

## **Paper-XIII: Unit 1**

### **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 intransigence 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 transcendently 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 signaled 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 a *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 us 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*, *Thyrsis*, *Scholar Gypsy*, *Dover Beach*, *Sohrab and Rustam*, *Shakespeare* (it is a sonnet), etc. *Thyrsis* is a great pastorelegy 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 pictureanism. Wine, women and music were the chief objects of his pleasure in the life as he believed that the life was short 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 Swinburne 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 Lipp 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 of 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 of 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:

*That, ere the snake’s, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
Till heart and beauty and life are in its hold. (Rossetti 3-8)*



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 Victorians 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 preceding 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 it 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.

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## Paper-XIII: Unit 2

### Tennyson's In Memoriam (Sections 7, 35, 50, 96)

#### Contents

1. Introduction to the Poet
2. Introduction to the Poem
3. Analysis of the Poem
4. Study Questions
5. Suggestions for Further Reading
6. Bibliography

#### STRUCTURE

##### 1. Introduction to the Poet

More than any other Victorian writer, Tennyson has seemed the embodiment of his age, both to his contemporaries and to modern readers. In his own day he was said to be— with Queen Victoria and Gladstone—one of the three most famous living persons, a reputation no other poet writing in English has ever had. As official poetic spokesman for the reign of Victoria, he felt called upon to celebrate a quickly changing industrial and mercantile world with which he felt little in common, for his deepest sympathies were called forth by an unaltered rural England; the conflict between what he thought of as his duty to society and his allegiance to the eternal beauty of nature seems peculiarly Victorian. Even his most severe critics have always recognized his lyric gift for sound and cadence, a

gift probably unequaled in the history of English poetry, but one so absolute that it has sometimes been mistaken for mere facility.

The lurid history of Tennyson's family is interesting in itself, but some knowledge of it is also essential for understanding the recurrence in his poetry of themes of madness, murder, avarice, miserliness, social climbing, marriages arranged for profit instead of love, and estrangements between families and friends.

### **Early Life**

Alfred Tennyson was born in the depths of Lincolnshire, the fourth son of the twelve children of the rector of Somersby, George Clayton Tennyson, a cultivated but embittered clergyman who took out his disappointment on his wife Elizabeth and his brood of children—on at least one occasion threatening to kill Alfred's elder brother Frederick. The rector had been pushed into the church by his own father, also named George, a rich and ambitious country solicitor intent on founding a great family dynasty that would rise above their modest origins into a place among the English aristocracy.

Part of the family heritage was a strain of epilepsy, a disease then thought to be brought on by sexual excess and therefore shameful. It was in part to escape from the unhappy environment of Somersby rectory that Alfred began writing poetry long before he was sent to school, as did most of his talented brothers and sisters. All his life he used writing as a way of taking his mind from his troubles. One peculiar aspect of his method of composition was set, too, while he was still a boy: he would make up phrases or discrete lines as he walked, and store them in his memory until he had a proper setting for them. As

this practice suggests, his primary consideration was more often rhythm and language than discursive meaning.

### **Writing Poetry**

When he was not quite eighteen his first volume of poetry, *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827), was published. Alfred Tennyson wrote the major part of the volume, although it also contained poems by his two elder brothers, Frederick and Charles. It is a remarkable book for so young a poet, displaying great virtuosity of versification and the prodigality of imagery that was to mark his later works; but it is also derivative in its ideas, many of which came from his reading in his father's library. Few copies were sold, and there were only two brief reviews, but its publication confirmed Tennyson's determination to devote his life to poetry.

Most of Tennyson's early education was under the direction of his father, although he spent nearly four unhappy years at a nearby grammar school. His departure in 1827 to join his elder brothers at Trinity College, Cambridge, was due more to a desire to escape from Somersby than to a desire to undertake serious academic work. At Trinity he was living for the first time among young men of his own age who knew little of the problems that had beset him for so long; he was delighted to make new friends; he was extraordinarily handsome, intelligent, humorous, and gifted at impersonation; and soon he was at the center of an admiring group of young men interested in poetry and conversation. It was probably the happiest period of his life.

In part it was the urging of his friends, in part the insistence of his father that led the normally indolent Tennyson to retailor an old poem on the subject of Armageddon and

submit it in the competition for the chancellor's gold medal for poetry; the announced subject was Timbuctoo. Tennyson's "Timbuctoo" is a strange poem, as the process of its creation would suggest. He uses the legendary city for a consideration of the relative validity of imagination and objective reality; Timbuctoo takes its magic from the mind of man, but it can turn to dust at the touch of the mundane. It is far from a successful poem, but it shows how deeply engaged its author was with the Romantic conception of poetry. Whatever its shortcomings, it won the chancellor's prize in the summer of 1829.

### **Friendship with Hallam**

Probably more important than its success in the competition was the fact that the submission of the poem brought Tennyson into contact with the Trinity undergraduate usually regarded as the most brilliant man of his Cambridge generation, Arthur Henry Hallam. This was the beginning of four years of warm friendship between the two men, in some ways the most intense emotional experience of Tennyson's life. Despite the too knowing skepticism of the twentieth century about such matters, it is almost certain that there was nothing homosexual about the friendship: definitely not on a conscious level and probably not on any other. Indeed, it was surely the very absence of such overtones that made the warmth of their feelings acceptable to both men, and allowed them to express those feelings so freely.

Also in 1829 both Hallam and Tennyson became members of the secret society known as the Apostles, a group of roughly a dozen undergraduates who were usually regarded as the elite of the entire university. Tennyson's name has ever since been linked with the society, but the truth is that he dropped out of it after only a few meetings, although he retained his closeness with the other members and might even be said to have

remained the poetic center of the group. The affection and acceptance he felt from his friends brought both a new warmth to Tennyson's personality and an increasing sensuousness to the poetry he was constantly writing when he was supposed to be devoting his time to his studies.

Hallam, too, wrote poetry, and the two friends planned on having their work published together; but at the last moment Hallam's father, perhaps worried by some lyrics Arthur had written to a young lady with whom he had been in love, forbade him to include his poems. *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* appeared in June 1830. The standard of the poems in the volume is uneven, and it has the self-centered, introspective quality that one might expect of the work of a twenty-year-old; but scattered among the other poems that would be forgotten if they had been written by someone else are several fine ones such as "The Kraken," "Ode to Memory," and--above all--"Mariana," which is the first of Tennyson's works to demonstrate fully his brilliant use of objects and landscapes to convey a state of strong emotion. That poem alone would be enough to justify the entire volume.

The reviews appeared slowly, but they were generally favorable. Both Tennyson and Hallam thought they should have come out more quickly, however, and Hallam reviewed the volume himself in the *Englishman's Magazine*, making up in his critical enthusiasm for having dropped out of being published with his friend.

The friendship between the young men was knotted even more tightly when Hallam fell in love with Tennyson's younger sister, Emily, while on a visit to Somersby. Since they were both so young, there was no chance of their marrying for some time, and meanwhile Hallam had to finish his undergraduate years at Trinity. All the Tennyson brothers and sisters, as well as their mother, seem to have taken instantly to Hallam, but he and Emily

prudently said nothing of their love to either of their fathers. Dr. Tennyson was absent on the Continent most of the time, sent there by his father and his brother in the hope that he might get over his drinking and manage Somersby parish sensibly. Arthur's father, the distinguished historian Henry Hallam, had plans for his son that did not include marriage to the daughter of an obscure and alcoholic country clergyman.

In the summer of 1830 Tennyson and Hallam were involved in a harebrained scheme to take money and secret messages to revolutionaries plotting the overthrow of the Spanish king. Tennyson's political enthusiasm was considerably cooler than Hallam's, but he was glad to make his first trip abroad. They went through France to the Pyrenees, meeting the revolutionaries at the Spanish border. Even Hallam's idealistic fervor scarcely survived the disillusionment of realizing that the men they met were animated by motives as selfish as those of the royalist party against whom they were rebelling. Nonetheless, in the Pyrenees Tennyson marked out a new dimension of the metaphorical landscape that had already shown itself in "Mariana," and for the rest of his life the mountains remained as a model for the classical scenery that so often formed the backdrop of his poetry. The Pyrenees generated such marvelous poems as "Oenone," which he began writing there; "The Lotos-Eaters," which was inspired by a waterfall in the mountains; and "The Eagle," which was born from the sight of the great birds circling above them as they climbed in the rocks. Above all, the little village of Cauteretz and the valley in which it lay remained more emotionally charged for Tennyson than any other place on earth. He came again and again to walk in the valley, and it provided him with imagery until his death more than sixty years later.

Early the following year Tennyson had to leave Cambridge because of the death of his father. Dr. Tennyson had totally deteriorated mentally and physically, and he left little but debts to his family, although he had enjoyed a good income and a large allowance from his father. Tennyson's grandfather naturally felt that it was hardly worth his while to keep Alfred and his two elder brothers at Cambridge when it was only too apparent that they were profiting little from their studies and showed no promise of ever being able to support themselves. The allowance he gave the family was generous enough, but it was not intended to support three idle grandsons at the university. Worse still, neither he nor Dr. Tennyson's brother Charles, who was now clearly marked out as the heir to his fortune, attended the rector's funeral, making the division in the family even more apparent. The widow and her eleven children were so improvident that they seemed incapable of living on the allowance, and they were certainly not able to support themselves otherwise.

This began a very bitter period of Tennyson's life. An annual gift of £100 from an aunt allowed him to live in a modest manner, but he refused his grandfather's offer to help him find a place in the church if he would be ordained. Tennyson said then, as he said all his life, that poetry was to be his career, however bleak the prospect of his ever earning a living. His third volume of poetry was published at the end of 1832, although the title page was dated 1833.

The 1832 *Poems* was a great step forward poetically and included the first versions of some of Tennyson's greatest works, such as "The Lady of Shalott," "The Palace of Art," "A Dream of Fair Women," "The Hesperides," and three wonderful poems conceived in the Pyrenees, "Oenone," "The Lotos-Eaters," and "Mariana in the South." The volume is notable for its consideration of the opposed attractions of isolated poetic creativity and social

involvement; the former usually turns out to be the more attractive course, since it reflected Tennyson's own concerns, but the poems demonstrate as well his feeling of estrangement in being cut off from his contemporaries by the demands of his art.

The reviews of the volume were almost universally damning. One of the worst was written by Edward Bulwer (later Bulwer-Lytton), who was a friend of Tennyson's uncle Charles. The most vicious review, however, was written for the *Quarterly Review* by John Wilson Croker, who was proud that his brutal notice of "Endymion" years before was said to have been one of the chief causes of the death of Keats. Croker numbered Tennyson among the Cockney poets who imitated Keats, and he made veiled insinuations about the lack of masculinity of both Tennyson and his poems. Tennyson, who was abnormally thin-skinned about criticism, found some comfort in the steady affection and support of Hallam and the other Apostles.

Hallam and Emily Tennyson had by then made their engagement public knowledge, but they saw no way of marrying for a long time: the senior Hallam refused to increase his son's allowance sufficiently to support both of them; and when Arthur wrote to Emily's grandfather, he was answered in the third person with the indication that old Mr. Tennyson had no intention of giving them any more money. By the summer of 1833, Hallam's father had somewhat grudgingly accepted the engagement, but still without offering further financial help. The protracted unhappiness of both Arthur and Emily rubbed off on the whole Tennyson family.

That autumn, in what was meant as a gesture of gratitude and reconciliation to his father, Arthur Hallam accompanied him to the Continent. In Vienna Arthur died suddenly of apoplexy resulting from a congenital malformation of the brain. Emily Tennyson fell ill for



nearly a year; the effects of Hallam's death were less apparent externally in Alfred but were perhaps even more catastrophic than for his sister.

The combination of the deaths of his father and his best friend, the brutal reviews of his poems, his conviction that both he and his family were in desperate poverty, his feelings of isolation in the depths of the country, and his ill-concealed fears that he might become a victim of epilepsy, madness, alcohol, and drugs, as others in his family had, or even that he might die like Hallam, was more than enough to upset the always fragile balance of Tennyson's emotions. "I suffered what seemed to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live," he said of that period. For a time he determined to leave England, and for ten years he refused to have any of his poetry published, since he was convinced that the world had no place for it.

Although he was adamant about not having it published, Tennyson continued to write poetry; and he did so even more single-mindedly than before. Hallam's death nearly crushed him, but it also provided the stimulus for a great outburst of some of the finest poems he ever wrote, many of them connected overtly or implicitly with the loss of his friend. "Ulysses," "Morte d'Arthur," "Tithonus," "Tiresias," "Break, break, break," and "Oh! that 'twere possible" all owe their inception to the passion of grief he felt but carefully hid from his intimates. Most important was the group of random individual poems he began writing about Hallam's death and his own feeling of loneliness in the universe as a result of it; the first of these "elegies," written in four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter, was begun within two or three days of his hearing the news of Hallam's death. He continued to write them for seventeen years before collecting them to form what is perhaps the greatest of Victorian poems, *In Memoriam* (1850).

The details of Tennyson's romantic attachments in the years after Hallam's death are unclear, but he apparently had at least a flirtation with Rosa Baring, the pretty young daughter of a great banking family, some of whose members had rented Harrington Hall, a large house near Somersby. Tennyson wrote a dozen or so poems to her, but it is improbable that his affections were deeply involved. The poems suggest that her position made it impossible for him to be a serious suitor to her, but she may have been more important to him as a symbol of wealth and unavailability than as a flesh-and-blood young woman. Certainly, he seems not to have been crushed when she married another man.

In 1836, however, at the age of twenty-seven, Tennyson became seriously involved with Emily Sellwood, who was four years younger than he. By the following year they considered themselves engaged. Emily had been a friend of Tennyson's sisters, and one of her own sisters married his next older (and favorite) brother, Charles. Most of the correspondence between Tennyson and Emily has been destroyed, but from what remains it is clear that she was very much in love with him, although he apparently withheld himself somewhat in spite of his affection for her. He was worried about not having enough money to marry, but he seems also to have been much concerned with the trances into which he was still falling, which he thought were connected with the epilepsy from which other members of the family suffered. To marry, he thought, would mean passing on the disease to any children he might father.

In the summer of 1840 Tennyson broke off all relations with Emily. She continued to think of herself as engaged to him, but he abandoned any hope of marriage, either then or in the future. To spare her further embarrassment, the story was put out that her father had

forbidden their marriage because of Tennyson's poverty; this legend has been perpetuated in the present century.

Through the second half of the 1830s and most of the 1840s Tennyson lived an unsettled, nomadic life. Nominally he made his home with his mother and his unmarried brothers and sisters, who continued to rent Somersby rectory until 1837, then moved successively to Essex and to Kent; but he was as often to be found in London, staying in cheap hotels or cadging a bed from friends who lived there. He was lonely and despondent, and he drank and smoked far too much. Many of those who had known him for years believed that his poetic inspiration had failed him and that his great early promise would remain unfulfilled; but this was to neglect the fact that when all else went wrong, he clung to the composition of poetry. He was steadily accumulating a backlog of unpublished poems, and he continued adding to his "elegies" to Hallam's memory.

The two volumes of *Poems* (1842) were destined to be the best-loved books Tennyson ever wrote. The first volume was made up of radically revised versions of the best poems from the 1832 volume, most of them in the form in which they are now known. The second volume contained new poems, among them some of those inspired by Hallam's death, as well as poems of widely varying styles, including the dramatic monologue "St. Simeon Stylites"; a group of Arthurian poems; his first attempt to deal with rampant sexuality, "The Vision of Sin"; and the implicitly autobiographical narrative "Locksley Hall," dealing with the evils of worldly marriages, which was to become one of his most popular poems during his lifetime.

After the reception of the 1832 *Poems* and after being unpublished for so long, Tennyson was naturally apprehensive about the reviews of the new poems; but nearly all were

enthusiastic, making it clear that he was now the foremost poet of his generation. Edgar Allan Poe wrote guardedly, "I am not sure that Tennyson is not the greatest of poets."

*The Princess*, which was published on Christmas 1847, was Tennyson's first attempt at a long narrative poem, a form that tempted him most of his life although it was less congenial to him temperamentally than the lyric. The ostensible theme is the education of women and the establishment of female colleges, but it is clear that Tennyson's interest in the subject runs out before the poem does, so that it gradually shifts to the consideration of what he thought of as the unnatural attempt of men and women to fulfill identical roles in society; only as the hero becomes more overtly masculine and the heroine takes on the traditional attributes of women is there a chance for their happiness. Considerably more successful than the main narrative are the thematic lyrics that Tennyson inserted into the action to show the growth of passion and between the cantos to indicate that the natural end of the sexes is to be parents of another generation in a thoroughly traditional manner. The subtitle, *A Medley*, was his way of anticipating charges of inconsistency in the structure of the poem. As always, the blank verse in which the main part of the poem is written is superb, and the interpolated lyrics include some of his most splendid short poems, such as "Come down, O maid," "Now sleeps the crimson petal," "Sweet and low," "The splendour falls on castle walls," and "Tears, idle tears." The emotion of these lyrics does more than the straight narrative to convey the forward movement of the entire poem, and their brief perfection indicates well enough that his genius lay there rather than in the descriptions of persons and their actions; this was not, however, a lesson that Tennyson himself was capable of learning. The seriousness with which the reviewers wrote of the poem was adequate recognition of his importance, but many of them found the central question of

feminine education to be insufficiently considered. The first edition was quickly sold out, and subsequent editions appeared almost every year for several decades.

The real measure of his relief at being rid of his old fear of epilepsy is that he soon set about writing further sections to be inserted into new editions of *The Princess*, in which the hero is said to be the victim of "weird seizures" inherited from his family; at first he is terrified when he falls into trances, but he is at last released from the malady when he falls in love with Princess Ida. Not only this poem, but his three other major long works, *In Memoriam*, *Maud*, and *Idylls of the King* (1859), all deal in part with the meaning of trances, which are at first frightening but then are revealed to be pathways to the extrasensory, to be rejoiced over rather than feared. After his death Tennyson's wife and son burned many of his most personal letters, and in what remains there is little reference to his trances or his recovery from them; but the poems bear quiet testimony to the immense weight he must have felt lifted from his shoulders when he needed no longer worry about epilepsy.

Tennyson's luck at last seemed to be on the upturn. At the beginning of 1849 he received a large advance from his publisher with the idea that he would assemble and polish his "elegies" on Hallam, to be published as a whole poem. Before the year was over he had resumed communication with Emily Sellwood, and by the beginning of 1850 he was speaking confidently of marrying. On 1 June *In Memoriam* was published, and less than two weeks later he and Emily were married quietly at Shiplake Church. Improbable as it might seem for a man to whom little but bad fortune had come, both events were total successes.

The new Mrs. Tennyson was thirty-seven years old and in delicate health, but she was a woman of iron determination; she took over the running of the externals of her husband's life, freeing him from the practical details at which he was so inept. Her taste was

conventional, and she may have curbed his religious questioning, his mild bohemianism, and the exuberance and experimentation of his poetry, but she also brought a kind of peace to his life without which he would not have been able to write at all. There is some evidence that Tennyson occasionally chafed at the responsibilities of marriage and paternity and at the loss of the vagrant freedom he had known, but there is nothing to indicate that he ever regretted his choice. It was probably not a particularly passionate marriage, but it was full of tenderness and affection. Three sons were born, of whom two, Hallam and Lionel, survived.

After a protracted honeymoon of some four months in the Lake District, Tennyson returned to the south of England to find that the publication of *In Memoriam* had made him, without question, the major living poet. It had appeared anonymously, but his authorship was an open secret.

This vast poem (nearly 3,000 lines) is divided into 131 sections, with prologue and epilogue; the size is appropriate for what it undertakes, since in coming to terms with loss, grief, and the growth of consolation, it touches on most of the intellectual issues at the center of the Victorian consciousness: religion, immortality, geology, evolution, the relation of the intellect to the unconscious, the place of art in a workaday world, the individual versus society, the relation of man to nature, and as many others. The poem grew out of Tennyson's personal grief, but it attempts to speak for all men rather than for one. The structure often seems wayward, for in T. S. Eliot's famous phrase, it has "only the unity and continuity of a diary" instead of the clear direction of a philosophical statement. It was bound to be somewhat irregular since it was composed with no regard for either chronology or continuity and was for years not intended to be published. The vacillation in mood of the finished poem, however, is neither haphazard nor capricious, for it is put together to show

the wild swoops between depression and elation that grief brings, the hesitant gropings toward philosophical justification of bereavement, the tentative little darts of conviction that may precede a settled belief in a beneficent world. It is intensely personal, but one must also believe Tennyson in his reiterated assertions that it was a poem, not the record of his own grief about Hallam; in short, that his own feelings had prompted the poem but were not necessarily accurately recorded in it.

To the most perceptive of the Victorians (and to modern readers) the poem was moving for its dramatic recreation of a mind indisposed to deal with the problems of contemporary life, and for the sheer beauty of so many of its sections. To a more naive, and far larger, group of readers it was a work of real utility, to be read like the Bible as a manual of consolation, and it is surely to that group that the poem owed its almost unbelievable popularity. Edition followed edition, and each brought Tennyson more fame and greater fortune.

### **Literary Life**

It was perhaps his very isolation that made him so interested in the Crimean War, for he read the newspapers voraciously in order to keep current with world affairs. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was one result in 1854 of his fascination with the heroism of that unpopular war. *Maud*, in which the hero redeems his misspent life by volunteering for service in the Crimea, was published the following year. In spite of that somewhat conventional-sounding conclusion, the poem is Tennyson's most experimental, for it tells a thoroughly dramatic narrative in self-contained lyrics; the reader must fill in the interstices of the story by inference. The lyrics are not even like one another in scansion, length, or style. The narrator of the poem is an unnamed young man whose father has committed

suicide after being swindled by his partner. The son then falls in love with Maud, the daughter of the peccant partner; but since he is poor and she is rich, there is no possibility of their marrying. When he is bullied by her brother, he kills him in a duel. After Maud also dies the narrator goes temporarily insane; he finally realizes that he has been as selfish and evil as the society on which he has blamed his bad fortune. In an attempt to make up for his wasted life, he goes to the Crimea, with his subsequent death hinted at in the last section of the poem.

As always, Tennyson is not at his best in narrative, but the melodramatic content of the plot finally matters little in comparison with the startling originality of his attempt to extend the limits of lyricism in order to make it do the work of narrative and drama, to capitalize on his own apparently circumscribed gift in order to include social criticism, contemporary history, and moral comment in the lyric. In part it must have been a deliberate answer to those who complained that his art was too self-absorbed and negligent of the world around him.

The experimental quality of *Maud* has made it one of the most interesting of his poems to modern critics, but to Tennyson's contemporaries it seemed so unlike what they expected from the author of *In Memoriam* that they could neither understand nor love it. An age that was not accustomed to distinguishing between narrator and poet found it almost impossible not to believe that Tennyson was directly portraying his own thoughts and personal history in those of the central figure. The result was the worst critical abuse that Tennyson received after that directed at the 1832 *Poems*. One reviewer went so far as to say that *Maud* had one extra vowel in the title, and that it made no difference which was to be deleted. Tennyson's predictable response was to become defensive about the poem



and to read it aloud at every opportunity in order to show how badly misunderstood both poem and poet were. Since it was a performance that took between two and three hours, the capitulation to its beauty that he often won thereby was probably due as much to weariness on the part of the hearer as to intellectual or aesthetic persuasion.

Ever since the publication of the 1842 *Poems* Tennyson had been something of a lion in literary circles, but after he became poet laureate he was equally in demand with society hostesses, who were more interested in his fame than in his poetic genius. For the rest of his life Tennyson was to be caught awkwardly between being unable to resist the flattery implied by their attentions and the knowledge that their admiration of him usually sprang from the wrong reasons. It was difficult for him to refuse invitations, but he felt subconsciously impelled when he accepted them to behave gruffly, even rudely, in order to demonstrate his independence. His wife's bad health usually made it impossible for her to accompany him, which probably increased his awkwardness. It all brought out the least attractive side of a fundamentally shy man, whose paroxysms of inability to deal with social situations made him seem selfish, bad-mannered, and assertive. In order to smooth his ruffled feathers, his hostesses and his friends would resort to heavy flattery, which only made him appear more arrogant. One of the saddest aspects of Tennyson's life is that his growing fame was almost in inverse ratio to his ability to maintain intimacy with others, so that by the end of his life he was a basically lonely man. All the innate charm, humor, intelligence, and liveliness were still there, but it took great understanding and patience on the part of his friends to bring them into the open.

*Idylls of the King* was published in 1859; it contained only four ("Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere") of the eventual twelve idylls. The matter of Arthur and Camelot

had obsessed Tennyson since boyhood, and over the years it became a receptacle into which he poured his deepening feelings of the desecration of decency and of ancient English ideals by the gradual corruption of accepted morality. The decay of the Round Table came increasingly to seem to him an apt symbol of the decay of nineteenth-century England. It was no accident that the first full-length idyll had been "Morte d'Arthur," which ultimately became--with small additions--the final idyll in the completed cycle. It had been written at the time of the death of Arthur Hallam, who seemed to Tennyson "Ideal manhood closed in real man," as he wrote of King Arthur; no doubt both Hallam's character and Tennyson's grief at his death lent color to the entire poem.

Like *The Princess*, *In Memoriam*, and *Maud*, the idylls were an assembly of poetry composed over a long time--in this case nearly half a century in all, for they were not finished until 1874 and were not all published until 1885. Taken collectively, they certainly constitute Tennyson's most ambitious poem, but not all critics would agree that the poem's success is equal to its intentions.

For a modern reader, long accustomed to the Arthurian legend by plays, musicals, films, and popular books, it is hard to realize that the story was relatively unfamiliar when Tennyson wrote. He worked hard at his preparation, reading most of the available sources, going to Wales and the west country of England to see the actual places connected with Arthur, and even learning sufficient Welsh to read some of the original documents. "There is no grander subject in the world," he wrote, and he meant his state of readiness to be equal to the loftiness of his themes, which explains in part why it took him so long to write the entire poem.

Although Tennyson always thought of the idylls as allegorical (his word was "parabolic"), he refused to make literal identifications between incidents, characters, or situations in the poems and what they stood for, except to indicate generally that by King Arthur he meant the soul and that the disintegration of the court and the Round Table showed the disruptive effect of the passions.

In all the time that he worked on the idylls Tennyson constantly refined their structure--by framing the main action between the coming of Arthur and his death, by repetition of verbal motifs, by making the incidents of the plot follow the course of the year from spring to winter, by making different idylls act as parallels or contrasts to each other, by trying to integrate the whole poem as closely as an extended musical composition. Considering how long he worked on the poem, the result is amazingly successful, although perhaps more so when the poem is represented schematically than in the actual experience of reading it.

As always, the imagery of the poem is superb. It is less successful in characterization and speech, which are often stilted and finally seem more Victorian than Arthurian. Even Arthur, who is meant to be the firm, heroic center of the poem, occasionally seems merely weak at the loss of his wife and the decay of the court rather than nobly forgiving. Individual idylls such as "The Last Tournament" and "Gareth and Lynette" have considerable narrative force, but there is an almost fatal lack of forward movement in the poem as a whole.

The reviewers were divided between those who thought it a worthy companion of Malory and those who found it more playacting than drama, with the costumes failing to disguise Tennyson's contemporaries and their concerns. The division between critics still maintains that split of opinion, although it is probably taken more seriously in the 1980s

than it was earlier in the twentieth century. Whether that attitude will last is impossible to predict.

In spite of the adverse reviews and the reservations of many of Tennyson's fellow poets, the sales of *Idylls of the King* in 1859 were enough to gladden the heart of any poet: 40,000 copies were printed initially and within a week or two more than a quarter of these were already sold; it was a pattern that was repeated with each succeeding volume as they appeared during the following decades.

The death of his admirer Prince Albert in 1861 prompted Tennyson to write a dedication to the *Idylls of the King* in his memory. The prince had taken an interest in Tennyson's poetry ever since 1847, when it is believed that he called on Tennyson when the poet was ill. He had written to ask for Tennyson's autograph in his own copy of *Idylls of the King*, and he had come over unannounced from Osborne, the royal residence on the Isle of Wight, to call on Tennyson at Farringford. In spite of the brevity of their acquaintance and its formality, Tennyson had been much moved by the prince's kindness and friendliness, and he had greatly admired the way Albert behaved in the difficult role of consort.

Four months after Albert's death the queen invited Tennyson to Osborne for an informal visit. Tennyson went with considerable trepidation, fearful that he might in some way transgress court etiquette, but his obvious shyness helped to make the visit a great success. It became the first of many occasions on which he visited the queen, and a genuine affection grew up on both sides. The queen treated Tennyson with what was great informality by her reserved standards, so that the relationship between monarch and laureate was probably more intimate than it has ever been before or since. She had an untutored and naive love of poetry, and he felt deep veneration for the throne; above all,

each was a simple and unassuming person beneath a carapace of apparent arrogance, and each recognized the true simplicity of the other. It was almost certainly the queen's feeling for Tennyson that lay behind the unprecedented offer of a baronetcy four times beginning in 1865; Tennyson each time turned it down for himself while asking that if possible it be given to Hallam, his elder son, after his own death.

Tennyson maintained a reluctant closeness with William Gladstone for nearly sixty years. It was generally accepted in London society that if a dinner was given for one of them, the other ought to be invited. Yet the truth was that they were never on an easy footing, and though they worked hard at being polite to each other, their edginess occasionally flared into unpleasantness before others. It is probable that some of their difficulties came from their friendship with Arthur Hallam when they were young men; Gladstone had been Hallam's best friend at Eton and felt left out after Hallam met Tennyson. To the end of their days the prime minister and the poet laureate were mildly jealous of their respective places in Hallam's affections so many years before. The feeling certainly colored Gladstone's reactions to Tennyson's poetry (which he occasionally reviewed), and nothing he could do ever made Tennyson trust Gladstone as a politician. The relationship hardly reflects well on either man.

