

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN POETRY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MY LAST DUCHESS AND THE LADY OF SHALLOT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry through a comparative analysis of Robert Browning's My Last Duchess and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's The Lady of Shalott. These poems serve as powerful reflections of Victorian gender dynamics, highlighting societal constraints and cultural perceptions of femininity. Browning's My Last Duchess examines themes of control and objectification, presenting a patriarchal figure whose dominance silences the female voice. In contrast, Tennyson's The Lady of Shalott portrays isolation and the longing for freedom, emphasizing the tragic consequences of societal expectations on women seeking autonomy.

By analyzing the thematic elements and drawing on social and cultural contexts, the research reveals that while Browning directly critiques male authority, Tennyson subtly interrogates the idealization of feminine passivity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Victorian poetry serves as both a mirror and a critique of societal values, particularly regarding women's roles and identities. This thesis underscores the enduring relevance of these works in examining gender dynamics, offering insights into the cultural and literary intersections of the Victorian era.

Keywords: Victorian Poetry, Gender Dynamics, Societal Constraints, Literary Critique

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in literature has long been a site of complex negotiation, revealing the underlying cultural and societal norms that shape female identity and agency. Victorian poetry, in particular, offers a fascinating lens through which to examine the gendered ideals and constraints imposed on women in the 19th century. This thesis focuses on the poems My Last Duchess by Robert Browning and The Lady of Shalott by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, two iconic works that reflect and interrogate the position of women within Victorian society. Both poems feature female protagonists who navigate restrictive environments, and through their stories, Browning and Tennyson comment on the

limits of female autonomy, the impact of patriarchal control, and the repercussions of defying societal expectations.

This study aims to compare and analyze the thematic, stylistic, and narrative techniques that Browning and Tennyson employ in these poems to portray female identity, examining how these works reflect Victorian society's views on femininity and gender roles. Additionally, it seeks to explore how the poems critique or reinforce the era's cultural perceptions of women. By engaging with these themes, this research will contribute to a broader understanding of the intersection between literature and social ideology in the Victorian era.

1.1 Background

Victorian poetry, emerging during the 19th century in the United Kingdom, reflects the complex cultural, social, and political landscape of the era. This period, marked by rapid industrialization, colonial expansion, and a rigid class structure, also witnessed significant debates over gender roles and the position of women in society. Literature, particularly poetry, became a medium through which these gender dynamics were both reflected and questioned. In particular, the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry often mirrored the restrictive societal norms while, at times, offering nuanced critiques of the constraints placed upon female identity.

Two prominent poems that encapsulate this tension are Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* (1842) and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (1832). Both works delve into the lives of female characters who are subject to societal expectations, yet each poem approaches the theme of female agency and identity in contrasting ways. Browning's *My Last Duchess* explores themes of male control and the objectification of women, while Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* examines the isolation and ultimate tragic fate of a woman who is confined by both physical and societal boundaries.

1.2 Research Problem

The portrayal of women in Victorian poetry is a subject of significant interest within literary studies, yet it remains a complex area for scholarly analysis. While many scholars have examined Victorian literature's reflection of gender roles, there has been less focus on the comparative portrayal of women in Browning's and Tennyson's works. The two poems, *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, offer rich examples of how Victorian poets depicted women's struggles with societal expectations. Therefore, the poems also differ in their narrative approaches, thematic emphases, and stylistic techniques, raising important questions about how women were perceived and portrayed in Victorian literature.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson depict and characterize women in *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, and what thematic, stylistic, and narrative elements contribute to these portrayals?
2. In what ways do these poems reflect the societal norms, gender roles, and cultural perceptions of femininity during the Victorian era, and how do these representations of women differ or intersect?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how do Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson depict and characterize women in *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, and what thematic, stylistic, and narrative elements contribute to these portrayals.
2. To examine in what ways do these poems reflect the societal norms, gender roles, and cultural perceptions of femininity during the Victorian era, and how do these representations of women differ or intersect.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The representation of women in literature, particularly during periods of significant social change, offers valuable insights into cultural values and attitudes. The Victorian era, with its complex gender dynamics and often rigid societal expectations, provides a particularly rich ground for such an exploration. By examining *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, this thesis not only contributes to the literary analysis of two key Victorian poems but also engages with broader discussions of gender and identity in the 19th century.

