

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **George Meredith**

**- poems -**

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## **Dirge in Woods**

A wind sways the pines,  
And below  
Not a breath of wild air;  
Still as the mosses that glow  
On the flooring and over the lines  
Of the roots here and there.  
The pine-tree drops its dead;  
They are quiet, as under the sea.  
Overhead, overhead  
Rushes life in a race,  
As the clouds the clouds chase;  
And we go,  
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,  
Even we,  
Even so.

George Meredith

## Juggling Jerry

Pitch here the tent, while the old horse grazes:  
By the old hedge-side we'll halt a stage.  
It's nigh my last above the daisies:  
My next leaf'll be man's blank page.  
Yes, my old girl! and it's no use crying:  
Juggler, constable, king, must bow.  
One that outjuggles all's been spying  
Long to have me, and he has me now.

We've travelled times to this old common:  
Often we've hung our pots in the gorse.  
We've had a stirring life, old woman!  
You, and I, and the old grey horse.  
Races, and fairs, and royal occasions,  
Found us coming to their call:  
Now they'll miss us at our stations:  
There's a Juggler outjuggles all!

Up goes the lark, as if all were jolly!  
Over the duck-pond the willow shakes.  
Easy to think that grieving's folly,  
When the hand's firm as driven stakes!  
Ay, when we're strong, and braced, and manful,  
Life's a sweet fiddle: but we're a batch  
Born to become the Great Juggler's han'ful:  
Balls he shies up, and is safe to catch.

Here's where the lads of the village cricket:  
I was a lad not wide from here:  
Couldn't I whip off the bale from the wicket?  
Like an old world those days appear!  
Donkey, sheep, geese, and thatch'd ale-house--I know them!  
They are old friends of my halts, and seem,  
Somehow, as if kind thanks I owe them:  
Juggling don't hinder the heart's esteem.

Juggling's no sin, for we must have victual:  
Nature allows us to bait for the fool.  
Holding one's own makes us juggle no little;  
But, to increase it, hard juggling's the rule.  
You that are sneering at my profession,  
Haven't you juggled a vast amount?  
There's the Prime Minister, in one Session,  
Juggles more games than my sins'll count.

I've murdered insects with mock thunder:  
Conscience, for that, in men don't quail.  
I've made bread from the bump of wonder:  
That's my business, and there's my tale.  
Fashion and rank all praised the professor:  
Ay! and I've had my smile from the Queen:  
Bravo, Jerry! she meant: God bless her!

Ain't this a sermon on that scene?

I've studied men from my topsy-turvy  
Close, and, I reckon, rather true.  
Some are fine fellows: some, right scurvy:  
Most, a dash between the two.  
But it's a woman, old girl, that makes me  
Think more kindly of the race:  
And it's a woman, old girl, that shakes me  
When the Great Juggler I must face.

We two were married, due and legal:  
Honest we've lived since we've been one.  
Lord! I could then jump like an eagle:  
You danced bright as a bit o' the sun.  
Birds in a May-bush we were! right merry!  
All night we kiss'd, we juggled all day.  
Joy was the heart of Juggling Jerry!  
Now from his old girl he's juggled away.

It's past parsons to console us:  
No, nor no doctor fetch for me:  
I can die without my bolus;  
Two of a trade, lass, never agree!  
Parson and Doctor!--don't they love rarely  
Fighting the devil in other men's fields!  
Stand up yourself and match him fairly:  
Then see how the rascal yields!

I, lass, have lived no gipsy, flaunting  
Finery while his poor helpmate grubs:  
Coin I've stored, and you won't be wanting:  
You shan't beg from the troughs and tubs.  
Nobly you've stuck to me, though in his kitchen  
Many a Marquis would hail you Cook!  
Palaces you could have ruled and grown rich in,  
But your old Jerry you never forsook.

Hand up the chirper! ripe ale winks in it;  
Let's have comfort and be at peace.  
Once a stout draught made me light as a linnet.  
Cheer up! the Lord must have his lease.  
May be--for none see in that black hollow--  
It's just a place where we're held in pawn,  
And, when the Great Juggler makes as to swallow,  
It's just the sword-trick--I ain't quite gone!

Yonder came smells of the gorse, so nutty,  
Gold-like and warm: it's the prime of May.  
Better than mortar, brick and putty  
Is God's house on a blowing day.  
Lean me more up the mound; now I feel it:

All the old heath-smells! Ain't it strange?  
There's the world laughing, as if to conceal it,  
But He's by us, juggling the change.

I mind it well, by the sea-beach lying,  
Once--it's long gone--when two gulls we beheld,  
Which, as the moon got up, were flying  
Down a big wave that sparked and swell'd.  
Crack, went a gun: one fell: the second  
Wheeled round him twice, and was off for new luck:  
There in the dark her white wing beckon'd:--  
Drop me a kiss--I'm the bird dead-struck!

George Meredith

## Love in the Valley

Under yonder beech-tree single on the green-sward,  
Couched with her arms behind her golden head,  
Knees and tresses folded to slip and ripple idly,  
Lies my young love sleeping in the shade.  
Had I the heart to slide an arm beneath her,  
Press her parting lips as her waist I gather slow,  
Waking in amazement she could not but embrace me:  
Then would she hold me and never let me go?

Shy as the squirrel and wayward as the swallow,  
Swift as the swallow along the river's light  
Circling the surface to meet his mirrored winglets,  
Fleeter she seems in her stay than in her flight.  
Shy as the squirrel that leaps among the pine-tops,  
Wayward as the swallow overhead at set of sun,  
She whom I love is hard to catch and conquer,  
Hard, but O the glory of the winning were she won!

When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,  
Tying up her laces, looping up her hair,  
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,  
More love should I have, and much less care.  
When her mother tends her before the lighted mirror,  
Loosening her laces, combing down her curls,  
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,  
I should miss but one for many boys and girls.

Heartless she is as the shadow in the meadows  
Flying to the hills on a blue and breezy noon.  
No, she is athirst and drinking up her wonder:  
Earth to her is young as the slip of the new moon.  
Deals she an unkindness, 'tis but her rapid measure,  
Even as in a dance; and her smile can heal no less:  
Like the swinging May-cloud that pelts the flowers with hailstones  
Off a sunny border, she was made to bruise and bless.

Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping  
Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.  
Lone on the fir-branch, his rattle-note unvaried,  
Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown eve-jar.  
Darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting:  
So were it with me if forgetting could be willed.  
Tell the grassy hollow that holds the bubbling well-spring,  
Tell it to forget the source that keeps it filled.

Stepping down the hill with her fair companions,  
Arm in arm, all against the raying West  
Boldly she sings, to the merry tune she marches,  
Brave in her shape, and sweeter unpossessed.  
Sweeter, for she is what my heart first awaking  
Whispered the world was; morning light is she.  
Love that so desires would fain keep her changeless;

Fain would fling the net, and fain have her free.