Almost as if he felt that his position as laureate and the most popular serious poet in the English-speaking world were not enough, Tennyson deliberately tried to widen his appeal by speaking more directly to the common people of the country about the primary emotions and affections that he felt he shared with them. The most immediate result of his wish to be "the people's poet" was the 1864 volume whose title poem was "Enoch Arden" and which also contained another long narrative poem, "Aylmer's Field." These are full of

the kinds of magnificent language and imagery that no other Victorian poet could have hoped to produce, but the sentiments occasionally seem easy and secondhand. The volume also contained a number of much more experimental translations and metrical innovations, as well as such wonderful lyrics as "In the Valley of Caunteretz," which was written thirty-one years after he and Hallam had wandered through that beautiful countryside, and "Tithonus." There was no question that Tennyson was still a very great poet, but his ambition to be more than a lyricist often blinded him to his own limitations. His hope of becoming "the people's poet" was triumphantly realized; the volume had the largest sales of any during his lifetime. More than 40,000 copies were sold immediately after publication, and in the first year he made more than £8,000 from it, a sum equal to the income of many of the richest men in England.

In the years between 1874 and 1882 Tennyson made yet another attempt to widen his poetic horizons. As the premier poet of England, he had been compared--probably inevitably--to Shakespeare, and he determined to write for the stage as his great predecessor had done. At the age of sixty-five he wrote his first play as a kind of continuation of Shakespeare's historical dramas. *Queen Mary* (1875) was produced in 1876 by Henry Irving, the foremost actor on the English stage; Irving himself played the main male role. It had been necessary to hack the play to a fraction of its original inordinate length in order to play it in one evening, and the result was hardly more dramatic than the original long version had been. In spite of the initial curiosity about Tennyson's first play, the audiences soon dwindled, and it was withdrawn after twenty-three performances; that was, however, a more respectable run than it would be today.

His next play, *Harold* (1876), about the early English king of that name, failed to find a producer during Tennyson's lifetime, although he had conscientiously worked at making it less sprawling than its predecessor. *Becket* (1884), finished in 1879, was a study of the martyred archbishop of Canterbury; Tennyson found the subject so fascinating that he once more wrote at length, in this case making a play considerably longer than an uncut *Hamlet*. *Becket* was, not surprisingly, not produced until 1893, the year after Tennyson's death. Following *Becket* in quick succession came *The Falcon* and *The Cup* (published together in 1884), *The Foresters* (1892), and *The Promise of May* (published in *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, Etc.* in 1886), all of which abandoned the attempt to follow Shakespeare. On the stage only *The Cup* had any success, and that was in part due to the lavish settings and the acting of Irving and Ellen Terry. After the failure of *The Promise of May* (a rustic melodrama and the only prose work in his long career), Tennyson at last accepted the fact that nearly a decade of his life had been wasted in an experiment that had totally gone amiss. Today no one would read even the best of the plays, *Queen Mary* and *Becket*, if they were not the work of Tennyson. They betray the fact that he was not profound at understanding the characters of other persons or in writing speech that had the sound of conversation. Even the flashes of metaphor fail to redeem this reckless, admirable, but totally failed attempt to fit Tennyson's genius to another medium.

The climax of public recognition of Tennyson's achievement came in 1883 when Gladstone offered him a peerage. After a few days of consideration Tennyson accepted. Surprisingly, his first thought was to change his name to Baron Tennyson d'Eyncourt in an echo of his uncle's ambition, but he was discouraged by the College of Arms and finally settled on Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Freshwater. Since he was nearly seventy-five

when he assumed the title, he took little part in the activities of the House of Lords, but the appropriateness of his being ennobled was generally acknowledged. It was the first time in history that a man had been given a title for his services to poetry. Tennyson claimed that he took the peerage on behalf of all literature, not as personal recognition.

### **Later Life**

The rest of his life was spent in the glow of love that the public occasionally gives to a distinguished man who has reached a great age. He continued to write poetry nearly as assiduously as he had when young, and though some of it lacked the freshness of youth, there were occasional masterpieces that mocked the passing years. He had always felt what he once described as the "passion of the past," a longing for the days that had gone, either the great ages of earlier history or the more immediate past of his own life, and his poetic genius always had something nostalgic, even elegiac, at its heart. Many of the finest poems of his old age were written in memory of his friends as they died off, leaving him increasingly alone.

Of all the blows of mortality, the cruelest was the death from "jungle fever" of his younger son, Lionel, who had fallen ill in India and was returning by ship to England. Lionel died in the Red Sea, and his body was put into the waves "Beneath a hard Arabian moon/And alien stars." It took Tennyson two years to recover his equanimity sufficiently to write the poem from which those lines are taken: the magnificent elegy dedicated "To the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava," who had been Lionel's host in India. Hauntingly, the poem is written in the same meter as *In Memoriam*, that masterpiece of his youth celebrating the death of another beloved young man, Arthur Hallam. There were also fine elegies to his



brother Charles, to FitzGerald, and to several others, indicating the love he had felt for old friends even when he was frequently unable to express it adequately in person.

Lionel's death was the climax of Tennyson's sense of loss, and from that time until his own death he became increasingly troubled in his search for the proofs of immortality, even experimenting with spiritualism. His poetry of this period is saturated with the desperation of the search, sometimes in questioning, sometimes in dogmatic assertion that scarcely hides the fear underlying it. Yet there were moments of serenity, reflected in such beautiful poems as "Demeter and Persephone," in which he uses the classical legend as a herald of the truth of Christianity. And there was, of course, "Crossing the Bar," written in a few minutes as he sailed across the narrow band of water separating the Isle of Wight from the mainland. At his request, this grave little prayer of simple faith has ever since been placed at the end of editions of his poetry.

Tennyson continued to compose poetry during the last two years of his life; when he was too weak to write it down, his son or his wife would copy it for him. When he had a good day, he was still able to take long walks or even to venture to London. The year before his death he wrote a simple and delicate little poem, "June Heather and Bracken," as an offering of love to his faithful wife; to her he dedicated his last volume of poetry, which was not published until a fortnight after his death. His friends noticed that he was gentler than he had been for years, and he made quiet reparation to some of those whom he had offended by thoughtless brusquerie.

## **Death**

On 6 October 1892, an hour or so after midnight, he died at Aldworth with the moon streaming in at the window overlooking the Sussex Weald, his finger holding open a volume of Shakespeare, his family surrounding the bed. A week later he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, near the graves of Browning and Chaucer. To most of England it seemed as if an era in poetry had passed, a divide as great as that a decade later when Queen Victoria died.

One of the most levelheaded summations of what he had meant to his contemporaries was made by Edmund Gosse on the occasion of Tennyson's eightieth birthday: "He is wise and full of intelligence; but in mere intellectual capacity or attainment it is probable that there are many who excel him. This, then, is not the direction in which his greatness asserts itself. He has not headed a single moral reform nor inaugurated a single revolution of opinion; he has never pointed the way to undiscovered regions of thought; he has never stood on tip-toe to describe new worlds that his fellows were not tall enough to discover ahead. In all these directions he has been prompt to follow, quick to apprehend, but never himself a pioneer. Where then has his greatness lain? It has lain in the various perfections of his writing. He has written, on the whole, with more constant, unwearied, and unwearied excellence than any of his contemporaries.... He has expended the treasures of his native talent on broadening and deepening his own hold upon the English language, until that has become an instrument upon which he is able to play a greater variety of melodies to perfection than any other man."

### **Legacy**

But this is a kind of perfection that is hard to accept for anyone who is uneasy with poetry and feels that it ought to be the servant of something more utilitarian. Like most

things Victorian, Tennyson's reputation suffered an eclipse in the early years of this century. In his case the decline was more severe than that of other Victorians because he had seemed so much the symbol of his age, so that for a time his name was nearly a joke. After two world wars had called into question most of the social values to which he had given only the most reluctant of support, readers were once more able to appreciate that he stood apart from his contemporaries. Now one can again admire without reservation one of the greatest lyric gifts in English literature, although it is unlikely that he will ever again seem quite the equal of Shakespeare.

When the best of his poetry is separated out from the second-rate work of the kind that any writer produces, Tennyson can be seen plainly as one of the half-dozen great poets in the English language, at least the equal of Wordsworth or Keats and probably far above any other Victorian. And that is precisely what his contemporaries thought.

## **2. Introduction to the Poem**

Questions of genre matter about *In Memoriam* because we tend to read according to certain definite genre rules, taking, for instance, something we recognize as satire very differently from something we categorize as a love poem, a tragedy, or an epic. Tennyson's great experimental poem reconceives the traditional elegy, which it blends with other genres, including ordinary lyric, epic, dream vision, landscape meditations, dramatic monologues, and so on. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines elegy, which comes from the Greek *elegeia*, "lament," as a "lyric, usually formal in tone and diction, suggested either by the death of an actual person or by the poet's contemplation of the tragic aspects of life. In either case, the emotion, originally expressed as a lament, finds consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle."

Many of the most famous elegies in English, including Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), Shelley's "Adonais" (1821), and Arnold's "Thyrsis" (1867) participate in the tradition of the pastoral idyll or eclogue, which dates back to Greek Moschus's "Lament for Bion" and the first idyll of Theocritus by way of Vergil's enormously influential *Eclogues*. This genre, whose action unfolds in an idealized country setting populated by shepherds and shepherdesses, employs particularly elevated formal diction and follows a ritualized progression. Pastoral elegy contains, for example, an announcement of a death, a mourning procession by denizens of the woodland, who may include shepherdesses and nymphs, a complaint to nature, until a final ritualistic resolution occurs. By alluding to pastoral elegies, *In Memoriam* in some sense aligns itself with this genre at the same time that its very different form and method challenges it.

One sign of Tennyson's combination of radically untraditional and traditional appears in the style — or rather styles — of *In Memoriam*, for unlike its predecessors, this poem varies from section to section as it embodies or alludes to a range of genres. Consequently, some of the sections employ plain style with simple, everyday diction, whereas others, which draw upon Spenser and Keats, emphasize lush, sensuous language. Similarly, the poem also manipulates its simple stanzaic form (abba) with astonishing virtuosity, sections sometimes consisting of only one or two long sentences whereas other sections use very short sentences. Some sections adapt the style and diction of sonnets, others resemble pastorals, yet others take the form of dialogues, and so on.

Throughout, Tennyson weaves his extremely varied styles and allusions to various genres together with chains of images and motifs, which in Tennysonian manner combine the simple and the complex: in isolation, most images, like most of the sections in which

they appear, seem fairly simple and straightforward, but their participation in a network of repeated and often contrasted images makes almost every one of them resonate with additional meaning and complexity.

*In Memoriam* is a typical product of his art, but it is even more representative of his attitude towards the problems and mysteries of human life; it is the poem which best reveals the secret of his largest popularity. It might have seemed hopeless to expect general favour for an elegy of such unprecedented length on a youth who had “miss’d the earthly wreath,” leaving a memory cherished by a few friends, who alone could measure the unfulfilled promise. Never, perhaps, has mastery of poetical resource won a more remarkable triumph than in Tennyson’s treatment of this theme. The stanza selected, with its twofold capacity for pathos and for resonance, is exactly suited to a flow of self-communing thought, prevailingy pensive, but passing at moments into a loftier or more jubilant note. The rhythm of this stanza also suits the division of the poem into sections; since the cadence of the fourth line—where the rhyme has less emphasis than in the central couplet—can introduce a pause without giving a sense of abruptness. Hence the music of the poem as a whole is continuous, while at the same time each section is an artistic unit. But this felicity is not merely technical; it is closely related to the treatment of the subject-matter. Two strains are interwoven throughout; one is personal—the memory and the sorrow, as they affect the poet; the other is broadly human and general—the experience of the soul as it contemplates life and death, as it finds or misses comfort in the face of nature, as it struggles through doubt to faith, or through anguish to peace. The blending of these two strains—which are constantly passing into each other—serves to idealise the theme, and so to justify the large scale of the treatment; it has also this effect, that the poem

becomes a record of successive spiritual moods, varied as the range of thought and emotion into which the personal grief broadens out. The composition of *In Memoriam* was, indeed, spread over seventeen years. The form has thus an inner correspondence with the material; each lyric section is a spiritual mood—not sharply separated from that which precedes or from that which follows it, yet with a completeness of its own. Among particular traits, one which deserves especial notice is the wonderful adumbration of the lost friend's power and charm. Neither quite definite nor yet mystic, the presence made sacred by death flits, with a strange light around it, through the poem; it never comes or goes without making us feel that this great sorrow is no fantasy, but has its root in a great loss. The religious thought of *In Memoriam* bears the stamp of the time at which it was produced, in so far as doubts, frankly treated, are met with a sober optimism of a purely subjective and emotional kind. But the poem has also an abiding and universal significance as the journal of a mind slowly passing through a bitter ordeal, and as an expression of reliance on the "Strong Son of God, immortal Love."

## 2.1 Context

The English poet Alfred Tennyson was born in Sommersby, England on August 6, 1809, twenty years after the start of the French Revolution and toward the end of the Napoleonic Wars. He was the fourth of twelve children born to George and Elizabeth Tennyson. His father, a church reverend, supervised his sons' private education, though his heavy drinking impeded his ability to fulfill his duties. His mother was an avid supporter of the Evangelical movement, which aimed to replace nominal Christianity with a genuine, personal religion. The young Alfred demonstrated an early flair for poetry, composing a full-length verse drama at the age of fourteen. In 1827, when he was eighteen, he and his

brother Charles published an anonymous collection entitled *Poems by Two Brothers*, receiving a few vague complimentary reviews.

That same year, Tennyson left home to study at Trinity College, Cambridge, under the supervision of William Whewell, the great nineteenth-century scientist, philosopher, and theologian. University life exposed him to the most urgent political issue in his day—the question of Parliamentary Reform, which ultimately culminated in the English Reform Bill of 1832. Although Tennyson believed that reform was long overdue, he felt that it must be undertaken cautiously and gradually; his university poems show little interest in politics.

Tennyson soon became friendly with a group of undergraduates calling themselves the “Apostles,” which met to discuss literary issues. The group was led by Arthur Henry Hallam, who soon became Tennyson’s closest friend. Tennyson and Hallam toured Europe together while still undergraduates, and Hallam later became engaged to the poet’s sister Emily. In 1830, Tennyson published *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, to Hallam’s great praise. However, within the larger critical world, this work, along with Tennyson’s 1832 volume including “The Lady of Shalott” and “The Lotos-Eaters,” met with hostile disparagement; the young poet read his reviews with dismay.

In 1833, no longer able to afford college tuition, Tennyson was living back at home with his family when he received the most devastating blow of his entire life: he learned that his dear friend Hallam had died suddenly of fever while traveling abroad. His tremendous grief at the news permeated much of Tennyson’s later poetry, including the great elegy “In Memoriam.” This poem represents the poet’s struggles not only with the news of his best friend’s death, but also with the new developments in astronomy, biology,

and geology that were diminishing man's stature on the scale of evolutionary time; although Darwin's *Origin of Species* did not appear until 1859, notions of evolution were already in circulation, articulated in Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844).

Tennyson first began to achieve critical success with the publication of his *Poems* in 1842, a work that includes "Ulysses," "Tithonus," and other famous short lyrics about mythical and philosophical subjects. At the time of publication, England had seen the death of Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and indeed all of the great Romantic poets except Wordsworth; Tennyson thus filled a lacuna in the English literary scene. In 1845, he began receiving a small government pension for his poetry. In 1850, Wordsworth, who had been Britain's Poet Laureate, died at the age of 80; upon the publication of "In Memoriam," Tennyson was named to succeed him in this honor. With this title he became the most popular poet in Victorian England and could finally afford to marry Emily Sellwood, whom he had loved since 1836. The marriage began sadly—the couple's first son was stillborn in 1851—but the couple soon found happiness: in 1853 they were able to move to a secluded country house on the Isle of Wight, where they raised two sons named Hallam and Lionel.

Tennyson continued to write and to gain popularity. His later poetry primarily followed a narrative rather than lyrical style; as the novel began to emerge as the most popular literary form, poets began searching for new ways of telling stories in verse. For example, in Tennyson's poem "Maud," a speaker tells his story in a sequence of short lyrics in varying meters; Tennyson described the work as an experimental "monodrama." Not only were his later verses concerned with dramatic fiction, they also examined current national political drama. As Poet Laureate, Tennyson represented the literary voice of the nation



and, as such, he made occasional pronouncements on political affairs. For example, “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) described a disastrous battle in the Crimean War and praised the heroism of the British soldiers there. In 1859, Tennyson published the first four *Idylls of the King*, a group of twelve blank-verse narrative poems tracing the story of the legendary King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This collection, dedicated to Prince Albert, enjoyed much popularity among the royal family, who saw Arthur’s lengthy reign as a representation of Queen Victoria’s 64-year rule (1837-1901).

In 1884, the Royals granted Tennyson a baronetcy; he was now known as Alfred, Lord Tennyson. He dedicated most of the last fifteen years of his life to writing a series of full-length dramas in blank verse, which, however, failed to excite any particular interest. In 1892, at the age of 83, he died of heart failure and was buried among his illustrious literary predecessors at Westminster Abbey. Although Tennyson was the most popular poet in England in his own day, he was often the target of mockery by his immediate successors, the Edwardians and Georgians of the early twentieth century. Today, however, many critics consider Tennyson to be the greatest poet of the Victorian Age; and he stands as one of the major innovators of lyric and metrical form in all of English poetry.

## **2.2 Background**

Tennyson’s poetic output covers a breadth difficult to comprehend in a single system of thematics: his various works treat issues of political and historical concern, as well as

scientific matters, classical mythology, and deeply personal thoughts and feelings. Tennyson is both a poet of penetrating introspection and a poet of the people; he plumbs the depths of his own consciousness while also giving voice to the national consciousness of Victorian society.

As a child, Tennyson was influenced profoundly by the poetry of Byron and Scott, and his earliest poems reflect the lyric intensity and meditative expressiveness of his Romantic forebears. These early poems demonstrate his ability to link external scenery to interior states of mind. However, unlike the Romantics, whose nature poems present a scene that raises an emotional or psychological problem, Tennyson uses nature as a psychological category. In "Mariana," for example, he uses Keatsian descriptions of the natural world to describe a woman's state of mind; he conveys via his natural setting the consciousness of a woman waiting vainly for her lover, and her increasing hopelessness.

Not only is Tennyson a poet of the natural and psychological landscape, he also attends frequently to the past, and historical events. "The Lady of Shalott" and the poems within *Idylls of the King* take place in medieval England and capture a world of knights in shining armor and their damsels in distress. In addition to treating the history of his nation, Tennyson also explores the mythological past, as articulated in classical works of Homer, Virgil, and Dante. His "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters" draw upon actual incidents in Homer's *Odyssey*. Likewise, his ode "To Virgil" abounds with allusions to incidents in the great poet's *Aeneid*, especially the fall of Troy. Tennyson thus looked both to historical and mythological pasts as repositories for his poetry.

Tennyson's personal past, too, figures prominently in his work. The sudden death of his closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam when Tennyson was just 24 dealt a great emotional blow to the young poet, who spent the next ten years writing over a hundred poems dedicated to his departed friend, later collected and published as "In Memoriam" in 1850. This lengthy work describes Tennyson's memories of the time he spent with Hallam, including their Cambridge days, when Hallam would read poetry aloud to his friends: thus Tennyson writes, "O bliss, when all in circle drawn / About him, heart and ear were fed / To hear him, as he lay and read / The Tuscan poets on the lawn!" Tennyson grapples with the tremendous grief he feels after the loss of such a dear friend, concluding famously that "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all."

"In Memoriam" also reflects Tennyson's struggle with the Victorians' growing awareness of another sort of past: the vast expanse of geological time and evolutionary history. The new discoveries in biology, astronomy, and geology implied a view of humanity that much distressed many Victorians, including Tennyson. In *Maud*, for example, he describes the stars as "cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand / His nothingness into man"; unlike the Romantics, he possessed a painful awareness of the brutality and indifference of "Nature red in tooth and claw." Although Tennyson associated evolution with progress, he also worried that the notion seemed to contradict the Biblical story of creation and long-held assumptions about man's place in the world. Nonetheless, in "In Memoriam," he insists that we must keep our faith despite the latest discoveries of science: he writes, "Strong Son of God, immortal Love / Whom we, that have not seen they face, / By faith, and faith alone, embrace / Believing where we cannot prove." At the end of the poem,

he concludes that God's eternal plan includes purposive biological development; thus he reassures his Victorian readers that the new science does not mean the end of the old faith.

Tennyson also spoke to his Victorian contemporaries about issues of urgent social and political concern. In "The Princess" he addresses the relations between the sexes and argues for women's rights in higher education. In "The Charge of the Light Brigade," he speaks out in favor of a controversial diplomatic maneuver, the disastrous charge on the Russian army by British troops in the Crimean War. Thus, for all his love of the past, Tennyson also maintained a lively interest in the developments of his day, remaining deeply committed to reforming the society in which he lived and to which he gave voice.

### **3. Analysis of the Poem**

#### **3.1 Themes, Motifs and Symbols**

##### **The Reconciliation of Religion and Science**

Tennyson lived during a period of great scientific advancement, and he used his poetry to work out the conflict between religious faith and scientific discoveries. Notable scientific findings and theories of the Victorian period include stratigraphy, the geological study of rock layers used to date the earth, in 1811; the first sighting of an asteroid in 1801 and galaxies in the 1840s; and Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection in 1859. In the second half of the century, scientists, such as Fülöp Semmelweis, Joseph Lister, and Louis Pasteur, began the experiments and work that would eventually lead to germ theory and our modern understanding of microorganisms and diseases. These discoveries challenged traditional religious understandings of nature and natural history.

For most of his career, Tennyson was deeply interested in and troubled by these discoveries. His poem "Locksley Hall" (1842) expresses his ambivalence about technology and scientific progress. There the **speaker** feels tempted to abandon modern civilization and return to a savage life in the jungle. In the end, he chooses to live a civilized, modern life and enthusiastically endorses technology. *In Memoriam* connects the despair Tennyson felt over the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam and the despair he felt when contemplating a godless world. In the end, the poem affirms both religious faith and faith in human progress. Nevertheless, Tennyson continued to struggle with the reconciliation of science and religion, as illustrated by some of his later work. For example, "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" (1886) takes as its protagonist the speaker from the original "Locksley Hall," but now he is an old man, who looks back on his youthful optimism and faith in progress with scorn and skepticism.

### **The Virtues of Perseverance and Optimism**

After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair, which he eventually overcame to begin writing again. During his time of mourning, Tennyson rarely wrote and, for many years, battled alcoholism. Many of his poems are about the temptation to give up and fall prey to pessimism, but they also extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life. The need to persevere and continue is the central theme of *In Memoriam* and "Ulysses" (1833), both written after Hallam's death. Perhaps because of Tennyson's gloomy and tragic childhood, perseverance and optimism also appear in poetry written before Hallam's death, such as "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, 1842). Poems such as "The Lady of Shalott" (1832, 1842) and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854) also vary this theme: both poems glorify characters who

embrace their destinies in life, even though those destinies end in tragic death. The Lady of Shalott leaves her seclusion to meet the outer world, determined to seek the love that is missing in her life. The cavalymen in “The Charge of the Light Brigade” keep charging through the valley toward the Russian cannons; they persevere even as they realize that they will likely die.

### **The Glory of England**

Tennyson used his poetry to express his love for England. Although he expressed worry and concern about the corruption that so dominated the nineteenth century, he also wrote many poems that glorify nineteenth-century England. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” praises the fortitude and courage of English soldiers during a battle of the Crimean War in which roughly 200 men were killed. As poet laureate, Tennyson was required to write poems for specific state occasions and to dedicate verse to Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert. Nevertheless, Tennyson praised England even when not specifically required to do so. In the *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson glorified England by encouraging a collective English cultural identity: all of England could take pride in Camelot, particularly the chivalrous and capable knights who lived there. Indeed, the modern conception of Camelot as the source of loyalty, chivalry, and romance comes, in part, from Tennyson’s descriptions of it in the *Idylls of the King* and “The Lady of Shalott.”

### **Motifs**

#### **Tragic Death**

Early, tragic death and suicide appear throughout Tennyson’s poetry. Perhaps the most significant event of his life was the untimely death of his best friend Arthur Hallam at age

twenty-two, which prompted Tennyson to write his greatest literary work, *In Memoriam*. This long poem uses the so-called *In Memoriam* stanza, or a **quatrain** that uses **iambic tetrameter** and has an *abba* rhyme scheme. The formal consistency expresses Tennyson's grief and links the disparate stanzas together into an elegiac whole. The speaker of "Break, Break, Break" (1834) sees death even in sunsets, while the early "Mariana" (1830) features a woman who longs for death after her lover abandons her. Each of that poem's seven stanzas ends with the line "I would that I were dead." The lady in "The Lady of Shalott" brings about her own death by going out into an autumn storm dressed only in a thin white dress. Similarly, the cavalymen in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" ride to their deaths by charging headlong into the Russian cannons. These poems lyrically mourn those who died tragically, often finding nobility in their characters or their deaths.

### Scientific Language

Tennyson took a great interest in the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, and his poetry manifests this interest in its reliance on scientific language. "The Kraken" (1830), which describes an ancient, slumbering sea beast, mentions a "cell" (8) and "polypi" (9). Section 21 of *In Memoriam* alludes to the 1846 discovery of Neptune. There, a traveler tells the speaker not to grieve for his friend. Rather than grieve, the traveler says, the speaker should rejoice in the marvelous possibilities of science. Section 120, in contrast, features the speaker wondering what good science might do in a world full of religious doubt and despair. Other poems praise technological discoveries and inventions, including the steamships and railways discussed in "Locksley Hall," or mention specific plants and flowers, as does "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, 1842). Taking **metaphors** and **poetic diction** from

science allowed Tennyson to connect to his age and to modernize his sometimes antiquarian language and archaic verse forms.

### **The Ancient World**

Like the romantic poets who preceded him, Tennyson found much inspiration in the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. In poems such as “The Lotos-Eaters” and “Ulysses,” Tennyson retells the stories of Dante and Homer, which described the characters of Ulysses, Telemachus, and Penelope and their adventures in the ancient world. However, Tennyson slightly alters these mythic stories, shifting the time frame of some of the action and often adding more descriptive **imagery** to the plot. For instance, “Ulysses,” a dramatic monologue spoken by Homer’s hero, urge readers to carry on and persevere rather than to give up and retire. Elsewhere Tennyson channels the voice of Tithonus, a legendary prince from Troy, in the eponymous poem “Tithonus” (1833, 1859). He praises the ancient poet Virgil in his ode “To Virgil” (1882), commenting on Virgil’s choice of subject matter and lauding his ability to chronicle human history in meter. Tennyson mined the ancient world to find stories that would simultaneously enthrall and inspire his readers.

### **Symbols**

#### **King Arthur and Camelot**

To Tennyson, King Arthur symbolizes the ideal man, and Arthurian England was England in its best and purest form. Some of Tennyson’s earliest poems, such as “The Lady of Shalott,” were set in King Arthur’s time. Indeed, Tennyson rhymes *Camelot*, the name of King Arthur’s estate, with *Shalott* in eighteen of the poem’s twenty stanzas, thereby emphasizing the importance of the mythical place. Furthermore, our contemporary



conception of Camelot as harmonious and magnificent comes from Tennyson's poem. *Idylls of the King*, about King Arthur's rise and fall, was one of the major projects of Tennyson's late career. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert envisioned themselves as latter-day descendants of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and their praise helped popularize the long poem. But King Arthur also had a more personal representation to Tennyson: the mythic king represents a version of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, whose death at twenty-two profoundly affected Tennyson. Hallam's death destroyed his potential and promise, which allowed Tennyson to idealize Hallam. This idealization allows Tennyson to imagine what might have been in the best possible light, much as he does when describing King Arthur and his court.

### **The Imprisoned Woman**

The imprisoned woman appears throughout Tennyson's work. In "Mariana," a woman abandoned by her lover lives alone in her house in the middle of desolate country; her isolation imprisons her, as does the way she waits for her lover to return. Her waiting limits her ability and desire to do anything else. "The Lady of Shalott" is likewise about a woman imprisoned, this time in a tower. Should she leave her prison, a curse would fall upon her. Tennyson, like many other Victorian poets, used female characters to symbolize the artistic and sensitive aspects of the human condition. Imprisoned women, such as these Tennyson characters, act as symbols for the isolation experienced by the artist and other sensitive, deep-feeling people. Although society might force creative, sensitive types to become outcasts, in Tennyson's poems, the women themselves create their own isolation and imprisonment. These women seem unable or unwilling to deal with the outside world.

### 3.3 Analysis

#### Section 7 (VII)

The poet waits by the house where he used to live, but he is not here anymore. Life begins far off and day begins.

#### Section 35 (XXXV)

A voice from the grave might say that there is no living after death, no hope in the dust. The poet might try to hold off this thought, but then he listens to the moaning of the sea and the streams and thinks about the dust of the land and how the vastness of the ages seems to war against Love.

#### Section 50 (L)

The poet asks Hallam to be near him when his faith droops, his heart is sick, and his blood “creeps.” He is racked with the harshness of time and life, and he feels his faith is dry. He wants Hallam near him when he fades away.

#### Section 96 (XCVI)

Someone tells the poet that doubt is from the devil, but he disagrees; he believes that a faith that comes from doubt and conflict is stronger “than in half the creeds.”

