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Poetic Language in Transition: A Comparative Study of Late Victorian and Early Modernist Poets

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Abstract

English poetry underwent a profound transformation in linguistic form and thematic substance as it moved from the late Victorian period into early Modernism. This study offers a detailed comparative examination of five central poets: Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning from the Victorian tradition, and Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Thomas Hardy as figures who bridge or embody the Modernist turn. The analysis unfolds against a backdrop of sweeping historical forces, including the rise of industrial machinery that reshaped daily existence, Charles Darwin's theories that unsettled long-held religious convictions, the strains of imperial expansion followed by its erosion, the devastation wrought by the First World War, the growth of sprawling cities that isolated individuals, and new understandings of the human mind drawn from emerging psychological thought. Poetic expression shifted from the elaborate vocabulary, carefully constructed sentence structures, regular musical patterns, and images that promised resolution in Victorian work to the spare phrasing, broken lines, irregular beats, and unsettling visions characteristic of Modernism. Key poems receive close attention here: Tennyson's meditative sequence *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, with its exploration of grief and belief; the narrative tapestry of *The Lady of Shalott*, probing the artist's separation from life; the rhythmic tribute to valor in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*; and the quiet acceptance of mortality in *crossing the Bar*. Browning contributes his probing dramatic voices in *My Last Duchess*, the disturbing intimacy of *Porphyria's Lover*, and the relentless journey of *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. Pound brings crystalline moments like *In a Station of the Metro* and the ritual echo of *The Return*. Eliot's *The Waste Land* assembles fragments of a shattered culture, while Hardy's poems such as *The Darkling Thrush*, *During Wind and Rain*, and *The Voice* capture a world tilting toward doubt. What emerges is not a clean separation between eras but a steady progression. Elements of uncertainty already present in Victorian poetry, such as the shifting tones in Browning's speakers or the shadowed faith in Tennyson's symbols, grow more pronounced in the Modernists, who confront a reality marked by division and loss. Words grow leaner and more pointed, sentences break apart to reflect disjointed thought, rhythms lose their steady pulse to match the uneven flow of experience, and images move from comforting patterns to stark revelations of emptiness. Poetry, in this view, serves as a living record of its time, adjusting its tools to capture the evolving sense of human life amid change. This perspective deepens our grasp of how literary language engages with broader currents in thought and society, linking one age to the next through shared struggles and innovations.

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Introduction

Literature holds up a mirror to the world, capturing the nuances of social change, cultural tensions, and intellectual debates in any given age. Few transitions in English literary history prove as striking as the one between late Victorian

poetry and the early Modernist movement. Poets like Tennyson and Browning wrote during a time when Britain grappled with the consequences of rapid factory growth, scientific ideas that questioned biblical accounts of creation, and a society divided by class and empire. Their poems often

seek balance, using rich language and firm structures to address questions of belief, loss, and human purpose. Tennyson, for instance, pours personal sorrow into grand forms in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, while Browning reveals hidden motives through speakers who speak directly to us in *My Last Duchess*.

By contrast, the early twentieth century brought fresh shocks: the mass death on European battlefields, cities swollen with strangers, theories of relativity that upended notions of time and space, and insights into the unconscious mind. Pound, Eliot, and Hardy respond with language that feels raw and unsettled. Pound strips description to its core in *In a Station of the Metro*, Eliot weaves a mosaic of voices and echoes in *The Waste Land*, and Hardy observes nature's indifference in *The Darkling Thrush*. The central question of this study asks how poets adapted their craft to these shifts. Did language leap from one style to another, or did it change gradually, with Victorian tendencies paving the way for Modernist boldness? The poems selected for analysis form a focused archive. From Tennyson come works that blend public duty and private feeling: the mythic isolation in *The Lady of Shalott*, where art's beauty proves deadly; the heroic rhythm of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, honoring soldiers amid blunder; and *Crossing the Bar*, facing death with quiet resolve. Browning offers psychological depth: the duke's chilling control in *My Last Duchess*, the lover's twisted logic in *Porphyria's Lover*, and the knight's grim quest in *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. Pound contributes brief, vivid captures of perception; Eliot a vast collage of cultural debris; Hardy songs of fading hope. Together, they illustrate a path from ordered expression to open experiment.

