



## Role of Gender in Victorian Society with Special Reference of Tennyson's Poetry

*Jayashree Halder*

*Assistant Teacher, Karanjali Balika Vidyalaya, West Bengal, India*

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### **Abstract**

*The Victorian era (1837 to 1901) was a time of profound societal change and evolving gender roles. This age is characterized by rigid gender stereotypes and expectations that prevailed in every sphere of society. In this society, distinct roles of men and women prevailed in the form of specific duties and responsibilities. For example, the role of women was to have children and tend the house. Women had to perform their duties and responsibilities thoroughly to run a respectable household. They had the duty to secure happiness among family members. On the other hand, men were the superior rulers. They were defined to run the public world. They had authority, superiority, domination, rationality, and strength. The great poet Alfred Tennyson has a strong voice in speaking about Victorian society. His poetry strongly reflects the gender-stereotyped society of the Victorian age. His poems are a powerful reflection of gender dynamics. These poems highlight societal norms, challenges regarding women's place, and also portray cultural perceptions of femininity. This article will portray Victorian society regarding gender issues through a detailed explanation of Tennyson's poems like "Mariana," "The Lady of Shalott," "The Princess," and "Ulysses." The reader will understand how these poems serve both as a mirror and a critique of societal values regarding women's role and identity. The stereotypical belief in the cult of domesticity is perfectly reflected in these poems. Women are presented as pure and morally superior, whose duty is to provide moral guidance to their children. They are the "angel of the house," responsible for nurturing their families.*

**Keywords:** *Superiority, Gender Stereotype, Domesticity, Rationality, Femininity, Cult of Domesticity*

### **Introduction**

The representation of women in literature has always been presented as a complex matter. The Victorian age is no exception. Victorian poetry clearly offers a picture of a feminine code of conduct that was considered the destiny of every woman. Every woman was mostly restricted to domestic confines. They were fully dependent on their husbands or fathers. They were meant to maintain only household activities, cooking, taking care of their children, and supporting their husbands in every aspect. Most of Tennyson's poems feature female protagonists who have limitations on their autonomy. These poems clearly reflect women's position and show how women are controlled by a patriarchal society. Tennyson aimed to show a critical view of Victorian society, where females do not have a single identity. They were deprived of their property rights and voting rights. Though in modern times women's roles are not the same as in the Victorian era, modern women are not fully controlled by a male-dominated society. Women have their individual identity. They can work, earn money, and are well aware of their position in society. On the other hand, Victorian women did not do anything outside their domestic world. Yet, within these confines, they found ways to challenge and reshape their roles. Tennyson has portrayed these things beautifully in his poems. He both reflected and reinforced gender norms through his poetry.

## Victorian Age

The Victorian Age is a period of British history spanning the 64-year reign of Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901. It is one of the longest reigns in the history of England. When Victoria became queen, she was 18 years old. Queen Victoria is associated with industrial expansion, economic progress, and development. It was an exciting age where the sun never set. The age is characterized by many societal and historical changes, scientific advancement, and the huge production of industrial elements. The social class was also reforming. The First Reform Bill of 1831 extended the franchise and gave more people the right to vote, though it excluded the working class. New theories came into conflict with old faith. People faced a contrast between science and religion, and they started to raise questions about religious faith. Many authors began writing about the suffering of women and the crises they faced during this era. Victorian literature reflected and questioned gender norms and presented the typical Victorian woman character. (Dr. H. Shimreingam, 2018)

## Alfred Lord Tennyson

Alfred Lord Tennyson was considered the representative poet of the age. He was born on 6th August, 1809. In 1829, he won the Chancellor's Medal for his first piece, "Timbuktu." In 1850, after Rogers' refusal and following the death of Wordsworth, Tennyson was appointed as the Poet Laureate. In reflecting the restless spirit of his progressive age, Tennyson is as remarkable as Pope was in voicing the artificiality of the early eighteenth century. His poetry is a mirror which reflects the social, political, moral, and religious trends and tendencies of the time. His representative character, besides his superb artistry, accounts for the wide popularity he achieved in his age (Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son, 1897, Vol. I). Tennyson used a wide range of subject matter, from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature. All his poems reflect the societal image of men and women perfectly (<https://en.wikipedia.org>).

