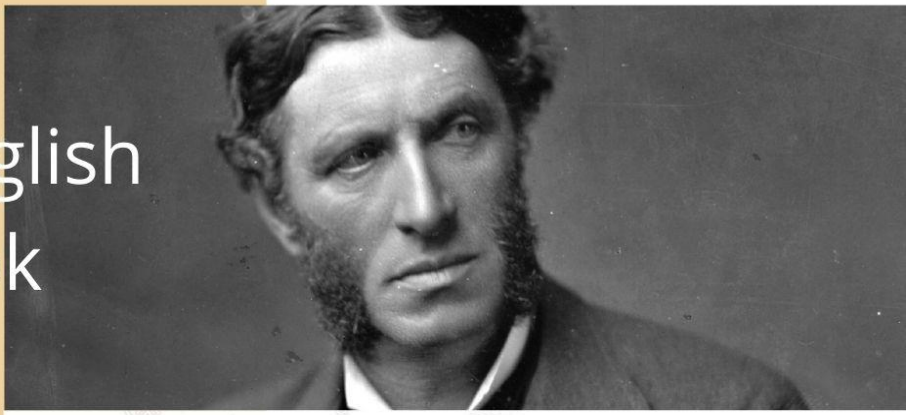
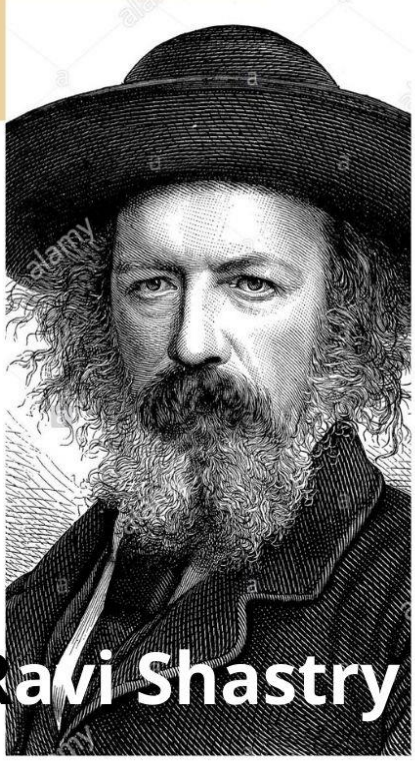
Fourth Semester

Optional English
Text book





Compiled

by

Dr. Udaya Ravi Shastry

Nuggets of Literature

E-text book
For private circulation only
For the Students
Of
Pallagatti Adavappa
Arts and Commerce College,
Tiptur, Karnataka

Nuggets of Literature

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Good Luck.

C O N T E N T S

Section A

Poetry

1. The Lotos-eaters

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

"Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land,
"This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon."
In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;
And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.
They saw the gleaming river seaward flow
From the inner land: far off, three mountain-tops,
Three silent pinnacles of aged snow,
Stood sunset-flush'd: and, dew'd with showery drops,
Up-clomb the shadowy pine above the woven copse.

The charmed sunset linger'd low adown
In the red West: thro' mountain clefts the dale
Was seen far inland, and the yellow down
Border'd with palm, and many a winding vale
And meadow, set with slender galingale;
A land where all things always seem'd the same!
And round about the keel with faces pale,
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.

Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,
Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave
To each, but whoso did receive of them,
And taste, to him the gushing of the wave

Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;
And deep-asleep he seem'd, yet all awake,
And music in his ears his beating heart did make.

They sat them down upon the yellow sand,
Between the sun and moon upon the shore;
And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland,
Of child, and wife, and slave; but evermore
Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then some one said, "We will return no more";
And all at once they sang, "Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam."

CHORIC SONG

I

There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.
Here are cool mosses deep,
And thro' the moss the ivies creep,
And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep."

II

Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness,
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown:
Nor ever fold our wings,
And cease from wanderings,

Nor steep our brows in slumber's holy balm;
Nor harken what the inner spirit sings,
"There is no joy but calm!"
Why should we only toil, the roof and crown of things?

III

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is woo'd from out the bud
With winds upon the branch, and there
Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
Sun-steep'd at noon, and in the moon
Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow
Falls, and floats adown the air.
Lo! sweeten'd with the summer light,
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
Drops in a silent autumn night.
All its allotted length of days
The flower ripens in its place,
Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,
Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil.

IV

Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea.
Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?
Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,
And in a little while our lips are dumb.
Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.

V

How sweet it were, hearing the downward stream,
With half-shut eyes ever to seem

Falling asleep in a half-dream!
To dream and dream, like yonder amber light,
Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height;
To hear each other's whisper'd speech;
Eating the Lotos day by day,
To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,
And tender curving lines of creamy spray;
To lend our hearts and spirits wholly
To the influence of mild-minded melancholy;
To muse and brood and live again in memory,
With those old faces of our infancy
Heap'd over with a mound of grass,
Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass!

VI

Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
And dear the last embraces of our wives
And their warm tears: but all hath suffer'd change:
For surely now our household hearths are cold,
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.
Or else the island princes over-bold
Have eat our substance, and the minstrel sings
Before them of the ten years' war in Troy,
And our great deeds, as half-forgotten things.
Is there confusion in the little isle?
Let what is broken so remain.
The Gods are hard to reconcile:
'Tis hard to settle order once again.
There *is* confusion worse than death,
Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,
Long labour unto aged breath,
Sore task to hearts worn out by many wars
And eyes grown dim with gazing on the pilot-stars.

VII

But, propt on beds of amaranth and moly,
How sweet (while warm airs lull us, blowing lowly)
With half-dropt eyelid still,
Beneath a heaven dark and holy,
To watch the long bright river drawing slowly

His waters from the purple hill—
To hear the dewy echoes calling
From cave to cave thro' the thick-twined vine—
To watch the emerald-colour'd water falling
Thro' many a wov'n acanthus-wreath divine!
Only to hear and see the far-off sparkling brine,
Only to hear were sweet, stretch'd out beneath the pine.

VIII

The Lotos blooms below the barren peak:
The Lotos blows by every winding creek:
All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone:
Thro' every hollow cave and alley lone
Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown.
We have had enough of action, and of motion we,
Roll'd to starboard, roll'd to larboard, when the surge was seething free,
Where the wallowing monster spouted his foam-fountains in the sea.
Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.
For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl'd
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl'd
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world:
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.
But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,
Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong;
Chanted from an ill-used race of men that cleave the soil,
Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,
Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil;
Till they perish and they suffer—some, 'tis whisper'd—down in hell
Suffer endless anguish, others in Elysian valleys dwell,
Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.
Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

2. My Last Duchess

ROBERT BROWNING

FERRARA

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.
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
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
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
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
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

3. Dover Beach

MATTHEW ARNOLD

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

4. The Blessed Damozel

G B Rossetti

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

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
  No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
  For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
  Was yellow like ripe corn.

Herseem'd she scarce had been a day
  One of God's choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
  From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
  Had counted as ten years.

(To one, it is ten years of years.
…Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she lean'd o'er me—her hair
Fell all about my face….
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

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.

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.

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

And still she bow'd herself and stoop'd
Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she lean'd on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

From the fix'd place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove

Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke as when
The stars sang in their spheres.

The sun was gone now; the curl'd moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sang together.

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

"I wish that he were come to me,
For he will come," she said.
"Have I not pray'd in Heaven?—on earth,
Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?

"When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is cloth'd in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God's sight.

"We two will lie i' the shadow of
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirr'd continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.

"We two will lie i' the shadow of
  That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
  Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
  Saith His Name audibly.

"And I myself will teach to him,
  I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
  Shall pause in, hush'd and slow,
And find some knowledge at each pause,
  Or some new thing to know."

(Alas! we two, we two, thou say'st!
  Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
  To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
  Was but its love for thee?)

"We two," she said, "will seek the groves
  Where the lady Mary is,
With her five handmaidens, whose names
  Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
  Margaret and Rosalys.

"Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
  And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
  Weaving the golden thread.
To fashion the birth-robes for them
  Who are just born, being dead.

"He shall fear, haply, and be dumb:
  Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
  Not once abash'd or weak:

And the dear Mother will approve
  My pride, and let me speak.

"Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
  To Him round whom all souls
Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumber'd heads
  Bow'd with their aureoles:
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, forever now
  Together, I and he."

She gazed and listen'd and then said,
  Less sad of speech than mild,—
"All this is when he comes." She ceas'd.
  The light thrill'd towards her, fill'd
With angels in strong level flight.
  Her eyes pray'd, 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.)

5. The Darkling Thrush

THOMAS HARDY

I leant upon a coppice gate
    When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
    The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
    Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
    Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
    The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
    The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
    Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
    Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
    The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
    Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
    In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
    Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
    Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
    Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
    His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
    And I was unaware.

Notes on the poems

1. The Lotos Eaters

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Summary

Tennyson's 'The Lotos-eaters' is based on a portion of Homer's Odyssey in which Odysseus's men are fed lotos plants and become mesmerized by the land onto which they have stumbled.

The poem begins with Odysseus commanding his men to have "Courage." They will soon find a shorn on which to land. They do so almost immediately and it enchants them with it's otherworldly beauty. There are valleys, snowy mountains, and cliffs that are covered in streams.

While the men are looking at their surrounding the "Lotos-eaters" appear and deliver to the men branches covered in lotos flowers and fruits. The men who eat these fruits, all but Odysseus, fall under the empty spell of the land. They believe that they no longer want to continue their quest homeward and would rather stay there where they do not have to worry about making their way back to the "Fatherland."

The second half of the poem is made up of a "Choric Song" in which the men describe all the reasons that they want to remain on the island. They do not think that it is fair that they should have to labor their whole lives while no other being is forced into the same fate. As humans, this is what their lives consist of and they no longer want to take part. They confess that what they want most is a life in which they relax until their death. They want to live as a leaf does, simply existing and then dying when it is their time. Instead, the men state, they are head towards death through a life that is nothing but misery. They would rather die now than have to work their whole lives.

The men do make sure to mention their wives and the homes they are abandoning. But they believe that their families will be better off without them by this point. Life has moved on and their return would only cause more problems. They are content to live as they believe the Gods do. They will lay in their fields of lotos, as the Gods do in their valleys of asphodel, and look out on human misery. They will make no effort to intervene or help. The poem concludes with the men stating once more, reassuring one another, that their wanders are truly finished.

Structure

The first and second halves of The Lotos-eaters are formed differently. The first half is divided into five stanzas of nine lines. These nine-line stanzas are referred to as Spenserian stanzas due to their use by Spenser in The Faerie Queen. The rhyme scheme remains consistent throughout, following the pattern of ABABBCBCC. Additionally, each line follows the same pattern of meter, except for the final, ninth line, of each stanza. The first eight are written in iambic pentameter while the ninth is composed of six iambic feet, also known as an "alexandrine."

The second half of the poem is structured much more loosely. There is no defined rhyme scheme. Just as each section has it's own theme, so too does it have its own rhyme scheme.

Analysis of The Lotos-eaters

Part I

First Stanza

The poem begins with Odysseus of Ithaca driving his men onward through "mounting wave[s]." They are in the midst of their ten year journey home from the battle of Troy. Tennyson's poem begins after Zeus has swept Odysseus's' boat along to the land of the "Lotos-eaters"(as can be read in Homer's Odyssey). He adds in, and embellishes, details that Homer started.

Odysseus, is encouraging his men, telling them to have "Courage," in the face of these mighty waves that Zeus has sent them. This next one, he tells them, will surely "roll us shoreward soon."

His words end up being true and the men are brought to land by that "afternoon." The speaker of the poem then gives the reader a number of details regarding the land to which they have come. It is a place that, no matter the time of day, seems to perpetually exist in the afternoon. This could be due to the heat or the activities of those that reside on the island. The air seems to move very slowly around the island,

it is “languid” and “swoon[ing].” These words foreshadow the change that will soon come over the men as they taste the lotos fruit.

The air of the land is further compared to “Breathing” as if one is in a dream. Each breath is long and requires effort. The moon is standing “Full-faced above the valley,” and from there a stream weaves its way “Along the cliff” pausing and falling.

Second Stanza

In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker is sharing the amazement he, and Odysseus’s party feel upon seeing this land. It seems to them to be “A land of streams!” There are all different kinds around them, some thin, and some lumbering and powerful. Each of these streams connects to one river that is flowing “seaward.”

