

GEORGE MEREDITH'S MODERN LOVE

IRRESPONSIBILITY AND IDENTITY
IN
MEREDITH'S MODERN LOVE

By
Lillian Rebecca Blume, B.A.

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University

September 1981

MASTER OF ARTS (1981)
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Irresponsibility and Identity in Meredith's
 Modern Love

AUTHOR: Lillian Rebecca Blume, B.A. (Simon Fraser University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. John Ferns

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 92

ABSTRACT

Critics have generally thought that George Meredith's discussion of marital breakdown in Modern Love was in advance of its time. It must be granted that the married couple in the poem do not conform to the image that the Victorians liked to project of themselves, but in my view the narrator's attitude toward his wife, in fact, reflects a very conventional Victorian standpoint. Instead of taking an honest look at the marriage, the narrator blames his wife and unseen forces for their problems. The narrator's share of responsibility is revealed, however, in his manner of narration, in his responses to his wife, and in his way of handling his problems when he begins to suspect her adultery.

When the narrator places the blame beyond himself, he has the least awareness of and control over his life. When he accepts responsibility for some of the blame for the failed marriage, he is generally stronger, and able to influence the course of his life, instead of yielding to invisible forces. Because of his weak sense of self the narrator is paralyzed by conflict and is unable to take effective action to improve his situation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my appreciation to Professor John Ferns for his criticism, support, and for discussing with me Victorian and modern morality.

I also thank Chimo and Latke for their protection and companionship during the many all-night office work sessions; Roldo Fritz for acting as resident muse; and, my mother, brothers, and sisters for helping me to shape my understanding of human relationships.

I especially want to thank Dennis Radesch for encouraging me to enter graduate school, and for the time we've spent celebrating all the problems of modern love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Notes to Introduction	27
I THE NARRATOR OF <u>MODERN LOVE</u> :	
SHARING RESPONSIBILITY OR ASSIGNING BLAME	32
Notes to Chapter I	53
II CONFLICT, INACTION, AND THE PROBLEM	55
OF IDENTITY	
Notes to Chapter II	82
CONCLUSION	84
Notes to Conclusion	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the behaviour of the narrator in George Meredith's fifty stanza poem, Modern Love. The narrator is a weak character who cannot accept responsibility for his actions. In fact, he cannot act decisively and he constantly foists blame for his inability to act on his wife and on unseen forces.

In the introduction, I study the values current in the era when the poem was written and then I discuss some aspects of Meredith's life and career which are relevant to the writing of Modern Love. I consider the views that have been propagated about the fate of Meredith's first wife and how they may have influenced previous readers' understandings (or misunderstandings) of Modern Love. Meredith's own feelings about Modern Love and those of the poem's earliest reviewers are noted. Finally, I trace the history of criticism of the poem, particularly noting the issues on which most studies have concentrated and where my analysis will diverge from these studies.

Chapter one then deals with the issue of the narrator's handling of responsibility. In chapter two, I go on to analyse the narrator's method of projecting his indecisiveness

and conflicting feelings into his narrative. Ultimately, irresponsibility, indecision and conflict are related to the narrator's weak sense of identity.

George Meredith wrote Modern Love in 1861, at the height of Queen Victoria's reign. Benét describes the Victorian era as a time of:

pride in the stable constitutional government, of optimism generated by her [England's] increasing industrial prosperity, of an as yet unshaken confidence in the inherent rightness of the liberal and evangelical virtues of industriousness, self-reliance, temperance, piety, charity, and moral earnestness.

However, Victorian man's situation was, according to J. Hillis Miller, "one of disconnection; disconnection between man and nature, between man and man, even between man and himself."² R. A. Levine says it was also "an age of anxiety, an age of flux" in which "[t]raditional institutions . . . were challenged from every corner."³ The stable and prosperous elements in society responded to the challenge of dissidents with censorship, social pressures, and legal restraints. The Victorians were very watchful of the stability of their institutions, especially the institution of marriage. W. S. Johnson states that "The defense of marriage laws often meant the defense of social structures and of orthodox religion, just as an attack on marriage meant an attack on society and the church -- if not, indeed, on the very ideas of order and Christianity."⁴

Walter E. Houghton suggests, in The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830 - 1870, that the prudishness of the Victorians was "acerbated by something new and dangerous in the environment."

He says:

There must have been immediate signs that the sexual impulse was threatening to overflow the traditional dykes; signs so ominous that men felt it could be checked only by the most severe and repressive code.⁵

Houghton outlines the major threats in the Victorian period to traditional sexual morality. First of all, he cites French novels, which were known as "the literature of prostitution", and yet were widely read in England. Houghton says, "All through the period the violence with which Balzac, Sue, and George Sand . . . were condemned reveals something much more than an outraged Puritan conscience. It betrays the fear of their influence."⁶ Houghton points to the philosophy and practice of "free love" as another cause of concern. Writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Stuart Mill and George Eliot criticised marriage; and many public figures conducted their personal relationships in untraditional ways.⁷ An example of the "free love" ethic can be found in a book on birth control published in 1854. The author of the book, a Dr. Drysdale wrote, "if a man and a woman conceive a passion for each other, they should be morally entitled to indulge it, without binding themselves together for life."⁸ This book went through twelve editions in twenty years.

According to Houghton, the major reason for Victorian sexual prudishness was "that sexual license in England not only existed on a large scale but seemed to be increasing."⁹ The seduction of women was commonplace and led directly to the increase of prostitution since "the fallen woman, made an

outcast by the Victorian code of purity, had little else to turn to for support."¹⁰

Much of the impetus for the repression of "immorality" came from the Evangelical movement. Russell M. Goldfarb found that "[p]eople from all walks of life grew up under Evangelical training and then as adults in Victorian England they responded to a morality inculcated in childhood."¹¹ Evangelical groups spread their message of strict morality everywhere and lobbied the government to make the law regulate morals. They succeeded in strengthening laws against obscene literature and even tried, unsuccessfully, in 1856 and 1857, to get parliament to legislate the death sentence for adultery. Another powerful moral force helping to entrench Victorian prudishness was the utilitarians, a social-political movement whose aim was to "develop a healthy society by appealing to the reason of men to pursue practical ends in life by practical means."¹² Soon, purity became associated with progress, morality with utility.

These influences left their mark on the public consciousness, and affected the ideas people brought to their relationships. Marriage, family and the home were held sacred. Duty and loyalty were of foremost importance. In 1865, John Ruskin defined "home" as the Victorians conceived of it. Houghton calls the work in which this definition appears "the most important single document . . . for the characteristic idealization of love, woman, and the home in Victorian thought."¹³ Ruskin said:

This is the true nature of home -- it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. . . so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home. . . . But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods . . . so far as it is this, . . . it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home.¹⁴

Religious literature and advice books glorifying the home were read by large numbers of people. The Homelife by Baldwin Brown exemplified the type of advice commonly given in the mid-Victorian era. Brown said it was the responsibility of women to make the home and themselves "an unfailing fountain of courage and inspiration to the hard-pressed man, who but for them must be worsted in life's battle."¹⁵ If women failed to behave appropriately, it was feared that men, and society with them, would founder helplessly. Consequently an attempt was zealously made to preserve women's virtue and loyalty. Houghton says that:

after marriage, quite as much as before, the Victorian ethic made fidelity the supreme virtue and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins. . . . Adultery, especially in the case of a wife, and no matter what the extenuating circumstance, was spoken of with horror. A "feeble and erring woman" became, in fact, a social outcast.¹⁶

The Victorian ideals of purity and virtue were not always achieved or even desired, but they were made to appear as if they were. The Victorians were hypocritical. Houghton writes that:

they concealed or suppressed their true convictions and their natural tastes. They said the 'right'

thing or did the 'right' thing: they sacrificed sincerity to propriety. . . . they pretended to be better than they were. They passed themselves off as being incredibly pious and moral; they talked noble sentiments and lived -- quite otherwise. . . . they refused to look at life candidly. They shut their eyes to whatever was¹⁷ ugly or unpleasant and pretended it didn't exist.

In this climate of moral piousness, censorship and hypocrisy, Meredith wrote Modern Love, a poetic sequence ostensibly about a "feeble and erring woman", and a man who becomes "helplessly afloat" (XL, 13)¹⁸ as a result. In Modern Love, Meredith uncovers the deepest fears of the Victorians and shows those forces which can potentially turn fear into painful reality. He confronts those who prefer illusion and pretension with the reality of an unhappy marriage. Meredith was not alone; other poets and novelists wanted to express their experience of reality -- which sometimes involved the tragedy of an unhappy marriage, the difficulty in obtaining a divorce, the question of woman's role in society, and what W. S. Johnson calls, "the worrisome matter of sexuality, of the use and abuse of sexual energy to manifest power or affection, and the question of inhibiting or even denying the sexual drive."¹⁹

In their novels, George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray and Hardy show marriages which are disastrous and hypocritical.²⁰ Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Clough, Patmore, Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold wrote poems that looked at the problems of love and marriage. Drawing from his own experience of an unhappy marriage, George Meredith

joined other Victorian authors in their analyses of married life.

In 1846, at the age of eighteen, George Meredith became an apprentice to a young "Bohemian soliciter",²¹ Richard S. Charnock, and soon became acquainted with Charnock's group of friends. Charnock and his friends were interested in writing and Meredith, himself, began writing verse before he turned nineteen. Meredith and his new friends, Mary Ellen Nicolls, Hilare C. de St Croix and Peter Austin Daniel joined together to produce a literary journal which they called the Monthly Observer. In this journal, Meredith published several of his own poems, translations from German poets, articles, and for the last few issues, acted as editor. In August 1849, he married Mary Ellen and the Monthly Observer ceased publication. George Meredith was twenty-one years of age.

Meredith continued writing poetry making occasional contributions to literary journals and newspapers,²² and by 1851, he had written enough poems to publish a volume of poetry called, simply, Poems. Meredith did not expect the book to earn him money, but he hoped that with it he could begin to make a name for himself. Meanwhile, the Merediths' marriage encountered several difficulties. Mary Ellen was not well after bearing "more than one child" all of which were either still-born or died soon after birth.²³ The Merediths had very little money. Both Mary Ellen and her father, Thomas Love Peacock, pressured Meredith to take a job with the East India Company, but, determined to be a writer, he refused.

The couple received help from and lodgings with Mary Ellen's father, and a son was born to them in June 1854. In 1855, Meredith published The Shaving of Shagpat: An Arabian Entertainment and two years later another fantasy entitled Farina: A Legend of Cologne. In the meanwhile, his relationship with his wife had deteriorated. Diane Johnson, in her biography of Mary Ellen Meredith, shows from Mary Ellen's letters, that by 1856 Meredith was often away, even during Mary Ellen's frequent illnesses.²⁴ Sometime between August 1856 and July 1857, Mary Ellen began an adulterous affair with a family friend, the painter, Henry Wallis. By the end of 1857, Meredith and his wife were living separately. In April 1858, Mary Ellen gave birth to a son, considered to be the child of Henry Wallis. At the time, Meredith was working on his novel, The Ordeal of Richard Fernal, which he published in June 1859.

