

LESSON 7.

ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Victorian Poetry from Tennyson to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit offers an introduction to Victorian poetry, and shows how the lyricism of the era can be regarded as a continuation of the Romantic tradition rejuvenated by new leitmotifs and genres.

KEY FIGURES:

Lord Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne
Arthur Henry Hallam, Elizabeth Siddall, John William Waterhouse, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, William Morris

COMPULSORY READINGS:

Lord Alfred Tennyson: *The Lady of Shalott, Ulysses*
Robert Browning: *My Last Duchess, Two in the Campagna*
Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *The Blessed Damsel*
Christina Rossetti: *Goblin Market*
Algernon Charles Swinburne: *Faustine*
Matthew Arnold: *Dover Beach*

KEY WORDS & TOPICS:

continuity, dramatic monologue, occasional poetry, agnosticism, pantheism, Darwinism, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, aestheticism, ekphrasis, symbolism, decadence

VICTORIAN POETRY: A CONTINUATION OF THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

The Victorian era witnessed an extraordinary flowering of literary culture, comparable only to what occurred during the reign of the other long-lived British monarch, Queen Elizabeth, in the Renaissance period. Most genres flourished – although significant dramas produced for the stage were scarce, and the most predominant mode of literary self-expression was indubitably the novel in its many forms. Victorian poetry is distinguished by a singular diversity: “produced by authors of both sexes in every social class from all districts in the British Isles and its colonies” it employed various verse forms, and lyrical subgenres – from dramatic monologue, to verse drama, and the pastoral elegy – and engaged a wide variety of “cultural discourses, mingling political, religious, social, economic, scientific registers in a direct or nuanced ways” which reflected the conflicted Victorian frame of mind. (see Cronin 2002)

Victorian poetry can be interpreted as a continuation of the Romantic tradition.

1 st GENERATION of Romantic poetry	Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge
2 nd GENERATION of Romantic poetry	Byron, Shelley, Keats
3 rd GENERATION	Tennyson, Brownings
4 th GENERATION	Rossettis, Morris, Swinburne

Affective continuity

Before the 19th century, the poet was acknowledged as the maker of the poem, but if his product was discussed in terms of emotions, those affects belonged to the reader. It is from the Romanticism on, that the poem came to be regarded as an expression of the poet's own "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and "passions recollected in tranquillity", as Wordsworth put it. The uninspired poet was no longer believed to be out of touch with external forces, but in no proper touch with his own feelings. The idea of the poem preserving an umbilical link with its creator prevails in the Victorian era.

Theoretical continuity

Both Romanticism and Victorianism embraced the *expressive theory of art*. According to this, Poetry is a projection of the poet's thoughts and feelings which are modified and synthesised through the *imaginative process* that revises reality in a new light. The Artist emerges as his own art critic, who generates both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged. (One can compare the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's *Biographia Litteraria*, or Keats's metapoetic line "Beauty is truth. Truth is beauty" in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's artistic manifestos or Tennyson's *ars poetica* and reflections on "the way of the soul" in his "In Memoriam A.H.H.", Matthew Arnold's nonfiction work "Literature and Dogma.")

Thematic continuity

The Romantic plots of insatiable desire, of the melancholic awareness of mortality, of the poet's heroic struggle to find the right words to communicate his message properly recur. (Eg. "Infinite passion and the pain/ Of finite hearts that yearn" in Browning's "Two in the Campagna") Poets still enjoy fantasizing about "the far-away and the long-ago" to escape pragmatism and utilitarianism, but they rather chose Medieval legends and fables and even cautionary fairy tales over the classical mythological themes preferred by their Romantic predecessors. (Eg. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," C. Rossetti's "Goblin Market") Victorians are still preoccupied with the relationship of Man and Nature, but they have a less idealistic view of it. The Romantic vision of a gentle, caring Mother Nature is replaced, under the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory's ideas on the struggle for survival by a more ominous image of the natural (and social) environment as a site of aggressive conflicts, of "Nature red in tooth in claw," as Tennyson put it. Victorians inherit from the Romantics an odd combination of religious scepticism and mystical faith, both expressed in lyrical form (Eg. Matthew Arnold. "Dover Beach"). Victorians are still interested in spiritual and moral conflicts and, like the previous generation of poets, express political criticism and hail the universal rights for freedom and equality. (Eg. Elizabeth Barrett's Browning's political poetry on slavery, child labour, or the exploitation of women)

Stylistic continuity

Victorians still use the language of common people to express their poetic ideas, but while Romantics like Wordsworth gained inspiration from the simple language of peasant folk from the rustic country region, the Victorians shifted their focus onto the city dweller's ordinary point of view. The poetic persona of the solitary walker moved from the rural to the urban landscape and metropolitan region. Both generations of poets used a sensorially stimulating discourse, abundant in synaesthesia and alliteration, to express personal feelings, social

critical opinions, or sometimes even abstract ideas like the conflict between religion and science and superstition (especially in the latter period).