Happy happy time, when the white star hovers  
Low over dim fields fresh with bloomy dew,  
Near the face of dawn, that draws athwart the darkness,  
Threading it with colour, as yewberries the yew.  
Thicker crowd the shades while the grave East deepens  
Glowing, and with crimson a long cloud swells.  
Maiden still the morn is; and strange she is, and secret;  
Strange her eyes; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells.

Sunrays, leaning on our southern hills and lighting  
Wild cloud-mountains that drag the hills along,  
Oft ends the day of your shifting brilliant laughter  
Chill as a dull face frowning on a song.  
Ay, but shows the South-West a ripple-feathered bosom  
Blown to silver while the clouds are shaken and ascend  
Scaling the mid-heavens as they stream, there comes a sunset  
Rich, deep like love in beauty without end.

When at dawn she sighs, and like an infant to the window  
Turns grave eyes craving light, released from dreams,  
Beautiful she looks, like a white water-lily  
Bursting out of bud in havens of the streams.  
When from bed she rises clothed from neck to ankle  
In her long nightgown sweet as boughs of May,  
Beautiful she looks, like a tall garden lily  
Pure from the night, and splendid for the day.

Mother of the dews, dark eye-lashed twilight,  
Low-lidded twilight, o'er the valley's brim,  
Rounding on thy breast sings the dew-delighted skylark,  
Clear as though the dewdrops had their voice in him.  
Hidden where the rose-flush drinks the rayless planet,  
Fountain-full he pours the spraying fountain-showers.  
Let me hear her laughter, I would have her ever  
Cool as dew in twilight, the lark above the flowers.

All the girls are out with their baskets for the primrose;  
Up lanes, woods through, they troop in joyful bands.  
My sweet leads: she knows not why, but now she totters,  
Eyes the bent anemones, and hangs her hands.  
Such a look will tell that the violets are peeping,  
Coming the rose: and unaware a cry  
Springs in her bosom for odours and for colour,  
Covert and the nightingale; she knows not why.

Kerchiefed head and chin she darts between her tulips,  
Streaming like a willow grey in arrowy rain:  
Some bend beaten cheek to gravel, and their angel  
She will be; she lifts them, and on she speeds again.  
Black the driving raincloud breasts the iron gateway:

She is forth to cheer a neighbour lacking mirth.  
So when sky and grass met rolling dumb for thunder  
Saw I once a white dove, sole light of earth.

Prim little scholars are the flowers of her garden,  
Trained to stand in rows, and asking if they please.  
I might love them well but for loving more the wild ones:  
O my wild ones! they tell me more than these.  
You, my wild one, you tell of honied field-rose,  
Violet, blushing eglantine in life; and even as they,  
They by the wayside are earnest of your goodness,  
You are of life's, on the banks that line the way.

Peering at her chamber the white crowns the red rose,  
Jasmine winds the porch with stars two and three.  
Parted is the window; she sleeps; the starry jasmine  
Breathes a falling breath that carries thoughts of me.  
Sweeter unpossessed, have I said of her my sweetest?  
Not while she sleeps: while she sleeps the jasmine breathes,  
Luring her to love; she sleeps; the starry jasmine  
Bears me to her pillow under white rose-wreaths.

Yellow with birdfoot-trefoil are the grass-glades;  
Yellow with cinquefoil of the dew-grey leaf;  
Yellow with stonecrop; the moss-mounds are yellow;  
Blue-necked the wheat sways, yellowing to the sheaf:  
Green-yellow bursts from the copse the laughing yaffle;  
Sharp as a sickle is the edge of shade and shine:  
Earth in her heart laughs looking at the heavens,  
Thinking of the harvest: I look and think of mine.

This I may know: her dressing and undressing  
Such a change of light shows as when the skies in sport  
Shift from cloud to moonlight; or edging over thunder  
Slips a ray of sun; or sweeping into port  
White sails furl; or on the ocean borders  
White sails lean along the waves leaping green.  
Visions of her shower before me, but from eyesight  
Guarded she would be like the sun were she seen.

Front door and back of the mossed old farmhouse  
Open with the morn, and in a breezy link  
Freshly sparkles garden to stripe-shadowed orchard,  
Green across a rill where on sand the minnows wink.  
Busy in the grass the early sun of summer  
Swarms, and the blackbird's mellow fluting notes  
Call my darling up with round and roguish challenge:  
Quaintest, richest carol of all the singing throats!

Cool was the woodside; cool as her white dairy  
Keeping sweet the cream-pan; and there the boys from school,  
Cricketing below, rushed brown and red with sunshine;

O the dark translucence of the deep-eyed cool!  
Spying from the farm, herself she fetched a pitcher  
Full of milk, and tilted for each in turn the beak.  
Then a little fellow, mouth up and on tiptoe,  
Said, "I will kiss you": she laughed and leaned her cheek.

Doves of the fir-wood walling high our red roof  
Through the long noon coo, crooning through the coo.  
Loose droop the leaves, and down the sleepy roadway  
Sometimes pipes a chaffinch; loose droops the blue.  
Cows flap a slow tail knee-deep in the river,  
Breathless, given up to sun and gnat and fly.  
Nowhere is she seen; and if I see her nowhere,  
Lightning may come, straight rains and tiger sky.

O the golden sheaf, the rustling treasure-armful!  
O the nutbrown tresses nodding interlaced!  
O the treasure-tresses one another over  
Nodding! O the girdle slack about the waist!  
Slain are the poppies that shot their random scarlet  
Quick amid the wheatears: wound about the waist,  
Gathered, see these brides of Earth one blush of ripeness!  
O the nutbrown tresses nodding interlaced!

Large and smoky red the sun's cold disk drops,  
Clipped by naked hills, on violet shaded snow:  
Eastward large and still lights up a bower of moonrise,  
Whence at her leisure steps the moon aglow.  
Nightlong on black print-branches our beech-tree  
Gazes in this whiteness: nightlong could I.  
Here may life on death or death on life be painted.  
Let me clasp her soul to know she cannot die!

Gossips count her faults; they scour a narrow chamber  
Where there is no window, read not heaven or her.  
"When she was a tiny," one aged woman quavers,  
Plucks at my heart and leads me by the ear.  
Faults she had once as she learnt to run and tumbled:  
Faults of feature some see, beauty not complete.  
Yet, good gossips, beauty that makes holy  
Earth and air, may have faults from head to feet.

Hither she comes; she comes to me; she lingers,  
Deepens her brown eyebrows, while in new surprise  
High rise the lashes in wonder of a stranger;  
Yet am I the light and living of her eyes.  
Something friends have told her fills her heart to brimming,  
Nets her in her blushes, and wounds her, and tames.--  
Sure of her haven, O like a dove alighting,  
Arms up, she dropped: our souls were in our names.

