

Poetry
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Victorian Poetry

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Victorian Poetry
(1837-1901)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Features of Victorian Poetry
- Victorian Poetic Forms
- Victorian Poets
- **The Dramatic Monologue**
- Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
- Art for Art's Sake Movement
- Religious Poetry
- Nonsense Poetry



Hello, we are going to deal with Victorian Poetry this week. We begin with a general introduction to Victorian poetry, from this period 1837 to 1901. First, we will pay attention to the historical and literary context, identify the features of Victorian poetry, discuss certain poetic forms practiced during this period, list a few poets who were prominent in this period and pay special attention to 'The Dramatic Monologue' form which became very popular during this time.

We will continue with 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Movement' during this Victorian period. Also discuss 'Art for Art's Sake Movement' for a while. Then discuss two more interesting features of Victorian poetry. One is Religious Poetry and another is Nonsense poetry.

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Historical Context

- Queen Victoria (1837-1901), though contested
- Values of honor, duty, moral seriousness, and sexual propriety – “double standards”
- Relative political, social and economic stability
- Industrial revolution: workshop of the world
- Advances in science and technology: steam engine, transport, communication, printing, medicine
- Bills and Acts for social and political reforms[†]
- 1857: the first War of Indian Independence
- 1859: Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*
- 1870: Education Act – compulsory elementary education
- Conflict between faith and doubt
- Rise of women power



The historical context is closely linked with the period of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901. Many critics may not agree with this periodization, but generally it serves our purpose. Values of honor, duty, moral seriousness and sexual propriety were highly valued at this time. But it was well known that, many of those Victorians maintained double standards; one in private life and another in public life.

There was a relative political, social and economic stability during this long reign of Queen Victoria. During this time, industrial revolution became much more serious and assured in the year of this workshop of the world for England. England came to be known as the workshop of the world because of many industries and factories. This period also witnessed advances in science and technology, steam engine, transport, communication, printing and medicine among others.

There were many social and political reformations for which several bills and acts were passed during this period. Certain notable historical events we may mention here: one is this 1857 incident, or event, the first war of Indian Independence. It shook this British empire. In 1859 Charles Darwin published his famous book, ‘On the Origin of Species,’ and shook this western belief in evolution of human beings from Gods and things like that.

And then we have this 1870 Education Act, which brought in compulsory elementary education for all people in England and brought about radical social change in the social setup of England. Because of these various changes that took place in this time,

there was a conflict between faith and doubt. People could not believe in God or society as they used to have earlier. One more serious factor that we have to consider is the rise of women power during this time.

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Literary Context

- Wordsworth was the poet laureate until 1850.
- Tennyson succeeded Wordsworth in 1850.
- Barrett Browning gave a tough fight to Tennyson.
- Poetry, prose, novel, and criticism were all developing.
- The novel became the dominant literary form of the age
- Writers could not have faith in religion and society completely as the old beliefs were floundering in front of their eyes.
- The dramatic monologue took shape seriously in the hands of Tennyson, Browning, and others.
- More women writers arrived on the scene, especially in the novel.



The literary context is also equally very important for us to understand this period. Wordsworth was the poet laureate until 1850 that is his death. Immediately after this Tennyson followed Wordsworth as poet laureate in 1850. We have to understand that Elizabeth Barrett Browning before her marriage was a very popular poet and she gave a tough fight to Tennyson when it came to the choice of this poet laureateship.

Poetry, prose, novel and criticism all were developing during this period in different ways. However, the novel became the most dominant literary form of this age. Writers could not have faith in religion and society completely because the old beliefs were floundering in front of their own eyes.

The most important poetic form that became very popular in this period is the dramatic monologue which took shape seriously in the hands of Tennyson, Browning and other poets. More women writers arrived on the scene, especially in the novel form and contributed to the development of Victorian literature in general, particularly poetry.

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Features of Victorian Poetry

- Conflict between religion and science
- Interest in medieval themes
- Radical changes in social life
- Sensory expressions and images
- Sentimentality
- Interest in verbal embellishment
- Mystical interrogation
- Brooding skepticism
- Whimsical nonsense



What are those features of Victorian poetry that we need to keep in mind while we deal with this Victorian poetry? Here we have listed some of them. Conflict between religion and science is the major one, faith and doubt. Interest in medieval themes, those writers went back to the past and looked for sources of inspiration. We also notice radical changes in social life which contributed to the flourishing of literature in this period.

The poets and writers of this period paid attention to sensory expressions and images. They were also sentimental in their writings. Further they took interest in this verbal embellishment which we can see more in poets like Tennyson. We also notice mystical interrogation. What is this life? What is this serious aspect of this life? Is there anything which we can understand so easily?