Structural continuity

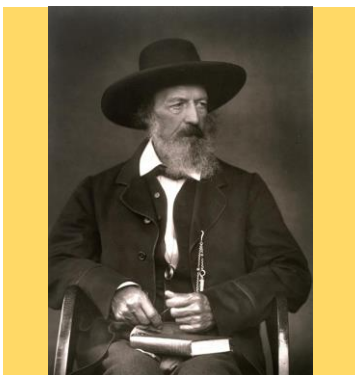
Both Romantic and Victorian poetry have a tendency to embrace a dualistic logic, and organise their ideas in terms of opposites, such as art/ life, immortality/ mortality, ideal/ real, fantasy/utilitarianism, eternity/human history. The spiritual themes of conflicting faith and doubt, of an archaic pantheistic wisdom conjoint with unknowing scepticism or agnosticism, the desire for enchantment and the disillusioning rationalisation by scientific knowledge also gain increasing ground.

Intermedial, cross-genre continuity

Both eras are characterised by a heightened sense of pictoriality: in their lyrical language they use elaborate imagery to convey thoughts and emotions, and often complement their poems with visual illustrations to fuel their image-texts with a special intermedial dynamics. Victorians (like Romantics) disrespect the decorum to experiment with the mixture of genres, most memorably fusing lyricism with dramatic monologue, to mock readerly expectations by lending the poem both a contemplative and a theatrical quality through an unreliable narrator figure's soliloquy. Popular subgenres of Victorian poetry include: *Narrative poetry*: (Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott", C. Rossetti's "Goblin Market"), *Dramatic poetry*. *Dramatic monologue* (Tennyson's "Ulysses", Browning's "My Last Duchess"), *Aestheticist ekphrastic imagetext* (The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's work, Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel")



THE POETRY OF LORD ALFRED TENNYSON



Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was perhaps the most esteemed and popular poet of the Victorian period. Upon the death of Wordsworth, he was named **Poet Laureate** in 1850, and preserved this prestigious position for more than four decades. Admitted to the peerage in 1883, he earned the title Baron, and was henceforward referred to as Lord Tennyson. He was the favourite poet of Queen Victoria who claimed to have gained comfort after the death of her husband from Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H.," still considered one of the greatest English poems about grief, loss, and consolation.

Tennyson's first verses in *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* published in 1830 before the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign (1837) sparked little critical attention. It is his 1842 collection *Poems* including new poems and reworked older ones printed in two volumes ("The Lady of Shalott," "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters") that established him as the leading poet of his generation. His powerful visual imagery, his eye for beauty, his mythological, chivalric, heroic, allegorical themes, his medievalism, and sensuous melancholy had a considerable impact on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. (Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Waterhouse, and

Elizabeth Siddall all created their visual adaptations of “The Lady of Shalott”) His contemporary critics praised him for being “a leader and a landmark of popular thought and feeling.”

He epitomised the conflicted Victorian frame of mind in so far as his poems combined **agnosticism** with **pantheism** and **mythologically inspired fantasizing**; while staging the **conflict of religious faith and scientific knowledge**, coupling **moralising (ideas, truths)** with **self-indulgent melancholy (sentiments, doubts)**. The tension between his interest in natural sciences and his Christian belief allowed him to put human affairs in perspective as a small part of the drama of the universe. In a non-idealistic view of the natural environment, influenced by Darwinism, he realised that “**Nature red in tooth and claw**” is not a benevolent maternal cradle of humankind, but disinterested in our struggles makes us ask about human life “**What is it all but a trouble of ants in the gleam of a million million of suns?**”

His best critic and friend, Arthur Hallam found five distinctive excellences in Tennyson’s poetic manner:

1. the control of a luxuriant imagination,
2. accuracy of adjustment in moods of character, so that narration and feeling naturally correspond with one another,
3. skill in emotionally fusing a vivid, picturesque portrayal of objects,
4. modulation of verbal harmony, (note the musicality of language: “ Sweet is every sound,/ Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;/The moan of doves in immemorial elms/ And murmuring of innumerable bees. ”)
5. mellow soberness of tone addressed to the <i>understanding heart</i> rather than mere understanding. (Bloom xiii)

ULYSSES (1833, 1842)

“Ulysses,” a **dramatic monologue** in blank verse form (iambic pentameter with no rhymes), focuses on the fallibility and vulnerability of a mythological hero who must face old age, decay, and the common burden of human mortality, yet eventually communicates a message of hope, and relentless defiance. The speaker is the famed adventurer King of Ithaca familiar from Homer’s *Odyssey* (800-700 BC) and Dante’s *Inferno* (1320). (The former classic narrates Ulysses’ epic voyage home after the Trojan War and his heroic defeat of Cyclops, Sirens, Scylla, and other monsters; while the latter retells his condemnation to a descent to hell for pursuing knowledge forbidden to men and for creating the deceptive Trojan Horse.)

Tennyson’s Ulysses finally returns to his kingdom after his dangerous travels yet he does not feel satisfied by being reunited with his family. He yearns to embark on further adventures, to explore again. (“**How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/ To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!**”) Throughout his soliloquy Ulysses introduces his heir, his son Telemachus to the public, he addresses his mariner comrades, and ponders about his own destiny. He emerges as an **unreliable narrator**: the contrast between the past active adventurous and contemplative sedentary domestic existential modes is mirrored in the clashing of the distinct voices of the responsible social being and the melancholic poet, as well as the identification of the self both along and against a textual tradition (“**I have become a name**”), upon realising that he has become **simultaneously a hero/a mythical idol and a fallible human being**. Ulysses goes through **four emotional stages**: first he bitterly rejects the barren, monotonous life in Ithaca, then he recalls nostalgically his heroic past, and finally after recognising his son’s

governance, he boldly begins to plan another journey. Via these changing affective states, Tennyson attributes psychological depth to the ‘lyrical voice’.