Soon will she lie like a white-frost sunrise.

Yellow oats and brown wheat, barley pale as rye,  
Long since your sheaves have yielded to the thresher,  
Felt the girdle loosened, seen the tresses fly.  
Soon will she lie like a blood-red sunset.  
Swift with the to-morrow, green-winged Spring!  
Sing from the South-West, bring her back the truants,  
Nightingale and swallow, song and dipping wing.

Soft new beech-leaves, up to beamy April  
Spreading bough on bough a primrose mountain, you,  
Lucid in the moon, raise lilies to the skyfields,  
Youngest green transfused in silver shining through:  
Fairer than the lily, than the wild white cherry:  
Fair as in image my seraph love appears  
Borne to me by dreams when dawn is at my eyelids:  
Fair as in the flesh she swims to me on tears.

Could I find a place to be alone with heaven,  
I would speak my heart out: heaven is my need.  
Every woodland tree is flushing like the dog-wood,  
Flashing like the whitebeam, swaying like the reed.  
Flushing like the dog-wood crimson in October;  
Streaming like the flag-reed South-West blown;  
Flashing as in gusts the sudden-lighted white beam:  
All seem to know what is for heaven alone.

George Meredith

## Love's Grave

MARK where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,  
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-back'd wave!  
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;  
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,  
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:  
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight  
Of those ribb'd wind-streaks running into white.  
If I the death of Love had deeply plann'd,  
I never could have made it half so sure,  
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid  
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!  
'Tis morning: but no morning can restore  
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:  
The wrong is mix'd. In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
We are betray'd by what is false within.

George Meredith

## Lucifer in Starlight

On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.  
Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend  
Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened,  
Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose.  
Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.  
And now upon his western wing he leaned,  
Now his huge bulk o'er Afric's sands careened,  
Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.  
Soaring through wider zones that pricked his scars  
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,  
He reached a middle height, and at the stars,  
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.  
Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,  
The army of unalterable law.

George Meredith

## **Meditation under Stars**

What links are ours with orbs that are  
So resolutely far:  
The solitary asks, and they  
Give radiance as from a shield:  
Still at the death of day,  
The seen, the unrevealed.  
Implacable they shine  
To us who would of Life obtain  
An answer for the life we strain  
To nourish with one sign.  
Nor can imagination throw  
The penetrative shaft: we pass  
The breath of thought, who would divine  
If haply they may grow  
As Earth; have our desire to know;  
If life comes there to grain from grass,  
And flowers like ours of toil and pain;  
Has passion to beat bar,  
Win space from cleaving brain;  
The mystic link attain,  
Whereby star holds on star.

Those visible immortals beam  
Allurement to the dream:  
Ireful at human hungers brook  
No question in the look.  
For ever virgin to our sense,  
Remote they wane to gaze intense:  
Prolong it, and in ruthlessness they smite  
The beating heart behind the ball of sight:  
Till we conceive their heavens hoar,  
Those lights they raise but sparkles frore,  
And Earth, our blood-warm Earth, a shuddering prey  
To that frigidity of brainless ray.  
Yet space is given for breath of thought  
Beyond our bounds when musing: more  
When to that musing love is brought,  
And love is asked of love's wherefore.  
'Tis Earth's, her gift; else have we nought:  
Her gift, her secret, here our tie.  
And not with her and yonder sky?  
Bethink you: were it Earth alone  
Breeds love, would not her region be  
The sole delight and throne  
Of generous Deity?

To deeper than this ball of sight  
Appeal the lustrous people of the night.  
Fronting yon shoreless, sown with fiery sails,  
It is our ravenous that quails,  
Flesh by its craven thirsts and fears distraught.  
The spirit leaps alight,

Doubts not in them is he,  
The binder of his sheaves, the sane, the right:  
Of magnitude to magnitude is wrought,  
To feel it large of the great life they hold:  
In them to come, or vaster interolved,  
The issues known in us, our unsolved solved:  
That there with toil Life climbs the self-same Tree,  
Whose roots enrichment have from ripeness dropped.  
So may we read and little find them cold:  
Let it but be the lord of Mind to guide  
Our eyes; no branch of Reason's growing lopped;  
Nor dreaming on a dream; but fortified  
By day to penetrate black midnight; see,  
Hear, feel, outside the senses; even that we,  
The specks of dust upon a mound of mould,  
We who reflect those rays, though low our place,  
To them are lastingly allied.

So may we read, and little find them cold:  
Not frosty lamps illumining dead space,  
Not distant aliens, not senseless Powers.  
The fire is in them whereof we are born;  
The music of their motion may be ours.  
Spirit shall deem them beckoning Earth and voiced  
Sisterly to her, in her beams rejoiced.  
Of love, the grand impulsions, we behold  
The love that lends her grace  
Among the starry fold.  
Then at new flood of customary morn,  
Look at her through her showers,  
Her mists, her streaming gold,  
A wonder edges the familiar face:  
She wears no more that robe of printed hours;  
Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love I: By This He Knew She Wept**

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes  
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet  
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;  
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love II: It Ended, and the Morrow**

It ended, and the morrow brought the task.  
Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in  
By shutting all too zealous for their sin:  
Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.  
But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!  
He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers:  
A languid humour stole among the hours,  
And if their smiles encountered, he went mad,  
And raged deep inward, till the light was brown  
Before his vision, and the world, forgot,  
Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.  
A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown  
The pit of infamy: and then again  
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove  
To ape the magnanimity of love,  
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love III: This Was the Woman**

This was the woman; what now of the man?  
But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,  
He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,  
Or, being callous, haply till he can.  
But he is nothing:--nothing? Only mark  
The rich light striking out from her on him!  
Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim  
Across the man she singles, leaving dark  
All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,  
See that I am drawn to her even now!  
It cannot be such harm on her cool brow  
To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!  
But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well  
I claim a star whose light is overcast:  
I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.  
The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love IV: All Other Joys of Life**

All other joys of life he strove to warm,  
And magnify, and catch them to his lip:  
But they had suffered shipwreck with the ship,  
And gazed upon him sallow from the storm.  
Or if Delusion came, 'twas but to show  
The coming minute mock the one that went.  
Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,  
Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:  
Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,  
Is always watching with a wondering hate.  
Not till the fire is dying in the grate,  
Look we for any kinship with the stars.  
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,  
And the great price we pay for it full worth:  
We have it only when we are half earth.  
Little avails that coinage to the old!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love IX: He Felt the Wild Beast**

He felt the wild beast in him betweenwhiles  
So masterfully rude, that he would grieve  
To see the helpless delicate thing receive  
His guardianship through certain dark defiles.  
Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?  
But still he spared her. Once: 'Have you no fear ?'  
He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.  
She laughed: 'No, surely; am I not with you?'  
And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she leaned  
Her gentle body near him, looking up;  
And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,  
He drank until the fluttering eyelids screened.  
Devilish malignant witch and oh, young beam  
Of heaven's circle-glory! Here thy shape  
To squeeze like an intoxicating grape  
I might, and yet thou goest safe, supreme.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love L: Thus Piteously Love**