According to Diane Johnson, Mary Ellen's life following her separation from Meredith did not follow the disgraced path that all of Meredith's biographers claim. She points out that certain fictions have developed around the break-up of the Merediths, probably instigated by Meredith's "Victorian" relatives and biographers who had puritanical beliefs about the fate of adulterous women. Rumours of Mary Ellen's "elopement" to Capri and subsequent "abandonment" by Wallis have no basis in fact. Johnson says, "It appears that Mary Ellen simply left George, intending to live by her writing and on a small

private income. Her involvement with Henry was not necessarily even related to her separation from George."²⁵ Mary was not well and the "elopement" to Capri may actually have been merely a trip to Italy's milder climate for the winter in hopes that she would regain her health. Henry accompanied her and probably helped her financially as well.²⁶ Because Mary Ellen returned from Capri alone, the traditional view has been that Henry deserted her. But as Johnson argues:

it seems more likely that Mary Ellen and Henry did not part at all. They just went underground, to provide for an undisturbed and scandal-free future. That this was so is testified to by the lifelong cordial relations between Henry and the Peacock family. Mary Ellen's few little things were given to him when she died. He corresponded with and called upon Edith [Mary Ellen's daughter by her first marriage] as long as he lived, and contributed to the Halliford edition of Peacock's works.²⁷

Mary Ellen died in October 1861, from a long-standing kidney ailment. Less than two months later, Meredith was working on the poem, Modern Love, so that by January 9, 1862, he was able to have proofs made of thirty-seven stanzas. The completed fifty stanza poem was included in a volume of poetry called Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside with Poems and Ballads, published on April 28, 1862. The activity of writing Modern Love seems to have given Meredith mixed feelings. In a letter to his friend, Frederick Maxse, he writes: "I am writing, of course. But the poem's morbid, and all about Love. So I despise my work, and sneer secretly at those that flatter me about it."²⁸

Meredith's bitterness toward women at this time can be seen from a letter to Bonaparte Wyse written in January 1862:

Women, my dear fellow, can occasionally be fine creatures, if they fall into good hands. Physically they neighbour the vegetable, and morally the animal creation; and they are, therefore, chemically good for man, and to be away from them is bad for that strange being, who, because they serve his uses, calls them angels.

I respect many. I dislike none. I trust not to love one. For what if you do? Was there ever such a gambler's stake as that we fling for a woman in giving ourselves for her whom we know not, and haply shall not know when twenty years have run. I do blame Nature for masking the bargain to us.

Yet, typical of the narrator's ambivalence in Modern Love, Meredith goes on not to blame nature, but to blame himself, comparing his previous trust of women to an infant who foolishly trusts its mother:

I have seen infants fed with pap-spoons. They took all in faith, and they were nourished. If I thought myself superior, I who looked at them loftily, and drank more than was good for me that night, was I not an ass?

In a letter to Augustus Jessopp written six months after the completion of Modern Love, Meredith refers to the poem as "a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days."³⁰ In light of this comment critics have often taken the poem to be a diatribe against romantic idealism. But one may question the legitimacy of basing so much on so little. It is better to look to the poem itself in analysing its meaning, rather than to the poet's casual assessment of his own work.

In the two years following the publication of Modern Love, at least twelve literary journals reviewed it. Most

reviewers condemned Meredith simply for his choice of topic. The first reviews appeared on May 17, 1862. The Critic issued a short notice saying merely that the poems of the book as a whole contained "much humour joined to very uncommon powers of observation and graphic painting." The Parthenon hailed Meredith, saying that the book revealed "the probable addition of a new original genius to the goodly company of England's poets." The Parthenon was owned by Meredith's friend, James Virtue, and the review was written by two of Meredith's close friends. In his biography of Meredith, Lionel Stevenson says that these were "trite compliments" and the more influential journals were yet to be heard from.³¹

The Press of May 17 and the Saunders, Otley and Company Literary Budget of June 1 had nothing complimentary to say about Modern Love.³² On May 24, a review of the poem in the Spectator said:

Modern Love [is] without any vestige of original thought or purpose which could excuse so unpleasant a subject . . . we can accuse it of nothing worse than meddling causelessly, and somewhat pruriently with a deep and painful subject, on which he [Meredith] has no convictions to express. . . . the form of versification makes the smartness look still more vulgar.

.
[Meredith] intersperses it, moreover, with sardonic grins that have all the effect of an intentional affectation of cynicism.

The reviewer suggests that a more accurate title for the poem would be "Modern Lust". He called most of the poems "a very thick solution of mental mud" and said that much of the book was "vulgar and tawdry."³³

The Atheneum of May 31 commented in a similar vein, but

in gentler language: "Modern Love contains passages of true beauty and feeling; but they are like the casual glimpses of a fair landscape in some noxious clime" and "the phases of the husband's torture are elaborately set forth, often with spasmodic indistinctness but now and then with real force and imagination." The reviewer described the style as "abrupt and obscure", the theme as "morbid".³⁴

On June 7, the influential Spectator published a letter by A. C. Swinburne condemning the prudishness of the Spectator's May 24 reviewer:

The present critic [of the Spectator] falls foul of him [Meredith] for dealing with "a deep and painful subject on which he has no conviction to express." There are pulpits enough for all preachers in prose; the business of verse-writing is hardly to express convictions; and if some poetry, not without merit of its kind, has at times dealt in dogmatic morality, it is all the worse and all the weaker for that.

Swinburne praised Modern Love for its "subtle strength", "depth of delicate power", and "passionate and various beauty", calling it "a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author."³⁵

Meredith's friend, Captain Frederick Maxse, wrote a review for the June 20 edition of the Morning Post based on an incomplete proof copy of the poem which he had seen in Italy. His article, of course, was favourable. In July 1862, three other journals, the Museum, Weldon's Register, and the Westminster Review expressed disapproval of Modern Love because of its morally distasteful subject matter and the London Review of September 13, disapproved almost as strongly

as the Spectator.³⁶

Much to Meredith's dismay, the prestigious journal, the Saturday Review, to which many of Meredith's friends contributed, did not immediately review Modern Love.³⁷ Finally on October 24, 1863, over a year after the poem's publication, the Saturday Review's notice appeared. It said that George Meredith indulges in "an elaborate analysis of a loathsome series of phenomena which he is pleased to call 'modern love'."³⁸ It referred to his choice of subject as "a grave moral mistake" and said that discussion of a failed marriage is neither interesting nor attractive, but "one of the most disastrous calamities that can befall a nation."³⁹ This comment reveals how closely the Victorians associated the stability of marriage with the stability of society.

C. Day Lewis sympathizes with the negative reactions of the reviewers. He says that if art is taken seriously by people, the critic has a right to discuss the moral implications of a work under judgement. Since the marriage bond was sacrosanct to the Victorians and the family was the keystone of society, it was immoral for a poet to reveal the strength of the forces which may corrode it.⁴⁰

Perhaps because of Victorian sensibilities, Modern Love remained virtually unknown for many years. Meredith, however, had enough faith in the value of the poem to reprint it in 1892. But this time he did not submit it to the whips of reviewers. He said that, "the flagellator has enough to do in dealing with me as a novelist."⁴¹ Perhaps he still

felt that reviewers would not understand the intention and meaning of the poem due to their passion for guarding public morals. Since then, however, analysing human relationships has become a private and public passion; Modern Love is no longer attacked as immoral, but rather, is praised for its psychological depths. Recent articles and books show that Meredith has finally found readers who appreciate and understand the problems of the man and wife in Modern Love. For many years critics have examined Modern Love unprejudiced by moral indignation and are impressed by its honesty and realism.

Modern Love has inspired much praise as well as much disagreement among the commentators of the last hundred years. Several arguments seem, as yet, unresolved, and are possibly unresolvable. Some critics question the degree to which the poem can be read as autobiographical. Others wonder whether Meredith achieved detachment from his personal tragedy prior to writing Modern Love or whether the writing of the poem was a type of therapy for him.

Some have attempted to justify Meredith's calling his sixteen line stanzas "sonnets" and to relate Modern Love to the Renaissance tradition of sonnet sequences. Studies compare Meredith's sequence to Victorian love poem sequences such as Clough's Amours de Voyage and Rossetti's The House of Life. The action of the poem and the style of narration cause much disagreement; the identity and purpose of the occasional omniscient narrator are still unresolved as is the question of whether or not the wife actually commits adultery. There are

at least three differing explanations for why she commits suicide. There is debate over whether the husband changes or whether his posturing and self-delusion continue to the end of the poem. Finally there are speculative, philosophical arguments about the poem. Do the images in it represent a mythological struggle above and beyond the overt struggles of the husband and wife? Is the poem optimistic or pessimistic? Can the reader apply the nature philosophy of Meredith's later poems to the action of Modern Love? These and other questions are posed by careful readers of the poem. They find that if put under close scrutiny, Modern Love can provide challenge and satisfaction to those who explore its complexities.

After the negative reviews of 1862 and 1863, Modern Love was forgotten until 1887 when Arthur Symonds mentioned it in his article in the Westminster Review.⁴² By this time, Meredith's reputation was secured by The Egoist (1879) and Diana of the Crossways (1885), and Meredith was once again publishing volumes of poetry.⁴³ Admirers of his new books began to look closely at his earlier work as well.

Richard Le Gallienne championed Modern Love in 1890. He claimed that if Modern Love had been in the more popular fourteen-line sonnet form, it would not have been ignored. But he said:

There was a moment in the history of the sonnet when sonnetters hung indecisive between a form in sixteen and that in fourteen lines. . . but do not the sixteen line poems in "Modern Love" so completely fulfil all the essential conditions of the sonnet as now traditionally formulated that we

may well extend to the benefit of that historic doubt and accept⁴⁴ them as that exception which proves the rule.

When Modern Love was reprinted in 1892, William Watson praised it, saying that it would stand the test of time. To those who had criticized it on moral grounds, he said; "The theme is painful, not delightful at all; but it is the mysterious province of tragic art to distil from moral pain aesthetic pleasure."⁴⁵ In 1894, Allen Monkhouse also praised the sixteen line sonnet saying that the regular sonnet form would be too formal and monotonous for such a poem. He found Modern Love intensely tragic, yet having "no taint of pessimism":

If it shows that vague aspirations are not a sufficient equipment for the changes and chances of married life, it gives no discouragement to lovers who have the sympathy and the comradeship⁴⁶ that comes of interests and work in common.

