

HERE BEGINNETH THE DE-  
FENCE OF GUENEVERE.

**B**UT, KNOW-  
ING NOW  
THAT THEY  
WOULD  
HAVE HER  
SPEAK,  
SHE THREW  
HER WET  
HAIR BACK,  
WARD FROM

HER BROW,  
HER HAND CLOSE TO HER  
MOUTH TOUCHING HER  
CHEEK,  
AS THOUGH SHE HAD HAD  
THERE A SHAMEFUL BLOW,  
AND FEELING IT SHAMEFUL  
TO FEEL OUGHT BUT SHAME  
ALL THROUGH HER HEART,  
YET FELT HER CHEEK BURN-  
ED SO,  
SHE MUST A LITTLE TOUCH  
IT; LIKE ONE LAME  
SHE WALKED AWAY FROM  
GAUWAIN, WITH HER HEAD

# What makes Morris's poetry distinctive?

An introduction to his poetry, from lyrics to narrative poems, by Florence Boos

I was pleased to be asked to present some thoughts on William Morris's poetry to a Morris Society audience, including those interested in other aspects of Morris's work such as his designs or political ideas who may be unaccustomed to reading nineteenth-century poetry. Writing poetry was basic to Morris's identity; he wrote verse at every stage of his life, from late adolescence until the year of his death. He published at least ten entire volumes of poems as well as additional ungathered lyrics, poetic translations, and poems inserted into longer prose narratives. Moreover the gifts he developed in composing poetry – a sense for rhythm and emotive language, dramatic skill at representing moments of crisis, versatility in anticipating audience response, and the ability to turn introspection into meta-reflection – arguably helped shape the style of his later

journalism, essays on art and socialism, and political romances such as *News from Nowhere*.

It is in his poetry, too, that Morris wrestled with what for him were the underlying metaphysical issues of life: how can human existence, so brief and so little remembered, have any enduring meaning? What can help compensate for failure, suffering, or the loss of love? And most important, faced with a potentially annihilating world, how can a lone individual resist or ameliorate the forces of destruction? The inevitably partial answers to these questions form the ethical framework of Morris's lyrics and narratives, as they motivated his private life and outward endeavors.

In what follows I will argue that Morris's poetry is distinctive for its variety; its narrative quality; and its embeddedness in history, or rather, in a set of beliefs about our relationship

with the past. All of these traits can initially seem alienating or intimidating to modern readers, but when fully internalised and understood they will be seen to constitute its strengths.

## **Variety and comprehensiveness**

Versatile in this as in his other endeavors, Morris composed in several modes, even within a single poem. He wrote dramatic narratives and monologues, dreamlike symbolic lyrics, expressive personal poems, a dramatic masque, extended linked verse tales in a variety of stanza patterns (rhymed couplets, Spenserian stanzas, interspersed lyrics), a Scandinavian and contemporary epic, and what might be called socialist hymns. The foremost commentator on Victorian metrics, George Saintsbury, found his lyrics among the subtlest of the age. Some of his poems are intentionally ambiguous or

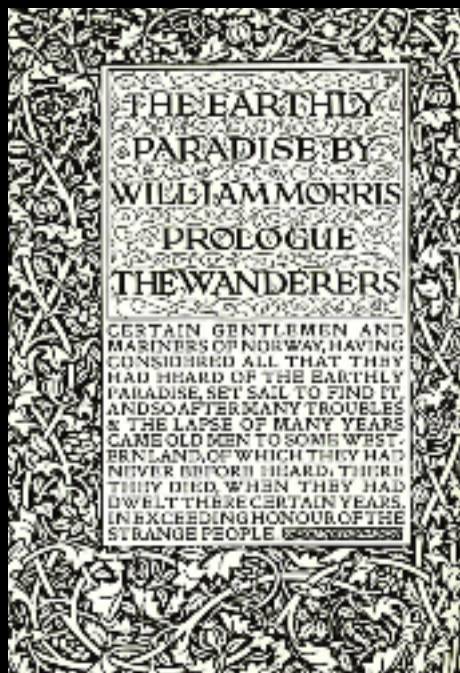
THE WEARINESS OF NOVEMBER.

Are thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick,  
 To struggle any more with doubt and thought  
 Whose formless veil draws darkening now and thick  
 A cross thee e'en as smoke-tinged mist wreaths, brought  
 Down a fair dale, to make it blind and nought?  
 Art thou so weary that no world there seems  
 Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?