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:  
The union of this ever-diverse pair!  
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,  
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.  
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,  
They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:  
But they fed not on the advancing hours:  
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.  
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,  
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.  
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul  
When hot for certainties in this our life!--  
In tragic hints here see what evermore  
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love V: A Message from Her**

A message from her set his brain aflame.  
A world of household matters filled her mind,  
Wherein he saw hypocrisy designed:  
She treated him as something that is tame,  
And but at other provocation bites.  
Familiar was her shoulder in the glass,  
Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass  
That a changed eye finds such familiar sights  
More keenly tempting than new loveliness.  
The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own:  
The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,  
Nor less divine: Love's inmost sacredness  
Called to him, 'Come!'--In his restraining start,  
Eyes nurtured to be looked at, scarce could see  
A wave of the great waves of Destiny  
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love VI: It Chanced His Lips Did Meet**

It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.  
She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.  
Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:  
And most she punishes the tender fool  
Who will believe what honours her the most!  
Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow  
Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,  
For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost,  
Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.  
The love is here; it has but changed its aim.  
O bitter barren woman! what's the name?  
The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?  
Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!  
That will I not do, though the sting is dire.  
Beneath the surface this, while by the fire  
They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love VII: She Issues Radiant**

She issues radiant from her dressing-room,  
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:  
--By stirring up a lower, much I fear  
How deftly that oiled barber lays his bloom  
That long-shanked dapper Cupid with frisked curls  
Can make known women torturingly fair;  
The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair,  
Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.  
His art can take the eyes from out my head,  
Until I see with eyes of other men;  
While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,  
And sends a spark up:--is it true we are wed?  
Yea! filthiness of body is most vile,  
But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.  
The former, it were not so great a curse  
To read on the steel-mirror of her smile.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love VIII: Yet It Was Plain She Struggled**

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt  
Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.  
Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!  
Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?  
My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped  
As balm for any bitter wound of mine:  
My breast will open for thee at a sign!  
But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:  
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;  
And they were music till he flung them down,  
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown  
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death  
I do not know myself without thee more:  
In this unholy battle I grow base:  
If the same soul be under the same face,  
Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love X: But Where Began the Change**

But where began the change; and what's my crime?  
The wretch condemned, who has not been arraigned,  
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustained,  
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?  
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,  
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:  
Not like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods,  
I dreamt of loyal Life:--the offence is there!  
Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;  
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.  
My crime is, that the puppet of a dream,  
I plotted to be worthy of the world.  
Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince  
The facts of life, you still had seen me go  
With hindward feather and with forward toe,  
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XI: Out in the Yellow Meadows**

Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee  
Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,  
And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing,  
Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.  
Or is it now? or was it then? for now,  
As then, the larks from running rings pour showers:  
The golden foot of May is on the flowers,  
And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.  
What's this, when Nature swears there is no change  
To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace  
Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace.  
Nor eyes, nor heart, has she to feel it strange?  
Look, woman, in the West. There wilt thou see  
An amber cradle near the sun's decline:  
Within it, featured even in death divine,  
Is lying a dead infant, slain by thee.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XII: Not Solely That the Future**

Not solely that the Future she destroys,  
And the fair life which in the distance lies  
For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies:  
Nor that the passing hour's supporting joys  
Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat  
Distinction in old times, and still should breed  
Sweet Memory, and Hope,--earth's modest seed,  
And heaven's high-prompting: not that the world is flat  
Since that soft-luring creature I embraced,  
Among the children of Illusion went:  
Methinks with all this loss I were content,  
If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,  
Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole  
Of life is mixed: the mocking Past will stay:  
And if I drink oblivion of a day,  
So shorten I the stature of my soul.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XIII: I Play for Seasons, Not Eternities**

'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'  
Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must  
All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!'  
And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies  
She is full sure! Upon her dying rose,  
She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,  
Scarce any retrospection in her eye;  
For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,  
Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag--there, an urn.  
Pledges she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!  
This lesson of our only visible friend,  
Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn ?  
Yes! yes!--but, oh, our human rose is fair  
Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,  
When the renewed for ever of a kiss  
Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XIV: What Soul Would Bargain**

What soul would bargain for a cure that brings  
Contempt the nobler agony to kill?  
Rather let me bear on the bitter ill,  
And strike this rusty bosom with new stings!  
It seems there is another veering fit  
Since on a gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure,  
I looked with little prospect of a cure,  
The while her mouth's red bow loosed shafts of wit.  
Just heaven! can it be true that jealousy  
Has decked the woman thus? and does her head  
Swim somewhat for possessions forfeited?  
Madam, you teach me many things that be.  
I open an old book, and there I find  
That "Women still may love whom they deceive."  
Such love I prize not, madam: by your leave,  
The game you play at is not to my mind.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XIX: No State Is Envable**

No state is enviable. To the luck alone  
Of some few favoured men I would put claim.  
I bleed, but her who wounds I will not blame.  
Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own  
Beat thro' me? could I hurt her? heaven and hell!  
But I could hurt her cruelly! Can I let  
My Love's old time-piece to another set,  
Swear it can't stop, and must for ever swell?  
Sure, that's one way Love drifts into the mart  
Where goat-legged buyers throng. I see not plain:--  
My meaning is, it must not be again.  
Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart.  
If any state be enviable on earth,  
'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,  
Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,  
In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XL: I Bade My Lady Think**

I bade my Lady think what she might mean.  
Know I my meaning, I? Can I love one,  
And yet be jealous of another? None  
Commits such folly. Terrible Love, I ween,  
Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave  
The lightless seas of selfishness amain:  
Seas that in a man's heart have no rain  
To fall and still them. Peace can I achieve,  
By turning to this fountain-source of woe,  
This woman, who's to Love as fire to wood?  
She breathed the violet breath of maidenhood  
Against my kisses once! but I say, No!  
The thing is mocked at! Helplessly afloat,  
I know not what I do, whereto I strive,  
The dread that my old love may be alive,  
Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XLI: How Many a Thing**

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,  
When others pick it up becomes a gem!  
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;  
And by reflected light its worth is found.  
Yet for us still 'tis nothing! and that zeal  
Of false appreciation quickly fades.  
This truth is little known to human shades,  
How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!  
They waste the soul with spurious desire,  
That is not the ripe flame upon the bough.  
We two have taken up a lifeless vow  
To rob a living passion: dust for fire!  
Madam is grave, and eyes the clock that tells  
Approaching midnight. We have struck despair  
Into two hearts. O, look we like a pair  
Who for fresh nuptials joyfully yield all else?