Far in the distance, the travelers and the omniscient narrator are able to see “three mountain-tops” that are like three old monuments of “aged snow.” They are standing strong in the sunlight, unrelenting to the warmth. There is mention of a “shadowy pine,” one dominating pine tree that is covered with dew and appears to “up-clomb” or climb up, the “woven copse,” or a small grouping of trees. This one larger tree is grander than the rest and it only seems to grow larger as they stare at the scene before them.

Third Stanza

The sun is setting when they arrive, the afternoon is moving on. But it is not moving quickly. It has “linger’d low” endowing the “West” with “red.” The speaker and the travelers can see through or “thro’” the mountains to what is a “dale,” or large valley, further in the distance. Even though they have just landed and are at sea level, they are still high enough to see far into the distance. The land seems to be “Border’d” with palm trees and “many a wandering vale / And meadow.” In these places, and in the meadow, the speaker is able to see “galingale” a type of sedge found in Europe and Asia. This land is one in which these things are equally beautiful. They are all a part of one another and make up the living environment.

The men are still on the boat as the speaker describes them looking down and seeing that while they have been entranced by the land the "Lotos-eaters" has come. They are gathered around the "keel," of the ship and are looking up at them with their "mild…melancholy" eyes and "pale /Dark faces."

Fourth Stanza

The speaker continues his narrative by describing the lotos fruit which the "Lotos-eaters" brought to the sailors. They all had "Branches" that "bore…that enchanted stem." The branches were filled with the fruit and flowers of the lotos plant which the "Lotos-eaters" shared with each man from the ship.

After eating from the plant the men were overcome. What they "tasted" came onto the men like the "gushing of the wave" and made their problem seem very distant. Each man became extraordinarily tired and their voices sounded like those of dead men, coming from the grave. They were all still awake, but only in a semi-conscious state. It was if they were both asleep and awake at the same time. The fruit had some kind of magical effect on the men and cast a spell upon their intentions. Each became consume solely with their own self. The only thing they could hear was the "beating" of their own hearts.

Fifth Stanza

In the last stanza before the second half of the poem, the men confess to a new desire.

They sat themselves down "upon the yellow sand" at the shore of the land. Their thoughts were cast to "Fatherland," their home, and all that was waiting for them there. They dreamed of "child, and wife, and slave," and all they left behind, but this desire for home was now deeply outweighed by their weariness. They no longer felt they had the energy or need to return to the ship and face the ocean once more. The men were more than content to remain with the "Lotos-eaters" for the rest of their lives.

They were, weary the oar, / Weary the wandering fields of barren foam," or the vast expanses of the ocean." A sight which once gave them all pleasure and excited their inner adventurer now means nothing.

They turned to one another and said that they would "return no more." They did not want to return to the arduous ten-year journey. They state that their island,

Ithaca, is “far beyond the wave,” it is too far for them to reach or even try to get back to. They decide they will “no longer roam.”

Part II

First Stanza

CHORIC SONG

The second half of this poem is made up of eight stanzas. These stanzas act as a “Chroic Song.” In them, Odysseus’s crew describes the safety and comfort of the land of the “Lotos-eaters” and the lack of desire they feel to return home.

In the first of these stanzas, the men begin by stating that this land is full of music that falls softly. It’s sound resembles the petals of “roses” blowing onto the grass or perhaps it resembles “night-dews” that softly collect on “still waters.”

They continue piling up metaphors and state that it is gentler than the feeling of closing one’s eyes when one is tired. It brings joy to them that is like “sweet sleep” falling down “from the blissful skies.”

They have everything they could want. The earth is made from “cool mosses” and is wound with “ivies.” This beautiful unity of plants is complemented by “stream[s]” that hold flowers and the “craggy ledge” which plays host to poppies.

The world around them resembles their own interior feelings. They are seeing their own inner peace reflected in plants, streams, and one another.

Second Stanza

The second part of the choral song follows a particular theme of discontent. The narrator, speaking for the men, asks the universe why men have no rest, while all others do. They state that they are “weigh’d upon with heaviness” while also being “consumed by sharp distress.” The men do not believe that this is fair as everything else in the world has “rest.” Why should they be the only creatures to consistently “toil alone?”

As was found in the first part of this poem the men, after eating the lotos fruits are only concerned with their own well being. They no longer feel for those beyond their reach.

They, the “first of things” are the only ones to “toil” and the only to make “perpetual moan[s].” The men are rejecting their previous lives of hard work and

struggle in favor of one in which they will only rest. They no longer want to be thrown from sorrow to sorrow, “Nor” ever have to stop doing as they please in favor of working.

Third Stanza

The third of these “Choric Song” stanzas speaks on how the men feel that unlike the rest of creation, they are unable to have a peaceful life that consists of living and then dying. They want to live as a leaf does. Budding, being blown on its branch, growing green “and broad,” never having to take care, and then finally after being “dew-fed” under the moon, turn yellow and float to the ground. They are seeing the life cycle of the simplest parts of creation as the most appealing to them.

All things, the chorus states, are able to live to an “allotted length of days” and then be replaced by something else that will eventually ripen and fade. These lives are the most fulfilling as they have a distinct purpose that does not including toiling.

Fourth Stanza

In the fourth stanza, the speakers are bemoaning the fact that we are all heading towards death and must “labour” on the way there. They do not believe that life should be completely made up of “labour.” They want to be left totally alone. Unbothered by the real world.

Their lives are moving very quickly and death will soon approach. While they are still alive they want to be left alone and have nothing else taken from them. There is no point that they can see fighting wars against evil as there is no pleasure in it. Nothing in the world is going to last, so why waste their time making dreadful memories.

By the end of the stanza, they have come to the conclusion that it is better to just die now rather than live a life of labour.

Fifth Stanza

The fifth stanza of the chorus describes how sweet a life it would be to lay around in a “half-dream” all the time. The speakers are seeing all of the good parts of a completely simple life and none of the bad parts of idleness. The men are dreaming here of a life in which they can “hear each other’s whisper’d speech” while they are laying around “Eating the Lotos day by day.” That is the only task which they have

to complete and the more they eat, the more satisfied with their situation they will become.

The men will “watch crisping ripples” or waves, washing up on the beach and admire the “curving lines” of the spray which it creates. They will commit their bodies, “hearts and spirits” to “melancholy” and spend their rest of the time “brood[ing]” over memories of the past.

They will remember all those that have passed away since they were born and that is now buried under a “mound of grass” or cremated and shut up in “an urn of brass!” They will not be bothered by death though ad they will know they are living the best possible version of their lives here on the island.

Sixth Stanza

The men continue on, saying that they will not forget their past lives. Their “wedded lives” will remain “dear” to them, as will the last moments they spent with their wives. They are not going to forget everything that used to matter to them but are accepting of the fact that there is nothing they can do to get back to how things were. Their households are probably “cold” they say and their sons, all grown up, having inherited their father’s “looks.” If they did return they would bring nothing but trouble to the home. They’ve been gone for so long that they do not believe things would ever go back to the way they were.

Or, they state, things could not have gone so peacefully at home. While they were fighting in Troy for ten years, “island princes” could have been “over-bold” and taken over their homes. The men’s “deeds” could have been forgotten and their names smeared.

They have no intention of fixing this state of things if it is indeed the case, they are fine to let it stay broken as it is too hard to regain order once it is lost. Still, they believe they would only make things worse, even if things have not gone well from the start.

Seventh Stanza

In the seventh stanza of the “Choric Song” the men once more reiterate what the alternative to returning home and creating more chaos would be. They could, and

want to, just stay here, “propt on beds of amaranth and moly,” two different types of European plants, (moly is said to have had magic properties).

They will relax, with “half-dropt eyelids” and spend their days watching the river and “His” waters from their “purple hill.” The sea will now be to them just sight in the distance. There will be no more sailing or dangers they have to face. They will be guaranteed safety and endless days of “gazing” on the rivers of this land.

Eighth Stanza

The final stanza of this section of the poems is longer than the seven that have preceded it. The speaker begins by describing how the Lotos blooms everywhere that they look. It survives in the most barren and most wet of places. The wind that gently “blows” through the island sweeps up the “yellow Lotos-dust,” most likely a reference to pollen, and carries it from place to place, spreading the plant farther.

The men have had enough of “action” and being blown around on a ship from side to side. They no longer want to face the monsters of the deep. Instead, they state, they will swear an oath to ignore the rest of mankind and only exert enough energy to lay around on the island and eat lotos. They will be as Gods, observing but not interfering with mankind. This is a misrepresentation of the Gods of Greek mythology as they were most known for the inability to stop interfering with mankind. They were constantly changing the course of history.

In the second half of this stanza, the sailors say that they see the Gods as spending all their time just as the men are now. The only difference being that they recline alongside “their nectar” while hurling bolts of lighting into the “valleys.” The Gods, they state, do not care about the impact of “famine, plague, and earthquake” on the humans below them. They “smile” and listen to music while men suffer.

The speakers describe the music as being created by the God’s indifference consists of human lamentation and misuse. The maltreatment of humans by the Gods has been going on forever, it is an “ancient” problem and the Gods have enjoyed all of the time.

Mankind is forced to “Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil.” A person’s life is made up of nothing but hard work and misery until “they perish and they suffer…down in hell.” Others, the speaker’s state, are dwelling in “Elysian

valleys," or paradise. These lucky beings are "Resting weary limbs on beds of asphodel," an immortal flower that grows in Elysian.

They conclude the poem by restating that "surely, slumber is sweeter than toil" and by reassuring one another that they will cease their wanders from now on.

In the myth on which this poem is based Odysseus, having not eaten from the lotos plants, is forced to carry his men back onto the ship and single-handedly sail away from the island. The men eventually come to their senses once the magic of the plant has worn off.

About Alfred Lord Tennyson

Alfred Lord Tennyson was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. He was one of twelve children and had, by the age of twelve, written his first epic poem that consisted of 6,000 lines.

In 1827 Tennyson left his home to attend Trinity College, Cambridge. It was there he and his brother, Charles, co-published a book of poems titled, Poems by Two Brothers. This book put Tennyson on the radar of other prolific college writers and he made friends with another student, Arthur Hallam. After a brief but intense friendship, Hallam died, leaving a bereft Tennyson to devoted a number of poems to his memory.

From 1830 to 1832, Tennyson published two more books of poetry. These were not met with outstanding reviews and the poet was greatly disappointed. His naturally shy disposition would keep him from publishing again for another nine years. Tennyson finally met with some success in 1842 after the publication of this book, Poems in two volumes. When Tennyson published In Memoriam, one of the pieces dedicated to his college friend, Hallam, his reputation was solidified throughout Britain. That same year he married Emily Sellwood, with whom he would have two sons.

Tennyson's popularity and success allowed him to continue writing full time and purchase a home for his family in the country. Tennyson died in 1892 and remains one of the most popular Victorian poets.

2. My Last Duchess

Robert Browning

“My Last Duchess” is a dramatic monologue written by Victorian poet Robert Browning in 1842. In the poem, the Duke of Ferrara uses a painting of his former wife as a conversation piece. The Duke speaks about his former wife's perceived inadequacies to a representative of the family of his bride-to-be, revealing his obsession with controlling others in the process. Browning uses this compelling psychological portrait of a despicable character to critique the objectification of women and abuses of power.

“**My Last Duchess” Summary**

The speaker (the Duke of Ferrara) directs the attention of a guest to a painting of his former wife, the Duchess of Ferrara, which hangs on the wall. The Duke praises the painting for looking so lifelike and then remarks on how hard the painter, Fra Pandolf, worked hard on it. The duke asks the guest to sit and look at the work. The duke then explains that he deliberately mentioned the name of the painter, because strangers like the emissary always look at the duchess’s painted face—with its deep, passionate, and earnest glance—and turn to the duke (and only the duke, since only he pulls back the curtain that reveals the painting) and act as though they would ask, if they dared, how an expression like that came into her face. The duke reiterates that the guest isn’t the first person to ask this question.

