



# Transition Booklet

## English Literature

### A Level

# Unseen Poetry

TRANSITION WORK : Please read the following poems and annotate any interesting uses of poetic language, poetic form and significant structural choices made by the poet. In other words, analyse the texts as poetry pieces.

We will explore some of these poems when you start your A' Level course.

## "Poem"

And if it snowed and snow covered the drive  
he took a spade and tossed it to one side.  
And always tucked his daughter up at night  
And slipped her the one time that she lied.  
And every week he tipped up half his wage.  
And what he didn't spend each week he saved.  
And praised his wife for every meal she made.  
And once, for laughing, punched her in the face.

And for his mum he hired a private nurse.  
And every Sunday taxied her to church.  
And he blubbed when she went from bad to worse.  
And twice he lifted ten quid from her purse.

Here's how they rated him when they looked back:  
sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that.

Simon Armitage

## Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

William Shakespeare

“Havisham”

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then  
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it  
so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,  
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days  
in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall; the dress  
yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;  
the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this

to me? Puce curses that are sounds not words.  
Some nights better, the lost body over me,  
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear  
then down till I suddenly bite awake. Love's

hate behind a white veil; a red balloon bursting  
in my face. Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.  
Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.  
Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.

Carol Ann Duffy

## Unseen Prose

1880-1910 context ( A03 )

TRANSITION WORK: read, annotate and make notes on the following articles ( all from the British Library website ). This will inform the unseen prose unit, where you will need to analyse extracts written during this time period, informed by your contextual knowledge.

### Aestheticism and decadence Article by: [Carolyn Burdett](#)

‘Art for art’s sake’? Aestheticism and decadence shocked the Victorian establishment by challenging traditional values, foregrounding sensuality and promoting artistic, sexual and political experimentation. Dr Carolyn Burdett explores the key features of this unconventional artistic period.

The National Philatelic Collection, held at the British Library, contains more than 8 million items, and includes postage stamps, railway letter stamps, telegraph stamps, airmails, metal dies and plates and philatelic literature. It has over 50 important collections, including the original Tapling bequest, the first to be gifted to the British Museum in 1891. Now on display at the British Library,

it is believed that the Tapling Collection is the only major 19th-century philatelic collection that remains intact. The selection below includes some of the rarest philatelic examples. They are often unique because of printing errors that make them truly one of a kind.

Although references to the 'aesthetic movement' are commonplace, there was no unified or organised movement as such. Critics still disagree about when aestheticism began and who should be included under its label. Some associate the movement with the Pre-Raphaelites, who were active from the mid-19th century. Their emphasis on sensual beauty and on strong connections between visual and verbal forms was certainly highly influential. Perhaps the most important inaugurating phase of aestheticism, however, occurred during the late 1860s and early 1870s.

## **Swinburne and Pater**

The poet Charles Algernon Swinburne is a crucial figure of this period. Strongly influenced by the French writers, Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier, Swinburne agreed with them that poetry had nothing to do with didacticism (the teaching of moral lessons). He also insisted that beautiful poetic form and what he deemed 'perfect workmanship' made any subject admirable. Like Baudelaire, he put this argument into practice by combining lyrical language and complex metrical rhythms with subject matter commonly seen as antithetic to aesthetically pleasing poetry. Themes of perverse sexuality or cruelty and violence shockingly dismantled what many Victorians felt were necessary or even natural lines drawn between aesthetic beauty and repellent or 'ugly' morality. Mainstream Victorian culture saw art and literature as a means of self-improvement or a spur to good works. Swinburne's poetry instead presented readers with moral ambiguity and provided them no comfortable psychological position.

Also influenced by French ideas was the critic Walter Pater. His 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is widely regarded as the manifesto of aestheticism. In a period when the Middle Ages were celebrated, Pater instead advocated Renaissance culture. He praised the renaissance artists' individualism and also their acknowledgement of hidden and mysterious motives and desires. But his most provocative and influential statements came in the book's famous 'Conclusion'. Flying in the face of Victorian notions of both objective reality and eternal truths, Pater described a world of fleeting impressions. All the individual has is the subjective experience provided by intense sensory engagement with lovely things. Pater advises that the wisest people will seek to concentrate all their energies and efforts on the pleasure of these moments. For some, this seemed a recipe for self-indulgence through the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. For others, though, it was a breathtakingly radical call to cast off the heavy weight of Victorian moralism and Christian doctrine in the name of art.

## **Aesthetic style**

Poetry was central to aestheticism, from the work of Pre-Raphaelites (especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti), Swinburne and William Morris, through to the flourishing of poetic voices in the final decades of the 19th century. After being lost to sight for much of the 20th century, recent literary scholarship has retrieved many important women poets of this period, including Alice Meynell and Amy Levy. Equally important, though, were the prose forms associated with aestheticism – and especially the essay of art appreciation. Important essayists include Pater, [Oscar Wilde](#), Arthur Symonds and Vernon Lee (the name adopted by Violet Paget).

Their writing was sometimes condemned as 'purple prose' (i.e. writing that's overly elaborate and ornate), because it borrowed from the stylistic techniques of imaginative writing and was often densely allusive and metaphoric. Wilde's writing, especially, also threw off Victorian ideas about earnest and serious argument, instead relishing playfulness and paradox.

Aesthetes played with traditional oppositions or even hierarchies between art and life. Wilde teased his readers with the claim that life imitates art rather than the other way round. His point was a serious one: we notice London fogs, he argued, because art and literature has taught us to do so. Wilde, among others, 'performed' these maxims. He presented himself as the impeccably dressed and mannered dandy figure whose life was a work of art.