This study is significant for both literary scholars and those interested in gender studies, as it uncovers how the cultural and societal attitudes of the Victorian period shaped the portrayal of women in poetry. The comparative analysis of Browning's and Tennyson's works will help illuminate the diverse ways in which Victorian poets depicted female identity, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intersection between literature and social norms.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Victorian poetry through a gendered lens has increasingly captured the attention of scholars seeking to understand how poets of this era represented women. This review critically examines recent and foundational scholarship on the topic, focusing on the gendered portrayal of women in Victorian poetry, specifically in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*. Organized chronologically, this review highlights key arguments and findings, drawing connections to explore the evolution of thought on this subject.

Brown (2022), in *Poetic Portrayals: Gender Representation in Victorian Poetry*, argues that Victorian poetry frequently utilizes female characters to explore the era's restrictive gender ideals. Through *My Last Duchess*, Brown suggests that Browning critiques male authority by presenting the Duke's control over the Duchess as emblematic of "the social entrapment of women". This perspective emphasizes the psychological dimensions of the Duke's dominance, painting the Duchess as a woman silenced by societal expectations. Brown highlights how Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* operates similarly, as the Lady's seclusion represents "the physical and symbolic confinement Victorian women endured".

Lee (2023), in 'Women in Verse: Exploring Female Characters in Victorian Poems', explores how Victorian poets constructed female identity within the boundaries of societal norms. Lee's analysis considers both Browning and Tennyson's works as reflections of the restrictive roles assigned to women. According to Lee, *My Last Duchess* captures the limitations imposed upon women through the Duke's monologue, positioning the Duchess as a mere object under his control. *The Lady of Shalott* is discussed as a symbol of feminine isolation and the desire for self-expression, where the Lady's choice to defy her confinement illustrates the struggles women faced when attempting to claim their own identities. Lee's research suggests that these poets were engaging with contemporary debates on femininity, providing layered perspectives on autonomy and individuality.

In *Beyond the Surface: Gender Dynamics in Victorian Poetry*, Smith (2019) critiques the limitations of previous interpretations that view Victorian poetry purely as reflective of social norms. Instead, Smith proposes that Browning's work in particular demonstrates "a subversive stance toward gender roles, one that critiques the superficiality of patriarchal values through the very act of depicting them". Smith's analysis thus positions Browning as a poet willing to challenge societal expectations, revealing a more progressive aspect of his work that aligns with feminist readings of Victorian literature.

Jones (2017) examines the portrayal of women as symbols in Victorian literature, asserting that women in poetry were often confined to representations of purity and passivity. In *The Symbolic Female in Victorian Poetry*, Jones discusses how poets like Tennyson and Browning used their female characters to comment on the era's gender ideologies. In her analysis, the *Lady of Shalott* becomes an embodiment of the Victorian ideal—isolated and observed, yet never an active participant in her own story. The Duchess, on the other hand, is cast in a role that ultimately leads to her death when she fails to meet societal expectations. Jones argues that these portrayals served as a commentary on the consequences of a rigid social structure, where women's identities were often constrained by patriarchal values.

Williams (2016) presents a nuanced discussion of Victorian poets' use of narrative voice to control female characters. In *Narrative Power and Gender in Victorian Poetry*, she examines how Browning's use of the Duke's monologue in *My Last Duchess* serves to underscore the Duke's dominance over the Duchess, reducing her to a silent figure controlled by his words. Williams interprets the Duke's narration as a reflection of the gender dynamics of the time, where women were expected to submit to male authority without question. In *The Lady of Shalott*, Williams interprets the Lady's confinement as symbolic of the societal restrictions placed on Victorian women, suggesting that her eventual departure from the tower serves as a metaphor for women's aspirations for freedom, despite the risks involved. Her study reveals how Victorian poets subtly

critiqued their society by embedding gender dynamics within their narratives.