In The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, which first appeared in 1906, G. M. Trevelyan offers a detailed description of the poem's action.⁴⁷ Trevelyan's book is mostly concerned with Meredith's nature philosophy and his belief that man must achieve a balance between his animal passions and his intelligence in order to have a harmonious existence. Trevelyan asserts that this philosophy, so obvious in Meredith's later poetry, is also the message of Modern Love. This idea emerges repeatedly in criticism of Modern Love and went unquestioned until early in the 1970's.⁴⁸

In 1907, in her book George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, M. Sturge Henderson continues the sonnet versus stan-

za debate. She says "calling them sonnets is misleading. The term sonnet obscures rather than exalts the refinement of the work."⁴⁹ Henderson describes the action of the poem stanza by stanza. Her commentary has traces of the moralistic judgements of the earliest critics of Modern Love. She says "the narrator's commentary on the situation raises it to tragedy, and makes us slow to discover that it is hardly tragic in itself. . . . The underlying story is inadequate." She hopes the characters in the poem are "not concerned with deception and jealousy and retaliation [which she sees as trite] but rather with a tragedy of inevitable loss, of wholly dreaded and half merited pain, of loneliness."⁵⁰ Henderson does not accept the weakness and pettiness of the characters and calls their behaviour in stanzas XV, XXXVI and XLV "antics" which "have no place in the poem."⁵¹ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1924) shares Mrs. Henderson's distaste for marital difficulties. He says that the subject has a bad effect on him and that confessions make him very uncomfortable.⁵²

Between 1925 and 1950 Meredith's reputation waned and there are only occasional references to Modern Love in books and articles.⁵³ In New Bearings in English Poetry (1932) for example, F. R. Leavis provides a scathing condemnation of Modern Love:

As for Meredith, if any one should comment that I have taken no account of him, I can only say that Modern Love seems to me the flashy product of unusual but vulgar cleverness working upon cheap emotion: it could serve later poets, if at all, only as a warning.⁵⁴

Sir E. K. Chambers wrote a detailed study of Modern Love in 1897, although it was not published until 1942. He thought that the poem was difficult because "the wife's history is only indirectly presented through the medium of the husband's misunderstandings; and therefore we have to read between the lines, and to reconstruct it for ourselves out of partial and often distorted reflections."⁵⁵ His theory is that the wife committed adultery, but still loved her husband. The husband, however, misunderstood both her actions and her feelings. When the husband declares his firm belief in her innocence, she feels such shame and guilt that she kills herself. Chambers' distrust of the husband-narrator's representation of his world began the unresolved critical debate regarding what actually happens in the poem.

While Modern Love was virtually forgotten in the 1930's and 40's, the poem's critical reputation has undergone a considerable revival since the mid-1950's. Several studies relate the poem to Meredith's life. In his book, George Meredith: His Life and Work (1956), Jack Lindsay describes the action of the poem, commenting mostly on the stanzas which are biographically relevant.⁵⁶ Gerald H. Perkus's study, "Meredith's Unhappy Love Life: Worthy of the Muse" (1970) discusses Meredith's ability both to reveal and to conceal autobiographical facts in his works. He shows how Meredith uses his poetry to justify his beliefs and to set his experiences at a distance in order to see them objectively.⁵⁷

Diane Johnson takes a feminist approach to Modern Love in her biography of Mary Ellen Meredith (1973).⁵⁸ She claims that Meredith wrote the poem in a mood of self-vindication. While he has the narrator deplore sentimentality in himself, Johnson says that Meredith knows that readers will approve of the narrator's romantic idealism and, like the narrator, will blame the wife for her lack of loyalty.

Four studies of the poem are primarily concerned with the narrator-husband's personality and his style of narration. Walter F. Wright (1953) looks at the husband in terms of Meredith's Essay on Comedy (1877) -- a much later work. Wright argues that "Because he [the husband] cannot see his own absurdity, he cannot be cured by any experience short of tragedy."⁵⁹ After discussing Modern Love in several of his books, C. Day Lewis wrote a substantial introduction to the poem when it was republished in 1959.⁶⁰ Lewis is very sympathetic to the husband who, he feels is trying to establish a relationship based on equality between men and women. What other critics see as the husband's illusory sentimentality, Lewis sees as magnanimity.⁶¹ New perspectives on the narrator emerge in the article "The Autobiographical Author as Fictional Character: Point of View in Meredith's Modern Love" (1972) by Willie D. Reader.⁶² Reader shows that point of view is not clearly divided into third and first person narrators. The third person narrator makes a delicate transition to first person. The effect is that of a single speaker trying, and failing, to be objective. Philip Wilson contributes to the debate

on the role of the narrator in his article "Affective Coherence, a Principle of Abated Action and Meredith's 'Modern Love'" (1974).⁶³ He argues that the narrator struggles to find himself innocent of his tragedy. Wilson believes that the audience becomes involved in the narrator's search for self-vindication. The story coheres through "affect" or feelings of affection for the narrator. In addition, Wilson says that Meredith introduces the principle of abated action-- action which ends neither tragically nor comically -- a principle which later informed many Victorian novels. Wilson says that understanding the principle behind the ending of Modern Love aids in interpreting Victorian novels, especially those of James and Dickens.

Some critics have tried to unravel Meredith's webs of imagery. Norman Friedman (1957) relates the imagery in Modern Love to both the action of the poem and the manner in which it is presented. He says that, "The narrator progresses from sentimentalism to cynicism and half-hearted sensualism to balanced wisdom, which reveals his egoism."⁶⁴ He concentrates on six image clusters within the poem, each of which represents an aspect of the husband. For example, Friedman claims that the images of time, torpor, games, the sun, and wings represent sentimentalism, while images of murder, knives, wounds, and blood represent disillusionment. Elizabeth Cox Wright (1958) discusses how the images are used to represent themes having a broader, more universal significance than that of a mismatched couple's marital problems.⁶⁵ In his book,

Hiding the Skeleton (1966), John Henry Smith compares the images in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and Modern Love and finds that Meredith has drawn from the same fund of imagery for both works.⁶⁶ Dorothy M. Mermin (1976) identifies those themes of Modern Love which are found in Meredith's fiction as well.⁶⁷ She discusses in depth Meredith's use of images, especially those of illusion and game-playing.

In his introduction to Selected Poems of George Meredith (1962), Graham Hough places Modern Love in the poetic climate of the mid-nineteenth century and discusses the Victorians need for "the poem of modern life."⁶⁸ He also points out that:

The medieval and Renaissance sonnet-sequences were not without their nineteenth-century imitators, notably Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Rossetti; and Meredith is working in this tradition, but at the same time turning it into something different.⁶⁹

Inspired by Hough's observations, several studies compare Modern Love to poetic sequences of the Victorian age and earlier times. The first of these by Richard Kowalczyk (1969) suggests that Meredith makes an ironic use of Renaissance motifs to show the inadequacy of Victorian marriages.⁷⁰ Cynthia Grant Tucker (1972) examines Modern Love as a parody of the Renaissance sonnet sequence's celebration of romantic love.⁷¹ She looks at Meredith's ironic use of sonnet sequence conventions such as the idealized woman, the lover's silence, and the imagery of battle and death. Approaching Modern Love in a similar way to Tucker, Arline Golden (1973) examines the extent to which Meredith is merely following Renaissance and

Victorian traditions and the degree to which he is being innovative.⁷² Meredith's "sonnet" form is compared with the traditional sonnet in Willie D. Reader's article, "Stanza Form in Modern Love" (1970).⁷³ Reader discusses the advantages of the sixteen line form and shows why it would have been chosen by Meredith over other forms. Reader argues that the sixteen line stanzas give a sense of incompleteness which encourages continuation of the narrative. He shows that Meredith uses near-rhymes to create a feeling of completeness when it is needed.

Finally, a further group of studies discuss the philosophical aspects of Modern Love. Norman Kelvin (1961) concentrates his study on the dark, warlike passions of man which Meredith saw as part of man's nature. In his discussion, he removes the responsibility from the individuals in the poem saying, "Not only the innate character of passion caused the tragedy, it was something derived from both nature and society which condemned the pair to live in a trap."⁷⁴ In the study, "Theme and the Myth of Lilith in Meredith's 'Modern Love'" (1968), Kenneth McKay finds a meaning in the theme and imagery of Modern Love which is "deeper" than the analysis of a marriage failure.⁷⁵ He sees the couple's failure as a failure to act in accordance with the laws of nature and time. McKay claims that Meredith based his characters on Adam, Eve, and Lilith. To McKay, Lilith is an inexplicable, ambiguous, and malevolent force that is always present to create turmoil for man.

Trevelyan's assumption that Meredith's nature philosophy was fully developed when he wrote Modern Love is challenged by Arthur L. Simpson.⁷⁶ In his study, "Meredith's Pessimistic Humanism: A New Reading of Modern Love" (1970), Simpson claims that Meredith had early, middle, and late philosophical periods. Modern Love and several poems published in journals between 1860 and 1880 belong, in his view, to the middle period in which Meredith was alienated from nature in much the same way that Matthew Arnold was.

In 1979 Carol Bernstein's book dealing with the whole of Meredith's poetry was published.⁷⁷ She agrees with Simpson's contentions. She finds that Modern Love does not conform to the central philosophy of Meredith and differs from Meredith's other poems in subject matter, narrative form, symbolic mode, and attitude of the speaker. Bernstein contributes her views to the discussion of Modern Love's imagery, the role of the narrator and the perceptions of the protagonists.

John Lucas tries to correct what he sees as the faults of earlier critics in his essay "Meredith as Poet" (1970), but in some areas, he only contributes to the confusion.⁷⁸ Lucas states firmly that Modern Love is "not about the collapse of moral values, in the Post-Darwinian world" and that it is "not a study of egoism" in the manner of Meredith's later novels.⁷⁹ He says that Modern Love has no "moral pattern" and "no centre" but, "is a ceaseless discovery of fluctuations."⁸⁰ Lucas argues that it is "disastrous"⁸¹ to identify the narra-

tor's voice with Meredith's and that the moral discoveries of the narrator are "not meant to provide the definitive judgement" on the "flow and recoil in a personal relationship."⁸² He further believes that the wife kills herself so that Meredith could end a poem which had become an unending series of "shifting dialectics."⁸³

Michael Lund (1978) sees Modern Love as an expression of the spiritual crisis of the nineteenth century.⁸⁴ He argues that the poem is concerned with the general questioning of the nature and purpose of the universe. Finally, in his book published in 1980, Richard McGhee studies the themes of duty and desire in Victorian poetry and drama.⁸⁵ He says that Modern Love analyses "the failure of the marriage system to hold together values of people whose desires have lost the direction of moral obligation."⁸⁶

The criticism of Modern Love has depended heavily on data extrinsic to the poem. Meredith's nature philosophy and sympathetic concern for feminist causes, both of which are obvious in his later poems and novels, are commonly assumed to inform Modern Love as well. The historical-biographical assumption of Mary Ellen Meredith's "inexcusable" infidelity sets most critics against the wife in the poem. Also, Meredith's comment that Modern Love is

"a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days" led many critics to assume that the narrator is against the sentimentality of romantic love. Based on these assumptions, Modern Love is hailed as a brave and honest analysis of a failed marriage.