### 3.4 Overall Analysis

“In Memoriam” is often considered Tennyson’s greatest poetic achievement. It is a stunning and profoundly moving long poem consisting of a prologue, 131 cantos/stanzas,

and an epilogue. It was published in 1850, but Tennyson began writing the individual poems in 1833 after learning that his closest friend, the young Cambridge poet Arthur Henry Hallam, had suddenly died at age 22 of a cerebral hemorrhage. Over the course of seventeen years Tennyson worked on and revised the poems, but he did not initially intend to publish them as one long work.

When he prepared "In Memoriam" (initially planning on calling it "The Way of the Soul") for publication, Tennyson placed the poems in an order to suit the major thematic progressions of the work; thus, the poems as published are not in the order in which they were written. Even with the reordering of the poems, there is no single unified theme. Grief, loss and renewal of faith, survival, and other themes compete with one another.

The work is notoriously difficult, and it is unclear how much other poets have appreciated it. T.S. Eliot stated that it is "the most unapproachable of all [Tennyson's] poems." Charlotte Bronte commented that she closed it halfway through, and that "it is beautiful; it is mournful; it is monotonous." The poem has also brought tremendous comfort to those who seek within its lines a way to assuage and eventually come out of their grief. Queen Victoria famously told Tennyson that it was much comfort to her after her husband, Prince Albert, passed away.

The poem partly belongs to the genre of elegy, which is a poem occasioned by the death of a person. The standard elegy includes ceremonial mourning for the deceased, extolling his virtues, and seeking consolation for his death. Other famous elegies, to which *In Memoriam* is often compared, include John Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Wordsworth's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The epilogue is also an

epithalamion, or a classical wedding celebration poem. The stanzas of the poems have uneven lengths but have a very regular poetic meter. The style, which Tennyson used to such great effect that it is now called the “In Memoriam stanza,” consists of tetrameter quatrains rhymed abba. The lines are short, and the rhythm is strict, which imparts a sense of stasis as well as labor to move from one line to the next.

In terms of structure, Tennyson once remarked that the poem was organized around the three celebrations of Christmas that occur. Other scholars point to different forms of structure. According to scholars A.C. Bradley and E.D.H. Johnson, cantos 1-27 are poems of despair/ungoverned sense/subjective; cantos 28-77 are poems of mind governing sense/despair/objective; cantos 78-102 are poems of spirit governing mind/doubt/subjective; and cantos 103-31 are spirit harmonizing sense and spirit/objective. In terms of the structure of Tennyson’s thoughts on the meaning of poetry, the scholars find a four-part division: poetry as release from emotion, poetry as release from thought, poetry as self-realization, and poetry as mission/prophecy. Canto 95 is seen, from this view, as the climax of the poem.

The most conspicuous theme in the poem is, of course, grief. The poet’s emotional progression from utter despair to hopefulness fits into the structure observed by the scholars. The early poems are incredibly personal and bleak. Tennyson feels abandoned and lost. He cannot sleep and personifies the cruelty of Sorrow, “Priestess in the vaults of Death.” He wonders if poetry is capable of expressing his loss. He wanders by his friend’s old house, sick with sadness. Memory is oppressive. Nature herself seems hostile, chaotic. His grief has a concomitant in a lack of religious faith.

However, as the poems proceed, the poet begins to grapple with his grief and find ways to move beyond it. He learns, as scholar Joseph Becker writes, to “experience deeper layers of grief so that he may transcend the limitations of time and space that Hallam’s death represents.” He has learned to love better and embrace his sorrow, which he now personifies as a wife, not a mistress. He learns that Hallam, while once his flesh-and-blood friend whom he misses dearly, is now a transcendent spiritual being, something the human race can aspire to become. Although Tennyson will never fully recover from the loss of Hallam, he can move forward; the wedding of his other sister establishes this result for him.

One of the reasons why the poem is so lauded by critics is its engagement with some contemporary Victorian religious and scientific debates and discourses. Tennyson is dealing not only with his sorrow over Hallam’s death, but also with the lack of religious faith that came with it. He wonders what the point of life is if man’s individual soul is not immortal after death. His emotions vacillate between doubt and faith. He eventually comes to terms with the fact that Hallam may be gone in bodily form, but that he is a perfect spiritual being whose consciousness endures past his death. Becker writes that Tennyson experiences “renewed faith ... that both individual and human survival are predicated on spiritual rather than physical terms.”

Also, significantly, he ruminates over the new scientific findings of the age, which are forerunners of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. In particular, Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1846) undermined the biblical story of creation. Several of the cantos deal with the ideas of the randomness and brutality of Nature towards man. Canto LVI has the poet anguishing, “So careful of the type? But no. / From scarp’d cliff and quarried stone / She

cries, 'A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go.'" One of the most famous lines in the English language, "Nature, red in tooth and claw," is also in this canto.

Tennyson grapples with what all of this means in terms of his religious faith as well as in the context of his loss; death is very, very long. The critic William Flesch observes, "Tennyson feels the utter oppressiveness of the emptiness and vacuity of time that Lyell has so devastatingly demonstrated. Within that, he feels the pain of his mourning for Hallam, a pain that may be sometimes intermittent but is always at the core of his being." Ultimately, though, the fact that love prevails and persists in the vastness of Nature gives Tennyson the hope he needs to place his faith in transcendence and salvation once more. The poet never rejected the actual findings of Lyell and others, but he certainly saw them as only partial answers to the mysteries of the universe and believed God still cared very much for human beings and that there was hope for such humans to attain a higher state.

The poem begins as a tribute to and invocation of the "Strong Son of God." Since man, never having seen God's face, has no proof of His existence, he can only reach God through faith. The poet attributes the sun and moon ("these orbs or light and shade") to God, and acknowledges Him as the creator of life and death in both man and animals. Man cannot understand why he was created, but he must believe that he was not made simply to die.

The Son of God seems both human and divine. Man has control of his own will, but this is only so that he might exert himself to do God's will. All of man's constructed systems of religion and philosophy seem solid but are merely temporal, in comparison to the eternal God; and yet while man can have knowledge of these systems, he cannot have knowledge

of God. The speaker expresses the hope that “knowledge [will] grow from more to more,” but this should also be accompanied by a reverence for that which we cannot know.

The speaker asks that God help foolish people to see His light. He repeatedly asks for God to forgive his grief for “thy [God’s] creature, whom I found so fair.” The speaker has faith that this departed fair friend lives on in God, and asks God to make his friend wise.

“In Memoriam” consists of 131 smaller poems of varying length. Each short poem is comprised of isometric stanzas. The stanzas are iambic tetrameter quatrains with the rhyme scheme ABBA, a form that has since become known as the “In Memoriam Stanza.” (Of course, Tennyson did not invent the form—it appears in earlier works such as Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle”—but he did produce an enduring and memorable example of it.) With the ABBA rhyme scheme, the poem resolves itself in each quatrain; it cannot propel itself forward: each stanza seems complete, closed. Thus to move from one stanza to the next is a motion that does not come automatically to us by virtue of the rhyme scheme; rather, we must will it ourselves; this force of will symbolizes the poet’s difficulty in moving on after the loss of his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam.

Tennyson wrote “In Memoriam” after he learned that his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a fever at the age of 22. Hallam was not only the poet’s closest friend and confidante, but also the fiancée of his sister. After learning of Hallam’s death, Tennyson was overwhelmed with doubts about the meaning of life and the significance of man’s existence. He composed the short poems that comprise “In Memoriam” over the course of seventeen years (1833-1849) with no intention of weaving them together, though he ultimately published them as a single lengthy poem in 1850.

T.S. Eliot called this poem “the most unapproachable of all his [Tennyson’s] poems,” and indeed, the sheer length of this work encumbers one’s ability to read and study it. Moreover, the poem contains no single unifying theme, and its ideas do not unfold in any particular order. It is loosely organized around three Christmas sections (28, 78, and 104), each of which marks another year that the poet must endure after the loss of Hallam. The climax of the poem is generally considered to be Section 95, which is based on a mystical trance Tennyson had in which he communed with the dead spirit of Hallam late at night on the lawn at his home at Somersby.

“In Memoriam” was intended as an elegy, or a poem in memory and praise of one who has died. As such, it contains all of the elements of a traditional pastoral elegy such as Milton’s “Lycidas,” including ceremonial mourning for the dead, praise of his virtues, and consolation for his loss. Moreover, all statements by the speaker can be understood as personal statements by the poet himself. Like most elegies, the “In Memoriam” poem begins with expressions of sorrow and grief, followed by the poet’s recollection of a happy past spent with the individual he is now mourning. These fond recollections lead the poet to question the powers in the universe that could allow a good person to die, which gives way to more general reflections on the meaning of life. Eventually, the poet’s attitude shifts from grief to resignation. Finally, in the climax, he realizes that his friend is not lost forever but survives in another, higher form. The poem closes with a celebration of this transcendent survival.



“In Memoriam” ends with an epithalamion, or wedding poem, celebrating the marriage of Tennyson’s sister Cecilia to Edmund Lushington in 1842. The poet suggests that their marriage will lead to the birth of a child who will serve as a closer link between Tennyson’s generation and the “crowning race.” This birth also represents new life after the death of Hallam, and hints at a greater, cosmic purpose, which Tennyson vaguely describes as “One far-off divine event / To which the whole creation moves.”

Not just an elegy and an epithalamion, the poem is also a deeply philosophical reflection on religion, science, and the promise of immortality. Tennyson was deeply troubled by the proliferation of scientific knowledge about the origins of life and human progress: while he was writing this poem, Sir Charles Lyell published his *Principles of Geology*, which undermined the biblical creation story, and Robert Chambers published his early evolutionary tract, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. In “In Memoriam,” Tennyson insisted that we hold fast to our faith in a higher power in spite of our inability to prove God’s existence: “Believing where we cannot prove.” He reflects early evolutionary theories in his faith that man, through a process lasting millions of years, is developing into something greater. In the end, Tennyson replaces the doctrine of the immortality of the soul with the immortality of mankind through evolution, thereby achieving a synthesis between his profound religious faith and the new scientific ideas of his day.

## 5. Study Questions

### a. How did Tennyson’s poetry change after he became Poet Laureate in 1850?

**Sample Answer:** Tennyson’s later poetry was primarily narrative rather than lyrical. For example, unlike “Mariana,” which described a particular emotional state through landscape, his later poem *Maud* took the form of a “monodrama” (in Tennyson’s own words), in which

a speaker tells his story in a sequence of short lyrics in varying meters. In addition, whereas his later works considered themes from mythology, history, or personal memory, Tennyson's later poetry dealt with issues of current national concern. As Poet Laureate, Tennyson represented the literary voice of the nation and, as such, made occasional pronouncements on political affairs. For example, in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854), he depicted a disastrous battle in the Crimean War and praised the heroism of the British soldiers. In 1859, Tennyson published the first four Idylls of the King, a group of twelve blank verse narrative poems tracing the story of the legendary King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This collection, dedicated to Prince Albert, enjoyed much popularity among the royal family, who saw Arthur's lengthy reign as a representation of **Queen Victoria's 64-year rule (1837-1901).**

**b. Tennyson said that as a child he was haunted by "the passion of the past." In what ways can Tennyson be considered a poet of the past?**

**Sample Answer:** Most of Tennyson's best poems ponder the past. "The Lady of Shalott" and the poems within Idylls of the King take place in medieval England and capture a world of knights in shining armor and their damsels in distress. In addition to treating the history of his nation, Tennyson also explores the mythological past, as articulated in classical works of Homer, Virgil, and Dante. His "Ulysses" and "The Lotos- Eaters" draw upon actual incidents in Homer's Odyssey . Likewise, his ode "To Virgil" abounds with allusions to incidents in the great poet's Aeneid , especially the fall of Troy. Tennyson thus looked both to historical and mythological pasts as repositories for his poetry. Tennyson's personal past, too, figures prominently in his work. The sudden death of his closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam when Tennyson was just 24 dealt a great emotional blow to the young poet, who spent the next

ten years writing over a hundred poems dedicated to his departed friend, later collected and published as "In Memoriam" in 1850. This lengthy work describes Tennyson's memories of the time he spent with Hallam, including their days at Cambridge University. "In Memoriam" also reflects Tennyson's struggle with the Victorians' growing awareness of another sort of past: the vast expanse of geological time and evolutionary history. His treatment of the important scientific issues of his day represents an attempt to come to terms with the evolutionary past history of our species and our world. Tennyson can thus be considered a poet of the historical, mythological, personal, and evolutionary past.

**c. How did Tennyson respond to the scientific advances of his day?**

**Sample Answer:** Tennyson lived through many important discoveries and developments in the fields of biology, astronomy, and geology. In 1830-33, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* extended the history of the earth back millions of years and reduced the stature of the human race in time. Astronomers presented a map of the sky overwhelming in its vastness. Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) made humans just another species within the animal kingdom. The new discoveries implied a view of humanity that much distressed many Victorians, including Tennyson. In *Maud*, for example, he describes the stars as "cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand / His nothingness into man"; unlike the Romantics, he possessed a painful awareness of the brutality and indifference of "Nature red in tooth and claw." Although Tennyson associated evolution with progress, he also worried that the notion seemed to contradict the biblical story of creation and long-held assumptions about man's place in the world. Nonetheless, in "In Memoriam," he insists that we must keep our faith despite the latest discoveries of science: he writes, "Strong Son of God, immortal Love

/ Whom we, that have not seen they face, / By faith, and faith alone, embrace / Believing where we cannot prove.” At the end of the poem, he concludes that God’s eternal plan includes purposive biological development; thus he reassures his Victorian readers that the new science does not mean the end of the old faith. Tennyson thus provided the Victorians with a way of reconciling the new discoveries of science with their personal and religious convictions about man’s place and purpose.

d. In what ways was Tennyson an heir to the Romantic generation? In what ways did he differ from his predecessors?

e. How did the death of Arthur Henry Hallam impact Tennyson’s poetry?

f. How does the refrain change in the various stanzas of “Mariana”? Do these changes indicate any sort of development or progression in the poem?

g. “The Lady of Shalott” has most commonly been interpreted as a poem about the relationship between art and life. How can the Lady’s story be interpreted in these terms? Do you find this interpretation compelling?

h. In what way do “Ulysses” and “The Lotos- Eaters” present conclusions thematically antithetical to one another? Do these poems speak to one another? What conclusions might both support?

i. Several of Tennyson’s poems have mythological as well as autobiographical origins. How do these origins come into play in a poem such as “Ulysses” or “The Epic”?

j. Compare the different ways in which Tennyson chooses a classical theme or figure to symbolically discuss the notion of departing from life's natural course? Consider specifically the poems "Tithonus," "Ulysses," and "The Lotos-Eaters."

k. Tennyson uses several Christian images in his poetry, including the three Christmases that structure time in "In Memoriam" and the image of the Pilot in "Crossing the Bar." What other such images does Tennyson employ? Is Tennyson making a statement about Christianity in these references? What might he be saying?

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## Paper XIII: Unit 3

### Arnold's "Dover Beach", "Yes, in the sea of life enisled"

#### Contents

#### 1. Introduction to the Poet

#### 2. Introduction and Analysis of the Poem "Dover Beach"

#### 3. Introduction and Analysis of the Poem "Yes, in the sea of life enisled"

#### 4. Study Questions

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### STRUCTURE

#### 1. Introduction to the Poet

Matthew Arnold, poet and critic, was born at Laleham on the Thames, the eldest son of Thomas Arnold, historian and great headmaster of Rugby, and of Mary (Penrose) Arnold. He was educated at Winchester; Rugby, where he won a prize for a poem on "Alaric at Rome"; and Oxford, to which he went as a Scholar of Balliol College in 1841, and where he won the Newdigate Prize for "Cromwell, A Prize Poem," and received a Second Class in *litterae humaniores*, to the regret though hardly to the surprise of his friends. Always outwardly a worldling, he had not yet revealed the "hidden ground of thought and of austerity within" which was to appear in his poetry. "During these years," writes Thomas Arnold the younger in *Passages in a Wandering Life*, "my brother was cultivating his poetic gift carefully, but his

exuberant, versatile nature claimed other satisfactions. His keen bantering talk made him something of a social lion among Oxford men, he even began to dress fashionably."

In 1845, however, after a short interlude of teaching at Rugby, he was elected Fellow of Oriel, accounted a great distinction at Oxford since the days of Keble, Newman, and Dr. Arnold himself. The record of his private life at this period is curiously lacking. It is known that his allegiance to France was sealed by a youthful enthusiasm for the acting of Rachel, whom he later said he followed to Paris about this time and watched night after night, and that he visited George Sand at Nohant on one occasion and made on her the impression of a "Milton jeune et voyageant." It seems not improbable, from the poems to the mysterious Marguerite and a veiled reference in an early letter to his intimate friend Arthur Hugh Clough, that his French allegiance was further strengthened by a less intellectual bond.

In 1847 he became private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, who in 1851 secured him an inspectorship of schools, which almost to the end of his life was to absorb the greater part of his time and energies, and may have been partly responsible for the smallness of his poetical output. But it shortly enabled him to marry Frances Lucy Wightman, daughter of Sir William Wightman, a Judge of the Queen's Bench.

His literary career — leaving out the two prize poems — had begun in 1849 with the publication of *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* by A., which attracted little notice — although it contained perhaps Arnold's most purely poetical poem "The Forsaken Mermaid" — and was soon withdrawn. *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* (among them "Tristram and Iseult"), published in 1852, had a similar fate.



Arnold's work as a critic begins with the Preface to the *Poems* which he issued in 1853 under his own name, including extracts from the earlier volumes along with "Sohrab and Rustum" and "The Scholar-Gipsy" but significantly omitting "Empedocles." In its emphasis on the importance of subject in poetry, on "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, simplicity of style" learned from the Greeks, and in the strong imprint of Goethe and Wordsworth, may be observed nearly all the essential elements in his critical theory. He was still primarily a poet, however, and in 1855 appeared *Poems, Second Series*, among them "Balder Dead."

Criticism began to take first place with his appointment in 1857 to the professorship of poetry at Oxford, which he held for two successive terms of five years. In 1858 he brought out his tragedy of *Merope*, calculated, he wrote to a friend, "rather to inaugurate my Professorship with dignity than to move deeply the present race of humans," and chiefly remarkable for some experiments in unusual — and unsuccessful — metres.

In 1861 his lectures *On Translating Homer* were published, to be followed in 1862 by *Last Words on Translating Homer*, both volumes admirable in style and full of striking judgments and suggestive remarks, but built on rather arbitrary assumptions and reaching no well-established conclusions. Especially characteristic, both of his defects and his qualities, are on the one hand, Arnold's unconvincing advocacy of English hexameters and his creation of a kind of literary absolute in the "grand style," and, on the other, his keen feeling of the need for a disinterested and intelligent criticism in England.

This feeling, a direct result of his admiration for France, finds fuller expression in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Literary Influence of Academies," which

were published as the first two of the *Essays in Criticism* (1865) in which collection the influence of French ideas, especially of the critic Sainte-Beuve, is conspicuous, both in matter and in form — that of the causerie. The *Essays* are bound together by a scheme of social rather than of purely literary criticism, as is apparent from the Preface, written in a vein of delicious irony and culminating unexpectedly in the well-known poetically phrased tribute to Oxford.

After the publication in 1867 of *New Poems*, which included "Thyrsis" and "Rugby Chapel," elegies on Clough and on Dr. Arnold, and in 1868 of the *Essay on the Study of Celtic Literature*, a stimulating but illusory excursion into dangerously unfamiliar realms of philology and anthropology in imitation of Renan and perhaps of Gobineau, Arnold turned almost entirely from literature to social and theological writings. Inspired by a fervent zeal for bringing culture and criticism to the British middle class, beginning with the challenging *Culture and Anarchy* (complete text), Arnold launched by dint of sheer repetition most of the catchwords associated with his name such as "Sweetness and Light," borrowed from Swift, and the term "Philistine," borrowed from the Germans through Carlyle. He felt himself to be like the poet earlier described in his "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse":

Wandering        between        two        worlds,        one        dead,  
The other powerless to be born

and in an attempt to reconcile traditional religion with the results of the new higher criticism, he fell back on the idea of God as a "Stream of Tendency," a phrase derived from Wordsworth.

To the relief of a good many of his contemporaries, a volume appeared in 1878 called *Last Essays on Church and Religion*; and the next year was published *Mixed Essays* — "an unhappy title," says Mr. Herbert Paul, "suggesting biscuits." Worthy of particular mention are the two essays on the French critic Edmond Scherer and his writings on Milton and Goethe, and that on George Sand, who had influenced him strongly in his youth.

In 1883 Gladstone conferred on Arnold a pension of £250 a year, enabling him to retire from the post in the exercise of which he had not only traveled the length and breadth of England, but made several trips abroad to report on continental education. These reports were published in book form, and together with his ordinary reports as a school inspector had an important effect on English education. With his increased freedom, he set out on a lecture tour in the United States, spreading Sweetness and Light as far west as St. Louis. There, however, he began "to recognize the truth of what an American told the Bishop of Rochester, that 'Denver was not ripe for Mr. Arnold.'" The three lectures on "Numbers," "Literature and Science," and "Emerson," which he delivered to American audiences in 1883-84, were afterwards published as *Discourses in America* — the book, he told George Russell, later his biographer and editor of his *Letters*, by which, of all his prose writings, he should most wish to be remembered.

At this time an American newspaper compared him, as he stooped now and then to look at his manuscript on a music stool, to an elderly bird picking at grapes on a trellis; and another described him thus: "He has harsh features, supercilious manners, parts his hair down the middle, wears a single eyeglass and ill-fitting clothes." He crossed the Atlantic again in 1886 on a visit to his daughter who had married an American. When she returned

the visit in 1888, he went to Liverpool to meet her, and there, while running to catch a tramcar, suddenly died.

*Essays in Criticism: Second Series* which he had already collected, appeared shortly after his death. This volume, introduced by the essay on "The Study of Poetry," with the celebrated discussion of poetry as "a criticism of life," contains together with *Essays in Criticism: First Series* the prose work by which Arnold is best known. His best-known poems are probably "The Scholar-Gipsy"; "Thyrsis," considered one of the finest elegies in English; and "Sohrab and Rustum," a narrative poem, in tone a blend of the Homeric with the elegiac, based on an episode from the Shah-Nameh of the Persian poet Firdausi.

Matthew Arnold "was indeed the most delightful of companions," writes G. W. E. Russell in *Portraits of the Seventies*; "a man of the world entirely free from worldliness and a man of letters without the faintest trace of pedantry." A familiar figure at the Athenaeum Club, a frequent diner-out and guest at great country houses, fond of fishing and shooting, a lively conversationalist, affecting a combination of foppishness and Olympian grandeur, he read constantly, widely, and deeply, and in the intervals of supporting himself and his family by the quiet drudgery of school inspecting, filled notebook after notebook with meditations of an almost monastic tone. In his writings, he often baffled and sometimes annoyed his contemporaries by the apparent contradiction between his urbane, even frivolous manner in controversy, and the "high seriousness" of his critical views and the melancholy, almost plaintive note of much of his poetry. "A voice poking fun in the wilderness" was T. H. Warren's description of him.

A deeper inconsistency was caused by the "want of logic and thoroughness of thought" which J. M. Robertson noted in *Modern Humanists*. Few of his ideas were his own, and he failed to reconcile the conflicting influences which moved him so strongly. "There are four people, in especial," he once wrote to Cardinal Newman, "from whom I am conscious of having learnt — a very different thing from merely receiving a strong impression — learnt habits, methods, ruling ideas, which are constantly with me; and the four are — Goethe, Wordsworth, Sainte-Beuve, and yourself." Dr. Arnold must be added; the son's fundamental likeness to the father was early pointed out by Swinburne, and has been recently attested by Matthew Arnold's grandson, Mr. Arnold Whitridge. Brought up in the tenets of the Philistinism which, as a professed cosmopolitan and the Apostle of Culture he attacked, he remained something of a Philistine to the end.

In his poetry he derived not only the subject matter of his narrative poems from various traditional or literary sources but even much of the romantic melancholy of his earlier poems from Senancour's *Obermann*. His greatest defects as a poet stem from his lack of ear and his frequent failure to distinguish between poetry and prose. His significant if curious estimate of his own poems in 1869 was that they represented "on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century."

It is perhaps true, however, that as Sir Edmund Chambers says, "in a comparison between the best works of Matthew Arnold and that of his six greatest contemporaries . . . the proportion of work which endures is greater in the case of Matthew Arnold than in any one of them." His poetry endures because of its directness, and the literal fidelity of his beautifully circumstantial description of nature, of scenes, and places, imbued with a kind of majestic sadness which takes the place of music. Alike in his poetry and in his prose, which

supplies in charm of manner, breadth of subject-matter, and acuteness of individual judgment, what it lacks in system, a stimulating personality makes itself felt. He was chiefly valuable to his own age as its severest critic; to ours he represents its humanist aspirations.

### **Writing Style**

Contemporary with Carlyle and Ruskin and fully worthy to rank with them stands still a third great preacher of social and spiritual regeneration, Matthew Arnold, whose personality and message, however, were very different from theirs and who was also one of the chief Victorian poets. Arnold was born in 1822, the son--and this is decidedly significant--of the Dr. Thomas Arnold who later became the famous headmaster of Rugby School and did more than any other man of the century to elevate the tone of English school life. Matthew Arnold proceeded from Rugby to Oxford (Balliol College), where he took the prize for original poetry and distinguished himself as a student. This was the period of the Oxford Movement, and Arnold was much impressed by Newman's fervor and charm, but was already too rationalistic in thought to sympathize with his views. After graduation Arnold taught Greek for a short time at Rugby and then became private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, who was minister of public instruction. Four years later, in 1851, Arnold was appointed an inspector of schools, a position which he held almost to the end of his life and in which he labored very hard and faithfully, partly at the expense of his creative work. His life was marked by few striking outward events. His marriage and home were happy. Up to 1867 his literary production consisted chiefly of poetry, very carefully composed and very limited in amount, and for two five-year terms, from 1857 to 1867, he held the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford. At the expiration of his second term he did not seek for reappointment, because he did not care to arouse the opposition of Gladstone--then a

power in public affairs--and stir up religious controversy. His retirement from this position virtually marks the very distinct change from the first to the second main period of his career. For with deliberate self-sacrifice he now turned from poetry to prose essays, because he felt that through the latter medium he could render what seemed to him a more necessary public service. With characteristic self-confidence, and obeying his inherited tendency to didacticism, he appointed himself, in effect, a critic of English national life, beliefs, and taste, and set out to instruct the public in matters of literature, social relations, politics and religion. In many essays, published separately or in periodicals, he persevered in this task until his death in 1888.

As a poet Arnold is generally admitted to rank among the Victorians next after Tennyson and Browning. The criticism, partly true, that he was not designed by Nature to be a poet but made himself one by hard work rests on his intensely, and at the outset coldly, intellectual and moral temperament. He himself, in modified Puritan spirit, defined poetry as a criticism of life; his mind was philosophic; and in his own verse, inspired by Greek poetry, by Goethe and Wordsworth, he realized his definition. In his work, therefore, delicate melody and sensuous beauty were at first much less conspicuous than a high moral sense, though after the first the elements of external beauty greatly developed, often to the finest effect. In form and spirit his poetry is one of the very best later reflections of that of Greece, dominated by thought, dignified, and polished with the utmost care. 'Sohrab and Rostum,' his most ambitious and greatest single poem, is a very close and admirable imitation of 'The Iliad.' Yet, as the almost intolerable pathos of 'Sohrab and Rostum' witnesses, Arnold is not by any means deficient, any more than the Greek poets were, in

emotion. He affords, in fact, a striking example of classical form and spirit united with the deep, self-conscious, meditative feeling of modern Romanticism.

In substance Arnold's poetry is the expression of his long and tragic spiritual struggle. To him religion, understood as a reverent devotion to Divine things, was the most important element in life, and his love of pure truth was absolute; but he held that modern knowledge had entirely disproved the whole dogmatic and doctrinal scheme of historic Christianity and that a new spiritual revelation was necessary. To his Romantic nature, however, mere knowledge and mere modern science, which their followers were so confidently exalting, appeared by no means adequate to the purpose; rather they seemed to him largely futile, because they did not stimulate the emotions and so minister to the spiritual life. Further, the restless stirrings of his age, beginning to arouse itself from the social lethargy of centuries, appeared to him pitifully unintelligent and devoid of results. He found all modern life, as he says in 'The Scholar-Gypsy,' a 'strange disease,' in which men hurry wildly about in a mad activity which they mistake for achievement. In Romantic melancholy he looked wistfully back by contrast to periods when 'life was fresh and young' and could express itself vigorously and with no torturing introspection. The exaggerated pessimism in this part of his outcry is explained by his own statement, that he lived in a transition time, when the old faith was (as he held) dead, and the new one (partly realized in our own generation) as yet 'powerless to be born.' Arnold's poetry, therefore, is to be viewed as largely the expression, monotonous but often poignantly beautiful, of a temporary mood of questioning protest. But if his conclusion is not positive, it is at least not weakly despairing. Each man, he insists, should diligently preserve and guard in intellectual and moral integrity the fortress of his own soul, into which, when necessary, he can retire in serene and stoical resignation,



determined to endure and to 'see life steadily and see it whole.' Unless the man himself proves traitor, the littlenesses of life are powerless to conquer him. In fact, the invincible courage of the thoroughly disciplined spirit in the midst of doubt and external discouragement has never been, more nobly expressed than by Arnold in such poems as 'Palladium' and (from a different point of view) 'The Last Word.'