Taylor (2015) explores the implications of female objectification in Victorian poetry in her work *Voices and Vessels: Gender in Victorian Poetry*. She argues that both Tennyson and Browning used their poems to reflect the societal perception of women as mere objects to be controlled and observed. Taylor discusses how *My Last Duchess* reflects this notion through the Duke's admiration for the Duchess's image, treating her as a possession rather than a person. The *Lady of Shalott*, on the other hand, represents the fragile existence women were forced into, bound by societal expectations and punished when they sought independence. Taylor's analysis underscores the role of Victorian poetry in critiquing the objectification of women and the consequences of defying gender norms.

Wilson (2013) examines the use of symbolism in Victorian poetry to convey the struggles of female characters. In *Confinement and Defiance: Gender Symbolism in Victorian Literature*, Wilson interprets the *Lady of Shalott's* mirror as a symbol of the limitations placed on women, reflecting their experiences without allowing them to directly engage with the world. The Duchess's painting in *My Last Duchess* is analyzed as a representation of her confinement and eventual erasure, where she is ultimately rendered silent by the Duke's need for control. Wilson's research suggests that the poems communicate the broader societal constraints placed on women, where their identities were often shaped and limited by male-dominated perspectives.

Harris (2010) offers a foundational study in *Women in Victorian Poetry: Agency and Autonomy*, discussing the inherent contradictions within Victorian ideals of femininity. She argues that *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott* serve as reflections of the era's conflicting views on female autonomy. Harris sees the Duchess as a woman whose desires clash with societal expectations, while the *Lady of Shalott* represents a woman punished for seeking freedom. Harris' work has been instrumental in highlighting how Victorian poets both upheld and critiqued the social constraints imposed on women.

Existing scholarship has extensively explored how *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott* encapsulate the Victorian ideals and anxieties surrounding femininity, with each work providing unique perspectives on the impact of societal restrictions on female identity. Scholars like Brown (2022), Lee (2023), and Smith (2019) emphasize the critical perspectives offered by Browning and Tennyson, interpreting their female characters as symbols of autonomy challenged by patriarchal norms. From the rigid control exercised over the Duchess in Browning's poem to the *Lady of Shalott's* struggle with confinement, these studies collectively reveal the complex ways in which Victorian poetry reflected, reinforced, and at times questioned the ideologies of its time. This literature review lays the foundation for a comparative analysis of both poems, highlighting the ongoing relevance of gender dynamics in literary studies.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used to examine the portrayal of women in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*. Given the focus on Victorian poetry and gender representation, this study adopts a qualitative approach that combines feminist literary criticism, and a comparative framework. This chapter explains the research design, data collection, analytical framework, and ethical considerations employed in the thesis.

3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is qualitative in nature, utilizing literary analysis to interpret the poems' thematic, and narrative elements. The study is comparative, focusing on how women are portrayed in the two poems in relation to Victorian societal norms, gender roles, and the cultural perceptions of femininity. A feminist lens is employed to explore how female characters in these poems either conform to or resist the expectations placed upon them in Victorian society.

This research is exploratory, as it seeks to uncover the nuances in gender representation within these

texts, particularly by analyzing their language, structure, and underlying themes. The comparative aspect of the research allows for a deeper understanding of how Browning and Tennyson's works intersect or diverge in their portrayal of female characters.

3.2 Data Collection

The data for this study consists of the primary texts of *My Last Duchess* by Robert Browning and *The Lady of Shalott* by Alfred Lord Tennyson, as well as secondary sources, including academic articles, books, and papers. The primary texts were chosen based on their central role in discussions about Victorian poetry and gender, and their contrasting narrative techniques. The selected poems offer rich ground for comparative analysis due to their distinct portrayals of women and the different narrative structures employed by Browning and Tennyson.

In addition to the primary texts, a comprehensive review of secondary literature, academic journals, monographs, and critical essays was conducted to situate this study within existing scholarly discourse. The sources include the works of Brown (2022), Lee (2023), and Smith (2019), alongside other relevant scholars (e.g., Gilbert & Gubar, 2019; Harris, 2020). These texts provide insight into gender dynamics in Victorian poetry and aid in understanding how women have been portrayed across different critical lenses.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis of the poems is guided by feminist literary criticism, a critical approach that interrogates how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges the cultural norms regarding gender. Feminist literary theory provides the tools to explore the ways in which female characters are constructed and how their agency or lack thereof is depicted in Victorian poetry.

