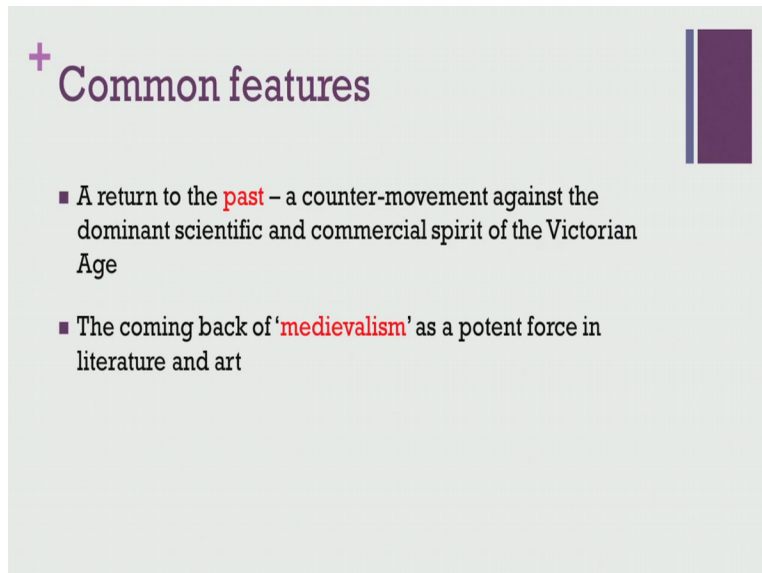


**History of English Language and Literature**  
**Prof. Dr. Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Madras**  
**Lecture 19c**  
**The Age of Tennyson - Victorian Poetry**

Good morning. I welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course, The History of English Language and Literature. Continuing our discussion on the Victorian poetry, we begin identifying some common traits which marked the distinctive features of the Victorian poetry. Though the Victorian poets were not really similar to one and other, they do display a lot of unique features in their personality as well as in the kind of writings that they produced.

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The slide features a light gray background with a purple plus sign and the title '+ Common features' in purple. To the right of the text is a vertical purple bar. Below the title are two bullet points, each starting with a purple square. The first bullet point discusses a return to the past as a counter-movement against the Victorian Age's scientific and commercial spirit. The second bullet point discusses the resurgence of medievalism in literature and art.

- A return to the **past** – a counter-movement against the dominant scientific and commercial spirit of the Victorian Age
- The coming back of '**medievalism**' as a potent force in literature and art

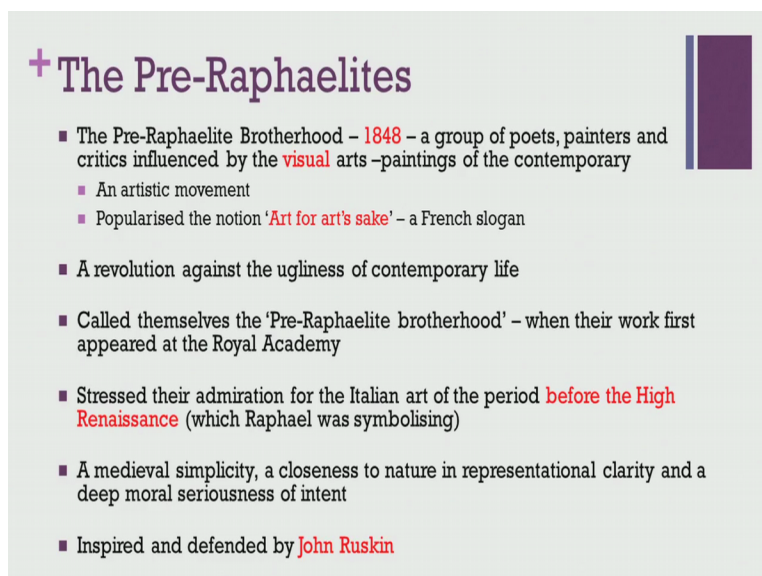
We notice that there are some striking similarities which make them all being identified as Victorian poets informed by the Victorian temper and also the sensibilities of the time. So one of the significant feature is a return to the past and this also we may notice that is a counter-movement against the dominant scientific and commercial spirit of the Victorian Age. As we have noticed in the introductory session itself, though the Victorian Age is dominated by a certain scientific temper and also peppered by a doubtful feelings which also instigated a lot of dilemma between reason, faith, science and all that were informing the human understanding of nature and also of oneself.