For others, similar notions propelled an interest in literature as a material thing of beauty. Intricately crafted books were produced by William Morris's Kelmscott Press, which opened in 1891, dedicated to printing and binding using traditional methods. In part, Morris was striving to preserve traditional skills against the ever-increasing cheap mass production of reading matter. In so doing, he was making an overtly political gesture. Morris was a socialist and rejected capitalist methods of producing goods which, he believed, exploited workers and reduced them to parts in machine-like factory processes. He rejected consumer culture as deadening to the human spirit. However, his own work – including textile and other crafts as well as books – quickly became associated with desirable consumer objects. Aestheticism has often been accused of complicity with the consumer culture it overtly rejected.

### **Aesthetics and politics**

Morris was one among a number of important proponents of aestheticism who saw art as inseparable from political ideals. He drew from the work of the great Victorian critic, John Ruskin, to argue that capitalism enslaves workers, and advocated instead a system in which work is creative as well as productive. In creativity, proper human freedom resides. Oscar Wilde was also a supporter of socialist politics, as was the writer Edward Carpenter. Carpenter was a socialist poet and a gay activist. He wrote as a prophet of a new age of fellowship based on socialist principles and a life lived with simple tastes and commitments to art and learning.

### **Satire and critique**

This mixture of radical politics, sexual dissidence and privileging of the individual's experience of beauty was highly alarming to more conventional Victorians. In the press, aestheticism was roundly criticised. It was also the butt of inventive satire. The magazine *Punch* was a leading force in this respect. *Punch* attacked figures like Swinburne, the artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, creating types like 'the fleshy poet'. Favourite aesthete caricatures included the poet Jellaby Postlethwaite, who had affinities with Wilde and was sometimes drawn to look like Whistler. His artist friend, Maudie, was modelled on Swinburne. In one famous cartoon, Postlethwaite goes to lunch and sits contemplating a lily, preferring to feast his senses on its beauty rather than ordering food.<sup>[1]</sup> These figures were invented and drawn by the satiric artist George du Maurier, who also has Postlethwaite explaining that he never bathes as 'I always see myself so dreadfully *foreshortened* in the water, you know.' Brilliant satire, such as Du Maurier's, helped popularise – albeit in distorted form – what were often rarefied poems, essays and arguments.

## Decadence

By the 1890s, another term had become associated with this focus on 'art for art's sake'. It has origins in common with aestheticism and the two terms often overlap and were sometimes used interchangeably. 'Decadence' was initially used to describe writers of the mid-19th century in France, especially Baudelaire and Gautier. By the century's end, decadence was in use as an aesthetic term across Europe. The word literally means a process of 'falling away' or decline. In relation to art and literature, it signalled a set of interlinked qualities. These included the notion of intense refinement; the valuing of artificiality over nature; a position of *ennui* or boredom rather than of moral earnestness or the valuing of hard work; an interest in perversity and paradox, and in transgressive modes of sexuality. One of the most important explicators of decadence was the poet Arthur Symons, whose essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), described decadence as 'a new and beautiful and interesting disease'. For Symons – as well as for others who were critical rather than intrigued and entranced – decadence was the literature of a modern society grown over-luxurious and sophisticated.

In France, decadence became associated with a type of poetry exemplified by the writing of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, and also with the fiction of Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans's most notorious work, *À Rebours* – published in 1884, it was translated as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain* – is widely believed to be the notorious 'poisonous' book that fascinates Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel, [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#). Huysmans's novel caused a shocked outcry when it appeared. Focused almost exclusively on the inner life of its ailing aristocrat protagonist, Des Esseintes, the novel charts his obsessive sensual experiments. Dorian Gray's passion for studying and collecting jewels or perfumes or ecclesiastical vestments, and surrounding himself with exotic and sensual objects, mirrors Des Esseintes's pursuit of ever more refined sensory experiences.

In England, it was Wilde himself who was identified as central to the English decadent tradition, along with Arthur Symons and the poet, Ernest Dowson. Wilde was important because of his high visibility in fashionable London clubs and theatres. He dressed flamboyantly, sparking fashions that others copied. He was a brilliant self-publicist, and quipped that his life was a work of art. Other important poets include Lionel Johnson and John Davidson. Although often under-recognised until very recently, women also contributed to decadent style. The most important voice was 'Michael Field', the name under which two women, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, jointly wrote. The Rhymers' Club, set up by poets W B Yeats and Ernest Rhys in 1890s, also explicitly rejected literary naturalism and embraced experimental modes of writing. 'Symbolist' poetry was closely aligned with aesthetic and decadent styles: all of them aimed to explore the beauty of strange, subjective and unique moments.

### ***The Yellow Book***

One of the most notorious exponents of what was labelled decadence was not a writer, however, but an artist. Aubrey Beardsley's distinctive, witty and often erotic illustrations are immediately recognisable, with their innovative shapes and lines and bold use of black and white space. Beardsley provided the cover illustrations for perhaps the most famous and notorious of decadent publications, *The Yellow Book*. This was a periodical, featuring essays, poems, fiction and illustrations. Launched in 1894, it ran until 1897. Yellow and green – colours associated with bruising and decay – were associated with decadent style, and *The Yellow Book* contributed to

their startling new appeal. Large format, and beautifully produced, the volumes drew attention to their appeal as objects, like the works from Morris's Kelmscott press. Again, decadence was part of a culture of commercialism as well as of creativity.

