

Power and Possession: Analyzing Control in Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and Its Reflections in Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* is among the most popular monologues of the Victorian era and a perfect case study for examining the depictions of power, possession, and control. From the face value, it is apparent from the poem that power resides with those who possess wealth and title. Additionally, those in power can become extremely controlling to the detriment of those subject to them. In this case, the duke embodies a controlling and possessive individual in a position of power. The main contrast between the poem and modern society is that it would not be possible for an individual today to commit murder with impunity regardless of wealth and power. The rationale is that in many societies, the power resides with the people, and the leaders are considered to serve the interests of the people. Even the dictators face the wrath of their subjects if they commit such acts. Additionally, even the most conservative societies today do not treat women the same way they were treated in the Victorian era. However, cases of female domination and control are still rampant. Domestic violence in modern society may reflect the need for some men to dominate and control their women with such desires that lead them to commit violence against them. However, such incidences are an oddity as opposed to the Victorian era, when they could have been common.

Keywords- power, control, possession, Victorian era, monologue, domination, nobility.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The poem *My Last Duchess* by Robert Browning is a dramatic monologue written in 1842. Many scholars have been attracted to the monologue, each trying to understand the meaning, deconstruct the poem, or even apply it to a given scenario. For example, some scholars believe that the monologue sheds light on a domestic problem considered important in the Victorian era (Gregory, 2009). Indeed, many may be justified in adopting such a view, especially those inclined towards feminist theory, most of whom perceive

the duke as controlling and possessive of the duchess even after her death (Hochberg, 1991). Therefore, it has become apparent that there are multiple ways to read and interpret *my Last Duchess*. However, any audience would understand that given the context of the poem, it might be difficult not to read into the domestic setting in the Victorian era. It is also imperative to understand the poet and his other works before delving into an analysis of *My Last Duchess*, as it might provide a more profound view of the poem when analyzed as part of Robert Browning's entire works.

Robert Browning (hence referred to as Browning) is recognized as one of the most significant English poets of the Victorian era. He is most known for his theatrical monologues:

Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea Del Sarto*, and *My Last Duchess*. Other works include the psycho-historic epic *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) and a number of poems such as *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, *A Death in the Desert*, and *Meeting at Night*. Browning, the only son of Robert Browning, was born on May 7, 1812, in Camberwell, a middle-class district of London. His father supported his son's endeavors. Browning had decided to be a poet when he was a child and never seriously considered any other profession (Poetry Foundation, n.d.). Browning, who died in 1889, was one of the most popular poets in England.

Perhaps one of the least-mentioned works by Browning is *James Lee's Wife*, which could be considered the polar opposite of *My Last Duchess* in that it is about a woman reflecting on a man she loved and worshiped. Like the duke, the woman seemed dissatisfied with the man. This observation could lead to the conclusion that love and relationships in the Victorian Era were not very fulfilling from the perspectives of both men and women.

According to Russo (1974), the woman's description of nature shows that the failure of her marriage was inexplicable and rooted in her personality. She was passive, felt powerless, was excessively dependent on her husband, and attributed power to everything outside herself. Considering this analysis of *James Lee's Wife*, it is possible to exonerate Browning as a chauvinist blaming women for domestic problems and see him as providing an objective view of the Victorian era family, love, and relationships and their underlying power dynamics.

This research paper focuses on analyzing power, possession, and control as depicted in Browning's *My Last Duchess* and examining how these themes apply to modern society. The structure of the research comprises several sections. First, a summary of *My Last Duchess* is presented, followed by an analysis and interpretation. Next, three core themes are explored: power, possession, and control.

Lastly, the research presents a reflection of the themes in modern society. A key point to note is that the core arguments drawn from the poem are backed by available literature. However, considering that the poem is ancient and few recent scholarly materials focus on the poem, some scholarly materials used in this research might also be old, meaning more than ten years old. The research attempts to show that despite modern society having moved away from the Victorian era regarding the

treatment of women, the elements of power, possession, and control have retained most of the characteristics depicted by the poem.

