Poetry in the Victorian world

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Structure

1. Introduction

1.1 Victorian Literature

The important writing of the Victorian period is to a large extent the product of a double awareness. This was a literature addressed with great immediacy to the needs of the age, to the particular temper of mind which had grown up within a society seeking adjustment to the conditions of modern life. And to the degree that the problems which beset the world of a century ago retain their urgency and still await solution, the ideas of the Victorian writers remain relevant and interesting to the twentieth century. Any enduring literature, however, must transcend topicality; and the critical disesteem into which so much Victorian writing
has fallen may be traced to the persistent notion that the literary men of that time oversubscribed to values with which our own time is no longer in sympathy. Yet this view ignores the fact that nearly all the eminent Victorian writers were as often as not at odds with their age and that in their best work they habitually appealed not to, but against the prevailing mores of that age. The reader who comes to the Victorians without bias must be struck again and again by the underlying tone of unrest which pervades so much that is generally taken as typical of the period. Sooner or later he begins to wonder whether there is any such thing as a representative Victorian writer, or at any rate, whether what makes him representative is not that very quality of intransigeance as a result of which he repudiated his society and sought refuge from the spirit of the times in the better ordered realm of interior consciousness. Since, however, any tendency to exalt individual awareness at the expense of conventionally established attitudes ran counter to the concept of the role of the artist which the Victorian age tried to impose on its writers, there resulted a conflict which has been too often ignored, but which must be taken into account in reaching any satisfactory evaluation of Victorian literature. This was a conflict, demonstrable within the work of the writers themselves, between the public conscience of the man of letters who comes forward as the accredited literary spokesman of his world, and the private conscience of the artist who conceives that his highest allegiance must be to his own aesthetic sensibilities.

Most Victorian writers still thought of themselves as men of letters in the full meaning of the term. Victorian literature was predominantly a literature of ideas, and of ideas, furthermore, brought into direct relation with the daily concerns of the reading public. To a degree now inconceivable the influential literary types of the nineteenth century were
expository in character-the essay, tract, and treatise. The student who wishes to understand the Victorian world begins with such works as *Past and Present*, *The Stones of Venice*, *On Liberty*, *Culture and Anarchy* (text). The assumption that a writer's first responsibility is to get into close correspondence with his audience induced many of the original thinkers in the period to turn aside from their fields of special knowledge, to the end of making their theories more generally accessible. So Mill, Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, Huxley, after achieving distinction along specialized lines, gave up exclusive concentration on these in order to apply the disciplines they had mastered to subjects of the broadest human import. Or, to consider the novel, Dickens, George Eliot, Disraeli, Kingsley, Mrs. Gaskell, and Charles Reade all quite evidently chose themes with an eye to their social significance.

Yet, paradoxically, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the great Victorians as other than solitary and unassimilated figures within their century. Deeply as they allowed themselves to be involved in the life of the times, familiarity seemed only to breed contempt. Their writings, inspired by a whole-hearted hostility to the progress of industrial culture, locate the centers of authority not in the existing social order but within the resources of individual being. Nor was this procedure merely a reaction to the isolation which is traditionally visited on prophets without honor, although for many the years brought disillusionment and bitterness over the debacle of cherished programs of reform. The prestige of a Carlyle or Ruskin or Newman may almost be said to have risen in inverse proportion to the failure of their preachments. At the core of the malaise which pervades so much that is best in Victorian literature lies a sense, often inarticulate, that modern society has originated tendencies inimical to the life of the creative imagination. By mid-century the circumstances of successful literary production had begun to make demands on writers
which strained to the breaking point their often very considerable capacities for compromise. Among novelists the careers of Dickens and Thackeray epitomize the all but intolerable difficulties of reconciling popular appeal with artistic integrity. A new generation, led by Rossetti and Swinburne, was to resolve the dilemma by an outspoken assertion of the artist's apartness; but for the writers who came of age in the 1830's and 1840's no such categorical disavowal of social commitment was admissible. As a result, there is recognizable in their work a kind of tension originating in the serious writer's traditional desire to communicate, but to do so without betraying the purity of his creative motive even in the face of a public little disposed to undergo the rigors of aesthetic experience. Even when, as was too often the case, their love of fame overcame their artistic restraint, traces of the initiating conflict remain imbedded in what they wrote; and it is these constantly recurring evidences of a twofold awareness which, perhaps more than any other trait, give its distinctive quality to the writing of the Victorian age.

Victorian Poetry is a major re-evaluation of the genre by one of the foremost scholars of the period. In a work that is uniquely comprehensive and theoretically astute, Isobel Armstrong rescues Victorian poetry from its longstanding sepia image as a moralized form of romantic verse, and unearths its often subversive critique of nineteenth-century culture and politics. For the first time, the aesthetics and politics of Victorian poetry are brought together in a sustained historical discussion. Isobel Armstrong examines its conservative and dissident traditions, and compares the work of familiar middle-class male poets to that of female and working-class poets. Victorian Poetry brilliantly demonstrates the extraordinary sophistication of the genre. At the same time it presents a vigorous challenge to some crucial issues in contemporary Marxist, post-structuralist and feminist criticism.
Writers of the Victorian era created literature that commented on societal, economical, religious, and philosophical ideas of the time. Much of Victorian literature criticized the increased industrialization of the world, and on the other hand, the deterioration of the rural lifestyle. Much Victorian literature dabbled in satire as it critiqued the society it entertained. While the middle class increased its political power over society, the poor had to make due with less. Writers of the Victorian era critiqued this imbalance of power in their work.

Victorian literature addressed the themes of conflict among the classes as well as the burgeoning push for women's rights. However, the defining characteristic of Victorian literature is a strong focus on morality. Heroes of Victorian literature are often the oppressed members of society, such as the poor. Victorian writers romanticized hard work and strong virtue. Characters with good morals were usually rewarded, while characters who acted poorly received their just desserts in the end. Victorian fiction was often written with the intention of teaching a moral lesson to readers. Underneath the moral surface, characters in Victorian literature are often teeming with passion and tempted by evil. The characters of Victorian literature, however, show restraint against their wild emotions—a restraint that was abandoned by the Romantic writers who came before, celebrating wildness and uncontrollable emotions.