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” – The poem’s last line encapsulates the old Ulysses’ determination. **His heroism resides in the fact that he knows his limits, yet he yearns to surpass them.** He seeks new adventures and never ceases “to follow knowledge”. The line is inscribed on the Memorial Cross erected on **Antarctica’s Observation Hill** in commemoration of the explorers (Robert Falcon Scott’s party in 1912) who lost their lives during their mission. Although more recent analyses highlighted a touch of **irony** in Ulysses’ heroic characterisation, arguing that he is a flawed protagonist because his desire to leave back his kingdom is selfish, but it is important to take into consideration the circumstances of the poem’s creation to see the solemn **ceremonious message** of Tennyson. He wrote the poem at age 24, in 1833, when his best friend Arthur Hallam died during a tour in Europe. Ulysses inspired by the soul-mate’s passing actually communicates this “**sense of loss and that all had gone by, but still life must be fought out to the end**” – as Tennyson himself acknowledged. It is the death of a beloved that warns us of the responsibility that comes with the recognition of our mortality, and urges to live life to the fullest in spite of all difficulties. This **existential philosophical** message turns the tone of the poem **self-reflective, contemplative, and hopeful against all odds.**

The poetic subgenre used in “Ulysses” is the **dramatic monologue**, also known as the **persona poem**. A fictive figure, clearly not identical with the poet, performs a speech in a specific situation at a critical moment. The soliloquist interacts with other people who are listening to him but we know little about the audience’s reactions only form occasional clues in the discourse of the single speaker. The monologue of the lyric speaker arouses the readers’/listeners’ interest, reveals the speaker’s temperament and character, and also seemingly accidentally gives away more than the speaker actually intends to communicate. (The reader can make guesses about the past background events from the single monologue presented on the occasion.) The speech is addressed to others (people of Ithaca, mariners of Ulysses) but it also functions as a self-reflective monologue addressed to oneself for purposes of introspection. (see MH Abrams)

LISTEN



[Click on the hyperlink and listen to Laureena McKennitt’s musical interpretation of “The Lady of Shalott.”](#)

THE LADY OF SHALOTT (two versions: 1833, 1842)

“The Lady of Shalott” is a lyrical ballad based on the Arthurian legend of Elaine of Estolat who died of unrequited love for Sir Lancelot – who was Knight of the Round Table, greatest comrade of King Arthur, and secret adulterous lover of Queen Guinevere. In Tennyson’s revisiting of the legend, the Lady is imprisoned in a castle tower on an island under a mysterious spell that makes her weave a magic web inspired by the mirror reflections of the outside world she contemplates in her mirror. Her inability to look at the world directly and her being spellbound by mirror reflections of reality reminds both of Greek philosopher **Plato’s cave allegory** (illustrating the soul’s aspiration towards ideas, and humans’ limited access to an illusory experience of reality, → *For detailed explanation see Chapter on Blake*) and of the **romanticisation of impossible love and succeeding heartbreak** (See Goethe’s Young Werther, Shakespeare’s Ophelia). The Lady “**half sick of shadows**” decides to leave

her enchanted chamber behind to meet Lancelot and face reality even at the cost of her death. As she flees her tower, her tapestry begins to unravel and her mirror cracks from side to side; and she dies before her boat reaches Camelot. Her greatest **tragedy** is that the young knight who find her fails to acknowledge her mystical powers and to realise her sacrifice, and can only lament the loss of a “lovely face.” Although the Lady meets the Victorian ideal of femininity (she is virginal, mysterious, yet submissive, and domestic) chivalric love seems to be questioned, demythified here. Lancelot’s remark is strangely inadequate to the tragedy and mystery of the enigmatic sorceress, he does not recognise the sublime magnitude of the supernatural’s intrusion into the ordinary. The Lady become martyr for a love she can never actually experience.

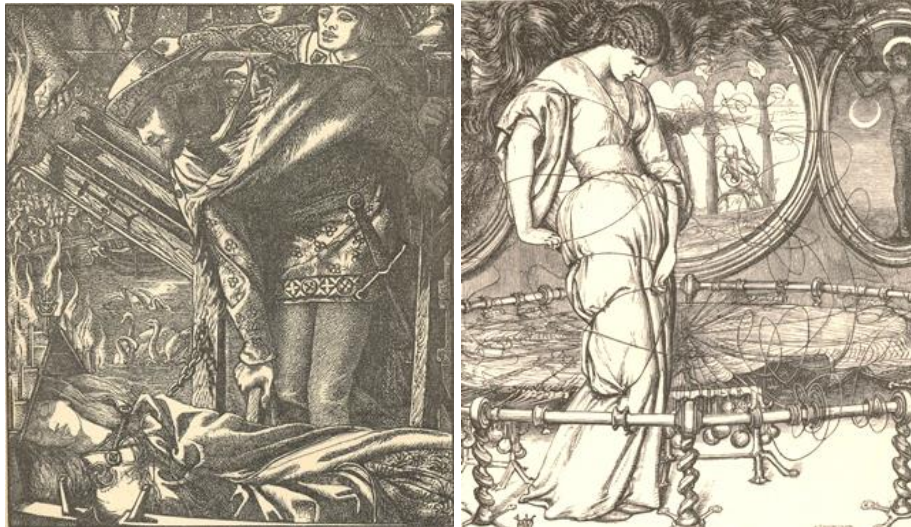


JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE’S PAINTINGS TO THE POEM (1888, 1915)


