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# "Last Words On Greece"

The Role of Literature in the Lives of  
Homosexual People in Victorian England



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*What are to me those honours or renown  
Past or to come, a new-born people's cry?  
Albeit for such I could despise a crown  
Of aught save laurel, or for such could die.  
I am a fool of passion, and a frown  
Of thine to me is an adder's eye  
To the poor bird whose pinion fluttering down  
Wafts unto death the breast it bore so high:  
Such is this maddening fascination grown,  
So strong thy magic or so weak am I.*

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Lord Byron, 1824



The Victorian Era 1837-  
1901

*VICTORIAN  
SOCIETY*

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# View of

## *Males* Sex Differentiation *Females*

- Physically and emotionally strong -
- Naturally violent -
- Hyper-sexual -
- Dominating -
- Self-expressive -
- Creative -
- Intelligent -



- Weak -
- Submissive -
- Emotional -
- Intuitive -
- Nurturing -
- Naive -
- Quiet -
- Celibate -



# SEPARATE SPHERES

## Inner Sphere

- Care for the home
- Birth and raise children
- Perform emotional labor for the family

## Outer Sphere

Practice religion

Maintain good social standing

- Work outside of the home
- Manage finances
- Focus on knowledge

# Homophobia in Victorian England

The term "homosexuality" was not first used until the late 1800's. Before then, society purposefully attempted to hide the presence and existence of gay and lesbian people.



- Belief of homosexuality as a sin / performing sexual acts for purposes other than procreation / considered hyper-sexual by nature
- Taboo
- Worry that homosexual relationships would cause downfall of society / straying from separate spheres
- A new "scientific" approach to viewing homosexuality

"A product of moral insanity" Karl Westphal, 1860

Ulrich's theory of "Urning"

- An increase in capital punishment for sodomy, "attempted sodomy"
- Impact on heterosexual male friendships

“A few more cases like Oscar Wilde’s and we should fine the freedom of comradeship now possible to men seriously impaired to the permanent detriment of the race” William Thomas Stead

- Erasure of queer identities



*LITERATURE'S  
INFLUENCE ON THE  
LIVES OF GAY  
VICTORIANS*

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# *SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERATURE*

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Studying & writing literature:

- Allowed discreet self expression -
  - Created spaces for gay people -
  - Allowed room for societal analysis, important for progression -
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# *EXPRESSING HOMOSEXUALITY*

Discreet methods of discussing homosexuality were often based on literary themes and tools.

## Polari

- A mixture of many different forms of slang -
- Began in the theater -
- Used to discuss homosexuality discreetly; a disguise -
- Often used by men in the Navy -

## Hellenism

- Greek writing used to understand and discuss homosexual feelings -
- Sappho -
- Greek studies & Aestheticism -

## Flowers

- Symbolism; different types/colors -
- Oscar Wilde known to wear green carnation -
- Lesbian writing; floral language -

# Prominent Queer Victorian Writers

- William Cory
- Christina Rossetti
- Percy Shelley
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti
- Michael Field
- Lord Alfred Douglas

Research on lesbian Victorian writing is limited:

Idea of "sisterhood"  
Pseudonyms (Michael Field)  
Difficulty succeeding in literary field