I think that if we study the poem carefully, we find that it is neither brave nor honest in its analysis of marriage breakdown. It is not honest in that the narrator fails to assess, except in the most superficial way, his own contribution to his problems. The poem is not brave in that it conforms to Victorian conventions of upholding loyalty as the prime value in a marriage without examining the reality of the marriage to which loyalty is demanded.

My thesis focuses on the character of the narrator as it emerges through the narrative. I will first examine the narrator's unwillingness to take his share of responsibility for the failed marriage. We will see that when he takes control of his life he is more willing to face the fact of his problems and acknowledge his participation in a mutual tragedy. When he avoids his problems and diverts attention away from the marriage, he is more likely to blame his wife

and powerful outside forces for its failure. In the second chapter, I will consider the narrator's ambivalence and indecisiveness. I will examine the type of action he takes and its general ineffectiveness. The narrator's ineffectiveness and inability to take responsibility, it will be discovered, are ultimately rooted in his weak sense of self. He is unable to blame himself, because he does not have a stable "self" to blame.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹William Rose Benét, The Reader's Encyclopedia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), p. 1058.

²J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1963), p. 2.

³Richard A. Levine, Backgrounds to Victorian Literature (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1967), p. 2.

⁴Wendell Stacy Johnson, Sex and Marriage in Victorian Poetry (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 20.

⁵Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 359.

⁶Houghton, p. 359.

⁷Carlyle, J. S. Mill, Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, Dickens, the publisher John Chapman, George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, the radical publisher-writer Thornton Hunt, John Ruskin, the Unitarian minister W. J. Fox, Mary Ellen Meredith, and Henry Wallis were all involved in long-term sexual relationships that, for various reasons, were not in accord with the public image that the majority wished to construct. See Houghton, pp. 361-362 and Russell M. Goldfarb, Sexual Repression and Victorian Literature (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970), pp. 53-55.

⁸Houghton, pp. 362-363.

⁹Houghton, p. 365.

¹⁰Houghton, p. 366.

¹¹Goldfarb, p. 23.

¹²Goldfarb, p. 29.

¹³Houghton, p. 343, n. 7.

¹⁴John Ruskin in Sesame and Lilies, see Houghton, p. 343.

¹⁵James Baldwin Brown, The Home Life (1866) in Houghton, p. 351.

¹⁶Houghton, p. 356.

¹⁷Houghton, pp. 394-395.

¹⁸George Meredith, "Modern Love", The Poems of George Meredith, ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), I, 140. Successive quotations from Modern Love are taken from this source and identified in the thesis by stanza and line numbers.

¹⁹Johnson, p. 39.

²⁰Dorothea Brooke and Dr. Lydgate in Eliot's Middlemarch (1871-1872); Thackeray's Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair (1848); Dickens' Lady Dedlock in Bleak House (1852); adultery and wife-selling in Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) and bad marriages in Jude the Obscure (1895) to name a few.

²¹Diane Johnson, The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1973), p. 72.

²²For information on these early works, see Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 32.

²³Johnson, Lesser Lives, p. 84.

²⁴Johnson, Lesser Lives, pp. 98-101.

²⁵Johnson, Lesser Lives, p. 211.

²⁶Johnson, Lesser Lives, p. 132.

²⁷Johnson, Lesser Lives, p. 133.

²⁸George Meredith, Letters of George Meredith, ed. C. L. Cline, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), I, 123.

²⁹Meredith, Letters, I, 125.

³⁰Meredith, Letters, I, 176.

³¹Stevenson, p. 109. See also L. T. Hergenham, "George Meredith and 'The Snuffling Moralists': Moral Disapproval of His Early Works and Its Effects", Balcony, V (1966), 3-12, for additional bibliographic information about the nineteenth-century journals cited in this thesis.

³²Hergenham, p. 8.

³³C. Day Lewis, Notable Images of Virtue (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1954), p. 44; and Stevenson, p. 111.

³⁴Lewis, p. 44; and Stevenson, p. 112.

³⁵A. C. Swinburne, Spectator, No. 1771 (June 7, 1862), pp. 632-633. Reprinted in George Meredith: Some Early Appreciations, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Methuen and Company, Limited, 1909), p. 101.

³⁶Hergenham, p. 8.

³⁷In Meredith's letter to Frederick Maxse of June 9, 1862, he comments on the silence of the Saturday Review. See Letters, I, 148.

³⁸Lewis, p. 44.

³⁹Lewis, p. 44.

⁴⁰Lewis, p. 45; but, stated more strongly in Lewis' introduction to Modern Love (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), p. xiii.

⁴¹Meredith, Letters, II, 1058.

⁴²Arthur Symons, "George Meredith's Poetry", Westminster Review (September 1887), pp. 693-697.

⁴³After 1862, Meredith published no books of poetry until Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of the Earth (1883) and Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life (1887). He published six more books of poetry in his lifetime.

⁴⁴Richard Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics (New York: United States Book Co., 1890), p. 125.

⁴⁵William Watson, Excursions in Criticism (London and New York, 1893) pp. 138-139.

⁴⁶Allen Monkhouse, Books and Plays (1894; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 68.

⁴⁷G. M. Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1920), pp. 22-23.

⁴⁸See Simpson (1970), note 76 and Lucas (1971), note 78.

⁴⁹M. Sturge Henderson, George Meredith, Novelist, Poet, Reformer (Port Washington, N.Y. and London: Kennikat Press, 1907), p. 61.

⁵⁰Henderson, pp. 63-64.

⁵¹Henderson, p. 64.

⁵²Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Studies in Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 179.

⁵³I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1925); Harriet Monroe, "Meredith as a Poet", Poetry, XXXII (1928), 210-216; B. Ifor Evans, English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1933); S. Sassoon, Meredith (London: Arrow Books, 1948). These are the items of that period.

⁵⁴F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), p. 21.

⁵⁵Sir E. K. Chambers, A Sheaf of Studies (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 75.

⁵⁶Jack Lindsay, George Meredith: His Life and Work (London: The Bodley Head, 1956), pp. 82-87.

⁵⁷G. H. Perkus, "Meredith's Unhappy Love Life: Worthy of the Muse", Cithara, IX (May 1970), 32-46.

⁵⁸Johnson, Lesser Lives, p. 208n.

⁵⁹Walter F. Wright, Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953) p. 167.

⁶⁰In addition to Lewis's introduction to Modern Love and Notable Images of Virtue, see also The Poetic Image (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), pp. 58-59; 82-85.

⁶¹Lewis, "Introduction", p. xx.

⁶²Willie D. Reader, "The Autobiographical Author as Fictional Character: Point of View in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Poetry, X (1972), 131-143.

⁶³Philip E. Wilson, "Affective Coherence, a Principle of Abated Action, and Meredith's Modern Love", Modern Philology, LXX (Nov. 1974), 151-171.

⁶⁴Norman Friedman, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love", Modern Languages Quarterly, XVIII (1957), 13.

⁶⁵Elizabeth Cox Wright, "The Significance of the Image Patterns in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Newsletter, XIII (1958), 1-9.

⁶⁶John Henry Smith, Hiding the Skeleton: Imagery in Feveral and Modern Love (Lincoln: Nebraska Wesleyan University Press, 1966).

⁶⁷Dorothy M. Mermin, "Poetry as Fiction: Meredith's Modern Love", ELH, XLIII (1976), 100-119.

⁶⁸Graham Hough, ed., Selected Poems of George Meredith (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); p. 5.

⁶⁹Hough, p. 8.

⁷⁰Richard L. Kowalczyk, "Moral Relativism and the Cult of Love in Meredith's Modern Love", Research Studies, XXXVII (March 1969), 38-53.

⁷¹Cynthia Grant Tucker, "Meredith's Broken Laurel: Modern Love and the Renaissance Sonnet Tradition", Victorian Poetry, X (1972), 351-365.

⁷²Arline Golden, "The Game of Sentiment: Tradition and Innovation in Meredith's Modern Love", ELH, XL (1973), 264-284.

⁷³Willie D. Reader, "Stanza Form in Modern Love", Victorian Newsletter, XXXVIII (1970), 26-27.

⁷⁴Norman Kelvin, A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), p. 35.

⁷⁵Kenneth M. McKay, "Theme and the Myth of Lilith in Meredith's 'Modern Love'", Humanities Association Bulletin, XIX (1968), 3-16.

⁷⁶Arthur L. Simpson, "Meredith's Pessimistic Humanism: A New Reading of Modern Love", Modern Philology, LXVII (1970), 341-356.

⁷⁷Carol Bernstein, Precarious Enchantment: A Reading of Meredith's Poetry (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979).

⁷⁸John Lucas, "Meredith as Poet", in Ian Fletcher, ed., Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) pp. 14-33.

⁷⁹Lucas, p. 23.

⁸⁰Lucas, p. 26.

⁸¹Lucas, p. 33.

⁸²Lucas, p. 23.

⁸³Lucas, p. 49.

⁸⁴Michael Lund, "Space and Spiritual Crisis in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Poetry, XVI (1978), 376-382.

⁸⁵Richard D. McGhee, Marriage, Duty and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980).

⁸⁶McGhee, p. 162.

CHAPTER I

THE NARRATOR OF MODERN LOVE:

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY OR ASSIGNING BLAME

The narrator of George Meredith's Modern Love finds himself in a dying marriage. As the marital relationship deteriorates, he becomes increasingly anxious to learn the cause of the problems in the marriage. He needs to know if love died of its own accord or if he and his wife killed it. This chapter examines the narrator's allocation of guilt for the death of love in his marriage. I show, first of all, that the narrator is unreliable and that we cannot unquestioningly accept the blame he attributes to his wife; however, if we study the way he disposes of guilt, we do find out more about him. It has been found that when he places blame beyond himself, he has the least awareness of and control over his life. When he accepts responsibility, he is most in charge of his situation.

The narrator's development can be divided into four stages. In the first ten stanzas he takes some responsibility for the marriage breakdown, but neither really considers it, nor learns from his mistakes. He asks rhetorically "what's my crime?" (X,1), but answers the question superficially, preferring to blame his wife. In the next sixteen stanzas the narrator assumes some control over his life and correspondingly

accepts greater responsibility for his problems. He reduces the degree of blame placed on his wife. He finds, though, that his experience is too painful and that he must act to release himself from pain. The action he takes is to get further away from his wife, rather than to work within the relationship to find a solution. The next twelve stanzas are concerned with his affair, but his problems with his wife only grow worse. In the final ten stanzas, he continues to ignore the reality of his marriage. He hopes that simply by returning to his wife, he can find peace, but he has not realized that this arrangement would be unacceptable to her and he blames her unrelentingly as the poem slides into its fatal ending.