This work draws strength from several fields. History provides the timeline of events that stirred these poets; philosophy clarifies the crisis of meaning; linguistics reveals patterns in word choice and arrangement; and studies of culture show how poetry both reflects and shapes public feeling. Much existing scholarship treats Victorian and Modernist poetry in isolation: Tennyson as a voice of moral comfort, Pound as a call for renewal. Yet few efforts trace the threads connecting them, such as how Browning's multiple voices anticipate Eliot's chorus or Tennyson's mechanical images echo in Pound's precise snapshots. By placing these poets side by side, the study uncovers a shared lineage, where Victorian poetry plants questions that Modernism harvests in fuller crisis.

Further work could explore figures like Yeats or Hopkins, who stand between eras, or extend the inquiry to novels and plays where similar changes appear. Influences from French poets or American writers might also enrich the picture. In essence, this research argues that poetic language does not stand still; it bends and reforms to meet the demands of its moment, offering a window into the human effort to make sense of upheaval.

Diction: From Ornamented Gravitas to Concise Intensity

Victorian poets selected words with care to convey emotional weight and historical depth, creating layers that addressed the philosophical challenges of their time. Alfred Lord Tennyson mastered this approach in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, where the phrase "wheels of being" combines ideas of mechanical order with spiritual questions. This choice grounds vast cosmic doubt in everyday sensation, as seen in lines like "blood creeps, and the nerves prick and tingle." The vocabulary mixes elevated archaic terms with personal intimacy, producing a tone of solemn reflection that connects individual

grief to larger patterns of existence. Readers feel the tension between faith and uncertainty through these precise yet resonant words.

In *The Lady of Shalott*, Tennyson builds an enchanting world with terms such as "gemmy bridle," "brazen tower," and "magic web with colours gay." These words draw on medieval romance, their soft sounds blending to pull the reader into the Lady's isolated dream. The richness of the language heightens the tragedy when that dream breaks against real life. Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* uses repeated military words like "cannon," "valley," and "stormed at with shot and shell" to turn a moment of military error into a celebration of courage. The steady buildup of these terms creates a sense of forward movement, honoring the soldiers' resolve even in defeat.

Robert Browning took Victorian word choice in a new direction, using everyday language to reveal hidden psychological truths. In *My Last Duchess*, phrases like "my gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name" and "spot of joy" carry courtly polish that slowly uncovers the Duke's cold control. The words seem polite at first, but their careful placement exposes obsession and power. Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* relies on simple domestic details, such as "yellow hair displaced its hood" and "blushed bright beneath my kiss." These plain terms make the story's horror all the more striking, as ordinary moments twist into something unsettling. Through such choices, Browning shows how language can hint at depths of the human mind that lie beneath surface appearances. His work prepares the ground for later explorations of inner conflict.

Modernist poets responded to a world of greater fragmentation by choosing words with sharp economy, focusing on direct impact over decoration. Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* captures a fleeting urban moment in just two lines: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: Petals on a wet, black bough." This pairing links hurried city life to quiet natural beauty, using minimal words to suggest vast connections. Pound's *The Return* keeps things sparse with "See, they return; and bring us their ancient gladness," allowing pauses to carry as much meaning as the words themselves. The result feels immediate and alive, free from unnecessary explanation.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* draws words from many languages and levels of society. "Unreal City, under the brown fog of a winter dawn" brings ancient religious echoes into smoky modern streets, while casual speech like "Oi" adds raw street life. This mix creates a sense of cultural collapse, where high and low blend in exhaustion. Thomas Hardy stands between eras, using everyday words to express deep pessimism. In *The Darkling Thrush*, "spectre-grey" frost and "cryptic blast" make the winter landscape feel ghostly, while the bird's "full-hearted evensong" offers a small, uncertain hope. Hardy's choices strip away Victorian fullness, pointing toward a plainer, more honest confrontation with reality.

