

Discussion Questions for Week Eight

As I discuss in the lectures, the division of the Romantic from the Victorian *literary* period is in many ways problematic, but we can characterize each of these *historical* periods: the Romantic period (1789-1837) is a time of revolution, violence, and radical changes on all levels of society while the Victorian period (1837-1901) is a time of relative peace and prosperity. According to the famous saying, “The sun never set on the British Empire” during the Victorian Age (until it did, of course). We will discuss the many important historical events and changes that occurred throughout the Victorian period in class. In terms of the Victorian poets, they are highly concerned and self-conscious about their inheritance of the work of the great Romantic poets. Many Victorian poets thus express anxiety about such inheritance and/or reject the Romantics and attempt to create something entirely different. As we read Arnold’s poetry, keep this dynamic in mind—we will compare many of the Victorian poems to Romantic poems we have already read.

- (1) “Dover Beach” follows a similar formula we’ve seen in Wordsworth: Arnold starts the poem by describing a natural landscape, and this scene of nature leads him into an introspective mood. Arnold, however, feels melancholy rather than joy. Why does he feel this melancholy? and how does this melancholy relate to the poem as an address to his lover (his wife, actually)?
- (2) What is the “buried life” that Arnold so desperately desires to uncover? and why is this buried life so important?
- (3) Both of Arnold’s poems are framed as addresses by a male speaker to a female auditor (his wife). What do his poems say about love in the Victorian age?
- (4) How does Browning’s poem about child labor compare to those of Blake?
- (5) In the 1830s, Tennyson was seen as part of the “Sensation School of Poets,” which included himself and John Keats, amongst a few others. Reviewers of the time believed these poets focused more on bodily sense and sensation in their poetry than on reflection and meditation, like Wordsworth. In particular, reviewers thought Tennyson drew from the pictorial arts in his poems: “Mariana,” for instance, was like a lush painting full of sensory details, colors, etc. What do you think? Does “Mariana” strike you as a different kind of poem? Does it seem like a painting? What does this focus on sensation do to your reading of the poem?
- (6) What does “Mariana” say about the lives of women during the Victorian period?
- (7) Why does the Lady of Shalott leave her tower? And why does she die for doing so??
- (8) The Lady symbolizes at least two things: (1) the lives of women during the Victorian period; and (2) the plight of artists during the Victorian period, who could now sell their work on the literary marketplace (something that wasn’t a thing before this time). How do these two symbolic roles work in the poem?

Discussion Questions for Week Six

The dramatic monologue is a distinctly Victorian poetic form. It is meant to be read aloud in a dramatic fashion by one speaker (thus, the “dramatic monologue”). Tennyson and Browning are credited with inventing and popularizing the form, although there is disagreement as to which poet created the form first. All of the poems we are reading for today are dramatic monologues. M. H. Abrams provides a concise overview of this poetic form:

A dramatic monologue is a type of lyric poem [that] has the following features: (1) A single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment; (2) This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors’ presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker; (3) The main principle controlling the poet’s choice and organization of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker’s temperament and character.

(1) How does the dramatic monologue compare to and contrast with the Greater Romantic Lyric?

(2) Consider “Ulysses”: Who is the speaker and silent auditor(s)? What is the dramatic moment? What kind of person does Ulysses reveal himself to be?

(When Browning first began publishing his dramatic monologues, readers didn’t know what to think: it seemed as if he was a murderous maniac! Many of his dramatic monologues, including those that we’re reading for today, centered on psychopathic men who killed without feeling. But readers didn’t yet understand this new poetic genre: Browning is *not* the speaker of the poems!)

(3) Why do you think Browning writes dramatic monologues with maniacal speakers? What kind of point does he seem to make about these men?

(4) How do you see the speakers of Browning’s poems? How do they see themselves?

(5) What happens to the Duke’s last duchess? How do you know?