**Victorian Literature**

**1. Introduction**

Defining Victorian literature in any satisfactory and comprehensive manner has proven troublesome for critics ever since the nineteenth century came to a close. The movement roughly comprises the years from 1830 to 1900, though there is ample disagreement regarding even this simple point. The name given to the period is borrowed from the royal matriarch of England, Queen Victoria, who sat on throne from 1837 to 1901. One has difficulty determining with any accuracy where the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century leaves off and the Victorian Period begins because these traditions have so many aspects in common. Likewise, identifying the point where Victorianism gives way completely to Modernism is no easy task. Literary periods are never the discrete, self-contained realms which the anthologies so suggest. Rather, a literary period more closely resembles a rope that is frayed at both ends. Many threads make up the rope and work together to form the whole artistic and cultural milieu. The Victorian writers exhibited some well-established habits from previous eras, while at the same time pushing arts and letters in new and interesting directions. Indeed, some of the later Victorian novelists and poets are nearly indistinguishable from the Modernists who followed shortly thereafter. In spite of the uncertainty of terminology, there are some concrete statements that one can make regarding the nature of Victorian literature, and the intellectual world which nurtured that literature.

**Developments characterize the Victorian era**

If there is one transcending aspect to Victorian England life and society, that aspect is **change** – or, more accurately, upheaval. Everything that the previous centuries had held as sacred and indisputable truth came under assault during the middle and latter parts of the nineteenth century. Nearly every institution of society was shaken by rapid and unpredictable change. Improvements to steam engine **technology** led to increased factory production. More manufacturing required more coal to be mined from the ground. The **economies** of Europe expanded and accelerated, as the foundations of a completely global economy were laid. Huge amounts of wealth were created, and the spirit of the times discouraged the regulation of business practices. Today, this is called **laissez-faire** economics. This generation of wealth was to the sole benefit of the newly risen “middle class,” an urbane, entrepreneurial segment of society which saw itself as the natural successor to the noble’s former position of influence. At the same time, **scientific advancements** were undermining the position of the Church in daily life. **Charles Darwin’s** theories of evolution and natural selection brought humanity down to the level of the animal, and seemingly reduced the meaning of life to a bloody struggle for survival. The poorest of their poor found their lot in life to be worse than it had ever been, as the new market economy favored industry over agriculture. Large numbers of dispossessed farmers and peasants migrated from the countryside to the cities, seeking work in the factories. The effects of that demographic shift can still be observed. Conditions in the overwhelmed, sprawling cities degenerated as the infrastructure simply could not handle the influx of new workers. Slums and shantytowns became the norm, and depredation was a fact of life for the majority of the working class.

For some, the fundamental changes taking place in the world meant progress, and were a source of hope and optimism. For the majority of writers and thinkers, however, the inequality present in Victorian society was a kind of illness that would sooner or later come to a tipping point. Many intellectuals saw it as their duty to speak out against the injustices of this new and frightening world. Essayists like ***Thomas Carlyle*** railed against the systematic abuse he saw happening all around him. He saw machinery and the Industrial Revolution as engines of destruction, stripping people of their very humanity. The level of social consciousness and immediate relevancy one finds in much of Victorian writing was something not witnessed before in English letters. Rather than turning inside or escaping into fantasy, essayists and novelists chose to directly address the pressing social problems of the day. These problems ranged from atrocious labor conditions and rampant poverty to the issue of women’s place in the world – what contemporaries referred to as “The Woman Question.” ***Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’***s long-form poem “The Cry of the Children” represents an attack on mining practices in England, specifically the employment of young children to work deep in the mines. Barrett-Browning had been outraged by a report she read detailing the practice and felt compelled to make her voice heard on the issue. She was certainly not alone in this feeling. Novelist ***Charles Dickens*** made a cottage industry out of addressing social ills in a light-hearted, optimistic tone. Each of his many novels called attention to real-world problems that others might just as soon have swept under the rug. Writers of the preceding era did not speak to a popular audience nearly as much as the Victorians, or at least not as self-consciously. The Romantic Movement was marked by introversion and abstraction; they were much less interested in commenting on, much less altering the course of world events. Furthermore, the Romantics did not see leadership as a primary objective for art. Victorians, on the other hand, tacitly agreed that encouraging society toward a higher good was a righteous, noble occupation for any artist.