## Role of Gender in Victorian World

**a) The Princess:** "The Princess: A Medley" is Tennyson's blank verse narrative poem. It was published in 1847. It is written on the subject matter of women's rights and education. It is a plea for intellectual equality for men and women. It is a serio-comic attempt to handle the theme that was then known as 'the New Woman.' The text critiques and reinforces Victorian gender stereotypes, depicting women as nurturing and men as intellectual or material leaders. Here, she renounces the world of men by establishing a female university. Princess Ida tries to break the norms. In her university, men are not allowed to enter. The poem presents the theme of higher education for women and challenges rigid Victorian roles. The concept of society is that men have the power to command, to hold the sword, to fight, and to work in the field. But women used to work inside, and they should obey their husbands. They do not have a separate existence.

"Man for the field and woman for the hearth;  
Man for the sword, and for the needle she;  
Man with the head, and women with the heart;  
Man to command, and woman to obey;  
All else is confusion." (Tennyson, 1899, p. 197)

Women are weak and frail. They do only domestic work. Their total dependence is upon men, who are the controllers of their lives. Here, Tennyson clearly shows the reflection of Victorian society, where women had to do only household work and submissiveness is rooted in their lives. But men are strong and powerful enough to rule the world. However, Princess Ida attempts to challenge society by her intellect. She tries to establish the idea that women are not only suited for domesticity, but also have the right to be educated. So, she establishes an all-female university. The "angel of the house," who is actually the representative of a high level of intellect, becomes rebellious. Women deserve education, but it is a time when men were considered superior. Their ultimate role was to act as a tempering and nurturing influence on men, rather than as an equal, independent force in public

life. Women were expected to live within four walls, to cook, and to maintain and look after their children. He argues that female power and intellect must be harmonized with male power: "Woman's cause is mine." The prince envisages a future where "the man may be more of woman, she of man."

He says, "My hopes and thine are one."

Ultimately, the poet tries to suggest that true harmony requires a balance between masculine strength and feminine compassion, rather than female segregation or total subjugation.

**b) The Lady of Shalott:** Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" is a perfect example of gender stereotypes. The Lady of Shalott confines herself to a domestic and isolated sphere with four grey walls and four grey towers. In this grey environment, she does not feel any life, but she has to live with her curse. She cannot see the world directly, but only through a mirror. She can only see the reflection of the world. She is not an active but a passive artist who can only weave, whereas the active Lancelot dominates the outside world. The lady's aloofness is due to her isolation from the outside world. The lady's direct looking, not through the mirror, at the prince symbolizes her desire to leave her confined world and touch the free outside world. Actually, the Lady of Shalott is trapped in a tower, which symbolizes the strict confinement of Victorian women in the private sphere. But at the end of the poem, her death, that is, her destruction, is caused by looking directly at the outside world. It strictly shows that the consequences for women in this patriarchal society can be severe if they try to challenge the norms and regulations set up by the male-dominated society. Tennyson perfectly represents the Victorian concept of male activeness, female passiveness, submissiveness, confinement, isolation, and the establishment of male artistry. How women were treated in the male-dominated society of the Victorian age is presented even at the end of the poem, when she dies and her face is recognized as a "lovely" object to be seen by men in Camelot.

The Lady of Shalott portrays the Victorian age by showing how men and women were divided between private and public life. In the tower, the lady is imprisoned, performing her feminine duty, that is weaving, whereas men in the outside world (Camelot) perform masculine and public duties. The lady, like other Victorian women, performs only her domestic duty and does not engage with the outside world. Her gender, her domesticated fate, and her act of weaving all represent Tennyson's idea of an ideal Victorian woman. The poem highlights the ideology of the age, where the lady's search for identity leads to a tragic end. When the lady comes out of her tower, she knows that she will be destroyed by her fate and that her curse will never be broken, but she still tries to gain her identity and to reach the outside world, which is fully controlled by masculine power. Her struggle to break the norms is perfectly presented in this poem. This longing to escape domesticity reflects an early form of feminism, which is more visible in modern times.

**c) Mariana:** In the poem "Mariana," Tennyson presents a common theme—despondent isolation. Like "The Lady of Shalott," this poem shares the same concept of aloofness and disconnection from the outside society. In the Victorian age, every woman's destiny was to confine herself within a specific sphere, sometimes for cooking, sometimes for tending families, or sometimes for maintaining household work. In this poem, Tennyson portrays Mariana's ardent desire to kill herself. She is tired of loneliness.

"She only said, 'My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said;  
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary;  
I would that I were dead!'"

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariana>)

Here, the poet strongly presents male power as capable of understanding everything, whereas women are shown as lacking such capacity, even to appreciate the beauty of nature. Mariana is unable to understand the movement of time:

"She could not look on the sweet heaven  
Either at morn or eventide."