Another popular theme of Romantic literature was the celebration of the past. During the Victorian era, many readers also sought stories about chivalry and courtly love. The poet laureate of the time—Alfred, Lord Tennyson—published a cycle of twelve narrative poems called "Idylls of the King" in the mid-nineteenth century. The poems told the story of the legend of King Arthur's kingdom, although some details were changed to better teach the
moral lessons of the day. For instance, in Tennyson’s version of the story, Lady Guinevere repents for her infidelities to the king by spending the rest of her life in a convent. Many critics saw the poems as an allegory for popular problems in Victorian culture, such as the struggle to remain morally ideal and women's attempts at earning more power.

1.2 Victorian Poetry

Victorian Poetry is a major re-evaluation of the genre by one of the foremost scholars of the period. In a work that is uniquely comprehensive and theoretically astute, Isobel Armstrong rescues Victorian poetry from its longstanding sepia image as a ‘a moralised form of romantic verse’, and unearths its often subversive critique of nineteenth-century culture and politics. For the first time, the aesthetics and politics of Victorian poetry are brought together in a sustained historical discussion. Isobel Armstrong examines its conservative and dissident traditions, and compares the work of familiar middle-class male poets to that of female and working-class poets. Victorian Poetry brilliantly demonstrates the extraordinary sophistication of the genre. At the same time it presents a vigorous challenge to some crucial issues in contemporary Marxist, post-structuralist and feminist criticism.

The foremost poet of the Victorian period was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who served as poet laureate of the United Kingdom from 1850 until his death in 1892. Much of Tennyson’s poetry focused on the retellings of classical myths. He experimented with meter, but most of his poetry followed strict formatting—a reflection of the strict formality of the Victorian era. His work often focused on the conflict between allegiance to religion and the new discoveries being made in the field of science.
Husband and wife team Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning became famous for the love poems they wrote to each other. Elizabeth was already an accomplished poet when she met her future husband in 1845. He influenced her to publish her love poems, which significantly increased her popularity. Also worth mention in a discussion of the Victorian era is a collection of writers and artists called the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood of which Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina were a part. In the late 1840s, a group of English artists organized the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with the goal of replacing the popular academic approach to painting with the more natural approach taken by artists who worked before the Italian Renaissance. Several writers joined this movement, echoing a simpler, less formal approach to writing literature.

In criticizing Victorian poetry it is necessary to keep this ambivalence in mind; and this is especially true for Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, the poets who touched their period at the greatest number of points. The history of nineteenth century English poetry records a gradual, but radical shift in the relationship of the artist to his public with the three poets just mentioned occupying a position at dead center of the forces which were in opposition. A divorce between the artist and society first became conspicuous as an element of the Romantic movement; but even though they had to endure abuse or neglect, the Romantics did not in any sense think of themselves as abdicating the poet's traditional right to speak for his age. Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, [xi/xii] Keats were all, it is true, keenly sensitive to their generation's reluctance to pay attention to what they were saying, but they accepted isolation as a necessary consequence of their revolutionary program. That they should confess defeat, with the alternatives either of self-withdrawal or compromise, never seriously occurred to them. On the contrary, they declared open
warfare on the prejudices which would dispossess them and continued to assert that the poet’s vision is transcendentally of intellectual and spiritual truth. Before the end of the century, however, the conflict thus resolutely engaged had been lost, and the artist had come to accept as a foregone conclusion his inefficacy as of his contemporaries. In compensation, he now espoused the aesthetic creed which goes by the name of art for art's sake, and with Pater and then Wilde as his apologists and Rossetti and Swinburne as his models, embraced his alienation from all but a coterie of initiates persuaded like himself to value the forms of art above its message.

Between the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites lie Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, leading the poetic chorus of the great Victorian noonday. By virtue of this midway position between the two extremes represented by the schools of poetry which came before and after, their work brings into sharp focus the choice which has been forced on the modern artist. In the common view, these mid-Victorian poets, either unable or unwilling to maintain the spirit of bellicose self-sufficiency which sustained their Romantic forbears, achieved rapprochement with their audience by compromising with the middle-class morality of the time, and in so doing deliberately sacrificed artistic validity. So flagrant a betrayal of the creative impulse, the argument then continues, provoked a reaction in the following generation, whereby the pendulum swung back towards the belief that art is and must be its own justification irrespective of ulterior motive. But this version of the poetic situation in the nineteenth century gravely misrepresents the real meaning of an endeavor on which Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold were alike engaged. For each of them was ultimately seeking to define the sphere within which the modern poet may exercise his faculty, while holding in legitimate balance the rival claims of his private, aristocratic insights.
and of the tendencies existing in a society progressively vulgarized by the materialism of both the nineteenth and twentieth century. Thus it came about that the double awareness, which so generally characterized the Victorian literary mind, grew almost into a perpetual state of consciousness in these poets through their efforts to work out a new aesthetic position for the artist.

The literary careers of Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold present a number of striking parallels which, since their poetic endowments were so divergent, can only be explained in terms of influences impinging on them from the outside. In the early manner of each there is an introspective, even a cloistral element which was later subdued in an obvious attempt to connect with contemporary currents of thought. Of the three, Tennyson succeeded most quickly in conforming to the Victorian ideal of the poet as popular bard; his reward was the laureateship as Wordsworth's successor. Browning's progress in public favor was more gradual, but the formation of the Browning Society in 1881 signalized his eventual arrival within the select company of Victorian idols of the hearth. Less versatile in poetic range, Arnold became a full-fledged man of letters and won the prestige of the Oxford Professorship of Poetry only after turning to prose; and it is perhaps worth pondering whether his inability to bring his poetry into closer accord with the demands of the age does not account for the fact that he has attracted a greater amount of serious critical attention in recent years than either Tennyson or Browning.

The Victorian writer, of course, had to acclimate himself to a reading public vastly bigger in size and more diverse and unpredictable in its literary requirements than any that had existed hitherto. There is something astonishing, even slightly appalling, in the unselective voracity with which the Victorians wolfed down *In Memoriam* and
Bailey's *Festus*, *The Origin of Species*, and Samuel Smiles' *Self-help*, the novels of Dickens and the tales of Harriet Martineau. The ill success of their first volumes early awakened Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold to a realization that under existing conditions originality was no passport to artistic acclaim. The critics were for the most part hostile; but it was the disapprobation of intimate friends which carried the greatest weight. For while the poets might turn a deaf ear to the voice of the age as it spoke through the weekly and monthly journals which had feebly replaced the *Edinburgh and Quarterly Reviews* as arbiters in literary matters, the well-intended strictures of a Hallam or Elizabeth Barrett or Clough were another matter. And friends and foes were at one in their insistence that the poets take a broader view of their responsibilities as men of letters. In general, their work drew reproof on three counts, one major and two incidental thereto. It was unduly introspective and self-obsessed and as a result it was too often obscure content and precious in manner. All three faults are chargeable to immaturity; but as attributed indiscriminately to Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, they carry additional implications suggestive of the tyranny which the age was to exercise over its artists. For the invariable inference in the attacks on these poets is that their faults could easily be remedied by more attention to normal human thoughts and activities, and correspondingly by less infatuation with their own private states of being.

