her and make her recognize herself as inferior to him. Sussman (1995, 79) uses the Lacanian term the «female Other» to describe this desire. Consequently, the Duke never fulfils his desire (Lacan, 1998, 98) «to recreate the image of the lost woman.» These last three lines prophesize the colonizers' failure to turn the colonized into slaves, as the Duke fails to tame the Duchess, who refuses to be his slave, or to eliminate her humanity and freedom, represented in her smiles and spot of joy.

## 8. Conclusion

Reflecting the age of its composition characterized by the spread of colonialization, the poem anticipates the inevitable conflict between the colonizers and the colonized, on one hand, and the conflict among the colonizers, on the other. Moreover, the poem condemns colonialization through its portrayal of the Duke's repugnant personality. Ironically, he seems to care for art acts contrary to its spirits and uses artists as propagandists to serve his anti-humanitarian aims. Opposing the Duke's desires, the Duchess symbolizes the colonized's resistance to the colonizers' attempts to tame and dominate their countries. Although the Duchess has been murdered, the readers feel that she emerges victorious because her smiles and

deep humanitarian feelings are stronger than the treacherous Duke.

1 Hereafter, I use line numbers in parentheses to refer to quotations from Robert Browning (2004), Robert Browning Poems. Classic Poetry Series, PoemHunter.com, pp. 252-253. Available free online at [https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/robert\\_browning\\_2004\\_9.pdf](https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/robert_browning_2004_9.pdf)

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