That is a kind of mystical experience or interrogation poets of this time, writers of this time had. Similarly, they were all brooding and they were all sceptically thinking about life and society in general. We have a very curious case of nonsense poetry at this time. That is why we have mentioned this whimsical nonsense. We will have some examples for this nonsense poetry as well.

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Victorian Poetic Forms

- **The Dramatic Monologue:** a lyric poem in the voice of a speaker other than the poet addressing a listener occasionally; Tennyson, E. B. Browning, R. Browning, Augusta Webster
- **The Epic:** long narrative poems telling stories, though not realistically like the novel; Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*
- **The Sonnet Sequence:** lyric poem on various themes, including love and death; George Eliot's *Brother and Sister Sonnets*, Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*, Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter Sonnets*, E B Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*



Let us see the Victorian poetic forms. There were many. We will see 3 of them here. One is the Dramatic Monologue, the second is The Epic and the third is The Sonnet Sequence. We must remember that we looked at this sonnet sequence when we discussed Elizabethan poetry. Now let us begin with The Dramatic Monologue. It is a lyric poem in the voice of a speaker other than the poet addressing a listener occasionally.

We have the examples in Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and we have one more well-known feminist writer of this time Augusta Webster. There are many others as well. Epic poetry was also quite popular at this time. It is a long narrative poem, telling stories though not realistically like the novel. We have examples in Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King,' George Eliot's 'The Spanish Gypsy,' William Morris's 'The Earthly Paradise.'

When it comes to The Sonnet Sequence, we understand this as a lyric poem on various themes not just on love alone. It dealt with love and death and many other themes. We have some examples in George Eliot's the novelist of course, the famous novelist George Eliot also wrote a sonnet sequence in this time, 'Brother and Sister Sonnets.'

Next, we have Christina Rossetti, a woman poet 'Monna Innominata.' Then again Augusta Webster, a female poet. She has 'Mother and Daughter Sonnets.' Then of course one more woman writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She also has a sonnet

sequence, 'Sonnets from the Portuguese.' It is a curious case of finding more sonnet sequence from women writers at this time.

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Victorian Poets

Alfred, Lord Tennyson,	Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Robert Browning,	Christina Rossetti
Matthew Arnold	George Eliot
Gerard Manley Hopkins	(Mary Ann Evans)
A C Swinburne	Augusta Webster
Dante Gabriel Rossetti	"Michael Field"
William Morris	(Katharine Harris Bradley
Oscar Wilde	and Edith Emma Cooper)
Edward Lear	
Thomas Hardy	



Here, we have a list of Victorian poets of course there are quite a lot of them, but here are some prominent ones. Beginning from Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Mathew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, A C Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Edward Lear, Thomas Hardy. When we come to Thomas Hardy, we move on to the next century, that is 20th century. He links Victorian Poetry with 20th century poetry.

Then we have a list of women poets; Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christiana Rossetti, George Eliot, whose pen name is Mary Ann Evans, Augusta Webster and then a very interesting case of 2 writers using 1 name that is, a pseudo name actually 'Michael Field:' Katharine Harris Bradley is a female writer and another is Edith Emma Cooper. They were writing poems, stories, novels collaboratively under this name Michael Field.

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Victorian Poetry

Dominated primarily by two poets



- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Lord Tennyson
(1809-1892) | • Robert Browning
(1812-1889) |
| • Cambridge educated | • Self-educated |
| • Lived in England | • Chose to live in Italy |
| • Influenced by Wordsworth | • Influenced by Shelley |
| • Commercially successful | • Socially popular |
| • Distinguished by doubt | • Characterized by faith |
| • Lyrical | • Dramatic |
| • Mostly melancholic | • Majorly sanguine |



When we look at Victorian Poetry, two prominent poets come to our mind, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. They have their own specific features. We will pay attention to them when we discuss their own poetries separately. Here we have just a comparison to understand the significance of these 2 poets for Victorian Poetry.

Tennyson was educated at the University of Cambridge whereas Robert Browning was self-educated at home. Tennyson, more often lived in England whereas Robert Browning left England and chose to live in Italy. While Tennyson is influenced by Wordsworth, we find the influence of Shelley on Browning. Similarly, we find, Tennyson is more commercially successful whereas Robert Browning is more socially popular.

In the case of Tennyson, we have more doubt- skepticism and in Robert Browning we find faith. And the general tenor of Tennyson's poetry is lyrical whereas the tenor of Robert Browning is dramatic. While Tennyson is mostly melancholic, Robert Browning is majorly sanguine that is optimistic. These features will help us to understand the major conflict in Victorian poetry faith and doubt.