There is a striking contrast (largely expressing an actual change of spirit and point of view) between the manner of Arnold's poetry and that of his prose. In the latter he entirely abandons the querulous note and assumes instead a tone of easy assurance, jaunty and delightfully satirical. Increasing maturity had taught him that merely to sit regarding the past was useless and that he himself had a definite doctrine, worthy of being preached with all aggressiveness. We have already said that his essays fall into four classes, literary, social, religious, and political, though they cannot always be sharply distinguished. As a literary critic he is uneven, and, as elsewhere, sometimes superficial, but his fine appreciation and generally clear vision make him refreshingly stimulating. His point of view is unusually broad, his chief general purpose being to free English taste from its insularity, to give it sympathetic acquaintance with the peculiar excellences of other literatures. Some of his essays, like those on 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,' 'Wordsworth,' and 'Byron,' are among the best in English, while his 'Essays on Translating Homer' present the most famous existing interpretation of the spirit and style of the great Greek epics.

In his social essays, of which the most important form the volume entitled 'Culture and Anarchy,' he continues in his own way the attacks of Carlyle and Ruskin. Contemporary English life seems to him a moral chaos of physical misery and of the selfish, unenlightened, violent expression of untrained wills. He too looks with pitying contempt on the material

achievements of science and the Liberal party as being mere 'machinery,' means to an end, which men mistakenly worship as though it possessed a real value in itself. He divides English society into three classes:

1. The Aristocracy, whom he nick-names 'The Barbarians,' because, like the Germanic tribes who overthrew the Roman Empire, they vigorously assert their own privileges and live in the external life rather than in the life of the spirit.
2. The Middle Class, which includes the bulk of the nation. For them he borrows from German criticism the name 'Philistines,' enemies of the chosen people, and he finds their prevailing traits to be intellectual and spiritual narrowness and a fatal and superficial satisfaction with mere activity and material prosperity.
3. 'The Populace,' the 'vast raw and half-developed residuum.' For them Arnold had sincere theoretical sympathy (though his temperament made it impossible for him to enter into the same sort of personal sympathy with them as did Ruskin); but their whole environment and conception of life seemed to him hideous. With his usual uncomplimentary frankness Arnold summarily described the three groups as 'a materialized upper class, a vulgarized middle class, and a brutalized lower class.'

For the cure of these evils Arnold's proposed remedy was Culture, which he defined as a knowledge of the best that has been thought and done in the world and a desire to make the best ideas prevail. Evidently this Culture is not a mere knowledge of books, unrelated to the rest of life. It has indeed for its basis a very wide range of knowledge, acquired by intellectual processes, but this knowledge alone Arnold readily admitted to be 'machinery.' The real purpose and main part of Culture is the training, broadening, and refining of the whole spirit, including the emotions as well as the intellect, into sympathy with all the

highest ideals, and therefore into inward peace and satisfaction. Thus Culture is not indolently selfish, but is forever exerting itself to 'make the best ideas'--which Arnold also defined as 'reason and the will, of God'--'prevail.'

Arnold felt strongly that a main obstacle to Culture was religious narrowness. He held that the English people had been too much occupied with the 'Hebraic' ideal of the Old Testament, the interest in morality or right conduct, and though he agreed that this properly makes three quarters of life, he insisted that it should be joined with the Hellenic (Greek) ideal of a perfectly rounded nature. He found the essence of Hellenism expressed in a phrase which he took from Swift, 'Sweetness and Light,' interpreting Sweetness to mean the love of Beauty, material and spiritual, and Light, unbiased intelligence; and he urged that these forces be allowed to have the freest play. He vigorously attacked the Dissenting denominations, because he believed them to be a conspicuous embodiment of Philistine lack of Sweetness and Light, with an unlovely insistence on unimportant external details and a fatal blindness to the meaning of real beauty and real spirituality. Though he himself was without a theological creed, he was, and held that every Englishman should be, a devoted adherent of the English Church, as a beautiful, dignified, and national expression of essential religion, and therefore a very important influence for Culture.

Toward democracy Arnold took, not Carlyle's attitude of definite opposition, but one of questioning scrutiny. He found that one actual tendency of modern democracy was to 'let people do as they liked,' which, given the crude violence of the Populace, naturally resulted in lawlessness and therefore threatened anarchy. Culture, on the other hand, includes the strict discipline of the will and the sacrifice of one's own impulses for the good of all, which means respect for Law and devotion to the State. Existing democracy, therefore, he

attacked with unsparing irony, but he did not condemn its principle. One critic has said that 'his ideal of a State can best be described as an Educated Democracy, working by Collectivism in Government, Religion and Social Order.' But in his own writings he scarcely gives expression to so definite a conception.

Arnold's doctrine, of course, was not perfectly comprehensive nor free from prejudices; but none could be essentially more useful for his generation or ours. We may readily grant that it is, in one sense or another, a doctrine for chosen spirits, but if history makes anything clear it is that chosen spirits are the necessary instruments of all progress and therefore the chief hope of society.

The differences between Arnold's teaching and that of his two great contemporaries are probably now clear. All three are occupied with the pressing necessity of regenerating society. Carlyle would accomplish this end by means of great individual characters inspired by confidence in the spiritual life and dominating their times by moral strength; Ruskin would accomplish it by humanizing social conditions and spiritualizing and refining all men's natures through devotion to the principles of moral Right and esthetic Beauty; Arnold would leaven the crude mass of society, so far as possible, by permeating it with all the myriad influences of spiritual, moral, and esthetic culture. All three, of course, like every enlightened reformer, are aiming at ideal conditions which can be actually realized only in the distant future.

Arnold's style is one of the most charming features of his work. Clear, direct, and elegant, it reflects most attractively his own high breeding; but it is also eminently forceful, and marked by very skilful emphasis and reiteration. One of his favorite devices is a

pretense of great humility, which is only a shelter from which he shoots forth incessant and pitiless volleys of ironical raillery, light and innocent in appearance, but irresistible in aim and penetrating power. He has none of the gorgeousness of Ruskin or the titanic strength of Carlyle, but he can be finely eloquent, and he is certainly one of the masters of polished effectiveness.

## **2. Introduction to the Poem**

### **2.1 Dover Beach: Introduction**

In *Dover Beach* Matthew Arnold is describing the slow and solemn rumbling sound made by the sea waves as they swing backward and forward on the pebbly shore. One can clearly hear this monotonous sound all the time. The withdrawing waves roll the pebbles back towards the sea, and then after a pause, the returning waves roll them up the shore.

'*Dover Beach*' notes how the pebbles of the sea rolled by the sea-waves bring into the mind the "eternal note of sadness." Here he points out that in ancient times Sophocles heard the same sound of the pebbles on the shore, and it reminded him of the ebb and flow of human misery. In his *Antigone* Sophocles expressed this thought. Now this poet hears the sound of this *Dover Beach*, and he finds in it the same thought. The poet explains the gradual loss of man's faith in a grand and suggestive simile. He compares faith in religion to a sea that surrounds the world. The sea has its full tide, and then it ebbs away with the mournful music over the pebbles and the grating of the pebbles brings the "eternal note of sadness in". The poet reminds the world in which there was full of faith and men believed in religion. But now that faith is gradually passing away and men's minds are like pebbles on the shore. The passing of faith causes

the minds to be isolated in the border between belief and disbelief. It is a sad melancholy state. When the poet hears the grating roar of pebbles of the sea, he is reminded of the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of faith as it retreats from men’s minds. It is a chilly prospect, like the breath of the night wind, and it brings into the mind a dreary feeling of helplessness, as though the mind is left stripped and bare on the vast and dreary edges of an unknown land. The lines from 'Dover Beach' give bitter expression of Arnold’s loss of faith, his growing pessimism. The world seemed to be strangely unreal, without anything real to cling to on grasp. It has variety, beauty and freshness. But it is all blind negation: there is in it neither love nor joy nor light nor peace. There is nothing certain in it. Therefore he compares men struggling in the world with armies struggling on a plain at night. There is a sound of confused alarms and struggles, but the soldiers are ignorant as to what they are fighting for and why.

'Dover Beach' is one of Arnold’s typical poems. It expresses frequently the lack of faith and certitude which was the principal disease of the Victorian age. The first stanza opens with a calm, bright moonlit sea which reflects the serene, peaceful, receptive mood of the poet. He calls upon his companion to share the sweetness and tranquility of the night air and even as he does so, he is conscious of ‘the grating roar’ a harsh sound which disturbs the peace, the calm and the sweet music. The stanza ends on a ‘note of eternal sadness’, that ‘still sad music of humanity’ disturbs the calmness of mind and spirit as much as the calm bay. Here he points out that in ancient times Sophocles heard the same sound of the pebbles on the shore, and it reminded him of the ebb and flow of human misery. In his Antigone, Sophocles expressed this thought. Now Arnold hears the sound of this Dover Beach, and he finds in it the same thought. In the second stanza the

poet effectively uses a metaphor where the ebb and flow of human misery is compared to the tides of the sea. The fortunes of Oedipus are like the ebb and flow of the sea sand and the retreating tide is a symbol of the loss of faith. Arnold describes the slow and solemn rumbling sound made by the sea waves as they swing backward and forward on the pebbly shore. The poet implies that this sound suggests the eternal note of sadness in human life. The poem falls into two parts. In the first part, Arnold speaks of the resonances of sea-waves on the pebbly shore. In the second he speaks of armies struggling ignorantly at night. There is perhaps not very clear connection between the earlier and the latter part. Yet the poem reads well because it is held together by a unity of sentiment. The two descriptive analogies are drawn from classical sources, but the unifying sentiment is romantic in its haunting pessimism and lack of faith. Arnold through 'Dover Beach' describes the effects of industrialization of the 19th century England. Victorian world was changing very rapidly with the growth of science and technology.

This poem condemns the loss of faith, religion and the meaning of life resulting from the industrialization and advancement in science and technology. Arnold describes the difference between the appearance and reality of the Victorian world. It looks new and beautiful like a land of dreams but in reality this world does not really have joy, love, light, peace, certitude or any help for pain. He describes the world as a dark plain which is becoming even darker as the time passes. He compares the people struggling and running in their ambitions to the armies fighting at night, unknown of why and with whom they are fighting. Although, this poem had shown the loss of faith, religion and love of 19th century it is similar in the context of the 21st century as well. People have

lost their faith in God. They are engaged in commerce. They have become materialistic which has decreased their satisfaction in life. They are more isolated and lonely. Now, they have forgotten "us" and only remember "I". So, the poet wants to aware all the human being from this disaster created by the sufferings, sorrows and melancholy. The only way out of this disaster according to Arnold is to love and to have a faith in one another and do believe in God and live in reality rather than the land of dreams. Arnold's skillful use of elaborate similes and lively images has made the message of the poem even more poignant.

## **2.2. Analysis of the Poem Dover Beach**

### **Summary**

One night, the speaker of "Dover Beach" sits with a woman inside a house, looking out over the English Channel near the town of Dover. They see the lights on the coast of France just twenty miles away, and the sea is quiet and calm.

When the light over in France suddenly extinguishes, the speaker focuses on the English side, which remains tranquil. He trades visual imagery for aural imagery, describing the "grating roar" of the pebbles being pulled out by the waves. He finishes the first stanza by calling the music of the world an "eternal note of sadness."

The next stanza flashes back to ancient Greece, where Sophocles heard this same sound on the Aegean Sea, and was inspired by it to write his plays about human misery.

Stanza three introduces the poem's main metaphor, with: "The Sea of Faith/Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore." The phrase suggests that faith is fading from



society like the tide is from the shore. The speaker laments this decline of faith through melancholy diction.

In the final stanza, the speaker directly addresses his beloved who sits next to him, asking that they always be true to one another and to the world that is laid out before them. He warns, however, that the world's beauty is only an illusion, since it is in fact a battlefield full of people fighting in absolute darkness.

### **Analysis**

Arguably Matthew Arnold's most famous poem, "Dover Beach" manages to comment on his most recurring themes despite its relatively short length. Its message - like that of many of his other poems - is that the world's mystery has declined in the face of modernity. However, that decline is here painted as particularly uncertain, dark, and volatile.

What also makes the poem particularly powerful is that his romantic streak has almost no tinge of the religious. Instead, he speaks of the "Sea of Faith" without linking it to any deity or heaven. This "faith" has a definite humanist tinge - it seems to have once guided decisions and smoothed over the world's problems, tying everyone together in a meaningful way. It is no accident that the sight inspiring such reflection is that of untouched nature, almost entirely absent from any human involvement. In fact, the speaker's true reflection begins once the only sign of life - the light over in France - extinguishes. What Arnold is expressing is an innate quality, a natural drive towards beauty.

He explores this contradiction through what is possibly the poem's most famous stanza, that which compares his experience to that of Sophocles. The comparison could be

trite, if the point were merely that someone long before had appreciated the same type of beauty that he does. However, it is poignant because it reveals a darker potential in the beautiful. What natural beauty reminds us of is human misery. Because we can recognize the beauty in nature, but can never quite transcend our limited natures to reach it, we might be drawn to lament as well as celebrate it. The two responses are not mutually exclusive. This contradictory feeling is explored in many of Arnold's poems - "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "A Dream" are two examples - and he shows in other poems an instinct towards the tragic, the human inability to transcend our weakness (an example would be "Consolation," which presents time as a tragic force). Thus, the allusion to Socrates, a Greek playwright celebrated for his tragedies, is particularly apt.

Such a dual experience - between celebration of and lament for humanity - is particularly possible for Arnold, since mankind has traded faith for science following the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and the rise of Darwinism. Ironically, the tumult of nature - out on the ocean - is nothing compared to the tumult of this new way of life. It is this latter tumult that frightens the speaker, that has him beg his lover to stay true to him. He worries that the chaos of the modern world will be too great, and that she will be shocked to discover that even in the presence of great beauty like that outside their window, mankind is gearing up for destruction. Behind even the appearance of faith is the new order, and he hopes that they might use this moment to keep them together despite such uncertainty.

The poem epitomizes a certain type of poetic experience, in which the poet focuses on a single moment in order to discover profound depths. Here, the moment is the visceral serenity the speaker feels in studying the landscape, and the contradictory fear that that

serenity then leads him to feel. To accomplish that end, the poem uses a lot of imagery and sensory information. It begins with mostly visual depictions, describing the calm sea, the fair moon, and the lights in France across the Channel. "The cliffs of England stand/Glimmering and vast" not only describes the scene, but establishes how small the two humans detailed in the poem are in the face of nature.

Perhaps most interestingly, the first stanza switches from visual to auditory descriptions, including "the grating roar" and "tremulous cadence slow." The evocation of several senses fills out the experience more, and creates the sense of an overwhelming and all-encompassing moment.

The poem also employs a lot of enjambment (the poetic technique of leaving a sentence unfinished on one line, to continue and finish it on the next). The effect is to give the poem a faster pace: the information hits us in rapid succession, forming a clear picture in our minds little by little. It also suggests that Arnold does not wish to create a pretty picture meant for reflection. Instead, the beautiful sight is significant because of the fear and anxiety it inspires in the speaker. Because the poem so wonderfully straddles the line between poetic reflection and desperate uncertainty, it has remained a well-loved piece throughout the centuries.

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a poem set near Dover, along the southeast coast of England, where Arnold and his new wife spent their honeymoon in 1851. It is believed that the poet wrote the early draft of "Dover Beach" while here, overlooking the English Channel toward the coast of France, about twenty-six miles away. Arnold and his wife are often considered the models for the speaker and listener in the poem, although any

young man and woman could represent the two figures in the tale, caught in a moment of their early lives.

“Dover Beach” is most often classified as a dramatic monologue, a poetic form that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and especially Robert Browning, found extremely attractive. The monologue, or poem spoken by a single voice, is made dramatic by the presence of a silent audience of one or more listeners, whose responses may be indicated by the speaker, or persona. In this way the poet may be empowered to express views using another person’s voice, as William Shakespeare is known for doing.

This strategy may have been particularly attractive to Arnold, for the views of his speaker are diametrically opposed to his own education and upbringing. Matthew was six years old when he was moved into the Rugby School after his clergyman father Thomas Arnold became its headmaster, or principal. As headmaster, Thomas Arnold gained a reputation for educational reform, based on his commitment to the high seriousness of making students aware of the moral as well as the social issues that would make them responsible citizens.

“Dover Beach” has often been read as a kind of seismological record of the shock waves in traditional religion brought about by the New Science in the mid-nineteenth century. The geology of Charles Lyell and others was forcing Europeans and Americans to rethink how life began on the planet. Lyell’s discoveries of fossils dating back more than one million years were making it increasingly difficult to accept the traditional notion in the book of Genesis that the world is the work of a creator a mere six or seven thousand years ago. By 1851, when “Dover Beach” was probably written, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace, and other scientists had already theorized the essentials of evolution, but it would take

Darwin another eight years to publish his findings. Even then, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) only at the urging of his friends, who warned him that others would publish first if he did not set aside his concerns for the devastating moral and spiritual consequences of challenging the traditional story of how life began. It is probably no coincidence that Arnold himself postponed the publication of “Dover Beach” until 1867.

The poem begins with a naturalistic scene, clearly within the Romantic tradition established by William Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, Arnold understands the elegance and power of simple language: “The sea is calm tonight./ The tide is full, the moon lies fair/ Upon the straits.” As often noted, the first stanza contains fourteen lines and the second and third stanzas have six and eight lines, respectively, suggesting the sonnet form, but without its more complicated meter and rhyme systems. From its initial visual images, the first stanza and the subsequent two stanzas move toward the dominance of auditory images. The shift is justified by the obviously limited opportunity to see, even with moonlight, but also by the strong impact of the waves breaking on the beach. By the first stanza’s end, the persona, or speaker, has established the poem’s central metaphor of the waves’ “tremulous cadence slow” to represent an “eternal note of sadness.” Additionally, a mere five lines into the poem, the voice has introduced a listener in the scene—telling the reader to “Come to the window”—setting up a tension: Who is the listener? What will be the effect of the melancholy poetic statement on that listener?

This “eternal note” draws the persona further from the directly visualized opening scene with its simple but strong language. The allusion to the ancient Greek tragic dramatist Sophocles offers a context for the speaker’s growing “sadness.” (Arnold was among one of

the last generations for whom a classical education entailed learning ancient Greek and Latin to read the classics in their original languages.) The allusion also draws the poem into the more didactic strategy of a statement—asserting rather than implying meaning—and the deployment of something like allegory—a “Sea of Faith” once at its “flow” but now at its “ebb.” This third stanza also reveals evidence of the poet’s effort at elevating the language, producing the difficult opening lines in which that sea once “round earth’s shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled,” a choice of words guaranteed to confuse the modern reader. This “girdle” is appropriate to the classical context of Sophocles, but not to the modern world, where it denotes an article of intimate apparel. However, attempts of academics to clarify that meaning have distracted attention from the figurative logic of a sea as a “girdle,” or belt, as well as from the unfortunate combination of sounds in “girdle furled.” Another issue left unaddressed is the dominance of pessimism in the persona’s inability to attend to the logic of this “Sea of Faith”: Whatever ebbs will inevitably flow in the future.

The final stanza recalls the earlier reference to the listener—“Ah, love, let us be true/ To one another!”—to focus on the melancholy consequences of the weakening of faith. To the persona, and presumably the poet, the world truly is “a land of dreams,” pipe dreams with nothing to believe in, not just God and an afterlife but “joy,” “love,” and so on. This is Romantic love at its most radical. Without love between a man and a woman, the world is as confusing—and as lethal—as a night battle, fraught with friendly fire. In a sense, Arnold is announcing the big question for the modern world, intent on forcing love to bear the enormous weight of providing human lives with meaning: If love is all humans have, what do they do when they cannot find love, or keep it? It is a question that resonates through the

novels, too, of Ernest Hemingway, such as in his *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), or in the contexts of wedding receptions, where some have to suppress the depressing thought, will this be the one of every two marriages that ends in divorce?

“Dover Beach” is the most anthologized text in the English language, and a frequent source of allusions for writers in their own works. One index of the poem’s effect on readers of poetry is a poem by American poet laureate Anthony Hecht. In his “Dover Bitch: A Criticism of Life” (1996), Hecht focuses on the silent listener in Arnold’s poem, developing her character as a woman who is definitely not the speaker’s wife, and identifying the persona in his poem as someone who knew Arnold, the speaker in “Dover Beach.” Hecht’s poem indicates that the woman responds to Arnold’s expression of melancholy, but her first response of sadness is displaced not by erotic desire but by anger at his treating her as “a sort of mournful cosmic last resort.” Although Arnold specialists Kenneth and Miriam Allott may attempt to defuse Hecht’s parody as “an irreverent *jeu d’esprit*,” this is no “witty or humorous trifle.” The perceptive Hecht grasps the shabby treatment of the woman by Arnold’s speaker, who is using her as a consolation prize for his loss of faith. By implication, Hecht also addresses the sexual mores of Arnold’s time, when the young poet could never have lived with his future bride and may well have resorted to Hecht’s less respectable female character. Unlike brides in Arnold’s day, bridegrooms were not expected to come to the marriage beds as virgins.

Hecht’s poem speaks to his confidence in his reader’s familiarity with Arnold’s poem. That familiarity is evident in the usual catalog of references to “Dover Beach” in popular culture, including in the rock album *Snakes & Arrows* (2007) by Rush, the American film *The Anniversary Party* (2001), Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22* (1961), Norman Mailer’s Vietnam

protest book *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and a composition for string quartet and baritone by Samuel Barber. To further demonstrate the poem's continuing influence, reference to "Dover Beach" is included in the climactic scene of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005).

### **Stylistic Devices**

"Dover Beach" is a brief, dramatic monologue generally recognized as Arnold's best—and most widely known—poem. It begins with an opening stanza that is indisputably one of the finest examples of lyric poetry in the English language. The topography of the nocturnal setting is a combination of hushed tranquillity and rich sensory detail. It is the world as it appears to the innocent eye gazing on nature: peaceful, harmonious, suffused with quiet joy. The beacon light on the coast of Calais, the moon on the calm evening waters of the channel, and the sweet scent of the night air all suggest a hushed and gentle world of silent beauty. The final line of the stanza, however, introduces a discordant note, as the perpetual movement of the waves suggests to the speaker not serenity but "the eternal note of sadness."

The melancholy strain induces in the second stanza an image in the mind of the speaker: Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, creator of *Oedipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 b.c.e.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715) and *Antigone* (441 b.c.e.; *Antigone*, 1729) standing in the darkness by the Aegean Sea more than two thousand years ago. The ancient master of tragedy hears in the eternal flux of the waves the same dark note, "the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery." Thus, the speaker, like Sophocles before him, perceives life as tragedy; suffering and misery are inextricable elements of existence. Beauty, joy, and calm are ephemeral and illusory. The speaker's pessimistic perspective on the human condition, expressed in stanzas two,



three, and four, undercuts and effectively negates the positive, tranquil beauty of the opening stanza; the reality subsumes the misleading appearance. In the third stanza, Arnold introduces the metaphor of the “Sea of Faith,” the once abundant tide in the affairs of humanity that has slowly withdrawn from the modern world. Darwinism and Tractarianism in Arnold’s nineteenth century England brought science into full and successful conflict with religion. “Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar” suggested to Arnold the death throes of the Christian era. The Sophoclean tragic awareness of fate and painful existence had for centuries been displaced by the pure and simple faith of the Christian era, a temporary compensation promising respite from an existence that is ultimately tragic.

The fourth and final stanza of “Dover Beach” is extremely pessimistic. Its grim view of reality, its negativity, its underlying desperate anguish are in marked contrast to the joy and innocent beauty of the first stanza. Love, the poet suggests, is the one final truth, the last fragile human resource. Yet here, as the world is swallowed by darkness, it promises only momentary solace, not joy or salvation for the world. The world, according to the speaker, “seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,” offering at least an appearance that seems “So various, so beautiful, so new,” but it is deceptive, a world of wishful thinking. It is shadow without substance, offering neither comfort nor consolation. In this harsh existence, there is “neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.”

Arnold closes the poem with the famous lines that suggest the very nadir of human existence; few poems have equaled its concise, sensitive note of poignant despair. Humanity stands on the brink of chaos, surrounded in encroaching darkness by destructive forces and unable to distinguish friend from foe. The concluding image of the night battle

suggests quite clearly the mood of the times among those who shared Arnold's intellectual temperament, and it is one with which they were quite familiar. Thucydides' *Historia tou Peloponnesiacou polemou* (431-404 b.c.e.; *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1550) describes the night battle of Epipolae between the Athenians and the Syracusans. Dr. Thomas Arnold, Matthew's father, had published a three-volume translation of Thucydides' text in 1835; it was a favorite text at Rugby. Another ancillary source was John Henry Newman, who, in 1843, published a sermon, "Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of Mind," in which he alludes to the growing religious controversy of the time, describing it as "a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together."

### **Themes and Meanings**

The prose work of Matthew Arnold, addressed to a more general audience, attempts to suggest to those of his day some relatively public, institutional substitute for the loss of the unifying faith that men once shared, most notably what Arnold called "Culture." Arnold's poetry, however, is more personal and ultimately less assured. Virtually all of Arnold's poetry is the record of his personal search for calm, for objectivity, for somewhere firm to stand.

As a broad generalization, the poem presents the common opposition between appearance and reality; the appearance is the opening six lines, which turn out to be a dream, while the reality of life, which the poet accepts, is the desolate beach and the confused battlefield. The poem also presents the eternal conflict between the wisdom of the heart and the wisdom of the head. The heart is attracted by the pleasant appearance of the view from the window, but the head is forced to take heed of the eternal sound of the surf, which says something entirely different. It is notable in the poem that the poet does

not make a clear choice between the two; in fact, he accepts that the world is the way his reason tells him. The problem is how to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable forces. The answer given, tentatively, is that perhaps true love between two people can somehow supply meaning in a world that is still filled with confusion and struggle.

In "Dover Beach," Arnold is doing two things: chronicling and lamenting the loss of faith and seeking a substitute, here the possibility of human love for another individual. (In other poems, Arnold suggested other substitutes.) Arnold firmly believed that Christianity was dead. His reason and his knowledge and investigation of such mid-Victorian intellectual trends as the Higher Criticism of the Bible and quasi-historical concerns about the historical Jesus had convinced him that a reasonable man could no longer believe in Christianity. Yet Arnold's heart and instincts told him, not that Christianity ought to survive, but that humankind desires and indeed must have something in which to believe in order to truly live, to be truly human. Humankind wants something which can give force and meaning to life, which the modern world with its science and commercialism cannot supply. Arnold's best-known expression of this problem is in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," where he finds himself "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born." The dead world is Christianity, the world powerless to be born is the modern world with its deceptive attractions.

Though on one level one may call "Dover Beach" a love poem, the possibility that human love and communication can somehow make the loss of faith and certitude bearable (because it will not make the world go away) is really given short shrift. The images of sadness, melancholy, and desolation dominate the poem, while the possibility of love gets no more than two short lines. Even those two lines are overwhelmed by the emotional

impact and vividness of the final image. The effect of the poem would seem to emphasize that the possibility of love is tentative at best, while the poet cannot seem to purge from his consciousness his horrifying vision of human life.

### **3. Introduction and Analysis of the Poem “Yes, in the sea of life enisled”**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the first stanza of this short poem, Arnold compares humans to islands, to suggest how distant we are from one another. He paints an image of a vast sea between the islands (people), and emphasizing their separation through the line "We mortal millions live *alone*." And yet these islands are drawn to one another, through the lovely sounds of birds singing, sounds which drift between the islands. The speaker expresses his desire for connection, which modern society lacks. He suggests that we must have once been together - all the "islands" must have once been one "continent." He desperately wishes that the water between the islands would recede so that the landforms might meet again.

In the final stanza, he asks what power could possibly keep lovers apart like this, and "render vain their deep desire." The answer, he states, is God — the God of the modern world does not provide the same hope and connection that He once did, since much of faith is tainted by science.

#### **Analysis**

It is likely that this poem was Arnold's response to the famous line from John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* published in 1624. The line read, "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine."

(Translated to contemporary parlance, the most famous part of the line is "No man is an island.") Donne wished us to believe that none of us are entirely alone - instead, we are all interdependent, reliant on one another. Every piece of land survives and thrives as part of a greater community, or "continent."

More than 200 years later, Arnold pessimistically argues that the opposite is true. The poem suggests that *every* man is an island, separated by water from those around him, even though they may seemingly be close. The real tragedy, however, is our awareness of others. Each island can hear the nightingales sing from other islands, a beautiful sound that is nevertheless too distant to reach. We know that there is joy in connection, but cannot achieve that.

The undercurrent of the poem is a skepticism in scientific discovery. The basic premise - that the continent has broken apart and drifted into separate islands - is based on a rational theory that reflects Enlightenment thought. This rational, scientific reading might have a basis in fact, but it for Arnold makes us spiritually distant from one another. We have traded faith - in the great community engendered by shared religious faith - for separation.

The line "We mortal millions live *alone*" is one of Arnold's most famous. It is so effective for a number of reasons; first, the juxtaposition of "millions" and "alone" is eerie and unsettling; surrounded by so many people all the time, it is hard for any of us to imagine feeling entirely alone. The word *alone* is italicized to stress that fact; in Victorian England, human isolation was extremely prominent, and being alone *was* a realistic fear. The terminal punctuation at the end of this line also adds to its potency. There are very few lines that end terminally in this poem; most are halted by commas, which is a subtle form of enjambment (when a sentence continues from one line to another). The period at the end

of this sentence allows it to resonate with a reader all the more strongly, since the next line is a whole new idea rather than a continuation of this one. The overall effect is one of unease, which naturally aligns with the sadness and anger at the poem's center.

#### **4. Study Questions**

##### **4.1 Discuss Matthew Arnold's stance on global modernization, and how that outlook manifests in his poetry.**

Matthew Arnold was clearly opposed to modern industrialization; he believed that it created a laborious work ethic, and that people ended up wasting their lives away on mundane tasks. He referred to such a life as a "prison." Many of his poems incorporate this viewpoint. For example, in "The Scholar-Gipsy," he lauds the scholar-gipsy for breaking away from this type of lifestyle. In "A Summer Night," he condemns how this modern world breaks everyone into either imprisoned laborers or those who are willing to be considered "madmen" by breaking away. He often poses nature as a contrast to this industrialized life. Overall, this desire to transcend the limitations of the modern world constitutes Arnold's most common theme.