# *ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE*

## Openly gay

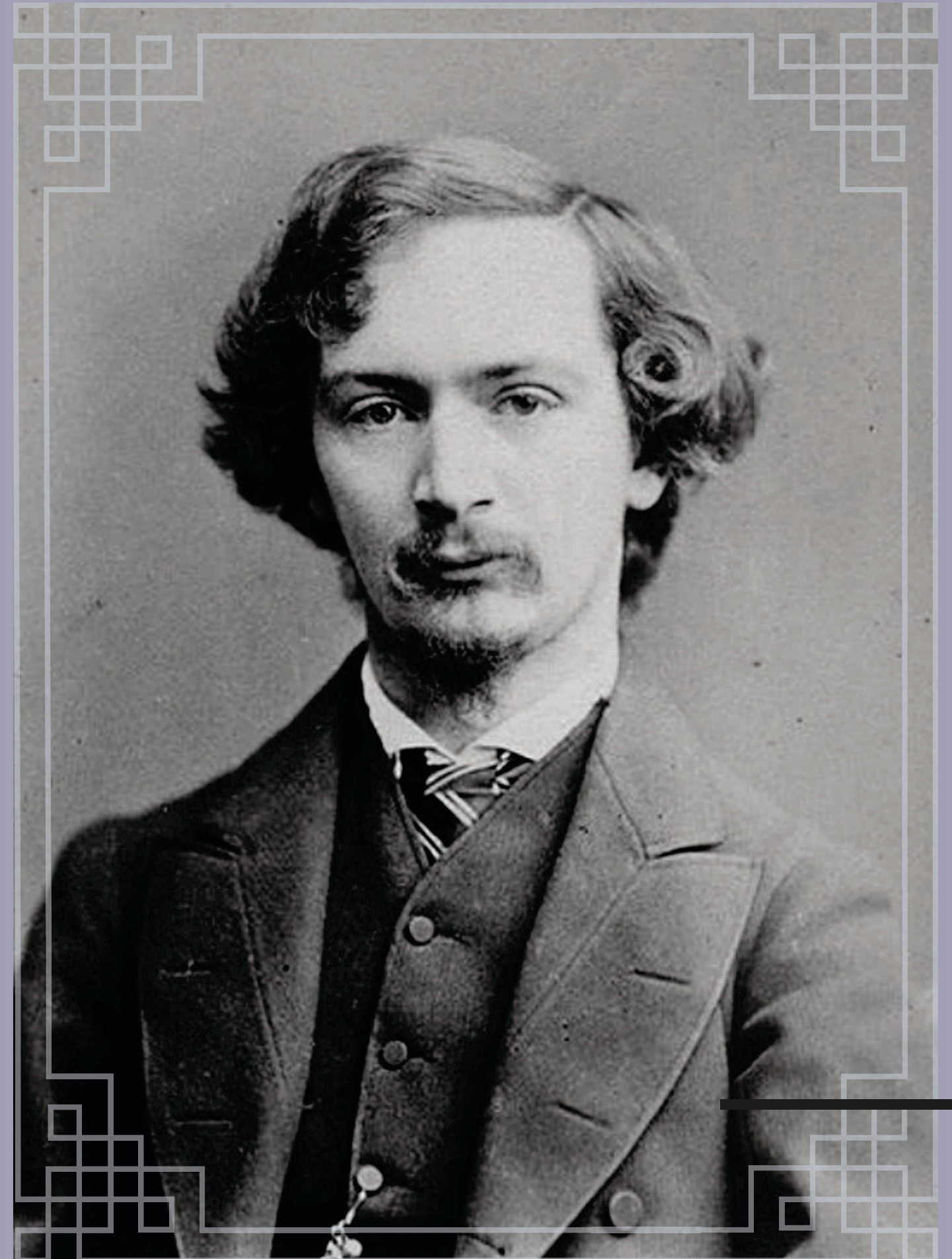
Had a relationship with Dante Rossetti  
Work heavily inspired by his own sexuality

## Taboo writing & disability

His writing often discussed sexual kinks  
Especially brave to be openly gay because of disability

## Greek Influence

Inspired by Sappho & wrote about her  
Wrote about lesbianism





# *AMY LEVY*

## Feminist writer

"A girl who has a touch of genius in her work" - Oscar Wilde

## "Sapphic interests"

Love letters to women

"A Wall Flower"; expressing lesbian repression

"I lounge in the doorway and languish in vain  
While Tom, Dick and Harry are dancing with  
Jane."

# OSCAR WILDE

## *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

1890

Homoerotic themes

## Affair with Lord Alfred Douglas

"The love that dare not speak its name"

## Imprisonment in 1885

2 years hard labor

Exiled 3 years until his death in 1900



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*Or in thy cedarn prison thou waitest for the bee:  
Ah, leave that simple honey, and take thy food from  
me.*

*My sun is stooping westward. Entranced dreamer,  
haste;  
There's fruitage in my garden, that I would have thee  
taste.*

*Now lift the lid a moment; now, Dorian shepherd,  
speak:  
Two minds shall flow together, the English and the  
Greek.*

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William Cory, 1891

