Lecture 5: The Industrial Revolution and Victorian Poetry: Tennyson and Browning

Duration: 3hours

Introduction

This lecture explores how Victorian poetry responds to the social and psychological upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Through close readings of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, the lecture examines how poets articulated ideals of perseverance, power, and moral complexity. The lecture considers how industrial modernity shaped new forms of poetic expression that reflected both the aspirations and anxieties of the Victorian age.

Part I. Industrial Modernity and the Emergence of the Victorian Self

5.1 Historical and Cultural Context

The Industrial Revolution (circa 1750–1850) was a transformative epoch in British history, marking the transition from agrarian economies to industrial capitalism. Innovations in textile manufacturing, steam power, and mechanized production catalyzed rapid urbanization and created new working-class and middle-class identities. These socioeconomic shifts were accompanied by unprecedented challenges: overcrowded cities, exploitative labor conditions, and the erosion of traditional social bonds.

For Victorian writers, these material changes posed profound questions about human agency, morality, and subjectivity. Literature, especially poetry, emerged as a site of both crisis and critique, reflecting anxieties about progress, identity, and the dehumanizing aspects of modernity.

5.2 Key Literary Consequences of Industrialism

- Moral and religious uncertainty (loss of spiritual authority in an industrial world).
- Tensions between individualism and collectivism (especially in the middle class).
- Psychological fragmentation and alienation, later theorized in modernist and psychoanalytic frameworks.

As such, poetry became not merely a vehicle for aesthetic expression but also a mode of cultural negotiation, grappling with the promises and discontents of industrial modernity.

Part II. Tennyson's *"Ulysses"* and the Victorian Ideal of Perseverance

5.3 Classical Myth and Victorian Anxiety

Browning's innovation lies in the development of the dramatic monologue, a poetic form that reveals character through indirect self-disclosure. Unlike Tennyson's mythic figures, Browning's speakers are deeply human, often morally ambiguous, and psychologically layered.

This form allows for:

- A single, often unreliable speaker.
- An implied audience (or listener).
- A revelation of inner conflict or obsession.

5.4 Key Themes and Passages *My Last Duchess* (1842)

5.4.1 Control and Patriarchy

"I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." (Browning 4)

This chilling admission from the Duke reflects the commodification and control of women in patriarchal Victorian society. The Duke's refined rhetoric masks an authoritarian, perhaps murderous, disposition.

5.4.2 Aesthetic Possession

The Duke's obsession with the painting reflects a desire to objectify and contain female vitality. The artwork becomes a symbolic site of dominance: echoing how Victorian gender ideology idealized passive femininity. Myth, History, and Modern Ideology

Tennyson's *Ulysses* (1833, pub. 1842) draws upon the classical figure of Odysseus to explore existential themes central to the Victorian ethos. The poem becomes a vehicle for articulating heroic persistence in the face of disillusionment, a key concern in an age that increasingly questioned the certainties of religion and tradition.

5.4.3 Restlessness and the Myth of Progress

“I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees.” (Tennyson 603)

This opening reflects the psychological disquiet of modern man: Ulysses, emblematic of the imperial and scientific adventurer, cannot be content with domestic stasis. His journey becomes a metaphor for the Victorian imperative to strive and achieve, echoing the capitalist and imperial ideologies of continual expansion and conquest.

5.4.4 Heroism, Age, and Individual Will

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” (Tennyson 605)

This famous concluding line encapsulates the ideology of perseverance. Yet the poem's speaker is not a triumphant hero but an aging man confronting decline and death. Tennyson therefore constructs a melancholic heroism, where individual will resists entropy; mirroring Victorian anxieties about mortality, legacy, and purposelessness.

5.4.5 Ambiguity and Irony

Although the poem is often interpreted as affirming Victorian values, it also opens itself to ironic readings. Ulysses’ speech may reflect hubris, escapism, or dissatisfaction, suggesting the existential cost of relentless ambition. Literary critics such as Herbert Tucker and Isobel Armstrong have emphasized the poem’s dialectical structure, in which stoic resolve masks deeper ontological instability.

Part III. Robert Browning’s Dramatic Monologues: Voice, Power, and the Fractured Self

5.5 Formal Innovation: The Dramatic Monologue

A dramatic monologue is a poetic form in which a single speaker addresses a silent or implied audience at a critical moment, revealing not only their thoughts but also key aspects of their character, often unintentionally. The form blends dramatic and lyric elements, creating a unique space for psychological exploration and social critique.

5.5.1 Key Features

1. Single Speaker: The poem is delivered entirely in the voice of one character, distinct from the poet.

2. Implied Audience: The speaker addresses another character whose presence is felt but who never speaks.
3. Revealing Character: The speaker often reveals more than they intend; especially flaws, contradictions, or moral ambiguities; through what they say and how they say it.
4. Dramatic Context: The monologue occurs at a moment of high tension or significance, giving the speech a dramatic immediacy.
5. Irony: A central feature is dramatic irony, where the reader discerns truths that the speaker either conceals or is unaware of.

5.5.2 Literary Significance

The dramatic monologue allows poets to explore subjectivity, power, and psychological complexity, often revealing the social and ideological structures that shape individual consciousness.