Not surprisingly, **women** in the Victorian world held very little power and had to fight hard for the change they wanted in their lives. What one thinks of as **feminism** today had not yet taken form in the Victorian period. The philosophy of female emancipation, however, became a rallying point for many female Victorian writers and thinkers. Poets and novelists frequently had to be coy when addressing their status in society. ***Christina Rossetti’s*** “Goblin Market” combines early feminist imagery with many other concepts in a fairy-tale like world of imagination. Her use of religious symbolism is especially fascinating. Though not as highly regarded, ***Letitia Elizabeth*** Landon was also an accomplished and popular female poet. ***Charlotte*** and ***Emily Brontë*** crafted novels that have stood the test of time and taken their place as literary classics. These women were exceptions to the rule. Patriarchy had been firmly entrenched in Western society for so long that women writers faced an uphill climb to gain any level recognition and acceptance. Some authors, like ***Mary Ann Evans***, felt the need to work under a male pseudonym in order to receive recognition. Evans published her first two novels, [***Adam Bede***and](http://www.online-literature.com/george_eliot/adam-bede/)[***Scenes of Clerical Life***](http://www.online-literature.com/george_eliot/scenes-of-clerical-life/), under the false name of George Eliot. Interestingly, even today Evans is more commonly known by her pseudonym than her real name.

**1.2. Poetry**

In the early years of the Victorian Period, **poetry** was still the most visible of literary forms. Like everything else, poetry and poetics underwent an evolution during the nineteenth century. Both the purpose of poetry and its basic style and tone changed drastically during the Victorian Period. In the first half of the nineteenth century, poetry was still mired in the escapist, abstract imagery and themes of the earlier generation. While essayists and novelists were confronting social issues head-on, poets for their part remained ambivalent at best. This self-induced coma gradually lifted, and by mid-century most poets had moved away from the abstractions and metaphysical tropes of the Romantics and fashioned a more down-to-earth, realistic kind of verse. ***Alfred, Lord Tennyson*** was the master of simple, earthy lyricism to which everyone could relate. His [***In Memoriam***](http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/718/) shows off this simplicity and economy of verse, while remaining an effective and moving elegy for his deceased friend Arthur Hallam. The obsession with the natural world and the imagination that so clearly distinguished the Romantic poets was supplanted during the Victorian Period by a clear-headed, almost utilitarian kind of poetics. The subject matter of Victorian poetry was quite often socially-oriented, but this was by no means set in stone. Victorian poets were nothing if not masters of variety and inventiveness. ***Robert Browning’s*** dramatic monologues, for example, covered a wide array of subjects, from lucid dreams to the nature of art and even the meaning of existence. Throughout his various aesthetic experiments, Browning never failed to inject humanity into his subject matter. “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church,” one of Browning’s most famous poems, demonstrates the intensity and psychological realism he was able to portray in the space of a few hundred lines.

**1.2.1. 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 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.

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 Pre-Raphaelite 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, 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. Before the end of the century, however, the conflict thus resolutely engaged had been lost, and the artist had come to accept as a foregone conclusion his inefficacy as of his contemporaries. In compensation, he now espoused the aesthetic creed which goes by the name of art for art's sake, and with Pater and then Wilde as his apologists and Rossetti and Swinburne as his models, embraced his alienation from all but a coterie of initiates persuaded like himself to value the forms of art above its message.

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

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

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

**1.3. Robert Browning and Dramatic Monologue**

Dramatic Monologue is one of the most effective literary devices in different aesthetics and didactics. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker’s character is distinguished from the poets. The double meaning which lies in a dramatic monologue expresses the speaker’s version of different feelings or intentions. The dramatic monologue has been practiced for so many years, but it was Browning who recognized the structure which was already existing and took it to a deeper level of meaning. Generally, this kind of poem is spoken in a critical sphere of the narrator’s life.

The presence of a silent listener makes the sayings more significant. It offers a great insight into the temperament, feelings, and character of the speaker. Browning tried his hands initially on the drama but the interest in human psychology and human mind led him to show his mastery over the dramatic monologue.