We notice that in spite of these very significant movements, we also find the writers moving away significantly from these dominant tenets of the times. Perhaps they were also quite weary of the way in which the commercial establishments were taking over. And also perhaps they were not initially aware of the ways in which all of these could threaten the very foundations of their being.

Another significant thing which could also be seen as an extension from the early romantic period is a comeback of medievalism. We also notice that this serves as a potent force in literature and art of the Victorian period. Some of these tendencies may not be visible in the Victorian period, this being fairly long period given that the Queen Victoria reigned for about 63 years. But nevertheless it is possible to identify some of these common themes and common departures which makes us possible to engage with Victorian poetry as a whole.

And again reiterating one of the things that we highlighted at the beginning of our discussions on the Victorian period, it is only possible to give a bare sketch of the period given the prolific literary output and also the number of texts that were being published and disseminated during this period.

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**+ The Pre-Raphaelites**

- The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – 1848 – a group of poets, painters and critics influenced by the **visual** arts – paintings of the contemporary
  - An artistic movement
  - Popularised the notion '**Art for art's sake**' – a French slogan
- A revolution against the ugliness of contemporary life
- Called themselves the 'Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood' – when their work first appeared at the Royal Academy
- Stressed their admiration for the Italian art of the period **before the High Renaissance** (which Raphael was symbolising)
- A medieval simplicity, a closeness to nature in representational clarity and a deep moral seriousness of intent
- Inspired and defended by **John Ruskin**

Today's session we take a look at a group of poets known as Pre-Raphaelites. In fact they were part of brotherhood known as Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood established in 1848. This consisted of a group of poets, painters and critics influenced by the visual arts. And again this is another

significant move that we notice from the Victorian period onwards. The distinctions that separated different forms of art, it begins to blur from the Victorian period onwards. We find this tendency culminating in the modernist and the post-modernist period. The poets who were part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, they were immensely influenced by the paintings of the contemporary.

So primarily it was an artistic movement and later it began to influence the literary movements and literary arts in a narrow sense. And this was the movement and this was the brotherhood that popularized the notion 'Art for art's sake' which was the English translation of French slogan which dominated France in the early 19th century. In a nutshell, it is possible to say that the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were revolting against the ugliness of contemporary life.

This ugliness was of different forms, it was physical, it was economic, it was commercial, it was also moral in nature. The set of poets they call themselves Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood for a particular reason. This term was first used when their work appeared for the first time by the middle of the 19th century. And this term stresses their admiration for the Italian art of the period before the High Renaissance.

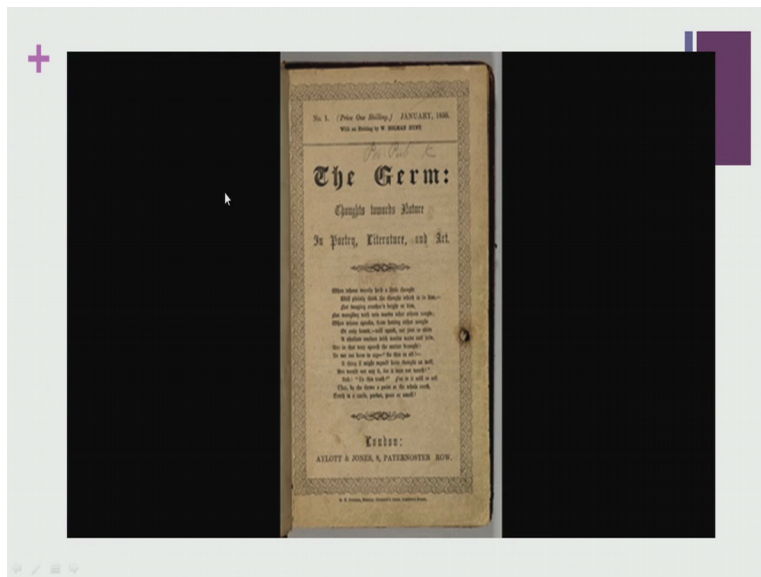
So significantly it is not the art of the period of Raphael which fascinated them but the art form and the painting that existed before the High Renaissance symbolized by the great artist Raphael. And accordingly they began to identify themselves as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They celebrated a medieval simplicity and closeness to nature in representational clarity and a deep moral seriousness of intent.