### **Degeneration and the Wilde trial**

Decadence alarmed those who valued 'traditional' norms and values. It seemed to signify a society and culture threatened to its core with decline and decay. By the 1890s, decadence was associated with degeneration, an association popularised by the sensationalist writing of Max Nordau, who condemned writers like Wilde in his 1895 book, *Degeneration*. But that same year also saw the event that did as much as anything to halt the inventive flourishing of decadence. Oscar Wilde, at the height of his fame as the most popular playwright of the moment, was put on trial. He was charged with gross indecency under recently passed legislation that allowed homosexual acts to be punishable under the law. The trial was an extraordinary media event and its outcome was Wilde's committal to two years hard labour.

Decadence was intimately associated with dissident sexual desires. Wilde's fate left in its wake fear and anxiety for those associated with it. Many felt it wise to distance themselves from its dangerous label. Nevertheless, the experimentalism, creative energy and commitment to thinking against the grain that characterised aestheticism and decadence did much to prepare the ground for the Modernist period, which was beginning to gather its own distinctive powers after the turn of the century.

### **Footnotes**

[1] George Du Maurier, 'An Aesthetic Midday Meal'. Cartoon from *Punch* (17 July 1880).

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## Daughters of decadence: the New Woman in the Victorian fin de siècle by: [Greg Buzwell](#)

Free-spirited and independent, educated and uninterested in marriage and children, the figure of the New Woman threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood. Greg Buzwell explores the place of the New Woman - by turns comical, dangerous and inspirational - in journalism and in fiction by writers such as Thomas Hardy, George Gissing and Sarah Grand.

The Victorian *fin de siècle* was an age of tremendous change. Art, politics, science and society were revolutionised by the emergence of new theories and challenges to tradition. Arguably the most radical and far-reaching change of all concerned the role of women, and the increasing number of opportunities becoming available to them in a male-dominated world. With educational and employment prospects for women improving, marriage followed by motherhood was no longer seen as the inevitable route towards securing a level of financial security.

A new air of sexual freedom also emerged in the *fin de siècle*. Although still a controversial subject, writers such as [Thomas Hardy](#) and George Moore addressed sexual desire head on in novels such as [Jude the Obscure](#) (1895) and *Esther Waters* (1894). The *fin de siècle* emphasis on the importance of pursuing new sensations also, inevitably, led to sex and sexuality playing an increasingly important part in the search for new experiences. It is no coincidence that the New Woman and the dandy were fashionable at the same time. Just as the New Woman undermined the traditional view of the feminine, so the dandy threatened the accepted view of masculinity. Such radical changes in behaviour caused outrage, with the social critic Max Nordau denouncing the abandonment of tradition and the feminisation of men and the increasingly mannish nature of women. This he heralded as 'The Dusk of Nations' – the title he gave to the first chapter of his influential book *Degeneration* (1892). Meanwhile *Punch* magazine made the New Woman a figure of fun, presenting her as an embittered, over-educated spinster perpetually stuck on the shelf.<sup>[1]</sup>

Arguments for and against the New Woman did not always follow obvious lines. Many men found the idea of women making their own way in the world both sensible and desirable, while many women – the novelist Mary Augusta Ward, who wrote under her married name Mrs Humphry Ward, being a notable example – were passionately against female emancipation and the threat it posed to the *status quo* of marriage and motherhood. Either way, whether viewed as a free-spirited, independent, bicycling, intelligent career-minded ideal or as a sexually degenerate, abnormal, mannish, chain-smoking, child-hating bore, the New Woman was here to stay and, admired or despised, she remained a force for change throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.

### **Origins of the term**

The origins of the term 'New Woman' are disputed, but it appears to have entered the language in 1894 when it was used in a pair of articles written by the novelists Sarah Grand (born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke) and 'Ouida' (the pseudonym of Maria Louise Ramé) in the *North American Review*. Grand published an article titled 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question'<sup>[2]</sup> from which 'Ouida' then extrapolated the soon to become famous phrase 'The New Woman' for the title of her essay.<sup>[3]</sup> The focus of Grand's piece was particularly pertinent to the rise of the New Woman, addressing as it did the double-standards inherent in Victorian marriages, which insisted on impeccable sexual virtue on the part of the wife but not on that of the husband – a theme she later addressed in her novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1894). Once coined, the term became popular shorthand to describe the new breed of independent, educated women. The qualities and

characteristics that came to define 'The New Woman' had, however, already been around for some time, as can be seen from the literature of the 1880s.

### **The New Woman in literature**

The New Woman was a real, as well as a cultural phenomenon. In society she was a feminist and a social reformer; a poet or a playwright who addressed female suffrage. In literature, however, as a character in a play or a novel, she frequently took a different form – that of someone whose thoughts and desires highlighted not only her own aspirations, but also served as a mirror in which to reflect the attitudes of society. Early examples of the New Woman in fiction include Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), a woman who leaves her husband to pursue her own desires; Lyndall in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) – a book that addresses themes including feminism, pre-marital sex and pregnancy out of wedlock; and Grace Melbury in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887), a woman whose excellent education leaves her intellectually isolated from her family and friends.