While the success or failure of the marriage ultimately rests with both husband and wife, we shall be concerned here primarily with the husband's responsibility. The husband reveals much about himself because he narrates the story of the marriage breakdown. He tries to objectify the relationship and to distance himself from his pain and anger, but he is not successful in presenting the story objectively. Most of the stanzas reflect the anguished subjectivity of the husband's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Consequently, the reader comes to know the inner workings of his troubled mind. His contradictory or ambiguous account of his wife's activities tells us more about him than it does about his wife. The wife appears in the poem only through the husband's presentation of her¹ and the bitter tone of the narration makes

one suspect that one is getting less than a fair account of her behaviour. Moreover, the husband is inconsistent in the picture that he does paint of her. First he suggests that she is an adulteress (VI, VII); then, he admits that he is not sure (XXIV). He feels rejected by her (V, VI); then he implies that he rejected her first (XLI). He speaks of her "faithlessness of heart" and loss of love for him (VI, VII, XXIV, XXV), but, in the end, he makes it clear that she still loves him (XLIV, XLIX). The subjective style of narration makes it impossible to assess accurately the wife's contribution to the breakdown of the marriage.

In the poem, the husband is alienated from his wife. To him, she seems unreal: from the beginning, she is like a "phantom" of the past (III), and a child of "Illusion" (XII); in the end, she remains "shadow-like" (XLIX). The husband does not really know her and because all of our information about her comes from him, our assessment of her true nature can, at best, be speculative. We can assume that her behaviour has caused the husband's extreme feelings, but since we cannot know what she feels, we are unable accurately to interpret her actions, or assess her contribution to the marital discord, except in a narrow way. However, we do learn about the husband. The husband speaks about his observations, his feelings, his pain, his dreams, and his opinions of his wife. The poem is primarily concerned with his inner life and his struggle to live with human suffering. Consequently, we must restrict our analysis to what we learn

about the husband.

The temptation remains, however, for the reader to join the husband in his censure of his wife because the narrator attempts to present himself as a righteous person, who, typical of the "unreliable narrators" identified by Wayne C. Booth, invites the audience to "participate in a dialogue with him for serious moral ends."² The husband in Modern Love directs the reader's attention to his wife's disloyalty: "mark / The rich light striking out from her on him!" (III, 5-6), and in the same stanza, asks the reader to observe his own loyalty: "See that I am drawn to her even now!" (III, 10). When the narrator has condemned his wife in stanza VI, he points out to the reader his own cowardice and his subsequent remorse and righteousness: "Behold me striking the world's coward stroke! / That will I not do, though the sting is dire " (VI, 13-14). The intimacy the husband creates between himself and the reader is one factor that prejudices a reader in his favour.

Biography has also prejudiced readers against the wife in Modern Love. Critics who depend heavily on Meredith's biography for their analysis of the poem have accepted the overt blame which the narrator places on his wife, and have ignored the confessions of his own guilt, which the narrator subtly reveals.

Our analysis will be restricted to the poem itself -- eschewing biographical details of the domestic lives of the author and his wife. In real life, Mary Ellen Meredith

separated from her husband and had a lover with whom she occasionally lived. In the poem, the wife does not leave her husband. She has a male friend, who may or may not have been her lover. The critics use their knowledge of Mary Ellen's infidelity to give credence to their condemnation of the wife in the poem. However, if we study the narrator's story and do not assume that Meredith is speaking autobiographically, the narrator then emerges as a sympathetic, but pathetic character, who desperately wants to believe that he is innocent of causing the breakdown of his marriage, but manages to indict himself nonetheless.

In order to understand where to place responsibility for the marital breakdown, the narrator tries to define "love". If he can believe that love is a force which follows its own laws, then neither he nor his wife is responsible for its departure from their lives. At times in the narrative, love is presented as a force beyond the bounds of human control. At other times the narrator suggests that the forces which diminish love are within his control and linked to his behaviour. By the end of the poem, he has not come to any firm conclusion about the nature of love.

The beginning of the last stanza attributes the action of the previous forty-nine stanzas to the force of 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. (L, 1-4)

The personification of love, which we see in these lines, occurs repeatedly in the poem and serves to remove responsibility from the narrator. The "ever-diverse pair" were united by the force of love, and condemned by that force to compete with each other like two falcons; to flit and dart about without ever making contact.

However, the next four lines present a different image:

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. (L, 5-8)

These lines blame the lovers, rather than "Love" for the fate of their relationship. The lovers neglected to nourish themselves on advancing time. They longed for the past, "the buried day." The final destructive act is then attributed to the lovers: "Then each applied to each that fatal knife, / Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole " (L, 9-10). In these lines, the actions of the lovers, rather than the uncontrollable force of love, cause the final tragedy.

Yet, the closing lines of the poem imply the presence of a darker, stronger power which controls their lives:

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! (L, 15-16)

In the end, the narrator is ambivalent about the nature of love. His ambivalence is an indication of his general confusion about life. He says in the final stanza: "Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul / When hot for certainties in this our life!" (L, 11-12); answers seem most "dusty" and

inconclusive to the narrator when he is least in control of his life. Furthermore, when he loses control, he feels like a victim and all the unpleasant events in his life are blamed either on his wife or on powerful, unseen forces. When he is in control of his life, he takes responsibility for his actions and emotions.

In the first ten stanzas of Modern Love, the husband-narrator feels some responsibility for the events that have shaped his life, but he avoids facing his mistakes and learning from them. He blames his wife for his woes. In the first stanza, the husband and wife lie awake reflecting on their past:

they from head to feet
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall. (I, 11-13)

The couple remembers their past only as an inscription written hastily and carelessly by regrets. They consider their regrets to be worthless and futile. This kind of reflection will not be constructive. They have not learned from their past mistakes and cannot proceed effectively with their lives.

In stanza II, we find the husband sharing the guilt with his wife, although indirectly:

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. (II, 1-3)

By entering the guilty gates, he joins her in her guilt. She can only let him in though, by shutting out awareness of "their sin." The narrator admits that he has some control over his life in stanza IV. He describes his passions as

"self-caged" (IV, 9). He also shows control in stanza V, where he restrains himself from kissing his wife. While these stanzas imply that he can control his passions, he relinquishes responsibility for that control later in the poem when he says "Passions spin the plot" (XLIII, 15).

In stanza V, the narrator alternates between blaming his wife for their situation and dimly realizing his own guilt. For example, he complains that she is hypocritical, but he is aware that, to her, he seems indirect:

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. (V, 1-5)

He then admits that his eye is "changed" and she appears "keenly tempting" (V, 6-9). This indicates a previous lack of interest in her beauty. Because his appreciation of her is uncharacteristic of him, his present passion for her is unexpected; yet he blames her for not recognizing the look of love that he offers:

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. (V, 13-16)

When he finally kisses her, the narrator says, "It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool" (VI, 1). It seems improbable that his lips can meet her forehead accidentally, but he attributes his kiss to chance, in order to salvage a little of his pride when his wife immediately rejects him. The narrator wants to believe that contact happens

by chance, just as he later wants to believe that loss of contact happens by chance. However, he is not yet blaming fate or chance for his suffering. He blames only his wife for giving her love to another man: "The love is here; it has but changed its aim" (VII, 10).

In stanza VIII, he wonders who is responsible for the tragedy: "Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?" (VIII, 4). This question does not lead to self-searching. The narrator immediately accuses his wife of being unsympathetic: "My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped / As balm for any bitter wound of mine" (VIII, 5-6). He then puts the blame on external forces:

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! (VIII, 8-12)

Because the God of Love discarded them, they no longer communicate. The narrator does not want to feel responsible for the events in his life. He distances himself from these events with elaborate metaphors, classical allusions or personified forces; all three are in evidence in stanza VIII.

Stanza X, like stanza VIII, begins by wondering where the responsibility for their unhappiness lies, but instead of answering the question "what's my crime?" (X, 1), the narrator puts the blame squarely on his wife, and presents his own "fault" as a noble quality:

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 forward toe,
 Her much-adored Fairy Prince! (X)

The narrator asks himself what he did wrong, but then, undermines his self-searching by saying with self-pity, that he has been condemned without a trial. He begins to fight back against his perceived victimization and self-condemnation. He asks himself if he will continue to do nothing but drag the dead body of love around behind him. He expresses an awareness of, and responsibility for, his inaction, and decides to act, yet this action is unrelated to finding out the nature of his crime. He wants to throw off the shackles of his own feelings of guilt. He has felt like a failure for the previous nine stanzas. Now, he feels changed and awake.

He presents his "offence" as a quality which will be taken by his audience as praiseworthy. He wanted loyalty; he wanted to subject love to laws and absolutes, not to be subject to love's moods. His desire to be "worthy of the world" took him away from his wife and caused her jealousy. Jealousy received all her attention (X, 9-10), which caused her anger, which, in turn, eroded her loyalty.

His "crime" was to follow his dream of complete social involvement. He does not take responsibility for his dream, but calls himself its "puppet". Since the dream is his master, he cannot be blamed; but he does blame his wife for her dream. She wanted a "fairy prince" who would distort the reality of "hard life", help her "to mince/ The facts of life", and, like a prince in a story, fill her life with affection and romance. He does not blame himself for failing to live up to her expectations, rather she is blamed for having such expectations in the first place.³

Following the narrator's decision to act, in stanza X, he gradually assumes greater control of his situation. The more control he has, the less he blames his wife. In the next several stanzas, he shows more awareness of his past mistakes and assumes, or at least shares, responsibility for the unhappy relationship.

In stanza XII, he blames the woman for the destruction of the future and the present. Her activities also make the past seem questionable:

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. (XII, 11-16)

Although he blames his wife for making the past "mad" and "mocking", he accepts his past, and will not allow himself to forget it. There is a hint, here, that he will one day learn from the memories to which he clings.

His control over his life increases. He rejects Nature's attitudes in XIII, refuses to play his wife's game in XIV, and challenges her with an illicit love-letter in XV. His awareness of his responsibility for the problems correspondingly increases. In stanza XVI, he recalls an early deception of his own and is haunted by the guilt he feels:

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! (XVI, 9-16)

The narrator is remorseful in these lines. During a romantic moment he behaved dishonestly and cavalierly with the woman. His intent in stating that love dies was to distance himself from her. He was afraid of making a verbal commitment to her, even though he felt committed.