And these were precisely the things that they found wanting in Victorian art and literature. Their artistic temperament was majorly influenced and inspired by John Ruskin and Ruskin we notice that in his work *Modern Painters*, he also went on to defend them against the major attacks that they faced from the English public.

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- ✚ Founders and main figures – William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti
- *The Germ* – the group's periodical (ed. William Michael) – 4 issues in 1850
  - Subtitle – *Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, literature and Art*
- Hard realism and heavy symbolism
- Commentary on contemporary society and higher state of being
- Criticisms – concerned too much with the body – voluptuous bodies
  - Identified as the 'Fleshy school of poetry'
- Influence stronger on the visual arts than on writing – less enduring impact on literature

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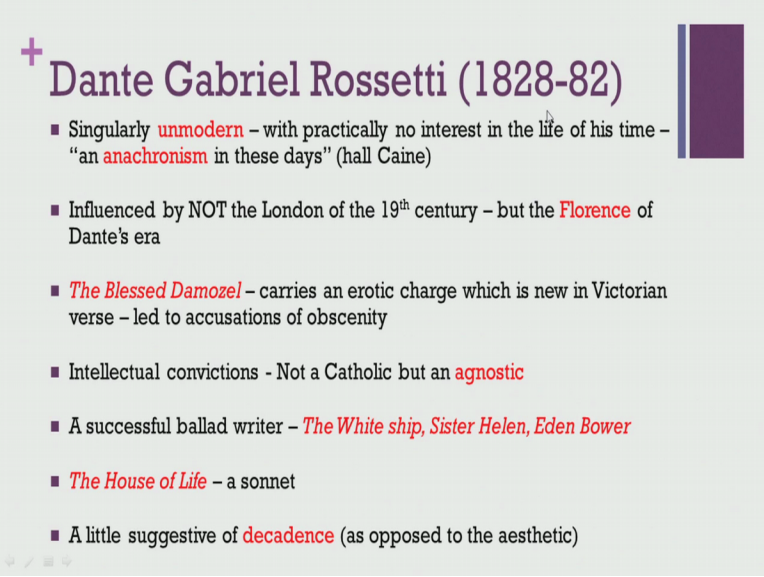
The founders and the main figures of this Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood include William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti who are brothers. And this group, they began to publish a periodical titled *The Germ* and this was edited initially by William Michael but however it only had four issues in 1850. They also had a subtitle in the initial editions which read like this – *Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, literature and Art*. And this was quite influential and many also thought that they were going to make quite a revolution in the literary scene in England.

But we also notice that it was rather a short lived influence and a short lived periodical that ran from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They focused on hard realism and heavy symbolism. This also made them closer to the romantics than to the Victorian artist. And we also find them at the same time being forced to respond to certain dominant things of the time. They did not remain aloof from the societal and the political concerns of the Victorian period.

On the contrary they also give a commentary on contemporary society and higher state of being. They also drew lot of flag from the English society. And the some of the major criticisms about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the kind of art that they produced was that they were concerned too much with the body. So voluptuous bodies were part of most of their artistic works and it was considered quite obscene in the 19th century.

And because of that many of them identified them with the fleshly school of poetry in a very derogatory sense. And significantly their influence was stronger on the visual arts than on writing. And their impact was less enduring in the literary arts of the period but however they were referred to over and again by some of the modernist writers as we will see when we discuss the 20th century.

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**+ Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)**

- Singularly **unmodern** – with practically no interest in the life of his time – “an **anachronism** in these days” (hall Caine)
- Influenced by NOT the London of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – but the **Florence** of Dante’s era
- ***The Blessed Damozel*** – carries an erotic charge which is new in Victorian verse – led to accusations of obscenity
- Intellectual convictions - Not a Catholic but an **agnostic**
- A successful ballad writer – ***The White ship, Sister Helen, Eden Bower***
- ***The House of Life*** – a sonnet
- A little suggestive of **decadence** (as opposed to the aesthetic)

The most important figure of the Pre-Raphaelite poets was Dante Gabriel Rossetti who lived from 1828 till 1882. He was a singularly unmodern that he sees to fascinate his contemporaries because of his peculiar style of living. He had practically no interest in the life of his time. And