The heyday of New Woman fiction, however, took place in the mid-1890s. Sarah Grand, following on from her article 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' highlighted the double-standards inherent in Victorian Society by launching an attack on the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s in her book *The Heavenly Twins*. In the book Evadne Frayling, the central character, refuses to consummate her marriage when she discovers, on her wedding day, her husband's dubious sexual past. The Contagious Diseases Acts had allowed for the forcible detainment of prostitutes in 'Lock Hospitals' while the men who frequented prostitutes, in a ghastly example of double-standards, remained at liberty to spread any disease they happened to be carrying. Grand's 1897 novel *The Beth Book* addresses similar themes while also exploring the disastrous consequences for a young woman who is encouraged to make an advantageous marriage at the first opportunity rather than pursue an education and intellectual freedom.

Other notable examples of the New Woman in fiction include Grant Allen's novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which demonstrated the perils of 'free love' for women who were economically dependent upon a man, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), in which Sue Bridehead bears Jude's children but refuses to marry him, thus incurring the wrath of society. After the death of her children, Sue receives what she regards as divine punishment for her 'sins'. *The Odd Women* (1893), by George Gissing is another important New Woman novel, examining the contrasting opportunities and pitfalls presented to women by the pursuit of marriage on the one hand and the pursuit of education, employment and a high-minded adherence to independence on the other.

### **The New Woman and sex**

The traditional view of a woman's role in Victorian society was epitomised by Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House', first published in 1854. The poem describes the author's ideal of femininity: a loving wife devoted to her husband, a mother devoted to her children. William Acton's observation regarding female sexuality meanwhile, published in 1862, summed up the medical man's view of the ideal woman's sexual desires, or rather the lack thereof:

As a general rule a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention.<sup>[4]</sup>

Fiction during the *fin de siècle* reacted against such traditional ideas in a number of different ways. Male writers tended to cast the New Woman as either a sexual predator or as an over-sensitive intellectual unable to accept her nature as a sexual being. Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is an example of the former, while Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* represents the latter. For Lucy Westenra the case is extreme. Even before Dracula turns her into a fully-fledged vampire, Lucy is expressing a desire for three husbands (and thus, of course, three sexual partners). Having received three proposals of marriage on the same day, she laments: 'Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?' (ch. 5). After Dracula's attacks, Lucy becomes a voluptuous, unnatural parody of the New Woman as sexual decadent; a figure who preys upon children, exhibiting no maternal instincts whatsoever. Lucy's ultimate dispatch – with her husband driving a stake through her heart while his friends look on – has the horrific feel of a rape, and represents not only a terrible punishment for her sexual licentiousness, but also perhaps a punishment for her submission to the attentions of a degenerate foreign aristocrat.

The character of Mina Murray in *Dracula* is more subtle. She is independent and intelligent, but with her marriage to Jonathan and her willingness to play the dutiful wife, she escapes punishment. The fact Mina survives while Lucy meets such a horrific end perhaps indicates that Stoker disliked the New Woman in particular, while admiring her more traditional counterpart.

A balance to Stoker's views of women who enjoy their sexuality can be found in the work of George Egerton (the pen name of Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright). Egerton's short stories, especially those published in the collection *Keynotes* (1893), celebrated the sexually adventurous side of the New Woman in a positive fashion – as indeed did her own life. Egerton was twice married, once divorced and once widowed, and enjoyed a string of affairs.

### **Decline and fall**

The New Woman and the Decadent were frequently linked, but the alliance was an uneasy one. Sarah Grand attacked Decadence via the disreputable figure of Alfred Cayley Pounce in *The Beth Book* – Pounce even works for a journal tellingly named *The Patriarch*. Other New Women writers however eagerly submitted stories to *The Yellow Book* which was viewed as the definitive Decadent publication. *The Yellow Book* fell from grace at the same time as Oscar Wilde. Although Wilde never contributed to *The Yellow Book* it was seen as somehow guilty by association. The New Woman, together with the Decadent and the dandy were caught up in the storm caused by Wilde's fall from grace and on 21 December 1895 *Punch* gloated 'THE END OF THE NEW WOMAN – The Crash has come at last'. New Woman fiction, post 1895, declined markedly but as a figure in real life, and as a prototype for virtually every feminist movement that followed, the legacy of the New Woman lives on to this day.

## **Inventing the future** Article by: [Mike Ashley](#)

Mike Ashley explores how the technological changes initiated by the Industrial Revolution inspired 19th-century writers.

The Industrial Revolution had kick-started the demand for bigger and better technology, and this in turn encouraged writers to imagine what form future technology or scientific progress might take.

### **The Modern Prometheus**

In January 1802, the chemist Humphry Davy, still only 23 years old, began a series of lectures that inspired a generation to marvel at the potential of science. He argued that science will enable man to shape his future. 'It has bestowed upon him powers which may almost be called creative,' he said, 'which have enabled him to modify and change the beings surrounding him and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar...but rather as a master.'

Amongst those inspired by this and later lectures were the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley and the philosopher William Godwin. In 1812 Godwin took his 14-year old daughter, Mary, to hear Davy lecture at the Royal Institution. So when the young Mary Godwin eloped with Percy Shelley to Switzerland in 1814, here were two kindred spirits fascinated with the prospect of science. Their discussions on the subject, along with Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori, led to each challenging the other to write a ghost story. Out of this grew Mary Shelley's [Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus](#), published in 1818 and regarded as the first genuine work of science fiction.

The character of Victor Frankenstein drew upon several of the great philosophers and scientists of the day but there's no doubt that Humphrey Davy is part of that essence. Mary and Percy also knew of the experiments conducted by Giovanni Aldini to try and reanimate a corpse by applying electricity to nerves and muscles. Mary wondered what would happen if electricity brought a dead creature back to life. Would it have a soul? A memory? Imagination, instinct? In short, would it be human?