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XLII: I Am to Follow Her**

I am to follow her. There is much grace  
In woman when thus bent on martyrdom.  
They think that dignity of soul may come,  
Perchance, with dignity of body. Base!  
But I was taken by that air of cold  
And statuesque sedateness, when she said  
'I'm going'; lit a taper, bowed her head,  
And went, as with the stride of Pallas bold.  
Fleshly indifference horrible! The hands  
Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!  
Within those secret walls what do I see  
Where first she set the taper down she stands:  
Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! Thoughts black as death,  
Like a stirred pool in sunshine break. Her wrists  
I catch: she faltering, as she half resists,  
'You love. . . ? love. . . ? love. . . ?' all on an in-drawn breath.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XLIII: Mark Where the Pressing Wind**

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,  
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!  
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;  
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,  
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:  
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight  
Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.  
If I the death of Love had deeply planned,  
I never could have made it half so sure,  
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid  
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!  
'Tis morning: but no morning can restore  
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:  
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
We are betrayed by what is false within.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XLIV: They Say That Pity**

They say, that Pity in Love's service dwells,  
A porter at the rosy temple's gate.  
I missed him going: but it is my fate  
To come upon him now beside his wells;  
Whereby I know that I Love's temple leave,  
And that the purple doors have closed behind.  
Poor soul! if in those early days unkind,  
Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,  
We now might with an equal spirit meet,  
And not be matched like innocence and vice.  
She for the Temple's worship has paid price,  
And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.  
She sees through simulation to the bone:  
What's best in her impels her to the worst:  
Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,  
Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XLIX: He Found Her**

He found her by the ocean's moaning verge,  
Nor any wicked change in her discerned;  
And she believed his old love had returned,  
Which was her exultation, and her scourge.  
She took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed  
The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.  
She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,  
And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed.  
She dared not say, 'This is my breast: look in.'  
But there's a strength to help the desperate weak.  
That night he learned how silence best can speak  
The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin.  
About the middle of the night her call  
Was heard, and he came wondering to the bed.  
'Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!' she said.  
Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XLV: It Is the Season**

It is the season of the sweet wild rose,  
My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!  
So golden-crownèd shines she gloriously,  
And with that softest dream of blood she glows:  
Mild as an evening heaven round Hesper bright!  
I pluck the flower, and smell it, and revive  
The time when in her eyes I stood alive.  
I seem to look upon it out of Night.  
Here's Madam, stepping hastily. Her whims  
Bid her demand the flower, which I let drop.  
As I proceed, I feel her sharply stop,  
And crush it under heel with trembling limbs.  
She joins me in a cat-like way, and talks  
Of company, and even condescends  
To utter laughing scandal of old friends.  
These are the summer days, and these our walks.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XLVI: At Last We Parley**

At last we parley: we so strangely dumb  
In such a close communion! It befell  
About the sounding of the Matin-bell,  
And lo! her place was vacant, and the hum  
Of loneliness was round me. Then I rose,  
And my disordered brain did guide my foot  
To that old wood where our first love-salute  
Was interchanged: the source of many throes!  
There did I see her, not alone. I moved  
Toward her, and made proffer of my arm.  
She took it simply, with no rude alarm;  
And that disturbing shadow passed reproved.  
I felt the pained speech coming, and declared  
My firm belief in her, ere she could speak.  
A ghastly morning came into her cheek,  
While with a widening soul on me she stared.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XLVII: We Saw the Swallows**

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,  
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.  
We had not to look back on summer joys,  
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:  
But in the largeness of the evening earth  
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.  
The hour became her husband and my bride.  
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!  
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud  
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood  
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood  
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.  
Love that had robbed us of immortal things,  
This little moment mercifully gave,  
Where I have seen across the twilight wave  
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XLVIII: Their Sense**

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,  
Destroyed by subtleties these women are!  
More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar  
Utterly this fair garden we might win.  
Behold! I looked for peace, and thought it near.  
Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each.  
We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.  
Alas I that was the fatal draught, I fear.  
For when of my lost Lady came the word,  
This woman, O this agony of flesh!  
Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,  
That I might seek that other like a bird.  
I do adore the nobleness! despise  
The act! She has gone forth, I know not where.  
Will the hard world my sentience of her share?  
I feel the truth; so let the world surmise.

George Meredith

## Modern Love XV: I Think She Sleeps

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low  
Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;  
The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.  
Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.  
The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love,  
Frights not our modern dames:--well if he did!  
Now will I pour new light upon that lid,  
Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. 'Sweet dove,  
Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.  
I do not? good!' Her waking infant-stare  
Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:  
Her own handwriting to me when no curb  
Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles through;  
A woman's tremble--the whole instrument:--  
I show another letter lately sent.  
The words are very like: the name is new.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XVI: In Our Old Shipwrecked Days**

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,  
When in the firelight steadily aglow,  
Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow  
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower  
That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat  
As lovers to whom Time is whispering.  
From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:  
The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.  
Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay  
With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!  
Love dies!" I said: I never thought it less.  
She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.  
Then when the fire domed blackening, I found  
Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift  
Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:--  
Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XVII: At Dinner She Is Hostess**

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.  
Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps  
The Topic over intellectual deeps  
In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.  
With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:  
It is in truth a most contagious game:  
HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.  
Such play as this the devils might appal!  
But here's the greater wonder; in that we,  
Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,  
Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;  
Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe,  
Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.  
We waken envy of our happy lot.  
Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.  
Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XVIII: Here Jack and Tom**

Here Jack and Tom are paired with Moll and Meg.  
Curved open to the river-reach is seen  
A country merry-making on the green.  
Fair space for signal shakings of the leg.  
That little screwy fiddler from his booth,  
Whence flows one nut-brown stream, commands the joints  
Of all who caper here at various points.  
I have known rustic revels in my youth:  
The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease.  
An early goddess was a county lass:  
A charmed Amphion-oak she tripped the grass.  
What life was that I lived? The life of these?  
Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.  
They must, I think, be wiser than I am;  
They have the secret of the bull and lamb.  
'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XX: I Am Not of Those**

I am not of those miserable males  
Who sniff at vice and, daring not to snap,  
Do therefore hope for heaven. I take the hap  
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails  
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,  
I know the devil has sufficient weight  
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.  
Besides, he's damned. That man I do suspect  
A coward, who would burden the poor deuce  
With what ensues from his own slipperiness.  
I have just found a wanton-scented tress  
In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.  
Of days and nights it is demonstrative,  
That, like some aged star, gleam luridly.  
If for those times I must ask charity,  
Have I not any charity to give?

