

Article

Mirror Prison Shadow: Lacanian Interpretation of "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning

Xiaoru Zhang^{1,*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, China

* Correspondence: Xiaoru Zhang, School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, China

Abstract: Robert Browning's dramatic monologue poem "My Last Duchess" portrays a noble duke with a strong desire for control and a distorted personality. This article conducts an interpretation around the three-dimensional images of living mirror image, static mirror image, and symbolic mirror image in the poem. The duke regards women as the carrier of the mirror image for constructing his self-identity. The living Duchess, as a living mirror image, breaks free from discipline and causes the collapse of his narcissistic system; the portrait of his last wife becomes a static mirror image that is completely controlled, continuing the duke's possessiveness; the sea god's sculpture training the seahorse becomes a symbolic mirror image, suggesting that the female tragedy will continue to cycle. This article analyzes the psychological essence of the duke establishing a false self through others, interprets the profound criticism of human alienation and power obsession in the poem, and confirms the application value of Lacanian mirror theory in the psychological interpretation of literary characters.

Keywords: "My Last Duchess"; Jacques Lacan; Mirror Stage Theory; dramatic monologue; self-identity

1. Introduction

Robert Browning was the master of dramatic monologue poetry in the Victorian era. This literary form adopts a single first-person narrative, with the author omitting subjective judgment and relying on the tone of the narrator and the subconscious to shape the characters, leaving room for readers to interpret freely. "My Last Duchess" is one of his classic works. The entire poem is spoken by the Duke alone, while the Duchess is completely speechless throughout. Readers can only reconstruct a tragic story of a wife being killed by a noble privilege from his arrogant and jealous monologue, and understand the opposing spiritual personalities of the two.

Lacan innovated the mirror stage theory based on Freud's psychoanalysis, proposing that self-identity is not innate and the subject relies on external images to shape the self, and regards the complete mirror image as the "ideal-I" [1]. The essence of mirror cognition belongs to self-deception. The mirror builds a bridge connecting the inner psyche and the external world, and the self-identity of the subject always relies on the carrier of the other to be completed, forming a dynamic tension relationship of domination and dependence, confrontation and balance [1]. Healthy subjects can clarify the boundary between self and other, while pathological subjects completely toolize the other: if the object conforms to the preset order, the self-adoring needs of the subject can be sustained; once the other awakens and breaks free from the discipline, the false self of the subject will collapse, thereby giving rise to anxiety, aggression, and even extreme violent behavior.

By comparing the narrative of the entire poem, the conflicts of the characters, and the tragic ending, the text naturally forms a closed loop system of living mirror, static mirror, and symbolic mirror, corresponding to the psychological process of Lacan's theory from the imagination realm to the symbolic realm. The living Duchess in this world is the living

Received: 24 August 2026

Revised: 07 October 2026

Accepted: 21 October 2026

Published: 28 October 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

mirror that shakes the Duke's narcissistic system, the portrait of the last duchess becomes a compensatory static mirror, and the bronze sculpture of Neptune taming the sea horses is a symbolic mirror that externalizes the dominant instinct. This article takes the triple mirror as the core framework, relying on Lacan's mirror theory to layerly analyze the symbolic connotations and operational logic of the three types of images, trace the psychological roots of the Duke's personality alienation and power obsession, analyze the balance relationship between the subject and the other, and reveal the literary presentation of the poem on the psychological alienation and self-identity dilemma of individuals under the privilege of the nobility.

2. Living Mirror: The Break from Discipline of the Other and the Self-Narcissistic Collapse of the Subject

In Lacan's mirror theory, the mirror is not a narrow physical mirror, but a psychological operational carrier at the ontological level. The self-construction of the subject always relies on the external other to be completed. All external objects that the subject uses to refer to and reflect the self-image can become mental-level mirrors [2]. For the duke in the poem, marriage completely strips away the essence of equal companionship. The duchess is not an individual with independent thoughts and emotions, but a living mirror object that is objectified and instrumentalized. She is the core carrier for him to maintain his noble identity, confirm absolute authority, and construct an idealized self. This secondary living mirror is both the starting point of the triple mirror system and the source of the contradictions and tragedies of the entire poem.

The duke, who comes from an old noble family, in the poem, "a nine hundred years old name" is not only an identity label, but also the core support for his self-identity [3]. The self constructed in the mirror stage is already an imaginary unity, and is prone to exist and persist based on external identity and external evaluation [2]. The long-standing noble bloodline gives the duke a strong obsession with power. He regards his wife as a private accessory to demonstrate class privilege and imposes strict and obsessive emotional discipline on her. The wife's smile, kindness, and emotional expression can only belong to him and must not be revealed to anyone.