The poem offers a **metaphor of artistic creativity**. The enchanted castle’s “**ivory tower**” represents the artist’s dilemma: the difficult decision between the privileged seclusion of solitary creativity that reimagines the world in the ingenious but often unappreciated artwork, or the immediate immersion into the mundane real facts and practicalities of the actual world and people. (**The dilemma between (re)creating an alternate reality or living the real world.**) The Lady’s looking into the **mirror** has nothing to do with narcissism or the vanity painting genre in which women contemplate their own beauty reflected in the mirror. She is more of an active onlooker than a passive spectacle. The **creative powers of her gaze** weave a magic web, a unique prophetic encapsulation of past, present, and future events, inspired by the mirror-reflections. Her **weaving** makes her resemble Greco-Roman mythological figures: the Moiras (Fates weaving the thread of life), Penelope (Ulysses’ wife who weaves a wedding dress during the day and unweaves it during the night to escape her suitors), Ariadne (whose thread leads Theseus out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth), and Philomela (whose tongue was cut out but told about her abuse by picturing the crime in a tapestry). It is difficult to tell if the enchanted enchantress is a **prisonkeeper or a prisoner**, if her **artistic representation surpasses or fails to live up to real presence**, if she **obeys or defies her curse**, if her solitary confinement grants her **death-like stasis or supernatural immortality**. (See Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian urn”) Her magic song echoing down to Camelot ravishes the reapers whispering about her, and is contrasted by the simple “tirra lira” of Sir Lancelot’s light-hearted lark song. Eventually her name inscribed on the boat can signify her “**coming to writing,**” a **women’s writing** (enhanced by the feminine aquatic imagery of the river waves on which she is sailing) that is doomed to remain illegible, misunderstood by a fundamentally patriarchal culture. The

poem performs a **play with notions of space and reality** by contrasting Camelot's exterior world with the Lady's interior psychic world and the alternate world called into being by the material work of art she creates.

The **medieval romanticism and enigmatic symbolism** inspired many painters, especially the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their followers.



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI's & WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT's illustrations to the poem

EXPLORE	VISUAL EXTRAS
	Click here to see more pictorial interpretations of "The Lady of Shalott" at The Victorian Web.

IN MEMORIAM A.H.H. (1850) (*The Way of the Soul*)

The poem is a **requiem, a fragmentary elegy** Tennyson wrote as a tribute to his beloved friend **Arthur Henry Hallam**, his sister's fiancé, who died aged 22. The expression of the personal experience of intense male friendship and the grief felt over its loss is conjoint with the discussion of public socio-cultural concerns, current debates concerning science, nature, and religion. Writing the poem holds a **therapeutical effect** for the artist, as "the mechanic exercise" in "measured language" soothes his pain. But he also **struggles with doubt** wondering if words can ever convey the intensity of his feelings, and remains uncertain whether a man's love for another, "**a private sorrow's barren song**" is a legitimate lyrical subject in an age of political unrest, social change, and **epistemological crisis** sparked by scientific discovery. As Holly Furnaux highlights, the poem's "**regular rhythm** echoes the involuntary biological processes of breath or heartbeat, the unwilling organic functions that keep [the poet] going, despite the ravages of grief." The recurring theme of the desire for physical contact between the two men, the longing for a touch of hands, chests, lips lends the poem a **homoerotic tone**. The text also draws imagery from a **variety of scientific fields** including geology, embryology, anatomy, and astronomy, and famously evokes the Darwinian evolutionary theory's key notion of the struggle for survival with the phrase "**nature red in tooth and claw**". Science offers an interpretive framework to understand reality but it cannot impart the **spiritual strength** offered by religious beliefs. The lyrical self oscillates between multiple identificatory positions, **between despair and consolation, between scientific and religious comprehension** (which can neither account for the

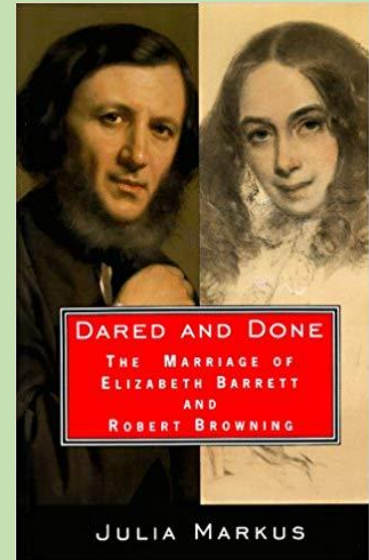
senseless premature loss of Hallam). The **shattering of certainties** provoked by mourning resonates with the **profound reconsideration of God** necessitated by emerging Victorian scientific and technological innovations. (Furneaux) Tennyson's conclusion is nevertheless heartwarming: **"Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all."**

THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING & ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was still attached to the Romantic notion of the poet as magician, visionary, and prophet, yet he also shared his generation's desire for a respectable literature of facts and moral usefulness. His mastery of **dramatic monologue** and **psychological portraiture** earned him a place among the immortals in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner.