The duke continues by saying that it wasn’t only his presence that brought that look into the painted eyes of the duchess or the blush of happiness into her painted cheek; he suggests that perhaps Fra Pandolf had happened to compliment her by saying "her shawl drapes over her wrist too much" or "paint could never recreate the faint half-blush that’s fading on her throat." The duke insists that the former duchess thought that polite comments like those were reason enough to blush, and criticizes her, in a halting way, for being too easily made happy or impressed. He also claims that she liked everything and everyone she saw, although his description suggests that she was ogling everyone who crossed her path. The duke objects that, to his former duchess, everything was the same and made her equally happy, whether it was a brooch or present from him that she wore at her chest, the sun setting in the West, a branch of cherries which some interfering person snapped off a tree in the orchard for her, or the white mule she rode on around the terrace. He claims that she would say the same kind words or give the same blush in response to all of them. The duke also objects to her manner of thanking men, although he struggles to describe his concerns. Specifically, he complains that she values his pedigree and social position (his 900-year-old name) as equally important to anyone else’s gifts to her.

The duke rhetorically asks whether anyone would actually lower themselves enough to argue with someone about their behavior. The duke imagines a hypothetical situation in which he would confront the former duchess: he says that even if he were good with words and were able to clearly say, "This characteristic of yours disgusts me," or, "Here you did too little or too much"—and if the former duchess had let

herself be degraded by changing, instead of being stubborn and making excuses— that even then the act of confronting her would be beneath him, and he refuses to ever lower himself like that.

The duke then returns to his earlier refrain about his former wife's indiscriminate happiness and complains to his guest that, while the duchess did smile at him whenever they passed, she gave everyone else the same smile as well. The duke explains that she began smiling at others even more, so he gave orders and all her smiles stopped forever, presumably because he had her killed. Now she only lives on in the painting.

The duke then asks the guest to stand up and to go with him to meet the rest of the guests downstairs. He also says that the Count, revealed here as the guest's master and the father of the duke's prospective bride-to-be, is so known for his generosity in matters of money that no request the duke could make for a dowry could be turned down. The duke also adds quickly that he has always insisted since the beginning of their discussions that the Count's beautiful daughter, and not the dowry, is his primary objective.

The duke ends his speech by demanding that he and the Count's emissary go downstairs together, and on their way, he directs the emissary's attention to a statue of the God Neptune taming a seahorse, which is a rare work of art that Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze specifically for him.

Themes

Theme : The Objectification of Women

"My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue in which the Duke of Ferrara tells the messenger of his potential wife's family about his previous wife, the "last" duchess of the poem's title. Using a painting of that former duchess as a conversation piece, he describes what he saw as her unfaithfulness, frivolity, and stubbornness, and implies that he prefers her as a painting rather than as a living woman. Throughout the poem, the duke reveals his belief that women are objects to be controlled, possessed, and discarded. In many ways, this reflects the thinking of Browning's own era, when Victorian social norms denied women the right to be fully independent human beings. Through this portrayal of the duke, Browning critiques such a viewpoint, presenting sexism and objectification as dehumanizing processes that rob women of their full humanity.

The duke's treatment of the painting reflects his treatment of women as objects to be owned. His description of the painting as a "piece" and a "wonder" portray it as a work of art rather than a testament to a former love. By repeating the name of the painter (the famous "Fra Pandolf) three times in the first 16 lines of the poem, he again implies that he values the painting because of its status as an object that shows

off his (that is, the duke's) wealth and clout. The painting is meant to aggrandize the duke rather than honor the woman it portrays.

This is made even clearer by the fact that the duke has placed this painting in a public area of his palace so he can proudly display it to guests, whom he invites to “sit and look at her” much like a museum curator would direct visitors to a famous work of art in a gallery. Such an attitude is reflected yet again when he tells the messenger that the Count’s “fair daughter’s self [… is his] object”: he intends to make his new bride another one of his possessions. Women, in the duke’s mind, are simply ornamental objects for men rather than actual people in their own right.

The poem thus implies that the duke finds his former wife’s actions unforgivable because they reflected her status as an independent person rather than an inanimate possession. Her crimes appear to be not sexual or romantic infidelity, but rather being happy (“too soon made glad,”), appreciative of others (she considered the duke’s “gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift”), self-confident (she wouldn’t “let / Herself be lessoned”), and willing to stand up for herself (she “plainly set / Her wits to [his]”). The duke, however, appears to believe that a husband owns his wife, and therefore has the right to dictate her feelings and to be the sole recipient of her happiness, kindness, and respect; any indication that she has thoughts or feelings of her own are unacceptable.

Ultimately, the poem heavily implies that the duke was so vexed by the idea that his former wife had an inner life of her own that he had the "last duchess" killed. Of course, the duke avoids explicitly confessing to assassinating his wife, and Browning himself allegedly once said in an interview that the duke may have simply had her sent to a convent. Regardless, the outcome is the same: there is no “last duchess” present in the poem to speak for herself and give her side of the story. The poem thus underscores how objectifying women ultimately silences them, robbing them of their voices and autonomy.

Theme : Social Status, Art, and Elitism

Though the poem doesn't outright condemn the duke, it does suggest that he's a brutish figure whose social status is in no way a reflection of any sort of moral worth. The duke repeatedly draws his guest's attention to his wealth and power, and issues veiled threats about what happens to those who don’t put a high enough price on his social standing. Through the duke, the poem takes a subtle jab at the snobbery of the upper class, suggesting the shallowness of an elitist society that bestows respect based on things like having a good family name or owning fancy artwork. Instead, the poem

reveals the various ways in which powerful men like the duke may use such markers of status simply to manipulate—and dominate—those around them.

The duke repeatedly reminds the messenger of the power in his title. He does this in part by mentioning the famous artists (Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck) who created works especially for him, but also by mentioning his “nine-hundred-years-old name.” The duke then moves quickly from intimidation to intimated threats when he hints that he had his former wife killed for not valuing his status sufficiently: he objects that she “ranked" his "nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift” and so he “gave commands” that "stopped" her "smiles."

Since the duke and his potential father-in-law, the Count, are about to sit down to discuss the fiancée’s dowry, they will put a price on exactly how much his name is worth. Consequently, the duke’s claim that the Count’s generosity is “ample warrant”—that the Count will give him a substantial amount of money for the daughter’s dowry—can actually be read as a veiled threat: the duke implies that, if the in-laws want their daughter to live, they will value his name and pay him a large sum.

Immediately before beginning negotiations with the prospective in-laws, the duke also tells the emissary to admire a statue of Neptune “taming a sea-horse,” made by a famous sculptor. The duke emphasis the statue's aesthetic merit as a means of imbuing himself with more importance: the statue is a "rarity" and was created just for him.

This moment has nothing to do with the duke emphasizing his refined tastes and his appreciation of art. Instead, again, it serves as a warning: Neptune was the Roman god of the sea, and the statue depicts this god forcefully subduing a creature who challenged him. By drawing the emissary’s attention to this statue before the negotiation, the duke implies that he himself is a godlike figure like Neptune, who will tame the emissary and the Count just as he did the former duchess. The trappings of upper-class status are again mainly a means for the duke to bully people.

The duke's seemingly refined manner and opulent surroundings are thus no indication that he's any better than those with lesser means—or that he's even a decent person at all. Through this depiction, the poem offers a subtle rebuke of elitism and the upper class. To men like the duke, beauty is not something to be valued and appreciated; instead, it is only something to dominate.

Theme : Control and Manipulation

Closely tied to the duke's repeated emphasis on his social status and his objectification of women is his clear desire for control. By treating women as objects to be possessed,

the duke can more readily dominate them; similarly, by drawing attention to his title and social clout, the duke can intimidate others into following his commands. Yet the poem also draws attention to quieter forms of control, as the duke dictates everything from the flow of conversation with his guest to the choreography of the scene itself. Through these forms of asserting dominance, the poem suggests the power—and danger—of such inconspicuous manipulation, which is made all the more insidious by its subtly.

The duke uses his social status—indicated by his ancient name and opulent artwork—to intimidate and threaten his guest. More discreetly, however, Browning also shows the duke controlling the conversation via its physical setting. The duke has staged the area with the duchess's painting: the painting is behind a curtain so he can limit who can view it, thereby reminding his audience that he can give and take away whatever he wants. He has also placed a seat in front of the painting so he can command visitors to sit while he tells the story of his former wife, a power dynamic that literally elevates him above anyone else in the room.

The duke likewise controls the flow of the conversation. He never gives the messenger a chance to speak, and once goes so far as to pretend that the messenger has asked a question ("not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus") even though the messenger himself remains silent. This action gives the messenger the illusion of being an active participant in the conversation without having any actual agency in it whatsoever.

Most intriguingly, there is nothing improvisatory about the duke's words, even when he trips over them. He comments that "strangers" who have seen the painting have asked him about the former duchess's expression, and that the messenger is "not the first" to inquire. The duke's insistence that others have asked about the duchess's expression suggests that he has given this spiel about his wife's supposedly inappropriate behavior to others. It is hard to believe, therefore that his interjections about his inarticulateness ("how shall I say?" or "somehow—I know not how") are genuine hesitations: if he has given this speech before, then presumably he knows what to say and how. In other words, his actions contradict his stated lack of expertise. The improvised nature of the duke's speech, then, with its self-interruptions and hesitations, might all be an act. He is so committed to controlling others that he seemingly rehearses even his moments of self-deprecation and seeming uncertainty. He says he doesn't have any "skill in speech"—meaning he's not a good talker—but this clearly isn't the case.

By having the duke deliver the dramatic monologue to the emissary, addressed throughout the poem as "you," Browning forces his readers to experience the duke's manipulation to better understand how abuse of power operates. This form of address

can encourage readers to imagine how they themselves would respond in such a situation: would they notice the manipulation and feel resentful, or would it slip past as they found themselves convinced by the duke’s subtle coercion?

3. Dover Beach

Matthew Arnold (1867)

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.

4. The Blessed Damozel

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The Blessed Damozel' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a traditional ballad that alternates its meter between iambic tetrameter, made of four beats per line, and iambic trimeter, containing three unstressed followed by stressed, beats per line. Each stanza of the poem is a sestet, meaning that it contains six lines.

Additionally, Rossetti maintains the rhyme scheme of ABCBDB throughout the piece.

Summary

"The Blessed Damozel" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a ballad that is dedicated to the love between a woman trapped in heaven and a man stuck on Earth.

'The Blessed Damozel' begins with the speaker describing a woman who, leaning out from heaven, can be seen holding lilies in her hands. She is breathtakingly beautiful but also melancholy. It soon becomes clear that she left someone on Earth. There is a lover, who's lines are written in the first person and contained within parenthesis, which is heartbroken by her departure. They pine for one another across the extraordinarily vast expanse between the "ramparts" of "God's house," on which she is leaning, and Earth.

The damsel, sounding like bird song, speaks out loud for all to hear. She describes the love that the two share and how soon, because they have both prayed for it, they will be reunited. God will bring them together.

Once her beloved arrives in heaven she will show him all there is to see. They will meet the Virgin Mary and she will introduce them to Christ who will bless their love. The two will be able to finally live in the peace and solitude they did not get to experience on Earth. Unfortunately, this is just a dream and after returning to reality the damsel breaks down crying once more at their separation.

Stanza One

Rossetti begins 'The Blessed Damozel' by having his speaker describe the woman that he refers to as, "The blessed damozel." This woman is leaning out over a wall, one of the highest points in "Heaven." The narrator can see into her eyes and discerns that they are "deeper than the depth" of stilled water.

This "damozel," or damsel, a young unmarried woman, is extraordinarily interesting to the speaker. He sees her as unattainable, but also as infinitely deep and beautiful.

The speaker continues on, giving some more detail to the scene he is viewing. The woman is holding "three lilies in her hand," and scattered throughout her hair are seven stars, representing the seven classical planets or luminaries. This woman is part of humankind and subject, in some way, to the delicacies of life and death but she is closer to God than a normal person would be. She is being directly related to the sky, the traditional realm of God.

It will become clear that this lady has passed on and is in fact in heaven with God, pining for one she left behind.

Stanza Two

The damsel's dress is loose around her waist, it has become "ungirt." Instead of being covered in decorations as one might expect, it is not covered in "wrought flowers," or adorned in any way. That is, aside from a "white rose of Mary's gift."