The main features of Browning’s dramatic monologues are that the readers part as the silent listener in the poem, the speaker talks about a case and makes it argumentative and we complete the poem from inside by using our imagination power.

**1.3.1. Features of Browning’s Dramatic Monologue**

In most of Browning’s poems, we can find a sole speaker. For example, in ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, Lippo speaks to the watchman. The soul of a man was the main thing of interest for Browning. Despite the human actions or misdemeanors, Browning reflected the human problems in his poems.

His characters are both moral and brutal. There is a silver lining in between those characteristics and that’s the most exciting thing about Browning. Browning offers an absolutely different experience than Wordsworth or any other lyrical poets. The speaker’s psychology is the main subject in Browning’s monologues. It gets expressed by the imaginative sympathy of the poet.

**1.4. Pre-Raphaelite poetry, its characteristics**

Pre-Raphaelitism actually means a certain type of painting in imitation of the great Italian painters who flourished before the time of Raphael (1488-1823) and who were said to be simple, sincere, and devoted.

The term was first used by a group of German artists who had worked together with the avowed idea of restoring art to medieval purity and simplicity. The term is now generally applied to a group of seven young painters – [D. G. Rossetti](https://literaryocean.com/dante-gabriel-rossetti-biography-and-his-famous-works/), his brother William, W. H. Hunt, Thomas Woolner, F. G. Stevens, J. Cettinson, and J. E. Millais. They formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England in 1848. They took, for their models, early Italian painters before Raphael. Their purpose was to restore simplicity and naturalness in art, against the growing artificiality and materialism of the age. They turned to the middle ages for their models, and one of their professed aims was to express wonders and reverence, and awe that characterize medieval art. They condemned strongly the mechanized style in painting, then in vogue, and rather preferred individuality and naturalness to make art really free, true, and graceful. They took for their models, Giotts, Bellim, and Fra Angelico, whose art had the marks of individuality, sincerity, and naturalness- those very qualities, which were absent in the works of the successors of Raphael.

Pre-Raphaelitism, which originated in painting, appeared in the poetical world, in course of time, in the Victorian age. In the latter half of the 19th century, under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, Pre-Raphaelite poetry appeared, with the basic endeavor to unify poetry and painting.

Pre-Raphaelite poetry is found to follow the concept of Pre Raphaelite painting, as laid down by Rossetti. The Pre Raphaelite poets are all found word-painters, and the essence of their poetry is perceived in their pictorial quality. In this respect, they appear to be the devout followers of the great Victorian, Lord Tennyson, and bear the Keatsian romantic tradition. It is their fidelity to painting, their genius in the pictorial representation in art, that may be looked upon as the chief element of merit in their poetry.

The Pre-Raphaelite poets came in an age, troubled with social and moral speculations. The relation between religion and science, faith and rationality, mysticism and materialism, was the key question of the age. The Pre-Raphaelites, however, did not participate in that great debate of the age. They kept themselves apart and aloof from the conflict between faith and materialism and from the growing social problems of Victorian life and society. They kept themselves away from Tennyson’s spiritual convictions, Browning’s optimistic speculations, Arnold’s criticism of life, or Newman’s faith in the old religious order.

The Pre-Raphaelite poets, in fact, appear, above everything else, artists, and their only religion seems to be art. In fact, Pre Raphaelite poetry envisages a sort of escapism and is found imbued with the Keatsian principle of ‘art for art’s sake.

Another element in Pre-Raphaelite poetry is perceived in love for beauty. The Pre-Raphaelite poets are lovers of beauty. Here they are the followers of the great poetic creed of Keats. In their rich sensuousness, they are also found to carry on the tradition of great romantic poetry. They are also found to be medievalist in their attachment to the medieval past. This also constitutes another romantic aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism. Their attempt to follow Byron’s revolutionary spirit and Shelley’s inspiration for loveliness do not appear to have much succeeded, yet these elements are not ignorable in them. Pre-Raphaelite poetry, in this respect, appears to be the second phase of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. This, however, appears to lack in humanism and in the idealistic vision of human life, so much marked in romantic poetry.

In another matter, the Pre-Raphaelite poets seem to follow their romantic predecessors. Like them, they, too, suffer from a hand with death. A tender note of melancholy characterizes their romantic aspiration and adds to their poetic appeal.