The narrator goes on to share responsibility with his wife for their deeds of social hypocrisy (XVII, XXI), but in stanza XIX, he deceives himself. He imagines that he is no longer blaming his wife, "I bleed, but her who wounds, I will not blame" (XIX, 3), but, by saying "her who wounds" she is already blamed. He continues, however, to make decisions that give him control over his life. This results in his insistence, in stanza XX, that he is responsible for his own fate:

I am not one 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. (XX, 1-10)

His decision to take responsibility results in an honest admission of one contribution he made to his marital discord:

I have just found a wanton-scented tress
 In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.
 Of days and nights demonstrative,
 That, like some aged star, gleam luridly.
 If for those times I must ask charity,
 Have I not any charity to give? (XX, 11-16)

His relations with his wife worsen, but the narrator does not simply blame her. In XXII, he is aware that he is as responsible as she is for their lack of communication:

wavering pale before me there,
 Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
 She will not speak. I will not ask. (XXII, 11-13)

In stanzas XXIII and XXIV, the narrator becomes aware of his pride and of how it prevents him from communicating with his wife. He suffers the shame of her rejection and the pain of his pride which now causes him to reject her: "Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain -- / Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!" (XXIII, 10-11). He does not want to wait for her to communicate with him. He tells himself to, "Pluck out the eyes of pride," but he cannot: "Never! though I die thirsting" (XXIV, 15-16).

In many of these stanzas, the narrator is ambivalent about what course of action to take, and consequently takes little action; yet, he faces his pain honestly, and self-knowledge gives him some control over his life. The pain, however,

becomes so extreme, that he is forced to take some action to relieve his suffering. He acts, though, by evading the problems with his wife, instead of trying to solve them. As soon as he distances himself from his problems, he loses the minimal control over his life which he has had in the last sixteen stanzas. He tries to avoid his painful problems by blaming his wife and distracting himself with a desire for revenge.

To distance himself from his unhappy situation, he becomes indirect and uses lofty rhetorical language. He attributes his forthcoming plan of revenge to the force of love turned serpent:

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. (XXVI, 1-11)

Since he is "cursed" , he need no longer accept responsibility for his actions or for his share of the problem. He blames his wife totally, "you that made Love bleed, / You must bear all the venom of his tooth!" (XXVI, 15-16). His resolve, in stanza XII to cling to the past, in XIX, not to find a lover, and, in XX, to take responsibility for his fate, evaporates. By blaming his wife, he justifies vengeful actions and temporarily distracts himself from the pain of self-confrontation and the difficulty of looking for a real solution to his

problems.

He gives up control of his life to the devil, and allows himself to behave impulsively, immorally, and cruelly. The devil symbolizes his anger, which he has thus far expressed only in sarcasm and bitter silence. His anger now controls him. He implies a divine sanction for his alliance with the devil. His doctor who recommends distraction is called "my oracle of Medicine" -- an oracle gives divinely inspired information. Yet, for all the justification which the narrator gives himself, the tone of stanza XXVII is sarcastic and self-hating:

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 seemed 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. (XXVII)

The taking of a mistress is not the panacea that the narrator wishes it to be. In stanzas XXVIII to XXXIX, the narrator experiences unrealistic bravado then emotional collapse; self-awareness then resignation, sarcasm, and anger; excitement then discouragement and confusion; integration, and finally, disintegration. During these stanzas, he blames his situation on everything and everyone but himself. In

stanza XXX, he blames nature for robbing man of love; in XXXI he indites women for their emasculating tendencies. He feels extreme desire for his mistress, coupled with self-loathing. He realizes that his pact with the devil is dehumanizing him (XXXIII). He continues to avoid communication with his wife, even when she makes overtures to him (XXXIV). Not taking charge of his life results in finding himself "hopelessly afloat" (XL). He must confront his responsibility for his problems and regain control of his life.

But he does not. The final ten stanzas reiterate the tone of the first ten. The narrator fails to bring about a successful reunion with his wife, because he simply has no more feelings for her, but rather than admit a personal failure, he maintains that the reunion failed because of mysterious forces: "Love" which robbed them (XLVII), plotting passions, inner falseness (XLIII) and a dark, powerful, but barely detectable power (L).

He shares responsibility for their reunion, but the woman is unflinchingly blamed for her past sins, and powerful forces are blamed for the narrator's faults. Stanza XLI analyses their reunion:

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! (XLI, 1-12)

The narrator explains that when a thing is cast off, it is because it is valueless. When another person finds the thing, it suddenly becomes more attractive. The original owner is attracted by the value the object has for the finder; yet, it really has no value to the original owner. Should the original owner regain the thing he cast off, his new-found appreciation for it quickly dies. Lines seven to nine say that humans rarely know what they really want because they do not listen to their instincts. Instead they follow false desires and waste the soul.

This philosophical stanza implies that taking back his wife out of jealousy was a mistake. She really has no value to him, even though he briefly thought that she did. These lines also suggest that the husband cast off the wife before she was "found" by the other man! He has given up his "living passion" for "My Lady"⁴ for a "lifeless vow" -- the legal bond with his wife. He realizes that he has not listened to his instincts, and that by taking back his wife he is wasting his soul on false desires.

This stanza is extremely problematic because it throws into doubt all of the narrator's previous assertions of desire for his wife; his dread at the end of XL that his old love is alive; his feeling in XXXII that he still loves his wife; and his longing for her, which obsesses him in the first nine stanzas. He is suggesting that he has not followed his

instincts, and that, in fact, he probably does not know what he really wants. Furthermore, if he cast off his wife before she became involved with another man, the blame he has placed, and will continue to place on his wife, becomes considerably less valid.

The narrator does not pursue the implications of this stanza, but the idea that he cast her off first is given some validity by her response to his sexual advance in XLII and by her behaviour in the last six stanzas. In XLII, she seems shocked by his sexual interest and dubious of it: "' You love. . . ? love. . . ? love. . . ? all on an indrawn breath " (XLII, 16), as if she is trying to understand and draw in his love.

She will not accept pity when there is no love, just as she refused to comply with demands of loyalty made by a man who no longer loved her. She wants only his love, which he has withheld, and will not settle for empty vows. Finally, the woman makes love with the narrator hoping to regain his love, while for the narrator it merely proves to him that he no longer loves her:

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. (XLIII, 8-13)

The husband accepts responsibility for making the death of love quite certain, however, he immediately re-directs his responsibility onto "what is false within":

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. (XLIII, 13-16)

The narrator blames neither himself nor his wife. He attributes their problems to an inner falseness caused by an innate flaw in humans. The falseness is aggravated by passions which follow their own course. With that aphorism, the narrator dismisses all human responsibility for human endeavor. The last four lines of XLIII are an insufficient answer to a much more detailed problem relating to a man's sense of identity and the nature of the action he takes. The problem has been thoroughly defined over forty-two stanzas and cannot be satisfactorily solved by a reductive attempt to avoid guilt.

The next stanza shows that when the narrator says, "I see no sin", he means he does not see his own sin:

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. (XLIV, 7-12)

The narrator accuses his wife of stinging instead of grieving and sees her as "vice" to his "innocence". Furthermore, he blames her for worshipping at the temple of love, that is, for clinging to her dreams of what a love relationship can be. The narrator twice blames "Love" for robbing them (XLVII, 8, 13) and, thus is placing responsibility for the failure of their relationship on the personified force of

love.

When the couple's conversation results in the woman's suicide, the man does not realize that he has tried to solve their marital problems unilaterally and, clearly, against the wishes of his wife. At the end of XLIV, she tells him exactly how strong her need for love is and how unwilling she is to accept anything less: "Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst, / Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone!" (XLIV, 15-16). The narrator has ignored her feelings wanting only "peace" (XLVIII, 5), but he does not have insight into his selfishness. He claims that honest confessions are to blame for causing her suicide: "We drank the pure daylight of honest speech. / Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear" (XLVIII, 7-8). Blaming honesty is as artificial as his earlier citing of loyalty as an offence (X). In the moral world of Victorian England, and in our own world, blaming honesty cannot be taken seriously. His real blame falls on the woman for not being subtle enough to understand him:

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. (XLVIII, 1-4)

Nowhere in these final stanzas does the narrator blame himself: his confused identity, his isolation, his alienation, or his tendency to err, for the failure of his marriage.

We have seen, in this chapter, that the narrator blames inner falseness, nature, love "the God" (VIII, 9) and

his wife for the death of his marriage. Yet, stanza XLI strangely undercuts the wife's guilt by implying that the narrator rejected her first. His own responsibility is thus clearly revealed, but the narrator continues to deceive himself. In the next chapter, we will discuss the weaknesses in the narrator's personality that cause his need for self-deception.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹In the early stanzas of Modern Love, a third person past tense narrator speaks intermittently. This narrator takes no position that is not reiterated several times by the husband when he speaks in first person present tense. See the article by Reader (1972) cited in n. 62 of notes to the introduction.

²Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 294.

³While sarcastically condemnatory of his wife, the final version of stanza X is less condemning than the original version found in the manuscript copy. The earlier version, which was never published by Meredith, blames women for their impatience, inconstancy, need for attention, narrowness, habitual behaviour, insecurity, jealousy, and for being ruled by their shifting instincts:

Contest not, we learn much from misery.
I knew not women till I suffer'd thus:
The things they are, and may be unto us.
She gives the key with her inconstancy,
They must see Love to feel him, and no less
He dies if his pursuing gaze they miss:
Lo, if you break the habit of a kiss,
And it comes strange, so comes their bashfulness!
Narrow'd in that hot centre of their life
Where instincts rule, they bind you to its laws,
These shifting sandbanks which the ebb-tide draws! --
You have a one-month's bride, and then a wife
Who weens that time deposes her; rebels:
While you are living upward to the air,
Those passions that are spawn of low despair,
She clasps, and gets the comfort that is Hell's. (MS, X)

This stanza shows even more clearly than the final version of stanza X, that the husband did not satisfy his wife's need for affection. By saying that women must "see Love to feel him," the man shows that he is aware of his inability to meet her needs, but blames her for needing a visible demonstration of love. She, quite justifiably, wants the "habit of a kiss," yet he lists this as a fault. If, as the husband says, his gazes were missed and his kisses were consistent, only unscheduled (ll 7-8), it is apparent that the husband prefers blaming to communicating. The final version of stanza X has essentially the same meaning as the

manuscript version, only it is expressed more mildly and less directly. In the final version, the narrator pretends to be sharing the blame, but as in the original version, he blames only the woman.

⁴"My Lady" refers to the narrator's mistress.
"Madam" refers to the narrator's wife.

CHAPTER II

CONFLICT, INACTION, AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

The narrator-husband in Modern Love is adamant about blaming his wife for his unhappiness. While some of his unhappiness is caused by her love affair, the affair itself is the result of the unhealthy marital relationship which they created together. However, the manner in which he reacts to her affair is his responsibility alone. It is apparent from the narrative that the speaker does not have the skill or the courage to examine his own degree of responsibility. If he did, he would find that his reaction to his situation only increases his problems. The narrator reacts to his problems with ambivalence; he does not know what to do. He cannot make a decision and stand by it. He is torn between different ways of responding to his dilemma and this is reflected in his fluctuating moods. Because the narrator's emotions are so unstable, consistent action becomes difficult.