This rose that she is wearing is a direct reference to Christianity. The Virgin Mary is often represented as a white rose and referred to as the "Rose of Heaven." This strengthens the divine connection that this woman appears to have.

The last lines of this stanza once more contrast the religious imagery. Instead of having her hair pulled back and covered as would be proper, it is down, laying "along her back" and shining bright "yellow." A woman's hair has been seen throughout time as the embodiment of her sexuality and to have it out as this character does would not follow with Christian teaching.

Stanza Three

It seems to the speaker, from her countenance, that the woman has only just gotten to heaven. She is "One of God's choristers," but she still has a look of "wonder" on her face as if she only just arrived. She is still stunned by her surroundings.

It might seem as if the woman has only been there for one day, but she's been there for ten years. This speaks to her purity and divine soul, that she is still amazed by what she is seeing.

Stanza Four

The fourth stanza of 'The Blessed Damozel' is told from a different perspective. The lover that she left behind in the mortal world is mourning for her absence. To him, it seems like she has been gone much longer than ten years, but he can still remember her well. So well, that at this moment it seems as if she is there leaning over him, her hair draping around his face.

This fantasy is soon crushed. It is not the hair of the damsel, only leaves that are falling from a tree. This person was outside daydreaming and got caught up in the fantasy.

Stanza Five

The narration returns to the moment when the speaker is gazing up at his beloved who is standing on the "rampart of God's house." She's leaning over the walls that surround heaven.

God built this place in safety. It is so far above the Earth that when the damsel looks down, hoping to see her lover, she can't even see the sun.

Stanza Six

In stanza six of 'The Blessed Damozel', the rampart of God "lies in Heaven," where the damsel is trapped. There are many things that separate the two lovers. There is the distance itself, as well as "the flood of ether" that heaven is built on, and the void of "space" through which the Earth is spinning "like a fretful midge," or a worried fly.

This stanza is meant to emphasize the different worlds that these people live in. Earth is deeply distant from Heaven and is regarded from God's house as a speck not even close enough to see.

Stanza Seven

The damsel is not alone in heaven. There are many people around her, lovers of all varieties. They are being reunited with those they have lost. Even though many have been separated for a long time, their hearts remember one another.

Their souls join together, and arm in arm, travel together "up to God." She is not so lucky. Her lover is still on Earth and she is mourning their separation. These people pass by her like "thin flames," and remind her of what she does not have.

Stanza Eight

In stanza eight of 'The Blessed Damozel', the is truly depressed by her situation. Even though she is in Heaven where she should be able to find eternal happiness, it is impossible for her without her lover at her side.

She is leaning upon the wall and gazing down at where she thinks Earth is. She is "bow'd," or bowed, and "stoop'd" or stooped, against the wall. Her body appears deflated and exhausted. Her bosom is pressed against its surface.

She has stood this way for so long that her body heat will have been transferred to its cold surface. The lilies she is holding are laying against her "bended arm" as if they are sleeping.

Stanza Nine

From her viewing spot, she can see that on Earth time is moving forward "fiercely" through all worlds. All are aging, it seems, except for her.

The damsel now begins to speak, the reader does not know what she says at this point, only that it sounds as if the stars are singing.

Stanza Ten

In stanza ten of 'The Blessed Damozel', the lady is still standing at her viewing point singing out into the vastness of space. It is now night and the crescent moon is thin, like a "little

feather." It is in this scene that the damsel will now speak. The poet repeats once more that her voice is elegant and sounds like a number of stars are singing together.

Stanza Eleven

Once more the poet chooses to have the lover speak to the reader through first-person, contained within parentheses. It becomes clear in this section of 'The Blessed Damozel' that this speaker is the lover that the damsel in heaven is so desperately missing.

While the reader still does not know what the damsel is saying, the lover on Earth seems to be able to understand her through the song of a bird. At the very least the singing of the birds reminds him of their time together just as does the ringing of church bells that he hears in the distance. They make him think of a time in which she accompanied him down "all the echoing stair."

Stanza Twelve

In the twelfth stanza of 'The Blessed Damozel' the damsel's words are revealed. She is described her desire for her lover, stuck on Earth, to join her in heaven. She says that she wishes he would "come to me." Then quickly follows that by reassuring herself that, yes, "he will come."

She knows this to be the case as she has prayed in "Heaven," and he has prayed "on Earth" for the two of them to be together. She is questioning her situation and God, asking, is this not enough? What else can we possibly do to be reunited?

Stanza Thirteen

The damsel continues to speak, describing for the reader her fantasy of what things will be like when he dies and is finally able to join her. His head will be ringed with a "aureole," or halo, and he will be wearing white clothes.

She tells anyone who is listening that she will take "his hand and go with him" into the depths of heaven as all the other lovers have been. There they will step into a stream and "bathe there in God's sight." The two will bare themselves to the mercy and beauty of God. They will have no fear of the future now that they are together.

Stanza Fourteen

She continues her prediction of the future in the next stanza of 'The Blessed Damozel'. She wants the two of them to be in "the shadow of / Occult," or more simply, hidden away somewhere that no one can find or bother them.

Inside this private place that she will find for them, there is much light and prayer. They will pray continually to God and bask in the granting of their previous requests.

Stanza Fifteen

When her lover comes to heaven the two of them will be able to lie together under the "mystic tree" that grows in God's house. Everything around them will be filled with light and touched with divinity. They will finally be reunited and have the peace that they have been so desperate for.

Stanza Sixteen

The damsel has a lot of plans for their time together and one of them involves teaching her lover how to sing the songs of heaven. They will work together to get the parts of the songs right, and he will relish the practice. He will find "some new thing to know," in all that they do. Singing is no exception.

Stanza Seventeen

Once more the reader is returned to the ground where the lover is still bemoaning his living state.

The lover seems to intuit the fact that the damsel has plans to bring him to heaven with her, but he doubts that that could really happen. He is worried that the two of them will never be reunited.

One of his main reasons for worrying is his belief that he has done nothing to prove he is worthy to go to heaven. The only good thing he says he has done harbor a "love for thee."

Stanza Eighteen

In stanza eighteen of 'The Blessed Damozel', the reader is returned to heaven and to the central narrative that the damsel is dreaming.

She tells the reader, the open space in front of her, and God, that she will take her lover to see "the lady Mary," the virgin Mary, along with her many handmaidens whose names she lists.

This will be an important visit, in its own right, and for what Mary will do for them.

Stanza Nineteen

The current speaker, the damsel, describes how they will find the women. They will be sitting in a circle with crowns of flowers on their heads and clothed in "fine cloth." The handmaids work continually making the robes for those who have just entered into heaven.

Stanza Twenty

Her lover, upon seeing all these sights will be “dumb” with happiness. She will be there to reassure him though and make sure to “lay [her] cheek / To his,” and remind him of their love. They should not be ashamed or “abash’d” of their passion as the Virgin Mary will approve of their union. She will in fact be so proud of the couple that she will grant the damsel a request.

Stanza Twenty-One

She says, with confidence, that Mary will bring the lovers, “hand in hand,” to see Christ. He will be encircled by the innumerable heads of souls worshipping at his feet, all of whom will have halos like the lover’s. Upon seeing the couple approach angels will begin to sing.

Stanza Twenty-Two

Once she has gotten an audience with Christ she will ask him to allow her and her lover to live as they used to back on Earth, “With Love” only.

She will tell Christ that they must be together in “Love” as they only had a short period to love each other on Earth. Now they will be able to do it for the rest of time.

Stanza Twenty-Three

The damsel breaks from the dream she is living in and comes back to her lonely reality. She is once more standing and gazing.

She is more deflated and disappointed than she is sad at this point and says “mild[ly],” that all this will happen “when he comes.” She stopped speaking after these final words and she is then filled with the light of the angels and heaven.

Stanza Twenty-Four

The damsel’s lover, still stuck on Earth, gets to speak two more times in the final stanza of ‘The Blessed Damozel’ . He first says that even though he is stuck on Earth he can see “her smile” in heaven.

The narrator of ‘The Blessed Damozel’ breaks into his thought and reminds the reader that nothing has been resolved. The angels in light that were moving toward the damsel have changed “their path.” The lady takes this as a negative sign and leans down on the wall against which she has been standing and weeps. She cries so loudly and with so much passion that her beloved so far below her on Earth can hear “her tears.”

About Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born in 1828 in London, England to Italian parents. When he was young, Rossetti hoped to become a painter and was, along with his siblings, a very talented child. After school Rossetti apprenticed to the painter Ford Madox Brown, as well as independently extending his knowledge and love for literature.

5. Darkling Thrush

Thomas Hardy

The Darkling Thrush is one of Thomas Hardy's characteristic poems of bleak despair over the world, natural and emotional. It is the last poem of the 19th century, or at least the last one to be discussed in this book, written on the last day of the century, December 31, 1900. Because it is December, the gloomy weather of the day, which is described in the poem, can stand for the century itself—both the one coming to an end and the one about to start.

The day is characteristically gray. The question the poem implicitly poses—and the question landscape and ambience always poses in Hardy, in both his poetry and his novels—is the extent to which the mind is brought low by the exterior grimness of weather and therefore of the surrounding world, of life, versus the extent to which we see in the surrounding world a reflection of our own moods and emotions.

"The Darkling Thrush" not only raises this question but perhaps despite itself answers it. For most of the poem, the landscape and the mood it is correlated with are indeterminate as to cause and effect. The features of the landscape seem to represent the corpse of the 19th century, gruesomely leaning out of its coffin, perhaps through rigor mortis. But it may be that the grimness of the century is the grimness of the passing of all time and the hopelessness of trying to impose human meaning on an unforgiving and indifferent natural process.

We can get some hint that not everyone may feel as grim as Hardy does through the fact that he is alone at the coppice gate: All other people have "sought their household fires," and while the landscape is inimical to them, it may be that the interior lives of their homes have compensatory pleasures. On the other hand, the fact that everyone sees nature as inimical might mean that Hardy is seeing the truth of the world, not imposing his own depression onto it. Indeed, he goes on to say "every spirit upon earth / Seemed fervourless as I."

The poem is partly about the use or point of writing poetry in so bleak and inhuman a universe. The land itself seems to be an allegory about the pointlessness of poetry: “The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres.”

The broken lyres mean the breaking of the instrument of lyric poetry, the Aeolian harp that Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth saw as the emblem for the poetic mind’s relation to nature, and that Hardy’s favorite poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, tried to imagine as a metaphor for the forest of autumn and then himself in the climax of “Ode to the West Wind.”

And yet the thrush—like the 60-year-old Hardy, “aged . . . frail, gaunt, and small”—pours its soul abroad in “such ecstatic sound,” recalling John Keats’s description of the nightingale singing in “such an ecstasy” in “Ode to a Nightingale.” To that song Keats has listened “darkling,” while “half in love with easeful death.” Darkling is Keats’s word as much as it is also John Milton’s, from whom he derives it; in Paradise Lost Milton describes how he listens as the nightingale “sings darkling.” The word means “in the dark,” but Hardy wants it to mean “headed toward darkness.” The “darkling thrush” of the title refers both to him, listening darkling, and the bird, singing darkling.

But we can see that the grimness of the poem is Hardy’s and not the world’s. The logic of the poem is to some extent self-refuting. It goes like this: Why should I not be bleak when the world around me is so demonstrably unvaried in its grimness? How can the thrush sing in such circumstances?

But the thrush is one of the circumstances, and therefore it contradicts the argument that the world is one of unvarying grimness. The hopelessness that the poem and perhaps the poet recognize is one within the human spirit, not the natural world. The thrush is singing a “happy good-night air” to the day, and not certainly to the century. There is hope in and for the natural world, but no hope that the poet can see for himself.

The first stanza posits a bleak and depressing landscape as the speaker leans on the “coppice gate” and surveys the dismal scene. Indeed, the scene is devoid of all forms of life, both natural and human. All that remains is a cold and colorless world,

"spectregray," rendered nondescript and featureless by "the weakening eye of day." Even worse, the very memory of its former inhabitants has now been obliterated. "And all mankind that haunted nigh / Had sought their household fires." But, most importantly, the joy and harmony of Nature have also departed, where only "tangled bine-stems" of a previously vibrant plant remain, "like strings of broken lyres," mute symbols of a time as far back as the ancient world when poetry and music were one, now become feeble reminders of their former exalted status.

