

AQA (A) Literature: 'Victorian literature'

AQA (B) Literature: 'Aspects of narrative: poetry 1800–1945'

AQA (B) Language and literature: 'Text transformation'

Edexcel Literature: 'Explorations in prose and poetry'

OCR Literature 'Poetry 1800–1945' (from 2012)

The background of the page is a reproduction of the painting 'Madonna with Child and Two Angels' by Fra Lippo Lippi. It depicts the Virgin Mary in profile, looking down at the Christ Child who is being held by two angels. The scene is set in a landscape with a distant city. The painting is framed by a dark border.

'To be or not to be'

Sue Hemming considers existential questions raised in narrative poems by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson

*Madonna with Child
and Two Angels, c.1465*
by Fra Lippo Lippi

Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson were Victorians, living in a world that saw huge changes in an increasingly industrialised society, and confident activity in the colonies. Many Victorians were made uneasy by such changes and longed for stability. The characters in narrative poems by Browning and Tennyson are often faced with the decision of whether to take action, or to preserve the status quo. Some can only contemplate the possibility of action from a position of powerlessness. Some tell their own stories; others are the subject of a narrator's account.

Two of Tennyson's characters are motivated by the force of love: one chooses action, the other is immobilised. Neither says much, but when they speak the words reveal their choices. The Lady of Shalott declares 'I am half sick of shadows', and acts. Mariana bewails the fact that her life is weary, and remains immobilised by her longing for a man who will not come. In both these poems, although the women behave differently in the face of their predicament, Tennyson uses his sharp and sensitive observation of the natural world to evoke their state of mind.

Mariana and The Lady

Mariana, a character suggested by a line in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, is isolated in her moated grange. The waters cut her off, while everything in nature declines and decays about her. Like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, she is surrounded by decay, 'tranced darkness', static 'blacken'd waters', which suggest the way her spirit has shrunk in the grief of loss. Miss Havisham does at least take action, however reprehensible, to promote her revenge. Mariana 'without hope of change' does nothing at all.

In 'The Lady of Shalott', the poet describes a world in which natural processes take their course, as inevitable as the progress of autumn in the celebrated ode 'To Autumn' by Keats. The barley ripens, the reapers harvest it, the river responds in darkening ripples to the breeze that moves over it, and propels the shallop, that lightly 'flits with silken sails', skimming over its surface on its journey. In contrast, the lady is imprisoned in 'four grey walls and four grey towers'. The spondees and repetition slow the line to a near halt so that the inflexibility and stasis of the place is vividly suggested. Within the walls the lady lives a charmed life, never engaging with the real world, but seeing it all as a reversed reflection in the mirror. She records the picture in her tapestry, an artist curiously disengaged from her subject. The sight of young lovers makes her restless and wakes a longing which causes her to burst into action when she sees and hears the brilliant, powerful knight, Sir Lancelot. The staccato verse rhythm creates a sense of her decisive action:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces through the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.

Action, she knows, will bring its fatal consequences, but she takes the risk. She makes a name for herself and sings until she dies, the price of being part of the living, human condition rather than a 'faery'.

Porphyria and the duchess

The ladies in Browning's poems have no such choices to make: they are all dead. Porphyria is strangled by a lover determined to preserve to eternity the moment when he sees adoration for him in her eyes. The duchess, in 'My Last Duchess', is killed by a husband too rigidly proud to bend in order to adapt to her nature. She is turned into a work of art that he can own and control, allowing only a few privileged people to see her. Ironically, the glow on her cheeks is also preserved as a perpetual reminder of the fault he found in her. These poems, because they are dramatic monologues, contain a dramatic tension not present in Tennyson's poems — the latter having a stillness that makes them admirable topics for paintings. For the most part the models stand motionless, and offer little or no sign of tension or conflict.

The tone of the duke's arrogance in 'My Last Duchess' would be easy for any actor to articulate, but there is also a comic irony in the man's stupidity, as he boasts of his murderous inflexibility to the emissary who has come to negotiate the terms of a new marriage. The reader can only speculate on the account of the negotiations that will be given to the count when his messenger returns. There is a dynamic in the story which encourages us to participate. The same is true of 'Porphyria's Lover'. Porphyria, like the duchess, is clearly a woman who engages actively in the world. She makes the fire blaze, she reveals her bare shoulders and loosens her hair provocatively, but her lover can see in such actions only the threat of change when 'passion would prevail'. He, because of social prejudice, is unable to participate in this action, and so he acts in the only way he can imagine, and tries to preserve the moment by murdering the woman he loves. At the end of his account, the reader is more aware than he is of the retribution that is bound to follow as the rest of the world rejects this mad impulse. Again we are encouraged to participate in, rather than observe, events.

