

In the Garden: *The Bible and Nineteenth-Century Literature* | BY MELISSA BROTTON

Nineteenth-century British writers intentionally recreated the Fall theme through ruined garden imagery and revisions of Adam and Eve. Influenced by the cultural and social revolutions of their period, the Victorians transformed the context of the Fall through the lenses of social concern and morality. In *Great Expectations* Dickens' Pip can be read as a type of young Adam losing his innocence in the garden once he falls for Estella, who has been deceived into acting a part in Miss Havisham's scheme. Dickens' revised ending places Pip and Estella back in the garden where they come to new understandings about their relationship:

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of the tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her.¹

Pip's narration provides a sense of finality to the act of leaving the garden, which carries echoes of Milton's final scene in *Paradise Lost*.

Also responsive to Milton's influence, women poets of the age rendered Eve more sympathetically than had been done in the past according to their new writing identities. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her 1844 preface to *A Drama of Exile*:

My subject was the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness; with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offense, appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man.²

Taking up where Milton left the couple, outside of the garden, Barrett Browning's Eve takes the responsibility for her choice to a suicidal extreme in her remorse for being the first human to sin. Eve's grief is later assuaged by Adam's prayer, and she speaks to Adam in redemptive terms:

*I am renewed.
My eyes grow with the light that is within thine;
The silence of my heart is full of sound.
Hold me up—so! Because I comprehend
This human love, I shall not be afraid
Of any human death (500–505)³*

Christina Rossetti, following closely on Barrett-Browning's heels, portrays Eve's voice in similar melodramatic tones. Eve weeps inconsolably for her loss of both Abel and Cain, blaming herself for the circumstance of Abel's murder through her fall into temptation.

*I, Eve, sad mother
Of all who must live,
I, not another,
Plucked bitterest fruit to give
My friend, husband, lover;—
O wanton eyes, run over;
Who but I should grieve?—
Cain hath slain his brother:
Of all who must die mother,
Miserable Eve! (26–35)⁴*

Rossetti's poem ends with the sad echoes of the lost natural world and its creatures in sympathetic response to Eve's grief, much like Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile*. Likewise, in "A Daughter of Eve," the narrator wrestles with a

sense of guilt over the demise of her own forsaken garden, applying Eve's suffering to future generations of women:

*My garden-plot I have not kept;
Faded and all-forsaken,
I weep as I have never wept:
Oh it was summer when I slept,
It's winter now I waken. (6–10)⁵*

Rossetti's Eve poems end with a sense of desolation and unmediated grief, representing a self-afflicted female type in Victorian literature. Alternatively Rossetti may offer a critique of such a figure as the despair remains in spite of self-reproach.

Unlike Rossetti's seeming fatalistic overtones in her Eve poems, a more hopeful picture emerges through nature's resiliency and God's spirit in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur." In his poem Hopkins expresses concern for the environment, which humans have not cared for, but though Earth's beauty is dimmed since the original creation, God's spirit refreshes both landscape and human spirit.

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent*

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (9–14)⁶
Hopkins' poem uses the metaphor of morning to represent the change that happens to Earth and mankind once God's care for the earth is acknowledged, creating an ecotheological vision for a new world.

Trailing the end of the nineteenth century, Frances Hodgson Burnett published *The Secret Garden*, a story depicting a reversal of the Fall, in which two emotionally damaged children find identity and healing as they discover and tend to a lost garden. In the following scene, Mary and Dickon bring Mary's sick cousin Colin into the garden for the first time:

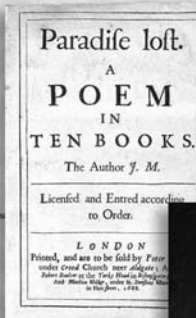
[H]ere and there everywhere were touches or splashes of gold and purple and white and the trees were showing pink and snow above his head and there were fluttering of wings and faint sweet pipes and humming and scents and scents. And the sun fell warm upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch. And in wonder Mary and Dickon stood and stared at him. He looked so strange and different because a pink glow of color had actually crept all over him—ivory face and neck and hands and all.

"I shall get well! I shall get well!" he cried out. "Mary! Dickon! I shall get well! And I shall live forever and ever and ever!"⁷


The restored garden reflects the redeemed relationships in this story. A father and his children are reunited, and, like Eden's promise of old, a new garden becomes a metaphor for healing and regeneration. ■

The Bible and Nineteenth-Century English Literature


King James Bible — 1611




John Milton
Political and Religious Poet
1608 - 1674
"Paradise Lost," 1667




Charles Dickens
Victorian Era English Novelist
1812 - 1870
"Great Expectations," 1861





Pip and Estella in the garden, by Charles Green, c. 1877
Gadshill Edition of "Great Expectations"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
English poet of the Romantic Movement
1806 - 1861
"A Drama of Exile," 1844



Footnotes

1. Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations: Norton Critical Edition*. Edgar Rosenberg, ed. (New York: Norton, 1999), 358.
2. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "Preface to the Edition of 1844." *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Poetic Library, 1994), 102-3.
3. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "A Drama of Exile." *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Vol. 1. Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone, and Beverly Taylor, eds. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 23.
4. Rossetti, Christina. "Eve." *Collected Works by Christina Rossetti*. Classic Literature. *About.com*. New York <<http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/crossetti/bl-crossetti-eve.htm>>. (Accessed February 27, 2011) .
5. Rossetti, Christina Georgina. "A Daughter of Eve." *Poems A Plenty*. <<http://www.poemsaplenty.com/poems/index.php?poemcategory=Future+Poems&poemID=783>> (Accessed February 27, 2011).
6. Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "God's Grandeur." *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 128.
7. Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden: A Norton Critical Edition*. (New York: Norton), 124.

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- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "A Drama of Exile." *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Vol. 1. Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone, and Beverly Taylor, eds. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010.
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- Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden: A Norton Anthology*. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, ed. New York: Norton, 2006.
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- Rossetti, Christina. "Eve." *Collected Works by Christina Rossetti*. Classic Literature. *About.com*. New York Times Company. <<http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/crossetti/bl-crossetti-eve.htm>> (Accessed February 27, 2011).

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The Secret Garden [is] a story depicting a reversal of the Fall, in which two emotionally damaged children find identity and healing as they discover and tend to a lost garden.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Late Victorian Poet;
Catholic Priest
1844 - 1880
"God's Grandeur,"
1877



"God's Grandeur,"
Dover Thrift Edition, 1995



Christina Rossetti
1830 - 1894
"A Daughter of Eve," 1879

Frances Hodgson Burnett

Late Victorian Novelist
1849 - 1924
"The Secret Garden," 1910



The Turn of the
— 20th Century