### **The March of Intellect**

Writing to *The Times* in May 1824, the industrialist and philanthropist Robert Owen remarked that in recent years 'the human mind has made the most rapid and extensive strides in the knowledge of human nature, and in general knowledge'. He called this 'the march of intellect' and believed it had reached a pace that could not be stopped. Building upon this, Henry Brougham established the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1826, with the purpose of enabling the education of the masses. The phrase 'the March of Intellect' became a rallying cry for social and technological progress, its importance being to give all classes the opportunity to better themselves. To others, though, it was seen as giving hope where in fact there was no opportunity and of raising people above their station. Would the March of Intellect benefit society or stagnate it?

Amongst those uncertain of its benefits was cartoonist William Heath who, in 1828, under the pen name Paul Pry, produced a series of posters called the March of Intellect. Even though Heath was satirising the movement, his posters include some wonderful future ideas for transport, including a steam horse and a steam coach, a vacuum tube, a bridge to Cape Town, and various forms of flight, including a flying postman.

## **The end of the world Article by: [Mike Ashley](#)**

Disease, famine, pollution and peculiar weather seemed to threaten human survival in the 19th century. Mike Ashley considers the apocalyptic literature that this climate of uncertainty produced.

For centuries life was fragile. Infant mortality was high and disease was rife, so while the privileged might live to their expected threescore years and ten, most people were lucky to reach 50. Wars, epidemics, storms, floods, earthquakes, all threatened our survival. It was accepted by many as our fate and no doubt the Biblical vision of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse — pestilence, famine, war and death — haunted the thoughts of many. As the 19th century progressed, with increased industrialisation, pollution became a new threat and, as scientists studied the heavens in more detail there was a growing awareness of a cosmic threat. These fears fuelled a new branch of apocalyptic literature, which increased as the century drew to a close.

### **Plague and pestilence**

Plague was an everyday threat at the start of the 19th century. A ruined harvest in Ireland in 1816 had led to famine and homelessness, and with this an epidemic of typhus and dysentery killed over a million people, almost a fifth of the population. At the same time, a cholera epidemic that had started in India had spread across Asia, and by the early 1820s was threatening Europe before it receded by 1826. It killed millions including thousands of British soldiers stationed in India.

[Mary Shelley](#), the author of *Frankenstein* was, at that time, still grieving the loss of her husband (drowned during a storm in 1822), and it was in that mood of desolation that she wrote *The Last Man* (1826). It is set towards the end of the 21st century, though the main characters are based on Mary herself and her now dead or lost friends including Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. The story follows a breakdown in society, which is accelerated by the arrival of a plague from Asia that soon kills everyone except for the novel's narrator.

The novel includes a reference to a darkened sky and black sun, for which Mary drew upon her memory of the dreadful summer of 1816 where the weather was affected by the violent volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815. It was this that had caused the bad harvest in Ireland and that continued to affect the weather for several years.

Although science gained a better understanding of disease it also gave access to virulent viruses and bacteria. This gave rise to the idea that diseases might be released upon mankind either as germ warfare or by accident. M P Shiel has the Chinese invaders infected by cholera in *The Yellow Danger* (1898). In *The End of an Epoch* (1901) by the doubtless pseudonymous A Lincoln Green, a microbiologist tries to perfect a universal antibiotic, but in the process a vial of a highly virulent toxin is accidentally spilled and rapidly wipes out all but the aged in Britain, before spreading around the world.

### **Pollution**

The growth of heavy industry in Britain led to severe pollution in the cities, further aggravated by every home having coal fires so that the smoke-filled atmosphere combined with water vapour to create smog — though that word wasn't created until 1905. Both sewerage and industrial waste were polluting the rivers. In *The Doom of the Great City* (1880), William DeLisle Hay depicts London suffocating under its pollution.

The writer Richard Jefferies had a passion for nature and the countryside and, suffering from tuberculosis, he could not live in the smog-ridden cities. He dreamed of a world that had reverted to nature and he describes this in *After London* (1885) where an unnamed catastrophe has wiped out most of humanity and nature has reclaimed the land. His portrayal of the rural landscape is lovingly described, but he depicts the few survivors trying to rebuild society as barbarous and violent.

As the Victorian era shifted to the Edwardian, mystery and thriller writer Fred M White penned a series where London suffered a succession of disasters. Under the umbrella title *The Doom of London* (1903) we find the city imperilled almost to destruction by smog, blizzard, pollution, earthquake, plague and commercial collapse. It says something for the resilience of Londoners that they come through it.

### **The weather**

We have already seen how Mary Shelley witnessed the Year with no Summer in 1816 and incorporated the apocalyptic vision of a black sun in *The Last Man*. Lord Byron was also affected by it and wrote the gloomy poem 'Darkness' (1816), which looked towards the end of the world: 'All earth was but one thought—and that was death...'. No one at that time had connected the volcanic eruption in Indonesia with the famine in Ireland. At the end of the Victorian period, in *The Purple Cloud* (1901), M P Shiel has most of humanity wiped out when a toxic gas erupts from a volcano. The narrator survives because he was at the North Pole where the poisonous cloud did not reach.

