

1-Victorian Age
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Modernist Poetry
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Victorian Age

The important characteristics of Victorian poetry are such as conflict between religion and science, social reforms, use of sensory elements, pessimism, interest in medieval fables & legends, realism, sentimentality and dramatic monologue.

Modernism

The word 'modern' and even 'modernism' are very vague terms whose precise meanings are hard to pin down. In literary criticism, the 'trend' called modernism is associated with several features seen in the literature of the early twentieth century, after the First World War, and especially after the publication of Eliot's "The Waste Land" in 1922, until the beginning of another equally versatile movement called post-modernism.

In general, modernist literature is characterized by the radical break with the traditions of literary subjects, forms, concepts and styles. In poetry, we can discuss the modernist elements in terms of four major subheadings: modern or new experiments in form and style, new themes and word-games, new modes of expression, and complex and open-ended nature of their themes and meaning.

The most striking element of modernist poetry is the invention and experimentation of new modes of expression. Modernism includes the many ‘-isms’ and therefore many different ways to express ideas and feelings. The different ways of expressing include the imagist way of presenting just concrete images for the readers to understand the idea and experience the feelings themselves; the symbolist way of presenting things in terms of deeply significant symbols of ideas and feelings for readers to interpret them intellectually; the realist way of truly reflecting the reality of the world; the naturalist way of going to the extreme of realism by showing the private, psychological, fantastic and the neurotic; the impressionistic way of presenting unrefined first impression of everything by the observer; the expressionistic way of probing deep into one’s own psyche and trying to express the hidden and deepest feelings, as in confessional poems; the surrealist way of imposing the mood of madness, intoxication and neurosis to excite the illogical ‘language’ of the unconscious; to name a few. Modernism includes all such experimentations in the technique of expression.

Another important element of modernist poetry is the use of new and wide range of subjects, themes and issues. Traditional poetry had to be limited to subjects of universal significance, general human appeal, and so on, even when the poems were romantically personal on their surface. But in modernist poetry, we read poems about just any topic and theme. We find poems about nature as well as eating plums, myth as well as satire of an old Christian woman, single characters as well as poor people, meaning of art as well as erotic memories of a woman, spiritual crisis as well as guilt of abortion, feminist movement as well as neurotic despise of a father, allegory of life-journey as well as the irony of death, and so on.

Besides being written on a large range of subjects and themes, modernist poems tend to be multiple in themes. It means that some single poems are about many things at the same time. For instance, Dylan Thomas’s poem “This Bread I Break” is at the same time about nature, about spirituality, and also about art. The poem “Jellyfish” is also

about the fish itself, the nature of human emotions and desires, the nature of women, as well as poetic expression. The poet never fully says, as in traditional poems, what the one and precise meaning of the poem is. That is why the reader has to work with many 'possible' themes and meanings in the same poem. The best one can expect is to try and find logical support for the theme or themes that he 'finds' in the poem. So, in modernist poetry, the meaning of a poem is the 'differing' interpretation of different readers. There can be no single and fixed meaning of any poem.

Also, modernist poets have violated all the known conventions and established rules of the past. In the form, style, stanza, rhythm and such other technical devices of poetry, old traditions have been demolished and new experiments are tested. Cummings' poems are good examples. There have been blank verse poems, pictorial poems, remixed rhythms, and so on. The old metrical systems, rhyme-schemes, and traditional symbols and metaphors are no longer dominating. Each poet makes his own rules. The multiplicity of styles is the characteristic of modernist poetry.

1- Thomas Hardy

It is frequently said of Thomas Hardy that he turned to the writing of poetry as a result of his anger and disappointment at the shortsighted and discouraging critical response to his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, which appeared in 1895. The truth of the matter appears to be that he had always preferred writing poetry to writing novels, and that he had written poetry before he presented himself to the reading public as a novelist and short story writer. He returned to his first love and decided to publish his poems only after he had established for himself a firm reputation as a novelist. Some of the verses which he included in his first volume of poems, *Wessex Poems*, had been composed more than thirty years before. He was then fifty-eight years old, and for the next thirty years he devoted himself exclusively to writing or rewriting his poems until his death in 1928.

His *Collected Poems*, retains almost a thousand poems which had appeared in eight preceding volumes of verse. This number testifies to his affection for and dedication to poetry, but it is too large an output to allow him to maintain consistent excellence. A few, relative to the large total, must be deemed outright failures, deficient either because of metrical inconsistency or inappropriateness, eccentric, excessive inversion, awkward diction, or an imagery and idea of embarrassing sentimentality. At the other end of the spectrum of his achievement, however, there are a few poems, again relatively speaking, which are extremely successful and claim the right to a permanent place in the ideal anthology of great and memorable poems in the English language. These poems, together with the large number which are at least interesting and competent, constitute a respectable body of work worthy of attention and high regard.