This chapter will first examine the different ways in which the narrator expresses his state of mental conflict. Stanzas which show extreme shifts in emotion will be studied closely (III, VI, XXIV, XXXI). His 'mood swings' are kept hidden, though, while the couple wears a facade for one another and for the world. I will show how the discrepancy between the narrator's inner and outer selves is revealed, primarily

in his method of communicating with his wife. It will be shown how the husband's actions contradict the decisions he makes, and how, eventually, every action he takes is ineffectual. Finally, I trace the problem of conflict and inaction to the narrator's weak sense of self and his dependency on others for self-definition.

The narrator's conflicting feelings are expressed in several ways: he changes his opinion on an issue several times within a stanza;¹ some stanzas contradict the stanza or stanzas which precede them;² frequently, his language and syntax are ambiguous and obscure;³ and, occasionally, he jumps erratically from one idea to another in a single stanza.⁴

The narrator's conflicting feelings and confusion are openly expressed when he is under extreme duress. For example, in stanza IX, he calls his wife, "Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam / Of heaven's circle-glory!" (IX, 13-14); and in stanza XL, he says, "Helplessly afloat, / I know not what I do, whereto I strive" (XL, 13-14).

Stanza III shows the dimensions of the narrator's conflict:

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! (III)

He begins by saying that he will ignore his wife's paramour: "But pass him." Then he reverses this statement by threatening to act violently if they meet (ll. 2-4). In line five he reverts to discounting the man's importance: "But he is nothing", and then he questions himself: "Nothing?" Then he becomes angry at his wife for being attracted to the man (ll. 5-9), but his anger changes immediately to desire (ll. 9-12). He desires to kiss her but cannot act on his desire because he is worried that the other man is in her mind (l. 12). He rejects that worry and asserts his right to her: "But she is mine!" But what is actually his, is only the phantom-woman of his memories. He realizes that his wife, as she is now, is somewhat less than the ideal woman that he remembers (ll. 13-15). These fluctuations make it impossible for the narrator to act. The last line of stanza III ("The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!") indicates that the narrator has found it impossible to act for some time. This is his moment of awakening from a long slumber of inactivity. In his "sleep" he imagined or dreamed that his wife was as she was in their early days. Some time ago, the "bell" signalled her transformation and he realizes now that he missed "the hour" when it occurred.

In stanzas II and IV, he acts, but either his action is ineffectual or it results in consequences opposite to those he desires. In stanza II, his attempts to act lovingly result only in emotional self-destruction:

He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
To ape the magnanimity of love,
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain. (II, 14-16)

In stanza IV, he strives to enjoy life, but either finds no pleasures available, or has only enough joy to make him despair at the general absence of joy from his 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. (IV, 1-6)

The last lines of stanza IV, show the impotence which he feels:

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! (IV, 13-16)

He claims that he will be able to act wisely, only when he is too old for his actions to matter.

The emotional confusion that begins in stanza III continues in stanza VI. Once again the narrator's ambivalence and fluctuating moods prevent him from taking action. First, he allows himself to kiss his wife "accidentally". From her response, he concludes that her love for him is dead:

Shamed nature, then confesses love can die:
 And most she punishes the tender fool
 Who will believe what honours her the most! (VI, 3-5)

The observation that love can die shocks the narrator into a cry of disbelief: "Dead! is it dead?" (VI, 6). This is followed by observing:

 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. (VI, 6-9)

His wife is alive because she has "a pulse, and flow / Of tears," but her love is dead. Each tear which falls like a drop of love's blood is the "price" she is paying for love's death. The phantom theme of stanza III is repeated here with love's reduction to the status of a ghost. It appears that the man is experiencing only apparitions of his earlier reality (to the point where, in stanza XVI, he is "haunted" by memories of that earlier time). Time, in the form of "the midnight" sobs with the woman over love's death. When the narrator is with his wife, images of time are always present. They either remind the couple of the importance of time, or the images of time mourn the loss of the spiritual feeling of eternal love that was once present in their relationship. The narrator has heard the sobs and will also sob; this poem is his cry.

His tears of sadness then change to tears of anger at his wife:

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? (VI, 10-12)

His anger suddenly turns against himself: "Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!" (VI, 13). The "coward stroke" which causes his shame may be any or all of several acts against his wife. He may think it unfair to condemn a woman for her relations with another man when men often take mistresses without condemnation; or he may be ashamed that he is accusing his wife without any confirmation of her guilt; or he may simply feel ashamed at calling her names. His pride now emerges to keep his anger and his behaviour in check: "That will I not do, though the sting is dire" (VI, 14). The abrupt mood changes in stanza VI give the impression that the husband is foundering and does not know what stance to take. His indecision is so extreme, he even shifts to the third person, as if he is trying to see the situation from another perspective: "-- Beneath the surface this, while by the fire / They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke" (VI, 15-16). By changing to a third person stance, the narrator is able to gain some distance from his extreme emotions.⁵ We also learn from these lines that the husband puts his conflicts out of sight. The reader is allowed "beneath the surface" to witness the husband's instability.

No matter how much the narrator suffers, he does not want to give in to his feelings of anger and violence. He wants to behave morally and he condemns his wife on moral grounds: "Yea! filthiness of body is most vile, / But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse" (VII, 13-14). He

bitterly notices that her immorality does not show on her face: "The former, it were not so great a curse / To read on the steel-mirror of her smile" (VII, 15-16). In fact, on the surface, she appears to be rising in moral stature, but he is aware that her appearance contrasts with her behaviour:

She issues radiant from her dressing-room,
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:
-- By stirring up a lower, much I fear! (VII, 1-3)

He senses a discrepancy between her outer appearance and her inner motives. A similar discrepancy exists between his calm exterior and his inner turmoil in stanza VI. Both husband and wife present public images which are inconsistent with their actual natures.

Because of his conflicting feelings, the narrator suddenly reverses the vituperative condemnation of his wife that ends stanza VII. In stanza VIII, he becomes sympathetic to her:

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt
Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.
Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!
.
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! (VIII, 1-3; 5-7)

She is seen as having both the powerlessness of a worm and the power of a queen (VIII, 3). At the end of the stanza, he pleads with her to speak and restore their earlier relationship: "If the same soul be under the same face, / Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!" (VIII, 15-16).

He desires the woman she used to be and still does not want to accept that she has changed.

Ironically, the narrator's plea for his wife to speak to him is not actually spoken to her. His plea is "beneath the surface", as his insults were in stanza VI. In these passages, the narrator is merely thinking things out for himself. When there is a spoken communication, it is put in quotation marks⁶ and, invariably, contains only veiled feelings. For example, in stanza IX, the narrator's anger is intense, however, instead of telling his wife how he feels, he asks her how she feels. When she responds, he is dissatisfied with her answer because it is not a response to his feelings:

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. (IX, 1-2)

The husband is actually thinking: don't you know that I am so angry sometimes that I want to hurt you. But instead he says, "Have you no fear?" She answers that she feels that he will protect her. She speaks to the gentle, manipulable man that she sees; not to the violent man that he keeps hidden. Her reply frustrates him and heightens the attraction/repulsion

he feels:

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. (IX, 13-16)

The violent action he imagines is expressed in the language of passion -- "thy shape / To squeeze like an intoxicating grape" -- suggesting eroticism and drunkenness, not viciousness. He wants to think of her as "helpless" and "delicate" (IX, 3), but finds that she is "safe" and "supreme."

When the narrator speaks to his wife in stanza XV, again he does not express his feelings honestly:

'Sweet dove,
Your sleep is pure. Nay pardon: I disturb.
I do not? good!' (XV, 8-10)

His seemingly gentle, respectful comments are, in fact, opposite to what he really feels as he is carrying a letter which reveals her duplicity.

The passages in quotation marks do not express the speaker's intentions except indirectly and sarcastically. What he really wants to say to his wife is in the passages that are not in quotation marks, and therefore are never actually said. These speeches are full of anger and other feelings which he is afraid to communicate directly to his wife. For example:

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. (XI, 13-16)

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. (XIV, 12-16)

you that made Love bleed,
 You must bear all the venom of his tooth! (XXVI, 15-16)

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. (XLIV, 7-10)

He cannot make any progress in his relationship with his wife since he expresses his feelings only in his imagination.

However, he briefly becomes stronger. He does not actually take action to help himself, but he adamantly avoids actions which he feels will taint him. He refuses to forget the past because it would reduce his level of self-awareness (XII, 13-16). He refuses to treat relationships as capriciously as nature treats her roses:

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! (XIII, 11-16)

and, he refuses to play Madam's "game" (XIV). In stanza XIV, he vows to bear the agony and passively allow the "new stings" to strike him. However, he contradicts this vow in the very next stanza, when he actively fights back. He confronts his wife with a letter which she wrote to her lover. This action, like his other actions, has no results.

The action of confronting his wife in stanza XV is

so emotionally unsettling for the narrator that he digresses from examining his marriage for six stanzas, and does not face his wife again until stanza XXII, when it is she who seems to want to speak to him; however, they cannot cross "the silent gulf between" them.

In stanza XXIV, the narrator reverts to the extreme 'mood swings' that characterized the early stanzas. He begins by implying that he believes that she has not committed adultery:

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. (XXIV, 1-4)

He thinks she is doing "penance" for losing her love for him and he finds this less forgivable than adultery:

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. (XXIV, 4-9)

He enjoys her suffering. She is quietly pattering around the house sighing or moaning "low vibrating sounds". These noises indicate to the narrator that the woman is "shrinking". He no longer sees her as supremely powerful over him. She has become vulnerable, dependent and docile; more like a "woman":

Madam, 'tis understood
When women play upon their womanhood;
It means, a Season gone. (XXIV, 10-12)

Suddenly, he suspects the sincerity of her penitent appearance: "And yet I doubt / But I am duped" (XXIV, 12-13). But he is pleased by her appearance of sexual innocence, even though it is designed to deceive him: "That nun-like look waylays / My fancy" (XXIV, 13-14). He needs to verify his suspicions that her "flesh" is "pure": "Oh! I do but wait a sign!" (XXIV, 14). He wishes he would be less proud: "Pluck out the eyes of pride! thy mouth to mine!" (XXIV, 15). He desires her mouth to give him the information that she is innocent, as well as the kisses he longs for. Then he resists the temptation to forgive, under any circumstance: "Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!" (XXIV, 16). Stanza XXIV's series of fluctuations ends with words similar to those which Hamlet speaks to Ophelia: "Go thy ways to a nunnery."⁷ The narrator is possibly hinting that he is committing an injustice to his wife, just as Hamlet was unjust to the innocent Ophelia.

