

The Unknowable Woman: Depictions of Women in Alfred Tennyson's *Moxon Tennyson* and the Arctic Monkeys' *AM*

Erin Slater

Abstract: This essay compares Alfred Tennyson's *Moxon Tennyson* (1857) and Arctic Monkeys' 2013 album *AM*, examining their enduring representations of women as devoted, desirable, and unknowable figures. Both artists use repetition, vivid imagery, and intermedial elements to develop a lasting depiction of enigmatic women. Using a presentist lens, this essay explores how historical resonances in Arctic Monkeys' songs and modern parallels in Tennyson's poetry make both works more alluring for a contemporary audience. In doing so, this essay illustrates that portrayals of women are neither confined to the past nor isolated in the present; rather, they persist across time.

Poetic verse and rock-music riffs alongside fascination with desire, devotion, and alluring enigmatic figures remains a timeless artistic obsession. Alfred Tennyson, a major Victorian poet, explored these themes in his influential intermedial poetry collection published in 1857, the *Moxon Tennyson*. Over 150 years later, the English indie rock band Arctic Monkeys, with lead vocalist and lyricist Alex Turner, address similar concepts in their 2013 album *AM*. While Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys may seem like an unexpected comparison, viewing them together reveals how certain literary strategies and themes persist over time. This analysis centres around the Arctic Monkeys as their focus on elusive and idealized women closely mirrors Tennyson's fascination with devoted and desirable figures, making the comparison meaningful and resonant. Through a presentist lens, an approach that interprets historical work in relation

to contemporary perspectives, this essay will demonstrate how Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys both position women as the focus of male fascination. Although they are separated by time and genre, both artists frequently centre their work around women, and through visual accompaniments, vivid sensory imagery, and repetition, they are able to effectively depict women as devoted, desirable, and mysterious figures. Such a comparative approach exposes the persistence of popular Victorian themes in contemporary music and makes Tennyson's poetry more approachable for modern readers, increasing the work's contemporary appeal and encouraging a deeper understanding of both historical and contemporary artistic works.

The *Moxon Tennyson*, an influential volume of illustrated poems by Tennyson, was published in 1857 by Edward Moxon. Victorian studies scholar June Hagen explains that Tennyson was reluctant to agree to this volume's publication, as he "generally disliked illustrations to his own poems," but eventually agreed upon realizing he would not have to write any new poems for this gift book (Hagen 22). The book is particularly renowned for its inclusion of several "lady" poems that controversially respond to Victorian gender separation, exploring a "pressing Victorian concern with the social roles" of women (Peterson 26).

While Tennyson enjoyed considerable popularity in Victorian culture before the *Moxon Tennyson* was released, the UK indie rock band Arctic Monkeys only achieved sustained global success with the release of *AM* in 2013. The album is the band's most digitally downloaded and streamed release to date, with its single, "Do I Wanna Know," earning over 3.8 million chart sales. This success cemented AM's place as "one of the defining pieces of rock music of the second decade of the 21st century" (Official Charts 2025). Despite the distance of time between them, Victorian and modern representations similarly position women as the focus of male desire rather than as independent figures.

Context

The significance of the *Moxon Tennyson* extends beyond its interesting publication history to the way the collection engages with contemporary Victorian attitudes toward gender. The Victorian culture that Tennyson was situated in featured firmly separate spheres for men and women. As Kathryn Hughes explored in her article, “Gender Roles in the 19th Century,” men dominated the public sphere of commerce and academics, while women were “best suited to the domestic sphere” (Hughes). Although Tennyson’s “lady” poems do not outright state the unfairly restrictive nature of the separate spheres, he “does not allow his [female] ‘characters of passion and imagination’ to be limited” (Peterson 37). He depicts women as desirable and devoted, which aligns with the Victorian societal norms, but also presents them as mysterious, multifaceted characters, indicating that these poems do not wholly participate in Victorian gender expectations.

Just as Tennyson’s poetry responded to Victorian cultural perceptions of women, Arctic Monkeys reflect modern cultural shifts towards casual relationships in what Justin R. Garcia and colleagues describe as an “openness and acceptance of uncommitted sex” (Garcia et al.). Written and sung by vocalist Turner, many of Arctic Monkeys’ songs centre on desirable but unattainable women, aligning with cultural anxieties about finding and securing reciprocated love. Additionally, despite the distance of time between them, both Victorian and modern representations similarly position women as the focus of male desire rather than independent figures. Comparing poems from the *Moxon Tennyson* with songs from *AM* not only reveals how both Tennyson and Turner consistently present women as devoted, alluring, and enigmatic, but how viewing Tennyson alongside contemporary media like *AM* makes his work relevant today.