II. SUMMARY OF MY LAST DUCHESS

My Last Duchess is a theatrical monologue by the famed Victorian poet Robert Browning. The speaker of the poem (the Duke of Ferrara) directs a guest's attention to a painting of his former wife, the Duchess of Ferrara, hanging on the wall. The duke begins by admiring the artwork and the painter's prowess in making it so realistic. He remarks that the painter, Fra Pandolf, must have worked very hard on it. The duke insists that the guest sit down to look at the painting as he explains why he brought up the name of the painter. The duke explains that strangers often ask that question after wondering how such an expression came onto her (the duchess's) face. The duke continues to explain the painting to the guest. For example, he tries to explain the blush of happiness painted on the cheek by suggesting that Fra Pandolf must have flattered her by saying things such as "paint could never recreate the faint half-blush that's fading on her throat" of that "her shawl drapes over her wrist too much." Such descriptions might hint at how the duke felt about the duchess's going with people.

In a tone that seemed like a complaint or dissatisfaction, the duke criticized his former wife by describing how she would often find a reason to blush. For example, she would think that such polite words were reason enough to blush, and he claimed that she was too easily impressed or made happy. The duchess liked everything and everyone she saw, but the duke's description seemed to indicate that she ogled everyone who crossed her path. The duke lamented that everything was the same to the duchess and made her equally pleased, whether it was a gift from him, the sun setting, riding a white mule, or even when someone broke off a branch of cherry for her. The fact that the painting depicted her blushing led the duke to believe that the painter had something to do with it.

Despite his complaints about the duchess to his guest, the duke claimed that complaining to his former wife or confronting her for anything was beneath him. This is presented in a rhetorical inquiry to the guest, asking whether anyone would lower themselves enough to argue with someone over their behavior. The duke presents a hypothetical scenario in which he confronts the former duchess, stating that her traits revolted him or that she did too little or too much of anything. He also wonders if the duchess would degrade herself by changing instead of remaining stubborn and making excuses. For these reasons, the duke argues that it was not like him to lower himself like that. Ironically, the duke continues to complain about his former wife's indiscriminate happiness, noting that while she smiled at him every time they passed, she smiled at everyone else as well. As a result, the duke issued orders after she

began smiling even more at others, and the smiling ceased permanently. This can be read to suggest that the duke's orders included her death, as he declared that she now only lives in the painting.

The duke then asks the guest to stand up and accompany him to meet the rest of the guests. In this part of the poem, it emerges that the duke is interested in marrying the daughter of a Count, the guest's master. The duke acknowledges the count's generosity by indicating that no request by the duke about the dowry could be turned down. The duke is also keen to insist to the guest that he focused more on the beautiful daughter and not the dowry. The duke draws the speech to a conclusion by asking that he and the guest go downstairs, where he directs the guest's attention to a statue of the God Neptune taming a seahorse, a rare sculpture that Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze especially for the duke.

III. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A poem like *My Last Duchess* could be interpreted in multiple ways, and its analysis and application to a given scenario depend on the interpretation. Therefore, this research must clarify the interpretation before applying it to the given thesis statement. In other words, the interpretation helps us understand how the poem depicts the treatment of women and the elements of power, possession, and control in the Victorian. The first point to note is that despite the duke's speech on the duchess, it is apparent that everything he says is more about himself than the duchess. Such an observation has been made by Khattak (2023), who argues that the duke outwardly projected rationality to hide his jealousy and desire for control, which led to the killing of the duchess.

If such a position is deemed plausible, then it is also possible to make an extension and suggest that the entire conversation may have been a veiled message or warning to the guest. This is especially the case after it is revealed that the guest is an emissary of the count whose daughter the duke is intent on marrying. The rationale is that the duke described everything he hated about the former duchess and indicated that rather than lower himself to the level of confronting her. He would prefer to simply kill her. While it may be difficult to come across scholars who endorse this argument, it is possible to back it up by examining what other scholars say about the duke and the demise of the duchess. To many scholars, the monologue depicts the destructive nature of the desires of possessive and jealous men (Goswami & Yadav, 2024). As indicated in the summary, it is possible to detect the lamentation in the duke's voice, especially when he explained how easy it was to please the duchess. As such, it is plausible to argue that the duke felt dissatisfied with the duchess and wanted

something other than a woman who smiled too much at other people.