In *The White Battalions* (1900), Fred M White suggests diverting the Gulf Stream to bring arctic conditions to Europe. Herbert C Fyfe foresaw, in 'How Will the World End' (1900), a cooling of the Earth and the eventual return of another Ice Age. Cutcliffe Hyne brought that cooling forward and in 'London's Danger' (1896) has London frozen over, with no water available, and attempts to keep warm leading to a conflagration. With Britain powerless, other nations invade the colonies. One of the characters comments that it is the worst catastrophe to befall civilization since the loss of Atlantis. Ignatius Donnelly had revived interest in that lost world in *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882) where he stated that the cradle of civilization had been destroyed by flood. Cutcliffe Hyne explored Atlantis further in *The Lost Continent* (1900) where the advanced civilization is able to control earthquakes, but in the end their science gets the better of them and earthquakes destroy the land, which sinks beneath the waves.

### **Cosmic catastrophe**

In 1705 the astronomer Edmond Halley predicted when the comet now named after him would return. He did not live to witness it, but Halley's Comet has returned as predicted every 75-76 years. When its approach in 1835 was imminent, writers turned their thoughts to possible consequences if a comet came too close. Both Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his poem 'The Comet' (1832), and Edgar Allan Poe in 'The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion' (1839) have the Earth destroyed by fire when a comet passes by. [H G Wells](#) also has the Earth almost destroyed in 'The Star' (1897) when a cosmic collision on the edge of the solar system sends space debris heading towards Earth. Fortunately, the Moon intervenes and saves the Earth from ultimate disaster, though there are still floods and earthquakes. George Griffith believed that our scientific knowledge would come to our aid. In 'The Great Crellin Comet' (1897) he has disaster averted by firing a projectile at the rogue comet, the first time such an idea appeared in print.

## **Own worst enemy**

*The Last American* (1889) is a rather tongue-in-cheek short novel by John Ames Mitchell. Set in 2951 it describes a Persian expedition sent out to see if the mythical America still exists. They discover a ruined world, which had collapsed in 1990 under its own racial, religious and cultural intolerance. In *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (1890) Australian Henry Marriott Watson believed that Britain would not survive the rise of socialism and being ruled by the masses. Its collapse is helped on its way by the Gulf Stream being diverted and an Ice Age returning to Britain.

## **Science fiction novel *The Last American***

*The Last American*, 1889, a novel in which a Persian expedition is sent out to see if the mythical America still exists. They discover a ruined world, which had collapsed in 1990 under its own racial, religious and cultural intolerance. The cover of *The Last American* by John Mitchell, 1889.

The nature of the ideal society has occupied philosophers and writers for millennia. Here Dr Marcus Waithe considers how Victorian writers such as H G Wells, William Morris and Edward Bulwer-Lytton re-imagined their own society and envisaged utopian futures.

### **'Modern' utopias**

In 1905, [H G Wells](#) published an experimental fiction with the provocative title, *A Modern Utopia*. The book proposed that tomorrow's ideal societies would not be like those of the past that saw happiness as a matter of arresting change, of keeping things still. Plato described a changeless society overseen by philosopher 'Guardians' in *The Republic* (c. 380 BC); and in *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More based his new world on the model of a lonely island state. Isolating the good society was one way of keeping it safe from the world's corruption. This made islands and mountain valleys an obvious location.

Consigning all this to history, Wells announced the coming of a 'kinetic' 'World-state'. By 'kinetic', he meant that it would embrace the forces of change that his predecessors saw as a threat to social perfection. By extending it across the whole globe, he meant to solve the problem of a hostile outside world. It would not be a permanent solution, but rather 'a hopeful stage', and it would lead to 'a long ascent of stages' inspired by the incremental mutations of Darwinian theory (ch. 1).

Wells overplayed the novelty of his enterprise: a great deal of utopian fiction was published between 1860 and 1905, and much of it was more 'modern' or experimental than he gave it credit. Why was this? It is a cliché to suggest that the Victorian age was a time of great change, but it is true that Victorian writers were unusually concerned with their position in history. Thinking about where you are in time is one short step away from imagining life in future times. This preoccupation with historical placing accounts for the popularity of the genre, and also its relationship with the beginnings of science fiction.

### **Slipping through time**

As modes of transportation improved, journeys in space were losing their mystique. In his earlier novella, [The Time Machine](#) (1895), Wells represented history as a medium through which we might travel. He was not alone in recognising time as the new frontier. Most literary utopias of the late 19th century focused on distant times, rather than distant places. Perhaps because sudden shocks held more obvious dramatic interest, many works preferred the surprise of an accidental 'time slip' to the slow pace of evolutionary change. Like Washington Irving's character Rip van Winkle, their heroes fell asleep in one age and woke up in another.

W H Hudson used this device in his 'romance of the future', *A Crystal Age* (1887). Dispensing with any framing scenario or explanation, the narrative begins in the confused first-person voice of a man who has just regained consciousness after falling during a 'botanizing expedition'. Unsure how long he has lain under the 'heap of earth and stones', he walks through an unspoiled and depopulated landscape, before settling in an isolated 'household',<sup>[1]</sup> whose members are welcoming, but also subtly strange.

In the same year, the American writer Edward Bellamy used this mechanism to deliver his hero, Julian West, into a reformed Boston of the future. Treated for insomnia by his doctor, West enters

a deep mesmeric sleep in a specially-constructed underground chamber. A century later, he is woken by the owner of the land on which his house was built. Unlike Hudson, who maroons the narrative voice in a mysterious future, Bellamy takes pains to explain how his character got there. He even situates his readers in the future: the book opens with the matter-of-fact claim that we are looking *back* on the 19th century, 'Living as we do in the closing year of the twentieth century'.<sup>[2]</sup> West experiences an unpleasant flashback at the end of the narrative, but we know his stay in the future will be permanent.