Devotion

Tennyson’s poetry and Arctic Monkeys’ music both depict women as devoted figures, and effectively accomplish this portrayal by presenting the women’s passive

devotion through an external voice. This parallel becomes particularly apparent when comparing Tennyson's lyric poem "Mariana" and Arctic Monkeys' song "Snap Out of It." Both works centre around a woman whose life is defined by her devoted longing for men, yet she remains passive in her sorrow. Mariana decays while waiting for a lover that never arrives, miserably repeating that her "life is dreary" (line 9) and that "[h]e cometh not" (line 10). Although Mariana's devotion to her lover is portrayed as "insatiable" (Peterson 36), Tennyson ensures she is characterized as resigned and unassertive in her longing, as aspects of femininity such as "passivity, submission, [and] dependence" were inherent in Victorian society (Chakraborty 295).

"Snap Out of It" involves a woman absorbed by her unreciprocated devotion while the singer pleads with her to break away from such a futile commitment: "Under a spell, you're hypnotized (Ooh) / Darling, how could you be so blind?" (lines 25–26). Rather than providing the woman's inner thoughts, Turner presents her devotion through the singer's cheekily annoyed perspective, questioning whether she was even built for such devotion, as "[f]orever isn't for everyone" (line 13). Both "Mariana" and "Snap Out of It" present the women's devotion through an external voice, reinforcing their passive commitment. The intermedial accompaniments of each work intensify this depiction of passive devotion: the *Moxon Tennyson's* illustration of "Mariana" shows her as an isolated weeping woman, while the official music video for "Snap Out of It" shows a woman watching a man on television perpetually, held captive by her own fixation. These visual components reinforce the excessive longing of the women and the suffering that such passive devotion can produce. Together, Tennyson and the Arctic Monkeys demonstrate how narratives of female devotion persist across centuries, portraying women as emotionally devoted and yet ultimately passive within their own longing.

Desire

The second notable parallel between Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys' depiction is in their portrayal of women as intensely desirable figures, achieved through vivid detail. Both artists' work revolves around an idealized woman, whose magnetic allure captivates the speaker. The speaker in Tennyson's "Lilian" adoringly describes the enchanting appeal of "fairy Lilian" (line 1), and in Arctic Monkeys' song "Arabella," Turner similarly describes a magical and mesmerizing woman. In both cases, women's beauty and the fascination they inspire are richly illustrated through sensory details. For example, Tennyson's description of Lilian's "crimson-threaded lips" (line 23) and "black bearded eyes" (line 15) establishes her as a visually striking and attractive figure. Likewise, Turner claims Arabella is "made of outer space" (line 17) with "lips ... like the galaxy's edge" (line 18); she is presented as something otherworldly and mysteriously enticing. In both of these examples, the lips become a focal point of the artist's fascination, illustrating the connection between the woman's desirability and her erotic allure. Despite their desirability, both Lilian and Arabella remain frustratingly unattainable. Lilian dances around and withholds her love, and similarly, Arabella only takes a "dip in [his] daydreams" (line 6) when seeking "shelter from reality" (line 5), reinforcing their unattainable nature. In both works, women are portrayed as extremely desirable yet unattainable objects of male fascination, highlighting the enduring cultural narrative of bewitching yet elusive women.

Mystery

Through repetition, Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys both depict women as unknowable and mysterious creatures. Tennyson's poem "Eleänore" centres around the inaccessible Eleänore, whose "dark eyes open'd not, / Nor first reveal'd themselves to English air" (lines 1-2). Though her enigmatic presence ignites a "languid fire [that] creeps / Thro' my veins to all my frame" (lines 129-130), the speaker is left wondering about Eleänore's inner feelings. He repeatedly questions who will love and care for her,

although his query receives no answer. His anxiety is echoed throughout the poem, emphasizing the impossibility of ever understanding her, despite his strong love.