Many scholars support their claims regarding the duke's involvement in the duchess' demise by upholding the belief that the 19th century was considered an era where men dominated women. As such, it is possible to understand why many commentators on *My Last Duchess* associate the monologue with colonization and suppression, especially the oppression of women (Al-Khade, 2018). As such, *My Last Duchess* has attracted the attention of many feminist authors keen to demonstrate male chauvinism and masculinity leading to the suppression and oppression of women. According to Iqbal et al. (2021), the monologue demonstrates the 19th-century Victorian-era patriarchy, where men manipulated women following their will and placed women in their feminine regime. Such scholars have extended their discussion and analysis to cover issues of power and control in the relationship between men and women in the Victorian era and attempted to show how the same applies to modern society. Such interpretations are hard to refute given that the duke simply orders the killing of his former wife because it would be beneath him to confront her on her inadequacies as the duke perceives them.

To other scholars, Browning's dramatic monologue is a depiction of paranoid personality disorder and other problems that cause serious harm to other humans, especially women. To come to such a conclusion, many scholars emphasize engaging the monologue at a psychoanalytical level. Such an approach helps understand the duke's lamentations about the former duchess. For example, smiling too much to a lot of people could have insinuated disloyalty or untrustworthiness. Even so, it is possible to make a case that the duchess' carefree life of simplicity and kind behaviors may have caused the misreading of innocent behaviors and kind gestures, creating extreme jealousy (Sultana & Jesmin, 2013). Such an outcome is plausible when an individual suffers from paranoid personality disorder. As explained by Ibrahim (2024), personality disorders feature thoughts and feelings about oneself and other people that have adverse effects on the individuals' ability to operate many facets of life. Such disorders may include narcissism and avoidance, which can also be evident in the duke. The rationale is that the duke chooses to avoid confrontation and displays narcissistic behavior when he sends a veiled message about the things he disliked about the former wife to an emissary representing the count whose daughter he intends to marry.

However, it is important to emphasize that some of the interpretations are incompatible, for example, personality disorders and gender oppression. The rationale is that gender oppression depicts a social problem, while personality disorders denote personal problems. If scholars who believe in personality disorders were to have their way, it would negate any

argument that the duke represented male dominance and oppression of women because the issue now focuses on the individual, not the society. For the purpose of this research, the selected interpretation is that, given the context of the poem, the duke represented male power, control, and domination of females.

IV. POWER

The element of power is among the most prominent themes in *My Last Duchess*, especially when considering gender and class relations. However, the depictions of power may differ considerably between the Victorian era and modern society. During the Victorian era, being a man was easily a source of power. Victorian manhood was, to some scholars such as Phillip Mallet, a state of perpetual crisis and a site of contradiction and anxiety as much as it was a source of power (MacDonald, 2015). Therefore, it is common practice for many novelists and poets of the era to depict manhood in a manner that projects power and masculinity. In Browning's poem, the duke depicts his frustrations with his inability to exercise the ultimate power over his wife. From the conversation with the guest, it is easy to tell that the duke expected to be the only one who made the duchess blush, smile, and be happy. His masculinity was supposed to be a source of power over his wife. His conversation with the guest also lays the foundation and expectations for his next marriage.

However, there is a need to deconstruct the concept of power before applying it to the poem. The rationale is that, as some scholars observe, the concept of power remains elusive despite recent and prolific writings on the subject and the disagreements regarding its meaning in various fields such as sociology and politics (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). One of the most basic premises of power is that every human institution is an ordered system of power, a concept often referred to as a power structure (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Therefore, every group or gathering of individuals, regardless of the social setting, is expected to depict the basic features of a power structure. For example, a family may have the father as the head of the family, and the power may trickle down to the mother and children. If it is a clan or a village, the same structure may be maintained in a different setting, with the leader either elected or emerging from the given criteria.

Power is also associated with other concepts such as authority, status, dominance and submission, and legitimacy, which often raises ambiguities. In this regard, the power relations between parties can be described in terms of the ability or the costs of resisting the power of the other individual (Emerson, 1962). For instance, a Victorian-era marriage makes a man powerful by denying the woman the means and resources to claim independence from the man, thus forcing the woman to always submit. It is possible that these ideas could be outdated (the articles were

published in 1962). However, looking at more recent publications reveal that the conceptualization of power has not changed much. According to Lawrence and Buchanan (2017), the term 'power' has been defined in a variety of ways, including a relational phenomenon. In other words, these researchers believe that power is a property of interactions in which the behaviors or beliefs of one actor are influenced by another actor or system. This makes power a relational phenomenon, rather than a commodity.