Look out upon the real world, where the moon,  
 Half-way mixt root and crown of these high trees,  
 Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,  
 Silent and full of wonders; for the breeze  
 Died at the sunset, and no images,  
 No hopes of day are left in sky or earth—  
 Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

Lo! I have looked, and seen November there;  
 The changeless seat of change it seemed to be  
 Fair death of things, that living once, were fair;  
 Bright sign of loneliness too great for me;  
 Strange image of the dread eternity;  
 In whose void patience how can these have part,  
 These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

Left: November lyric from the *Book of Verse*, 1870.  
 Below left: Title page from *The Earthly Paradise*, Kelmscott Press edition, 1896-97; first published 1868-70.  
 Below right: Frontispiece from *Sigurd the Volsung*, Kelmscott Press edition, 1898; first published 1876.



embedded in foreign ways of thought; others are direct, clear, and contemporary. In the face of so many different styles and stages of his work, one may well ask, where to begin?

Since the next sections consider his narrative poems and 'existential' historicism, here it seems appropriate to mention the simplest of his poems, his lyrics. These share with other Victorian verses a sense of poetry as music, evoking a direct response through sound, cadence, rhythm, colour and symbol rather than logical connectives. Here, for example, is the November lyric of *The Earthly Paradise*, published in 1870 when its author was 37:

Are thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick  
To struggle any more with doubt and thought,  
Whose formless veil draws darkening now and  
thick  
Across thee, e'en as smoke-tinged mist-wreaths  
brought  
Down a fair dale to make it blind and nought?  
Art thou so weary that no world there seems  
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and  
dreams?

Look out upon the real world, where the moon,  
Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high  
trees,

Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,  
Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze  
Died at the sunset, and no images,  
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Yea, I have looked and seen November there;  
The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,  
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Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,  
Strange image of the dread eternity,  
In whose void patience how can these have part,  
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless  
heart?

A great deal could be said about this poem – its sources, its speaker, its form and images, its use of sounds to convey emotion, its careful repetitions and contrasts, or its relationship to the longer sequence, *The Earthly Paradise*, of which it is a part. But no reader needs to ponder these matters to understand its meaning – its evocation of enduring and total isolation. As in Morris's other lyrics, its art consists in its controlled simplicity.

Twenty-one years later Morris composed another lyric poem on a similarly sombre subject, this time directed toward a more public context: *Alfred Linnell, Killed in Trafalgar Square November 20th, 1887: A Death Song*. Written to be sung at the funeral of an innocent bystander killed by the police as these attacked peaceful protesters in Trafalgar Square, the poem presented Morris with the difficult task of commemorating the tragedy of Linnell's death yet nonetheless inspiring his audience with hope and resolve:

What cometh here from west to east awending?  
And who are these, the marchers stern and slow?  
We bear the message that the rich are sending  
Aback to those who bade them wake and know.  
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,  
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;  
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning:  
We come back speechless, bearing back our  
dead.  
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken.  
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;  
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken.  
But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.  
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;  
Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;  
But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen  
Brings us our day of work to win the best.  
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

Once again Morris uses the cadenced patterning of emotive language to build up to the final claim of solidarity, 'Not one, not one, ... / But one and all.' The simple images (a march, voices denied speech, a dead man shut out of lighted halls, a storm followed by a cloudy dawn) were easily accessible by his audience and channeled anger (not acceptance) into a shared bond of strength.

### Narrative poetry

Morris was best known in his day for his narrative poems, especially *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), and *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). An attraction of Morris's narrative poetry is its psychological complexity, combined with grace of narration, moments of sudden realism, and an emphasis on music or melody. If modern audiences continued to appreciate long poems, these works would still be more widely esteemed and enjoyed. It is hard to convey the effects of Morris's narrative tales without quoting extended sections; and in any case, it is not the plot per se but the narrator's participation through choices of language and detail that add vividness and evoke empathy.

Morris's early narrative poetry is often remarkably visceral and direct. Consider, for example, *The Haystack in the Floods*, from Morris's early volume *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). The poem is set in France during the Hundred Year's War, and its narrator describes the death of two lovers, Robert and Jehane, who are entrapped by French guerillas as they attempt to escape over the border into safety. For the twenty-four-year old author, steeped in the patriotic narrative of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, it seemed clear that the war's worst atrocities had been perpetrated by the French. At the poem's

end, Robert and Jehane die bravely in full awareness of their shared fate. Morris's account is both stark and empathetic:

For Robert – both his eyes were dry,  
He could not weep, but gloomily  
He seem'd to watch the rain; yea, too,  
His lips were firm; he tried once more  
To touch her lips; she reach'd out, sore  
And vain desire so tortured them,  
The poor grey lips, and now the hem  
Of his sleeve brush'd them.