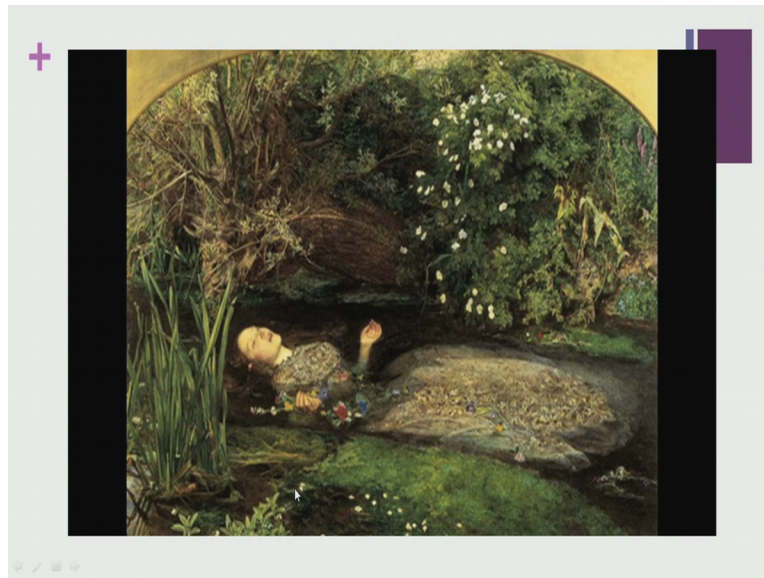
we find one of the critics Hall Caine referring to him as an anachronism in these days. So that was the kind of life that he led and also the kind of belief system that he held onto.

He was rightfully influenced not by the London of the 19th century but his inspiration and his influence lie in the Florence of Dante's era. So he was a man who was living in the Victorian Age but was not really present there mentally or aesthetically. His work *Blessed Damozel* is a perfect example of this. And this poem, *The Blessed Damozel* also had another charge on it because it was the one of the earliest poems to talk about eroticism and had an erotic tone built into it.

But it was quite new in the Victorian verse and also if you remember discussions about the Victorian prudishness, any reference or any kind of mention of sexuality was considered quite taboo in the Victorian period. When Rossetti wrote about the erotic element in his poem, quite publicly it was seen as quite obscene and it also led to a lot of charges of obscenity against him. His intellectual convictions however were not of the past but he was rather a radical.

He was not a catholic; he did not have any kind of professed Christian faith. He was more like an agnostic. And that made him closer to the Victorian Age than with any other age of the previous times. He was also a successful ballad writer. In this element we find him again going back to the medieval elements and also getting majorly influenced by the romantic writers. His successful ballads include *The White Ship*, *Sister Helen* and *Eden Bower*. He also wrote a sonnet titled *The House of Life*. His general poetic and artistic tendency was more towards decadence we can say than towards the aesthetic.

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This is one of his famous art works titled Ophelia. And we find most of the Pre-Raphaelite writers producing art of similar kind and most of these paintings were considered quite significant and successful in determining the transition from the Victorian period towards the modernist as well.

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## + Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909)

- 'the last to die of the great race of Victorian poets' (Hudson)
- Belonged to the **romantic** stock
  - *Ave Atque Vale* – an elegy to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet Charles Baudelaire – continues a traditional line from Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*
- **Rebelled** against established codes
  - In religion he was a pagan, and in politics he wanted to see the overthrow of established governments. In poetry, his work confirms a collapse of conventional Victorian poetic standards

Capable of producing miracles of word-music but something more than word-music is necessary to ensure the permanence of a poem

*Arnold's Thyrsis – a monody on Clough's death*

Algernon Swinburne who lived from 1837 till 1909 is a writer we have already taken a look at. But however he forms a significant part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as well. And as Hudson points out he was the last to die of the great race of Victorian poets. In a certain way it is

possible to say that his genius belonged to the romantic stock though he lived in the Victorian period. His significant work, *Ave Atque Vale* is an elegy to the 19th century French poet Charles Baudelaire.

Charles Baudelaire was also a significant influence in framing the tenets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. And this work which was an elegy, it continues in the tradition of Milton's *Lycidas* and Shelley's *Adonais*. Here it is useful to remember that many celebrated writers of this period, they used to write mournful or allergic poems in memory of the death of their favorite friend or a fellow colleague.