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXI: We Three Are**

We three are on the cedar-shadowed lawn;  
My friend being third. He who at love once laughed,  
Is in the weak rib by a fatal shaft  
Struck through, and tells his passion's bashful dawn  
And radiant culmination, glorious crown,  
When 'this' she said: went 'thus': most wondrous she.  
Our eyes grow white, encountering that we are three,  
Forgetful; then together we look down.  
But he demands our blessing; is convinced  
That words of wedded lovers must bring good.  
We question; if we dare! or if we should!  
And pat him, with light laugh. We have not winced.  
Next, she has fallen. Fainting points the sign  
To happy things in wedlock. When she wakes,  
She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes:  
Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XXII: What May the Woman**

What may the woman labour to confess?  
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.  
'Tis something to be told, or hidden:--which?  
I get a glimpse of hell in this mild guess.  
She has desires of touch, as if to feel  
That all the household things are things she knew.  
She stops before the glass. What sight in view?  
A face that seems the latest to reveal!  
For she turns from it hastily, and tossed  
Irresolute, steals shadow-like to where  
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,  
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.  
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are  
League-sundered by the silent gulf between.  
Yon burly lovers on the village green,  
Yours is a lower, and a happier star!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXIII: 'Tis Christmas Weather**

'Tis Christmas weather, and a country house  
Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get  
An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret  
At that, it is half-said. The great carouse  
Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door,  
But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.  
Why did I come here in that dullard fit?  
I enter, and lie couched upon the floor.  
Passing, I caught the coverlet's quick beat:--  
Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain--  
Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!  
Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.  
The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.  
I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,  
I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:  
My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XXIV: The Misery Is Greater**

The misery is greater, as I live!  
To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense,  
That she does penance now for no offence,  
Save against Love. The less can I forgive!  
The less can I forgive, though I adore  
That cruel lovely pallor which surrounds  
Her footsteps; and the low vibrating sounds  
That come on me, as from a magic shore.  
Low are they, but most subtle to find out  
The shrinking soul. Madam, 'tis understood  
When women play upon their womanhood;  
It means, a Season gone. And yet I doubt  
But I am duped. That nun-like look waylays  
My fancy. Oh! I do but wait a sign!  
Pluck out the eyes of pride! thy mouth to mine!  
Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXIX: Am I Failing**

Am I failing ? For no longer can I cast  
A glory round about this head of gold.  
Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;  
Not like the consecration of the Past!  
Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth  
I cry for still: I cannot be at peace  
In having Love upon a' mortal lease.  
I cannot take the woman at her worth!  
Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed  
Our human nakedness, and could endow  
With spiritual splendour a white brow  
That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed ?  
A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave  
Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.  
But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,  
And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XXV: You Like Not That French Novel**

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.  
You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.  
The actors are, it seems, the usual three:  
Husband, and wife, and lover. She--but fie!  
In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,  
The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;  
Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,  
Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:  
So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries rosbif.  
Meantime the husband is no more abused:  
Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.  
Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF:--  
If she will choose between them. She does choose;  
And takes her husband, like a proper wife.  
Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:  
And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXVI: Love Ere He Bleeds**

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,  
Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve  
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave  
The fatal web below while far he flies.  
But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.  
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,  
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,  
Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.  
A subtle serpent then has Love become.  
I had the eagle in my bosom erst:  
Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.  
I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.  
Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.  
Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:  
But be no coward:--you that made Love bleed,  
You must bear all the venom of his tooth!

George Meredith

## **Modern Love XXVII: Distraction is the Panacea**

Distraction is the panacea, Sir!  
I hear my oracle of Medicine say.  
Doctor! that same specific yesterday  
I tried, and the result will not deter  
A second trial. Is the devil's line  
Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?  
And does a cheek, like any sea-shell rosed,  
Or clear as widowed sky, seem most divine?  
No matter, so I taste forgetfulness.  
And if the devil snare me, body and mind,  
Here gratefully I score:--he seemèd kind,  
When not a soul would comfort my distress!  
O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!  
O Lady, once I gave love: now I take!  
Lady, I must be flattered. Shouldst thou wake  
The passion of a demon, be not afraid.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXVIII: I Must Be Flattered**

I must be flattered. The imperious  
Desire speaks out. Lady, I am content  
To play with you the game of Sentiment,  
And with you enter on paths perilous;  
But if across your beauty I throw light,  
To make it threefold, it must be all mine.  
First secret; then avowed. For I must shine  
Envied,--I, lessened in my proper sight!  
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!  
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.  
Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:  
And men shall see me as a burning sphere;  
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan  
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!  
I feel the promptings of Satanic power,  
While you do homage unto me alone.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXX: What Are We First**

What are we first? First, animals; and next  
Intelligences at a leap; on whom  
Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,  
And all that draweth on the tomb for text.  
Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:  
Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.  
We are the lords of life, and life is warm.  
Intelligence and instinct now are one.  
But nature says: 'My children most they seem  
When they least know me: therefore I decree  
That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee,  
And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.  
Then if we study Nature we are wise.  
Thus do the few who live but with the day:  
The scientific animals are they.  
Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXI: This Golden Head**

This golden head has wit in it. I live  
Again, and a far higher life, near her.  
Some women like a young philosopher;  
Perchance because he is diminutive.  
For woman's manly god must not exceed  
Proportions of the natural nursing size.  
Great poets and great sages draw no prize  
With women: but the little lap-dog breed,  
Who can be hugged, or on a mantel-piece  
Perched up for adoration, these obtain  
Her homage. And of this we men are vain?  
Of this! 'Tis ordered for the world's increase  
Small flattery! Yet she has that rare gift  
To beauty, Common Sense. I am approved.  
It is not half so nice as being loved,  
And yet I do prefer it. What's my drift?

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXII: Full Faith I Have**

Full faith I have she holds that rarest gift  
To beauty, Common Sense. To see her lie  
With her fair visage an inverted sky  
Bloom-covered, while the underlids uplift,  
Would almost wreck the faith; but when her mouth  
(Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address  
The inner me that thirsts for her no less,  
And has so long been languishing in drouth,  
I feel that I am matched; that I am man!  
One restless corner of my heart or head,  
That holds a dying something never dead,  
Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can.  
It means, that woman is not, I opine,  
Her sex's antidote. Who seeks the asp  
For serpent's bites? 'Twould calm me could I clasp  
Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXIII: In Paris, at the Louvre**

'In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen  
The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce  
Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,  
Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!  
The young Pharsalians did not disarray  
Less willingly their locks of floating silk:  
That suckling mouth of his, upon the milk  
Of heaven might still be feasting through the fray.  
Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,  
They conquer not upon such easy terms.  
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms  
And does he grow half human, all is right.'  
This to my Lady in a distant spot,  
Upon the theme: While mind is mastering clay,  
Gross clay invades it. If the spy you play,  
My wife, read this! Strange love talk, is it not?

