A Feminist Reading of “My Last Duchess”

When first read, Browning's "My Last Duchess" is about a Duke that has his wife killed because he is displeased with her. But Browning is using this poem to show that Victorian men are weakened by their dependency on the power they have over women. Browning also uses the dysfunctional relationship between the Duke and the Duchess to illustrate Victorian men's obsession with domination, while also showing that it takes both sexes to stop the abuse of women in the Victorian period. Men in this period look at their wives only to find a reflection of themselves. However, through this poem Browning is showing the public that the errors between men and women are caused by the structure of Victorian society.

The structure of Victorian society puts men in control over women. The Duke feels he has taken back his control once he kills the Duchess. Nevertheless, from the reader's point of view, the Duke is a little boy craving for attention. Ismet Ozkilic, a graduate of the University of Central Oklahoma Graduate College, points out that the Duke feels a sense of "absolute control" because the reader and the envoy do not know the Duchess's side of the story (8). However, the Duke, like many Victorian men, does not realize that "such selfishness . . . helps reinforce and vivify their immanent weakness" (Ozkilic 8). Men in Browning's period silence women so that only a man's point of view
is heard, therefore leaving no opposition. Unfortunately men such as the Duke become dependent on women's silence.

The Duchess's outgoing personality threatens the insecure Duke; he is more secure with the Duchess as an object than as a person. I discovered that Ismet Ozkilic agrees with me on this point. However Ozkilic only emphasizes that the Duke, because of his insecurity, is more comfortable with the painting of the Duchess than he was when the Duchess was alive. Browning is also using the Duke's preference for the lifeless painting of the Duchess to illustrate Victorian society's preoccupation with things that are superficial. Victorian society is more concerned with appearance then moral values. In "My Last Duchess," as well as in Victorian society, "manmade objects displace divinely constructed ones in terms of importance" (Mitchell 74).

Though Victorian men play a large part in the suppression of the women's equality movement, Victorian women are not blameless for their own bondage. In an attempt to please men and society, women forsake their independence and identity. For a view on the thoughts of the women in this period I turn to Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women." In this book Wollstonecraft emphasizes the part that women play in their own ruin. Wollstonecraft also illustrates how women demean themselves by acting like children (104). When the Duke speaks of the Duchess, he says, "she had a heart . . . too soon made glad, too easily impressed" (Browning lines 21-23). These are words that are normally used to describe the actions of a young child. The Duke refers to the Duchess as if she was too innocent and child-like to tell the difference between an ordinary event and one that should evoke extraordinary joy. Upon closer examination, the Duke's statement can be seen as a symbol of Victorian women. In the
Victorian age men equate women with innocence. However, Wollstonecraft states that while "[c]hildren . . . should be innocent . . . when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness" (105). Browning is showing Victorian women the consequences of conforming to the will of men by becoming child-like.

While the Duchess was alive, the Duke wanted to control her so much that his happiness depended on the Duchess conforming to his will. The Duke wanted to rule the Duchess in every way. The Duke wanted her smiles, laughter, and joy to be directed only toward him. The Duchess's outgoing and friendly personality threatened the Duke's power. So much so that the Duke was "disgust[ed]" by the Duchess's warmth toward anyone other than himself (Browning line 38). Unfortunately the Duke was so obsessed with controlling the Duchess that he did not want her to even look at other people. Control over what women are exposed to is very important to Victorian men.

While the Duchess was alive the duke had no control over what she was exposed to. Now that the Duchess is dead "[the Duke] . . . can open or close the curtain as he pleases: he can exert complete control." (Marchino 1445). The Duke expresses to the envoy that the Duchess's "looks went everywhere" (Browning line 24). The Duchess unmanned the Duke; he could not deal with her independence. The fact that the Duchess did not depend on the Duke completely terrorized him. The Duchess treated people with the respect that the Duke felt by right was only his.

The Duke felt he should be granted special attention from the Duchess because of his status in society. Joseph A Dupras states "The Duke's aristocratic standards cause[s] him to think his last Duchess . . . was undiscriminating [and] indiscreet" (3). The Duke feels the Duchess should have placed him above all others. The Duke claims the Duchess
"ranked {his] gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody's gift." (Browning lines 34). As far as the Duke is concerned, the Duchess was supposed to worship him. One of the ways the Duchess failed the Duke was by not reserving her "smiles" exclusively for him (Browning line 45). Likewise Victorian women are considered failures by society if they do not reserve their lives exclusively for their husbands.