With a start  
Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart;  
From Robert's throat he loosed the bands  
Of silk and mail; with empty hands  
Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw  
The long bright blade without a flaw  
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand  
In Robert's hair; she saw him bend  
Back Robert's head; she saw him send  
The thin steel down; the blow told well,  
Right backward the knight Robert fell,  
And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead,  
Unwitting, as I deem: so then  
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,  
Who ran, some five or six, and beat  
His head to pieces at their feet.

Then Godmar turn'd again and said:  
"So, Jehane, the first fitte is read!  
Take note, my lady, that your way  
Lies backward to the Chatelet!"  
She shook her head and gazed awhile  
At her cold hands with a rueful smile,  
As though this thing had made her mad.

This was the parting that they had  
Beside the haystack in the floods.

The seemingly mundane but evocative image of a 'haystack in the floods' – concrete, bleak, and unrelieved – provides a fit setting for sadism and murder.

In his later tales Morris often inserted internal witnesses – poets, singers, storytellers, or wisdom figures – to comment on the action and appeal directly to his audience. Victorian writers tended to address their audiences directly (perhaps the most famous example is the declaration of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: 'Reader, I married him'), but Morris is unusual in the importance he ascribes to the singer-witness. We have seen such an example in the November lyric, spoken by an unnamed voice which is presumably that of the author of the cycle's tales. Another example appears in the figure of Orpheus, who in *The Life and Death of Jason* sings of the meaning of the Argonauts' voyage, and in *The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice*, of his loss of Eurydice and defiance of the gods.

A further distinctive feature of Morris's poetry is its concrete interest in the crafts and occupations of ordinary people, the skilled activities needed for more realistic 'heroism'. Some of the more dramatic passages of *The Life and Death of Jason* may be found in its narration

Lonely Love & Loveless Death

I have I have heartening  
To some dread new-comer?  
What chain is it bindeth,  
What-curses is wight  
That the world is a-berkering  
Amidmost the summer,  
That the soft sunset blancheth,  
And death standeth by?

Doth it wean, is it going,  
Lest gone be for ever,  
The life that seemed so true,  
The longing thought?  
How is turned to wandering  
That constant endeavor,  
To bind love that bound me  
To hold all it brought?

Behold, tell beholding  
Grew pain twice told over;  
I heard the life bearing  
Grew ~~stronger~~ <sup>stronger</sup> past reach;  
I discerned the unfolding  
And blessing the course,  
Till the dream past all bearing  
The death's mid did reach.

Beaten back, ever smitten  
With pain that none knoweth,  
Did love ever languish  
Did hope ever die?  
I know not, but little  
By the light that love showeth.

So when we wade the tangled wood  
In haste and hurry to be there  
Nought seem its leaves & blossoms <sup>good</sup> fair  
For all that they be fashioned fair.  
But looking up at last we see  
The glimmer of the open light  
From o'er the place where we dwell,  
Then grow the very brambles bright.  
So now amidst our day of strife  
With many a matter glad we play,  
When once see the light of life  
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.

William Morris  
Feb 5th 1887

MINE AND THINE.  
FROM A FLEMISH POEM OF THE  
FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

Mine and  
Thine.



Two words about the  
world we see,  
And nought but  
MINE & THINE  
they be.  
Ah! might we drive  
them forth and wide  
With us should rest  
and peace abide;  
All free, nought

owned of goods and gear,  
By men and women though it were.  
Common to all all wheat and wine  
Over the seas and up the Rhine.  
No manslayer then the wide world o'er  
When MINE and THINE are known no  
more.

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SOLD FOR THE BENEFIT OF LINNELL'S ORPHANS.

ALFRED LINNELL



Killed in Trafalgar Square,  
NOVEMBER 20, 1887.

A DEATH SONG,

BY MR. W. MORRIS.

Memorial Design by Mr. Walter Crane.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

Left: *Lonely Love and  
Drawing Near the Light* from  
Huntington Library MS.  
6427, published in *Poems by  
the Way*, 1891.  
Above top: *Mine and Thine*  
from *Poems by the Way*,  
1891.  
Above: *Alfred Linnell: A Death  
Song*, cover page designed  
by Walter Crane, 1887.