Some scholars have found the need to discuss the various fallacies when defining the concept of power. When used semantically to imply authority, influence, force, manipulation, coercion, and strength, the two fallacies that emerge are the exercise and vehicle fallacies (Iukes, 2007). The exercise fallacy can be described equating power with its exercise, such as winning, dominating people, or making good decisions. The vehicle fallacy occurs when power is associated with the means or resources of power. From a sociological perspective, power is often used to imply status or wealth. From a military perspective, power comes in the form of weaponry and military forces. Social and political contexts are often the most common areas for the definition and contextualization of power. For the purpose of this paper, the context is presumed to be social since the poem in question focuses on a social context. So, how should this paper use the concept of power, given the definitions and discussions above? It appears more prudent to use power as a relational phenomenon and use both the exercise and the means to exercise power. Such an approach helps achieve a more comprehensive discussion of the theme of power in *My Last Duchess*.

The theme of power appears constantly in many scholarly works on *My Last Duchess*. An interesting observation is that not all authors and researchers have the same perception of the depiction of power in the poem. According to Khattak (2023), the poem was about the duke's mania for power and control, aspects that the duke tries to hide to avoid coming off as overbearing. Besides demonstrating the desire for power over the former Duchess, Khattak (2023) argues that the duke also demonstrates power over the guest through the commands he makes. For example, the duke commands the guest to sit, stand, or move at will. The fact that the duke does not forget to use the word 'please' simply implies a calculated move for a man who does not want to forget his manners.

As mentioned earlier, it is prudent to use the view of power from both the exercise of power and the means to exercise power. Regarding the exercise of power, the duke is seen as eager to exercise the power he has over the people around him. The first act of power exercise is with his former duchess. In this regard, it is apparent that the duke wanted a wife who submitted to him and his power as a man and as a duke. As a man, the duke would have preferred to be the only one who made

his wife smile. This insinuates that he wanted to freely exercise power over his wife's actions. As a duke, he wanted to have a relationship with a duchess who understood what the position of a duke was and the power it held. This is apparent when he laments that he would not lower himself enough to argue with his former wife about her behavior. To him, such an action was beneath the status of a duke. However, he also uses the excuse that the duchess may not lower herself to accept being degraded by the duke instead of remaining stubborn and making excuses.

The duke is also seen exercising power over other people, including the guest, the emissary of the count whose daughter he intended to marry, and the other guests waiting downstairs. Essentially, the duke commands the guest when to sit, stand, or follow him. The duke has a number of guests waiting for him downstairs, but he still has time to talk to the count's emissary about a painting. This shows he is not in a hurry to address the guests as he is the one in charge. This shows social status as a source of power. Indeed, the duke even hints at the generosity of the count as a good thing because it means he would not charge too much dowry for his daughter. However, a closer examination of this statement reveals that it could be a coded message that the duke does not expect the count to ask for an expensive dowry. In an aristocracy, a duke outranks a Count, meaning that the duke is simply exercising his power over the count by hinting that he does not expect the count to demand too much dowry from a person who outranks him. In other words, the duke expects that the count does not turn down whatever request for dowry the duke makes.

The vehicle fallacy, as outlined earlier, equates power to the means or resources of power. This aspect is also evidenced in the poem *My Last Duchess*, which also takes the form of a relational phenomenon. The Victorian era was an aristocracy, which involved a privileged class holding hereditary titles, the same as nobility. Immediately below the royal family was the nobility or peerage that composed the House of Lords. They included dukes, marquesses, earls (or counts), viscounts, and barons in descending order of rank (The Noble and Most Singular Order of the Blue Carbuncle, 2020). This is also the rank in which the hierarchy of power flowed, meaning that the title was indeed a resource and a means of power. In the poem setting, the titles that emerge are the duke, duchess, the count, and the count's servant (the titles of the other guests are not clearly defined). Therefore, it is apparent that the duke held the most power among all characters because of his title. He had the power to order the death of the former duchess because he was not pleased. If that happened in the modern world, the duke would not be exempt from prosecution, indicating how powerful he must have been in the Victorian era.

Bearing the title of a duke also meant that he demanded the respect and submission of everyone below

him and not just the duchess. As explained earlier, the duke is attempting to convey a message that he expects the count to be generous enough to accept whatever offer he makes for a dowry for the count's daughter. This argument also appears to support the notion that the duke was wealthy but did not want to part with too much of his wealth in exchange for a wife. Ideally, the title of a duke was held by individuals from the most affluent and powerful families. Their wealth came from land ownership that included estates (agricultural land, forests, etc.) and urban property, political power that allowed them to protect commercial interests, investments and business interests, and inheritance. Even though these aspects of wealth are not immediately apparent in the poem, it is easy to associate the title of a duke with the wealth and power that such wealth carries.