Arctic Monkeys' "Do I Wanna Know" follows a similar pattern, as the singer wonders if his affections are reciprocated. Amidst his "wonderin' if [her] heart's still open" (line 26), he continues to anxiously ask "(Do I wanna know?) If this feelin' flows both ways?" (line 11), mirroring the repeated questioning in "Eleänore." He spends the song describing his repetitive thoughts of her, continually asking if she shares his romantic feelings. The repeated questions in both works convey the endless waiting and confusion provoked by these mysterious women. Moreover, Turner's refrain, wherein he is "crawlin' back to" the woman, displays the singer's strong attachment to her, even though he is unsure if his desire is reciprocated (line 15). Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys' respective portrayals reveal that the narrative of desire for enigmatic women is pertinent to both historical and contemporary audiences.

Significance

Comparing culturally impactful intermedial works such as Tennyson's *Moxon Tennyson* and the Arctic Monkeys' *AM* reveals the persistence of popular Victorian themes in contemporary music. Although Tennyson's work cannot be interpreted exactly as it was by contemporary Victorians, modern comparisons between these works can illustrate that Tennyson's poetic themes and focuses were not static historical trends but dynamic topics that continue to resonate today. Analyzing Tennyson's and Arctic Monkeys' similar depictions of desirable, devoted, and mysterious women fashions the former's poetic strategies as freshly engaging for new audiences—those of whom may be unfamiliar with Victorian poetry, but well-versed in modern indie rock music. At the same time, this comparison enriches the interpretation of Arctic Monkeys' songs, as it reveals how their focus on enigmatic women and melancholic themes is not an isolated interest but reflective of persistent patterns in lyrical art. Therefore, this

presentist attitude towards Tennyson and Arctic Monkeys can be mutually illuminating: Tennyson's work becomes contemporarily relatable, and Arctic Monkeys are shown to be historically rooted, allowing for a richer understanding of both historical and contemporary artistic works.

Works Cited

- Arctic Monkeys. "Arabella." AM, Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2013. *Spotify*, www.open.spotify.com/track/0NdTUS4UiNYCNn5FgVqKQY
- . "Do I Wanna Know." AM, Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2013. *Spotify*, www.open.spotify.com/track/0NdTUS4UiNYCNn5FgVqKQY
- . "Snap Out of It." AM, Domino Recording Co Ltd, 2013. *Spotify*, www.open.spotify.com/track/0NdTUS4UiNYCNn5FgVqKQY
- "Arctic Monkeys' Official Biggest Songs and Albums Revealed." *Official Charts*, www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/arctic-monkeys-official-biggest-songs-and-albums-revealed__22872/.
- "Arctic Monkeys - Snap Out Of It (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Official Arctic Monkeys, 16 June 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8tLS_NOWLs
- Asriadi, Rahmad Dede, and Andi Muhammad Irawan. "Analysis of Figurative Language Used in Selected Song Lyrics of Arctic Monkeys in 'AM' album." *English Language and Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 7 Oct. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.24036/ell.v11i1.116318>.
- Chakraborty, Shrabani Ganguly. "19th Century Britain, a Time of Reshaping Women in the Ideology of 'Separate Spheres.'" *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 2022, www.ijels.com/upload_document/issue_files/40IJELS-102202223-19thcentury.pdf.
- Garcia, Justin R., et al. "Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review." *Sage Journals*, 2012, www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1037/a0027911?icid=int.sj-abstract.citing-articles.30.

- Hagen, June Steffensen. "Tennyson's Troubled Years With Moxon & Co.: A Publishing Relationship." *Browning Institute Studies*, vol. 7, 1979, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0092472500001036>.
- Hughes, Kathryn. "Gender Roles in the 19th Century." *British Library*, 15 May 2014, www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/
- Letissier, Georges. "Neo-Victorianism and the Victorian Heritage: Authenticity, Post-Authenticity and Presentism." *HAL Open Science*, www.nantes-universite.hal.science/hal-04504161/document.
- Peterson, Linda H. "Tennyson and the ladies." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 47, no. 1, Mar. 2009, pp. 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.0.0040>.
- Tennyson, Alfred. "Eleänore." *Poems*, Edward Moxon, London, 1857, pp. 76–81, www.babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nc01.ark:/13960/t56f3v418&seq=32.
- . "Lilian." *Poems*, Edward Moxon, London, 1857, pp. 3–4, www.babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nc01.ark:/13960/t56f3v418&seq=32.
- . "Mariana." *Poems*, Edward Moxon, London, 1857, pp. 7–8, www.babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nc01.ark:/13960/t56f3v418&seq=32.