As might be expected, Hardy's poetry complements and intensifies the unhappy vision of life depicted in most of his novels. Hardy protested in an introductory note to his final volume of poems, *Winter Words*, that he had not attempted to present a "harmonious philosophy" in that book or in any of his earlier poetic work. Despite these protestations, however, there can be no question that an easily discernible, special "Hardyesque" vision of life emerges from his poetry as well as from his prose. Cast in the form of imaginative art, it may not have the rigidity or discipline of what we call philosophy, but it offers, nevertheless, a very consistent, even relentless view of life as a series of adventures in frustration and defeat. Man as an individual, man as a creature of society and the cosmos, is simply acting out the whims and dictates of an inexorable life force, a blind, indifferent, neutral Immanent Will. Though the Will (variously called Fate, Chance, Hap, Destiny, and Necessity) is ostensibly neutral about man's fate, the general reality is that man usually becomes "time's laughstock," his efforts to achieve love and dignity and significance simply create "satires of circumstance." These concepts emerge so clearly and triumphantly from his novels and poems because, while they may be few and schematic,

they were for him matters of fundamental, abiding concern, and he used them constantly as the basis and the framework of his vision.

The themes and the vision which emerge from the poetry is almost wholly clouded and pessimistic. This was the way Hardy himself summed up the consensus of many reviews of his poetical work ("Apology," *Late Lyrics and Earlier*) a judgment which he deemed "odd." But the real oddity is that he should think this judgment...

An August Midnight

Thomas Hardy

I

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,
And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:
On this scene enter—winged, horned, and spined—
A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;
While 'mid my page there idly stands
A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands...

II

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
At this point of time, at this point in space.
—My guests besmear my new-penned line,
Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.
"God's humblest, they!" I muse. Yet why?
They know Earth-secrets that know not I.

Thomas Hardy was interested in 'natural history' and the reconsideration of the relationship established between men and nature. Hence, this can be read in '*An August Midnight*.' The poem presents the meeting of a man with five insects. However, the man and the insects are described as equals, generating empathy with these small creatures.

'An August Midnight' has two stanzas with six lines each. The poem presents two dissimilar rhyme schemes: the first stanza has an ABABC rhyme scheme and the second stanza has an AABBCC rhyme scheme. Something similar occurs within the stanzas with the meter. For example, the first line of the first stanza has iambic pentameter, whereas the second line has anapaests. With this mixture of rhyme and meter, Hardy creates a particular and interesting rhythm that consists of alteration rather than stability. This sporadic rhythm can be read as the movement of insects.

The main theme in '*An August Midnight*' is the meaning and purpose in life. A sense of the past is created, by using detailed descriptions, in order to portray a vivid memory with a message. The lyrical voice is aware of his/her surroundings and conveys an observational view over the narrated events.

2- A. E. *Housman*

A.E. Housman is one of the most important poets of the 19th and 20th centuries. He is best known for his simple style, and memorable and moving images that made his work popular during his lifetime. 'To an Athlete Dying Young' by A. E. Housman describes the death of a youthful man who is celebrated for his glorious passing and remembered for his loss, rather than his athletic achievements. In this poem, the speaker begins by recalling a young athlete who won a small-town race. He was celebrated by everyone around him. Now, in the present, the athlete is being celebrated in a very different way. He's died and is being carried back home. He died gloriously and the speaker seems to praise him for it. The speaker follows this up by providing the reader with a series of dark and thoughtful images that allude to the loss the town has suffered and the future the young man will never get to have. He also brings in images of the afterlife and the crown the young man will be wearing there.

There are several important themes to take note of in this poem. These include youth, glory, death, and fear. These are all linked together through the life and death of this young man and the speaker's contemplation of him. There is an implicit fear of death in the speaker's depiction of the young man's early death. He dwells on what has been lost and will now never be regained. There is a good example in the second stanza when the poet's speaker spends time thinking about the period between life and death and the threshold through which the townspeople carry the young man. This liminal space is holding an important place in the speaker's mind. There is a brief allusion in the line "Smart lad, to slip betimes away" to the possibility that the young man killed himself. Therefore meeting death on his own terms. There is also a focus on the man's age and how athletic he was throughout the poem. These things generally do not go together with death and are therefore juxtaposed to bring attention to one another. The speaker describes youth as a period of time that goes by much too quickly, death comes whether one is ready for it or not.

Structure

‘To an Athlete Dying Young’ by A. E. Housman is an elegiac poem that is made up of seven, four-line stanzas. These are known as quatrains. The quatrains follow a simple rhyme scheme of AABB CCDD and so on, changing end sounds from stanza to stanza. These seven stanzas can be further separated into three sections. The first contains a memory of the past, the second stanza all the way through the sixth brings the reader to the athlete’s death and funeral. These stanzas also contain a discussion about youth being the right time for one to die. The final stanza concludes the poem with thoughts about the future and what might be in store for the athlete in the afterlife.

Literary Devices

Housman makes use of several literary devices in ‘To an Athlete Dying Young’. These include but are not limited to alliteration, enjambment, and apostrophe. Apostrophe is an arrangement of words addressing someone, something, or creature, that does not exist, or is not present, in the poem’s immediate setting. The exclamation, “Oh,” is often used at the beginning of the phrase. The person is spoken to as though they can hear and understand the speaker’s words. In this case, the speaker is talking to the athlete who has died. This is quite a common technique in elegies. There is a good example of sibilance in these lines with the words “shady“ and “shut“ as well as “silence sounds” and “stopped”.

To an Athlete Dying Young’

To an Athlete Dying Young

The time you won your town the race

We chaired you through the market-place;

Man and boy stood cheering by,

And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.