His poems speak of faith mixed with uncertainty and the desperate yearning for the reopening of the gates of Heaven ("**Christmas Eve and Easter Day**", 1850), the alluring but menacing natural world worshipped and feared by the poet ("**Caliban**", "**Saul**"), simple people, craftsmen, travellers, collectors, enquirers who make up Victorian society ("**Men and Women**"), the love of **"two hearts beating each to each"** ("**Meeting at Night**", 1845), and even a murder case told from nine different perspectives to illustrate the relativity of truth ("**The Ring and the Book**" 1848)

Browning describes **life in turbulent metaphors of quest, adventure, pilgrimage, ride, research, ocean voyage, a task of knight errantry**. His relation to the world is characterised by a state of excited, unquiet possession. The goal of the adventure might remain unclear. In "**Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came**" the knight errant reaches a Dark Tower after years of mysterious, apparently hopeless quest, and realizes that the grim plain – full of ominous signs, a repulsive cripple who points out the way, a war ridden ground, nameless engines of torture, and the Tower – is, in fact, his destination. Aware that there is no more way forward, dauntless, he sets his horn to his lips and blows the signal. The tragic **quest has no closure**, it remains open ended, in a suspended animation in the nightmarish dreamscape permeated by a Gothic atmosphere of suspense.



BROWNING AS A SPOKESMAN OF HIS DAY
"In politics and morals he stands for the liberalism of his generation, his religion is an undogmatic evangelical nonconformity, he is a Victorian tourist rampant in his gusto for men and cities and his patronizing connoisseurship in the art of the past; he is a representative philistine in his hearty message of progress and his shadow-boxing with Doubt."
(Salingar on Browning 237)



THINK

EXERCISE

Read Coleridge's "[Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner](#)" and Browning's "[Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came](#)."

Compare how the poems create **suspense**, and reflect on the questions of choice and destiny, courage and ordeal, knowing and uncertainty.

MY LAST DUCHESS (1842)

Browning excelled in the lyrical subgenre of **dramatic monologue**. In this type of poem a fictive speaker's soliloquy unintentionally reveals aspects of his/her character while describing events in a specific situation at a critical moment. This is a very compact form: the speaker's psychological character and prehistory comes to light in a single vivid scene. There is an ironic tension between the setting and the drastic actions implied and the distanced, neutral standpoint of the speaker whose subjective, unreliable lyrical voice might tell more than (s)he intends to communicate. The reader/listener fills in the gaps of the missing bits of information, and gradually pieces together the story from the casual remarks or the digressions of the speaker. Throughout these **ironic character sketches**, the **monologue turns into confidential self-justification in defence of a questionable philosophy of life**. The semi-conscious monologues of memorable characters – like a Victorian Catholic priest, an Arab physician examining Lazarus, Shakespeare's savage Caliban, or an American spiritualist medium – reflect a drama in the psyche and unveil secrets the speaker does not wish to convey.

In “**My Last Duchess**” an Italian aristocrat is showing around a guest in his house, commenting on his collection of artworks. His random remarks about the portrait of his former wife give away his cruelty to her. His mysterious claim, “**I gave commands, Then all smiles stopped together...**” is a euphemistic understatement referring to the **haunting unsaid**, a story of obsessive, possessive passion, jealousy and tragic crime. The Duke could not keep his spouse to himself, so his male desire of ownership had her killed, turned into an art object. The poem is an example of **ekphrasis**, the verbal description of a visual artwork. Yet, because of the silenced murder associated with it, the painting invites moral rather than aesthetic judgment. It is bitterly ironic that for the speaker, the portrait is just a single piece in a whole collection, just one stop on a guided tour. After the brief comments on the portrait, the host leads his guest towards the next exhibit, a sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse. To his mind, the **crime** is a justifiable act, a marital right, a fleeting memory, a forgettable and forgivable episode. The poem refers to the actual historical figure of Renaissance Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, married to Lucrezia Medici, as well as to the mythical villain of Bluebeard. Some scholars argue that there is place for the Duchess's rebellion, as being turned into an icon, a pictorial sign she becomes a **visual countercontext** to the Duke's authority to textualize.



READ

[Margaret Atwood's short story „My Last Duchess.”](#)

Compare it with Browning's poem.

“TWO IN THE CAMPAGNA”

“Two in the Campagna” from the collection *Men and Women* (1855) is a love poem that deconstructs love, a **conversational poem** that remains a soliloquy, a pastoral that witnessed decay. Rome countryside emerges as a kind of alternative social landscape where a gentle discord takes place between Nature and the poet-tourist's mind contemplating it. The major leitmotif is the **melancholic recognition of the fleeting transience of Nature, History, Thought and Love**. “**Finite heart's infinite yearning**” is a metonymical marker of human's simultaneous (spiritual) magnificence and (physical) vulnerability. The lyrical voice's metafictional commentary reflects on the inability to ever perfectly capture ideas verbally, to grasp the situation, to transcend the crude experience of self-consciousness. Just like the

thought chased through the landscape can never be captured, the total communion of lovers can never be achieved. Despite the helpful erotic suggestions of nature, we cannot feel each other's feelings. **Poetry and Love are both imperfect, but this is precisely what makes them beautiful.** The poem has a **marital, autobiographical** aspect, and also makes use of the Romantic tradition of **Weltschmerz**, the divine discontent, while philosophically pondering about the human condition. The poem is driven by a **desire for transcendent union**, its recurring question is about shared experience: **"do you feel today/ as I have felt?"** Published a few years before *The Origin of Species*, the poem anticipates the **Darwinian ideas**: the poet emerges as a **naturalist**, who observes nature (as well as its maker who might still reside in Heaven) as well as his own psychological, mental processes, and draws parallels between the two. The flow of thoughts is expressed via the rhetorical device of **enjambment**, whereby the meaning runs over from one poetic line to the next without any terminal punctuation.