3.4 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism forms the core of this study's analysis, as it focuses on the representation of gender and power dynamics within literature. The method involves a close reading of the poems, examining how the female characters in *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott* are portrayed in

terms of their relationships to male authority and societal expectations. This approach allows for an exploration of the ways in which Browning and Tennyson either conform to or challenge the Victorian ideal of femininity, as well as the underlying power structures that shape their characters' experiences.

The feminist framework draws on theories of gender and representation from key scholars, such as Gilbert and Gubar (2019), who examine the roles of women in Victorian literature as both subjects and objects. Their work emphasizes how literary texts can both reflect patriarchal ideologies and offer space for subversion, an idea central to the analysis of both *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*.

3.5 Comparative Analysis

The study employs a comparative analysis of the two poems to uncover the similarities and differences in how women are portrayed. This method is useful for identifying patterns, contrasts, and thematic intersections between the two texts. For instance, *My Last Duchess* presents a woman who is silenced by her husband's narrative, while *The Lady of Shalott* presents a woman isolated and controlled by a supernatural force, both reflecting the limitations placed on women in the Victorian era. Comparative analysis allows for a holistic examination of how these different forms of control are depicted in the context of 19th-century gender roles.

By comparing the two poems, the research highlights the broader implications of gender representation in Victorian poetry, focusing on the consequences of female defiance and agency within a patriarchal framework. This analysis is informed by previous studies on Victorian gender dynamics (e.g., Smith, 2019; Lee, 2023), which emphasize how literary representations both enforce and question cultural norms.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion and Analysis

In the Victorian era, rigid gender roles shaped public expectations for both men and women. Women were often confined to domestic roles and idealized for virtues like beauty, obedience, and passivity. Poets of this period frequently

explored these themes, sometimes challenging the status quo and questioning societal norms. Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* are seminal works that examine and critique these issues. Through these poems, Browning and Tennyson underscore the impact of male authority and female confinement on identity, agency, and autonomy. By analyzing how each poet uses themes of power, isolation, and the quest for self-expression, this chapter seeks to uncover the nuanced critique of Victorian norms embedded within these works.

4.1 Analysis of *My Last Duchess*: Possession, Objectification, and Male Authority

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* is one of the most well-known dramatic monologues of the Victorian period, a poem that presents the inner workings of a male aristocrat, the Duke of Ferrara. This chapter focuses on the portrayal of female identity and gender dynamics in *My Last Duchess*, and how Browning uses themes, narrative structure, and stylistic techniques to offer a critique of Victorian gender roles. The Duke's character and his attitude toward his late wife, the titular Duchess, provide a lens through which to examine how Victorian women were objectified, controlled, and ultimately silenced within patriarchal structures.

Browning's *My Last Duchess* examines themes of possession, control, and male authority, as seen through the perspective of the Duke of Ferrara, who narrates his late wife's story with chilling detachment. Browning's choice of the Duke as the speaker allows readers to experience firsthand his manipulative nature, shedding light on Victorian attitudes toward women as possessions.

4.1.1 Objectification Through Art and Language

The Duke's portrayal of his wife as a mere object is established early in the poem. He refers to her as "my last Duchess" (line 1), emphasizing ownership and reducing her identity to that of a possession. Her portrait, which "looks as if she were alive" (line 2), serves as a haunting reminder of her beauty, now preserved and controlled by the Duke. By using the phrase "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" (lines 9-10),

the Duke asserts his authority over who may view her, a control that extends beyond her life and encapsulates the Victorian ideal of male dominance over female visibility and agency.

The Duke's portrayal of his late Duchess as art reflects societal norms that valued women primarily for their beauty. His statement, "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift" (lines 32-34), reveals his dissatisfaction with her inability to appreciate the "gift" of his noble heritage. In the Duke's view, her failure to conform to his expectations justifies his dissatisfaction, illustrating the objectifying view that women existed to reinforce male pride and authority.