Overall, this shift in word choice reflects broader changes. Victorian poets used language to build bridges between doubt and comfort, drawing on tradition for strength. Modernists cut to the essentials, matching a time when old certainties had crumbled. Words became tools for precision rather than display, helping poetry face the sharp edges of modern experience.

Syntax: Metaphoric Complexity and Structural Fractures

Victorian poets built sentences with clear logical flow, often linking ideas in ways that held together even as they explored

difficult emotions. Tennyson in *In Memoriam* A.H.H. connects physical sensations step by step: "Be near me when my light is low, when the blood creeps, and the nerves prick." This structure guides the reader through stages of weakening strength and growing despair, keeping emotional chaos within a framework of order. The sentences build like a steady progression, turning personal pain into something shared and universal.

In *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Tennyson repeats commands like "Forward, the Light Brigade! Was there a man dismayed?" to create unstoppable energy. The short, linked phrases push the narrative ahead, making danger feel part of a larger purpose. Browning adds layers of complexity to this approach. His *My Last Duchess* breaks lines thoughtfully: "She ranked my gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name." The pause after "ranked" lets the Duke's resentment emerge slowly, as if the sentence itself reveals his unstable mind. In *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, Browning piles up questions: "What made those holes? Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set." These interruptions mimic the knight's growing confusion, bending standard sentence flow to match inner turmoil. *Porphyria's Lover* uses sudden stops: "That moment she was mine, mine, fair, perfectly pure and good." The repetition locks the moment in place, freezing the speaker's warped logic.

Modernist poets broke these patterns entirely, letting sentences reflect the scattered nature of thought and experience. Eliot's *The Waste Land* jumps between ideas without smooth connections: "April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire." Seasons, plants, and feelings collide, creating a picture of broken culture where nothing flows neatly. The structure forces readers to piece together meaning, just as people in that era tried to reassemble their world. Pound works similarly in *The Cantos*, linking fragments across time: "And even I can remember A day when the historians left blanks in their writings." Past and present overlap without warning, inviting active interpretation.

Hardy uses plain, cutting sentences to show time's erosion. In *During Wind and Rain*, "Down their carved names the raindrop ploughs" wears away both stone and memory in one direct image. The simplicity underscores loss without elaborate buildup. This change in sentence structure marks a key evolution. Victorian poets contained their tensions within balanced forms, suggesting that order could still hold. Modernists let those tensions break free, using fractured lines to capture a sense of self and society coming apart at the seams. Sentences became less about guiding the reader and more about enacting the disorder of real life.

Rhythm and Meter: From Perfectionism to Disruption

Victorian poetry relied on regular rhythms to bring calm and structure to troubled subjects. Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* moves in even beats: "Sunset and evening star, And one clear call for me." The steady pulse suggests a peaceful journey toward death, with form offering reassurance. In *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, the galloping rhythm "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward" matches the horses' charge, turning tragedy into something noble and measured. Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* follows a traditional ballad pattern, it's even flow contrasting sharply with the story's dark turn. This steadiness heightens the unease, as normal sounds frame abnormal actions.

Modernists moved away from strict patterns, letting rhythm follow natural speech and feeling. Pound's *The Return* places

stresses carefully: "See, they return," with pauses building a sense of quiet arrival from the past. The rhythm feels open and unforced. Eliot varies pace in *The Waste Land*, shifting from smooth flow in "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many" to jagged reminders of the dead. This uneven movement captures city chaos and spiritual emptiness. Hardy's *The Voice* sways irregularly: "Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me." The rhythm echoes wind and fading memory, breaking from tight measures.

These changes mirror a world losing its old rhythms. Victorian poets used meter to impose meaning on confusion; Modernists let sound reflect life's true irregularity, making poetry feel more immediate and honest. Tennyson's careful balance in *In Memoriam* creates a musical ladder through despair, each stanza's repetition offering steps toward hope. Browning experiments further, letting rhythm bend with character: the Duke's measured speech in *My Last Duchess* accelerates subtly as his anger surfaces. Pound takes this freedom further, his lines in *The Garden* pulsing like breath held and released. Eliot's shifts in *The Waste Land* mimic heartbeats under strain, while Hardy's later poems settle into a weary cadence that feels like footsteps in mud.