The experiments in the narrative and dramatic modes to which Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold turned so early in their careers were certainly undertaken out of a desire to counteract objections of this kind. Yet it is apparent from the vagaries of their critical reputations that they were never sure enough of their audience to be able to estimate its response with any degree of reliability. The appearance of *Maud* or *Sordello* or *Empedocles*
on Etna, interspersed among more admired efforts, is continuing evidence that the best will in the world could not compensate for temperamental variances with prevailing tastes which went much deeper than the authors themselves always recognized. That they should have professed impatience with the often obtuse and [xiv/xv] ill-considered estimates of their poetry is not in itself surprising; but it is to be noted that as time went on they tended increasingly to transfer this resentment to the reading public at large. In their later days Tennyson and Arnold would have agreed with Browning's statement in "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country" about "artistry being battle with the age/ It lives in!" There is, of course, an element of the disingenuous in such professions of disdain for popular favor; and their assumed indifference cannot disguise the fact that all three poets were keenly sensitive to the fluctuations of their literary stock. In this respect they were no more than exhibiting an awareness natural to men of letters possessed of an inherent belief in the instrumentality of literature as a social force.

Yet again, the conventional explanation does not cover the facts; and we are brought back to the dichotomy which emerges from any close analysis of the relations between the artist and society in the Victorian period. The hallmark of the literary personalities of Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold alike is a certain aristocratic aloofness, a stubborn intractability which is likely to manifest itself at just those points where the contemporary social order assumed automatic conformity with its dictates. Thus, their refusal to be restricted by current suppositions is less often a subterfuge to cover a fear of failure than a forthright avowal of the artist's independence from societal pressures whenever these threaten to inhibit the free play of his imaginative powers. Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold never went to the lengths of the poets who came after in disassociating themselves from
their audience. On the other hand, there is a fundamental error in the prevalent notion that they uncritically shared most of the foibles that, rightly or wrongly, are attributed to the Victorians. Such an opinion overlooks that quality of double awareness which we are now to investigate as the crux of the Victorian literary consciousness.

2. Victorian Poets

The Victorian poetry is divided in two main groups of poetry: The High Victorian Poetry and The Pre-Raphaelites. Dealing with the first group, “the major High Victorian poets were Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barret Browning, Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins.”

Queen Victoria’s reign made the idea of empire appear in poetry, and one of the poets who used it was Tennyson. For Robert Browning, the dramatic monologue was a great innovation, but Alfred Tennyson and Dante Rossetti invented and used it too (in the Pre-Raphaelites). “To be a dramatic monologue a poem must have a speaker and an implied auditor, and that the reader often perceives a gap between what that speaker says and what he or she actually reveals”, but there are some poets that does not agree with this last idea as Glenn Everett who “proposes that Browninesque dramatic monologue has three requirements (1. The reader takes the part of the listener. 2. The speaker uses a case-making, argumentative tone. 3. We complete the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination.)”. Elizabeth Barret Browning's poetry was important for the feminist literature because before her poetry there were not too much poetry about feminism. Matthew Arnold was “influenced by Wordsworth” and “often considered a
precursor of the modernist revolution.” And Hopkins wrote in an unusual style and influenced a lot of the 1940s' poets.

Victorian poetry does not have a topic in the poems about love and worship of Nature as the Romantics had in their poetry. It is because the Romantics loved Nature and it was shown through their poems adoring and blessing her as if she were God. But, in the Victorian poetry we have not found themes related to the topic of this paper, love and worship of Nature because the Victorians do not talk about her in their poetry. Therefore, we will not relate this topic with the Victorians, but we will talk about the Nature that the Victorian poets refer to in the descriptions of places in the poems and the love and worship of God in comparison with love and worship of Nature, Nature understood as part of God, created by Him, maybe as a personification of God himself in the Earth.

First of all, it can be mentioned that, the selection of poems has been made taking only the topic of this work into account and not the importance of the poem itself in the poet's poems. Then, we are going to show some of the poems of the most important High Victorian poets that refer to Nature or that have some aspects related with Nature.

The prominent poet of the Victorian age was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Although romantic in subject matter, his poetry was tempered by personal melancholy; in its mixture of social certitude and religious doubt it reflected the age. The poetry of Robert Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was immensely popular, though Elizabeth’s was more venerated during their lifetimes. Browning is best remembered for his superb dramatic monologues. Rudyard Kipling, the poet of the empire triumphant, captured the quality of
the life of the soldiers of British expansion. Some fine religious poetry was produced by Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell, Christina Rossetti, and Lionel Johnson.

In the middle of the 19th cent. the so-called Pre-Raphaelites, led by the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, sought to revive what they judged to be the simple, natural values and techniques of medieval life and art. Their quest for a rich symbolic art led them away, however, from the mainstream. William Morris—designer, inventor, printer, poet, and social philosopher—was the most versatile of the group, which included the poets Christina Rossetti and Coventry Patmore.

Algernon Charles Swinburne began as a Pre-Raphaelite but soon developed his own classically influenced, sometimes florid style. A. E. Housman and Thomas Hardy, Victorian figures who lived on into the 20th cent., share a pessimistic view in their poetry, but Housman's well-constructed verse is rather more superficial. The great innovator among the late Victorian poets was the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. The concentration and originality of his imagery, as well as his jolting meter ("sprung rhythm"), had a profound effect on 20th-century poetry.