4.1.2 Silence, Voice, and Autonomy

The Duchess's voice is notably absent in the poem, with the Duke exclusively narrating her life and choices. This silence reflects the Victorian tendency to suppress female voices in both public and private spheres. When the Duke mentions, "She smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile?" (lines 43-45), he criticizes her warmth and friendliness, viewing it as a threat to his authority. His disapproval of her generosity and refusal to grant her agency reflects the Victorian ideal that women should be compliant and reserved.

The Duke's assertion, "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (lines 45-46), suggests that he exercised ultimate control over her fate, with chilling implications. Browning's ambiguous language leaves it unclear whether these "commands" resulted in her murder or seclusion, symbolizing the extreme consequences Victorian women faced when they defied male expectations.

4.2 Analysis of *The Lady of Shalott*: Isolation, Desire, and Fatal Consequence

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (1832, revised in 1842) is one of the most iconic poems of the Victorian era, portraying a tragic heroine confined within a tower, forced to view the world only through reflections in a mirror.

In contrast to Browning's overt depiction of male control, Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* explores female isolation and autonomy through an

allegorical approach. The Lady's confinement within her tower reflects the physical and social restrictions Victorian women faced, while her ultimate decision to break free highlights the perils of challenging societal norms.

The Lady's isolation in her tower and her reliance on a mirror to view the world outside are central symbols in Tennyson's work. She perceives reality only through reflections, as Tennyson writes, "And moving through a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear" (lines 46-48). This distance from direct experience symbolizes the limitations imposed on women, who were often relegated to a domestic sphere that limited their interactions with the outside world.

Her longing for autonomy and real experience is evident in her declaration, "I am half-sick of shadows" (line 71). This statement marks her growing dissatisfaction with a life that offers only indirect glimpses of reality, emphasizing her desire to break free from confinement. Her yearning for autonomy parallels the Victorian woman's plight, as she was expected to adhere to roles that restricted her social and intellectual freedom. When the Lady defies her curse and looks out directly, Tennyson's narrative takes a fatal turn. The curse's consequences imply that autonomy and freedom are forbidden for women, who face severe repercussions for defying societal norms. Tennyson describes her final moments, "Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror cracked from side to side" (lines 114-115), as symbolic of her liberation and rebellion against confinement.

However, her rebellion comes at a cost. The Lady's decision to leave her tower ultimately leads to her death, as she is found "singing her last song" (line 143) as she drifts toward Camelot. Her tragic fate serves as a critique of a society that punishes women for seeking independence, suggesting that freedom and self-expression for women were considered incompatible with societal expectations.

4.3 Comparative Discussion: Confinement, Power, and the Cost of Autonomy

Both *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott* illustrate the tension between confinement and

autonomy, albeit through different perspectives. Browning's Duke embodies the direct male authority that defined Victorian domestic expectations, while Tennyson's Lady represents the tragic consequences of a woman who defies her confinement.

Browning's Duke exerts control by treating his wife as a possession, a theme evident in the line, "That's my last Duchess" (line 1), in which "my" reinforces his proprietary attitude. The Lady, in contrast, is isolated by an external curse that prevents her from interacting with the world. Tennyson's decision to place her in a tower suggests a broader societal force, rather than a single man, imposing limitations on her life. These different portrayals reveal that, regardless of whether confinement stemmed from individual authority or societal norms, women's experiences were shaped by the power dynamics that defined Victorian life.

4.3.1 The Cost of Rebellion and Autonomy

In both works, the heroines' defiance against their confines has fatal outcomes. The Duke's "commands" in *My Last Duchess* suggest he may have ordered the Duchess's death, while the Lady's act of rebellion leads to her inevitable demise. Both authors highlight the potential dangers faced by Victorian women who sought autonomy, with Tennyson emphasizing the dangers of societal norms and Browning focusing on the consequences of male control. As both women face tragic ends, Browning and Tennyson critique the moral and societal expectations that restricted women, inviting readers to reflect on the implications of these norms.