##### **4.2 How does the theme of faith manifest in Matthew Arnold's poetry?**

Though he often questioned the nature of organized religion, Arnold was a huge proponent of using faith to guide life, and this shows in his poetry. In his opinion, the rising prominence of science and rapid modernization was pushing faith farther and farther away from people's lives, and this was inexcusable and detrimental. As evidenced in "East London," Arnold believed that only faith could brighten one's path during this dark time, and yet it was still being shunted to the side. In Arnold's most famous poem, "Dover Beach," the

speaker laments the difference in the way faith was valued in earlier times and the way it is valued now. Overall, faith is less important in Arnold's work as a religious sentiment than it is as an escape from the perils of modern life.

#### **4.3 Why did Arnold believe poetry was more difficult than any other art?**

In "Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoon," Arnold expresses his belief that poetry is unfairly appreciated in comparison to other arts, particularly painting and music. Those latter two mediums tend to garner more attention. And yet Arnold believes that poetry is both the most difficult and all-encompassing. Whereas a painter can only capture a single moment in time, and the musician has only a limited number of notes with which to work, a poet is charged with capturing the entire movement of the world and its people, and with a multitude of tools at his disposal. Further, a poet is responsible for not only the present, but the past as well, making his art into a huge responsibility. In short, because poetry has the most potential, it also poses the most difficult challenge.

#### **4.4 Why does Arnold so frequently incorporate natural metaphors and outdoor imagery into his poetry?**

Since so much of Arnold's work condemns the state of humanity and society in the modern world, it makes sense that he would be so enamored of nature. Whereas society seemed to be changing incessantly before his eyes, nature remained a much more reliable constant. Nature is beautiful, pure, and never-changing. In other words, nature serves as an expression of man's transcendent potential, while the physical world only reflects man's limitations. (Arnold tends to represent these limitations through the symbol of cities, a clear juxtaposition to nature.) One good example is "A Wish," in which the speaker expresses his

desire to look out towards nature as he dies, to contemplate greater possibilities, rather than focus on the superficialities of the human world.

#### **4.5 Discuss Arnold's use of language, structure, and rhyme in his poetry.**

Though he may not have followed strict parameters as did many other poets of his time, style and structure are still both important components of Matthew Arnold's poetry. Further, while different poems use different approaches, there are some overlapping ideas. Arnold's diction paints many mental pictures throughout his poems; through his word choice, readers can imagine the locations and scenes he describes. This is particularly important since he tends to juxtapose the serenity of nature with the hustle and bustle of modern life. Also, he uses a variety of poetic structures, including sonnets such as "East London" and "West London," and utilizes shorter lines and enjambment when a poem is meant to be read at a fast pace. Through his decisions in this regard, he makes his ideas about modern life seem important and pressing, not simply abstractions. Finally, Arnold frequently uses rhyme schemes, though his patterns are often simple so as not to distract the reader. Whenever rhyme is noticeable, it usually connotes an innocence or childishness that underlines the theme of that particular poem.

#### **4.6 How does Matthew Arnold juxtapose the earthly elements in his poetry, particularly in "A Dream?"**

Though he incorporated all four elements into many of his poems, Arnold most commonly juxtaposed water and fire, two elements that are notably opposite from one another. The most obvious occurrence of such juxtaposition occurs in "A Dream." In this poem, the speaker and his friend begin their journey sailing on a small creek surrounded by beautiful, natural scenery. The creek is deemed the "River of Life," and it whisks them



farther and farther along, until they pass by "burning plains of cities." These cities represent societal corruption and modernization, expressed negatively by fire. This fire threatens to ruin their journey until the River of Life whisks them into a calm sea; water again offers security. This basic juxtaposition - whereby water represents peaceful salvation, and fire potential devastation amongst humanity - is present in many of the poems.

#### **4.7 How and why does Matthew Arnold draw upon classical mythology?**

Arnold frequently incorporates the tales of classical mythology into his poetry, usually as an example of a type of serenity that has been lost in the modern world. Some of the most notable examples are "Apollo Musagetes" and "Cadmus and Harmonia." During the time of the ancient gods and goddesses, faith was a huge component of everyday life; people explained the happenings of the world by way of the deities they believed in. Further, the gods were human-type figures who had an inherent connection to the immortality of nature. For Arnold, this connection made figures like Harmonia or Apollo enviable. Overall, Arnold draws upon mythology to emphasize and condemn the difference between a world that valued faith and a modern world that values work and toil more highly.

#### **4.8 Does Arnold take a reflective or an emotional stance in his poetry? Explain.**

Though there are bouts of emotion in Arnold's poems (particularly in those involving love and his idealized "Marguerite"), the poems typically take more of a reflective stance. In particular, they remark on (and typically criticize) the human condition. In other words, they tend to have a more intellectual than emotional agenda. Arnold believed, as evidenced by "Austerity of Poetry," that poetry should express a simple philosophy or hold some sort of

moral, even if it is disguised under layers of figurative language and beautiful imagery. He certainly practiced what he preached; after reading of a set of his poems, it becomes quite clear that Arnold had a lot to say about modern life.

#### **4.9 Discuss the speakers in Arnold's poetry.**

In his poetry, Matthew Arnold most frequently uses his speaker as a representation of himself, rather than as fictional characters with distinct voices. Though his speakers may have experienced things that he did not, they always share his opinions and express his own ideas. Also, his speakers will often relate personal anecdotes that are eventually translated into worldly lessons and criticisms, something that can be noticed in the pair of sonnets "East London" and "West London."

#### **4.10 Arnold chooses to personify a number of intangible ideas in his poems. What effect does this have?**

Arnold's use of personification feeds his intellectual approach, since he can then treat abstract ideas as things to be physically reckoned with. For instance, in "Desire," Arnold personifies both "The Soul" and "Pride" in order to emphasize the way that pride can corrupt the soul. By making these aspects of humanity into physical beings, Arnold creates a more immediate picture of their power. He does something similar in "Consolation," personifying Time to better explore how time affects our experience. Overall, his use of personification suggests that certain forces are virtually out of our control. We must almost literally battle the problems of the world and ourselves; they are more than abstract ideas.

## 5. Suggestions for Further Reading

- George W. E. Russell (editor), *Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1849–88*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1895). Published seven years after their author's death these letters were heavily edited by Arnold's family.
- Howard F. Lowry (editor), *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932)
- C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (editors), *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, Oxford University Press, 1950 standard edition, OCLC 556893161
- Kenneth Allott (editor), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London and New York: Longman Norton, 1965) ISBN 0-393-04377-0. Part of the "Annotated English Poets Series," Allott includes 145 poems (with fragments and juvenilia) all fully annotated.
- Robert H. Super (editor), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* in eleven volumes (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960–1977)
- Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super (editors), *The Oxford Authors: Matthew Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1986)
- A strong selection from Miriam Allot, who had (silently) assisted her husband in editing the Longman Norton annotated edition of Arnold's poems, and Robert H. Super, editor of the eleven volume complete prose.
- Stefan Collini (editor), *Culture and Anarchy and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) part of the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* series.

- Collini's introduction to this edition attempts to show that "*Culture and Anarchy*, first published in 1869, has left a lasting impress upon subsequent debate about the relation between politics and culture" —Introduction, p. ix.
- Cecil Y. Lang (editor), *The Letters of Matthew Arnold* in six volumes (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1996–2001)
- George Saintsbury, *Matthew Arnold* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899). Saintsbury combines biography with critical appraisal. In his view, "Arnold's greatness lies in 'his general literary position' (p. 227). Neither the greatest poet nor the greatest critic, Arnold was able to achieve distinction in both areas, making his contributions to literature greater than those of virtually any other writer before him." Mazzeno, 1999, p. 8.
- Herbert W. Paul, *Mathew Arnold* (London: Macmillan, 1902)
- G. W. E. Russell, *Matthew Arnold* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904)
- Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (New York: Norton, 1939). Trilling called his study a "biography of a mind."
- Park Honan, *Matthew Arnold, a life* (New York, McGraw–Hill, 1981) ISBN 0-07-029697-9. "Trilling's book challenged and delighted me but failed to take me close to Matthew Arnold's life. ... I decided in 1970 to write a definitive biography... Three-quarters of the biographical data in this book, I may say, has not appeared in a previous study of Arnold." —Preface, pp. viii–ix.
- Stefan Collini, *Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). A good starting point for those new to Arnold's prose. "Like many late century scholars, Collini believes Arnold's chief contribution to English literature is as a critic. ... Collini insists Arnold remains a force in literary criticism because 'he characterizes in unforgettable ways'

the role that literary and cultural criticism 'can and must play in modern societies'" (p 67). Mazzeno, 1999, pp. 103–104.

## 6. Bibliography

- Nicholas Murray, *A Life of Matthew Arnold* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996). "...focuses on the conflicts between Arnold's public and private lives. A poet himself, Murray believes Arnold was a superb poet who turned to criticism when he realised his gift for verse was fading." Mazzeno, 1999, p. 118.
- Ian Hamilton, *A Gift Imprisoned: A Poetic Life of Matthew Arnold* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998)
- "Choosing to concentrate on the development of Arnold's talents as a poet, Hamilton takes great pains to explore the biographical and literary sources of Arnold's verse." Mazzeno, 1999, p. 118.
- Thomas Burnett Smart, *The Bibliography of Matthew Arnold 1892*, (reprinted New York: Burt Franklin, 1968, Burt Franklin Bibliography and Reference Series #159)
- Laurence W. Mazzeno, *Matthew Arnold: The Critical Legacy* (Woodbridge: Camden House, 1999)
- Not a true bibliography, nonetheless, it provides thorough coverage and intelligent commentary for the critical writings on Arnold.
- Writings on Matthew Arnold or containing significant discussion of Arnold (by publication date):
- Stephen, Leslie (1898). "Matthew Arnold". *Studies of a Biographer* 2. London: Duckworth and Co. pp. 76–122.
- G. W. E. Russell, *Portraits of the Seventies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916)

- Sir Edmund Chambers, "Matthew Arnold," Watson Lecture on English Poetry, 1932, in *English Critical Essays: Twentieth century*, Phyllis M. Jones (editor) (London: Oxford University Press, 1933)
- T. S. Eliot, "Matthew Arnold" in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933). This is Eliot's second essay on Matthew Arnold. The title of the series consciously echoes Arnold's essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864).
- Professors Chauncey Brewster Tinker and Howard Foster Lowry, *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold: A Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940) Alibris ID 8235403151
- W. F. Connell, *The Educational Thought and Influence of Matthew Arnold* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd, 1950). Mazzeno describes this as the "definitive word" on Arnold's educational thought. Mazzeno, 1999, p. 42.
- George Watson, "Matthew Arnold" in *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962)
- Dwight Culler, "Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
- Described by Stefan Collini as "the most comprehensive discussion" of the poetry in his "Arnold" *Past Masters*, p.121.
- David J. DeLaura, "Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater" (Austin: University of Texas Pr, 1969). This celebrated study brilliantly situates Arnold in the intellectual history of his time.

- Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (in "Daedalus", 99, 2, pp. 268–342, Spring 1970; then New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1983) ISBN 0-7108-0641-8
- Joseph Carroll, *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981)
- Ruth apRoberts, *Arnold and God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983)
- Harold Bloom (editor), W. H. Auden, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Tillotson, G. Wilson Knight, William Robbins, William E. Buckler, Ruth apRoberts, A. Dwight Culler, and Sara Suleri, *Modern Critical Views: Matthew Arnold* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987)
- David G. Riede, *Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988). "...explores Arnold's attempts to find an authoritative language, and argues that his occasional claims for such language reveal more uneasiness than confidence in the value of 'letters.' ... Riede argues that Arnold's determined efforts to write with authority, combined with his deep-seated suspicion of his medium, result in an exciting if often agonised tension in his poetic language." –from the book flap.
- Donald Stone, *Communications with the Future: Matthew Arnold in Dialogue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997)
- Linda Ray Pratt, *Matthew Arnold Revisited*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000) ISBN 080571698
- Francesco Marroni, *Miti e mondi vittoriani* (Rome: Carocci, 2004)
- Renzo D'Agnillo, *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold* (Rome: Aracne, 2005)





## Paper-XIII: Unit 4

### D.G.Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel"

#### Contents

1. Introduction to the Poet
2. Introduction to the Poem
3. Analysis of the Poem
4. Stylistic Devices
5. Study Questions
6. Suggestions for Further Reading
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#### STRUCTURE

##### 1. Introduction to the Poet

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born 12 May 1828 in London, the second child and eldest son of Italian expatriates. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was a Dante scholar, who had been exiled from Naples for writing poetry in support of the Neapolitan Constitution of 1819. Rossetti's mother had trained as a governess and supervised her children's early education. Few Victorian families were as gifted as the Rossettis: the oldest child, Maria Rossetti, published *A Shadow of Dante* (1871) and became an Anglican nun; William Michael Rossetti was along with his brother an active member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and

became an editor, man of letters, and memoirist; the youngest, Christina Georgina Rossetti, became an important and influential lyric poet.

As a child Dante Gabriel Rossetti intended to be a painter and illustrated literary subjects in his earliest drawings. He was tutored at home in German and read the Bible, Shakespeare, Goethe's *Faust*, *The Arabian Nights*, Dickens, and the poetry of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. After leaving school, he apprenticed himself to the historical painter Ford Madox Brown, who later became his closest lifelong friend. He also continued his extensive reading of poetry—Poe, Shelley, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, Browning, and Tennyson—and began in 1845 translations from Italian and German medieval poetry. In 1847 and 1848 Rossetti began several important early poems—"My Sister's Sleep," "The Blessed Damozel," "The Bride's Prelude," "On Mary's Portrait," "Ave," "Jenny," "Dante at Verona," "A Last Confession," and several sonnets, a form in which he eventually became expert.

Rossetti did not have the natural technical talent that is seen in the small detail and brilliant color of a typical Pre-Raphaelite painting, and his early oil paintings, the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) and the *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1850), were produced only at the expense of great technical effort. In the less demanding technique of watercolor, however, Rossetti clearly revealed his imaginative power. The series of small watercolors of the 1850s produced such masterpieces as *Dante's Dream* (1856) and the *Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra* (1857).

In almost all of Rossetti's paintings of the 1850s he used Elizabeth Siddal as his model. Discovered in a hat shop in 1850, she was adopted by the Brotherhood as their ideal

of feminine beauty. In 1852 she became exclusively Rossetti's model, and in 1860 his wife. Struggling with growing depression, she killed herself two years later. Rossetti buried a manuscript of his poems in her coffin, a characteristically dramatic gesture which he later regretted. *Beata Beatrix* (1863), a posthumous portrait (portrait done after her death) of Elizabeth Siddal is one of Rossetti's most deeply felt paintings. It is one of his last masterpieces and the first in a series of symbolic, female portraits, which declined gradually in quality as his interest in painting decreased.

Rossetti divided his attention between painting and poetry for the rest of his life. In 1848 he founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with six other young men, mostly painters, who shared an interest in contemporary poetry and an opposition to certain stale conventions of contemporary academy art. In a general way, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood sought to introduce new forms of thematic seriousness, high coloration, and attention to detail into contemporary British art. Members of the group included John Everett Millais, its most skilled painter and future president of the Royal Academy, and William Holman Hunt, Thomas Woolner; Frederic Stephens; and William Michael Rossetti, who as P.R.B. secretary kept a journal of activities and edited the six issues of its periodical, the *Germ* (1850). Associates of the group included the older painter Ford Madox Brown, the painter and poet William Bell Scott, the poet Coventry Patmore, and Christina Rossetti, six of whose poems appeared in the *Germ*.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers provided each other with companionship, criticism, and encouragement early in their careers and defended each other against initial public hostility. Dante Gabriel Rossetti shaped the group's literary tastes, pressed for the founding of the *Germ*, and published several poems in it, including "My Sister's Sleep." He also

contributed an allegorical prose tale, "Hand and Soul," in which a thirteenth-century Italian painter, Chiaro dell' Erma, is visited by a woman representing his soul, who tells him, "Paint me thus, as I am ....so shall thy soul stand before thee always"—an early suggestion of Rossetti's later artistic preoccupation with dreamlike, heavily stylized female figures.

In the late 1840s, Rossetti began exhibiting his paintings and, in 1850 met Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, "Lizzie," then sixteen or seventeen years old. Lizzie became Rossetti's model, and eventually his wife. After losing a child, she committed suicide in 1862; already depressed, her death pushed Rossetti into deeper melancholy. As a last tribute Rossetti placed a manuscript of his poems in his wife's grave, a decision he later regretted. However marked by tragedy, the 1850s and '60s saw Rossetti's reputation grow rapidly. In 1856 several university undergraduates, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, began a journal modeled after the *Germ*. Entitled the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, it had a run of twelve issues to which Rossetti contributed three poems. Through his connection to the magazine, Rossetti met Jane Burden—his life-long muse and mistress—and introduced her to her future husband William Morris.

The triangle between Rossetti, Jane Burden, and Morris was complex. Rossetti cofounded a firm of designers comprised of Morris and others, doing decorative work for churches and private houses. Morris seems to have been aware of the affair, and even to some extent sanctioned it. Rossetti's first portraits of Jane Burden, in crayon, pencil, and oil, are usually considered his most striking artistic work. Letters from Rossetti to Morris reveal that by 1869 she had become the center of his emotional life: "All that concerns you is the all-absorbing question with me... no absence can ever make me so far from you again as your presence did for years. For this long inconceivable change, you know now what my

thanks must be." Jane Morris suffered from poor health, however, and by the late 1860s, Rossetti had also begun to show physical and mental ailments which burdened him for the rest of his life: uncertain eyesight, headaches, insomnia, a hydrocele which made sitting difficult and required periodic drainage, and growing fear of, and distaste for, the outer world. However, the years of Rossetti's relationship with Jane Morris coincided with some of his most vigorous poetic activity: 1869 was an *annus mirabilis*. In addition to about seventeen "House of Life" sonnets, Rossetti worked on revisions to "Dante at Verona," "Jenny," and "A Last Confession"; composed the highly erotic "Eden Bower" and "Troy Town"; wrote several more sonnets on pictures; and began "The Stream's Secret," which he completed the next year. In the March 1869 *Fortnightly Review*, he published the four Willowood sonnets, whose presentation of erotic frustration and intensity exemplifies his best style, as in Love's song from sonnet three:

"O Ye, all ye that walk in Willowood,  
  
That walk with hollow faces burning white;  
  
What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,  
  
What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,  
  
Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed  
  
Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite  
  
Your lips to that their unforgotten food,  
  
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!"

Rossetti decided in 1869 to publish a volume of his poems, and in October he employed Charles Augustus Howell and others to exhume the manuscript from his wife's grave. Rossetti's year of production was not without its shadows: in his 1892 *Autobiographical Notes*, William Bell Scott related that during a visit to Scotland, Rossetti showed fear at a chaffinch which he felt contained the spirit of his dead wife. In the spring of 1870 Rossetti rested his eyesight at the estate of Barbara Bodichon in Scalands, Sussex, near Jane Morris, at Hastings for her health. The Morrises visited Rossetti together, and Jane Morris remained with him while her husband returned to work. At Scalands Rossetti also began to drink chloral with whiskey to counter his insomnia. Chloral induces paranoia and depression, both latent traits of Rossetti's character. His suspiciousness, reclusiveness, and fear of strangers steadily worsened.

Throughout 1870 Rossetti lodged in various country houses with Jane Morris, continuing to write poems and add sonnets to his long sequence, "The House of Life." Rossetti and Jane Morris's brief period of apparent happiness and (presumably) sexual liaison has attracted biographers by its supposed romantic unconventionality. It might be more sympathetic as well as realistic to keep in mind the situation's infirmities and constraints: Rossetti's obesity, addiction, hydrocele, bad eyesight, and growing anxieties; and Jane Morris's ever-present children, neuralgia, and bad back. Rossetti's anxieties focalized in 1871, when the *Contemporary Review* published a pseudonymous article by Thomas Maitland (Robert Buchanan), who attacked Rossetti as a leader of a school of poets of sensual lust: "he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes." Though a minor poet, Buchanan's review upset Rossetti. Rossetti replied with an article in

the *Athenaeum*, "The Stealthy School of Criticism," and Buchanan then expanded his views for publication under his own name in the spring of 1872 as *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*. William Michael Rossetti wrote of the effect of the attack on his brother in his memoir, "It is a simple fact that, from the time when the pamphlet had begun to work into the inner tissue of his feelings, Dante Rossetti was a changed man, and so continued till the close of his life."

In an atmosphere of Victorian prudery, it was not unreasonable to fear harm from such a pamphlet, though most of Rossetti's poetic predecessors and contemporaries, Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Morris, and Swinburne, had survived worse reviews. Almost all the reviews of Rossetti's 1870 *Poems* were favorable, and the book had sold unusually well (four editions in 1870). More directly, Rossetti may also have feared public exposure of his relationship with Jane Morris. In any case, after leaving Kelmscott on 2 June 1872, Rossetti suffered a complete mental breakdown. He was taken to the Roehampton home of his friend Dr. Thomas Gordon Hake, where he attempted to commit suicide (as had Lizzie) with an overdose of laudanum. He then spent the summer under the care of friends and associates. However, by 1873, Rossetti's poetic productivity had revived, and he finished seven single sonnets and the double sonnet "The Sun's Shame." The sonnets of this period are melancholy and resonant, but the familiar themes of suffused passion have begun to merge with new ones—the creation of art and intimations of immortality. Rossetti also continued to paint steadily, using Jane Morris as a model, though she was absent more and more frequently. Rossetti eventually left Kelmscott, where they had been staying together, for Chelsea. There his health continued to decline. Jane's letters of the mid-1870s indicate a decline in her own health; she found it difficult to

sit and suffered from faints. Rossetti's phobias and increasingly paranoid suspicions may also have contrasted more and more unfavorably with William Morris's energy, prosperity, affectionate goodwill, and attentive concern for the Morrises' children. Rossetti suffered further breakdowns in 1877 and 1879, though a last surge of poetic energy in 1880 and 1881 anticipated the publication of his poems in 1881. In this edition, he added six sonnets to "The House of Life," completed seventeen more sonnets and short poems, revised "Sister Helen," finished "The White Ship," and wrote a carefully developed historical ballad, "The King's Tragedy." The final sonnets and short poems reflect on the nature and source of art, as in the famous introductory sonnet to "The House of Life":

A Sonnet is a moment's monument,—

Memorial from the Soul's eternity

To one dead deathless hour.

.....

A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals

The soul,—its converse, to what Power 'tis due:—

Whether for tribute to the august appeals

Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,

It serve; or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,

In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.



In 1881 Rossetti sold one of his largest and best paintings, *Dante's Dream*, to the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. Although his volumes of *Poems* and *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881) were quietly but favorably received, he had entered a final pattern of depressive ill health. A sudden decline in February 1882 caused him to move to Birchington, where he revised the comic poem *Jan Van Hunks*, was visited by his mother, William, and Christina, and died of blood poisoning from uric acid on 9 April 1882. At his death he left behind the almost completed "Joan of Arc" and "Salutation of Beatrice."

Many of Rossetti's self-estimates were accurate. Had he been able when young to choose a literary career, he would probably have been a better poet than painter; he was a genuinely original and skillful writer. In part, his achievement was vicarious: he galvanized others in many ways not easily measured. However, insecurity and self-reproach manifested themselves in all but his earliest poems. Rossetti was haunted by a (perhaps partially accurate) private assessment of his weaknesses as a painter and obsessed with Jane Morris as a model. Yet he was perhaps right that his intense response to such private archetypes was the chief distinction of his work. But it would be wrong to sentimentalize Rossetti as a victim of "tragic loves." It seemed to serve some inner purpose for Rossetti to idealize women who were withdrawn, invalid, and/or melancholic. Their genuine alienation seems to have provided some counterpart for an inner sense of inadequacy and isolation in him. In some way he seemed to need serious emotional attachments with women poised on the edge of withdrawal. In any case, a sense of this equilibration heightened the effects both of his paintings and of his poetry.

Critics have differed in assessing the quality of Rossetti's poetic achievement and in their preferences for different periods of his work. However, it is difficult to date Rossetti's

work or divide it into periods, since he continually revised poems begun as a young man. The texts to many early poems—"The Blessed Damozel," "Sister Helen," "The Burden of Nineveh," "The Portrait," "Jenny," "Dante at Verona," and several of the sonnets—gradually became near-palimpsests. Though concerned with many of the same themes over the course of his career—idealized, fleeting love and disappointment—in Rossetti's middle and later poetry, sexual love became a near-desperate desire to transcend time. Passion's benefit is not pleasure or mutual relaxation but a poignant hope that one moment may endure. This shift brought radical changes in themes and style and makes it somewhat difficult to compare Rossetti's achievement with that of other Victorian poets. For its modest size, Rossetti's poetic work is wide in manner and subject. He was a talented experimenter, and his heightened rhythms and refrains influenced other mid-and late-century poetry. He was also an important popularizer of Italian poetry in England and a major practitioner of the sonnet. His erotic spirituality and gift for the dramatic were his own, and poets from Swinburne to Wilde benefited from the liberating influence of his example. Rossetti's attempt to create a unified oeuvre of poetry and painting was also pioneering and extended conceptions of both arts. Rossetti also had an indirect influence on the literature of the Decadence. He conceived the idea of the *Germ*, the first little magazine of literature and art, and with Brown, Morris, Burne-Jones, and Webb helped cofound the movement to extend the range of decorative art and improve the quality of book design.

It would be difficult to imagine later nineteenth-century Victorian poetry and art without Rossetti's influence. His writings can perhaps best be viewed as an unusually acute expression of Victorian social uncertainty and loss of faith. Rossetti's poetry on the absence of love is as bleakly despairing as any of the century, and no poet of his period conveyed

more profoundly certain central Victorian anxieties: metaphysical uncertainty, sexual anxiety, and fear of time.

## 2. Introduction to the Poem

If history is to be believed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was a faction of louche and rapacious deviants who flouted Victorian conventions by gormandizing on drink, ingesting miscellaneous subtropical chemicals and debauching honey-eyed cygnets in a fashion equalled only by Marquis de Sade himself. History is often a hybrid account of fable and fact yet inevitably it frequently has roots in the latter. As such I have a feeling that the three predominant members of the PRB – Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais – along with their champion, art critic John Ruskin, were a wild and fractious bunch – each in their own measure, but even more so when together. And there is something to be said for men who dared to defy convention in the era of pious mores and social repression. Perhaps the most appropriate would be that they were, as a brotherhood, the pioneers of the avant-garde – an axiom which cannot be applied to any other. Their subject matter was rife with sexual connotation, verging on the realms of pornography, and their irreverent depictions of Christ caused mortal offence; as did their relationships with their models. But, while polite society may have been shocked it was also quietly drawn to the works of these hircine artistes, which ironically came to epitomize the art of the Victorian age.

The founding member of the PRB, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is known for his works of art as well as his poetry which according to his most theoretical critic at the time, Robert Buchanan, belonged to the *The Fleshy School* due to its amative and erotic nature. Writing

about Rossetti after the publication of his collected poems, Buchanan yirred: "*In petticoats or pantaloons, in modern times of in the middle ages, he is just Mr Rossetti, a fleshy person, with nothing particular to tell us or teach us...*" But Rossetti did have something to teach us by making his poetic work a critical mirror reflecting the image back to the reader and thereby inviting him to trace aspects of his own experiences and perceptions in the verses – a technique which was quite new in Victorian England.

In 1859 Rossetti met a prostitute by the name of Fanny Cornforth with whom he remained involved for the rest of his life. He captured her in the painting *Bocca Baciata*, and later reworked a poem in her honour called *Jenny* which offers a libertine meditation on a sleeping beauty, a woman whom Rossetti describes as being "*fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea*". The concupiscent language and the imagery it evokes makes the poem highly provocative, particularly when Rossetti talks about the "*homage of the dim boudoir*" and the "*realms of love...silver-shrined in shadowy grove*". Interestingly, the poem reads both as a sensuous admonition and a love letter, subtly merged into one. The speaker points out a marked difference between himself and the woman, through the following observation: "*This room of yours, my Jenny, looks/A change from mine so full of books/Whose serried ranks hold fast, forsooth/So many captive hours of youth,*" and later uses the literary reference as a subtext for the human soul which too can be opened and closed as a book thus making the speaker realise that reading is an exercise for the damned. Subsequently the reading of the poem itself makes the reader guilty of indiscretion by association. The subject matter is similar in *The Portrait*, another poem in celebration of a woman most likely Rossetti's wife. The poem examines the relationship between the artist and his work and probes the connection between the man, his sense of self and his art. Rossetti uses the mythological story of Narcissus to convey the idea that the artist is

attached to his art as much as to the person depicted and thereby himself, when he says: *"In painting her I shrin'd her face,"* immortalising it, but also himself by doing so and *"While hopes and aims long lost with her/Stand round her image side by side/Like tombs of pilgrims that have died/About the Holy Sepulchre,"* the image remains.