When Victoria came on the throne of England in 1837, English literature seemed to have entered into a period of lean years. Only sweet memories and poetic fruitfulness by the Romantic poets were remained, while the poets had passed away. It seemed that no writer was there in England to fulfill their place. But later on we find that Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning have tried to fulfill that empty place. Let we have a little bit knowledge of the Victorian poets.
a. Lord Alfred Tennyson (1808-1892)

- Tennyson stood as the summit of poetry in England. For nearly half a century, he was not only a man, and a poet, but the voice of all people, expressing their doubt and faith, grief and triumphs. In his poetry we find:
  - Dreaminess of Spenser
  - Majesty of Milton
  - The natural simplicity of Wordsworth
  - The fantasy of Blake and Coleridge
  - The melody of Keats and Shelley
  - Narrative vigor of Byron

Only the dramatic power of the Elizabethan Age was lacking. In ‘Ulysses’ he has taken the subject of ‘hunger heart’ for the adventurous life. He writes,

> “And this gray spirit yearning in desire,

> To follow knowledge like a sinking star…”

His poem Locksley Hall (1842) is full of the restless spirit of “young England” and of its faith in science, commerce, and the progress of mankind. In The Princess the poet grapples with one of the rising questions of the day—that of the higher education of women and their place in the fast changing conditions of modern society. Maud deals with the patriotic passion of the time of the Crimean War and reflects the mammon worship of the day. It is a mono-drama. Idylls of the King deals with medieval machinery. It carries 12 poems. Though he was from an aristocratic family, he was profoundly interested in common
people and common things which we find in his poems like *The May Queen, Enoch Arden*, *Dora* etc. *Enoch Arden* deals with his theory of love after marriage. In *Crossing the Bar* we find the poets keen desire for the oneness with God where he writes,

“I hope to see my pilot Face to face When I have crost the Bar”

His other poems include *The Lady of Shalott, Break, Break, Break*. However is mainly famous for his *In Memoriam*. It is a collection of 131 poems. It deals with the great conflict of the age between doubt and faith. It is an elegy composed to many short lyrics. It also laments on death of his closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam. He had been awarded with the Chancellor’s Medal for his poem *Timbuctoo* at university. In 1850, he became poet-laureate to succeed Wordsworth. His often quoted line is from *Ulysses*,

“...To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.”

b. Robert Browning (1812-1889)

He was the lover of music. His famous poems are *A Toccato of Galuppi, The Last Rider Together, My Last Duchess, Rabbi Ben Ezpa, Fra Lippo Lippa, A Death to the Desert, Men and Women* (a collection of poems) etc. He was the supreme master of the Dramatic Monologue. He was an undying optimist, who said,

“God is in his Heaven,

All’s right with the world”

(Pippa Passes)
c. Matthew Arnold (1822-1883)

He is a poet cum critic. His famous poems are *Rugby Chapel*, *Thyris*, *Scholar Gypsy*, *Dover Beach*, *Soharab and Rustam*, *Shakespeare* (it is a sonnet), etc. *Thyris* is a great pastoralelegy and in this poem he mourns the death of his friend, Arthur Clough. *Rugby Chapel* is also his elegy in which he mourns the death of his father. *However, he is mainly famous for his essay (critical works) like, Culture and Anarchy, Literature and Dogma.*

d. Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1961)

He is famous for his poem *The City of Dreadful Night*. It deals with the note of insomnia and nightmarish pessimism. He believed that the appearance of progress was a mere illusion.

e. Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1888)

He is mainly famous for his verse translation of the Persian Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. His pessimism was inherent in his acceptance of the life’s purposelessness. His pessimism was the cause of his epicureanism. Wine, women and music were the chief objects of his pleasure in the life as he believed that the life was sort and may end at any moment.

The Pre-Raphaelite Poets

The Pre-Raphaelite was a movement. It was begun in 1848 by three painters in England including Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It aimed at a return to older principles in painting,
but as Rossetti and other followers like William Morris and Suinburne were also gifted writers, they aimed to bring about a change in literary manner as well.

3. Major Themes: an Overview

Many of the themes and meanings of Victorian poetry reflect a conflicted sense of self. At once many poems by Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning portray a longing for the ideals of the Romantic period in literature but they are stunted it seems by the unique period and its new use of language, the changing and ever-growing economy in the bustling city of London, and of course, the changing views of religion and its place in such a complex world. Through the poems from the Victorian era of both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Matthew Arnold, the recurrent themes of shifting religious ideas, language usage, and the economy are clear.

During the long reign of Elizabeth religious dissent was growing and the Church broke off into three distinct branches. This schism was also coupled with the fact that new discoveries were being made, most notably by the controversial theories of Darwin, but by other thinkers as well that argued for a more rational existence. Influenced by the works of Percy and Mary Shelley, Robert Browning already had atheistic ideas and although his feelings dissipated to some degree later in his life, his numerous criticisms of religion are obvious in his poem “Fra Lippo Lippi” in which he tells the tale, in the form of a narrative poem complete with slang and comedy, of a man that was not destined to be in the Church and chooses to heed his more physical impulses instead of conforming to the will of the Church. “Browning seems to be engaging in a dialogue with the Church regarding celibacy—both in the artistic and sexual sense.
The feelings of the poem’s narrator in “Fra Lippo Lippi” by Browning can easily be seen as Browning’s own critique and while the main theme concerns art, the strict sense in which the church views artistic pursuits and products is similar to the way it requires priests to live celibate lives. While the church’s main argument is that art should be presented as something “higher” than the base representation of the human form, this denies the essential humanity of the subject, God’s people. Along these same lines, the way the church frowns upon sexual, lustful activity on the part of its clergy by demanding celibacy is exactly the same request as for the artist. Both demands of the church, artistic and sexual are idealized conceptions of how humans should be represented and both, according to the narrator of the poem, are entirely unrealistic and misguided. Through this poem, Browning is arguing against mandatory celibacy for priests and is suggesting, through the story and artistic struggle of Fra Lippo Lippi, that the demands of the church go against human nature.

We are all, to use Browning’s word, “beasts” thus prone to the same desires that the church wishes to “rub out”. The narrator of this poem from the Victorian period argues that his life in cloister has been unnatural and restraining and bemoans the lack of life he is allowed to experience (although he obviously breaks the rules). The mandatory celibacy is made even more absurd when the Fra point out, “You should not take a fellow eight years old/ And make him swear to never kiss the girls” (224-25). Earlier in the poem, he speaks of this in terms of other boys that had been brought into cloister by openly saying, “Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici/ Have given their hearts to—all at eight years old” (100-101). He seems to see this celibacy as a terrible waste of youth and life—both of which he values above all else. He seeks to represent truth through art, despite the fact that everything in his life is geared towards a completely celibate existence—both in art, sexuality, and life. The story of his life can be summed up in the simple phrase on line 221, “Rub all out!’ Well,
well, there’s my life in short.” He has been told to extinguish the art and the humanity, thus the keen sexual desire that longs to be free. This goes against human nature—an idea that was taking firm root after the more scientific observations about the self and the natural world and thus religion is represented as the antithesis of all that is natural.