The duchess retains a complete and independent personality. She treats everyone regardless of social status and shows the same gentle smile to all. This equal and open-minded character trait becomes an unforgivable fault in the eyes of the obsessive duke [4]. The duke repeatedly complains, "Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without much the same smile? " [3] In the duke's mirror logic, the wife's kindness is an exclusive sign of submission to himself, and the equal distribution of kindness means that the mirror loses its reflecting value and cannot support his narcissistic system.

From the perspective of Lacan's mirror stage theory, the duke's wife's equal conduct and independent personality mean that the living mirror as the other completely breaks away from the control of the subject, and the mirror order in the imaginary realm is completely out of balance. The subject's self-identity is highly dependent on the feedback of the mirror, and the disorder of the mirror will directly impact the false self on which the subject relies for existence. The duke presupposes that the wife will accept the dehumanizing fate like traditional women of the era and become a mirror carrier of absolute obedience, but the duchess refuses to attach to and worship class, and adheres to independent value judgment. This spiritual independence completely breaks the narcissistic system meticulously constructed by the duke, causing his class superiority and authority perception to suffer a heavy blow.

Facing the mirror disorder and self-identity crisis, the duke's aristocratic arrogance completely blocked the possibility of reconciliation. "Never to stoop" directly exposes his obsessive and vulnerable personality traits [3]. For the duke, compromising and conceding is equivalent to denying his absolute power, which will further disintegrate the illusory idealized self. Therefore, he refuses to negotiate and smooth over, allowing the anger and anxiety brought about by the self-narcissism's setback to accumulate continuously.

There is a natural latent tension of conflict and confrontation between the self and the mirror. When the complete and unified ideal self in the subject's fantasy conflicts violently with the rebellious and out-of-control other in reality, the subject will fall into the void and despair after the collapse of self-identity [5]. Under long-term psychological pressure, destroying the out-of-control mirror becomes the most direct and extreme way for the duke to repair himself and relieve anxiety. The poem does not depict bloody violence, but simply briefly describes the tragic ending, "I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together" [3]. Relying on noble power, the duke ended the life of the duchess.

The destruction of the living mirror did not heal the emptiness in the duke's heart. The static mirror then took over and became a new carrier for self-construction, completing the iterative transformation of mirror forms within the imaginary realm. The essence of the conflict between the living mirror is the ultimate confrontation between the subject's desire for domination and the independent personality of the other, confirming Lacan's core assertion: The self constructed through the construction of the other is fundamentally illusory, fragile, and extremely unstable [6].

3. Static Image: The Captured Portrait and the Everlasting Obsession of Possession

Compared to the living mirror image with autonomous consciousness and the potential for rebellion, the portrait of the deceased wife becomes a controllable static image by the duke. As a compensatory other carrier, it continues the duke's possessive desire and narcissistic projection, belonging to the mirroring misrecognition in the imaginary realm. At the beginning of the poem, the duke leads the messenger to view the portrait of his deceased wife and explains, "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive" [3]. The possessive pronoun "my" in the sentence has a highly symbolic meaning, directly exposing the deeply rooted objectification mentality. In the duke's perception, the Duchess, whether alive or dead, always belongs to his private property. "My last Duchess" strengthens the subordinate relationship between the two, suggesting the instrumental nature of marriage. When the previous image fails, a new substitute carrier is sought. He praises the painting for its authenticity, indulges in the pleasure of permanent possession, and continues the mirroring attachment relationship.

The curtain in front of the portrait is the most concrete symbolic symbol of the subject's control over the static image. The duke specifically informs the messenger, "since none puts by the curtain I have drawn for you, but I" [3]. Within the mansion, only the duke has the absolute power to open and close the curtain, controlling the display and concealment of the static image. The living Duchess had the freedom of action and the possibility of being out of control; after being transformed into a portrait, the display right was completely handed over to the duke, completely avoiding the risk of the uncontrollable live mirror image. At the same time, the duke's active display of the portrait to the foreign messenger was an extension of the self-love of the mirror image. According to Lacan's theory, the self-love of the subject not only depends on the interaction between the subject and the mirror image, but also requires the confirmation and reinforcement of a third-party gaze. The duke's display of the portrait of his deceased wife was essentially to showcase his private property and his dominance, using the messenger's praise to confirm the authority of the noble, completing the self-love satisfaction in the public scene. To create a perfect static image, the duke hired highly skilled painters to replicate the appearance and expression of the Duchess. But the painter admitted, "Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint" [3]. The brushstrokes and pigments can replicate the appearance, but they cannot imprison the vibrant spiritual core of the deceased. This detail can be interpreted as the most core reverse gaze at the static image level, constituting the implicit spiritual confrontation within the mirror relationship [7, 8].