"It is not surprising that poets should wish to keep hold of an association with song which goes back to the very origins of their art, and which carries with it such powerful connotations of divine authority, potency, and vision. My argument is that the wish became an anxiety during a period which begins, very roughly, with Milton, and ends with a group of poets who straddle the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth…. Why this loss of empire happened is a fascinating and complex story, far to complex to analyze here … Nevertheless, I think it is no coincidence that poets insisted on identifying themselves— self-consciously, rhetorically—as singers at a historical moment of divergence between poetry and song…. (Danny Karlin, "The Figure of the Singer in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy")

Amidst this barren background, in the second stanza the poet laments the death of the nineteenth century by endowing it with human attributes, "the Century's corpse outleant," and conceiving a funeral service attended only by the all but defunct forces of nature. Here, the wind no longer produces the sweet music of the lyre but, rather, provides the funeral dirge. "His crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind his death-lament." Instead, the promise of renewed inspiration, "the ancient pulse if germ and birth," is buried in a wasteland that reflects the poet's dejected state of mind. "And every spirit upon earth / Seemed fervourless as I." It is important to note that the last two lines of this stanza indicate an important reversal in terms of cause and effect with respect to nature and the poet's state of mind. Up to this point, the poet has presented himself as depressed by his surroundings, whereas now he suggests that the landscape is a mirror for his feelings, merely reflecting back to him his own sense of lost creativity. Thus, a poem which at first appears to describe a rustic (NW) landscape is transformed into one that uses the guise of Nature to express the poet's emotional struggle.

Having buried the past century and his poetic precursors, the third stanza suggests that there is yet some hope that the poet may find a way out of his dilemma when he overhears the song of "an aged thrush." It appears at first that there is indeed a way of resolving his crisis as he listens to its "full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited," where

happiness without boundaries signals the successful transcendence of his previous fears and anxiety. The poet imagines the thrush coming to his rescue, having "chosen to fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom." But for all this, the poet's desire for a renewed sense of well-being is not assured for he is imagining an aged bird with "blast-beruffled plume."

More importantly, the poet cannot participate in the thrush's celebratory mood for he cannot imagine any reason for its happiness. This is the theme of the fourth and final stanza. Here, the poet simply cannot find any reason for hope or any way out of his crisis. When he states that he cannot imagine any "cause for carolings / Of such ecstatic sound," we are made to understand that he can no longer be inspired by the sound of the thrush's singing, unable to identify with or be transported by its music. His imaginative efforts to the contrary, the poet simply cannot find a way out of his feelings of futility and hopelessness. "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware."

Section B

Novel

Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens

Brief Biography of Charles Dickens

Born to an English Navy clerk and a mother of seven other children, Charles Dickens lived a life of some middle-class comfort until, abruptly, changes in the family's financial situation forced his family into a poorhouse and him, at age ten, to work for some time at a boot-blacking factory. Although Charles eventually went to school and began a career as a law clerk, journalist, and writer, he never forgot this period of economic privation and social despair, and he included depictions of poverty in many of the fifteen novels and other stories and pieces of prose he wrote over the course of his life.

Historical Context of Oliver Twist

The Victorian Period coincides with a series of political, economic, and social changes in England that are inseparable from the nature of the fiction produced. The high-point of the Industrial Revolution took place, more or less, at the time of Oliver Twist's writing; the production of goods had transitioned from "cottage industries" in the countryside to centralized factories in London and in the newer cities of Manchester and Birmingham. A whole host of other industries sprang up to support these new modes of production (including coal energy and railroad infrastructure development), and cities grew to include vast tenements of workers recently relocated from the country. England was also the crown jewel of an Empire "on which the sun never set," meaning it extended across much of the known world, including Australia and New Zealand, the Indian subcontinent, and interests in Africa. London was not just a hub for English workers, writers, artists, and thinkers—it was a multinational cosmopolis, the like of which the world had never seen (or had not since the far different Roman Empire, 1800 years previous). Dickens fiction reflects London both as a center of international power, as a city consisting of small neighborhoods, and of a city made up of the rich and those clinging to new and tenuous economic circumstances.

Oliver Twist Summary

Oliver Twist begins in a workhouse in 1830s England, in an unnamed village, where a young woman, revealed to be Oliver's mother, gives birth to her son and promptly dies. The boy, lucky to survive, is raised until the age of nine in a "farm" for young orphaned children, and then is sent to the local workhouse again, where he labors for a time, until his innocent request for more food so angers the house's board and beadle, Mr. Bumble, that the workhouse attempts to foist Oliver off as an apprentice to some worker in the villager. Oliver is eventually given over to a coffin-

maker named Sowerberry. Oliver works as a "mute" mourner for Sowerberry, and must sleep at night among the coffins. After a fight with Noah, another of Sowerberry's apprentices, over Oliver's unwed mother (whom Noah insults), Oliver runs away to London, to make his fortune.

Near London, Oliver meets a well-dressed young boy who introduces himself as the Artful Dodger, a thief under the employ of a local crime boss named Fagin. The Dodger takes Oliver to Fagin, who promises to help Oliver but really holds him hostage, and forces him to go on a thieving mission with the Dodger and Bates, another young criminal. Bates and Dodger try to steal the handkerchief of an old man, who notices Oliver (an innocent onlooker), and believes him to be the thief. Oliver is caught and hauled to jail, only to be released into the old man Brownlow's company after Brownlow sees that Oliver had nothing to do with the crime. Brownlow nurses Oliver for a time and vows to educate him properly. But after sending Oliver out to return some books and money to a bookseller, Brownlow is shocked to find that Oliver does not return—Oliver has been picked up by Nancy, an associate of Fagin's, and taken back to the criminal gang.

The remainder of the novel comprises Brownlow's attempts to find Oliver, and Oliver's attempts to escape Fagin, his criminal associate Sikes, and the other boys. Fagin orders Oliver to accompany Sikes and another thief named Toby Crackit on a house-breaking, in a country village, that goes awry; Oliver is shot in the arm in the attempt, by a servant named Giles of the Maylie house (the house being broken into); Oliver nearly dies, but walks back to the house the next morning and is nursed back to health by Rose, Mrs. Maylie, and a local doctor named Lorsborne. Lorsborne later takes Oliver into London to find Brownlow, but they discover Brownlow has gone to visit the West Indies. Oliver is crestfallen, but is happy nonetheless with the Maylies, and is educated by an old man in the Maylies' village. Later, on a trip into London, Rose is visited by Nancy, who wishes to come clean about her involvement in Oliver's oppression, and Oliver finds that Brownlow is back in the city, having returned from the West Indies.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Corney, mistress of the workhouse, receives a package from a dying woman named Old Sally, which Sally in turn received from Oliver's mother upon her death. The package contains material indicating Oliver's family history, which is of interest to a friend and shadowy associate of Fagin's named Monks. Nancy meets with Rose and Brownlow in secret in London, to discuss what she has overheard, from Fagin and Monks, regarding Oliver's parentage; Noah, sent to spy on Nancy, overhears this conversation, and reports it to Fagin. Fagin tells Sikes, misleadingly, that Nancy has

"peached" on the whole gang (even though Nancy refused to incriminate Fagin or Sikes to Brownlow), and Sikes, in a fit of rage, kills Nancy, then goes on the lam with his dog.

Brownlow realizes that he recognized Oliver as resembling the picture of a woman in his parlor, and also recognized a man he comes to realize is Monks. Brownlow pieces together the mystery of Oliver's parentage: Oliver's father is also Monks' father, and Monks' mother defrauded Oliver's mother, an unwed woman named Agnes, of the inheritance Oliver's father, Edwin, intended to leave to Oliver and Agnes. Monks wishes to destroy these facts of Oliver's parentage in order to keep all the inheritance for himself. But Brownlow confronts Monks with these facts, and Monks agrees, finally, to sign an affidavit admitting his part in the conspiracy to defraud Oliver.

Meanwhile, the members of Fagin's gang are all caught: Noah; Charlotte, his partner; the Dodger; and Fagin himself. Sikes dies, by accident, attempting to escape a mob that has come to kill him following Nancy's death. Brownlow manages to secure half of Oliver's inheritance for Oliver, and gives the other half to Monks, who spends it in the New World on criminal activity. Rose Maylie, long in love with her cousin Harry, eventually marries him, after Harry purposefully lowers his social station to correspond with Rose's; Rose was said to be of a blighted family, and in the novel's final surprise, this "blight" is revealed: Rose's sister was Agnes, meaning that Rose is Oliver's aunt.

At the novel's end, Oliver is restored to his rightful lineage and is adopted by Brownlow. The pair live in the country with Harry, who has become a parson, and Rose, along with Losborne and Mrs. Maylie. Oliver can, at last, be educated in the tranquility and manner he deserves, as the son of a gentleman.

Characters :

Oliver Twist

As the child hero of a melodramatic novel of social protest, Oliver Twist is meant to appeal more to our sentiments than to our literary sensibilities. On many levels, Oliver is not a believable character, because although he is raised in corrupt surroundings, his purity and virtue are absolute. Throughout the novel, Dickens uses Oliver’s character to challenge the Victorian idea that paupers and criminals are already

evil at birth, arguing instead that a corrupt environment is the source of vice. At the same time, Oliver's incorruptibility undermines some of Dickens's assertions. Oliver is shocked and horrified when he sees the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates pick a stranger's pocket and again when he is forced to participate in a burglary. Oliver's moral scruples about the sanctity of property seem inborn in him, just as Dickens's opponents thought that corruption is inborn in poor people. Furthermore, other pauper children use rough Cockney slang, but Oliver, oddly enough, speaks in proper King's English. His grammatical fastidiousness is also inexplicable, as Oliver presumably is not well-educated. Even when he is abused and manipulated, Oliver does not become angry or indignant. When Sikes and Crackit force him to assist in a robbery, Oliver merely begs to be allowed to "run away and die in the fields." Oliver does not present a complex picture of a person torn between good and evil—instead, he is goodness incarnate.

Even if we might feel that Dickens's social criticism would have been more effective if he had focused on a more complex poor character, like the Artful Dodger or Nancy, the audience for whom Dickens was writing might not have been receptive to such a portrayal. Dickens's Victorian middle-class readers were likely to hold opinions on the poor that were only a little less extreme than those expressed by Mr. Bumble, the beadle who treats paupers with great cruelty. In fact, Oliver Twist was criticized for portraying thieves and prostitutes at all. Given the strict morals of Dickens's audience, it may have seemed necessary for him to make Oliver a saintlike figure. Because Oliver appealed to Victorian readers' sentiments, his story may have stood a better chance of effectively challenging their prejudices.

Nancy

A major concern of Oliver Twist is the question of whether a bad environment can irrevocably poison someone's character and soul. As the novel progresses, the character who best illustrates the contradictory issues brought up by that question is Nancy. As a child of the streets, Nancy has been a thief and drinks to excess. The narrator's reference to her "free and agreeable . . . manners" indicates that she is a prostitute. She is immersed in the vices condemned by her society, but she also commits perhaps the most noble act in the novel when she sacrifices her own life in order to protect Oliver. Nancy's moral complexity is unique among the major characters in Oliver Twist. The novel is full of characters who are all good and can barely comprehend evil, such as Oliver, Rose, and Brownlow; and characters who are all evil and can barely comprehend good, such as Fagin, Sikes, and Monks. Only Nancy comprehends and is capable of both good and evil. Her ultimate choice to do good at a

great personal cost is a strong argument in favor of the incorruptibility of basic goodness, no matter how many environmental obstacles it may face.

Nancy's love for Sikes exemplifies the moral ambiguity of her character. As she herself points out to Rose, devotion to a man can be "a comfort and a pride" under the right circumstances. But for Nancy, such devotion is "a new means of violence and suffering"—indeed, her relationship with Sikes leads her to criminal acts for his sake and eventually to her own demise. The same behavior, in different circumstances, can have very different consequences and moral significance. In much of Oliver Twist, morality and nobility are black-and-white issues, but Nancy's character suggests that the boundary between virtue and vice is not always clearly drawn.