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXIV: Madam Would Speak With Me**

Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes:  
The Deluge or else Fire! She's well, she thanks  
My husbandship. Our chain on silence clanks.  
Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs.  
Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!  
The journals, too, I diligently peruse.  
Vesuvius is expected to give news:  
Niagara is no noisier. By stealth  
Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad  
I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.  
"And are not you?" "How can I be?" "Take ship!  
For happiness is somewhere to be had."  
"Nowhere for me!" Her voice is barely heard.  
I am not melted, and make no pretence.  
With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense.  
Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXIX: She Yields**

She yields: my Lady in her noblest mood  
Has yielded: she, my golden-crownèd rose!  
The bride of every sense! more sweet than those  
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.  
O visage of still music in the sky  
Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!  
True harmony within can apprehend  
Dumb harmony without. And hark! 'tis nigh!  
Belief has struck the note of sound: a gleam  
Of living silver shows me where she shook  
Her long white fingers down the shadowy brook,  
That sings her song, half waking, half in dream.  
What two come here to mar this heavenly tune?  
A man is one: the woman bears my name,  
And honour. Their hands touch! Am I still tame?  
God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXV: It Is No Vulgar Nature**

It is no vulgar nature I have wived.  
Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound  
Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned,  
And not a thought of vengeance had survived.  
No confidences has she: but relief  
Must come to one whose suffering is acute.  
O have a care of natures that are mute!  
They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.  
What is she doing? What does she demand  
From Providence or me? She is not one  
Long to endure this torpidly, and shun  
The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.  
At Forfeits during snow we played, and I  
Must kiss her. 'Well performed!' I said: then she:  
"Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?"  
Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXVI: My Lady unto Madam**

My Lady unto Madam makes her bow.  
The charm of women is, that even while  
You're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile,  
Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.  
The interview was gracious: they anoint  
(To me aside) each other with fine praise:  
Discriminating compliments they raise,  
That hit with wondrous aim on the weak point:  
My Lady's nose of Nature might complain.  
It is not fashioned aptly to express  
Her character of large-browed steadfastness.  
But Madam says: Thereof she may be vain!  
Now, Madam's faulty feature is a glazed  
And inaccessible eye, that has soft fires,  
Wide gates, at love-time only. This admires  
My Lady. At the two I stand amazed.

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXVII: Along the Garden Terrace**

Along the garden terrace, under which  
A purple valley (lighted at its edge  
By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud-ledge  
Whereunder dropped the chariot), glimmers rich,  
A quiet company we pace, and wait  
The dinner-bell in prae-digestive calm.  
So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm  
Breathes round, we care not if the bell be late:  
Though here and there grey seniors question Time  
In irritable coughings. With slow foot  
The low rosed moon, the face of Music mute,  
Begins among her silent bars to climb.  
As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread,  
I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern  
My Lady's heel before me at each turn.  
Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?

George Meredith

### **Modern Love XXXVIII: Give to Imagination**

Give to imagination some pure light  
In human form to fix it, or you shame  
The devils with that hideous human game:  
Imagination urging appetite!  
Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,  
Who dazzle us, whom we can not revere:  
Imagination is the charioteer  
That, in default of better, drives the hogs.  
So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love!  
My soul is arrowy to the light in you.  
You know me that I never can renew  
The bond that woman broke: what would you have?  
'Tis Love, or Vileness! not a choice between,  
Save petrification! What does Pity here?  
She killed a thing, and now it's dead, 'tis dear.  
Oh, when you counsel me, think what you mean!

George Meredith

## Modern Love: I

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes  
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet  
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;  
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

George Meredith

## Modern Love: II

It ended, and the morrow brought the task.  
Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in  
By shutting all too zealous for their sin:  
Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.  
But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!  
He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers:  
A languid humour stole among the hours,  
And if their smiles encountered, he went mad,  
And raged deep inward, till the light was brown  
Before his vision, and the world, forgot,  
Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.  
A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown  
The pit of infamy: and then again  
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove  
To ape the magnanimity of love,  
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

George Meredith

## Modern Love: L

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:  
The union of this ever-diverse pair!  
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,  
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.  
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,  
They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:  
But they fed not on the advancing hours:  
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.  
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,  
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.  
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul  
When hot for certainties in this our life!--  
In tragic hints here see what evermore  
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XIV

What soul would bargain for a cure that brings  
Contempt the nobler agony to kill?  
Rather let me bear on the bitter ill,  
And strike this rusty bosom with new stings!  
It seems there is another veering fit  
Since on a gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure,  
I looked with little prospect of a cure,  
The while her mouth's red bow loosed shafts of wit.  
Just heaven! can it be true that jealousy  
Has decked the woman thus? and does her head  
Swim somewhat for possessions forfeited?  
Madam, you teach me many things that be.  
I open an old book, and there I find  
That "Women still may love whom they deceive."  
Such love I prize not, madam: by your leave,  
The game you play at is not to my mind.

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XLVI

At last we parley: we so strangely dumb  
In such a close communion! It befell  
About the sounding of the Matin-bell,  
And lo! her place was vacant, and the hum  
Of loneliness was round me. Then I rose,  
And my disordered brain did guide my foot  
To that old wood where our first love-salute  
Was interchanged: the source of many throes!  
There did I see her, not alone. I moved  
Toward her, and made proffer of my arm.  
She took it simply, with no rude alarm;  
And that disturbing shadow passed reproved.  
I felt the pained speech coming, and declared  
My firm belief in her, ere she could speak.  
A ghastly morning came into her cheek,  
While with a widening soul on me she stared.

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XVI

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,  
When in the firelight steadily aglow,  
Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow  
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower  
That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat  
As lovers to whom Time is whispering.  
From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:  
The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.  
Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay  
With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!  
Love dies!" I said: I never thought it less.  
She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.  
Then when the fire domed blackening, I found  
Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift  
Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:--  
Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XX

I am not of those miserable males  
Who sniff at vice and, daring not to snap,  
Do therefore hope for heaven. I take the hap  
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails  
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,  
I know the devil has sufficient weight  
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.  
Besides, he's damned. That man I do suspect  
A coward, who would burden the poor deuce  
With what ensues from his own slipperiness.  
I have just found a wanton-scented tress  
In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.  
Of days and nights it is demonstrative,  
That, like some aged star, gleam luridly.  
If for those times I must ask charity,  
Have I not any charity to give?

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XXII

What may the woman labour to confess?  
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.  
'Tis something to be told, or hidden:--which?  
I get a glimpse of hell in this mild guess.  
She has desires of touch, as if to feel  
That all the household things are things she knew.  
She stops before the glass. What sight in view?  
A face that seems the latest to reveal!  
For she turns from it hastily, and tossed  
Irresolute, steals shadow-like to where  
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,  
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.  
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are  
League-sundered by the silent gulf between.  
Yon burly lovers on the village green,  
Yours is a lower, and a happier star!

George Meredith

## Modern Love: XXVI

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,  
Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve  
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave  
The fatal web below while far he flies.  
But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.  
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,  
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,  
Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.  
A subtle serpent then has Love become.  
I had the eagle in my bosom erst:  
Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.  
I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.  
Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.  
Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:  
But be no coward:--you that made Love bleed,  
You must bear all the venom of his tooth!