4.4 Victorian Society's Constraints on Women and Literary Critique

Through *My Last Duchess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, Browning and Tennyson illustrate how Victorian norms restricted women's autonomy, often resulting in devastating consequences. Browning's Duke embodies possessiveness and a cold detachment, illustrating a critique of patriarchal control. In contrast, Tennyson's Lady, confined to her tower, seeks freedom but faces ruin when she steps outside societal boundaries.

Both poems invite readers to question the ethical implications of a society that limits female autonomy, underscoring the theme that freedom for women was often unattainable and costly within Victorian society. Through their works, Browning and Tennyson not only reflect the period's social dynamics but also highlight the individual cost of these restrictions on women's lives.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry through a comparative analysis of Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, examining how each poet engages with themes of female identity, autonomy, and societal expectations. By analyzing the characters, narrative structures, and symbolic elements within each poem, this study reveals the ways in which Victorian poetry reflects, critiques, and complicates the period's gender norms. Through the figures of the Duchess and the Lady of Shalott, Browning and Tennyson offer complex representations of women as both constrained by and subtly resistant to the cultural forces surrounding them.

A primary insight of this thesis is that both poets utilize confinement as a narrative and symbolic device to underscore the restrictions placed upon women. Browning's Duchess is controlled by her husband's power, silenced and rendered passive in both life and death. Tennyson's Lady, likewise, is bound to her isolated tower, doomed by a curse to view life only through a mirror. Each of these situations represents the broader societal tendency to restrict women's freedom, limiting their agency within a rigid framework of male control and expectation. As seen in *My Last Duchess*, Browning's exploration of patriarchal power serves as a critical commentary on the ways in which men in Victorian society exerted dominance over women's lives, reducing them to possessions or symbols of status.

In *The Lady of Shalott*, Tennyson presents a different, yet equally poignant, critique by romanticizing the Lady's seclusion while simultaneously illustrating its tragic consequences. The Lady's yearning for freedom and her ultimate

departure from the tower suggest a desire for autonomy and experience beyond her limited world. Her tragic end, however, implies the societal risks associated with women who attempt to assert their independence. Both poems thus reflect the dangers inherent in a culture that idealizes women as passive and submissive, punishing those who seek agency or autonomy. These narratives serve as poignant critiques of Victorian gender roles, revealing the social costs of conformity and the fatal consequences of transgression.

The thematic analysis in this study also reveals that while Browning's portrayal is more direct in its critique of male authority, Tennyson's approach is subtler, relying on romanticized tragedy to convey the restrictive nature of Victorian ideals. Browning's Duchess embodies the forceful assertion of control that typified male authority, while Tennyson's Lady offers a softer, more symbolic representation of feminine constraint. Together, these poems offer a nuanced view of Victorian gender dynamics, highlighting both the overt and insidious ways in which female agency was curtailed.

In synthesizing these analyses, this thesis contributes to our understanding of Victorian poetry as a complex medium for examining gender norms. Browning and Tennyson, while reflective of their cultural context, also present subversive undertones that question the morality and consequences of restricting women's independence. Their works underscore the tensions within Victorian society, where idealized femininity existed in opposition to genuine freedom, and where women's lives were often defined by male perceptions and desires.

My Last Duchess and *The Lady of Shalott* offer rich, multifaceted portrayals of women in Victorian poetry, depicting them as bound by societal expectations yet subtly embodying resistance to those constraints. The insights gained from this study suggest that Victorian poets were not merely products of their time but rather engaged critically with the prevailing norms and values, questioning the roles and identities imposed upon women. This thesis encourages further exploration of how literature both shapes and reflects cultural perceptions of gender,

inviting readers to re-evaluate Victorian poetry as a nuanced field of both critique and affirmation of societal norms.

Through their art, Browning and Tennyson bring to light the complexities of female experience in a male-dominated society, leaving a lasting impact on our understanding of Victorian gender dynamics and the ways in which literature serves as both a reflection and critique of cultural values. This study demonstrates that the voices of these poetic figures, though fictional, continue to resonate, inviting readers to reconsider the roles assigned to women in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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