The static image has inherent structural flaws and cannot truly satisfy the duke's deep narcissistic needs. The maintenance of the Lacanian mirror relationship requires the two-way interaction and feedback between the subject and the mirror image. A single one-way gaze cannot fill the psychological void of the subject. The portrait has no emotions,

no response, and no interaction, and can only passively accept the viewing, unable to replicate the vivid and true feedback of the live mirror image. Although the duke achieved absolute control over the mirror image, completely eliminating the risk of rebellion, he completely lost the self-love satisfaction brought by the mirror interaction.

This made the duke fall into a profound psychological contradiction. He was intoxicated by the absolute controllability and possessive pleasure of the static image and, at the same time, continued to be trapped in psychological emptiness due to the rigidity, coldness, and lack of interaction of the mirror. The static image could only temporarily alleviate the loss caused by the collapse of the live mirror image, but could not eliminate his obsession with the vivid, interactive, and dominable other mirror image. As the compensatory value of the static image gradually depleted, the imaginary realm's mirror system could no longer be sustained. The duke would inevitably seek anew, seeking a new live mirror image, pushing the narrative from the concrete image in the imaginary realm to the symbolic sign in the symbol realm, completing the natural transition of the three-layer mirror. Overall, the portrait as a static image is the ultimate manifestation of the duke's objectification of others and his obsession with possession [9]. The eternal reverse gaze, on the other hand, confirms the power of independent spirit that never yields, giving the text a profound ironic meaning and tragic connotation.

4. Symbolic Mirror Image: The Metaphor of Objects and the Circular Cycle of Female Tragedy

When the living mirror image completely disappears and the static mirror image fails to compensate, the dominant desire and narcissistic gap deep in the duke's heart cannot be filled. His subconscious begins to seek a more abstract and essential desire carrier, and thus the symbolic mirror image is formed. In Lacan's mirror theory system, apart from the concrete person and the portrait, objects, sculptures, and other symbolic objects can all become the externalization carriers of the subject's desires and constitute the symbolic mirror image in the symbolic world. The symbolic mirror image departs from specific individual persons, sheds interpersonal disguises, and directly exposes the dominant instinct, also elevating the individual's gender contradiction to a universal contradiction under the Victorian era's gender order, indicating the infinite cycle of female tragedy.

The bronze sculpture of Neptune taming the seahorse that appears at the end of the poem is the ultimate symbolic mirror image of the entire poem. The taming of the seahorse by Neptune, the god of the sea, is a classic image in Western classical art. In the textual context and character psychological system of this article, the image has a clear symbolic reference. Neptune is the projection of the duke's idealized self, symbolizing his admiration for absolute authority and hierarchical order; the seahorse metaphorically represents a subordinate female role that needs to be dominated. The power relationship between Neptune, the leader of the turbulent sea, and the seahorse, the subordinate, perfectly replicates the ideal gender order in his mind: in his view, men are born with the right to dominate, while women are born submissive and should submit, accepting the discipline and control of men.

Compared to real people and portraits, sculpture, as a pure artistic symbol, does not need to rely on human emotions and dignity, and can completely strip off the disguise and directly present the subject's subconscious desires. Previously, when facing his wife and the portrait, the duke's possessiveness and obsessive desires were still concealed by noble etiquette and social dignity; but when gazing at the Neptune taming the seahorse sculpture, he completely immersed himself in the power fantasy of the strong dominating the weak, without any concealment of his dominant obsession. In his cognition, all women are like seahorses, being subordinate objects dependent on the strong, and any act of breaking the order and demonstrating independence is a provocation of power, which must be suppressed and corrected.

The timing of the duke's display of the sculpture has profound significance. At this time, he is formally discussing the matter of remarriage with the count's envoy, intending to marry the daughter of the count and establish a new marital relationship. After the

previous living mirror image was destroyed and the static mirror image completely failed, the duke has already embarked on a new round of mirror exploration. From recalling the portrait of his deceased wife, negotiating the matter of remarriage, to displaying the Neptune taming the seahorse sculpture, the three consecutive plots are closely connected, clearly outlining the duke's behavioral logic: when the old mirror image loses value, it is immediately replaced, and he has never reflected on anything; he has always adhered to the core cognition that women are the appendages of the mirror image.