George Meredith

### **Modern Love: XXXIV**

Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes:  
The Deluge or else Fire! She's well, she thanks  
My husbandship. Our chain on silence clanks.  
Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs.  
Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!  
The journals, too, I diligently peruse.  
Vesuvius is expected to give news:  
Niagara is no noisier. By stealth  
Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad  
I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.  
"And are not you?" "How can I be?" "Take ship!  
For happiness is somewhere to be had."  
"Nowhere for me!" Her voice is barely heard.  
I am not melted, and make no pretence.  
With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense.  
Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred.

George Meredith

## Phoebus with Admetus

WHEN by Zeus relenting the mandate was revoked,  
Sentencing to exile the bright Sun-God,  
Mindful were the ploughmen of who the steer had yoked,  
Who: and what a track show'd the upturn'd sod!  
Mindful were the shepherds, as now the noon severe  
Bent a burning eyebrow to brown evetide,  
How the rustic flute drew the silver to the sphere,  
Sister of his own, till her rays fell wide.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.  
Chirping none, the scarlet cicalas crouch'd in ranks:  
Slack the thistle-head piled its down-silk gray:  
Scarce the stony lizard suck'd hollows in his flanks:  
Thick on spots of umbrage our drowsed flocks lay.  
Sudden bow'd the chestnuts beneath a wind unheard,  
Lengthen'd ran the grasses, the sky grew slate:  
Then amid a swift flight of wing'd seed white as curd,  
Clear of limb a Youth smote the master's gate.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

Water, first of singers, o'er rocky mount and mead,  
First of earthly singers, the sun-loved rill,  
Sang of him, and flooded the ripples on the reed,  
Seeking whom to waken and what ear fill.  
Water, sweetest soother to kiss a wound and cool,  
Sweetest and divinest, the sky-born brook,  
Chuckled, with a whimper, and made a mirror-pool  
Round the guest we welcomed, the strange hand shook.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

Many swarms of wild bees descended on our fields:  
Stately stood the wheatstalk with head bent high:  
Big of heart we labour'd at storing mighty yields,  
Wool and corn, and clusters to make men cry!  
Hand-like rush'd the vintage; we strung the bellied skins  
Plump, and at the sealing the Youth's voice rose:  
Maidens clung in circle, on little fists their chins;  
Gentle beasties through push'd a cold long nose.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

Foot to fire in snowtime we trimm'd the slender shaft:

Often down the pit spied the lean wolf's teeth  
Grin against his will, trapp'd by masterstrokes of craft;  
Helpless in his froth-wrath as green logs seethe!  
Safe the tender lambs tugg'd the teats, and winter sped  
Whirl'd before the crocus, the year's new gold.  
Hung the hooky beak up aloft, the arrowhead  
Redden'd through his feathers for our dear fold.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

Tales we drank of giants at war with gods above:  
Rocks were they to look on, and earth climb'd air!  
Tales of search for simples, and those who sought of love  
Ease because the creature was all too fair.  
Pleasant ran our thinking that while our work was good.  
Sure as fruits for sweat would the praise come fast.  
He that wrestled stoutest and tamed the billow-brood  
Danced in rings with girls, like a sail-flapp'd mast.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

Lo, the herb of healing, when once the herb is known,  
Shines in shady woods bright as new-sprung flame.  
Ere the string was tighten'd we heard the mellow tone,  
After he had taught how the sweet sounds came.  
Stretch'd about his feet, labour done, 'twas as you see  
Red pomegranates tumble and burst hard rind.  
So began contention to give delight and be  
Excellent in things aim'd to make life kind.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

You with shelly horns, rams! and, promontory goats,  
You whose browsing beards dip in coldest dew!  
Bulls, that walk the pastures in kingly-flashing coats!  
Laurel, ivy, vine, wreathed for feasts not few!  
You that build the shade-roof, and you that court the rays,  
You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-rent:  
He has been our fellow, the morning of our days;  
Us he chose for housemates, and this way went.  
God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darken'd  
That had thee here obscure.

NOW the North wind ceases,

The warm South-west awakes;  
Swift fly the fleeces,  
Thick the blossom-flakes.

Now hill to hill has made the stride,  
And distance waves the without-end:  
Now in the breast a door flings wide;  
Our farthest smiles, our next is friend.  
And song of England's rush of flowers  
Is this full breeze with mellow stops,  
That spins the lark for shine, for showers;  
He drinks his hurried flight, and drops.  
The stir in memory seem these things,  
Which out of moisten'd turf and clay,  
Astrain for light push patient rings,  
Or leap to find the waterway.  
'Tis equal to a wonder done,  
Whatever simple lives renew  
Their tricks beneath the father sun,  
As though they caught a broken clue:  
So hard was earth an eyewink back;  
But now the common life has come,  
The blotting cloud a dappled pack,  
The grasses one vast underhum.  
A City clothed in snow and soot,  
With lamps for day in ghostly rows,  
Breaks to the scene of hosts afoot,  
The river that reflective flows:  
And there did fog down crypts of street  
Play spectre upon eye and mouth:--  
Their faces are a glass to greet  
This magic of the whirl for South.  
A burly joy each creature swells  
With sound of its own hungry quest;  
Earth has to fill her empty wells,  
And speed the service of the nest;  
The phantom of the snow-wreath melt,  
That haunts the farmer's look abroad,  
Who sees what tomb a white night built,  
Where flocks now bleat and sprouts the clod.  
For iron Winter held her firm;  
Across her sky he laid his hand;  
And bird he starved, he stiffen'd worm;  
A sightless heaven, a shaven land.  
Her shivering Spring feign'd fast asleep,  
The bitten buds dared not unfold:  
We raced on roads and ice to keep  
Thought of the girl we love from cold.

But now the North wind ceases,  
The warm South-west awakes,  
The heavens are out in fleeces,

And earth's green banner shakes.

George Meredith

## **Song in the Songless**

They have no song, the sedges dry,  
And still they sing.  
It is within my breast they sing,  
As I pass by.  
Within my breast they touch a string,  
They wake a sigh.  
There is but sound of sedges dry;  
In me they sing.

George Meredith

## Winter Heavens

Sharp is the night, but stars with frost alive  
Leap off the rim of earth across the dome.  
It is a night to make the heavens our home  
More than the nest whereto apace we strive.  
Lengths down our road each fir-tree seems a hive,  
In swarms outrushing from the golden comb.  
They waken waves of thoughts that burst to foam:  
The living throb in me, the dead revive.  
Yon mantle clothes us: there, past mortal breath,  
Life glistens on the river of the death.  
It folds us, flesh and dust; and have we knelt,  
Or never knelt, or eyed as kine the springs  
Of radiance, the radiance enrings:  
And this is the soul's haven to have felt.

George Meredith