5.5.3 Formal Innovation: The Dramatic Monologue

Robert Browning's development of the dramatic monologue marked a significant departure from lyric subjectivity. The form typically features:

- A single speaker in a psychologically revealing situation.
- An implied audience whose responses are inferred but never voiced.
- A disjunction between what the speaker intends to reveal and what is actually exposed.

This mode invites the reader into an interpretive role, revealing the self as fractured, contradictory, and performative. The dramatic monologue anticipates later developments in modernist psychology and post-structuralist subjectivity.

5.6 *My Last Duchess* (1842): Aesthetic Control and Gendered Violence

"I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." (Browning 206)

This line chillingly implies the murder of the Duchess, revealing the Duke's pathological need for dominance and aesthetic control. The poem becomes a case study in patriarchal authority, where women are reduced to possessions to be observed, judged, and ultimately silenced.

5.6.1 Art as Objectification

The Duke's obsession with the Duchess's portrait demonstrates a desire to objectify and control female subjectivity. The poem critiques Victorian norms that idolized female purity while denying women autonomy.

5.6.2 Ambiguity and Irony

The Duke's rhetorical polish contrasts with the moral horror of his actions, showcasing Browning's use of dramatic irony to expose the violence underlying Victorian propriety. Scholars such as Angela Leighton have explored how Browning's speakers reveal the ideological contradictions of gender, class, and culture.

5.7 "Porphyria's Lover" (1836): Desire, Transgression, and Moral Narcissism

"That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good…" (Browning 173)

This monologue explores the psychology of possessive love, culminating in a murder the speaker justifies as preserving a perfect moment. The act is framed as a perverse sacrament: suggesting the theological inversion of Victorian sexual morality.

5.7.1 Narrative Unreliability

The calm, rational tone of the speaker juxtaposed with the violence of the act invites critical attention to the unreliable narrator and the instability of moral judgment.

5.7.2 The Gothic and the Domestic

Like Tennyson, Browning reworks Romantic and Gothic traditions; but in *Porphyria's Lover*, the Gothic is domesticated, suggesting that violence and obsession lurk within the heart of respectable society.

5.7.3 Gendered Psychosis

The poem highlights Victorian fears of female sexual agency. Porphyria is active and autonomous: qualities the speaker eliminates through violence. The murder reveals not only his pathology but the cultural anxieties about shifting gender norms.

Part IV. Comparative Reflections: Victorian Poetry and the Self in Crisis

5.8 Tensions and Paradoxes

Together, Tennyson and Browning illustrate the multifaceted role of poetry in the Victorian period. Their works respond to the contradictions of an age defined by:

- Faith in progress vs. fear of decline.
- Individual will vs. societal constraints.
- Moral certainty vs. psychological ambiguity.

Where Tennyson's *Ulysses* articulates an aspirational, even stoic model of heroism, Browning's dramatic monologues present characters consumed by ego, desire, and violence, revealing the unconscious forces shaping Victorian subjectivity.

5.9 Theoretical Connections

- **New Historicist** critics (e.g., Jerome McGann) have argued that Victorian poetry must be read in light of the ideological structures of its time, particularly imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy.
- **Psychoanalytic theory** (Freud, Lacan) illuminates the internal conflicts in Browning's monologues, where speech acts betray unconscious drives.
- **Feminist criticism** (e.g., Elaine Showalter) reads these texts as cultural symptoms of Victorian gender anxiety.

Conclusion

This lecture has examined how Tennyson and Browning use poetic form and voice to navigate the personal and societal crises generated by the Industrial Revolution. Tennyson idealizes endurance in a world losing metaphysical certainty; Browning dissects the masks of Victorian respectability to expose the self's deeper conflicts. Both poets demonstrate that in the age of machinery and moral complexity, the poetic voice becomes a site of both resistance and revelation.

In our next lecture, we will turn from the introspective and often symbolic landscapes of Victorian poetry to the socially grounded worlds of Victorian prose fiction. As the 19th century progressed, novelists like Charles Dickens and George Eliot employed the realist mode to confront the concrete realities of industrial society: poverty, class inequality, and moral hypocrisy. We will explore how realism functioned not merely as a stylistic choice but as a tool for ethical engagement and social critique. Through close readings of *Hard Times* and *Middlemarch*, we will examine how these authors used narrative perspective, character psychology, and social detail to challenge complacency and imagine forms of communal responsibility.

5.10 Evaluation Task

Victorian poetry often reflects the tensions between personal ambition and social responsibility, inner desire and public duty, as shaped by the profound changes of the Industrial Revolution.

Write a short essay (800–1000 words) that analyzes how either Tennyson's *Ulysses* or one of Browning's dramatic monologues (e.g., *My Last Duchess* or *Porphyria's Lover*) engages with these tensions.

In your essay, you should:

- Provide close textual analysis of key passages.
- Explore how form (e.g., dramatic monologue, blank verse) contributes to meaning.
- Situate the poem within its historical and cultural context.
- Reflect on how the poem critiques or upholds Victorian ideals such as duty, perseverance, individualism, or gender norms.

5.11 Works Cited

- Browning, Robert. *The Poems of Robert Browning*. Edited by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, Penguin Classics, 1981.
- Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

- McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton UP, 1999.
- Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *The Major Works*. Edited by Adam Roberts, Oxford UP, 2009.
- Tucker, Herbert. *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*. Harvard UP, 1988.