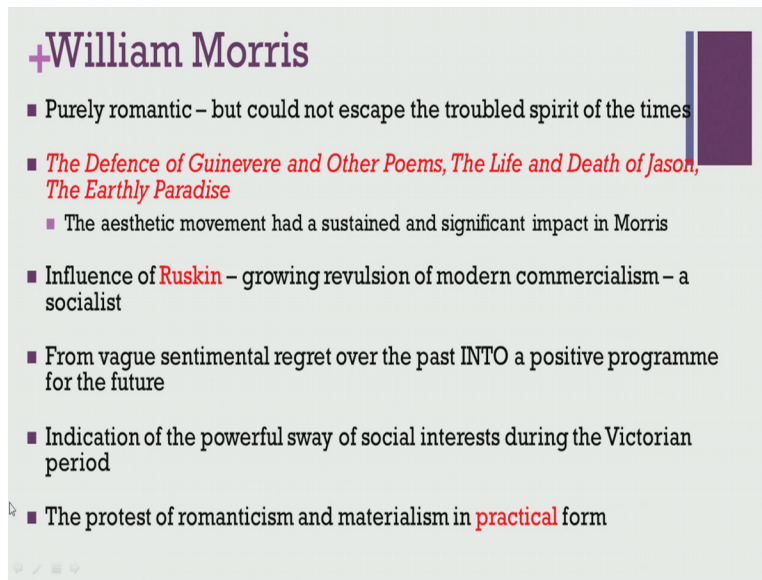
And in that sense it is also useful to remember that Arnold, one of the other Victorian poets also had written an elegy upon the death of another poet friend Clough, was titled *Thyrsis*. And Swinburne was a poet who rebelled against most of the established poets of the Victorian times. And if you remember though the Victorian times were characterized by a dilemma between a lot of contesting faiths and contesting principles and belief system, it was also a time which try to impose a certain social code of conduct on the citizens.

And in that sense it was considered quite controversial to move against any of the established conventions of those day. It said about Swinburne that in religion he was a pagan and in politics he wanted to see the overthrow of established governments. In poetry, his work confirms a collapse of conventional Victorian poetic standards. It is also said about Swinburne that though he was considered as quite a successful poet, his poet had word-music built into it but it fell to make much success during his lifetime.

And later also he was never considered as one of the greatest poets of the Victorian period. As Hudson reiterates as part of the many negative things that he had to say about Swinburne, Swinburne was capable of producing miracles of word-music. But something more than word-music is necessary to ensure the permanence of a poem.



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## +William Morris

- Purely romantic – but could not escape the troubled spirit of the times
- *The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems, The Life and Death of Jason, The Earthly Paradise*
  - The aesthetic movement had a sustained and significant impact in Morris
- Influence of **Ruskin** – growing revulsion of modern commercialism – a socialist
- From vague sentimental regret over the past INTO a positive programme for the future
- Indication of the powerful sway of social interests during the Victorian period
- The protest of romanticism and materialism in **practical** form

William Morris was another trouble Victorian writer who was purely romantic but he could not really escape the spirit of the Victorian times. In his works, *The Defense of Guinevere and Other Poems*, *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, we find a significant impact of these elements. And we also notice that while the other Pre-Raphaelite poets were more focused on the aesthetic element, we find the aesthetic movement having a more sustained and significant impact in the poetry of Morris.

In that sense his poetry is more significant to the Victorian times than any other Pre-Raphaelite poets. He also was immensely influenced by Ruskin. And we find him increasingly moving away from the modern commercial tenets of those times. And he also shows tendencies towards socialist government. We find that unlike many other Pre-Raphaelite poets he is not able to remain unconcerned about the turn of events which were dominating the century.

And we also find him moving from a vague sentimental regret over the past into a positive program for the future. He is in that sense one of the few Victorian poets who begin to realize that it is very important to have a hope for the future and also a practical solution to come out of this despair than to just loom regretfully over the past which has already left England. In his work we also find an indication of the powerful sway of social interest during the Victorian period.

This is not peculiar to Morris poetry. We also find that in though in varying degrees in most of the writers who were writing in the Victorian period. It is only his work critics say that we can find protest of romanticism and materialism in a practical form. And in that sense we also find him moving away from the aesthetic and the literary sort of productions and towards more useful pragmatic and practical responsibilities in life. And he also contributes actively to the social and political life in London.