Immobility and energy

In 'The Lotos-Eaters', Tennyson presents us with another largely static picture, which represents a state of complete inaction and disengagement on the part of the characters in the story. The Lotos-Eaters are some of the sailors who accompany Odysseus on his travels, who have been washed onto an island where the natives give them lotos fruit to eat. The consequence is a state of drugged immobility which Tennyson again suggests through his description of the natural scene. The far-off mountain tops are 'silent pinnacles of aged snow', the streams like 'Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn'. It is 'A land where all things always seem'd the same'. In this land, drugged by the lotos, the men in chorus question the purpose of action and effort: 'Death is the end of life; ah, why / Should life all labour be? / Let us alone.' Nature follows an inevitable pattern where everything 'ripens in its place, / Ripens, and fades, and falls, and hath no toil'. The poem has a mesmeric quality which draws us into the lethargy of the protagonists. There is no action, no progress. Homer tells us that the men escape, but Tennyson leaves them in their hypnotised state: 'O rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.'

The reverse of this is to be found in 'Ulysses', in which the aging Ulysses (the Roman name for Odysseus), who has returned to his home to rule his kingdom, expresses his dissatisfaction with

an 'aged wife', and 'a savage race / That hoard and sleep and feed and know not me'. He wants to 'drink life to the lees' and 'follow knowledge like a sinking star'. He will not submit to the frustration of old age, and while we may disapprove of his abandonment of his wife and people, and his condescending approval of the ability of his son, Telemachus, to rule in his stead, we have to admire the purposeful energy which will not let him disengage from restless adventure, 'strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'. We become more involved in his decision than that of the entranced lotos-eaters.

Facing death

The dramatic monologue 'Tithonus' gives us a contrasting view of age. Tennyson described it in a letter as 'a pendent' — a partner poem — to 'Ulysses'. Tithonus, in Greek mythology granted eternal life without eternal youth, grows daily to be a 'white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream'. Condemned daily to see the new day dawning and to 'wither slowly' in the arms of the ever youthful Eos, the goddess of the dawn who loves him, he longs only for death, an undistinguished death which allows him to be acted upon by natural forces and be 'earth in earth', buried like any peasant beneath a field that he has worked.

In this he is quite different from Browning's bishop, who gives directions for the building of his tomb ('The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's Church'). We observe in him the anguished impotence of a dying man who wants to influence events after his death, and who gradually realises that he is powerless to do so. It doesn't stop him trying. Motivated by a jealous rivalry rising from his love of a long-dead woman who has mothered his son, the bishop is desperate to secure a place in the church, and a tomb, which will put in the shade that of his dead rival. As his pleading with his son continues, we and he realise that the latter has no intention of wasting a lump of precious lapis lazuli gemstone to ornament his tomb, or to spend the fortune the bishop is leaving him on costly engraved basalt.

Tithonus wants to be removed from the world of action. The bishop wants to retain the power and control that is slipping from him. Again, it seems, the reader observes Tithonus but engages with the bishop in his struggle. His son and nephews do not speak, but their silence is voluble. The bishop, as he slips towards death, recalls his life as a lover of the tall pale woman, and remembers the clerics from his religious life. Tithonus merely recalls the vague 'dark world where I was born'. It would take a film with flashbacks to translate the experience of reading Browning's poems, and a painter to realise Tennyson's.

Painting life

Browning, in his dramatic monologues, gives us two painters: Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi. Both are much exercised about their talents. The latter emerges as a man vitally engaged with the world and his art. The Lady of Shalott sits in her bower weaving pictures based on shadowy reflections of the world, but which never engage with it. This is a method that would have met the approval of Lippo's clerical masters, who would have him paint 'no more of body than shows soul'. Lippo renounced the world of 'Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house' when he was eight years old and in need of food and shelter. The common monks admire his skill in painting the realities of the world, but his masters deplore what they see as a lack of spirituality.

Once more, the reader is drawn into the argument, though Browning gives Lippo all the best lines. As he paints, we are told the story of a murderer seeking sanctuary in the church, the little children in awe of the violent man, the girl who comes to help him. There is a world of life in his painting, but his seniors do not want to see the world of 'perishable clay': 'Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.' Were their own intentions less self-interested and concerned with competing for decoration with their rivals the Camaldolese and preaching friars, we might sympathise more with them. The painter's belief that

If you get simple beauty and nought else,
You get about the best thing God invents;
That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.

is very winning. We follow his arguments and engage with his conflicts. His interest in ordinary faces, his imaginative grasp of possibilities, his impatience to get started with a bit of chalk or scrap of charcoal speak of abundant life.

Both poets paint vividly suggestive backgrounds which suggest the mood and tone of the characters. The lonely house where Mariana mourns, the sleepy landscape of 'The Lotos-Eaters' where the men lounge at their ease, the claustrophobia of the room where the bishop lies dying, or the dark alley where Fra Lippo Lippi encounters the watch with their torches, all contribute to the effectiveness of the narratives.

Tennyson may be the more harmonious, Browning rougher and more colloquial, but Browning's own imaginative engagement with his historical or fictitious characters draws us into his stories and prevents any sense of detached alienation from the world. Tennyson's narrative method, by contrast, tends to lull us into a kind of sympathetic torpor or to pity from a distance characters condemned to a life of disengagement.

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- Butler, C. (2001) 'Tennyson's telling images', Vol. 12, No. 1
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