Lastly, there is also an aspect of political power in the form of a political class hierarchy. However, this might not be the most apparent resource and means of power in the poem as it is overshadowed by the social context. Even so, some scholars believe that the poem demonstrates the duke's fear of waning political power and his ability to rein and control his subjects (Lawrence, 2010). During the Victorian era, many marriages among the political elite were arranged to improve political advantage, social status, and family influence (Lawrence, 2010). Therefore, the former duchess failed to give the duke the political advantage he sought, or she failed to live up to expectations. The fact that she smiled at everyone and other personal behaviors the duke detested showed that the last duchess was not suited for the duke's political reputation. As such, the duke seems to correct the error by getting her killed and arranging to marry the daughter of a count. Additionally, the count is depicted as a generous man, which can be translated to mean a wealthy man. Wealth was a source of power and a major tool for accession to higher positions of power. Therefore, aligning himself with the wealthy and generous count can be seen as a political move by an individual keen on cementing his position of power.

V. POSSESSION

Possession is a theme that is closely tied to power in many ways. Consider the notions of the resources and means of power discussed in the previous section. It would appear that possessing material resources or wealth was both a source of power and a means of exercising it. The term possession does not necessarily attract much scholarly attention regarding its definition and conceptualization as power does. Therefore, this section focuses more on demonstrating how this theme is depicted in the poem and what other scholars say about the same.

The main point to note is that possession in the theme applies to both material resources and people in a relational context. In this case, the less obvious

possession was that of wealth. As discussed in the previous section, it is possible to establish that the duke and the count were wealthy individuals on account of their possessing material wealth. The title of duke indicates that the beholder was wealthy enough either by earning the title and wealth it accompanies or by inheriting it. Regardless of the source, the duke is wealthy enough to buy or enforce the respect of his subject. Another demonstration of the possession of wealth comes from the count. The duke regards and acknowledges the count's generosity, meaning wealth. In the Victorian era, the generosity of an individual could be measured in terms of material gifts. Among the upper class, such gifts could be in the form of expensive jewelry, paintings, sculptures, or other items that denoted wealth. By hinting at the count's generosity, the duke is also not expecting to part with too much of how to own wealth as a dowry for the count's daughter. Furthermore, people of lower ranks in an aristocracy often gift those above them to gain favors with superiors. Even when this was not the case, extravagant gifting was an indication of superior wealth.

The second notion of possession in the poem involves people, specifically in a marriage setting. This is also the aspect of possession that is more obvious and which attracts more attention from scholars and commentators of *My Last Duchess*. Most notably, the duke is depicted as a possessive man when it comes to his wife. He is so possessive that he does not like the fact that other people are equally capable of making his wife smile. He is depicted as a man who wants to possess a woman as one would a piece of property. In other words, the former duchess was expected to be the duke's property to own and control. Since it became apparent to the duke that he could not possess his former wife, he had her killed and hoped to marry another one that would allow him to possess her, her behaviors, life, and potential, all her existence as a duchess. He would prefer a wife who is not easily pleased by other people without him having to confront her about it.

As outlined in the analysis and interpretation section, the duke could be sending a veiled message to the count's emissary that the duke does not expect to be the one reminding the duchess on how to act or behave like a duchess. Another point to note is that when the duke used the phrase 'lowering myself,' he could be insinuating that the duchess was from a lower social class than himself. This is plausible because he is also seeking to marry the daughter of a count, a title ranked below that of the duke. If the former duchess was from a duchy family, there would be two possibilities, given the nature of the duke. First, the duchess would have had the behavior and mannerisms of a duchess and would not need to be reminded of what is expected of a woman of her class. Second, the duke would possibly not have considered it 'lowering himself' to confront the duchess about her behavior because they would both be from the same social class. Therefore, the duke expects his next

wife to understand how to behave in a way that reflects the social and political status of the duke.

Many scholars and commentators may not hold the same views regarding possession as depicted in *My Last Duchess*. However, most agree that the duke was the embodiment of possessiveness in the poem. According to Uruk (2021), the duke is seen as "striving 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" (p. 212). Uruk (2021) also argues that the possessiveness of the duke is reflected in his jealousy of his former wife, as the blush in the painting indicates the painter must have made her blush. Uruk (2021) observes that the duke must have been humiliated by the former wife's intimate glances towards other men as he expected to be the sole owner of the so-called 'coy' or 'flirtatious' implications.