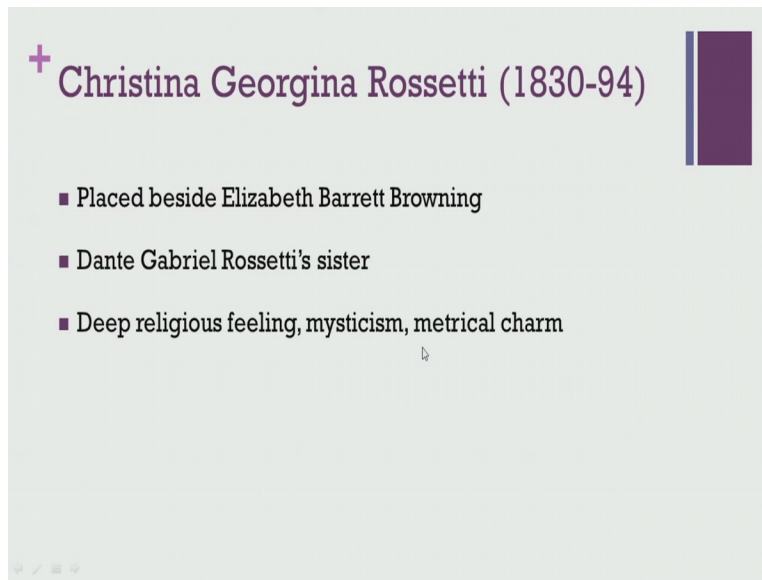
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+ Ernest Dowson

- Had the aesthetic sensibility of the 1890s rather than the stoical self-doubt of the mid-Victorians
- *The Yellow Book*
- Died in 1900 – the same year as Oscar Wilde

Ernest Dowson, another important poet of the Victorian period had, Ernest Dowson, another significant Victorian poet had the aesthetic sensibility of the 1790s rather than the stoical self-doubt of the mid-Victorians. In our discussion we have so far noted that there are many Victorian poets who actually lived in the Victorian times and because of the kind of crisis which the age was ridden with, we find that aesthetic sensibilities being shaped more by a preceding age than by the contemporary age. His important work was Yellow Book in which we find most of his works being compiled and collected. He also died in 1900, the same year as Oscar Wilde.

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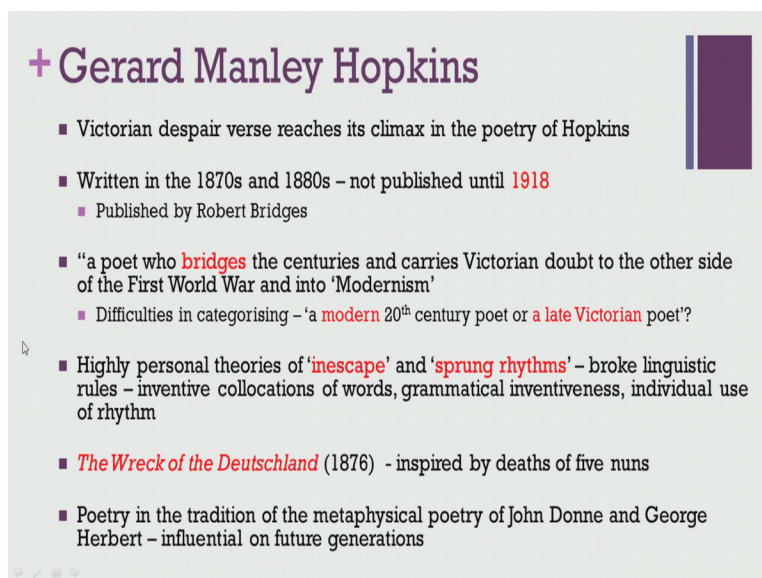


## + Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-94)

- Placed beside Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sister
- Deep religious feeling, mysticism, metrical charm

Christina Georgina Rossetti who lived from 1830 till 1894 was a sister of Gabriel Rossetti. In terms of her canonical importance she is also placed beside Elizabeth Barrett Browning who is considered as the most important woman poet of the times. Christina Rossetti's poems were more significant in the sense that it had a deep religious feeling, mysticism and metrical charm. Here it is also useful to remember that the women poets and the women writers of the period were not really torn apart like the male writers. On the other hand we find them more, being more grounded and also talking about things with more firm temperament.