What is most interesting about this religious criticism in the Victorian era as seen in some of its poetry is that there is also a certain yearning for the old days of religious order. For example, in “Sonnets from the Portuguese” Elizabeth Barrett Browning bemoans her loss of faith when she equates her lover as something she cannot quite grasp, something that is far away but familiar, the “lost Saints” that once presided over her world. It is almost a romantic-era poem but in the last stanza, :I love thee freely, as men strive for right; / I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise” (43.8) then goes on... “I love thee with a love I seemed to lose / With my lost Saints” (43.13) and the general tone of the poem indicates that there is something missing and remote about the speaker’s existence. She is not quite connected with the world of God and Saints yet she is also not connected with the Romantic ideas from earlier poetry. In true Victorian style she seems unable to extricate religion from the picture, it is something she seems to yearn for, much like a lost or dead lover from glorious days gone by. The Introduction to Victorian puts it rather succinctly as “All of the Victorian poets show the strong influence of the Romantics, but they cannot sustain the confidence that the Romantics felt in the power of the imagination. Victorians often rewrite poems from the Romantic Movement with a sense of belatedness and distance” (1060). One cannot help but wonder if it is the “religion question” that is perturbing their brilliance or just a melancholy from the fast-paced, industrialized, modern world that had sprung up in this era.
Victorian poetry asks to be read with the ear. Its rhythms and rhymes demand our attention as patterns of sound moving in time. But is the achievement of the Victorian poets a matter or pure sound, or is there substance too? This course explores this contested question (and pursues some surprising answers) by close reading a selection of the most celebrated poets of the age.

Victorian poetry employs every established verse form in the English language and exploits every poetic subgenre, while refining upon some, such as the verse drama and pastoral elegy, and innovating others, such as the dramatic monologue. Newly minted and ‘native’ forms of the oldest vintage (Anglo-Saxon strong stress and alliterative patternings) also jostle with antique ‘foreign’ versification borrowed from Latin, Greek and late medieval French poetry. This course explores some of the poetic, political and philosophical ambitions that animate this prosodic variousness. More specifically, this course explores how and why it is that these diverse poetic forms so often ask to be read with the ear. The rhythms and rhymes of Victorian verse demand our attention as patterns of sound moving in time. But is the achievement of the Victorian poets a matter or pure sound, or is there substance too?

‘Fascinated as everybody must be by the music of his verse,’ writes John Morley of Swinburne, ‘it is doubtful whether part of the effect may not be traced to something like a trick of words and letters’. ‘Nay, he will write you a poem with nothing in it except music’, worries R H Horne, this time about Tennyson. Such comments are typical of the criticism that emerged in the Victorian period, and the same kinds of comments are still rehearsed by readers and critics today. But is it adequate to suggest that the ‘music’ of Victorian verse is self-evidently meaningless? We will consider this contested question (and pursue some surprising answers) by close reading a selection of the most celebrated poets of the age.
Five poets will be our primary focus, with a class dedicated to each: Alfred Tennyson; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Christina Rossetti; Algernon Charles Swinburne; Gerard Manley Hopkins. But three other poets will also be noted along the way: Robert Browning; Arthur Hugh Clough; Matthew Arnold.

Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina Rossetti embraced the transitional nature of Victorian poetry and explored traditional values in unconventional ways. The poems I will examine closely are: Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel,” and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” I will provide specific examples from the selected poems that go against Victorian attitudes about sexuality, gender and religion. Victorian England was a society controlled by strict codes of conduct, but even within these confines writers and artists of the age found original ways to talk about divisive subjects. My analysis will include alternative interpretations of the selected poems to further illustrate the complexity of layering and duality in the Victorian era.

Interpreting poetry on multiple levels is difficult for modern readers because singularity and stability are important attributes to modernity. The Victorian era was a time of transition and uncertainty. I have selected poems that exemplify the changing attitudes and expectations of a newly literate public. I will connect these sources in terms of their poetic form as well as the controversial content of each. It is my hope that readers of poetry attempt to gain a sense of each poet’s unique biography through close examination of their work combined with a fundamental knowledge of the society at that time. I will use direct quotes from the work as a base and explore possibilities for interpretation by thinking imaginatively about the structure of Victorian society.
Writers were more able to talk about taboo subjects with an ever-growing economy of words and the innovations in print technology created the possibility for a large, diverse reading market. Writers were able to publish wildly imaginative and disturbing pieces that contained multiple and conflicting meanings. I will explore each poet’s identity as an “other” within the poetic community and consider imaginative contemporary and modern interpretations. Each of these poets wrote during a time of rapid social and artistic transformation in an era where the means of producing literature were more readily available than they had ever been before.

A popular image during the Victorian period was that of young girls with golden locks. These girls were corrupted by murderous lovers, tempted by forbidden goblin fruits and looked down on lost lovers from heaven in poems of the time. The color and quality of a woman’s hair was an indicator of her social station. Fair hair was also a marker for morality because as with all things Victorian, the exterior reflected the interior and appearance said more about you than anything else. The poetry and artwork of the period suggest a preoccupation with women’s beauty. Victorian imaginations believed that physical beauty had the power to ensnare a lover; that is evident in the theme of strangulation found in several poems. The fact that the image of golden hair comes up again and again is not a coincidence; everything about the Victorians relied on image and the image of the curious blonde represented Victorian fears of corruption and the loss of innocence.

Browning is often credited with the mastery of the dramatic monologue, a form that allowed him to explore the unique psychologies of his numerous narrators. Browning’s exploitation of sexuality through manic narrators directly influenced Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s representation of the Damozel in his unconventional vision of heaven. Rossetti
presents controversial views regarding the duality of the body and soul in his poem, “The Blessed Damozel” and its complementary painting.

The vision of the departed lover seems more substantial than her spirit alone, her body’s presence is felt in the weight of her warm bosom and in the splashing of salty tears which are disheartening to a Christian audience who would view existence in heaven far better than life on earth. Both Browning and Rossetti created dramatic monologues with a dead woman at their center. The similarities in imagery further stress the objectification of women. By focusing on dead (or dying) women narrators are able to use them “as objects of desire without fear that their paradoxical dead/alive sexuality could be made operative” (Maynard 552). The male poets I have selected would have been seen as more progressive in their time because the main issue was the treatment of Christianity in their work.