THINK

EXERCISE

How do these lines attempt a Darwinian reconciliation of the universe?
"Such miracles perfumed in play, / Such primal naked forms of flowers, /
Such letting nature have her way / While heaven looks from its towers!"

Robert Browning is often mentioned in connection with **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** because of their legendary romance, and lasting creative partnership, throughout which they mutually inspired each other's work during their travels together in Italy. Robert praised the poetry of his wife for its "fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos, and true new brave thought" and wrote to her "You speak out, you. I only make men & women speak, give you truth broken into prismatic hues, & fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I'm going to try."

Elizabeth wrote **romantic love poetry** (*Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)) but she was mostly famed for her **political poetry**: she campaigned for the abolition of slavery ("The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"), the reform of child labour legislation ("The Cry of Children"), the Tuscan struggle for liberty ("Casa Guidi Windows") and women's rights ("Aurora Leigh") among others. **"A Curse for a Nation"** is a passionate cry for justice, addressing the poet's sister-campaigners to rebel, to write. **("Weep and write./ A curse from the depths of womanhood/ Is very salt, and bitter, and good./ So thus I wrote, and mourned indeed,/ What all may read.")** A poet of liberal social conscience she was a candidate of *poeta laureata*. She had a tremendous influence on Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf.

The verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) a narrative poem in nine books is her most ambitious work. Grounded in her own life experiences it plays with stereotypes of the Victorian novel and **rethinks the traditional feminine roles** with regards to marital dependence versus independent individuality. It follows the life of a studious, intelligent, aspiring poetess who struggles to balance work and love. Her handsome cousin proposes to her, to be first rejected because he questions her artistic abilities, but then he eventually grows worthy of her. She reinterprets the institution of marriage by assuming that to become a good wife, one must become a perfect Artist driven by autonomous free will. Characters include a fallen woman, a raped girl, and a prostitute portrayed not as sinners but victims.

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of young English painters, poets, and critics founded in London in 1848 who rejected the conventional aesthetic ideals established by the Royal Academy as exemplified in the work of the Renaissance master Raphael (especially his painting *Transfigurations*). Their main aims were as follows:

- Challenge classical doctrines and dogmas (expounded by Sir Joshua Reynolds)
- Rebel against triviality of popular genre painting of the time
- Treat serious subjects with realism instead of idealisation (follow John Ruskin's advice who urges artists to 'go out to nature' –Millais paints river in [*Ophelia*](#) for five months spent outdoors)
- Natural accuracy of details (nearly scientific scrutinisation), pure realism, including peculiarities of physiognomy and character →scandal provoked by blasphemous realism of Millais's [*Christ in the House of his Parents*](#)
- Themes: religious/Biblical, mythical, neo-medievalism, literary/poetic (illustrations!), bucolic scenes, focus on love, death, dreaminess, turn away from hideous urban world BUT social problems, prostitution, poverty, double standards of sexual morality (William Holman Hunt's [*The Awakening Conscience*](#))
- Ground an Aesthetic Movement in a Religion of Beauty & a Cult of Personality
- Focus on multisensory details, decadent, bohemian sensuality, synaesthesia, auditory details, tactility, bodyliness →shocking, immoral for Victorians (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's [*Beata Beatrix*](#))
- realism BUT non-mimetic: archaic medieval quality, symbolical balladistic mode, ambiguity of waking dream, reverie and melancholy of fall, fairy-tale themes (Edward Burne Jones' [*Sleeping Beauty*](#))
- Provocative, seek controversy and attention, use bright colours
- Brilliant sense of atmosphere and mood
- Portray beautiful, powerful, mysterious, muscular women
- Use religious language for evocative purposes
- Combine genuine ideas to express with attentive study of Nature, and a heartfelt sympathy →goal: simply to make good Art
- Key figures: "self-possessed, articulate, passionate, and charismatic": **Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Edward Burne Jones, John William Waterhouse**
- famous muse (and an artist on her own right): Elisabeth Siddall



DG ROSSETTI, WH HUNT, JE MILLAIS

[CLICK HERE](#) to watch the trailer of **DESPERATE ROMANTICS**, BBC's mini-series on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Click here for: [EPISODE ONE](#))



John Millais, Ophelia



Holman Hunt. *Hireling Shepherd*, 1851.



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828-1882)

Painter, illustrator, poet, translator, **Dante Gabriel Rossetti** – the son of an Italian scholar émigré – was the strongest personality and the effective organiser of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He is famous for

- ✚ his sensual, symbolical, mythological imagery,
- ✚ his aestheticism and idealisation of beauty (his fleshly, yet divine, ethereal feminine ideal was embodied by his muse and partner Elisabeth ‘Lizzie’ Siddal, portrayed on many of his paintings as well as Millais’s “Ophelia”),
- ✚ his eccentricities (he dug up the grave of Lizzie to recuperate his poems addressed to and buried with her),
- ✚ his carnal poetry and his attempts to contain the sensual feel of the fleeting moment (in “Nuptial Sleep” he wrote, “He woke, and wondered more, for there she lay”)