Rossetti was first and foremost a painter – his poetic endeavours came a little later in life and almost didn't materialise at all. In 1849 Rossetti was introduced to a young woman by the name of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Siddal, who posed for several painters including Walter Deverell and Hunt before modelling exclusively for Rossetti. The two fell in love but Rossetti's growing acclaim and casual infidelities put a strain on the relationship and Lizzie's health. In May 1860, Rossetti set off to visit her in Hastings and came to the belief that the two should marry. The couple's connubial life was incredibly complicated, made more so by Lizzie's deepening depression due to a stillbirth, insomnia, neuralgia and a growing dependence on laudanum. Lizzie died, on 11th February 1862, of an overdose. Compelled by contrition Rossetti buried his manuscript of poems with her and it later had to be retrieved at the suggestion of Rossetti's agent Charles Augustus Howell. In his biography, *Rossetti, His Life and Works*, Evelyn Waugh writes about the exhumation, and Rossetti's role in the process, saying: *"He permitted and assisted in the preliminary formalities necessary for the recovery of the manuscript of his poems... This took place at night, under Howell's supervision, and while it was being done Rossetti sat alone at the house of a friend in a fever of conflicting emotions. A fire was lighted by the grave and the coffin opened. It is said that the body was not unduly disfigured, but that some of the hair came away with the book."* The guilt plagued Rossetti for the rest of his life.

There were three key women in Rossetti's life: his wife, Cornforth and Jane Burden, later Jane Morris by marriage to Rossetti's friend William Morris. All three featured both in

Rossetti's art and poetry. Lizzie was the "*heavenly lady*" with the ethereal face and long, auburn hair, the embodiment of *Beatrice* in the painting. She was the divine beauty of the soul and personified Rossetti's belief in the salvific nature of romantic love. Cornforth was another great influence on the poet. Legend has it that he met Cornforth in 1856 while she was standing on a street corner in Strand cracking nuts with her teeth. He was attracted to her blond "*yellow-harvest*" hair and her voluptuous carnality; she therefore came to represent the sinful image of the woman ripe and venal. She liberated Rossetti from the idea of virginal muliebrity, instead offering him a release and sexual satisfaction. The last of the women in Rossetti's artistic demimonde is Jane Burden Morris. According to some historians, Burden Morris served as a nexus for all of Rossetti's fantasies. The two met in Oxford in 1857 when she posed as a model for Rossetti's Oxford Union murals. She later married Morris, but continued to pose for Rossetti and was his muse from 1866 until his death. Rossetti once wrote of Burden Morris: "*Beauty like hers is genius*". Their illicit affair, which ceased eventually due to scandal, left Rossetti in adverse mental health. The break, and the fact that he could no longer see Burden Morris, precipitated Rossetti's chloral hydrate abuse, turning him into an image of a tortured artist but more accurately into a mentally ill addict. Rossetti's wellbeing was further debilitated by Buchanan's critique of his poetry and representations of him as a sybaritic reprobate. This together with Rossetti's deteriorating eyesight, chronic fear of blindness, several suicide attempts and indulgence in drugs led to the poet's death in 1882. The official cause being a stroke and kidney failure.

Rossetti's most famous poetical works are his sonnets, most of which are of romantic nature. In his metonymy "*love*" symbolises sexuality and physical relations, "*death*" mortality and religious anxieties. This is particularly true of the poems in *The House of Life* collection, such as *Last Fire* when Rossetti alludes to copulation saying: "*Love, through your spirit and*

*mine what summer eve/Now glows with glory of all things possess'd"* or in the poem *Life in Love* when he names love-for-woman as the sole purpose of life: "*Not in thy body is thy life at all/But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes/Through these she yields the life that vivifies.*" Rossetti's poems are nothing short of masterful, if not in subject matter – repetitive if interesting – then certainly in technique. This is, in part, due to his ability to take the monadic representation of the repressed and lovelorn female and turn it into a vivid image. His muses, all puritanically pale with breasts the size of fine-china teacups and faces so beautifully pristine they'd make those of Grecian goddesses seem like portraits of Dorian Gray, are highly sexualised and liberated from the oppressive contemporary values. It is perhaps no wonder that his poetry is considered a beacon of lyric eroticism, and somewhat ironically iconic of the Victorian age.

One of Rossetti's most acclaimed poems, *The Blessed Damozel*, encompasses all the elements that typify his work, down to his greatest influence the Italian poet Dante. Rossetti wrote *The Blessed Damozel* at the age of 19 but emended it for the remainder of his life. The poem combines Rossetti's preoccupation with women, religious references, and his most important and evolving interpretation of the Dantean legacy. *The Blessed Damozel* is considered to be Rossetti's single most important work. The poem contains Catholic, and in particular medieval, frills, picking up on the modish enthusiasm for the Gothic and for the revival of interest in Arthurian mythology, which appears throughout Rossetti's work. It relays the story of two lovers divided by death, and their hope to be reunited in heaven. Rossetti's approach is strongly eroticised in the treatment of his subject, but also highly romanticised and idealistic. The poet cited Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* as one of his influences when working on *The Blessed Damozel*. In a letter to his friend Hall Caine, Rossetti wrote: "*I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of*

*the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven.*" By today's standards *The Blessed Damozel* is somewhat bromidic and dated in its depictions of love as "deathless" and the "hand in hand" journey to dream's kingdom. It is, however, striking. And, there's a misty realism over the ideal, especially in the closing lines when Rossetti says: "*Her eyes prayed, and she smil'd/(I saw her smile.) But soon their path/Was vague in distant spheres/And then she cast her arms along/The golden barriers/And laid her face/between her hands/And wept. (I heard her tears),*" which connotes a steadfast realisation of mortality and the proverbial wall between life and death.

*The Blessed Damozel* has often been said to be about Rossetti's wife – the deceased heavenly female figure in the poem. Rossetti was somewhat haunted by her ghostly presence, as he was by those of the other two women in his life. This added another dimension to his work, a more eerie and foreboding one. Although his subjects ranged from classical, biblical, historical, and literary, and often the ethereal and romantic mood prevailed, his female subjects were often portrayed as seemingly innocent yet obdurate seductresses charming the male to his end. Perhaps Rossetti adhered to the antediluvian belief that the great fall of man rests at the hands of a woman. But who can say? Rossetti's poems, like his paintings, are beautiful, at times remarkably so and characterised by the themes which shaped the poet's own life, namely love and death.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was only 18 when he wrote "The Blessed Damozel" in 1847. The poem went through many subsequent revisions, and it was not until 1871 that Rossetti began to work on a visual rendering of the poem. As a double work of art the pictorial version acts as a visual interpretation of his words. The first four stanzas of "The Blessed



"The Blessed Damozel" are also written on the base of the frame, which Rossetti designed. "The Blessed Damozel" tells the beautiful yet tragic tale of how two lovers are separated by the death of the Damozel and how she wishes to enter paradise, but only with her beloved by her side. Rossetti takes this theme of separated lovers that are to be rejoined in heaven from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, a continual source of inspiration. Rossetti divides the painting into two sections with a principal canvas on top and a narrower predella canvas beneath — a style reminiscent of Italian Renaissance altarpieces. The upper part shows the Damozel in Heaven, leaning over the golden bar or "barrier," surrounded by angels and flowers. She holds three lilies in her hands and stars encircle her flowing red hair. She gazes longingly down towards her beloved, depicted on Earth with grass and trees, in the lower predella. His hands are clasped above his head, emphasizing his plea and his state as a prisoner on Earth. The painting directly corresponds to the first verse of the poem:

The blessed damozel leaned out  
 From the gold bar of Heaven;  
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth  
 Of waters stilled at even;  
 She had three lilies in her hand,  
 And the stars in her hair were seven.

The painter's choices and inclusion of detail also connect with his descriptive stanzas and illustrate the overall mood of the poem. "The Blessed Damozel" contains three different vantage points: that of the the Damozel's from heaven, the lover's from his memories and fantasies, and the lover's from his current consciousness. This last voice is indicated by parentheses, which separate the lover's earthly thoughts from the Damozel's reflective

musings. By painting the Damozel on the upper portion and her beloved on the lower, Rossetti clearly demonstrates this spatial separation. He also emphasizes the fact that while this separation does not allow them to be together physically, it cannot keep them apart in their thoughts. In lines 37-42, the Damozel observes,

Around her, lovers, newly met  
                   'Mid deathless love's acclaims,  
 Spoke evermore among themselves  
                   Their heart-remembered names;  
 And the souls mounting up to God  
                   Went by her like thin flames.

Here the Damozel questions why she cannot be with her beloved in Heaven when all others are with their loves. "Have I not prayed in Heaven? — on earth, Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd? / Are not two prayers a perfect strength?" she asks. Rossetti paints other ethereal lovers in various forms of embrace behind her, using warm, luminous tones to create a vision of idealized love in a glorious Heaven. However, this inclusion also contrasts and highlights the Damozel's unhappy and tragic situation. He also distinguishes this depiction of Heaven by using darker muted greens and browns to paint Earth. Throughout the poem, the Damozel dreams of the day when she and her beloved will be reunited and present themselves before God. In lines 125-132, the Damozel describes how her ideal love will be approved:

And angels meeting us shall sing  
                   To their citherns and citoles.

'There will I ask of Christ the Lord  
 Thus much for him and me: —  
 Only to live as once on earth  
 With Love, — only to be,  
 As then awhile, for ever now  
 Together, I and he.'

Despite her hopes and prayers, the Damozel eventually realizes that she cannot be with her beloved until the right time comes and that she shall be entering Heaven without him. The Damozel "laid her face between her hands, And wept" while her lover on Earth "hears her tears." They remain apart, yet together in their hearts, separated by the two worlds. As a member of the PRB, Rossetti did not focus on biblical or typological symbolism with the intensity of William Holman Hunt. While "The Blessed Damozel" includes obvious references to biblical imagery, such as the allusion to God and Mother Mary, Rossetti does not seem to be as interested in religious symbolism in his painting. Instead, he creates a dreamy vision of Heaven full of angels, flowers and lovers — but one that still separates the two tragic lovers. In his painting, Rossetti seems to utilize the Damozel's place in Heaven and her concerns with God's grace in order to emphasize and glorify the spiritual depths of the feminine soul.

### **3. Analysis of the Poem**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was only 18 when he wrote "The Blessed Damozel." Although Rossetti was still young, the images and themes in his poem have caught the attention of many critics throughout the years. "The Blessed Damozel" is a beautiful story of how two

lovers are separated by the death of the Damozel and how she wishes to enter paradise, but only if she can do so in the company of her beloved.

"The Blessed Damozel" is one of Rossetti's most famous poems and has been dissected and explicated many times by many different people. Even so, they all revolve around the same ideas and themes. The theme of Rossetti's poem is said to have been taken from *Vita Nuova*, separated lovers are to be rejoined in heaven, by Dante. Many people say his young vision of idealized love was very picturesque and that the heavens Rossetti so often painted and those which were in his poems were much like Dante. The heaven that Rossetti painted in "The Blessed Damozel" was warm with physical bodies and beautiful angels full of love. This kind of description of heaven was said to have been taken from Dante's ideas. Others said that Rossetti's heaven was described so in "The Blessed Damozel" because he was still young and immature about such matters. In other words, he had not yet seen the ugliness and despair that love can bring, which he experienced later in his life after the death of his true love Elizabeth Siddal.

"The Blessed Damozel" is beautiful in that it flows so easily from one line to the next and it seems, although it is not very apparent, that Rossetti filled it with symbolism and references to his own personal feelings and future life. The first few stanzas tell of how the Damozel is in heaven overlooking earth and thinking of her lover. Rossetti writes in stanza three of how time to the Damozel seemed to last forever because she was without her love. "To one it is ten years of years..." There are a few stanzas in the poem where the narrative jumps to her lover. In stanza four, it is the lover on earth talking about his beloved. The next few stanzas describe heaven, where it lies, and other lovers reuniting around her as she sits and watches...alone. In stanzas ten and eleven, her earthbound lover describes the sound of

her voice like a bird's song which tells the reader that not only is he thinking of her, but it hints he can hear her and feel her about him. Of course, she can not understand why she must be miserable in heaven when all others are with their loves, after all, "Are not two prayers a perfect strength?" (stanza 12). In stanza thirteen, she dreams of the day that they will be together and present themselves in the beauty and glory of God. It is also in this stanza that Rossetti lets the reader know that she has not yet entered heaven. She is at the outer gates of the kingdom of heaven.

Through the second half of the poem, the Damozel refers to herself and her lover as "we two" and describes how they will be together again someday in heaven. The Damozel even says she will teach him the songs that she sings...and she dreams of them together. It is in the next stanza, (stanza 17), that the narrative changes again back to the lover. He says that she keeps on saying "we two" but when and will they ever really be together like they used to be. Rossetti is using the Damozel in these few stanzas to describe how the Damozel would want her ideal and perfect love to be, but could that really be with her in heaven and him on earth? The two worlds separating them doesn't keep them apart in thought, but it is not possible to be together. In stanza twenty-two, she once again says that she will want their love to be as it was on earth with the approval of Christ the Lord.

Near the end of the poem, in the last couple of stanzas, the Damozel finally realizes that she can have none of this until the time comes. The Damozel suddenly becomes peaceful and lets the light take her in stanza twenty-three. It is there that the reader also realizes that she will enter heaven without her love. Her lover on earth, of course, knows this and it is there in the last stanza that "I saw her smile...I hear her tears." Apart, but together in hearts, the two are separated by two worlds so great that there is nothing that

can be done but hope and pray. And that is why the Damozel "laid her face between her hands, And wept."

Dante Gabriel Rossetti used the ideas of Christian belief in order to write his poem. His poem explores if two lovers, or anyone will be reunited once again in heaven. In many ways this poem is both optimistic and idealistic. That is why so many people said Rossetti was immature on the subject of love when he wrote this. To read Rossetti's poetry starting with some of his earliest, "The Blessed Damozel", and ending with his later, "The Orchard Pit", it is apparent how his feelings and ideas changed. As many times as "The Blessed Damozel" has been read and explicated, it is no wonder it has been said that so many ideas lie in his famous piece, but who doesn't want to believe, like Rossetti did in his younger years that love, no matter what, would always live in the spirit of soul and memory.

The Blessed Damozel leans out from a golden banister on the outermost boundary separating heaven from space. Her eyes are deeper than the bottom of still waters. In one hand she holds three lilies attesting to her purity and the nearness of the triune God. In her hair are seven stars symbolizing the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione in Greek mythology. These young women included Alcyone, Celaeno, Electra, Maia, Merope, Sterope, and Taygete, who attended the goddess of virginity, Artemis. After they died, they became stars in the heavens.

The damozel's robe hangs loosely about her. No embroidered flowers adorn the robe. But affixed to it is a single white rose, a gift of the Blessed Virgin Mary in recognition of the damozel's faithful service to Heaven. Her hair, the color of ripe corn, flows onto her back.

It seems to her that she has abided in the celestial realm no more than a day. But the family and friends she left behind miss her so much that it is as if ten years have passed since they last saw her. To the young man to whom she pledged her love, it is as if she has been gone ten years of years. As he muses about her, he thinks he feels the softness of her hair fall about his face. Alas, though, it is nothing but the fall of the autumn leaves as time moves on.

The damozel stands on a rampart built by God around heaven. So high is this place that when she looks down, through the great void of the universe, she can hardly see the sun. This rampart lies between space and the inner regions of heaven. Below the rampart, the tides of day and night ebb and flow, lapping at the boundaries of the universe and at the earth, which is spinning like a nervous insect. Around the damozel stand lovers, newly united in heaven, greeting each other. Other souls are just now rising to heaven, like "thin flames."

But the damozel continues to look down into the vastness of space, yearning for her earthbound young man. She sees time raging on ineluctably as the sky darkens and a crescent moon appears. She speaks: "I wish that he were come to me / For he will come..."

When he does arrive someday in a white robe with a halo around his head, they will go hand-in-hand into heaven and bathe in the wondrous light of God. There, in that holiest of shrines, where prayers from earth reach God, they will see their old prayers, granted, melt away like little clouds. They will lie in the shadow of the tree of life, where the Holy Spirit—in the form of a dove—sometimes alights and every leaf speaks His name. She then

will teach her beloved the songs that she sings, and he will pause as he sings to absorb the knowledge that they contain.

The young man on earth wonders whether God will invite him to enjoy endless unity with his beloved. The damozel, meanwhile, says that after her beloved arrives in heaven they will visit groves where Mary abides with five handmaidens who weave golden threads into white cloth used to make the robes of the newly dead born into eternal life. The damozel will speak with pride of her love for the young man, and Mary will approve and will take them to the place where all souls kneel around God while angels sing and play their stringed instruments. The damozel will then petition Christ to allow her and her young man to live forever together, united in love. All of which she speaks will come to pass, she believes. The young man imagines he sees her smile. But then she casts her arms down on the golden banister and weeps. He hears her tears.

The poem is composed by 24 stanzas of 5 lines each and its rhyme scheme is abbcdb. The first stanza presents the setting. "The Blessed Damozel" is in Heaven, however, as we observe in the painting as well, she seems worried about something as she is leaning out from the gold bar of Heaven. She has three lilies in her hand which have connotations of purity. It can be also understood as the purity of her love. The image of his beloved in the painting, placed just below her, on earth, confirms what we suppose by reading the poem, in other words, we see that her love is away from her, even more, in a different sphere.

The dress that the Blessed Damozel is wearing is not adorned by flowers but by a white rose of Mary's gift, symbol of purity. In these two first stanzas there is also imagery of



richness “the gold bar of Heaven” and “yellow like ripe corn”. This second metaphor connotes health as well, in my opinion, because her hair is blonde, yellow like gold is.

She still seems to be wondering why is she is there *“The wonder was not yet quite gone/ From that still look of hers;”* (line 16). A day for her in Heaven counts as ten years as she feels alone. *“Albeit, to them she left, her day/ had counted as ten years”* (line 18)-. It is in the fourth stanza when we can observe how her love is thinking of her as much as she does. He is imaging what she was doing; it is as if he was contemplating her as well. *“surely she lean’d o’er me – her hair / Fell all about my face..”* (lines 21-22). In the painting we observe her lover, lied down on the forest and looking at the sky, just below his picture we find the Blessed Damozel in Heaven. Both are separated by a sacred barrier composed by three angels as we can see in the painting. Indeed the painting is divided into two, as if there were two different paintings because both are separated by a white line.

The seventh stanza describes couples of lovers around “the blessed Damozel” in Heaven. Everyone is happy because they are with their respective beloved ones whereas she yearns for her beloved who is on earth. *“Around her, lovers, newly met/ Mid deathless love’s acclaims”* (lines 37-38). This image is also represented in the painting, the couples are around the blessed Damozel and surrounded at the same time by red flowers, symbol of passion. The blessed Damozel continues bowing herself towards the earth instead of being in Paradise *“and still she bow’d herself and stoop’d/ out of the circling charm”*, if we have a look at the painting, it is as if she finds she is out of place because her beloved is not with her whereas all the women in Heaven are accompanied by their respective beloved. In the painting we can also observe that each one of the couples around the blessed Damozel give an impression of being a unique element as they are so extremely close.

The Blessed Damozel fights against time; time is her enemy as time separates her from her beloved. She cannot see the time to meet him "*From the fix'd place of Heaven she saw/ Time like a pulse shake fierce.*" (lines 49-50). As we can observe in the painting instead of being in Heaven, paradise, the most wonderful place, the anguish is reflected in the Blessed Damozel's face because she needs the arrival of her beloved. That is the reason why in the poem it is found this fighting with time.

She feels devastated as she is not with her beloved, the happiness, represented in the poem by the sun has gone away "*the sun was gone now: the curl'd moon / was like a little feather*" (lines 55-56). However her love for him goes beyond the barrier of death as her beloved seems to hear her prays "*Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song, strove not her accents there*". In the painting her beloved is lying down looking at the sky with a lost gaze. He seems to be looking at the blessed Damozel in his mind.

The blessed Damozel says she wishes him to go with her to Heaven, and asks God if they haven't prayed enough to be together (lines 67-72). The painting is a representation of the poem, however the poem can express deeper thoughts as we can read what the Damozel is thinking which confirms our intuitions. It is from this point in the poem that the Damozel imagines the day her beloved will join her in Heaven "*When round his head the aureole clings, and he is cloth'd in white...*" (lines 73-74). In stanzas fourteenth, fifteenth and seventeenth there is a repetition to emphasise they will be together and what they will do together in Heaven "*We two will stand beside that shrine*" (line 79), "*we two will lie l' the shadow of that living mystic tree*" (line 86) "*we two will seek the goves/ where the lady Mary is*" (line 103). They both feel they complement each other and they are not fulfilled until they stayed eternally together in Heaven. Both seem to see each other instead of being

in separate worlds physically as he said he heard her singing and now she is talking about laying both in a mystic tree as he is in that moment but on the earth.

Until line 132 She is dreaming awake about his arrival to Heaven and she plans to teach him how life is there, to console him if he is fear "*he shall fear, haply, and be dumb:/ then will I lay my cheek / to his, and tell about our love*"(lines 115-117). However suddenly she faces the cruel reality, he is not yet there "all this is when he comes" (line 135". then she smiles and in the end she cries as *their path was vague in distant spheres* but he saw her smile and heard her tears.

To sum up, the hard separation of these two lovers because of the death of the Damozel is perfectly captured in both, the poem and the painting. They are addressed as a unique soul divided into two, one half is in Heaven and the other one on earth. It gives us that impression because instead of their separation they seem to be linked as he seems to hear her prayers "*Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song, strove not her accents there*" and she seems to be looking at him "*we two will lie I' the shadow of that living mystic tree*" (line 86 ).What calls more the attention about both masterpieces is the fact that the separation because of death is taking the perspective of the death and not the other way around as it is usually addressed this topic.

#### **4. Stylistic Devices**

The key term in the title, *damozel*, is an archaic word for *damsel* (maiden, unmarried young woman). Other archaic words with the same meaning are *damosel*, *damoiselle*, and *demoiselle*. All of these words descend from the Old French word *dameisele*. Rossetti's use of *damozel* perfumes the poem with an air of medieval romance. The adjective *blessed* suggests that the damozel deserves recognition as a saint. In Roman

Catholic theology, a deceased candidate for sainthood receives the title *Blessed* before his or her name. Of course, the word may also simply signify her goodness and holiness.

Applying pre-Raphaelite principles, Rossetti wrote “The Blessed Damozel” as a poignant, uncomplicated depiction of the kind of innocent young love that flourished in the days of the chivalric code. The poem presents a romantic, dreamlike atmosphere as a virginal young woman—claimed recently by death—stands at the threshold of heaven pining for the young man she left behind while he likewise pines for her on earth. Rossetti links the heavenly damozel with her earthbound lover by mixing the spiritual imagery of heaven with the physical imagery of earth. Thus, while the seven stars of the heavenly constellations adorn her hair, it flows down her back with the color of “ripe corn.” And while the young man thinks he feels her hair fall over him, he discovers only the fall of autumn leaves.

In helping readers to fathom the pain of the separated young lovers, Rossetti emphasizes the vastness of the gulf separating them:

It was the rampart of God's house  
That she was standing on;  
By God built over the sheer depth  
The which is Space begun;  
So high, that looking downward thence  
She scarce could see the sun.

To emphasize the loneliness of the lovers, he presents an image of lovers united in Heaven:

Around her, lovers, newly met  
 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,  
 Spoke evermore among themselves  
 Their heart-remember'd names

In "The Blessed Damozel" Dante Gabriel Rossetti illustrates the gap between heaven and earth. The damozel looks down from Heaven, yearning for her lover that remains on earth. Through imagery Rossetti connects the heavenly damozel to things of the earth, symbolizing her longing but emphasizing the distance between the lovers. She stands on God's rampart, which is

So high, that looking downward thence  
 She scarce could see the sun.  
 It lies in Heaven, across the flood  
 Of ether, as a bridge.  
 Beneath, the tides of day and night  
 With flame and darkness ridge  
 The void, as low as where this earth  
 Spins like a fretful midge.

Though distanced so far from the earth, her hair is "yellow like ripe corn." Rather than declare her ethereal beauty, Rossetti depicts the damozel's appearance through earthly detail. She may be far from her lover and fixed in Heaven, but her appearance and her gaze, like her heart, is grounded with her beloved on earth. Even Rossetti's description of the space between the two lovers is an attempt to unite Heaven and earth. He calls the ether a

"flood" and the rampart above the ether a "bridge," both images of inherently earthly qualities — water and the manmade construction that crosses it. The passing of day and night belows her are "tides" tinged by flame and darkness. The earth is so far from heaven it looks "like a fretful midge" — small, agitated, and a sharp contrast to the peaceful stillness of Heaven.

This picture of the space separating the lovers mirrors Rossetti's description of the damozel's eyes. Just as the ether is a flood, her eyes "were deeper than the depth of waters stilled at even." The damozel sees only the distance from her beloved, and through most of the stanzas, she prays for and imagines their union together, rather than immersing herself in Heaven. Heaven is fixed, while the earth spins fretfully, and in an ironic twist, the damozel's gaze is fixed upon the earth. Rossetti creates a poignant sense of her longing by depicting her gaze and her heavenly position through earthly images, and in effect, he gives the reader a glimpse of the heavens from the damozel's unreachable position.

The reader can see in "The Blessed Damozel" the expression of an ancient and well-known theme: the desire of an isolated, separated lover to achieve unity with the beloved. Rossetti has framed this vision as a reverie, a daydream, a wish-fulfilling dream in the mind of a lover. The heart of the poem is the ironic conflict between the earthly bodily desire and the tradition that heaven is a place of disembodied souls, comforted and joyful in the presence of God. This irony is emphasized by the poem's religious framework.

The earthly, fleshly dimension of the lover in heaven is unconsciously revealed in several places in the poem: Her bosom "warms" the bar of heaven (line 46); she imagines taking her lover's hand (line 75), lying together in the shadow of the mystic tree (lines 85 to

86), laying her cheek against his (line 116), and, finally, living in heaven “as once on earth” (line 129).

These are all images of touching in the earthly sense. Yet, by the standards of medieval theology—which the whole framework of the poem implies—she ought to be contemplating the joy of God and exhorting her lover to lay aside grief and remember that she now enjoys the real reward of life: eternal life with God.

The Christian imagery, which is largely derived from Dante and other medieval Italian poets, is used decoratively and in this context does not support the sensuous desires of the lover. As much as Rossetti tried to emulate the austere spiritual idealization of Dante, his own sensuousness prevented him from achieving it.

The heavenly lover yearns passionately, intensely, for her earthly companion. In her yearning, she moves from a vision of their reunion, to hope of everlasting unity, and finally to doubt and despair. The void between heaven and earth is immense. What is emphasized is the separateness of the lovers: The wish is not the thing itself; the traditional Christian songs about being in heaven hold no comfort for the bereaved lover, for without the beloved, the heaven becomes a hell.

Although it may be argued that Rossetti has resorted to somewhat mechanical means to differentiate three voices or centers of consciousness in the poem, we ought to view all three as the self-contained, single consciousness of the earthbound lover himself. The supernatural visions of his lady, her speeches, his replies, his supernatural interpretation of natural phenomena- all are but interlocking pieces of the vision of a single consciousness.

"The Blessed Damozel" is a quest poem in which the lover probes multiple levels of his consciousness in an attempt to discover the reality of a spiritual-supernatural existence. He does not (as no one can) envision the lady in the formless state of pure spirit, but in all her physical attributes. The particularity of physical detail throughout the poem becomes a means for him to conceptualize the existence of a non-physical, spiritual sphere. Traditional religious belief in the spiritual world by virtue of faith alone is noticeably absent in the poem despite the abundance of Christian imagery. Rossetti has recast traditional Christian imagery into something quite different and that he has attempted to reinvest it with new meaning.<sup>3</sup> But whether Rossetti is relying upon the inherited tradition which lies behind the religious symbolism (which is unlikely), or whether he is attempting to revitalize a tired tradition, the effect of his using the imagery at all seems to remain the same. The religious imagery is invoked by the lover to help him.

The lover, uncertain of the real existence of his lady's "heaven," uses the religious imagery just as he uses the naturalistic imagery- as an invocation; it is an attempt to discover a reality wherein he can be reunited with his lady. The dominant mood throughout the poem is one of a placid longing for union, but death has denied the possibility of physical union. The lover is asking, however, if death has also denied the possibility of a spiritual union. He is seeking a spiritual reality in which he and his lady may be reunited, but he questions whether elevation to an eternal spiritual existence will be possible solely through the love of a finite being.

... But shall God lift

To endless unity



The soul whose likeness with thy soul

Was but its love for thee? ( 11. 99-102)

He never explicitly answers his own question. However, one must assume that the lady weeps at the end of the poem because she does not see her lover's soul among those being escorted to heaven. And when we remember that this entire drama is being enacted within the single consciousness of the earthbound lover, we are led to believe that he finally questions the possibility of an eternal reunion with the dead loved one, the memory of whom has triggered this entire "vision." It is significant that it is the lover's own voice that speaks last in the poem, "(I heard her tears)," because the vision has been a mystical and self-revelatory experience for him; his vision has suggested that eternal union with his lady is not probable; it is only in transitory visionary moments that he can transcend the realm of the physical existence in which he is rooted.

It would appear that in "The Blessed Damozel," Rossetti is attempting to recapture poetically the transcendent experience felt in transitory moments of "vision." It is a vision in which the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, have been harmoniously reintegrated. Thus the ethereal mood evoked by the counterplaying of the three voices within one consciousness and by the juxtaposition of supernatural with naturalistic imagery is of central importance to the poem, for it is essentially in the mood evoked by the poem that we are invited to share the lover's (or the poet's) moments of vision.

Rossetti is certainly not the only nineteenth-century poet to struggle with the problem of finding the right imagery to capture and hold the moment of poetic vision; it is

Rossetti's technique which sets him apart. It is interesting to note how Tennyson, for example, so unlike Rossetti in stylistic technique, also attempted to bridge poetically the gulf between the natural and the supernatural.