Fagin

Although Dickens denied that anti-Semitism had influenced his portrait of Fagin, the Jewish thief's characterization does seem to owe much to ethnic stereotypes. He is ugly, simpering, miserly, and avaricious. Constant references to him as "the Jew" seem to indicate that his negative traits are intimately connected to his ethnic identity. However, Fagin is more than a statement of ethnic prejudice. He is a richly drawn, resonant embodiment of terrifying villainy. At times, he seems like a child's distorted vision of pure evil. Fagin is described as a "loathsome reptile" and as having "fangs such as should have been a dog's or rat's." Other characters occasionally refer to him as "the old one," a popular nickname for the devil. Twice, in Chapter 9 and again in Chapter 34, Oliver wakes up to find Fagin nearby. Oliver encounters him in the hazy zone between sleep and waking, at the precise time when dreams and nightmares are born from "the mere silent presence of some external object." Indeed, Fagin is meant to inspire nightmares in child and adult readers alike. Perhaps most frightening of all, though, is Chapter 52, in which we enter Fagin's head for his "last night alive." The gallows, and the fear they inspire in Fagin, are a specter even more horrifying to contemplate than Fagin himself.

The Study of Poetry

MATTHEW ARNOLD

Introduction

Matthew Arnold was one of the foremost poets and critics of the 19th century. While often regarded as the father of modern literary criticism, he also wrote extensively on social and cultural issues, religion, and education. Arnold was born into an influential English family—his father was a famed headmaster at Rugby—and graduated from Balliol College, Oxford. He began his career as a school inspector, traveling throughout much of England on the newly built railway system. When he was elected professor of poetry at Oxford in 1857, he was the first in the post to deliver his lectures in English rather than Latin. Walt Whitman famously dismissed him as a "literary dude," and while many have continued to disparage Arnold for his moralistic tone and literary judgments, his work also laid the foundation for important 20th century critics like T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, and Harold Bloom. His poetry has also had an enormous, though underappreciated, influence; Arnold is frequently acknowledged as being one of the first poets to display a truly Modern perspective in his work.

Perhaps Arnold's most famous piece of literary criticism is his essay "The Study of Poetry." In this work, Arnold is fundamentally concerned with poetry's "high destiny;" he believes that "mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us" as science and philosophy will eventually prove flimsy and unstable. Arnold's essay thus concerns itself with articulating a "high standard" and "strict judgment" in order to avoid the fallacy of valuing certain poems (and poets) too highly, and lays out a method for discerning only the best and therefore "classic" poets (as distinct from the description of writers of the ancient world). Arnold's classic poets include Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer; and the passages he presents from each are intended to show how their poetry is timeless and moving. For Arnold, feeling and sincerity are paramount, as is the seriousness of subject: "The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner." An example of an indispensable poet who falls short of Arnold's "classic" designation is Geoffrey Chaucer, who, Arnold states, ultimately lacks the "high seriousness" of classic poets.

At the root of Arnold's argument is his desire to illuminate and preserve the poets he believes to be the touchstones of literature, and to ask questions about the moral value of poetry that does not champion truth, beauty, valor, and clarity.

Arnold's belief that poetry should both uplift and console drives the essay's logic and its conclusions.

The essay was originally published as the introduction to T. H. Ward's anthology, The English Poets (1880). It appeared later in Essays in Criticism, Second Series.

"The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry."

Let me be permitted to quote these words of my own [from The Hundred Greatest Men—ed.], as uttering the thought which should, in my opinion, go with us and govern us in all our study of poetry. In the present work [The English Poets—ed.] it is the course of one great contributory stream to the world-river of poetry that we are invited to follow. We are here invited to trace the stream of English poetry. But whether we set ourselves, as here, to follow only one of the several streams that make the mighty river of poetry, or whether we seek to know them all, our governing thought should be the same. We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science"; and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge"; our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive

their hollowness, the more we shall prize “the breath and finer spirit of knowledge” offered to us by poetry.

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment. Sainte-Beuve relates that Napoleon one day said, when somebody was spoken of in his presence as a charlatan: “Charlatan as much as you please; but where is there not charlatanism?”—“Yes” answers Sainte-Beuve, “in politics, in the art of governing mankind, that is perhaps true. But in the order of thought, in art, the glory, the eternal honour is that charlatanism shall find no entrance; herein lies the inviolableness of that noble portion of man’s being” [Les Cahiers—ed.]. It is admirably said, and let us hold fast to it. In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honour, that charlatanism shall find no entrance; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these. And in poetry, more than anywhere else, it is unpermissible to confuse or obliterate them. For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true, is of paramount importance. It is of paramount importance because of the high destinies of poetry. In poetry, as in criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue on half-true.

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present. And yet in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it. We should therefore steadily set it before our minds at the outset, and should compel ourselves to revert constantly to the thought of it as we proceed.

Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious. A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really. They may count to us historically. The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it; in short, to overrate it. So arises in our poetic judgments the fallacy caused by the estimate which we may call historic. Then, again, a poet or poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here also we overrate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated. And thus we get the source of a second fallacy in our poetic judgments—the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal.

Both fallacies are natural. It is evident how naturally the study of the history and development of poetry may incline a man to pause over reputations and works once conspicuous but now obscure, and to quarrel with a careless public for skipping, in obedience to mere tradition and habit, from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in its poetry. The French have become diligent students of their own early poetry, which they long neglected; the study makes many of them dissatisfied with their so-called classical poetry, the court-tragedy of the seventeenth century, a poetry which Pellisson long ago reproached with its want of the true poetic stamp, with its politesse stérile et rampante [sterile and bombastic politeness—ed.], but which nevertheless has reigned in France as absolutely as if it had been the perfection of classical poetry indeed. The dissatisfaction is natural; yet a lively and accomplished critic, M. Charles d'Héricault, the editor of Clément Marot, goes too far when he says that "the cloud of glory playing round a classic is a mist as dangerous to the future of a literature as it is intolerable for the purposes of history." "It hinders," he goes on, "it hinders us from seeing more than one single point, the culminating and exceptional point; the

summary, fictitious and arbitrary, of a thought and of a work. It substitutes a halo for a physiognomy, it puts a statue where there was once a man, and hiding from us all trace of the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures, it claims not study but veneration; it does not show us how the thing is done, it imposes upon us a model. Above all, for the historian this creation of classic personages is inadmissible; for it withdraws the poet from his time, from his proper life, it breaks historical relationships, it blinds criticism by conventional admiration, and renders the investigation of literary origins unacceptable. It gives us a human personage no longer but a God seated immovable amidst His perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus; and hardly will it be possible for the young student to whom such work is exhibited at such a distance from him, to believe that it did not issue ready—made from that divine head."

All this is brilliantly and tellingly said, but we must plead for a distinction. Everything depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word classic, classical), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry. Everything which interferes with it, which hinders it, is injurious. True, we must read our classic with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition; we must perceive when his work comes short, when it drops out of the class of the very best, and we must rate it, in such cases, at its proper value. But the use of this negative criticism is not in itself, it is entirely in its enabling us to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent. To trace the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end. It may be said that the more we know about a classic the better we shall enjoy him; and, if we lived as long as Methuselah and had all of us heads of perfect clearness and wills of perfect steadfastness, this might be true in fact as it is plausible in theory. But the case here is much the same as the case with the Greek and Latin studies of our schoolboys. The elaborate philological groundwork which we require them to lay is in theory an admirable preparation for appreciating the Greek and Latin authors worthily. The more thoroughly we lay the groundwork, the better we shall be able, it may be said, to enjoy the authors. True, if time were not so short, and schoolboys wits not so soon tired and their power of attention exhausted; only, as it is, the elaborate philological preparation goes on, but the authors are little known and less enjoyed. So with the investigator of "historic

origins" in poetry. He ought to enjoy the true classic all the better for his investigations; he often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best, and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to over-rate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.

The idea of tracing historic origins and historical relationships cannot be absent from a compilation like the present. And naturally the poets to be exhibited in it will be assigned to those persons for exhibition who are known to prize them highly, rather than to those who have no special inclination towards them. Moreover, the very occupation with an author, and the business of exhibiting him, disposes us to affirm and amplify his importance. In the present work, therefore, we are sure of frequent temptation to adopt the historic estimate, or the personal estimate, and to forget the real estimate; which latter, nevertheless, we must employ if we are to make poetry yield us its full benefit. So high is that benefit, the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry, that we do well, I say, to set it fixedly before our minds as our object in studying poets and poetry, and to make the desire of attaining it the one principle to which, as the Imitation says, whatever we may read or come to know, we always return. Cum multa legeris et cognoveris, ad unum semper oportet redire principium ["When you have read and learned many things, you should always return to the one principle." Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ—ed.].

The historic estimate is likely in especial to affect our judgment and our language when we are dealing with ancient poets; the personal estimate when we are dealing with poets our contemporaries, or at any rate modern. The exaggerations due to the historic estimate are not in themselves, perhaps, of very much gravity. Their report hardly enters the general ear; probably they do not always impose even on the literary men who adopt them. But they lead to a dangerous abuse of language. So we hear Cædmon, amongst our own poets, compared to Milton. I have already noticed the enthusiasm of one accomplished French critic for "historic origins." Another eminent French critic, M. Vitet, comments upon that famous document of the early poetry of his nation, the Chanson de Roland. It is indeed a most interesting document. The joculator or jongleur Taillefer, who was with William the Conqueror's army at Hastings, marched before the Norman troops, so said the tradition, singing "of Charlemagne and of Roland and of Oliver, and of the vassals who died at Roncevaux", and it is suggested that in the Chanson de Roland by one Turoldus or Théroulde, a poem preserved in a manuscript of the twelfth century in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, we have certainly the matter, perhaps even some of the words, of the chant which Taillefer sang. The poem has vigour and freshness; it is not without

pathos. But M. Vitet is not satisfied with seeing in it a document of some poetic value, and of very high historic and linguistic value; he sees in it a grand and beautiful work, a monument of epic genius. In its general design he finds the grandiose conception, in its details he finds the constant union of simplicity with greatness, which are the marks, he truly says, of the genuine epic, and distinguish it from the artificial epic of literary ages. One thinks of Homer; this is the sort of praise which is given to Homer, and justly given. Higher praise there cannot well be, and it is the praise due to epic poetry of the highest order only, and to no other. Let us try, then, the Chanson de Roland at its best. Roland, mortally wounded, lay himself down under a pine-tree, with his face turned towards Spain and the enemy—

De plusurs choses à remembrer li prist,

De tantes teres cume li bers cunquist,

De dulce France, des humes de sun lign,

De Carlemagne sun seignor ki l'nurrit."

["Then began he to call many things to remembrance,—all the lands which his valour conquered, and pleasant France, and the men of his lineage, and Charlemagne, his liege lord who nourished him"—Chanson de Roland, iii, 939–42. Arnold's note.]

That is primitive work, I repeat, with an undeniable poetic quality of its own. It deserves such praise, and such praise is sufficient for it. But now turn to Homer—

Hös phato tous d'eide katechen physizoos aia

en Lakedaimoni auphi philei en patridi gaiei

["So said she; they long since in Earth's soft arms were reposing, / There, in their own dear land, their fatherland, Lacedaemon"—Iliad, iii, 243, 244 (translated by Dr. Hawtry). Arnold's note.]

We are here in another world, another order of poetry altogether; here is rightly due such supreme praise as that which M. Vitet gives to the Chanson de Roland. If our

words are to have any meaning, if our judgments are to have any solidity, we must not heap that supreme praise upon poetry of an order immeasurably inferior.

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently. Take the two lines which I have just quoted from Homer, the poet's comment on Helen's mention of her brothers;—or take his

A deilo, ti sphoi, domen Pelei anakti

Thneta; hymeis d' eston agero t' athanato' te.

ei hina dystenoisi met' andrasin alge' echeton

["Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?"—Iliad, xvii. 443–45.]

the address of Zeus to the horses of Peleus;—or take finally his

Kai se, geron, to prin men akouomen olbion einai

["Nay, and thou too, old man, in former days wast, as we hear, happy."—Iliad, xxiv. 543.]

the words of Achilles to Priam, a suppliant before him. Take that incomparable line and a half of Dante, Ugolino's tremendous words—

Io no piangeva; sì dentro impietrai.