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## + Gerard Manley Hopkins

- Victorian despair verse reaches its climax in the poetry of Hopkins
- Written in the 1870s and 1880s – not published until 1918
  - Published by Robert Bridges
- “a poet who **bridges** the centuries and carries Victorian doubt to the other side of the First World War and into 'Modernism'
  - Difficulties in categorising – ‘a **modern** 20<sup>th</sup> century poet or a **late Victorian** poet?’
- Highly personal theories of ‘**inescape**’ and ‘**sprung rhythms**’ – broke linguistic rules – inventive collocations of words, grammatical inventiveness, individual use of rhythm
- *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1876) - inspired by deaths of five nuns
- Poetry in the tradition of the metaphysical poetry of John Donne and George Herbert – influential on future generations

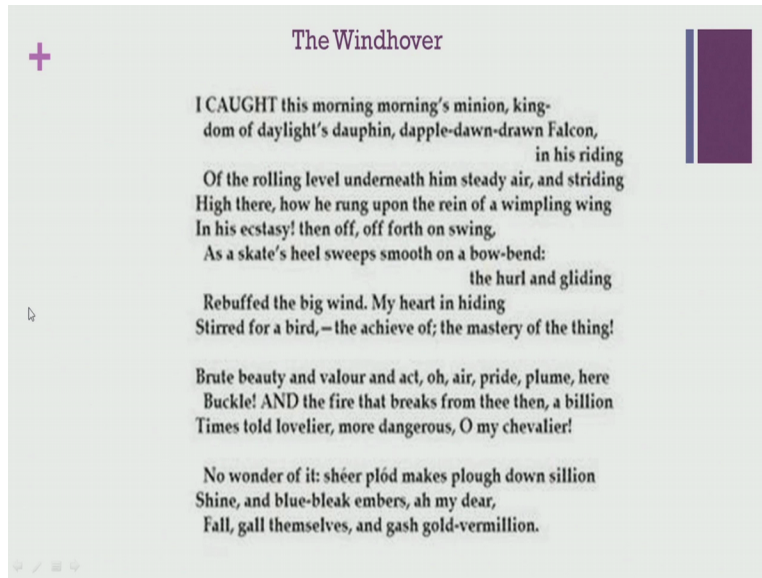
As we come to the fag-end of our discussion on Victorian poetry, we take a look at the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins. It said about Hopkins that the Victorian despair verse reaches its climax in the poetry of Hopkins. His poetry was written in the 1870s and 1890s but they were only published in 1918. His work was published by a close friend of Hopkins named Robert Bridges. And he is considered in that sense as a poet who bridges the centuries and carries Victorian doubt to the other side of the First World War and into modernism.

And because of these varying decades in terms of the actual writing of his poetry and the publication of the poetry, many historians find it quite difficult to classify his work. There is a lot of debate about whether he needs to be considered as modern 20th century poet or as a late Victorian poet. We find anthologies including him in both these sets of works. Hopkins is more significant for the highly personal theories of poetry that he had put forward namely inescape and sprung rhythms.

And we also find him in his poetry breaking linguistic rules and also being quite inventive about words and phrases. He came up with new coinages and also collocations of words. He, his poetry is ridden with grammatical inventiveness. And there is also an individual use of rhythm which was not found quite common in English poetry. His 1876 poem, *The Wreck of Deutschland* is the most famous of his works. In that we find him being inspired to a sense of grief by the death of five nuns in a certain boat accident.

His poetry could be regarded along the lines of the metaphysical poetry of John Donne and George Herbert. And though his influence in the Victorian period was quite limited because the work was not published, we find him being more influential on the future generations especially on the modernist poetry.

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The Windhover

I CAUGHT this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,  
in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:  
the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

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

No wonder of it: sheer plód makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

In this particular poem titled The Windhover, we can find the use of sprung rhythms. If you read just even the first couple of lines, “I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding.” So we find this particular kind of rhythm and energy in most of Hopkins poems.

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Other Victorian poets

- Sir Henry Taylor
- Robert Stephen Hawker
- Martin Farquhar Tupper
- Philip James Biley
- Sydney Dobell
- Alexander Smith
- James Thomson
- Lord Macaulay
- Lord Lytton
- George Eliot
- Thackeray
- Kingsley

The other major Victorian poets who wrote and lived during this period include Sir Henry Taylor, Robert Stephen Hawker, Martin Farquhar Tupper, Philip James Biley, Sydney Dobell, Alexander

Smith, James Thomson, Lord Macaulay who is also a prose writer, Lord Lytton, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Kingsley. Again some of them were also significant novel and prose writers.

All of these other Victorian poets about whom we shall not be discussing in detail, they had also produced a significant number of works but however since they were not considered representative of the age and their work was not considered with notable worth we shall not be going into the details of their works. So with this we come to the end of today's session. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.