

Victorian Poetry: Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold

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Please Silence Cell Phones

Overview of Victorian Literature

- Romantic poets were seen as visionaries, but Victorian poets sought to be more **practical**
- Romantic emphasis on self-expression was viewed with suspicion; Victorians emphasize **moral soul-searching**
- **Eclectic style**: contemporary social issues mingle with Greek myth or Arthurian legend
- Use of **dramatic monologue**
- **Realism** and the Novel: Dickens, Henry James, George Eliot, Bronte sisters

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

- *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, 1830
- Death of friend Arthur Henry Hallam, 1833
- Marriage
- *Poems*, 1842: Ulysses, Tithonus, Morte d'Arthur, and Teiresias)
- 1850: Poet Laureate



Ulysses:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/ulysses/text.html>

- Dante's Ulysses (Odysseus)
- Restless and discontented
- "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."
- Tragic Heroism of Man
- Nobility in Striving and Struggling

Robert Browning, 1812-1889

- Father, Bank Clerk; library of 6,000 books
- Highly allusive poetry
- Courtship of Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- 1846: marriage and move to Florence
- Famous for “dramatic monologue” technique



Browning's Poetry

- Shakespeare as model: **personality as staged and variable**
- Narrative voice in lyric to create **objectivity**
- *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842, "lyric in expression," but they are "the utterances of so many **imaginary persons, not mine.**"
- Dramatic monologue: Marvel and Tennyson had used it, but **B. perfected it**
- **Focus on an emotional moment**
- Unappealing yet Sympathetic Characters

Porphyria's Lover

<http://www.cswnet.com/~erin/rbpoem.htm#porph>

- Does the narrator love Porphyria?
- Why does the narrator kill Porphyria?
- Porphyria's disease: pale, weak, sensitive to light
- Interpretation 1: He kills in fulfillment of her wish to die: God can't complain because morally what he has done is right.
- Interpretation 2: He kills her out of jealousy to possess her completely: men destroy that which we love and find ways to justify it

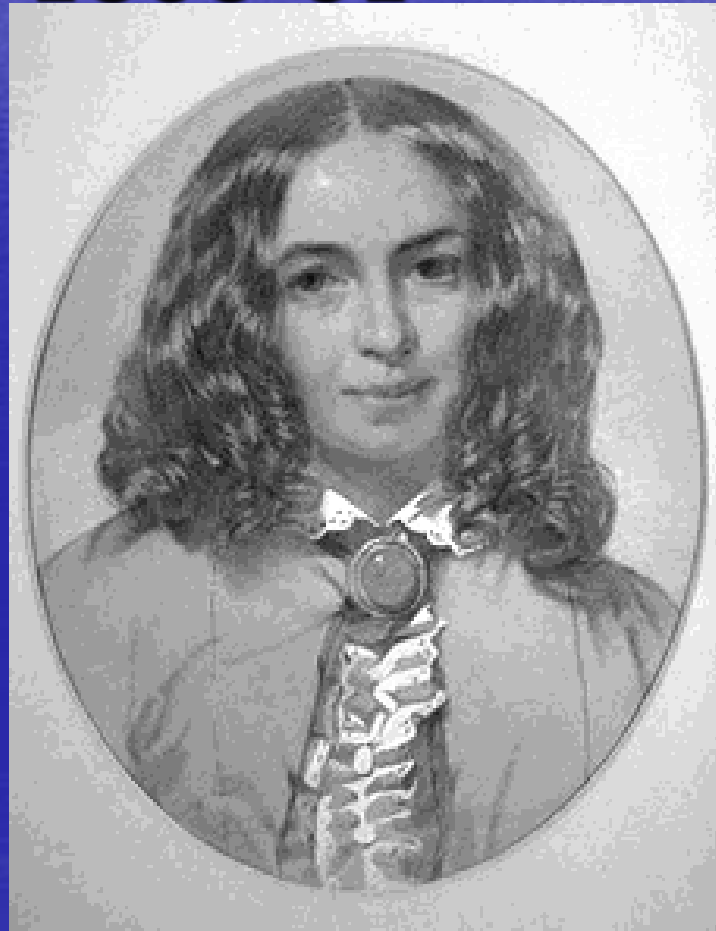
"My Last Duchess"

<http://www.cswnet.com/~erin/rbpoem.htm#duchess>

- Set in Renaissance Florence
- Wealthy Duke speaks to a guest about his dead wife while looking at a picture of her
- He suspected her of an affair
- Shockingly you discover he had her killed
- The Listener is a marriage ambassador for another woman
- The Duke collects Women like Works of Art
- Possesses the dead Duchess in her painting
- Questions the moral quality of passion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1806-61

- Self educated: Greek, Latin, French, Portuguese, Italian; Child Prodigy; Isolated
- Controlling Father
- Interests: Child Labor, Women's Rights, Oppression of the Lower Class, Slave Trade, Italian Independence
- *Sonnets from the Portuguese* document her love for Robert; 1845-7



Sonnet XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and
height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's

Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's
faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,--I love thee with the
breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life!--and, if God
choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

- Celebrates Love as an Idea and Action rather than an Object
- Reverses the Itemized, Objective Love of Petrarch

Sonnet XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say
*I love her for her smile--her look--her way
Of speaking gently,--for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of ease on such a day--*

For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee,--and love,
so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheek dry,--
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

- Response to Pascal's *Pensee* 567

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

- Father was a professor of history
- Attended Oxford; won Newdigate Prize for Poetry
- Secretary to a Lord and then inspector of schools
- Preface to *Poems, 1853*; importance of emotional and moral impact on reader and nation
- 1857, Professor of Poetry, Oxford



Dover Beach

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/writings/doverbeach.html>

- Suffering of Sophocles' Antigone recalled in the sound of the Sea
- "Where ignorant armies clash by night."; recalls Thucydides
- Echoes of Past Alive in the Present
- Love as a temporary respite from suffering
- "Sea of Faith" is "retreating" and "melancholy"
- Arnold and Religion: Agnosticism

Summary

- Victorian Writers are not “tame” or “restrained” as Victorian Society was; they write about themes that challenges society’s assumptions
- Reject easy optimism and hope of the Romantics
- Offer a practical wisdom about how to live in a new world where old structures are beginning to break
- Moral object of Poetry rooted not in Religion or Nature, but in Human Ideas and Love