In “Body’s Beauty” Rossetti inverts Browning’s violent image of Porphyria’s strangulation by wrapping the hair around the heart of Lilith’s love interest: “Lo! as that youth’s eyes burned at thine, so went / Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent / And round his heart one strangling golden hair” (Rossetti 12-14). Lilith herself is portrayed as a blonde predator, a femme-fatale whose beauty and vanity shrivels men in her ensnaring web:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{That, ere the snake’s, her sweet tongue could deceive,} \\
\text{And her enchanted hair was the first gold.} \\
\text{And still she sits, young while the earth is old,} \\
\text{And, subtly of herself contemplative,} \\
\text{Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,} \\
\text{Till heart and beauty and life are in its hold. (Rossetti 3-8)}
\end{align*}
\]
The disturbing quality in this poem is that Lilith is animated from the outside in and her outer beauty does not correspond to what lurks underneath. This poem presents yet another less than positive representation of Victorian women.

Christina Rossetti provides a female voice on the subject of religion and offers commentary on the position of women in a male-driven economy in “Goblin Market.” The poem is a response to the needs of the “fallen women” of Victorian society and a cautionary tale for daughters of the dangerous Victorian age. Laura, the curious sister, is tempted to “clip a precious golden lock” (Rossetti 126) in order to taste the fruit she desires. Rossetti makes it clear to her audience that even someone who has made a mistake can be redeemed by a righteous person. It is perhaps because Rossetti remains steadfast in her own Christian convictions that readers were able to look past the violence and sexuality brimming from the poem.

Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti twisted traditional values such as love and religion slightly to fit into their own poetic world. Browning is the poet whose work was perhaps the least known of the three poets; in his time Browning may have been better known for being the significant other of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning’s narrators often transform women into “alluring objects of desire” which renders them “speechless, unable to speak their culturally confused desire” (Maynard 552). Interpretations of the violent actions of the narrator in “Porphyria’s Lover” range from murder to masturbation. The narrator claims that Porphyria worships him. This gives him the proof he needs to enact her will to “belong” to him forever.
Browning does more than simply evoke the traditional image of a pure young woman; he murders her: “I found / A think to do, and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her” (Browning 37-41). The narrator then proceeds to mention the absence of God and the fact that his deed has gone unpunished: “And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word” (Browning 58-60). This ending offers commentary on the growing skepticism of religion due to advancements in science and technology in the nineteenth century.

Other possible interpretations of “Porphyria’s Lover” exist in the context of Browning’s contemporaries and our own time. Modern interpretations become apparent when considering the origin of Porphyria’s name, the narcissistic personality of the narrator as well as the nature of a man’s anatomy. The narrator cares only about pleasing himself; a quality that suggests the young and beautiful Porphyria may actually be his own appendage and not a woman. He is able to derive pleasure only on his own terms after the strangling is complete. He must fantasize about a woman (which could be a female projection of himself considering his daunting vanity) in order to achieve orgasm. Given the conservative views of sexuality during the period this poem remains vague enough to offer several distinct possibilities for interpretation.

E. D. H. Johnson teaches a course in Victorian literature at Princeton and discusses the marketability of Victorian poets and explores that ways they were able to push certain boundaries and innovate the forms and content of poetry. Most people consider Victorians obsessed with social conformity but the age was also a time of growth in alternative
literature. Johnson disputes overly simplistic views of Victorian readership by stating that writers like Browning had to appeal to a large and diverse reading public:

Browning’s conviction that the passionate intensity of romantic love is incompatible with conventional social morality leads him to glorify one at the expense of the other. That perennial theme, the world well lost for love, is so appealing that Victorian readers in their sentimentality were apparently willing to overlook its frequent anti-social corollary in Browning’s poetry, where the decision to give all for love more often than not involves some course of action at variance with established codes of conduct. (Johnson 103).

It is possible to read Browning into some of his narrators while others appear completely insane. This makes Browning innovative in another way, “By motivating the actors in his dramas with his own ideas and impulses, Browning could speak out with greater originality and boldness than would ever have been possible in his own person” (Johnson 92). While some of these readers may have considered Browning’s deviant themes proof of his own mental instability and “otherness” many recognized a split between Browning’s own beliefs and those of his demented narrators.

Most of Browning’s dramatic monologues deal with the conflict between the individual and their environment which is made evident in “Porphyria’s Lover” when the narrator casts his own emotions on his surroundings: “The sullen wind was soon awake, / It tore the elm-tops down for spite, / And did its worst to vex the lake” (Browning 2-4). This mirrors the way the narrator projects his own desires onto the young woman he objectifies. Browning explores the location of power in society and says things through his disturbed characters that he could never say if he wrote exclusively from his own persona. Browning’s
poetry was accepted by mainstream Victorian society in a similar way that “sensational” novels were devoured by housewives. Johnson commends Browning for exploring the dark side of love, “a subject which he handles with greater candor and penetration than any other poet of the early and mid-Victorian periods” (Johnson 100). Critics of Browning’s abnormal themes and imagery accused him of “contaminating” the poetic world; similarly, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was chastised for blending conventional Christian philosophy with earthly imagery.

The main focus of “The Blessed Damozel” is the duality of the body and soul. His description of the Damozel and his framing of heaven are at odds with traditional Christian views. Rossetti places emphasis on the eyes of his characters which were considered windows to the soul, “The blessed damozel leaned out / From the gold bar of Heaven; / Her eyes were deeper than the depth / Of waters stilled at even” (Rossetti 1-4). This structure (in the poem as well as in the accompanying painting) suggests that Rossetti’s intention was for the reader and viewer to consider these scenes occurring simultaneously as well. Victorians were outraged by the union of the body and soul because they considered them to be separate concerns with more importance resting on the soul.

John Maynard discusses all three poets and their position on sexuality and states that Rossetti’s poems “confuse himself as well as his readers with their mixture of religious and sexual language, uncomfortable moving between sensuality and religious epiphany in two directions at once, as if to sacralize sexuality while also sexualizing religion” (Maynard 562). Rossetti’s poem exposes a Victorian preoccupation with love and sex in heaven. This fascination proves that while Victorian’s didn’t always view sexuality in the same way as
modern society does it nonetheless was thinking about sex; even if it was whether or not it was appropriate when and for whom.