Imagery and Thematic Evolution: From Certainty to Crisis

Victorian images often worked toward resolution, turning doubt into something hopeful. Tennyson's mirror in *The Lady of Shalott* holds a beautiful but false world until it shatters, suggesting art's limits but also life's pull. The pilot in *Crossing the Bar* promises safe passage to a higher place. Browning's vast plain and dark tower in *Childe Roland* challenge the knight but leave room for grim determination.

Modernists presented images of division and emptiness. Pound's faces becoming petals in *In a Station of the Metro* blend human and natural in a fleeting glimpse, without clear comfort. Eliot piles broken pieces: "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter." These visions show myths failing in a barren time. Hardy's thrush in *The Darkling* sings amid grey frost and cryptic wind, a weak sign of life in overwhelming desolation. Themes shift from wrestling with belief to accepting fracture. Victorian poetry sought wholeness; Modernist work exposed lasting cracks, with images serving as honest witnesses to change. Tennyson's weaving web in *The Lady of Shalott* symbolizes creation trapped by distance, its colors vivid until reality intrudes. Browning's strangled hair in *Porphyria's Lover* turns a lover's trophy into a grotesque monument, blending beauty with violence. Pound's wet bough holds transient beauty against urban blur, Eliot's river carries drowned hopes, and Hardy's rain etches graves with relentless patience. These pictures evolve from symbols of struggle toward emblems of endurance, poetry charting how humans face a world that offers no final answers. Victorian imagery promised patterns beneath chaos; Modernist visions reveal chaos as the enduring pattern itself.

Conclusion

This study has traced the evolution of poetic language from the late Victorian era to early Modernism through a focused comparison of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. The analysis of diction, syntax, rhythm, and imagery reveals a gradual transformation rather than an abrupt break. Victorian poets employed ornate vocabulary and structured forms to wrestle with emerging doubts about faith, progress, and human purpose amid

industrialization and scientific upheaval. Tennyson's resonant phrases in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and rhythmic drive in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* sought to impose order on uncertainty, while Browning's subtle psychological revelations in *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover* introduced hints of fragmentation within dramatic voices. These elements laid essential groundwork, containing tensions within familiar poetic traditions.

Modernist poets intensified these tendencies in response to profound crises, including the First World War, urban alienation, and philosophical disillusionment. Pound's precise imagism in *In a Station of the Metro* and Eliot's polyphonic collage in *The Waste Land* stripped language to its core, using concise diction and fractured syntax to mirror a splintered reality. Hardy's transitional work, such as *The Darkling Thrush*, bridged the eras with colloquial restraint and irregular rhythms, evolving Victorian melancholy into stark existential observation. Across all categories, poetic tools adapted progressively: words grew leaner for sharper impact, sentences loosened to reflect disjointed thought, rhythms shifted from measured perfection to natural pulse, and images moved from symbolic reassurance to unflinching exposure of crisis. This continuum confirms the central hypothesis—Modernism did not invent rupture but amplified latent Victorian ambiguities, shaped by escalating historical pressures.

The findings carry broader implications for literary scholarship. By challenging the dominant view of Modernism as a radical departure, this research highlights poetry's role as a responsive medium, continually reshaping itself to articulate collective consciousness. Victorian earnestness, with its moral scaffolding, gives way to Modernist experimentation, yet both engage the same human struggles: loss, identity, and meaning in flux. Such insights enrich interdisciplinary dialogues, linking literature to history, linguistics, and cultural studies, and underscore how poetic language serves as both mirror and forge for societal change.

Future investigations might extend this framework to intermediary figures like Gerard Manley Hopkins or W.B. Yeats, whose innovative sprung rhythms and mythic syntheses further illuminate the transition. Comparative studies across genres—such as the novel's stream-of-consciousness in James Joyce or Virginia Woolf—could trace parallel linguistic shifts. Global perspectives, including colonial echoes in English poetry or influences from French Symbolism, offer additional avenues. Ultimately, this work affirms poetry's enduring power: in moments of upheaval, language evolves not to resolve but to witness, connecting past certainties to present fractures and inviting readers to navigate the ongoing dialogue between tradition and renewal.

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