### **Dream visions**

William Morris's utopian romance, *News from Nowhere* (1890) also links a personal journey into the future to a process of history. His hero, William Guest, falls out of bed into a London transformed by a socialist revolution. It's a magical change, but in the end no substitute for the hard struggle of history, as a long section on 'How the Change Came' makes fully apparent. In his review of *Looking Backward* (1887), Morris was critical of what he saw as Bellamy's 'tightly drilled' vision.<sup>[3]</sup> Instead of a collective end-point, he casts *Nowhere* as a personal dream, inspired by the dream-visions of medieval literature, but written to prompt diverse striving for better futures. Guest is accordingly ejected from this ideal society at the end of the book, the implication being that happiness is something we will need to work at together.

### **Focusing on place**

Not all Victorian utopias staged a journey through time. Two earlier works, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) retained More's original emphasis on place (hence, *utopia* from the Greek word *topos*). Bulwer-Lytton's hero finds an alien civilisation underground, and Butler's Higgs finds a new world over a New Zealand mountain range. Neither entirely fulfils the expectation that a utopia is a 'good' place: in both works, the hero is forced to plan an escape. Bulwer-Lytton and Butler keep happiness at arm's length, seeming to fear unchanging perfection as a tyranny. In contrast, Morris and Bellamy are insistent that the new world is *also* London, or Boston. A balance is struck between sheer novelty and the possibility that our familiar cities really could undergo radical change.

### **Footnotes**

[1] W. H. Hudson, *A Crystal Age* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010; originally printed, 1887), p.8.

[2] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1887), p. xviii.

[3] William Morris, "Looking Backward: 2000-1887", *The Commonweal*, 22 January 1889. Cited in A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), p.155.

- Written by [Marcus Waithe](#)

**Dracula: vampires, perversity and Victorian anxieties Article by:**

**Greg Buzwell**

The vampire is a complicated creature: caught between life and death, at once alluring and horrifying. Greg Buzwell considers the way the novel reflects the fears that haunted late 19th-century society – fears of immigration, sexual promiscuity and moral degeneration.

The vampire has always been a contradictory figure: on the one hand a repellent blood-sucking creature crawling from the grave, and, on the other, a strangely alluring representation of nocturnal glamour and potent sexuality. The very concept of vampirism horrifies and fascinates in seemingly equal measure, and much of this perverse duality stems from the most famous vampire novel of them

Dracula – described by a reviewer in the 26 June 1897 edition of Punch as ‘the very weirdest of weird tales’ – presents a series of contrasts and clashes between old traditions and new ideas. Stoker uses the figure of the vampire as thinly-veiled shorthand for many of the fears that haunted the Victorian fin de siècle. Throughout the novel, scientific rationality is set against folklore and superstition; old Europe is set against modern London; and traditional notions of civilised restraint and duty are threatened at every turn by the spread of corruption and wanton depravity.

Dracula’s forays into London, for example, and his ability to move unnoticed through the crowded streets while carrying the potential to afflict all in his path with the stain of vampirism, play upon late-Victorian fears of untrammelled immigration. The latter was feared as leading to increased levels of crime and the rise of ghetto communities. Dracula creates several lairs in the metropolis, including one in Chicksand Street, Whitechapel – an area notorious for the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888 – and one in Bermondsey, the location of Jacob’s Island – the low-life rookery immortalised by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*. The Ripper murders had created a storm of hysteria in the press with the local Jewish community bearing the brunt of the outbursts. The secretive nature of the Jewish ghetto was also cited as a reason why the murders were never solved, with the Jews seen as having closed ranks around one of their own number who had committed the crimes. Such fears, which Dracula mirrors very closely, ultimately lay behind the introduction of The Aliens Act of 1905, which was put in place largely to stem immigration from Eastern Europe.

The act of vampirism itself, with its notion of tainted blood, suggests the fear of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and, more generally, the fear of physical and moral decay that was believed by many commentators to be afflicting society. Towards the end of the book the character of Mina, who stands for everything Stoker sees as morally upright and respectable, observes ‘The Count is a criminal, and of criminal type, Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him’ (ch. 25). The Hungarian social critic Max Nordau’s influential book *Degeneration*, an impassioned attack on what he regarded as the prevalent air of hysteria and moral decline in Western Europe, had been translated into English in 1895. *Degeneration* was dedicated to the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso whose work used a similar pseudo-Darwinian language to analyse the psychology of the criminal mind. In an era noted for its foppish dandies, its pleasure-seeking aesthetes and the rise and fall of brilliantly flamboyant figures such as Oscar Wilde, Stoker is deliberately aligning Count Dracula with everything ‘respectable’ late-Victorian society would have regarded as morally corrupting, criminal and perverse.

Victorian literature tends to present the vampire myth as a sexual allegory in which English female virtue is menaced by foreign predators. For example Sheridan Le Fanu's short story 'Carmilla' (1872) places the virtuous English girl Laura at the mercy of the predatory East European vampire of the title. Dracula follows a similar pattern, with the Count's attentions focused in particular on Mina, a woman who selflessly (and symbolically) spends her honeymoon nursing her sick husband in a convent, and the beautiful Lucy Westenra, who is, by contrast, dangerously modern in her ways. All women, though, are seemingly at risk: as the Count suggests when he pointedly taunts Professor Van Helsing and his followers by saying 'Your girls that you all love are mine already' (ch. 23). During the course of the book Dracula attacks both Mina and Lucy; but Mina, due to the traditional Victorian qualities of determination and loyalty towards her husband is able to resist his advances. The rather more free-spirited Lucy is not so lucky.