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Perfect and DM Approximations (Sessions, 1947)

Perfect Example	Imperfect	Formal	Approximate
1. Speaker	1. Shifting of center of interest from speaker	1. Speaker	1. Speaker
2. Audience		2. Audience	2. Lacking one or more of features listed under the Formal or the Imperfect
3. Occasion		3. Occasion	
4. Interplay between speaker and audience	Or		
5. Revelation of character	2. Fading into indefiniteness of one or more of the last six Perfect characteristics		
6. Dramatic action			
7. Action taking place in the present			



We said the dramatic monologue is the most important poetic form that we have to understand when it comes to Victorian poetry. A critic called Sessions, wrote an article on the dramatic monologue in 1947. She has identified 7 features of a perfect example of dramatic monologue, then in decreasing order certain qualities may be missing in some forms.

Let us pay attention to these 7 features which we need to identify in a dramatic monologue. Speaker, audience, occasion, interplay or interaction between the speaker and the audience, revelation of character, dramatic action and lastly action taking place in the present. These are the features which we will find in a perfect example of a dramatic monologue.

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The Dramatic Monologue

Browning's *My Last Duchess* is a perfect example.

1. A **speaker**: the Duke.
2. An **audience**: the Envoy.
3. The **occasion**: the wedding plan discussion.
4. The **interaction** between the speaker and audience:
The Duke and the Envoy interact throughout.
5. **Character revelation**: The Duke reveals his own character as he describes the Duchess.
6. **Dramatic action**: the death of the old Duchess, and the Duke's negotiation for the new Duchess.
7. **Action in the present**: the action of the poem unfolds in front of the eyes of the reader as if it happens now.



The example that we have chosen is Browning's *My Last Duchess*, which has all these 7 features. The speaker is a Duke. The audience is the Envoy that is a messenger. The occasion is a wedding plan discussion of the Duke with the Envoy. The interaction between the speaker and the audience, we find between the Duke and the Envoy. They interact throughout the poem. We have the character revelation of the Duke as well as the Duchess. Then we have this dramatic action of the death of the Duchess which led to finding a new Duchess for the Duke. Then the whole action takes place in the present. The action is unfolded in front of the eyes of the reader as it happens as we read the poem.

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My Last Duchess - I

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

5. Will't please you sit and look at her? I said

"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by

10. The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,



We have just 2 extracts from 'My Last Duchess.' It is a long poem, but we will have just two extracts. First extract is this:

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

5. Will't please you sit and look at her? I said

"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

10. The curtain I have drawn for you, but I),

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst."

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My Last Duchess- IV



Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
40. Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. **Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without**
45. **Much the same smile?** This grew; I gave commands;



The second extract is here:

“Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
40. Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set,
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without,
45. Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands.”

Actually, the Duke had killed his Duchess and got her painted and he has this painting of this Duchess and this painting is shown to the Envoi who have come to negotiate the wedding for the new Duchess and the Duke.

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The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

- An art movement inspired by the Pre-Raphael and Pre-Renaissance period, especially Italian medieval painters, in the Continent
- Valued simplicity, sincerity, and directness of truth
- Founded in England by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt
- Painters also wrote poems and started a literary style
- Included Christina Rossetti, William Morris, etc.
- Characterized by picturesqueness, idealism, and mysticism
- Infused life into medieval art and literature



This is a very important phenomenon of Victorian time. This is called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It is an art movement inspired by the Pre-Raphael and Pre-Renaissance period, especially Italian medieval painters, in the continent. This movement valued simplicity, sincerity and directness of truth.

It was founded in England by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt. Many painters wrote poems and started a literary style which included Christina Rossetti and William Morris. They used picturesqueness, idealism and mysticism in their poems. They also infused life into medieval art and literature and took special shape of their own as Pre-Raphaelite movement brotherhood or poets.

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C. Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio" (1856)

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress, 5
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel — every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more or less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him, 10
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but as when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.



We have an example from Christina Rossetti's poem, 'In an Artist's Studio,' published in 1856. This is a sonnet. Rossetti herself was a model for her own brother for painting. Here we have a description of what happens in a studio:

"One face looks out from all his canvases,

One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

We found her hidden just behind those screens,

That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress, 5

A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,

A saint, an angel — every canvas means,

The same one meaning, neither more or less.

He feeds upon her face by day and night,

And she with true kind eyes looks back on him, 10

Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:

Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;

Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.”

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Art for Art's Sake Movement

- An offshoot of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
- Belief in art as religion for its own sake
- Principle of autonomous and self-sufficient art having intrinsic values
- Pitched against the utilitarian Victorian values
- A French aesthetic practice introduced by Walter Pater
- English practitioners: Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, A C Swinburne
- A forerunner of symbolism and modernism with its emphasis on visual images and fidelity to truth
- Led to “Decadence” with an obsessive focus on physical and mental aberrations, including experiments with drugs and extra-natural sexual experiences



Next, we pay attention to this movement called Art for Art's Sake Movement. This is an offshoot of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood actually. They believed in art as religion for its own sake. They had the principle of autonomous and self-sufficient art having intrinsic values. They pitched against the utilitarian values of the Victorian period. This was originally a French aesthetic practice and introduced into England by Walter Pater.