The possession of the painting is a central focus among many scholars who agree that it insinuates the possessive nature of the duke when it comes to women. In other words, the duke possesses the women and also their paintings. Some even indicate that the phrase 'last duchess' indicates that there must have been other women before her, insinuating that the duke likes to possess women one after the other (Aboud, 2020). According to Dohal (2023), the duke hides the painting behind a curtain because he aspires to possess it, meaning he desires something for himself. Dohal (2023) is also keen to observe that by having the painting, the duke wants to possess the duchess for himself alone. The duchess is being treated as an object or property for ownership. As such, since he could not possess the duchess, he now possesses her painting. He is seen as having prided himself in having a lovely wife. However, he is more satisfied by having her neatly preserved under his direct control, as manifested by possessing her portrait (Khattak, 2023). The duke is portrayed as a man obsessed with possessing things.

The possessiveness of the duke is seen as so extreme that he is willing to commit atrocities and use other methods to possess what he desires. For example, Lawrence (2010) describes the duke as a witless, vain, possessive, and dilettante who is not afraid of sending sinister messages of foreboding to his future bride. He is seen as warning, demanding, hinting, implying, and intimating how her future bride must behave once she becomes his wife. To the former duchess, the duke seemed comfortable having her killed and preserved in a form and state that he alone could possess. Other scholars go as far as hinting that the duke is depicted as a weak man seeking to dominate and control others. This comes from the description of the duke as possessive, jealous, proud, and materialistic (Gemmette, 1982). The duke's possession of the female other is depicted by Knoepfmacher (1984) as mental, meaning that in the

duke's mind, his wife should be alone. Overall, many commentators agree that the duke's desire to possess material things and people is problematic and depicts him as a weak man craving for domination and control.

VI. CONTROL

One can argue that one of the most obvious uses of power is control. The rationale is that those in power are often seen to be controlling those under their influence. The relationship between a king and his subjects involves the king controlling his subjects. In regard to Browning's *My Last Duchess*, it is hardly possible to distance the aspect of power from that of control, especially given the hierarchical nature of the relationships among the characters in the poem. For instance, the duke is depicted as a powerful individual seeking to control the actions and behavior of his wife and his relationship with those below his status. He wants to marry the daughter of a wealthy count, but he wants to make sure that the count knows the duke does not expect the dowry offer to be rejected. The conceptualization of power is both an exercise and a means to exercise, and it insinuates that with power comes the ability to be in control of people and situations around the individual. Similar to the theme of possession, it is less important to define and conceptualize the term since it can be taken for its face value. As a noun, the term 'control' implies the power to influence the course of events or people's behavior. In this section, the verb and noun forms of this term are used to assess how this theme is represented in Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

A key observation is that many commentators of this poem often associate control with power or perceive control as an outcome or means of exercising power. According to Lawrence (2010), the duke is worried about the waning political power and control over his subjects. To maintain the power and reassert control over his subjects, including his wife, the duke orders the killing of the former duchess and lets it be known to the count's emissary why he made the decision. This way, the emissary can convey the veiled message to the count and his daughter about the ruthlessness of the duke in his quest to keep his subjects under control. Lawrence (2010) also indicates that the duke is keen to control what the world sees in the art. This is a plausible argument, given that people often do not take pride in having their spouses killed. However, the duke wants the people around him to know that he is ruthless to those unfaithful to him. This can be interpreted as controlling how the world sees him, especially if he feels that his political power is under threat.

The poetic techniques deployed by Browning effectively convey the duke's obsession with power and control. As Khattak (2023) explains, the duke is seen as projecting "rationality to his jealous insecurity and the

desire for control, which ultimately lead to his cold-blooded killing of the duchess and his immoral ways"(p. 159). In other words, the immoral acts committed by the duke are directed at ensuring he regains lost control and ensures the desired outcomes for the given events. Khattak (2023) outlines other aspects of the duke that depict his controlling nature. For example, the duke is seen as exerting complete control of the listener. The duke is addressing the count's emissary, an individual of inferior title to him. His controlling nature is manifested through the attempts to engage the guest in movements and postures that ensure he is paying attention. For example, the duke asks the guest to sit and glance at the painting. The short conversation could have been had when the two individuals stood, especially considering that they were headed downstairs, where other guests were waiting. The fact that the guest does not interrupt indicates that the duke has complete control of this encounter.