Tennyson portrays Mariana as a fallen Victorian woman by suggesting that she is not married but has strong sexual desire. During the Victorian era, it was considered sinful and unconventional to have sexual desire outside marriage. The absence of her lover makes Mariana a “fallen woman.” She does not perform any domestic work but only waits and laments. Her existence is defined by the total abandonment of her lover. She has no importance without him.

Mariana is confined in a “lonely moated grange.” She suppresses her feelings and constantly wishes to die. Even at the end of the poem, she has a strong desire to die:

“She wept, ‘I am aweary, aweary,  
Oh God, that I were dead!’”

**d) Ulysses:** Tennyson’s great dramatic monologue “Ulysses” has a strong reference to gender stereotypes. This poem glorifies masculine action, adventure, and public leadership of the King of Ithaca, while femininity is associated with a dull life and confinement to domestic space. Ulysses believes that his old age is not an age of rest, but of restlessness and exploration, whereas he dismisses his wife as an “aged wife,” whose secondary life is presented as restricted. Domestic stability is the ultimate fate of Penelope.

This poem shows the heroic temperament of Ulysses, who desires sea voyages and adventure, but in contrast, the life of Penelope is associated with “still hearth” and “barren crags.” This poem clearly presents a male-centric world. Men have an unending struggle with an unsuppressible desire “to strive, to find, and not to yield.” This reflects the patriarchal legacy of Victorian society, where men are active outside the domestic sphere. They have responsibilities and duties to perform in public and political life, leaving their wives in a private, confined domestic world.

In this poem, the hero does not show regard for his wife. He disregards her by saying:

“Match’d with an aged wife, I mete and dole.”

He feels that he does not want to waste time with his old wife and the uncivilized people of Ithaca. This clearly shows how Victorian men underestimated femininity, which was associated with maintaining household work. To spend time with their wives is seen as a waste—this reflects the mentality of many men of the time. They consider themselves superior within family and society. They do not consider their wives’ desires, likes, or dislikes. Tennyson clearly highlights male rejection of a settled, domestic, and seemingly feminine way of life.

## **Victorian Women vs Modern Women**

In Victorian society, women had limitations in running their lifestyle smoothly. In Tennyson’s poetry, it has been portrayed perfectly that Victorian women are simple and pure. Even their body is seen as a temple. The legal rights of married women were like those of children. They belonged either to their husband or their father. Like farm animals, they were fully controlled by their owner in the form of husband or father. They had nothing to do except playing the piano, doing household work, maintaining the family, or looking after children. Sometimes, the “angel of the house,” being tired of doing the same boring household work, wanted to free herself, but was shattered in the end. Public duty was prohibited for women.

But in contrast, modern women have the liberty to work publicly. They have equal rights like men. They can maintain their own accounts as well as their lives. Modern women appear intelligent, sharp-witted, and independent. They are capable of doing any work successfully if given the opportunity. They can run their families smoothly by supporting their husbands. They can go outside for work anytime, whether in the evening or during the day. They are aware of their capabilities, and that is why they expect to be given the respect they deserve. In Victorian society, women had limited rights, whereas modern women have equal rights of voting, property, etc. Now they form societies, hold public meetings, and publish newspapers and magazines. They have succeeded in gaining an equal place in society after a long and difficult struggle (Dr. Shahana Makhdoom, 2025).

## Conclusion

This article has explored the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry through a detailed and minute analysis of Tennyson's poems- "The Princess," "The Lady of Shalott," "Mariana," and "Ulysses." It examines how the poet engages with themes of female identity, male superiority, domination, and social and cultural perceptions. Women in the Victorian age lived under the control of a male-created world, where their feminine code and conduct were fully maintained by patriarchal figures. Gradually, they started to raise their voices against societal norms and conditions. They began to free themselves from the clutches of masculine power through their intelligence and knowledge. They started gaining the power to speak about their rights in the late nineteenth century.

With the wave of the feminist movement, women began to gain equal rights. The concept of gender equality fully flourished in the twentieth century. Though, even at present, the idea of gender inequality still remains at the core of society. The stereotypical concept of gender roles still exists in every family, every office, and every sphere of society. Though men and women now work together to run their families smoothly, women still bear the primary responsibility of taking care of children and maintaining household activities. Nowadays, women work and earn, but the concept of superiority still exists in the minds of many men. They often try to establish that they are the dominant authority.

In spite of all these gaps, we can say that Victorian women's roles remain a vital chapter in the history of women's empowerment. The complexity of human nature and the stereotypical concepts of society regarding gender should change, becoming more open-minded and broad.

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