Piangevan elli …

["I wailed not, so of stone grew I within; / they wailed.—Inferno, xxxiii. 39–40.]

take the lovely words of Beatrice to Virgil—

Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale,

Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,

Nè fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale . . .

["Of such sort hath God, thanked be His mercy, made me, / That your misery toucheth me not, / Neither doth the flame of this fire strike me."—Inferno, ii. 91–93.]

take the simple, but perfect, single line—

In la sua volontade è nostra pace

["In His will is our peace."—Paradiso, iii. 85.]

Take of Shakespeare a line or two of Henry the Fourth's expostulation with sleep—

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast

Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains

In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . .

and take, as well, Hamlet's dying request to Horatio—

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story . . .

Take of Milton that Miltonic passage—

Darken'd so, yet shone

Above them all the archangel; but his face

Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care

Sat on his faded cheek . . .

add two such lines as—

And courage never to submit or yield

And what is else not to be overcome . . .

and finish with the exquisite close to the loss of Proserpine, the loss

. . . which cost Ceres all that pain

To seek her through the world."

These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.

The specimens I have quoted differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power, we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical

quality is present or wanting there. Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples;—to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry, by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.

Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observation that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness (philosophoteron kai spoudaioteron [Poetics, ix—ed.]). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substances and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the other. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other. So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter.

So stated, these are but dry generalities; their whole force lies in their application. And I could wish every student of poetry to make the application of them for himself. Made by himself, the application would impress itself upon his mind far

more deeply than made by me. Neither will my limits allow me to make any full application of the generalities above propounded; but in the hope of bringing out, at any rate, some significance in them, and of establishing an important principle more firmly by their means, I will, in the space which remains to me, follow rapidly from the commencement the course of our English poetry with them in my view.

Once more I return to the early poetry of France, with which our own poetry, in its origins, is indissolubly connected. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that seedtime of all modern language and literature, the poetry of France had a clear predominance in Europe. Of the two divisions of that poetry, its productions in the langue d'oil and its productions in the langue d'oc, the poetry of the langue d'oc, of southern France, of the troubadours, is of importance because of its effect on Italian literature;—the first literature of modern Europe to strike the true and grand note, and to bring forth, as in Dante and Petrarch it brought forth, classics. But the predominance of French poetry in Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is due to its poetry of the langue d'oil, the poetry of northern France and of the tongue which is now the French language. In the twelfth century the bloom of this romance-poetry was earlier and stronger in England, at the court of our Anglo-Norman kings, than in France itself. But it was a bloom of French poetry; and as our native poetry formed itself, it formed itself out of this. The romance-poems which took possession of the heart and imagination of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are French; "they are," as Southey justly says, "the pride of French literature, nor have we anything which can be placed in competition with them." Themes were supplied from all quarters; but the romance-setting which was common to them all, and which gained the ear of Europe, was French. This constituted for the French poetry, literature, and language, at the height of the Middle Age, an unchallenged predominance. The Italian Brunetto Latini, the master of Dante, wrote his Treasure in French because, he says, "la parleure en est plus delitable et plus commune a toutes gens" [the language is more agreeable and more widely known—ed.]. In the same century, the thirteenth, the French romance-writer, Christian of Troyes, formulates the claims, in chivalry and letters, of France, his native country, as follows:—

Or vous ert par ce livre apris,

Que Gresse ot de chevalerie

Le premier los et de clergie;

Puis vint chevalerie à Rome,

Et de la clergie la some,

Qui ore est en France venue.

Diex doinst qu'ele i soit retenue,

Et que li lius li abelisse

Tant que de France n'isse

L'onor qui s'i est arestée!

"Now by this book you will learn that first Greece had the renown for chivalry and letters: then chivalry and the primacy in letters passed to Rome, and now it is come to France. God grant it may be kept there; and that the place may please it so well, that the honour which has come to make stay in France may never depart thence!"

Yet it is now all gone, this French romance-poetry of which the weight of substance and the power of style are not unfairly represented by this extract from Christian of Troyes. Only by means of the historic estimate can we persuade ourselves not to think that any of it is of poetical importance.

But in the fourteenth century there comes an Englishman nourished on this poetry, taught his trade by this poetry, getting words, rhyme, metre from this poetry; for even of that stanza which the Italians used, and which Chaucer derived immediately from the Italians, the basis and suggestion was probably given in France. Chaucer (I have already named him) fascinated his contemporaries, but so too did Christian of Troyes and Wolfram of Eschenbach. Chaucer's power of fascination, however, is enduring; his poetical importance does not need the assistance of the historic estimate; it is real. He is a genuine source of joy and strength, which is flowing still for us and will flow always. He will be read, as time goes on, far more generally than he is read now. His language is a cause of difficulty for us; but so also, and I think in quite as great a degree, is the language of Burns. In Chaucer's case, as in that of Burns, it is a difficulty to be unhesitatingly accepted and overcome.

If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry—why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world, we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life,—so

unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view. We have only to call to mind the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales. The right comment upon it is Dryden's: "It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty." And again: "He is a perpetual fountain of good sense." It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance; and Chaucer's poetry has truth of substance.

Of his style and manner, if we think first of the romance-poetry and then of Chaucer's divine liquidness of diction, his divine fluidity of movement, it is difficult to speak temperately. They are irresistible, and justify all the rapture with which his successors speak of his "gold dew-drops of speech." Johnson misses the point entirely when he finds fault with Dryden for ascribing to Chaucer the first refinement of our numbers, and says that Gower also can show smooth numbers and easy rhymes. The refinement of our numbers means something far more than this. A nation may have versifiers with smooth numbers and easy rhymes, and yet may have no real poetry at all. Chaucer is the father of our splendid English poetry; he is our "well of English undefiled," because by the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement, he makes an epoch and founds a tradition. In Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, we can follow the tradition of the liquid diction, the fluid movement of Chaucer; at one time it is his liquid diction of which in these poets we feel the virtue, and at another time it is his fluid movement. And the virtue is irresistible.

Bounded as is my space, I must yet find room for an example of Chaucer's virtue, as I have given examples to show the virtue of the great classics. I feel disposed to say that a single line is enough to show the charm of Chaucer's verse; that merely one line like this—

O martyr souded in virginitee!

["The French soudé; soldered, fixed fast." Arnold's note.]

has a virtue of manner and movement such as we shall not find in all the verse of romance—poetry;—but this is saying nothing. The virtue is such as we shall not find, perhaps, in all English poetry, outside the poets whom I have named as the special

inheritors of Chaucer's tradition. A single line, however, is too little if we have not the strain of Chaucer's verse well in our memory; let us take a stanza. It is from The Prioress' Tale, the story of the Christian child murdered in a Jewry—

My throte is cut unto my nekke-bone
Saidè this child, and as by way of kinde
I should have deyd, yea, longè time agone;
But Jesus Christ, as ye in bookès finde,
Will that his glory last and be in minde,
And for the worship of his mother dere
Yet may I sing O Alma loud and clere."

Wordsworth has modernised this Tale, and to feel how delicate and evanescent is the charm of verse, we have only to read Wordsworth's first three lines of this stanza after Chaucer's—

My throat is cut unto the bone, I trow,
Said this young child, and by the law of kind
I should have died, yea, many hours ago.

The charm is departed. It is often said that the power of liquidness and fluidity in Chaucer's verse was dependent upon a free, a licentious dealing with language, such as is now impossible; upon a liberty, such as Burns too enjoyed, of making words like neck, bird, into a disyllable by adding to them, and words like cause, rhyme, into a disyllable by sounding the e mute. It is true that Chaucer's fluidity is conjoined with this liberty, and is admirably served by it; but we ought not to say that it was dependent upon it. It was dependent upon his talent. Other poets with a like liberty do not attain to the fluidity of Chaucer; Burns himself does not attain to it. Poets, again, who have a talent akin to Chaucer's, such as Shakespeare or Keats, have known how to attain his fluidity without the like liberty.

And yet Chaucer is not one of the great classics. His poetry transcends and effaces, easily and without effort, all the romance-poetry of Catholic Christendom; it transcends and effaces all the English poetry contemporary with it, it transcends and effaces all the English poetry subsequent to it down to the age of Elizabeth. Of such avail is poetic truth of substance, in its natural and necessary union with poetic truth of style. And yet, I say, Chaucer is not one of the great classics. He has not their accent. What is wanting to him is suggested by the mere mention of the name of the first great classic of Christendom, the immortal poet who died eighty years before Chaucer,—Dante. The accent of such verse as

In la sua volontade è nostra pace . . .

is altogether beyond Chaucer's reach; we praise him, but we feel that this accent is out of the question for him. It may be said that it was necessarily out of the reach of any poet in the England of that stage of growth. Possibly; but we are to adopt a real, not a historic, estimate of poetry. However we may account for its absence, something is wanting, then, to the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed in the glorious class of the best. And there is no doubt what that something is. It is the spoudaiotes, the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this virtue of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed. A voice from the slums of Paris, fifty or sixty years after Chaucer, the voice of poor Villon out of his life of riot and crime, has at its happy moments (as, for instance, in the last stanza of La Belle Heaulmière) ["The name Heaulmière is said to be derived from a head-dress (helm) worn as a mark by courtesans. In Villon's ballad, a poor old creature of this class laments her days of youth and beauty . . . . "—Arnold's note.] more of this important poetic virtue of seriousness than all the productions of Chaucer. But its apparition in Villon, and in men like Villon, is fitful; the greatness of the great poets, the power of their criticism of life, is that their virtue is sustained.

To our praise, therefore, of Chaucer as a poet there must be this limitation; he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue. Still, the main fact for us to bear in mind about Chaucer is his sterling value according to that real estimate which we firmly adopt for all poets. He has

poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry.

For my present purpose I need not dwell on our Elizabethan poetry, or on the continuation and close of this poetry in Milton. We all of us profess to be agreed in the estimate of this poetry; we all of us recognise it as great poetry, our greatest, and Shakespeare and Milton as our poetical classics. The real estimate, here, has universal currency. With the next age of our poetry divergency and difficulty begin. An historic estimate of that poetry has established itself; and the question is, whether it will be found to coincide with the real estimate.

The age of Dryden, together with our whole eighteenth century which followed it, sincerely believed itself to have produced poetical classics of its own, and even to have made advance, in poetry, beyond all its predecessors. Dryden regards as not seriously disputable the opinion "that the sweetness of English verse was never understood or practised by our fathers." Cowley could see nothing at all in Chaucer's poetry. Dryden heartily admired it, and, as we have seen, praised its matter admirably; but of its exquisite manner and movement all he can find to say is that "there is the rude sweetness of a Scotch tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect." Addison, wishing to praise Chaucer's numbers, compares them with Dryden's own. And all through the eighteenth century, and down even into our own times, the stereotyped phrase of approbation for good verse found in our early poetry has been, that it even approached the verse of Dryden, Addison, Pope, and Johnson.

Are Dryden and Pope poetical classics? Is the historic estimate, which represents them as such, and which has been so long established that it cannot easily give way, the real estimate? Wordsworth and Coleridge; as is well known, denied it; but the authority of Wordsworth and Coleridge does not weigh much with the young generation, and there are many signs to show that the eighteenth century and its judgments are coming into favour again. Are the favourite poets of the eighteenth century classics?

It is impossible within my present limits to discuss the question fully. And what man of letters would not shrink from seeming to dispose dictatorially of the claims of two men who are, at any rate, such masters in letters as Dryden and Pope; two men of such admirable talent, both of them, and one of them, Dryden, a man, on all sides, of

such energetic and genial power? And yet, if we are to gain the full benefit from poetry, we must have the real estimate of it. I cast about for some mode of arriving, in the present case, at such an estimate without offence. And perhaps the best way is to begin, as it is easy to begin, with cordial praise.

When we find Chapman, the Elizabethan translator of Homer, expressing himself in this preface thus: "Though truth in her very nakedness sits in so deep a pit, that from Gades to Aurora and Ganges few eyes can sound her, I hope yet those few here will so discover and confirm that, the date being out of her darkness in this morning of our poet, he shall now gird his temples with the sun,"—we pronounce that such a prose is intolerable. When we find Milton writing: "And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he, who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem,"—we pronounce that such a prose has its own grandeur, but that it is obsolete and inconvenient. But when we find Dryden telling us: "What Virgil wrote in the vigour of his age, in plenty and at ease, I have undertaken to translate in my declining years; struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write,"—then we exclaim that here at last we have the true English prose, a prose such as we would all gladly use if we only knew how. Yet Dryden was Milton's contemporary.

