

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,
- *Poems*, 1842: *Ulysses*, *Tithonus*, *Morte d'Arthur*, and *Teiresias*)
- 1850: Poet Laureate



Charge of the Light Brigade, 1854

- Crimean War between Russia and Turkey, (1854-6)
- British forces under Lord Raglan entered battle to prevent the Russians from gaining an important sea route
- The brigade of 650 charged to prevent the Russians from seizing cannons; they charged the wrong way and over 100 were killed in crossfire.
- 1855 version omitted the phrase, “someone had blundered,” but it was later reinserted.
- The phrase is a motif in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.
- [The Charge of the Light Brigade | The Poetry Foundation](#)

Ulysses

- [Ulysses | The Poetry Foundation](#)
- 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 in his [futile?] attempt to Conquer the unknown
- Necessity to Strive and Struggle against all Odds is what makes us Noble

Robert Browning, 1812-1889

- Father was a clerk for the Bank of England; library of 6,000 books
- Highly allusive poetry with many inter-textual allusions.
- 1844: read a poem by Elizabeth Barrett praising his poetry; courtship through letters
- 1846: marriage and move to Florence
- Famous for “dramatic monologue” technique



Browning's Poetry

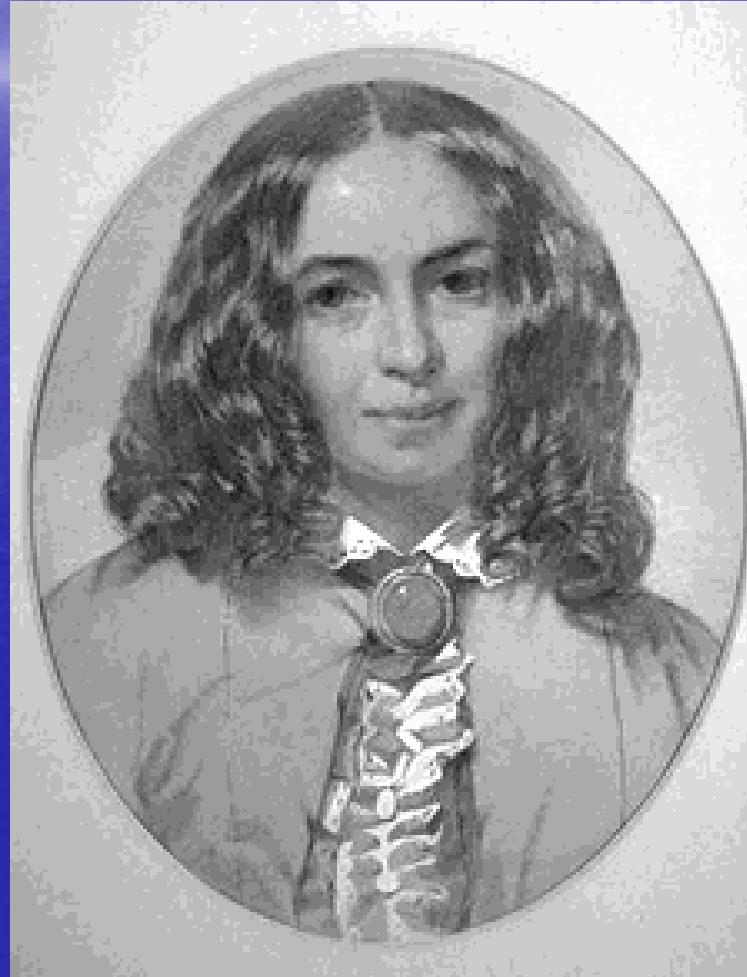
- Having read Shakespeare, he was taken with the idea of personality as staged and variable; dedicated to write in an objective way where he assumes various persona
- Use of narrative voice in lyric accomplishes this objectivity
- *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842, announced the poems were “lyric in expression,” but they are “the utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.”
- Dramatic monologue: Marvel and Tennyson had used it, but B. perfected it; situated in time and place; focus on an emotional moment; characters are often unappealing, yet they draw out sympathy

Porphyria's Lover

- [Porphyria's Lover | The Poetry Foundation](#)
- Does the narrator love Porphyria?
- Why does the narrator kill Porphyria?
- Porphyria's disease: pale, weak, sensitive to light
- Interpretation 1: He kills her because of her illness in fulfillment of her wish to die: God can't complain because morally what he has done is right.
- Interpretation 2: He kills her because of a rival lover and in order to possess her completely in the moment that he attains her love: the point is that men destroy that which we love and find ways to justify it

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806-61

- Self educated: Greek, Latin, French, Portuguese, Italian; Child Prodigy; Isolated
- Father forbade marriage; disinherited
- Interests included Social Issues such as 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



Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh*, 1856

- Verse Novel in blank verse:
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html>
- Tells the story of a female writer
- She is orphaned; lives with Aunt who prepares her to be a wife; Turns down proposal from Aunt's cousin, Romney; Becomes a poet; Rescues a poor woman rejected by Romney, who is raped and pregnant
- Romantic Devotion to Art and Escape from Societal Restrictions
- In the end she marries her cousin and will write poetry in service of her husband's ideas

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.