Based on the metaphorical connotation of the symbolic mirror image, the tragic fate of the new wife of the duke was already predetermined. No matter whether the new wife chooses to comply or resist, she cannot escape this set of gender constraints of the era: if she adheres to an independent personality and pursues equality and kindness, she will replicate the fate of the previous wife, trigger the duke's narcissistic anxiety, and ultimately lead to destruction; if she remains submissive and obedient, becoming a perfect living mirror image, she will also eventually be replaced and solidified into an icy portrait after the novelty wears off. The symbolic image of Neptune taming the seahorse has already transcended the category of individual tragedy and become a cruel prophecy of the survival predicament of the female group under the hierarchical gender order.

From the deep logical source of Lacan's theory, the root of this infinite cycle of tragedy lies in the duke's inability to construct a complete and independent inner self. Throughout his life, he has been chasing mirror image carriers, relying on subduing and dominating others to confirm his self-worth, and all controlling behaviors are futile attempts to make up for the lack of self. The replacement and destruction of mirrors can only temporarily fill the psychological void, but cannot fundamentally solve the core problem of self-alienation. The duke chases mirrors, is trapped by mirrors all his life, controls power but ultimately becomes a prisoner of his own desires.

5. Conclusion

Based on Lacan's mirror stage theory's hierarchical interpretation framework, this article conducts a progressive analysis of the live mirror, static mirror, and symbolic mirror, and sorts out the psychological framework of the duke's false self's generation, collapse, and desire cycle. It builds a reading path from individual psychology to the gender order of the era. The duke's paranoia, brutality, and possessiveness are not merely character flaws, but rather a structural mental predicament resulting from the construction of the self through others. Lacan believes that self-identity is an imagined misrecognition. A healthy individual can distinguish the boundaries between self and others and respect the subjectivity of others; however, the duke, who was under the Victorian aristocratic gender order, broke this balance, alienating women as tools for confirming his own superiority, and replacing equal emotions with power-based discipline. As a live mirror, the duke's wife adhered to an independent personality, resisted discipline, and ultimately perished; the portrait of the deceased wife, as a static mirror, satisfied her possessiveness but lacked two-way interaction, and the reverse gaze of the portrait exposed the narrowness of power; the sea god training the seahorse sculpture, as a symbolic mirror, projected the individual's dominance as an institutionalized aristocratic gender order, foreshadowing the tragic cycle of women being constantly disciplined and sacrificed. Browning used dramatic monologue, through the unconscious self-revelation of the duke, to criticize the hypocrisy of the aristocratic class and its suppression of the female subjectivity. Although the duke held privileges, he was trapped by the mirror misrecognition and became a prisoner of power and narcissism. "My Last Duchess" uses the tragic marriage to reveal the illusion of establishing self through dependence on others and restricting others with power, centering on power, dignity, and self-identity, and highlighting Browning's psychological insight and ideological value in his poetry.

References

1. J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, A. Sheridan, Trans. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2001.

2. C. Du and Y. Chen, "On Ego in the Mirror Stage and Its Relationship with Subject," *Journal of Neijiang Normal University*, vol. 31, no. 9, pp. 92–97, 2016.
3. R. Browning, *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, J. Woolford, D. Karlin, and J. Phelan, Eds. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2013.
4. R. Melrose, "Sites and parasites of meaning: Browning's 'My Last Duchess'," *Language and Literature*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 123–140, 2006.
5. Y. Zhang, "The Self of the 'Other'—The Subjective Predicament of Women from the Perspective of Lacan's 'Mirror-Stage Theory'," *Masterpieces Review*, no. 15, pp. 93–96, 2023.
6. S. Sumayah and M. S. Mumu, "Psychoanalysis of Duke of Ferrara from 'My Last Duchess'," *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 1–6, 2020.
7. Z. Ren, "An Early Withered Flower in the Mirrored Image of Man Power—An Analysis of 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning," *Journal of Ningbo Radio & TV University*, no. 1, pp. 30–32+112, 2007.
8. A. Rifkin, "Collecting men, or my next duchess," *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 312–317, 2001.
9. A. M. A. Ibrahim, "'My Last Duchess' Poem from a Psychosocial and Social Point of View," *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 1–6, 2021.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.