But after the Restoration the time had come when our nation felt the imperious need of a fit prose. So, too, the time had likewise come when our nation felt the imperious need of freeing itself from the absorbing preoccupation which religion in the Puritan age had exercised. It was impossible that this freedom should be brought about without some negative excess, without some neglect and impairment of the religious life of the soul; and the spiritual history of the eighteenth century shows us that the freedom was not achieved without them. Still, the freedom was achieved; the preoccupation, an undoubtedly baneful and retarding one if it had continued, was got rid of. And as with religion amongst us at that period, so it was also with letters. A fit prose was a necessity; but it was impossible that a fit prose should establish itself amongst us without some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul. The needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. The men of letters, whose destiny it may be to bring their nation to the attainment of a fit prose, must of necessity, whether they work in prose or in verse, give a predominating, an almost exclusive attention to the qualities of regularity, uniformity, precision, balance. But an almost exclusive attention to these qualities involves some repression and silencing of poetry.

We are to regard Dryden as the puissant and glorious founder, Pope as the splendid high priest, of our age of prose and reason, of our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century. For the purposes of their mission and destiny their poetry, like their prose, is admirable. Do you ask me whether Dryden's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

A milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged,

Fed on the lawns and in the forest ranged.

I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the inaugurator of an age of prose and reason. Do you ask me whether Pope's verse, take it almost where you will, is not good?

To Hounslow Heath I point, and Banstead Down

Thence comes your mutton, and these chicks my own.

I answer: Admirable for the purposes of the high priest of an age of prose and reason. But do you ask me whether such verse proceeds from men with an adequate poetic criticism of life, from men whose criticism of life has a high seriousness, or even, without that high seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity? Do you ask me whether the application of ideas to life in the verse of these men, often a powerful application, no doubt, is a powerful poetic application? Do you ask me whether the poetry of these men has either the matter or the inseparable manner of such an adequate poetic criticism; whether it has the accent of

Absent thee from felicity awhile . . .

or of

And what is else not to be overcome . . .

or of

O martyr souded in virginitee!

I answer: It has not and cannot have them; it is the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.

Gray is our poetical classic of that literature and age; the position of Gray is singular, and demands a word of notice here. He has not the volume or the power of poets who, coming in times more favourable, have attained to an independent criticism of life. But he lived with the great poets, he lived, above all, with the Greeks, through perpetually studying and enjoying them; and he caught their poetic point of view for regarding life, caught their poetic manner. The point of view and the manner are not self-sprung in him, he caught them of others; and he had not the free and abundant use of them. But, whereas Addison and Pope never had the use of them, Gray had the use of them at times. He is the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry, but he is a classic.

And now, after Gray, we are met, as we draw towards the end of the eighteenth century, we are met by the great name of Burns. We enter now on times where the personal estimate of poets begins to be rife, and where the real estimate of them is not reached without difficulty. But in spite of the disturbing pressures of personal partiality, of national partiality, let us try to reach a real estimate of the poetry of Burns.

By his English poetry Burns in general belongs to the eighteenth century, and has little importance for us.

Mark ruffian Violence, distain’d with crimes,

Rousing elate in these degenerate times;

View unsuspecting Innocence a prey,

As guileful Fraud points out the erring way;

While subtle Litigation's pliant tongue

The life-blood equal sucks of Right and Wrong!

Evidently this is not the real Burns, or his name and fame would have disappeared long ago. Nor is Clarinda's love-poet, Sylvander, the real Burns either. But he tells us himself: "These English songs gravel me to death. I have not the command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scotch. I have been at Duncan Gray to dress it in English, but all I can do is desperately stupid." We English turn naturally, in Burns, to the poems in our own language, because we can read them easily; but in those poems we have not the real Burns.

The real Burns is of course in this Scotch poems. Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, a Scotchman's estimate is apt to be personal. A Scotchman is used to this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners; he has a tenderness for it; he meets its poet halfway. In this tender mood he reads pieces like the Holy Fair or Halloween. But this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners is against a poet, not for him, when it is not a partial countryman who reads him; for in itself it is not a beautiful world, and no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world. Burns world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, is often a harsh, a sordid, a repulsive world: even the world of his Cotter's Saturday Night is not a beautiful world. No doubt a poet's criticism of life may have such truth and power that it triumphs over its world and delights us. Burns may triumph over his world, often he does triumph over his world, but let us observe how and where. Burns is the first case we have had where the bias of the personal estimate tends to mislead; let us look at him closely, he can bear it.

Many of his admirers will tell us that we have Burns, convivial, genuine, delightful, here—

Leeze me on drink! it gies us mair

Than either school or college;

It kindles wit, it waukens lair,

It pangs us fou o' knowledge.

Be’t whisky gill or penny wheep

Or only stronger potion,

It never fails, on drinking deep,

To kittle up our notion

By night or day.

There is a great deal of that sort of thing in Burns, and it is unsatisfactory, not because it is bacchanalian poetry, but because it has not that accent of sincerity which bacchanalian poetry, to do it justice, very often has. There is something in it of bravado, something which makes us feel that we have not the man speaking to us with his real voice; something, therefore, poetically unsound.

With still more confidence will his admirers tell us that we have the genuine Burns, the great poet, when his strain asserts the independence, equality, dignity, of men, as in the famous song “For A’ That, and A’ That”—

A prince can mak’ a belted knight,

A marquis, duke, and a’ that;

But an honest man’s aboon his might,

Guid faith he mauna fa’ that!

For a’ that, and a’ that,

Their dignities, and a’ that,

The pith o’ sense, a pride o’ worth,

Are higher rank than a’ that.

Here they find his grand, genuine touches; and still more, when this puissant genius, who so often set morality at defiance, falls moralising—

The sacred lowe o’ weel-placed love

Luxuriantly indulge it;

But never tempt th’ illicit rove,
Tho’ naething should divulge it.
I waive the quantum o’ the sin,
The hazard o’ concealing,
But och! it hardens a’ within,
And petrifies the feeling

Or on a higher strain—

Who made the heart, ’tis He alone
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone;
Each spring, its various bias.
Then at the balance let’s be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What’s done we partly may compute,
But know not what’s resisted.

Or in a better strain yet, a strain, his admirers will say, unsurpassable—

To make a happy fireside clime
To weans and wife,
That’s the true pathos and sublime
Of human life.

There is criticism of life for you, the admirers of Burns will say to us; there is the application of ideas to life! There is, undoubtedly. The doctrine of the last-quoted lines coincides almost exactly with what was the aim and end, Xenophon tells us, of

all the teaching of Socrates. And the application is a powerful one; made by a man of vigorous understanding, and (need I say?) a master of language.

But for supreme poetical success more is required than the powerful application of ideas to life; it must be an application under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Those laws fix as an essential condition, in the poet's treatment of such matters as are here in question, high seriousness;— the high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity. The accent of high seriousness, born of absolute sincerity, is what gives to such verse as

In la sua volontade e nostra pace . . .

to such criticism of life as Dante's, its power. Is this accent felt in the passages which I have been quoting from Burns? Surely not; surely, if our sense is quick, we must perceive that we have not in those passages a voice from the very inmost soul of the genuine Burns; he is not speaking to us from these depths, he is more or less preaching. And the compensation for admiring such passages less, from missing the perfect poetic accent in them, will be that we shall admire more the poetry where that accent is found.

No; Burns, like Chaucer, comes sort of the high seriousness of the great classics, and the virtue of matter and manner which goes with that high seriousness is wanting to his work. At moments he touches it in a profound and passionate melancholy, as in those four immortal lines taken by Byron as a motto for The Bride of Abydos, but which have in them a depth of poetic quality such as resides in no verse of Byron's own—

Had we never loved sae kindly,

Had we never loved sae blindly,

Never met, or never parted,

We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

But a whole poem of that quality Burns cannot make; the rest, in the Farewell to Nancy, is verbiage.

We arrive best at the real estimate of Burns, I think, by conceiving his work as having truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent or the poetic virtue of the highest masters. His genuine criticism of life, when the sheer poet in him speaks, is ironic; it is not—

Thou Power Supreme, whose mighty scheme

These woes of mine fulfil,

Here firm I rest, they must be best

Because they are Thy will!

It is far rather: Whistle owre the lave o't! Yet we may say of him as of Chaucer, that of life and the world, as they come before him, his view is large, free, shrewd, benignant,—truly poetic therefore; and his manner of rendering what he sees is to match. But we must note, at the same time, his great difference from Chaucer. The freedom of Chaucer is heightened, in Burns, by a fiery, reckless energy; the benignity of Chaucer deepens, in Burns, into an over-whelming sense of the pathos of things;—of the pathos of human nature, the pathos, also, of non-human nature. Instead of the fluidity of Chaucer's manner, the manner of Burns has spring, boundless swiftness. Burns is by far the greater force, though he has perhaps less charm. The world of Chaucer is fairer, richer, more significant than that of Burns; but when the largeness and freedom of Burns get full sweep, as in Tam o' Shanter, or still more in that puissant and splendid production, The Jolly Beggars, his world may be what it will, his poetic genius triumphs over it. In the world of The Jolly Beggars there is more than hideousness and squalor, there is bestiality; yet the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goethe's Faust, seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes.

Here, where his largeness and freedom serve him so admirably, and also in those poems and songs where to shrewdness he adds infinite archness and wit, and to benignity infinite pathos, where his manner is flawless, and a perfect poetic whole is the result,—in things like the address to the mouse whose home he had ruined, in things like "Duncan Gray," "Tam Glen," "Whistle and I'll Come To You, My Lad," "Auld Lang Syne" (this list might be made much longer),—here we have the genuine Burns, of whom the real estimate must be high indeed. Not a classic, nor with the

excellent spoudaiotes [high seriousness—ed.] of the great classics, nor with a verse rising to a criticism of life and a virtue like theirs; but a poet with thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of style, giving us a poetry sound to the core. We all of us have a leaning towards the pathetic, and may be inclined perhaps to prize Burns most for his touches of piercing, sometimes almost intolerable, pathos; for verse like—

We twa hae paidl't i' the burn

From mornin' sun till dine;

But seas between us braid hae roar'd

Sin auld lang syne . . .

where he is as lovely as he is sound. But perhaps it is by the perfection of soundness of his lighter and archer masterpieces that he is poetically most wholesome for us. For the votary misled by a personal estimate of Shelley, as so many of us have been, are, and will be,—of that beautiful spirit building his many-coloured haze of words and images.

Pinnacled dim in the intense inane—

no contact can be wholesomer than the contact with Burns at his archest and soundest. Side by side with the

On the brink of the night and the morning

My coursers are wont to respire,

But the Earth has just whispered a warning

That their flight must be swifter than fire . . .

of Prometheus Unbound, how salutary, how very salutary, to place this from Tam Glen—

My minnie does constantly deave me

And bids me beware o' young men;

They flatter, she says, to deceive me;

But wha can think sae o' Tam Glen?

But we enter on burning ground as we approach the poetry of times so near to us—poetry like that of Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth—of which the estimates are so often not only personal, but personal with passion. For my purpose, it is enough to have taken the single case of Burns, the first poet we come to of whose work the estimate formed is evidently apt to be personal, and to have suggested how we may proceed, using the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone, to correct this estimate, as we had previously corrected by the same means the historic estimate where we met with it. A collection like the present, with its succession of celebrated names and celebrated poems, offers a good opportunity to us for resolutely endeavouring to make our estimates of poetry real. I have sought to point out a method which will help us in making them so, and to exhibit it in use so far as to put any one who likes in a way of applying it for himself.

At any rate the end to which the method and the estimate are designed to lead, and from leading to which, if they do lead to it, they get their whole value,—the benefit of being able clearly to feel and deeply to enjoy the best, the truly classic, in poetry,—is an end, let me say it once more at parting, of supreme importance. We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature, and that to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself. But it never will lose currency with the world, in spite of monetary appearances; it never will lose supremacy. Currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,—by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.

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