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!

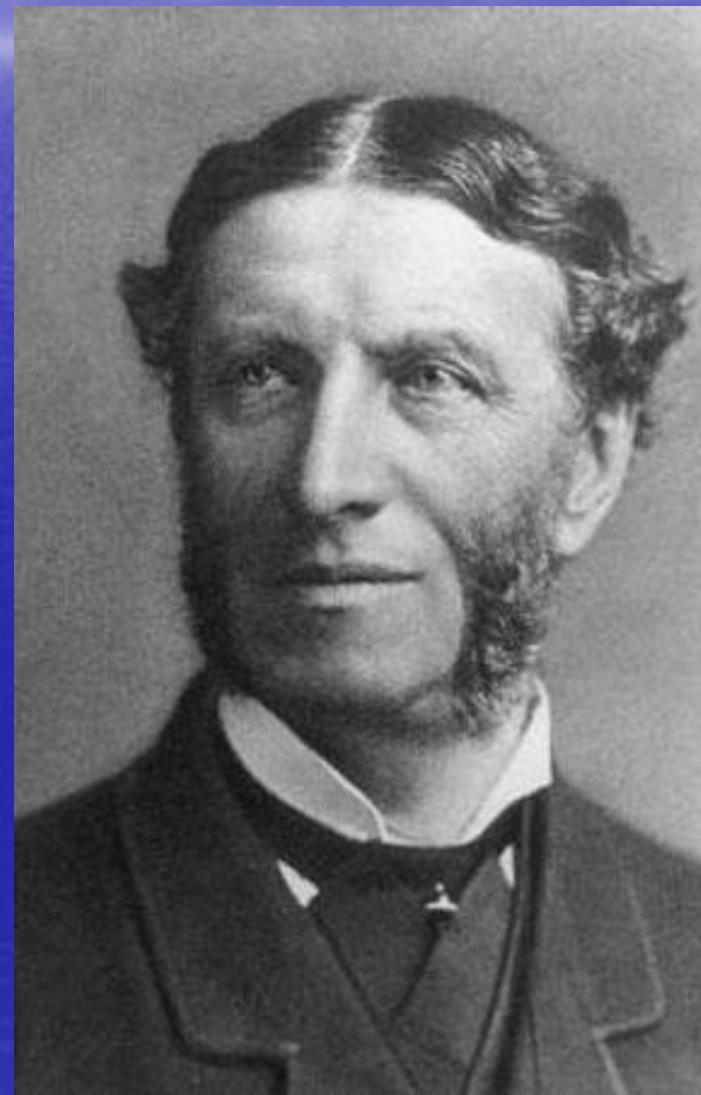
But love me for love's sake, that evermore

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
- Won a scholarship to Attend Oxford; won Newdigate Prize for Poetry
- Secretary to a Lord and then inspector of schools
- 1849, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*
- Preface to *Poems, 1853*; importance of emotional and moral impact on reader and nation
- 1857, Professor of Poetry, Oxford
- Influenced by Wordsworth, Goethe, and Sainte-Beuve (style is the man)



Dover Beach

- [Dover Beach | The Poetry Foundation](#)
- Sophocles' *Antigone*: a house shaken by the gods is like a beach struck by waves when the winds stir up the sea
- "Where ignorant armies clash by night."; recalls Thucydides' description of Athenians fighting at Syracuse at night
- Echoes of Past Alive in the Present
- Dwelling upon the sweetness and tenderness of his present companion provides a respite from past and future sorrow; but, it does not protect one from suffering.
- "Sea of Faith" is "retreating" and "melancholy"; Darwin

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 unbridled hope of the Romantics
- Offer a practical wisdom about how to live in a new world where old structures are beginning to break down
- Introduced a new poetic genre: dramatic monologue
- Elizabeth Browning is perhaps the first and most complete female poet of the West; women in novel (George Eliot and Bronte’s) are established