Rossetti’s favored the temporal over the everlasting and corrupts traditional Christian views. Rossetti contemplated human existence and found that although it was often disappointing it was possible to “transcend these limitations of the human condition, expressed sometimes as a…longing for the union of lovers” (Howard 196). Death was highly romanticized in the era proceeding the Victorians and so it retained much power in the minds of readers who could identify with the unbearable gap between heaven and earth:

The poem’s real success lies in the intersecting dramatic monologues of the speaker and his envisioned damozel, and its real concern is not with a depiction of the Christian heaven, but with the apparently unbridgeable gulf that separated the heavenly maiden and the earthly lover. (Riede 23)

Readers were able to easily identify with “The Blessed Damozel” due to the narrative quality of the poem. David G. Riede suggests that the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning strongly influenced Rossetti’s poem. He points out that even in the earliest versions the poem emphasized human love in opposition to spiritual love and represented a merging of the two worlds momentarily. “The Blessed Damozel” does not try to exploit the Christian view of heaven but attempts to make the Christian imagery more secular so that readers are presented with “a kind of medieval painting with two levels, a heavenly one and an earthly one… Thus the narrator can report two vastly separated but simultaneous scenes” (Howard 44). The revisions of Rossetti’s poems show a shift in his personal beliefs as well as an editorial attitude towards his collection of work.
Robert Buchanan was an opponent of Rossetti’s work and the “fleshly school of poetry,” a term he coined for the Pre-Raphaelites. Riede calls Buchanan’s attack “silly in its priggishness” but admits “that Rossetti’s overt eroticism claimed for art the right to speak of matters generally under taboo in Victorian society” (Riede 319). Buchanan politicized Rossetti’s work and opened it up for discourse among members of the poetic community. He feared that Rossetti’s work would become the “norm” and that all poetry would become infected with “otherness.” Rossetti was simply portraying the way he viewed the world, a vision that conflicted with traditional critics like Buchanan who had strict limitations of what they would consider art.

“The Blessed Damozel” may be considered the first Pre-Raphaelite poem and is also one of Rossetti’s most known works. Unfortunately Buchanan’s criticisms had a lasting effect on Rossetti’s mental stability and caused a “general decline in the 1870’s, but it also clearly established the terms by which Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism challenged Victorian beliefs” (Riede 319). Buchanan’s attacks were a failure in because instead of stifling Rossetti and his “fleshly” peers it legitimized their poetry in the realm of art, whether Victorians found it to be distasteful or not.

Christina Rossetti was viewed as much more conventional as a result of her “piety” which “fitted the prevailing belief of the age and made her rather less ‘counter-cultural’ or avant-garde than her brother and other Pre-Raphaelite poets” (Riede 312). Her fairy tale, “Goblin Market,” is contains sexually charged imagery and a blending of religious and economic themes. This “erotic” quality despite clearly religious references in her poems caused her to be “perceived by contemporaries as sharing the Pre-Raphaelite tone and aesthetic values” (Riede 312). Rossetti challenged the status of women in her society and
commented on the shifting position of women within the writing world. She frames her poem in a much different way than her brother by transforming a dark morality tale into a children’s story.

As a female poet, Christina Rossetti spoke about issues that had rarely been addressed in poetry, the “highest” form of writing of which men were mostly in control. Society decided what type of writers could contribute and what topics were appropriate in each literary form. When a Victorian woman “leaves her domestic sphere and strives to be a consumer in an area where she lacks bargaining power, [she] always risks being consumed” (Maxwell 88). Laura consumes the fruit given to her in exchange for her “golden curl” and is nearly consumed by her desire to taste the goblin fruits a second time. Laura’s sister Lizzie confronts the goblins and attempts to purchase the fruits with a penny, not for herself but in order to save Laura.

John Maynard has published essays and articles on Christina Rossetti, D. G. Rossetti and Robert Browning, in a section of A Companion to Victorian Poetry. He discusses Christina Rossetti’s poem in the context of Victorian’s changing attitudes about sexuality and love. Modern readers of “Goblin Market” might be able to substantiate an incestuous or lesbian relationship between the two sisters if they are not careful to analyze the poem in the context of the repressed sexuality of the period which didn’t have such terms readily available. Same-sex relationships discussed in Victorian literature were much more open to interpretation due to the lack of labels for such relationships.

Likewise Rossetti herself is often classified as a lesbian by modern readers due to her lack of success in love with the opposite sex. Maynard argues that the violent sexual
encounter Lizzie has with the goblin men is the “sexual center of a poem that discards the ordinary sensuous attractions of men and only lightly praises themes of domesticity and procreation at the end” (Maynard 556). As we discussed in class the goblins were considered “others”; creatures outside of respectable Victorian society. In addition to the general fear of the corruption by the “other” came a division between secular and religious interpretations of sexuality.

Religion is emphasized in “Goblin Market” when Laura, a “fallen woman,” is “redeemed” by her sister Lizzie, a Christ-like figure. This is illustrated by Christina Rossetti’s use of traditional religious imagery in the poem; Lizzie stands “White and golden...Like a lily in a flood” (Rossetti 108-09). She allows herself to be “consumed” by the “others” in order to attain the juices of the fruit to revive her sister. Rossetti ends the tale on a strange note using the distancing device of time to lessen the horror of the goblin attack and to reconcile the sisters in their domestic home life to please Christian readers who are deeply concerned with Laura’s redemption.

It is this Christian overtone that excuses the violent rape of Lizzie by the goblin men. Rossetti frames this social commentary on sexuality within the context of a children’s story; a practice that was used frequently in the Victorian era. I was curious as to why Rossetti’s violent “rape” scene wasn’t censored; especially considering it was a work intended for children. Wealthy Victorian children were able to spend much of their leisure time reading. Reading was often considered a dangerous threat to the status quo and a gateway for children to step out of the reality of society and into the realm of their imaginations.
Catherine Maxwell has published several articles on Robert Browning and Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and offers a feminist perspective on Christina Rossetti’s place in the writing world. Her analysis considers the economic and literary marketplace as well as the disadvantages women writers had especially in the area of poetry. Maxwell examines the disadvantages of women in Victorian society through analysis of multiple meanings of “consumption” in “Goblin Market”.

In the Victorian age poetry was still considered “an art for the few, not for the many” (Maynard 558). The few generally still meant wealthy white men but more and more women were daring to cross over into more “serious” literature. This explains why male poets Robert Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were allowed to explore more controversial imagery and themes in their poetry than Christina Rossetti. Other readers interpret the fruit as not just tempting food but literally “literary produce”. The sisters in the poem as well as the poet must partake of the (male) goblin’s offerings, “male-owned or male-identified texts” (Maxwell 81). Rossetti was one of the earliest successful female poets and so in order to assume her position in the writing world she had to draw upon the works that had come before her in order to tap into the Victorian consciousness. She uses images from works that influenced her and most of those works were written by her male predecessors:

Rossetti’s poem reveals that women cannot enter this tradition on the same footing as men, any more than they can compete with men on equal terms in the mid-Victorian marketplace. Yet is also suggests that female interaction with the male tradition, however complicated and risky, is inevitable. Although the goblins are presented as dangerous
creatures to be outwitted and escaped, they also give this poem its motivating energy.