The painting of the Last Duchess is also a major focus among scholars examining the depiction of control in *My Last Duchess*. According to Dohal (2023), the duke has kept the painting as a "way of appreciation and also as a method of showing his power and control"(205). Dohal (2023) also sees the painting as control of the setting in order to impose his authority as a duke. In this regard, it is also apparent that the author cannot separate power from control. The duke seems to make an effort to show that everything is under control. However, a reader can almost tell that things are evidently out of control, and the duke's efforts are merely designed to create an impression of control. He needs to show his guests that he is in charge of his household and title by setting the tone of the forthcoming meeting and marriage of the count's daughter. His controlling nature is so profound that he prefers to preserve a painting of his former wife after having her killed. He would preserve it as personal property hidden by a curtain so that only he could control it.

The poem depicts the duke as reacting negatively to the idea that his wife is attracted to men other than himself. Uruk (2021) considers the duke's desire to control his former wife's manners and femininity as illicit and emotional. The main problem was that the duke had a fragile masculinity that prevented him from warning or confronting her since doing so was beneath him. As such, his obsession with controlling the feminine and dominating the masculine leads to him committing a murder. Therefore, it is possible to make a case that the duke's failures to assert the desired levels of control caused him enough frustration to believe that the only way to control his former wife was to preserve her as a painting. Hidden behind the curtains, he now does not have to worry about other men making her blush.

Many authors examining control argue that men who are controlling in nature are weak men. According

to Gemmette (1982), it could be inferred from the poem that the duke is in a false or untenable position that renders him weak and seeking to dominate and control others. The duke controls her fate by giving commands for her death. Gemmette (1982) also sees the duke as controlling and manipulating the guest as if he were a puppet, which further demonstrates his controlling nature. In the eyes of Knoepfelmacher (1984), the duke's controlling nature is typical of masculinity seeking to dominate the female other.

Overall, it is apparent from the poem and its scholarly examination that the elements of power, control, and possession are hardly inalienable. Being in possession of material wealth gives individuals power, and with power, individuals have the means to fulfill their desires for control. The Duke in *My Last Duchess* is depicted as an entitled individual in a position of power who likes to possess women and control them. Some scholars have seen this as a depiction of toxic masculinity where men with fragile egos commit illicit acts to assert control. Regardless of the perspective taken, it remains apparent that the interplay between power, possession, and control may have been extreme in the Victorian era, such that a man can commit murderous acts simply to assert his control and power in a social setting.

VII. REFLECTIONS IN MODERN SOCIETY

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* may not be the best work to compare the depictions of power, possession, and control between the Victorian era and the modern world. The rationale is that there have been massive shifts since the Victorian era, and now that women are no longer viewed as property to be owned and controlled, the political power has shifted from aristocracy to democracy, and economic shifts have led to the detachment of political power from wealth. Consider the United States as a typical society of the 21st century. With capitalism, wealth is not necessarily confined to the political elite since anyone can work hard to accumulate wealth and live the American dream. In a democracy, the power belongs to the people, and the leaders are mere representatives of their constituents. Lastly, women have long been regarded as equal to and with the same human rights as men. Therefore, it is evident that the themes of power, possession, and control may not apply to the modern world the same way they are depicted in *My Last Duchess*.

Even so, it is important to make a few observations regarding the concentration of wealth and power. The main problem with a capitalist system is that it concentrates wealth and economic resources on a few people, leaving the vast majority majorly economically disenfranchised. Indeed, the role of capitalism in creating economic inequality is a major theme among scholars from different fields. For example, some

scholars argue that extreme economic inequalities are not compatible with the values of social justice (Franzini et al., 2016). Their rationalization is that the heterogeneity of the working rich indicates that the high earnings cannot be the result of competition. Rather, such high earnings indicate the lack of or deficient competition. Additionally, such earnings cannot be justified in terms of efficiency or merit, nor do they generate positive trickle-down effects with benefits to society. In such a setting, there are hardly any differences between the wealthy elites of the modern world and the nobility of the Victorian era. This is because the wealth and economic resources are still concentrated among the rich few while the vast majority are impoverished.