Some critics have argued that Stoker uses the character of Lucy to attack the concept of the New Woman – a term coined towards the end of the Victorian era to describe women who were taking advantage of newly available educational and employment opportunities to break free from the intellectual and social restraints imposed upon them by a male-dominated society. Those who took a hostile attitude towards the New Woman saw her either as a mannish intellectual or, going to the opposite extreme, an over-sexed vamp. Stoker certainly portrays Lucy as racy 'forward' in her desires. At one point Lucy receives three proposals of marriage on the same day and comments, as she regrets having to turn down two of the proposals: 'Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?' (ch. 5). Lucy's moral weakness allows Dracula to prey repeatedly upon her during the night, and only a series of desperate blood transfusions from each of her former suitors – a sickly symbolic echo of Lucy's desire for three husbands (and thus three lovers) – delay, for a while, the inevitable. As Lucy joins the ranks of the 'undead' she herself becomes a vampire, leaving her tomb by night to feed upon a succession of defenceless children in a parodic distortion of the Victorian ideal of maternal femininity. When confronted by Van Helsing after one such raid, Lucy behaves in a manner that would have been viewed as an affront to both femininity and motherhood: 'With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone' (ch. 16). For Stoker, Lucy's decline from the Victorian feminine ideal to the perceived selfish

Bram Stoker includes numerous references to the very latest ideas and inventions in his novel. Dr Seward keeps his diary using a phonograph which was a relatively new and expensive piece of technology in 1897; similarly, references to Kodak cameras, portable typewriters, telegrams being sent across Europe and the blood transfusions carried out by Professor Van Helsing all reflect the rapid technological changes taking place in the late-Victorian period. In addition, as already shown in the earlier mention of Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, the characters in the novel frequently refer to contemporary theories in medicine and psychology. The entire novel is presented in the form of letters, diaries and newspaper cuttings: so the scientific method of observing and recording information is integral to both the structure of the book itself, and to the attempts of Van Helsing and his friends to destroy Dracula. Set against this atmosphere of scientific advance, however, are the intangible concepts of religious faith and the supernatural. Van Helsing may use blood transfusions in an attempt to keep Lucy alive, but he also resorts to garlic flowers and crucifixes to hold the vampire at bay. Throughout

the novel there is a sense that Dracula, with his ability to pass through keyholes like a mist and his affinity with bats, rats and wolves, represents the inexplicable; an alien force which science on its own cannot defeat. Early in the novel Jonathan Harker observes the Count climbing lizard-like down the outside of the castle walls. Unsurprisingly the sight shakes him to the core. Returning to his room he writes '... in my diary in shorthand all that has happened since I closed it last. It is the nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance. And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have powers of their own which mere "modernity" cannot kill' (ch. 3). Dracula suggests modernity and science may have their limits and, faced with the supernatural figure of the Count, Harker fears such limits may have been reached.

## Wide Reading to support literary context

Emily Bronte	Wuthering Heights
Bram Stoker	Dracula
RL Stevenson	Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde
Thomas Hardy	Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Charles Dickens	Hard Times
Margaret Atwood	The Handmaid's Tale
Yann Martel	Life of Pi
Mohsin Hamid	The Reluctant Fundamentalist
Aravind Adiga	The White Tiger
Sebastian Barry	The Secret Scripture
Philip Hensher	The Northern Clemency
Hilary Mantel	Wolf Hall
A. S. Byatt	The Children's Book
Emma Donoghue	Room
Julian Barnes	The Sense of an Ending
Patrick deWitt	The Sisters Brothers
Stephen Kelman	Pigeon English
Eleanor Catton	The Luminaries
Richard Flanagan	The Narrow Road to the Deep North
Karen Joy Fowler	We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves
Howard Jacobson	J
Neel Mukherjee	The Lives of Others
Chigozie Obioma	The Fishermen
Sunjeev Sahota	The Year of the Runaways
Anne Tyler	A Spool of Blue Thread
Hanya Yanagihara	A Little Life
Paul Beatty	The Sellout
Deborah Levy	Hot Milk
David Szalay	All That Man Is
Paul Auster	4 3 2 1

Emily Fridlund	History of Wolves
Mohsin Hamid	Exit West
Fiona Mozley	Elmet
Anna Burns	Milkman
Esi Edugyan	Washington Black
Daisy Johnson	Everything Under
Rachel Kushner	The Mars Room

**Texts that you can read to prepare for coursework**

Jane Eyre – preferred core text

Wide Sargasso Sea – second choice core text

Vernon God Little

A Thousand Splendid Suns

On Chesil Beach

Exit West

The Power

The Kite Runner

Atonement

Brick Lane

White Teeth

A Brief History of Seven Killings

## **Texts / poets you can read to support poetry / drama :**

Rossetti

Carol Ann Duffy read all of the poems we do not study in class and try to read another of her anthologies: "Hand in Hand".

Philip Larkin read all of the poems we do not study in class and another of his anthologies: "High Windows".

John Keats

Elizabeth Barret Browning

King Lear

Any Shakespearean tragedy

For a deeper appreciation of Willaims' "A Streetcar Named Desire", read/watch: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", "The Glass Menagerie" and/or "Summer and Smoke".

For a deeper appreciation of Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi", read/watch: "The White Devil".

## **Resources to support critical understanding and context**

1066 The Year of Lear

The British Library Website – Romantics and Victorians ( especially the period 1850-1910)

The Victorian Web

The English Review

Emag