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL (1847) is a **sonnet** Rossetti wrote when he was 18, and illustrated in an **altar-piece-like painting** when he was 50. The poem contrasts and confuses the spiritual, psychic and physical experience of yearning and revisits the leitmotif of love poetry, the **idealisation of eternal/impossible love**. The dead beloved is looking down from Heaven, yearning for her lover she left behind, filling heaven with pain. The minute details of her beauty (3 lilies in her hands, 7 stars in hair) are rich in symbolical significations and are enhanced by the sensory experience of her unfulfilled, insatiable desire (**"I saw her smile/I heard her tears."**). Rossetti's major source of inspiration was the pair of separated lovers in **Dante's Vita Nuova**. He was also interested in the spiritual/psychic depth of the female soul, the physical separation by death, and the infinite longing mirrored (above in the infinite realm of Heaven and below on Earth, the land of the mortals). The painting is separated into three parts as a triptych: it depicts the Damsel musing in Heaven, the mourning lover's chained earthly existence and thoughts, and the shared memories and mutual fantasies both connecting and separating them.



CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830-1894)

Christina Rossetti was Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sister, a foremost female poet of her times, who wrote in a variety of genres, including sonnets, hymns, ballads, devotional and children's poetry. She was affiliated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but also criticised their narcissistic self-glorification and objectification of women/ muses in her **"In an Artist's Studio."**



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"Golden head by golden head"

THE GOBLIN MARKET

“The Goblin Market” (1862) is a complex poem that lends itself to a variety of different significations. It narrates two sisters’ encounters with mysterious forest creatures, goblin merchant men who seduce the girls with offering them irresistible, delicious fruit. Laura yields to the temptation and can only be saved from wasting away by her sister, Lizzie who comes to her rescue with the antidote she steals from the goblins.

1. Because of the enchanted forest, the magical beings, and the talking animals, the poem lends itself to be interpreted as a **fairy tale**. More specifically it evokes a **cautionary tale of consumption** that warns against the tasting of a forbidden food item (eg. the Grimms’ Hansel & Gretel).
2. As an allegory about temptation, self-sacrifice, and salvation, the poem has a **Biblical significance**. The fruit reminds of the apple Eve picked from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The magical powers of the food evoke the Eucharist’s Transubstantiation of the Christian religious ritual. Lizzie risking her life by returning to the goblins to gain fruit that can cure her sister is a sacrificial Christ figure.
3. The poem has a remarkably **sensual imagery** due to the description of the oral delights and seducing sense impressions (taste, smell, touch) offered by the fruits. The scene of the goblins attacking Lizzie, smearing their fruits against her mouth in a vain attempt to make her eat reminds of a rape fantasy. Whereas Laura licking off the juices from Lizzie’s body has **lesbian erotic connotations**. (*“Eat me, drink me, love me.” “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices, Squeezed from goblin fruits for you.” “She sucked and sucked and sucked the more/ Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,/ She sucked until her lips were sore, /Then flung the empty rinds away”*)
4. The poem also comments on the **functioning of desire**, that is unsatisfiable by definition. This idea is a precursor of **Freudian psychoanalysis**. The melancholy felt over the betrayed expectations in love is merged with the dark lure of lustfulness,
5. The theme of **addiction** refers to drug abuse and its **psychopathological consequences**. Some members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood used opiates (present is poppy seed) as a recreational drug to stimulate their imagination. Dante Gabriel Rossetti grew addicted to chloral hydrate, Lizzie Siddal possibly died of laudanum overdose.
6. The two sisters represent the binary opposition between the two **Victorian stereotypes of femininity**: the **angelic virgin** and the **fallen woman whore**. Their Biblical equivalents are the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Twinning the sisters (fusing into one as in DG Rossetti’s illustration to the painting) represents the blurring of these opposites, and the troubling of gender roles (ie. the simultaneous challenging of the idealisation and the demonization of women). The misrepresentation of women is challenged through the depiction of rebellious, daring, imaginative female agency and sisterly solidarity.
7. The twin sisters might also stand for the **split self**, humans’ vulnerability to temptation (succumbing to evil) and the altruistic urge to act of kindness (the will to do good).
8. Romantic ideas of **“carpe diem”** and **“vanitas mundi”** traditions are contrasted. If Laura represents addiction, Lizzie stands for ascetism.
9. The poem has a **social critical layer**. Rossetti was a volunteer worker from 1859 to 1870 at the St Mary Magdalene house of charity in Highgate, a refuge for former prostitutes, and possibly dedicated and read out the poem to the **fallen women** she encountered there. The text sensually describes erotic desire but also urges social redemption and forgiveness. Christina Rossetti opposed slavery, cruelty to animals, and underage prostitution.

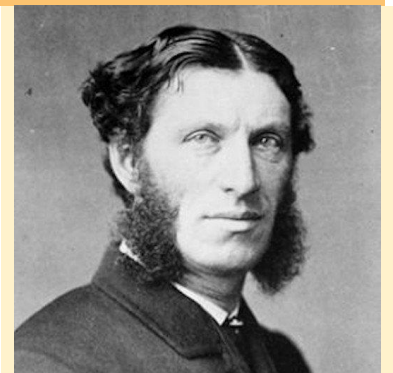
10. The leitmotif of Greek tragedies, the trope of **hubris and redemption, crime and punishment** is recycled here (Compare with Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner")
11. The merchant men's call "Come buy and buy!" highlight Victorian fiction's thematisation of the **market** as a site of financial transactions and social interactions, and an instrument of commentary on the emerging **consumerism**. (Compare with the symbol of the marketplace in *Vanity Fair*)
12. The gothic **fantasy of vampirism**, of imminent unpredictable danger, and the demon lurking within can be tracked in the text.
13. The sisters' final **maturation into storytellers** might refer to the narrative construction of history, the curative potential of storytelling, the misremembering caused by nostalgia, proto-feminist agency or the compulsion for confession and self-correction.
14. Tracking the publication history of the poem, from girls' schoolbook to *Playboy Magazine*, reveals how each era activates a different layer of the rich variety of meanings embedded in the text.