Even adopting democratic policies in a country's politics does not ensure that wealth will be fairly distributed. Wealth often comes in the form of capital and the ownership of the factors of production. In a democracy, even those without wealth may oppose policies that enforce the redistribution of wealth as long as the country abides by capitalist principles (Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). Therefore, only those who possess these factors of production can benefit the most. Even labor is not necessarily a means to accumulate wealth, considering that the modern business environment is becoming highly digitized and automated. As such, the wealth will continue to be concentrated among the elite few. In this case, the wealth accumulation and inequality reflect the possession of material wealth in *My Last Duchess*.

However, possession in the context of social relationships in the modern is virtually the complete opposite of what is depicted in *My Last Duchess*. The rationale is that modern men do not behave towards women as the duke does. A modern man, despite the wealth and power he possesses, cannot simply claim to own a woman to whom he is married. In other words, a modern woman is not a piece of property. For example, the American Constitution protects the rights of individuals under the law regardless of their gender, race, or other social classification. This means that a woman has the same rights as a man. Therefore, even the marriage is protected by the law such that no partner may deny the other human rights. Indeed, the Constitution goes as far as protecting the wealth of individuals in a marriage in the form of a prenuptial agreement. Therefore, a wealthy man today would simply divorce a woman or vice versa rather than get her killed in an effort to assert control over the other.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the oddities that might occur in modern life. In other words, granting women freedoms and equal rights as men does not prevent some men from attempting to control women as the duke did, which often ends up in domestic violence. Indeed, even the case of the duke can be considered an oddity unless there is evidence to suggest that men of all walks and titles in

the Victorian era had their wives murdered with impunity just to assert control. Many studies today, especially among feminist research, attribute domestic violence to patriarchy (Mshweshwe, 2020). Additionally, sociodemographic indicators of structural inequality affect the propensity for domestic assaults. Gender-based violence is perceived to be rooted in gender and power and the representation of men's desires and attempts to maintain dominance and control over women (Anderson, 2007). Therefore, it is not prudent to dismiss the fact that power, possession, and control can still manifest in the same way in modern society as they do in *My Last Duchess*.

Therefore, one can argue that the modern world is more advanced than the Victorian era was, but the possession of material wealth remains a major source of power, and men may still be driven by desires to dominate and control women. The power still resides with the rich and wealthy due to their ability to control the tools of power. For example, rich people may control the media and shape public opinions and narratives, thus influencing political outcomes. According to (Chadwick et al., 2016), fewer people in a mass express opinions than receive them. Additionally, opinions are controlled by authorities who control and organize the media. While the duke exercised his power overtly, it is expected that the rich of modern society exercise their power more covertly. There are societies that are conservative and do not follow the same democratic and liberal principles as the United States and other Western nations. In those societies, the rich are often in direct control of the country's resources and power, either by being the rulers or being close to the rulers. However, the situation may change, and the control over the media and political narratives may no longer be effective. Digitization and the advancement of the Internet and digital devices mean that people can get first-hand information and commentaries from independent journalists and experts, which neutralizes the power of media moguls.

VIII. CONCLUSION

My Last Duchess is a thrilling monologue by Robert Browning that shows the power of wealth and title in Victorian-era nobility. This research has examined the depictions of power, possession, and control. Regarding power, the perspective taken was the exercise and the means and resources to exercise power. The duke is depicted as having both and is not afraid to exercise power, even if it means using extreme and illicit means to do so. Possession is often associated with material wealth. However, the duke is depicted as more concerned with possessing women. His obsessive desires to possess are such that he prefers to have his former wife killed and preserved as a painting hidden behind a curtain only for him to possess. The possession of material wealth seems of secondary importance.

Regarding control, the monologue depicts an individual who is afraid of losing power and a grip on things and subjects. Therefore, he resorts to murderous actions to regain or assert control, which depicts him as a weak man with a fragile ego.

The research also makes an effort to reflect on the monologue and the three themes regarding how they might connect to the modern world. In this aspect, an immediate challenge emerges due to the fact that modern society does not operate in the same way as the Victorian era. Even so, it is still evident that modern society is still driven by the need to possess material wealth, especially in a capitalist setting. In a democratic setting, the power resides with the people since the leaders are mere representatives. However, the wealthy elites exert significant control over the tools of power. In a domestic setting, the constitutional protection of rights means a marriage or a relationship cannot mirror that of the duke and the woman he marries and possesses. However, patriarchy has been blamed for the cases of domestic violence as men seek to control and dominate women.

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