Previous critics have noted Rossetti's admiration for Keats and one cannot ignore the Keatsian mood which permeates "The Blessed Damozel." One is struck, for example, by the similarity between Keats' s"Ode to a Nightingale" and Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel." In the former the narrator longs to "fade far away, dissolve," to fuse his being with the ethereal and timeless existence represented by the nightingale, to transcend the natural for the superseveral critics have pointed to the relationship between Tennyson's poetry and the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Rossetti, too, is using "poesy" as a vehicle for transcendence. The damozel seems to serve much the same purpose in Rossetti's poem as does the nightingale in Keats's. She serves as a stimulus for a visionary glimpse of another realm; union with her, and thus participation in that deathless sphere, is that which is longed for. In the last stanza of Keats's "Ode" the narrator says:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

In "The Blessed Damozel" Rossetti, too, uses the images of bird and bell; however, Rossetti's narrator questions whether or not he heard "in the bird's song" and those bells' chime the stirring of a supernatural spirit (Stanza 11):

( Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,  
 Strove not her accents there,  
 Fain to be hearkened? When those bells  
 Possessed the mid-day air,  
 Strove not her steps to reach my side  
 Down all the echoing stair? )

Keats's narrator laments that "The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do," and though Rossetti's narrator makes earnest attempts to the contrary, he arrives at the same conclusion.

The lover in "The Blessed Damozel" is left with the same mystification of his visionary experience as the narrator in Keats's "Ode" who asks,

"Was it a vision or a waking dream? / ... Do I wake or sleep?"

In "The Blessed Damozel" Rossetti employs poetic art as a vehicle for the pursuit of an ideal world, but it remains an elusive world, and he is not even certain of its existence. His candid uncertainty coupled with his earnest attempts to discover a means for transcendence is what gives the poem its ethereal equanimity. The poem belies an inexorable pursuit of the nature and meaning of both natural and supernatural existence.

At least some of the adverse criticism of "The Blessed Damozel" seems to stem from an uneasiness over its apparent ambiguity. For Rossetti, as for Keats, the act of poeticizing was in itself a legitimate vehicle for the pursuit of truth. That he was unable to answer finally the very questions raised in his quest probably would not have negated for Rossetti the worth of his poetic endeavor. The quest itself was a means of arriving at least nearer the truth about natural and supernatural existence than if the quest had never been made.

### 5. Study Questions

- a. The poem poses a parallel to Dante and Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*. How does Rossetti twist the role of Beatrice in the damozel?
- b. The damozel's beloved speaks in the poem, and he seems to sense her and know her thoughts even though they are separated by life and death. What effect do these parenthetical interjections have on the poem? Why did Rossetti give the damozel's lover a voice?
- c. Rossetti connects heaven and earth through the water imagery, but he also weaves images of circles ("circling charm," "circle-wise sit they") and light ("lamps are stirred continually," "deep wells of light") throughout the poem. How do these images function? What other contrasts between Heaven and earth does Rossetti use?
- d. Rossetti often mentions the stillness of the damozel's gaze. Does this bear any significance for his fair lady portraits, whose mysterious gazes are central in the compositions? Are the visual representations similar to his poetic representation of the damozel?

**e.** Write an essay that compares and contrasts "The Blessed Damozel" with Poe's poem "The Raven." Both poems focus on lovers separated by death. Among the questions you should discuss are these: Which poem is more rhythmic and musical--that is, which appeals more to the sense of sound? Which relies more heavily on language that appeals to the sense of sight?

**f.** Identify two similes in the first two stanzas.

**g.** What is a "wrought flower" (line 8)?

**h.** Review Rossetti's painting of the Blessed Damozel and the predella (a panel containing a separate painting that appears below the painting of the damozel). Write an essay discussing whether the painting accurately reflects the content of the poem.

**i.** Do you like the poem? Explain why or why not.

**j.** Rossetti uses alliteration in the following lines:

Herself shall bring us, hand in hand  
To Him round whom all souls  
Kneel, the clear-rang'd unnumber'd heads

Find other examples of alliteration in the poem.

**k.** Rossetti's depictions of Heaven and Earth show two very different atmospheres — does Heaven seem like a warmer, more welcoming place? If so, why does Rossetti leave the Damozel's hopes and prayers unfulfilled? What does this say about Heaven? And death? What is the poem's view of love — should it be viewed as ideal and optimistic or not?

**l.** In addition to her spiritual thoughts and prayers, the Damozel hold lilies, the symbol of purity, and she wears a simple white robe that "No wrought flowers did adorn." In Rossetti's

descriptions of her, what sort of relationship appears between the spirit and the body?

Between physical and mystical love?

m. Thirty years after its first appearance Rossetti told Hall Caine that he had written "The Blessed Damozel" as a sequel to Poe's "The Raven," published in 1845: "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven." (RPO) In Poe's poem, the speaker is a male, longing for his love, Lenore. Does Rossetti's reversal of Poe's gender roles hold any significance? How does he describe and depict the Damozel's "yearning"? And how does this reflect her gender?

n. Rossetti makes many references to nature in the poem, including the lilies, the tide, the stars, the "living mystic tree" and the Dove. Do some of these elements hold Biblical symbolism? Are they significant?

o. How does this affect his vision of Heaven and the overall theme of the poem?

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## Paper XIII: Unit 5

### Hopkins's "The Windhover", "Pied Beauty", "God's Grandeur"

#### Contents

1. Introduction to the Poet
2. Analysis of the poem "The Windhover"
3. Analysis of the poem "Pied Beauty"
4. Analysis of the poem "God's Grandeur"
5. Study Questions
6. Suggestions for Further Reading
7. Bibliography

#### STRUCTURE

##### 1. Introduction to the Poet

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born July 28, 1844, to Manley and Catherine (Smith) Hopkins, the first of their nine children. His parents were High Church Anglicans (variously described as "earnest" and "moderate"), and his father, a marine insurance adjuster, had just published a volume of poetry the year before.

At grammar school in Highgate (1854-63), he won the poetry prize for "The Escorial" and a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford (1863-67), where his tutors included Walter Pater and Benjamin Jowett. At one time he wanted to be a painter-poet like D. G.

Rossetti (two of his brothers became professional painters), and he was strongly influenced by the aesthetic theories of Pater and John Ruskin and by the poetry of the devout Anglicans George Herbert and Christina Rossetti. Even more insistent, however, was his search for a religion which could speak with true authority; at Oxford, he came under the influence of John Henry Newman. (See Tractarianism.) Newman, who had converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism in 1845, provided him with the example he was seeking, and in 1866 he was received by Newman into the Catholic Church. In 1867 he won First-Class degrees in Classics and "Greats" (a rare "double-first") and was considered by Jowett to be the star of Balliol.

The following year he entered the Society of Jesus; and feeling that the practice of poetry was too individualistic and self-indulgent for a Jesuit priest committed to the deliberate sacrifice of personal ambition, he burned his early poems. Not until he studied the writings of Duns Scotus in 1872 did he decide that his poetry might not necessarily conflict with Jesuit principles. Scotus (1265-1308), a medieval Catholic thinker, argued (contrary to the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas) that individual and particular objects in this world were the only things that man could know directly, and then only through the *haecceitas* ("thisness") of each object. With his independently-arrived at idea of "inscape" thus bolstered, Hopkins began writing again.

In 1874, studying theology in North Wales, he learned Welsh, and was later to adapt the rhythms of Welsh poetry to his own verse, inventing what he called "*sprung rhythm*." The event that startled him into speech was the sinking of the *Deutschland*, whose passengers included five Catholic nuns exiled from Germany. *The Wreck of the*

*Deutschland* is a tour de force containing most of the devices he had been working out in theory for the past few years, but was too radical in style to be printed.

From his ordination as a priest in 1877 until 1879, Hopkins served not too successfully as preacher or assistant to the parish priest in Sheffield, Oxford, and London; during the next three years he found stimulating but exhausting work as parish priest in the slums of three manufacturing cities, Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow. Late in 1881 he began ten months of spiritual study in London, and then for three years taught Latin and Greek at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire. His appointment in 1884 as Professor of Greek and Latin at University College, Dublin, which might be expected to be his happiest work, instead found him in prolonged depression. This resulted partly from the examination papers he had to read as Fellow in Classics for the Royal University of Ireland. The exams occurred five or six times a year, might produce 500 papers, each one several pages of mostly uninspired student translations (in 1885 there were 631 failures to 1213 passes). More important, however, was his sense that his prayers no longer reached God; and this doubt produced the "terrible" sonnets. He refused to give way to his depression, however, and his last words as he lay dying of typhoid fever on June 8, 1889, were, "I am happy, so happy."

Apart from a few uncharacteristic poems scattered in periodicals, Hopkins was not published during his own lifetime. His good friend Robert Bridges (1844-1930), whom he met at Oxford and who became Poet Laureate in 1913, served as his literary caretaker: Hopkins sent him copies of his poems, and Bridges arranged for their publication in 1918.

Even after he started writing again in 1875, Hopkins put his responsibilities as a priest before his poetry, and consequently his output is rather slim and somewhat limited in

range, especially in comparison to such major figures as Tennyson or Browning. Over the past few decades critics have awarded the third place in the Victorian Triumvirate first to Arnold and then to Hopkins; now his stock seems to be falling and D.G. Rossetti's rising. Putting Hopkins up with the other two great Victorian poets implies that his concern with the "in-scapes" of natural objects is centrally important to the period; and since that way of looking at the world is essentially Romantic, it further implies that the similarities between Romantic and Victorian poetry are much more significant than their differences. Whatever we decide Hopkins' poetic rank to be, his poetry will always be among the greatest poems of faith and doubt in the English language.

Hopkins died of typhoid fever and was buried in the Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin. Among his unfinished works was a commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order.

After Hopkins' death, Robert Bridges began to publish a few of the Jesuit's most mature poems in anthologies, hoping to prepare the way for wider acceptance of his style. By 1918, Bridges, then poet laureate, judged the time opportune for the first collected edition. It appeared but sold slowly. Not until 1930 was a second edition issued, and thereafter Hopkins' work was recognized as among the most original, powerful, and influential literary accomplishments of his century; it had a marked influence on such leading 20th-century poets as T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C. Day Lewis.

Hopkins sought a stronger "rhetoric of verse." His exploitation of the verbal subtleties and music of English, of the use of echo, alliteration, and repetition, and a highly compressed syntax were all in the interest of projecting deep personal experiences,

including his sense of God's mystery, grandeur, and mercy, and his joy in "all things counter, original, spare, strange," as he wrote in "Pied Beauty." He called the energizing prosodic element of his verse "sprung rhythm," in which each foot may consist of one stressed syllable and any number of unstressed syllables, instead of the regular number of syllables used in traditional metre. The result is a muscular verse, flexible, intense, vibrant, and organic, that combines accuracy of observation, imaginative daring, deep feeling, and intellectual depth.

Hopkins' letters reveal a brilliant critical faculty, scrupulous self-criticism, generous humanity, and a strong will. His friends paid tribute to his personal integrity and to his rare "chastity of mind." Coventry Patmore wrote of him: "There was something in all his words and manners which were at once a rebuke and an attraction to all who could only aspire to be like him."

Much of Hopkins's historical importance has to do with the changes he brought to the form of poetry, which ran contrary to conventional ideas of metre. Prior to Hopkins, most Middle English and Modern English poetry was based on a rhythmic structure inherited from the Norman side of English literary heritage. This structure is based on repeating groups of two or three syllables, with the stressed syllable falling in the same place on each repetition. Hopkins called this structure "running rhythm", and though he wrote some of his early verse in running rhythm he became fascinated with the older rhythmic structure of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, of which *Beowulf* is the most famous example. Hopkins called his own rhythmic structure sprung rhythm. Sprung rhythm is structured around feet with a variable number of syllables, generally between one and four syllables per foot, with the stress always falling on the first syllable in a foot. It is similar to

the "rolling stresses" of Robinson Jeffers, another poet who rejected conventional metre. Hopkins saw sprung rhythm as a way to escape the constraints of running rhythm, which he said inevitably pushed poetry written in it to become "same and tame." In this way, Hopkins sprung rhythm can be seen as anticipating much of free verse. His work has no great affinity with either of the contemporary Pre-Raphaelite and neo-romanticism schools, although he does share their descriptive love of nature and he is often seen as a precursor to modernist poetry or as a bridge between the two poetic eras.

The language of Hopkins's poems is often striking. His imagery can be simple, as in *Heaven-Haven*, where the comparison is between a nun entering a convent and a ship entering a harbour out of a storm. It can be splendidly metaphysical and intricate, as it is in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, where he leaps from one image to another to show how each thing expresses its own uniqueness, and how divinity reflects itself through all of them.

He uses many archaic and dialect words, but also coins new words. One example of this is *twindles*, which seems from its context in *Inversnaid* to mean a combination of *twines* and *dwindles*. He often creates compound adjectives, sometimes with a hyphen (such as *dapple-dawn-drawn falcon*) but often without, as in *rolling level underneath him steady air*. This concentrates his images, communicating the intensity of the poet's perceptions of an inscape to his reader.

Hopkins was a supporter of linguistic purism in English. In an 1882 letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins writes: "It makes one weep to think what English might have been; for in spite of all that Shakespeare and Milton have done [...] no beauty in a language can make up for want of purity".<sup>[14]</sup> He took time to learn Old English, which became a major influence on

his writing. In the same letter to Bridges he calls Old English "a vastly superior thing to what we have now"

Added richness comes from Hopkins's extensive use of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and rhyme, both at the end of lines and internally as in:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Hopkins was influenced by the Welsh language that he acquired while studying theology at St Beuno's near St Asaph. The poetic forms of Welsh literature and particularly *cynghanedd* with its emphasis on repeating sounds accorded with his own style and became a prominent feature of his work. This reliance on similar sounding words with close or differing senses mean that his poems are best understood if read aloud. An important element in his work is Hopkins's own concept of "inscape" which was derived, in part, from the medieval theologian Duns Scotus. The exact detail of "inscape" is uncertain and probably known to Hopkins alone but it has to do with the individual essence and uniqueness of every physical thing. This is communicated from an object by its "instress" and ensures the transmission of the item's importance in the wider creation. His poems would then try to present this "inscape" so that a poem like *The Windhover* aims to depict not the bird in general but instead one instance and its relation to the breeze. This is just one interpretation of Hopkins's most famous poem, one which he felt was his best.

During his lifetime, Hopkins published few poems. It was only through the efforts of Robert Bridges that his works were seen. Despite Hopkins burning all his poems on entering the Jesuit novitiate, he had already sent some to Bridges who, with a few other friends, was one of the few people to see many of them for some years. After Hopkins's death they were distributed to a wider audience, mostly fellow poets, and in 1918 Bridges, by then poet laureate, published a collected edition; an expanded edition, prepared by Charles Williams, appeared in 1930, and a greatly expanded edition by William Henry Gardner appeared in 1948 (eventually reaching a fourth edition, 1967, with N. H. Mackenzie).

Notable collections of Hopkins's manuscripts and publications are in Campion Hall, Oxford; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; and the Foley Library at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.

Some contemporary critics believe that Hopkins' suppressed erotic impulses played an important role in the tone, quality and even content of his works. These impulses seem to have taken on a degree of specificity after he met Robert Bridges's distant cousin, friend, and fellow Etonian Digby Mackworth Dolben, "a Christian Uranian". The Hopkins biographer Robert Bernard Martin asserts that when Hopkins first met Dolben, on Dolben's 17th birthday, in Oxford in February 1865, it "was, quite simply, the most momentous emotional event of [his] undergraduate years, probably of his entire life."

Hopkins was completely taken with Dolben, who was nearly four years his junior, and his private journal for confessions the following year proves how absorbed he was in imperfectly suppressed erotic thoughts of him

Hopkins kept up a correspondence with Dolben, wrote about him in his diary and composed two poems about him, "Where art thou friend" and "The Beginning of the End."



Robert Bridges, who edited the first edition of Dolben's poems as well as Hopkins's, cautioned that the second poem "must never be printed," though Bridges himself included it in the first edition (1918). Another indication of the nature of his feelings for Dolben is that Hopkins's High Anglican confessor seems to have forbidden him to have any contact with Dolben except by letter. Their relationship was abruptly ended by Dolben's drowning in June 1867, an event which greatly affected Hopkins, although his feeling for Dolben seems to have cooled a good deal by that time. "Ironically, fate may have bestowed more through Dolben's death than it could ever have bestowed through longer life ... [for] many of Hopkins's best poems — impregnated with an elegiac longing for Dolben, his lost beloved and his muse — were the result.

Some of his poems, such as *The Bugler's First Communion* and *Epithalamion*, arguably embody homoerotic themes, although this second poem was arranged by Robert Bridges from extant fragments.<sup>[22]</sup> One contemporary literary critic, M.M. Kaylor, has argued for Hopkins's inclusion with the Uranian poets, a group whose writings derived, in many ways, from the prose works of Walter Pater, Hopkins's academic coach for his Greats exams, and later his lifelong friend.

Some critics have argued that homoerotic readings are either highly tendentious, or, that they can be classified under the broader category of "homosociality," over the gender, sexual-specific "homosexual" term. Hopkins's journal writings, they argue, offer a clear admiration for feminized beauty. In his book *Hopkins Reconstructed* (2000), Justus George Lawler critiques Robert Martin's controversial biography *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (1991) by suggesting that Martin "cannot see the heterosexual beam... for the homosexual biographical mote in his own eye... it amounts to a slanted eisegesis". The

poems that elicit homoerotic readings can be read not merely as exercises in sublimation but as powerful renditions of religious conviction, a conviction that caused strain in his family and even led him to burn some of his poems that he felt were unnecessarily self-centered. Julia Saville's book *A Queer Chivalry* views the religious imagery in the poems as Hopkins's way of expressing the tension with homosexual identity and desire. The male figure of Christ allows him to safely express such feelings, which mitigates the political implications.

## **2. Analysis of the poem "The Windhover"**

### **Summary**

The windhover is a bird with the rare ability to hover in the air, essentially flying in place while it scans the ground in search of prey. The poet describes how he saw (or "caught") one of these birds in the midst of its hovering. The bird strikes the poet as the darling ("minion") of the morning, the crown prince ("dauphin") of the kingdom of daylight, drawn by the dappled colors of dawn. It rides the air as if it were on horseback, moving with steady control like a rider whose hold on the rein is sure and firm. In the poet's imagination, the windhover sits high and proud, tightly reined in, wings quivering and tense. Its motion is controlled and suspended in an ecstatic moment of concentrated energy. Then, in the next moment, the bird is off again, now like an ice skater balancing forces as he makes a turn. The bird, first matching the wind's force in order to stay still, now "rebuff[s] the big wind" with its forward propulsion. At the same moment, the poet feels his own heart stir, or lurch forward out of "hiding," as it were—moved by "the achieve of, the mastery of" the bird's performance.

The opening of the sestet serves as both a further elaboration on the bird's movement and an injunction to the poet's own heart. The "beauty," "valour," and "act" (like "air," "pride," and "plume") "here buckle." "Buckle" is the verb here; it denotes either a fastening (like the buckling of a belt), a coming together of these different parts of a creature's being, or an acquiescent collapse (like the "buckling" of the knees), in which all parts subordinate themselves into some larger purpose or cause. In either case, a unification takes place. At the moment of this integration, a glorious fire issues forth, of the same order as the glory of Christ's life and crucifixion, though not as grand.

### **Form**

The confusing grammatical structures and sentence order in this sonnet contribute to its difficulty, but they also represent a masterful use of language. Hopkins blends and confuses adjectives, verbs, and subjects in order to echo his theme of smooth merging: the bird's perfect immersion in the air, and the fact that his self and his action are inseparable. Note, too, how important the "-ing" ending is to the poem's rhyme scheme; it occurs in verbs, adjectives, and nouns, linking the different parts of the sentences together in an intense unity. A great number of verbs are packed into a short space of lines, as Hopkins tries to nail down with as much descriptive precision as possible the exact character of the bird's motion.

"The Windhover" is written in "sprung rhythm," a meter in which the number of accents in a line are counted but the number of syllables does not matter. This technique allows Hopkins to vary the speed of his lines so as to capture the bird's pausing and racing. Listen to the hovering rhythm of "the rolling level underneath him steady air," and the

arched brightness of “and striding high there.” The poem slows abruptly at the end, pausing in awe to reflect on Christ.

### **Commentary**

This poem follows the pattern of so many of Hopkins’s sonnets, in that a sensuous experience or description leads to a set of moral reflections. Part of the beauty of the poem lies in the way Hopkins integrates his masterful description of a bird’s physical feat with an account of his own heart’s response at the end of the first stanza. However, the sestet has puzzled many readers because it seems to diverge so widely from the material introduced in the octave. At line nine, the poem shifts into the present tense, away from the recollection of the bird. The horse-and-rider metaphor with which Hopkins depicted the windhover’s motion now give way to the phrase “my chevalier”—a traditional Medieval image of Christ as a knight on horseback, to which the poem’s subtitle (or dedication) gives the reader a clue. The transition between octave and sestet comes with the statement in lines 9-11 that the natural (“brute”) beauty of the bird in flight is but a spark in comparison with the glory of Christ, whose grandeur and spiritual power are “a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous.”

The first sentence of the sestet can read as either descriptive or imperative, or both. The idea is that something glorious happens when a being’s physical body, will, and action are all brought into accord with God’s will, culminating in the perfect self-expression. Hopkins, realizing that his own heart was “in hiding,” or not fully committed to its own purpose, draws inspiration from the bird’s perfectly self-contained, self-reflecting action. Just as the hovering is the action most distinctive and self-defining for the windhover, so

spiritual striving is man's most essential aspect. At moments when humans arrive at the fullness of their moral nature, they achieve something great. But that greatness necessarily pales in comparison with the ultimate act of self-sacrifice performed by Christ, which nevertheless serves as our model and standard for our own behavior.

The final tercet within the sestet declares that this phenomenon is not a "wonder," but rather an everyday occurrence—part of what it means to be human. This striving, far from exhausting the individual, serves to bring out his or her inner glow—much as the daily use of a metal plow, instead of wearing it down, actually polishes it—causing it to sparkle and shine. The suggestion is that there is a glittering, luminous core to every individual, which a concerted religious life can expose. The subsequent image is of embers breaking open to reveal a smoldering interior. Hopkins words this image so as to relate the concept back to the Crucifixion: The verb "gash" (which doubles for "gush") suggests the wounding of Christ's body and the shedding of his "gold-vermilion" blood.

### **Analysis**

"The Windhover" is one of the most discussed, and it would seem least understood, poems of modern English literature." These opening words of a Hopkins' critic forewarn the reader of Hopkins' "The Windhover" that few critics agree on the meaning of this sonnet. Most critics do concur, however, that Hopkins' central theme is based on the paradoxical Christian principle of profit through sacrifice. Although most critics eventually focus on this pivotal concept, each one approaches the poem from a different analytical perspective. The various critics of Hopkins' "The Windhover" find woven throughout its diverse levels

expressions of Hopkins' central theme: all toil and painful things work together for good to those who sacrificially love God.

The research of Alfred Thomas provides an interesting place to begin a study of the major critical approaches to the dominant theme in "The Windhover." Thomas chooses to view the poem's theme through what he feels are its sources, citing as the major source Hopkin's life as a Jesuit. Thomas' articulation of the central paradox of the poem, then, is in the terms of the ascetic life which the Jesuit poet would have experienced: Hopkins, the priest, desires to obtain spiritual glory/gain through sacrificing a secular life for one of religious tasks. Thomas suggests that this priestly life is metaphorically pictured in two distinct manners, one in the octave the other in the sestet. Within the octave, Thomas believes that the chivalric terms suggest the first metaphorical picture—a religious man as a knight of Christ. He adds, further, that both the terminology and the picture itself have their source in the Jesuit handbook *Spiritual Exercises*. In Thomas' opinion, the poem's chivalric words blend "perfectly with the Ignatian ideal of a Jesuit as a knight of Christ" (498). According to this metaphor, the Jesuit, like a knight, would give up the painless, peaceful life to wage exhausting battles and suffer devilish wounds in his spiritual war, but would ultimately gain a crown of everlasting glory. This is the heroic version that is drawn in the octave.

In the sestet, however, there is a less glamorous representation of the ascetic life (particularly recorded in the last three lines). Thomas explains that Hopkins' own experience provides a source for this section of his sonnet, as well as intruding upon the poem in line twelve: "[Hopkins'] imitation of Christ took the unromantic form of meticulously carrying out the dreary duties assigned him, thereby living out his own line 'sheer plod makes plough

down sillion/Shine" (501). In this more pragmatic view of the life of a Jesuit, the priest relinquishes his worldly freedoms to dully plod away at religious chores, hoping thereby to "shine" his halo in preparation for heaven. Thomas, then, approaches "The Windhover" on the experiential level of the poet-priest, finding the central theme expressed in the spiritual gains of the often tedious Jesuit life.

Peter Milward opts to discipline himself, remaining on the literal level of the "The Windhover" in his exploration of the poem's paradoxical theme. According to his approach, the octave simply depicts a falcon sacrificing some amount of effort through its battle with the wind in order to obtain pleasure for itself and its viewer. The sestet, Milward believes, literally represents the poet's sacrificial servitude to Christ which allows Hopkins to be a more effective force against evil. Milward adeptly describes his perception of the octave in this manner:

There is thus an intense, if unseen, struggle, a pitting of strength between mighty opposites, the bird on the one hand and the wind on the other....In this struggle the bird maintains his mastery over the wind, and from it he derives a feeling of ecstasy, which is in turn conveyed to the watching poet.

With the last phrase of this final sentence, Milward neatly makes his transition from the bird to the poet (octave to sestet).

Moving toward his interpretation of the sestet, Milward suggests that it is the ecstatic success of the bird's struggle which inspires the poet to attempt similarly to dominate over the evil spiritual winds within himself (51). According to Milward, Hopkins realizes, however, that this subduing of evil forces cannot be achieved by "striding/High."

"Paradoxically, it is to be achieved not by mastery, but by service" (51). Milward reaches this interpretation by suggesting that in the first half of the sestet Hopkins is literally speaking of his heart as "buckling in humble submission to Christ" (52). This buckling entails the painful sacrifice of human "pride," but according to Hopkins' chief principle: "Once this condition [of sacrifice] is fulfilled..., then the fire of divine love that will break from [the poet] will be immeasurably lovelier and more effective-more 'dangerous' against his spiritual enemies" (52). Milward asserts that the second half of the sestet is comprised of two literal (and more earthy) examples of Hopkins' central theme: the sacrifice of labour from the plodding ploughman and the painful galling of the embers brings the glow of heavenly "gold" (53). Milward, then, by limiting himself to the literal level of the poem has discovered Hopkins' paradoxical theme expressed in the beauty achieved by the laboring bird and the wounded ember, and he has revealed the spiritual power that the poet gains by his difficult relinquishing of pride and his arduous service to Christ.

Donald McChesney lays his critical foundation on the literal images of the poem, but he discovers the ultimate working out of the achievement-through-sacrifice on the metaphorical level. He might summarize the poem's theme in this manner: Christ was not only a glorious master of the heavens (like the windhover), but he was also a willing "redemptive sacrifice" who manifested "the hidden splendor of sacrificial suffering" (like the hidden splendor of the "plough" and the "blue beak embers"). McChesney asserts that Hopkins uses the windhover as the vehicle in his attempt to describe the lofty grandeur of Christ with a metaphor from nature. This is the greatness of which Christ divests himself when he imprisons himself in flesh. McChesney notes, however, that Christ's confinement was not without its reward. For Hopkins uses the "plough" and the "embers" as the vehicles



of his metaphorical description of the concealed glory which is resident in Christ's trying sacrifice (66). Finally, McChesney concludes by citing an interesting additional relationship between the tenor and vehicles of Hopkins' metaphors. "Beside this beauty of voluntary redemptive sacrifice, the beauty of the natural and created order is nothing; in fact, the latter [nature as the vehicle] can find no consummation without the former [Christ, the tenor]" (66). He perceptively identifies the winning of eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ's galling cross experience as the impetus behind this paradoxical principle. McChesney, then, finds in "The Windhover" a metaphorical representation of Christ's victory through sacrificial defeat.

Romano Guardini, taking a similar approach, believes that the literal level of the poem is simply a metaphorical springboard for a description of Christ, a living example of the poem's paradoxical principle. He believes that the metaphorical description of Christ begins before his incarnation: Christ as a spirit (bird) took on the pain of flesh (buckle), toiled (plough), and suffered death (fall, gall), and thereby gained glorious eternal life (gold-vermillion). He centers his summary of the poem's metaphorical message around the crucial word "buckle." Speaking, at first, in general germs, he states:

A greatness that even now had captured the imagination by its freedom and magnificence is, as it were, dethroned: "Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume"-all these are invoked-"Here/Buckle!" However the word "buckle" may be explicated, it includes the meaning that what was before free in the heights, surrounded by light, unlimited...must now yield to or overcome a thing that dwells in the lower darkness, constricted, care-worn, yet, in truth, greater.

Guardini, of course, identifies Christ as the magnificent tenor of Hopkins' metaphor: It is Christ who yields his freedom for a constriction which is, in truth, greater. In order to explain Hopkins' paradoxical thesis, Guardini is drawn to the writings of the apostle Paul: "He who formerly lived in the divine light, through the Incarnation 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' (Phil 2.7). Once like a falcon, he is now like a serf bound to the plough" (78). Guardini even incorporates the galled embers into his metaphorical explanation: "the suffering Christ whose wounds gape blood-red [gold-vermillion embers] in the struggle for redemption yet gleam like gold [gold-vermillion embers] because of His secret glory" (79). Guardini threads his interpretation from the literal world of the falcon through the eye of Hopkin's buckle and into the metaphorical world of the Christ, discovering the eternal worth of Christ's sacrificial, crimson, blood.