English practitioners include Pater, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and A C Swinburne. This movement is a forerunner of symbolism and modernism with its emphasis on visual images and fidelity to truth. It finally led to ‘Decadence’ with an obsessive focus on physical and mental aberrations, that is abnormalities, including experiments with drugs and extra-natural sexual experiences.

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Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden"
Last Stanza



Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead.



We have an example from one of the practitioners of this Art for Art's Sake Movement, Swinburne. His poem is called, 'A Forsaken Garden.' And we have the last stanza alone here.

“Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,

Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,

Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble

The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,

Here now in his triumph where all things falter,

Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,

As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,

Death lies dead.”

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Religious Poetry



- Religious fervor was equally powerful in Victorian Era.
- The Evangelists spread Christianity around the globe.
- Need for divine grace to move from darkness to light
- John Henry Newman's "Lead Kindly Light"

• Stanza I

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home,—
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene,—one step enough for me.

5



Religious poetry was also there at this time. It was even quite popular as we can see from the practice of John Henry Newman. Religious fervor was equally powerful in Victorian Era. The Evangelists, the Christian Evangelists went to the whole of the world and spread Christianity. There was a need for divine grace to move from darkness to light as exemplified well in John Henry Newman's poem 'Lead Kindly Light.'

First let us see this stanza 1.

“Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home,—

Lead thou me on!

Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see

5

The distant scene, —one step enough for me.”

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Newman's Poem, Stanza II and III



I was not ever thus, nor prayed that thou
Shouldst lead me on:
I loved to choose and see my path, but now
Lead thou me on! 10
I loved the garish days, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long thy power hath blessed me, sure it still
Will lead me on;
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till 15
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.



The next two stanzas are here.

“I was not ever thus, nor prayed that thou
Shouldst lead me on:
I loved to choose and see my path, but now
Lead thou me on! 10
I loved the garish days, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long thy power hath blessed me, sure it still
Will lead me on;
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till, 15
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.”

It exemplifies faith, complete faith in God, as we saw the religious conflict or the conflict between religion and science. Here we have an example of the extreme faith in God.

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Nonsense Poetry

- **Lewis Carroll** (1832-1898): *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) contains some poems
- **Edward Lear** (1812-1888): *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets* (1871)
- Is poetry sensible? Yes/No
- Is there a distinct nonsense poetry? Yes
- Is it a Victorian invention? No
- One of the earliest anonymous nonsense poems

“Hey, diddle, diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.”



Now we come to Nonsense Poetry. It was also interesting to see at this time that Lewis Carroll’s novel ‘Through the Looking Glass,’ contained some nonsense poems. Edward Lear became a serious practitioner of this form. He has a collection of poems called Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets, published in 1871. We can ask a few questions like this. Is poetry sensible? The answer maybe yes, no. Is there a distinct nonsense poetry? Of course, yes. Is it a Victorian invention? Certainly not.

We have a very early example, one of the earliest examples for this nonsense poem is this:

“Hey, diddle, diddle,

The cat and the fiddle,

The cow jumped over the moon;

The little dog laughed

To see such sport,

And the dish ran away with the spoon.”

It is a nursery rhyme. Many rhymes may not make sense to children but they love them.

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Nonsense Poetry – Victorian Example



➤ Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy-cat"

Stanza 1

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!



We have the example of nonsense poetry from Edward Lear's poem called 'The Owl and the Pussy-cat.' We have only the first stanza here, Stanza 1.

“The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea,

In a beautiful pea-green boat,

They took some honey, and plenty of money,

Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

The Owl looked up to the stars above,

And sang to a small guitar,

'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,

What a beautiful Pussy you are,

You are,

You are!

What a beautiful Pussy you are!’

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Features of Victorian Poetry
- Victorian Poetic Forms
- Victorian Poets: Tennyson and Browning
- The Dramatic Monologue
- Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
- Art for Art's Sake Movement
- Religious Poetry
- Nonsense Poetry



To summarize whatever, we have looked at so far in this topic, Victorian poetry, we have paid attention to historical and literary context. We listed the various features of Victorian poetry. Paid attention to the conflict between religion and science, that is, faith and doubt among many others. We saw the three major Victorian forms, dramatic monologue, epic and sonnet sequence. We listed many poets of this period including Tennyson and Browning.

We examined this dramatic monologue and identified the features, gave one example from Browning himself that is, ‘My Last Duchess.’ We discussed Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Art for Art’s Sake Movement and also Religious Poetry, Nonsense Poetry. For each of these we gave examples, so that we can have a better understanding of various aspects of Victorian poetry.

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Some references here. Those of you who are interested in pursuing further can read at least one or two of these references. Thank you.