(Maxwell 84)

Victorian women are at a disadvantage because they “appear to lack the credentials, the means and authority” for an easy transition into the “literary marketplace” (Maxwell 88). The idea that female poets must “consume” the fruits laid down before them by their male predecessors is only one way in which critics use the term “consumption” to describe Rossetti’s commentary on society.

Maxwell discusses “fallen women” in Victorian society in relation to the examples Rossetti constructs in “Goblin Market.” Views of the poem often center around “historical assumptions about the poet’s religious beliefs and gender ideology” (Maxwell 77) as well as our own modern persuasions concerning gender and sexuality. “Goblin Market” is an important text due to its role in establishing a “female tradition” but since that tradition relies upon the already established “male tradition” Rossetti’s “treatment of the problems of equal exchange between men and women in the mid-Victorian period recognizes the need to explore and transform their relationships with men” (Maxwell 79). The goblin men may be viewed as simply men or as “others” depending upon the issue being considered. In a way Lizzie and Laura are pioneers that venture to the “marketplace” which is dominated by male influence and can only rely upon each other.

The female body is offered up by the “fallen woman” as an object to be consumed. There is further symbolism when considering the place of fruit in the Christian creation myth and the role of women in the loss of paradise. When Eve is tempted into eating the “forbidden” fruit she is cast out of Eden, cast out of the economy and like the “fallen
woman” is devalued. It is an image that has colored societies perception of females and perhaps the origin of inequality in gender politics. Rossetti gives us a cautionary tale with a twist at the end; two types of women can survive in the marketplace if they work together.

Male poets of the time were becoming mindful of the change in representations of gender and sexuality and used controversial images to shock religious audiences. When viewing “Porphyria’s Lover” in a modern context it is easy to produce “sexist” interpretations as a result of the “objectification” of women. It is essential that readers limit their inherently modern perspectives of gender roles and remain open to multiple layers of meaning. Ethnocentric readings of works are not helpful for gaining an understanding of that work’s relevance during the time it was written. All of the poets I discussed used themes and imagery that were at odds with strong artistic guidelines that existed during the Victorian era.

Readers of poetry must keep the time in which the work was written ever-present in their minds because the meanings of words, images and themes can drastically change over time. Victorians were preoccupied with time: leisure time, time travel, daily routines that operated within strict social structures. Browning’s narrator wanted to possess Porphyria’s undying love forever so he kills her in a moment of perfection. Dante Gabriel Rossetti examines the gap between the spiritual and physical realm and the bridge that separates time on earth from eternity in heaven. He also hints at established social customs surrounding death and exposes Victorian’s wishes to travel to a better place, be it heaven or a faraway fantasy world. Christina Rossetti shows how unhealthy obsessions can destroy a life in a short amount of time and how distance can make even a horrible reality a good opportunity for a didactic lesson. It is this preoccupation with time that gives a new
profound meaning to youth and an obsessive fear of death which began in the Victorian era and has developed further in our own age.

Victorians were well on their way to modern ways with innovations in technology and ever-increasing disparities between social classes. Several distinctions are clear immediately: their dress, their working conditions and requirements, their speech, their looks and their reading material. Women and children were most targeted as readers of “lower quality” material while “high arts” were male oriented. Women assumed new roles in society as both the “objects” of male desires and the writers of their own fantasies. Modern perspectives of sexuality allow us to project terms like masturbation and lesbianism onto the text even before the terms for those behaviors were coined.

Culture was changing in the Victorian era and its technologies were solidifying and standardizing its language and customs at an alarming rate. We are provided with images from the period, some of which reinforce the stereotypes we have long since associated with Victorians and those that paint a different picture. The women in the poems and paintings may seem one-dimensional but women themselves began to formulate their own opinions, assert their own beliefs and write their own fairytales where they can redeem themselves instead of waiting for a “prince” to do it for them. Women’s view of themselves was not perfect and society still presented unrealistic and distorted images of what girls and women could be, but so does every age, including our own.

Our interpretations of Victorian work is just that, our own thoughts projected on the textual evidence. While I have presented numerous approaches to each poem “None can assure us that we are really getting beyond our own discourses and obsessions and finding
Victorian life or poetry as it truly was” (Maynard 543-66). History is one group's interpretation of textual evidence transmitted over a certain period of time and history has the ability to change depending on who is telling it. I have thought imaginatively about the physical poems, the actual evidence and interpreted their meaning by comparing my personal understanding with that of knowledgeable and not so knowledgeable critics who reflect their own times in their positions.

4. Study Questions

- “Victorian poetry demonstrates a clear break with the optimistic pantheism of the Romantics.” Do you agree?
- Is Victorian poetry, in your view, "essentially neo-Romantic" poetry? Answer with reference to the work of TWO such poets.
- Would you agree that “satire enjoys a resurgence in Victorian poetry”? Answer with reference to the work of TWO of the following poets: Tennyson, Robert Browning, Arnold, Hardy, and Hopkins.
- "A harbinger of Modernism? More likely the last hurrah of Romanticism." Do you agree with this assessment of Hopkins’ poetry?
- Does the adjective ‘Victorian’ denote a distinctive kind of poetry? Answer with reference to the work of ONE Romantic poet and ONE of the following poets: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Hardy.
- With close reference to the work of TWO Victorian poets, critically assess the representation of the black and/or female voice in poetry.
- Consider the dialectic of tradition and innovation in Victorian poetry with reference to the work of two of the following poets:
Tennyson, Robert Browning, Hopkins.

- "Are God and Nature then at strife?" Tennyson asks. To what degree does In Memoriam constitute a profound questioning of Wordsworth’s optimistic pantheism?
- Compare Robert Browning’s use of the dramatic monologue with Coleridge’s achievement in his so-called ‘conversation poems.’
- "His poetry oscillates in an almost Blakean way between the optimism that accompanies innocence and a pessimism that is the product of experience." Discuss this assessment of Hopkins’s poetry.
- Literary historians often draw a clear line between the Romantic and Victorian periods. Referring closely to the work of one Victorian poet which you have studied, show how such a clear-cut distinction may be questioned.
- "A moving personal record of Tennyson’s psychological recovery from grief and the regeneration of his religious faith." Do you agree with this assessment of In Memoriam?
- Examine Browning’s use of the dramatic monologue.

5. Bibliography

6. Suggested Readings