Bruce Wallis also chooses to approach Hopkins' basic theme through metaphor. He formulates the principle in terms of Christ's sacrifice of His divinity to win man's salvation. Wallis' technique is to begin with a single metaphor, which he believes has been incorrectly interpreted until the present, and then to branch out to show how he thinks this crucial metaphor affects the entire poem. Wallis takes issue with the traditional view of the falcon as a horseman. He explains his reasons for questioning this interpretation: "The image...not only contradicts the language through which the bird is presented, but also both weakens the turn in the sonnet and severely undermines the theological implication with which the sonnet is infused." Wallis feels that to interpret the falcon as riding in a chariot is more appropriate. He believes that this image draws in an allusion to the majestic sun god Apollo, who better than a clumsy horseman represents the Son of God (27). He supports this

interpretation by citing passages in the poem which seem to describe the more graceful movements of a chariot as opposed to the jerky movements of a horse (27).

After presenting and defending his alternate interpretation, Wallis steps back and tries to explain the importance of this interpretation to the entire poem:

The distinction is crucial, for the image of the bird in complete and proud control reinforces the distinction between the octave and the sestet, where bird and Christ are in absolute majesty and dominion, and the sestet, whereby a deliberate act of humility ("air, pride, plume here/Buckle"), both bird and Christ plunge earthward—bird in pursuit of prey, Christ to the state of manhood and the death of the cross. (27) Wallis, believes further that the image of the bird as a charioteer adds to the majesty of the octave and, therefore, increases the contrast between the octave and the sestet (i.e. it emphasizes the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice). However, more important, in the eyes of Wallis, is the fact that the image of a chariot incorporates the mythology of the sun god Apollo. And in Hopkins' Christian context, the chariot implies "the presence of the Son of God" (27). Wallis, then, believes that the metaphor of the bird as charioteer is essential to Hopkins' paradoxical expression: Christ earned eternal life by sacrificing his divine dominion to suffer as a man.

C.J. Tweedy employs a fascinating overlaying of the literal and symbolic levels of the "The Windhover" to express the poem's theme. He finds that for the literal bird, the gain is that of his prey, resulting from the bird's fight with the wind; and for the symbolic Christ, the gain is eternal life, resulting from his fight with the flesh. Tweedy is probably unique in his view of the sestet as continuing the literal story of the falcon. He argues his interpretation in this manner:

Probably most people would agree that the kestrel is rather gradually revealed by the glory of its life in the octave as a symbol of Christ as Lord, and that the sestet relates more to Christ as the hero on earth...crucified-yet still, I think, actively symbolized in the kestrel. In terms of the bird, the octave as I see it, is about the flight of the kestrel: the sestet about its stoop.

A specific example of Tweedy's singular view may be found in his literal explanation of lines ten and eleven: "The 'fire that breaks from thee then' I see as the sudden revelation of the beautiful rufous...colour on the male kestrel's upper parts as it turns...to dive-lovely indeed, but also to the prey below most 'dangerous'" (89). Finally, Tweedy descends to the last line of the poem, wrapping the literal and symbolic levels into one neat, paradoxical package:

Did not Hopkins feel himself at times-and perhaps all men at times-to be the minute prey of a great and terrible, but beautiful and ultimately loving and merciful God? Death, I would suggest-in the "gashed" prey (still present even with the "embers" metaphor: this sonnet is all about the kestrel, as well as much else)-is seen, as the Crucifixion is, as a terrible but merciful moment of transformation into the new (and perhaps Risen) Life. (89)

Tweedy, then, through a literal and symbolic study of "The Windhover" decides that "Death" is the key term to the central paradoxical issue: through Hopkins' picture of Christ's death, the reader is to realize that his own death (i.e. painful sacrifice of life) will gain him entrance into heaven.

Raymond Schoder chooses to deal chiefly with the symbolism of "The Windhover." He views the images of the poem as being powerful symbols of Christ: both as a high riding

chevalier and as a heroic sufferer, Christ inspires the poet's heart to desire to follow Christ's sacrificial example. Schoder first explains the symbolism of Christ as a chevalier: "The falcon is not only a vividly real nature object, but becomes...a symbol, a revelation of Christ, Who also stirs the mind to admiration with His utterly intrepid comportment in the face of opposition" (298). He next describes his symbolic interpretation of Christ as the suffering hero in the sestet:

For Hopkins, Christ is the supreme Hero of all time, Who of His own free choice undertook the greatest, most painful and terrifying mission ever laid on man's shoulders, and with inexpressible heroism flowing from infinite love and selfless dedication carried through the mighty struggle unto death, even on a cross, to the final triumphant "It is consummated." (289)

Both of these symbolic pictures create in the observer a desire to have this principle of salvation through bold sacrifice working in his own life. Schoder further explains the symbolic significance of the embers and the plough: "The law of glory through struggle, he thus reminds his heart..., prevails not only when the struggle is one of joy, as with the falcon, but also when it implies pain and the wearisome cross of undiversified drudgery, as in the galled ember and plodding plough" (302). Schoder, then, finds evident in the symbolism of "The Windhover" the case "law of glory through struggle": the decision for Christ in the case of Christ vs. The Flesh established the precedent, and now man through painful trial may obtain the same verdict.

Perhaps, the paradoxical theme of "The Windhover" may be approached on one final level, structure. If the central theme of the poem is that some positive end may be achieved

through the sacrifice of an individual, then surely the form of the poem will support this message. The form which Hopkins chooses is comprised of three parts. This three-part structure may be abstracted in this way: first, Hopkins establishes that there is something to sacrifice, then he records the actual sacrifice, and finally he implies the gains from the sacrifice. Beginning on the broadest level, Hopkins structures his entire poem, as Guardini suggests, in a manner which ably bears his theme: Christ (as symbolized by the falcon) first exists as an all-powerful spirit in the octave, then he sacrifices this glory in the sestet to be painfully strapped to the flesh, to laboriously plough, and to be galled, killed. The light images of the sestet, however, imply the salvational gain of Christ's sacrificial death. The "fire," the "shine," and the shimmering "gold" suggest that Christ's sacrifice will be the light which leads to the Father's heavenly realm.

Hopkins, however, also employs his three-part structure on a more intricate level. The octave itself contains this three-fold, message-supporting structure. First, Hopkins establishes the majesty of the falcon ("morning's minion" and "daylight's dauphin"). Next, he records the struggle of the bird ("off, off forth on swing" 5); this would at least have been a sacrifice of a great amount of energy. Finally, Hopkins records the success of this sacrifice, the inspiring of the poet ("My heart in hiding/Stirred for a bird" 7-8). This inspiration at the very least gained for the poet his favorite poem.

The next example of Hopkin's conforming his message to his structure occurs on a still smaller scale:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here Buckle! AND the fire that  
brakes from thee then, a billion Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

From eight lines, Hopkins compresses his message into three. He begins by establishing the grandeur of Christ (or the bird) with his list of "brute beauty and valour," etc. The sacrifice is expressed in the word "Buckle"-no matter what the other possible interpretations of this word may be, "buckle" definitely contains the sense of giving up the preceding list of proud qualities. The gain from this sacrifice is an eternal-life "fire that breaks from" Christ which is incredibly lovely for the believer and terribly "dangerous" for the unrepentant sinner.

Finally, Hopkins distills his paradox into a single word unit: "gold-vermillion." Within the context of the poem "gold" is a symbol of the same princely riches that Hopkins established in his octave. This is followed by "vermillion," the bloody color which symbolizes Christ's sacrifice in the sestet. Finally, the gain may be seen by looking at the entire unit. The gold tinted, blood-red color evokes an image of the streets of gold upon which the blood-washed saints will stand because of the sacrifice of Christ's vermillion blood. It can be seen, therefore, that Hopkins uses a three part structure to inform his three-fold theme, also adding compressed force to his message by methodically reducing his structural message into smaller units each more potent than the last.

Hopkins infuses the fourteen short lines of "The Windhover" with an existential, literal, metaphorical, symbolic, and structural expression of the central, life-giving paradox of salvation history. The apostle Paul chose to explain this essential principle through the science of exposition. Hopkins, however, decided to express the hidden heart of the gospel through the art of poetry. Both men were master communicators:

Christ Jesus, who being in the form of Daylight's dauphin, thought it not robbery to be equal with the King-:

But emptied himself of all pride, and took upon himself to buckle to the form of a ploughman. And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto galling, even the gold-vermillion death of the cross. The poetics of "The Windhover" reverberate with the resonance of the fundamental principle of the gospel: "The Windhover" represents "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

The Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins is a semi-romantic, religious poem dedicated to Christ. It is a usual Hopkinsian sonnet that begins with description of nature and ends in meditation about God and Christ and his beauty, greatness and grace. The poem also uses his usual "sprung rhythm", Anglo-Saxon diction, alliteration, internal rhyming, new compound metaphors, elliptical grammar and complex threads of connotation.

Hopkins has mixed his romantic fascination with the nature with his religious favor of gratitude towards God for giving us a beautiful nature. The beauty of nature is here illustrated by a wonderful bird flying in the air. He describes a bird which he saw flying in the sky that morning. Like in a romantic poem, he remembers the experience to express his feelings. That morning, the speaker had been out at dawn. From the excited description in the poem, we can infer that the speaker was probably in the field. His attention was suddenly drawn by the scene of a bird flying in the sky. The first stanza of the poem is a description of the different tricks of the bird's flight. In the second the speaker remembers the beauty of Christ and says that he is a billion times loveliest. So, claiming that the nature's beauty is no wonder, he concludes in the last stanza that everything he looks at



reminds him the pain and suffering of Christ which has made human life so beautiful and given this opportunity to enjoy it. To this devotee of Christ, everything brings the image of Christ and his wounds and pain and sacrifice. This suggests that he always remembers and becomes thankful to Christ. As the subtitle suggests, the poem is a thanksgiving to Christ.

The Windhover is a sonnet whose octave describes the flight of a kestrel (windhover) that he saw that morning. The sestet is divided in two parts: the first three lines are about the bird and the comparison of the bird with Christ who is 'a billion times lovelier', and the last three lines express his memories and appreciation of Christ. But the poem is rather difficult because the poet has used odd old English words, only implications, and Christian symbols to suggest the pain (gall), wound (gash), blood (vermillion), sacrifice, and so the greatness of Christ. The bottom-line of the difficult ideas in this poem is that 'it is because of the sacrifice of Christ that we have such a life, and we can enjoy the majestic beauty of the nature: so we should thank him. The speaker compares the bird with Christ, "my chevalier", who is a billion times lovelier, more brute (wild) and dangerous (consuming) in his beauty. The fire or brilliance of Christ is dazzling this bird is no wonder. "No wonder", says the poet about the bird because the real wonder of the world is another supreme gift of God, his son, the Christ. His steps on the soil make a semblance (shape) of a wound (gash) when the blood-red (vermillion) and golden light of the sun is cast on it. The flight of the bird reminds the speaker of his Christ's crucifixion; his blood falls on us for redemption: his suffering (gall) is also another thing to remember.

The last stanza associatively brings together unrelated words, each telling something about Christ and his suffering and sacrifice for human beings. The description of the first stanza and the comparison of the second stanza are all forgotten when the poet deeply

meditates and exalts in the sacrifice and greatness of Christ in the last three-line stanza. The red ember-like the light of the morning sun on the horizon of the blue-bleak sky and he is lost in contemplation. The poem is almost impossible to understand without good background knowledge about Hopkins's ideas and his odd words. There are many words of the Anglo-Saxon origin like *rung* (past tense of 'ring' meaning go round), *minion*, *dauphin*, *chevalier* (prince), etc.

There are also unusual combinations like "dapple-dawn-drawn", which is an image of the bird. The last stanza is particularly complex because of the associatively linked words related to Christ and his sacrifice. Finally, the grammar is also odd; actually the poem does not follow any traditional grammar and structure. In short, the poem can be discussed as a sonnet because it has some of the features of the typical sonnet, but it must be called a modified sonnet adapted to a different kind of subject, word-game and music. By implication, the poem is therefore a poem of thanksgiving to Christ. It is a hymn that is romantic in form but religious in theme. When the poet sees the beautiful bird, he is reminded of Christ and becomes thankful and appreciative of him. The poem's theme is therefore related to the poet's praise of Christ rather than being about the bird.

Gerard Manley Hopkins himself thought that "The Windhover" was his best poem, and generations of readers have agreed with him. The poem, composed on May 30, 1877, contains the account of the flight of a falcon, as observed by the poet in North Wales as he attended religious studies at St. Beuno's seminary. The poem ends with a meditation on the activity of God in the world, as evidenced by the activity of the bird.

A windhover is better known as a kestrel, a type of falcon. The octave of the sonnet, the first eight lines, describes the flight of the windhover and its great skill in riding the currents of air. The narrator of the poem catches sight of the falcon at dawn, as the bird hovers and swoops in its hunt for prey. The different maneuvers of the bird in its flight are vividly described.

The first three lines describe the falcon's uncannily steady flight forward: "his riding/ Of the rolling level underneath him steady air." The fourth line describes how the falcon pivots around from his forward flight: "how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing." To ring upon the rein is a term from horse training: A young horse has a long rope attached to his bridle, and the trainer makes the horse trot around him in a large circle. In exactly this manner does the falcon swing around from his level flight forward to sweep into a circle. "Wimpling" means that his wings, to perform this maneuver, swing up into a curve that is like the wimple on a nun's headdress.

### **3. Analysis of the poem "Pied Beauty"**

#### **Summary**

The poem opens with an offering: "Glory be to God for dappled things." In the next five lines, Hopkins elaborates with examples of what things he means to include under this rubric of "dappled." He includes the mottled white and blue colors of the sky, the "brinded" (brindled or streaked) hide of a cow, and the patches of contrasting color on a trout. The chestnuts offer a slightly more complex image: When they fall they open to reveal the meaty interior normally concealed by the hard shell; they are compared to the coals in a fire, black on the outside and glowing within. The wings of finches are multicolored, as is a

patchwork of farmland in which sections look different according to whether they are planted and green, fallow, or freshly plowed. The final example is of the “trades” and activities of man, with their rich diversity of materials and equipment.

In the final five lines, Hopkins goes on to consider more closely the characteristics of these examples he has given, attaching moral qualities now to the concept of variety and diversity that he has elaborated thus far mostly in terms of physical characteristics. The poem becomes an apology for these unconventional or “strange” things, things that might not normally be valued or thought beautiful. They are all, he avers, creations of God, which, in their multiplicity, point always to the unity and permanence of His power and inspire us to “Praise Him.”

### **Form**

This is one of Hopkins’s “curtal” (or curtailed) sonnets, in which he miniaturizes the traditional sonnet form by reducing the eight lines of the octave to six (here two tercets rhyming *ABC ABC*) and shortening the six lines of the sestet to four and a half. This alteration of the sonnet form is quite fitting for a poem advocating originality and contrariness. The strikingly musical repetition of sounds throughout the poem (“dappled,” “stipple,” “tackle,” “fickle,” “freckled,” “adazzle,” for example) enacts the creative act the poem glorifies: the weaving together of diverse things into a pleasing and coherent whole.

### **Commentary**

This poem is a miniature or set-piece, and a kind of ritual observance. It begins and ends with variations on the mottoes of the Jesuit order (“to the greater glory of God” and “praise to God always”), which give it a traditional flavor, tempering the unorthodoxy of its

appreciations. The parallelism of the beginning and end correspond to a larger symmetry within the poem: the first part (the shortened octave) begins with God and then moves to praise his creations. The last four-and-a-half lines reverse this movement, beginning with the characteristics of things in the world and then tracing them back to a final affirmation of God. The delay of the verb in this extended sentence makes this return all the more satisfying when it comes; the long and list-like predicate, which captures the multiplicity of the created world, at last yields in the penultimate line to a striking verb of creation (fathers-forth) and then leads us to acknowledge an absolute subject, God the Creator. The poem is thus a hymn of creation, praising God by praising the created world. It expresses the theological position that the great variety in the natural world is a testimony to the perfect unity of God and the infinitude of His creative power. In the context of a Victorian age that valued uniformity, efficiency, and standardization, this theological notion takes on a tone of protest.

Why does Hopkins choose to commend “dappled things” in particular? The first stanza would lead the reader to believe that their significance is an aesthetic one: In showing how contrasts and juxtapositions increase the richness of our surroundings, Hopkins describes variations in color and texture—of the sensory. The mention of the “fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls” in the fourth line, however, introduces a moral tenor to the list. Though the description is still physical, the idea of a nugget of goodness imprisoned within a hard exterior invites a consideration of essential *value* in a way that the speckles on a cow, for example, do not. The image transcends the physical, implying how the physical links to the spiritual and meditating on the relationship between body and soul. Lines five and six then serve to connect these musings to human life and activity. Hopkins first

introduces a landscape whose characteristics derive from man's alteration (the fields), and then includes "trades," "gear," "tackle," and "trim" as diverse items that are man-made. But he then goes on to include these things, along with the preceding list, as part of God's work.

Hopkins does not refer explicitly to human beings themselves, or to the variations that exist among them, in his catalogue of the dappled and diverse. But the next section opens with a list of qualities ("counter, original, spare, strange") which, though they doggedly refer to "things" rather than people, cannot but be considered in moral terms as well; Hopkins's own life, and particularly his poetry, had at the time been described in those very terms. With "fickle" and "freckled" in the eighth line, Hopkins introduces a moral and an aesthetic quality, each of which would conventionally convey a negative judgment, in order to fold even the base and the ugly back into his worshipful inventory of God's gloriously "pied" creation.

### **Analysis**

"Pied Beauty" is a rhymed "curtal" (shortened) sonnet divided into two stanzas, consisting of three full tercets and a truncated fourth. The title refers to the variegated beauty of the world that first may appear ugly or chaotic. Though "pied" suggests at least two tones or colors, it also suggests a blotched or botched effect, as when in an earlier era, a printer spilled a galley of set type, creating a printer's "pie."

Though traditional sonnets are fourteen lines, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his experiments with poetic form, line, and meter, altered the shape of the sonnet. In the case of "Pied Beauty," he "curtailed" or shortened the sonnet's traditional fourteen lines to eleven; in some other cases, he lengthened the form and wrote sonnets "with codas," or tails.

The poem celebrates God for the beauty in a varied creation. Hopkins, a devout Jesuit priest, isolates a number of instances of this “pied” or dappled beauty in the first stanza (lines 1-6). He finds it in two-toned skies as well as on cows, on spotted trout, and on the wings of birds. He also sees variety and unity in the contrasts between all these life-forms, for he sees echoes of plants on fish—“rose-moles upon trout,” echoes of the dying embers of fires in the chestnuts falling from the tree.

In the poem, the narrator praises God for the variety of "dappled things" in nature, such as piebald cattle, trout and finches. He also describes how falling chestnuts resemble coals bursting in a fire, because of the way in which the chestnuts' reddish-brown meat is exposed when the shells break against the ground. The narrator then moves to an image of the landscape which has been "plotted and pieced" into fields (like quilt squares) by agriculture. At the end of the poem, the narrator emphasizes that God's beauty is "past change", and advises readers to "Praise him".

This ending is gently ironic and beautifully surprising: the entire poem has been about variety, and then God's attribute of immutability is praised in contrast. By juxtaposing God's changelessness with the vicissitude of His creation, His separation from creation is emphasized, as is His vast creativity. This turn or volta also serves to highlight the poet's skill at uniting apparent opposites by means of form and content: the meter is Hopkins's own sprung rhythm, and the packing-in of various alliterative syllables serves as an aural example of the visual variety Hopkins describes.

#### 4. Analysis of the poem “God’s Grandeur”

##### Summary

The first four lines of the octave (the first eight-line stanza of an Italian sonnet) describe a natural world through which God’s presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flashes like the refracted glintings of light produced by metal foil when rumpled or quickly moved. Alternatively, God’s presence is a rich oil, a kind of sap that wells up “to a greatness” when tapped with a certain kind of patient pressure. Given these clear, strong proofs of God’s presence in the world, the poet asks how it is that humans fail to heed (“reck”) His divine authority (“his rod”).

The second quatrain within the octave describes the state of contemporary human life—the blind repetitiveness of human labor, and the sordidness and stain of “toil” and “trade.” The landscape in its natural state reflects God as its creator; but industry and the prioritization of the economic over the spiritual have transformed the landscape, and robbed humans of their sensitivity to the those few beauties of nature still left. The shoes people wear sever the physical connection between our feet and the earth they walk on, symbolizing an ever-increasing spiritual alienation from nature.

The sestet (the final six lines of the sonnet, enacting a turn or shift in argument) asserts that, in spite of the fallenness of Hopkins’s contemporary Victorian world, nature does not cease offering up its spiritual indices. Permeating the world is a deep “freshness” that testifies to the continual renewing power of God’s creation. This power of renewal is seen in the way morning always waits on the other side of dark night. The source of this constant regeneration is the grace of a God who “broods” over a seemingly lifeless world



with the patient nurture of a mother hen. This final image is one of God guarding the potential of the world and containing within Himself the power and promise of rebirth. With the final exclamation (“ah! bright wings”) Hopkins suggests both an awed intuition of the beauty of God’s grace, and the joyful suddenness of a hatchling bird emerging out of God’s loving incubation.

### **Form**

This poem is an Italian sonnet—it contains fourteen lines divided into an octave and a sestet, which are separated by a shift in the argumentative direction of the poem. The meter here is not the “sprung rhythm” for which Hopkins is so famous, but it does vary somewhat from the iambic pentameter lines of the conventional sonnet. For example, Hopkins follows stressed syllable with stressed syllable in the fourth line of the poem, bolstering the urgency of his question: “Why do men then now not reck his rod?” Similarly, in the next line, the heavy, falling rhythm of “have trod, have trod, have trod,” coming after the quick lilt of “generations,” recreates the sound of plodding footsteps in striking onomatopoeia.

### **Commentary**

The poem begins with the surprising metaphor of God’s grandeur as an electric force. The figure suggests an undercurrent that is not always seen, but which builds up a tension or pressure that occasionally flashes out in ways that can be both brilliant and dangerous. The optical effect of “shook foil” is one example of this brilliancy. The image of the oil being pressed out of an olive represents another kind of richness, where saturation and built-up pressure eventually culminate in a salubrious overflow. The image of electricity

makes a subtle return in the fourth line, where the “rod” of God’s punishing power calls to mind the lightning rod in which excess electricity in the atmosphere will occasionally “flame out.” Hopkins carefully chooses this complex of images to link the secular and scientific to mystery, divinity, and religious tradition. Electricity was an area of much scientific interest during Hopkins’s day, and is an example of a phenomenon that had long been taken as an indication of divine power but which was now explained in naturalistic, rational terms.

Hopkins is defiantly affirmative in his assertion that God’s work is still to be seen in nature, if men will only concern themselves to look. Refusing to ignore the discoveries of modern science, he takes them as further evidence of God’s grandeur rather than a challenge to it. Hopkins’s awe at the optical effects of a piece of foil attributes revelatory power to a man-made object; gold-leaf foil had also been used in recent influential scientific experiments. The olive oil, on the other hand, is an ancient sacramental substance, used for centuries for food, medicine, lamplight, and religious purposes. This oil thus traditionally appears in all aspects of life, much as God suffuses all branches of the created universe. Moreover, the slowness of its oozing contrasts with the quick electric flash; the method of its extraction implies such spiritual qualities as patience and faith. (By including this description Hopkins may have been implicitly criticizing the violence and rapaciousness with which his contemporaries drilled petroleum oil to fuel industry.) Thus both the images of the foil and the olive oil bespeak an all-permeating divine presence that reveals itself in intermittent flashes or droplets of brilliance.

Hopkins’s question in the fourth line focuses his readers on the present historical moment; in considering why men are no longer God-fearing, the emphasis is on “now.” The answer is a complex one. The second quatrain contains an indictment of the way a culture’s

neglect of God translates into a neglect of the environment. But it also suggests that the abuses of previous generations are partly to blame; they have soiled and “seared” our world, further hindering our ability to access the holy. Yet the sestet affirms that, in spite of the interdependent deterioration of human beings and the earth, God has not withdrawn from either. He possesses an infinite power of renewal, to which the regenerative natural cycles testify. The poem reflects Hopkins’s conviction that the physical world is like a book written by God, in which the attentive person can always detect signs of a benevolent authorship, and which can help mediate human beings’ contemplation of this Author.

### **Analysis**

The sonnet *God’s Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins stresses the immanence of God. The whole universe is an expression of God’s greatness, but man fails to recognize it. Though the soil is bare and smeared with man’s toil, there is a constant renewal or natural beauty because God continues to “brood” over the world.

In this sonnet, Hopkins praises the magnificence and glory of God in the world, blending accurate observation with lofty imagination. The world is filled with the greatness of God. God’s glory expresses itself in two ways. Sometimes it flames out with sudden brightness when a gold foil is shaken. At other times, the poet thinks of an olive press, with the oil oozing (flowing out) from the pressed fruit. It oozes from every part of the press in a fine film and then the trickles gathers together to form a jar of oil. In the same way, the grandeur of God is found everywhere, trickling from every simple thing in a created universe and accumulating to form greatness. The poet wonders why people do not care about God’s

rod. People pursue their worldly activities without any thought of God's will and without the fear of god's anger.

Generations of human beings have followed the same worldly path and have become so habituated to it that they don't know its uselessness. It has become monotonous due to lack of the divine will. The world has been degraded and made ugly by commercial activity and by hard work aimed at worldly gains. The world bears the marks of man's dirt and gives out man's bad smells. The beauty of nature is spoiled by man's industrial activity and the sweet smell of nature has been drowned in the bad smells that come from machines. The earth is now bare, having lost all living beauty. Man is insensitive to this bareness. Because of the shoes, he can't feel whether the earth is soft or hard.

In spite of man's activities tending to destroy the beauty of Nature, it is inexhaustible. At the bottom of the world there is freshness. This freshness never disappears. When spring comes nature renews itself and thus shows underlying freshness. And although the sun goes down the western sky and the earth is plunged in darkness, the next day will dawn and the sun will be rising again in the eastern sky. Just as a dove with its warm breast broods over its young ones in its nest, so the Holy Ghost broods protectively over the world which is bent in sleep and forgetfulness.

The repetition of the words 'have trod' captures the mechanical forces in verse because of their heavy accents. What is sometimes called the 'daily grind' is the repetitive thump in which the feet of generation march on; and the 'trod... trod... trod' sets up the three beat rhythm of the next line: 'seared... bleared... smeared! 'Seared' means 'dried up' or it can mean 'rendered incapable of feeling'. 'Bleared' means 'blurred with inflammation

of the eyes' and 'smeared' means 'rubbed over with dirt'. They suggest that there is no delicacy of feeling or perception in the world. The whole world has been degraded and made ugly by commercial activity and by toil aimed at monetary gains.

## 5. Study Questions

**1. Hopkins's sonnets typically shift from a personal, often sensual experience rooted in the physical world to moral, philosophical, and theological reflections. Discuss this movement in relation to several poems.**

**Sample Answer:** The poetic shift from the world of experience to more abstract considerations reflects the way Hopkins believed all experiences to harken back eventually to the metaphysical, to God the creator. He believed that the world of nature (and even the man-made aspects of the experienced world) were all part of God's creative expression, and that the spirit of God was infused in his creation. "God's Grandeur" suggests that the energy of God runs through all things, sometimes welling up to an excess and revealing itself in bursts of brilliance or goodness. For Hopkins, because God infused all the world, the world was a means of access to spiritual truth, a way of getting in touch with God and his will and design. The transition in a poem such as "The Windhover" from the contemplation of a bird to the contemplation of God was therefore a very natural one for Hopkins, and one very deeply rooted in his religious beliefs. The Italian sonnet form is perfectly suited for this kind of poetic argument because it incorporates a turn of tone between the first and second parts.

**2. Trace some images of science and technology in Hopkins's poems. How did he reconcile scientific understanding with religious belief?**

In "God's Grandeur," Hopkins uses electricity as a metaphor for God's power and presence in the world. The poem does not explicitly mention lightning, but lightning was one of the poet's favorite images, and it is certainly suggested in the image of a charge that "will flame out" after "gather[ing] to a greatness." Electricity was a focus of much research by scientists of Hopkins's day, and lightning is a good example of a phenomenon that had traditionally been seen as a direct act of God. (Even the Greeks had attributed lightning bolts to the hand of Zeus.) As science began to propose physical explanations for lightning, many people considered such hypotheses a threat to religion and a denial of the existence of God. Hopkins was keenly aware of these sorts of debates, and he engages them at some level by choosing such provocative images for his profoundly religious poetry; yet he does not ponder long over the conflict, but rather swiftly (and summarily?) resolves it. He takes the patterns found in nature, and in the world's various objects, as testimony to God's hand in creating an orderly universe.

3. Why do you think the method of "sprung rhythm" appealed to Hopkins? How does it contribute to his poems?

4. How does Hopkins think and write about his religious vocation, and how does that relate to his sense of his work as a poet? What other kinds of work or trades appear in Hopkins's poem, and what does his attitude seem to be toward physical labor?

5. Think about some of the images that recur in Hopkins's poems, and discuss why they are appropriate to the themes that most concerned him as a poet.

6. Are Hopkins's poems at all political? Do they make any attempt to come to terms with questions of history or nation? If so, where and how?

7. Hopkins is famous as a poet of both nature and religion. How does he combine these two traditional poetic subjects, and to what effect?

8. What does Hopkins believe about the presence of God in the natural world? Illustrate your answer with reference to two or more poems.

9. Does Hopkins's poetry more closely resemble Romantic or Modernist poetry? Explain your answer.

10. Hopkins often said that he wanted his poetic language to be true to living speech. In what ways do his unusual diction and his "sprung rhythm" succeed or fail in this capacity?

## 6. Suggestions for Further Reading

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