[CLICK HERE](#) to see more illustrations of *The Goblin Market* at the British Library's Website

MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-1888)

Matthew Arnold was a poet and cultural critic who instructed his readers on **contemporary social issues**. (In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he defended liberal arts, his *Literature and Dogma* (1873) contained his religious criticism, in *The Popular Education of France* he shared his thoughts on democratic education, *On Translating Homer* (1861) discussed principles of literary criticism.)



"**Dover Beach**" published in 1867 in his collection *New Poems* is a piece of **occasional poetry** (poetry produced for a particular occasion, in this case Arnold's honeymoon). It conjoins immediate experience and long-term memory with a reflection on the nature of existence. The **symbolic beach landscape** is a site where feelings of **elegiac brooding** and **metaphysical dilemmas** can be projected. The sea waves outside symbolise Eternity, and life going on despite the tragedies.

The starlit scenery provides a perfect romantic setting for the tender call addressed to the beloved companion in this **dramatic monologue**. Change is seen as troubling, the ebb and flow of ocean waves symbolize human misery. **Love remains the only source of hope and means of survival amidst the sea of pain, the “maze of confusion”**. All the rest is illusion and disillusion. Hence the melancholic call: **“Let us be true to one another!”** The soothing, rhythmic movement of sea provides consolation in a world ruled by chaos. The gloomy vision of the darkling plain **“swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight”** in the desperate fight makes a historical reference to the **night battle at Epipolae**. In this combat of the Peloponnesian war described by Thucydides “ignorant armies clash[ed] by night” unable to distinguish enemies from comrades confused by “mournful roar.” This memory of past familiar from ancient literature (Greek classics, including Sophocles’ Antigone with a reference to the divine curse), a knowledge shaped by well-educated imagination guides all to the recognition of the significance of empathy, understanding, and true love, the only value left counter to History.

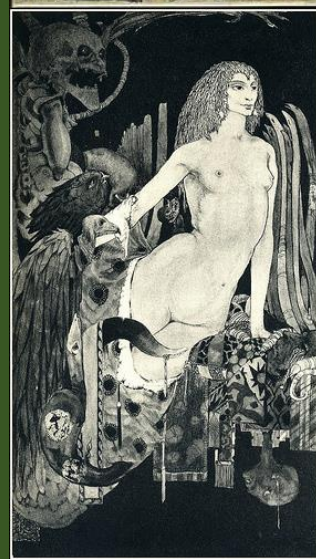


[LISTEN to Tom Hiddleston reading “Dover Beach”.](#)

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE (1837-1909)



Algernon Swinburne was a **decadent, symbolist** poet who enjoyed shocking his contemporaries with scandalous acts as well as controversial themes and **taboo topics** embedded in his poetry, including lesbianism, cannibalism, sado-masochism, bestiality and anti-theism. He toyed with the lure of evil and in the fashion of art for art’s sake, embraced being unclean for the sake of uncleanliness. His roundel, „The little eyes that never knew light” resonate with Victorian post-mortem photography.



His poem **“Faustine”** from the collection *Poems and Ballads* (1866) focuses on a demonic, vampiric, voracious, dominatrix **femme fatale** figure, evocative of the castrating symbol of the **Vagina Dentata**. He salutes her with the greeting of Roman gladiators marching towards their death “Ave Faustina Imperatrix, Morituri te Salutant.” Divine order is contrasted with hazard and fate as the devil is throwing dice with God for the cursed soul of Faustine – in a scene reminiscent of Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”. Swinburne is preoccupied with the same dilemma Blake has raised in his rhetorical question: “Did he who made the lamb make thee?” This philosophical, ethical, religious dilemma tackles the coexistence of good and evil. Swinburne’s question to his anti-heroine **“Did Satan make you to spite God? / Or did God mean to scourge with scorpions for a rod / Our sins, Faustine?”** asks if life is worth to be lived in sin, and what is the meaning of life if you are a sinner? (this question is raised in Oscar

Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* too) Via an amoral relativisation the blame is removed from the wrongdoer, as Faustine appears to be just as much a victim as a predator. The question is as follows: “If she is doomed to be evil, it’s in her nature and cannot help it, is it really her fault?” Her omnipotent power is not a result of her choice, she is a new-born soul without any

consciousness. Strangely when addressing the Evil, the poet asks who she is, but even more importantly **how she is**. He attempts to communicate with the **cursed woman** (a dark double of the Lady of Shalott), and strives to understand her, ravished by the **riddle he attempts to solve in vain**.

	<p><u>TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE</u></p> <p>https://docs.google.com/forms/d/12jSchPDPUKGEgrijOtHwX7ON5YdcUi1eEV4NkxPQ5tc/edit</p>
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