"My Last Duchess" reveals that Victorian men will be able to understand that women need to be educated, if men get a grip on their obsession with control. The Duke was so provoked by his inability to control the Duchess's "smile ... [that he] gave commands [and had] all smiles stopped" (Browning lines 45-46). The Duchess's smile was a symbol of her connection with the outside of her marriage. The Duchess was able to communicate and bond with others through her smile. Likewise, Victorian women will be able to communicate and bond with others through education. One of the reasons Victorian men oppose educating women is that education frees women from being dominated by men. When it comes to the improvement of women's lives, Victorian men are interested only in what will benefit men. Consequently it is easier to control an uneducated wife, than one that is intellectually equal to her husband. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft points out that women are better equipped to raise children and be companions to their husbands if their education includes [something other than table manners] (117).

Victorian women will continue to be subjected to the whims of their husbands until they stop worshipping men. When the Duke had the Duchess killed, it was a threat to all women. The Duke had the Duchess murdered because she did not worship her husband. She viewed him as a man and not a god. By bragging to the envoy the Duke is
also making a threat toward the future Duchess. The Duke is telling the envoy that if the future Duchess does not give her husband the fawning that he feels he deserves, she will lose what power she will gain by marrying him; by becoming an object on the wall. Likewise, by calling intellectual women "masculine women," men are threatening to denounce studious women (Wollstonecraft 102). In other words[,] if a woman in the Victorian period attempts to seek education she will be denied a place in society and become as insignificant as an object on the wall.

By seeing their actions written in poetry, men can judge the Duke without realizing the Duke is a caricature of Victorian men. Through Browning's Duke, Victorian men are introduced to a self-centered egomaniac. The "horror" is when men start seeing similarities between themselves and the Duke (Ozkilic 17). At first the Duke seems to be a horrible creature that snuffs the life out of his inattentive wife. Victorian men are shocked that "[the Duke] makes no attempt to conceal [this murder], so preoccupied is he with his own standard of judgement and so oblivious of the world's" (Langbam 135). After some thought the men realize, that like the Duke, they crave for "the [women] most nearly connected [to] them" to be willing slaves (Mill 1015). Subconsciously Victorian men can understand the insecurity that drove the Duke to have the Duchess killed. But Victorian men don't want to admit that they are also capable of mentally or physically killing their wives. Whereas the Duke makes no effort to conceal "the possessiveness and jealousy" that caused him to kill the Duchess, Victorian men secretly harbor these traits (Marchino 1445). By revealing the Duke's obvious mental illness, Victorian men admit their own inadequacies.
Through "My Last Duchess," Browning has placed a seed of doubt in the heads of all men that come in contact with the Duke. Every preconceived idea that men have about women is second-guessed. If men were wrong about a woman's natural need to "seek . . . happiness only in the happiness of others," men will see that maybe they were wrong about other assumptions as well (Stickney Ellis 1599). It is easier for Victorian men to admit their mistakes when the errors of Victorian society are illustrated in a poem. Unfortunately it is also easy for Victorian men to brush the Duke off as a fictional character. Nevertheless, Browning uses the painting of the Duchess as a symbol of the subjection of women.

Browning is hoping to force Victorian men to reevaluate their mentality. First Victorian men will have to realize their attitudes toward women are negative and destructive. Then men will have to understand that they can be powerful and important without using women as stepping stones. Finally Victorian men must comprehend that only weak and inferior men put women under subjection in order to rise to power. Victorian women will be able to start improving their lives once men have accepted the part they play in keeping women under subjugation. And from this social revolution, children will grow up respecting women.

Unfortunately these changes are not a reality. Women struggle everyday for the respect that is given to men just because of their sex. Women demean themselves over and over again in an attempt to gain a semblance of power. And children are raised seeing their fathers mentally and physically abusing their wives. The fight for women's equality has come a long way, but for every step we take forward we take two steps back.
As in the Victorian age, in the twenty-first century it will take both sexes to stop the abuse of women.
Works Cited