When the narrator decides to take a mistress in stanza XXVII, he reverses the moral resolve he has in stanza XIX; yet, his affair does not satisfy him and only throws him into greater conflict. He realizes he cannot achieve spiritual satisfaction with his mistress. Instead of raising his self-image, his affair lowers it: "Is my soul beggared?" he asks shortly after he begins his affair (XXIX, 5). He is reminded of his need of "Something more than earth" (XXIX, 5).

For ten stanzas, the tension between the narrator and his world grows. His despair deepens but he does not act to change his life. In stanza XXXI, his inner chaos causes him to lose control of his narration. The beginning and the end of the stanza do not relate to the middle. The narrator begins by praising his mistress: "This golden head has wit in it. I live / Again, and a far higher life, near her" (XXXI, 1-2). He feels revived but this does not change his deep anger and bitterness which is clear from his cynicism in the next eleven lines:

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! (XXXI, 3-12)

He does not like the way that women treat men. He feels that they emasculate men and want only their submissiveness, and yet he seems jealous of the "young philosopher" who is adored. He suddenly reverts to the topic which began the stanza:

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? (XXXI, 13-16)

His mistress does not adore him, but she approves of him. He enjoys her approval although her love would be better to

have, but he does not really feel sure of what he is saying.

The narrator increases his enjoyment and appreciation of his mistress, but his problems remain:

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 serpents' bites? 'Twould calm me could I clasp
Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine! (XXXII, 10-16)

The narrator at first cites his dissatisfaction as being only in "one restless corner" of himself, but as he explores the nature of his problem it turns out that his conflict is so extreme that he feels possessed by "Shrieking Bacchantes". He wishes he could clasp and control the wildness within himself. His conflict has worsened because where previously he was only unsure of how to treat his wife, now he has to struggle with the "poison" of his dissatisfaction with "My Lady".

He gets away from his problems by going to Paris where he meditates upon why his affair seems to be the "asp" he is using to cure the serpent's bite of his marriage. The metaphoric language of his contemplation helps the narrator to create a distance between his rational and his frenzied thoughts:

'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!
.....
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. (XXXIII, 1-4, 9-15)

The narrator observes that Raphael's picture, a symbolic portrayal of good's triumph over evil, is not realistic. He feels that man does not achieve mastery over evil without becoming half evil himself. The narrator tries to master the evil in his life -- the jealous and violent emotions his wife's affair has created in him -- by having an affair himself. The affair comforts him, but it also causes him to lose the "ancient wealth" (XXIX, 9) and higher purpose that he previously attributed to human life. He is becoming half-serpent; as he tries to conquer one evil, another invades it. The narrator's fight with the devil reaches its climax in stanza XXXVIII:

Give to imagination some pure light⁸
 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. (XXXVIII, 1-8)

He wants "my Lady" to be "pure light / In human form". He wants the intimate, spiritual aspects of love as well as the physical. Without "pure light", the relationship with "my Lady" is just a hideous game in which the imagination concentrates only on lustful appetites. The greatest sinners have fallen because, lacking spirituality, their imaginations

drove them to the hogs. He is dazzled by those most sinful and lustful, but cannot imitate them. He wants to give his mistress more than his lust: "So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love! / My soul is arrowy to the light in you" (XXXVIII, 9-10). He wants a spiritual relationship. He is not just pointing his phallic arrows towards her; his soul is "arroy" as well.

This stanza is a response to the lady's advice that he have more pity on his wife:

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! (XXXVIII, 11-16)

He rejects her advice. He needs love from "my Lady" because he no longer loves his wife. His choices are either to have love from his mistress, "vileness" from his wife, or to petrify -- to become like stone -- and be totally inactive and without spirituality. The husband must act and make demands in order to break out of the unhappy stalemate that his life has become. He demands to make his relationship with his mistress more than a game, and succeeds; but like the other actions that arose from his confused mind, the results are ultimately the opposite to those he desires. As he achieves the desired closeness with "my Lady", he is thrown into a panic by the appearance of his wife:

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! (XXXIX, 13-16)

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. (XL, 13-16)

The narrator returns to his wife, but he is obviously unhappy about that decision (XLI). His feelings of attraction and repulsion continue in stanza XLII, with 'mood swings' as extreme as the ones in stanzas III, VI, and XXIV. The action in the final stanzas is presented in vague and ambiguous language, and because of the narrator's mental confusion, he continues to contradict himself.

In stanza XLIV, the narrator says that he believes his wife is suffering now because she believed in romantic love: "She for the Temple's worship has paid the price, / And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat" (XLIV, 11-12). But the husband obviously "worships" in the Temple of Love as well. His sentimental language and imagery show that he is as romantic as she is (XLV, 1-8). He is merely too discouraged to strive for his romantic ideals any longer. In XLIV, he offers his wife pity, but in the next stanza his unflattering description of her suggests only bitter contempt, not pity for the painful jealousy which she is obviously feeling:

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. (XLV, 9-16)

The narrator's reunion with his wife is extremely unpleasant for him, but he feels defeated and is unable to act to ease his discomfort. Their unexpected moment of silent communion described in XLVI shocks him. They soon find themselves engaged in the "pure daylight of honest speech", but this communication, unusual for this couple, does not lead to the "pure light" of intimacy and spirituality:

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! that was the fatal draught, I fear. (XLVIII, 1-9)

The narrator implies in line two that his wife invented subtle interpretations of his "honest speech" which destroyed her, at least this is what the narrator wants to believe. Yet, several other factors are clear: the wife will not accept pity (XLIV), the husband loves "my Lady" (XLV), the husband no longer loves his wife (XLI), yet she wants him to love her (XLII, XLIV). Of course all this information is given up by a distraught narrator, nonetheless, it seems that she was not "destroyed" by an overwhelming irrational outburst caused by misinterpreting subtleties, but rather, destroyed by a rational decision not to live without his love. The other possibility is that he did not speak honestly, but lied to his wife or spoke subtly -- that, in fact, he did love her, but was so indirect in revealing his love, that she thought,

wrongly, that he loved his mistress. Judging from the narrator's difficulty in understanding himself, and his constantly changing feelings, it is possible that he was indirect, rather than honest. If this is the case, then the subtleties which destroyed the wife were not her subtle interpretations of her husband's feelings, but his subtle means of self-expression. In the end, however, the only one who acts effectively is the wife, although it seems that until the end, she is as filled with conflict and indecision as her husband is.

When faced with an unsatisfying relationship, there are only three effective paths a person can take. He can hang on to his dream of what he wishes the relationship would be like and wait for the dream to become a reality (ideally, taking steps to make the dream into a reality), he can leave the relationship, or he can modify the dream. All are honest, strong, decisive choices.

Those people who are dishonest, weak, and indecisive, like the husband and wife in Modern Love, cannot make such choices. They hang on to their dreams and hope they will become realities, but in the meanwhile, they look outside the relationship and try to get what they want elsewhere. It is too painful for them to live with the frustration of waiting passively for a dream to come true. But looking for spiritual or physical comfort outside of the relationship undermines any chances of their dream becoming a reality.

Both the husband and the wife in Modern Love have a dream of what they want in a relationship. The husband dreams of "loyal life" (X, 8) and the wife wants a "fairy prince" (X, 16) who will give her love and attention. Neither of them fulfil their spouse's expectations. Frustrated with her situation, the wife takes a lover. She wants to maintain her marriage yet have her dream realized elsewhere. Frustrated equally, the husband takes a mistress. Part of their dreams are fulfilled in the new relationships, but their dreams also involved marriage and permanence and spiritual fulfillment -- something which the newly acquired lovers cannot provide. The husband and wife are reunited looking once again to each other for fulfillment. The husband, however, realizes that he will not get what he wants from his wife. He lets go of his dream and is willing to settle for "peace" (XL, XLVIII). The wife will not let go of her dream and, "lest her heart should sigh / And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed" (XLIX, 7-8), she prefers to die.

The narrator of Modern Love provides several clues as to why he is unable to make strong, honest and decisive choices. The poem shows that the husband lacks autonomy. An autonomous person is an individual who has a sound identity and a strong sense of self.⁹ If a person is dependent on another person for his self-definition, separation from the definer causes a crisis. In Modern Love, the husband

does not have a strong sense of self. He is dependent first on his wife for his self-definition, and later, on his mistress. In stanza II, we see the husband's vulnerability and emotional instability: "And if their smiles encountered, he went mad" (II, 8). We see his rage:

And raged deep inward, till the light was brown
Before his vision, and the world forgot,
Looked wicked as some dull old murder-spot. (II, 9-11)

and his pretensions: "He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove / To ape the magnanimity of love" (II, 13-14). His inner self is antithetical to the self he projects to the outside world. Lack of integration between inner and outer selves will lead to an uncertainty as to who one truly is. Madness, rage, and pretentiousness cause further disturbance to one's sense of self. When his wife looks at the other man in stanza III, she leaves "dark / All else" (III, 8-9). The husband feels that all is dark. He is even in the dark, unsure of who he is. He needs his wife's direction and approval. He is drawn to her to find himself, but sees that instead of finding in her, the approval he needs, he will find the other man.

In stanza IV, he cannot become involved in "other joys of life" (IV, 1) because, as the relationship sinks, so does his fragile sense of self. His identity has been shipwrecked and everything he sees reflects the sick, sallow feeling he has about himself (IV, 1-4). Since the narrator does not reveal his inner feelings, his wife is not aware

of how he perceives himself. She treats him the way she would like him to be:

A message from her set his brain aflame.

.....
 She treated him as something that is tame,
 And but at other provocation bites. (V, 1, 4-5)

He is angered by her "message", but she ignores or is unaware of his anger and treats him as though he were harmless; as though he would not respond to her, but only to "other provocation". He conforms to her expectations of him and thereby reinforces her false view of him. In IX, he feels wild and fierce, but she finds it impossible to consider him a threat. He criticises women who treat men like lap-dogs (XXXI), but he allows himself to be treated like a lap-dog by being "tame". When his wife's sudden appearance (XXXIX) disturbs him, his response is, "Am I still tame?" (XXXIX, 15). Tame not only implies domesticated, but also, mastered. He is not strong enough to be his own master.

Stanza VII shows how easily he loses his sense of self:

His [Cupid's] 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? (VII, 9-12)

His own perspective of his wife falls away and he can see her as other men do. His inner self, with its "deeper knowledge", is so weak, that it can only send up "a spark". In contrast his wife is "radiant" (VII), she sends "rich light" (III), and is a "beam / Of heaven's circle-glory" (IX). His identity is so fragile that in stanza VIII, he says, "I do not know

myself without thee more" (VIII, 3). Drinking from her eyes in stanza IX, is like poison because it kills his sense of self. When he is with her, he does not know who he is or what he wants.

Stanza XII indicates that he does not trust his past, and in stanza XVIII he wonders what kind of life he used to live. These stanzas suggest that his identity problem goes back beyond his relationship with his wife. His past is hazy because his past experiences were not strong expressions of an individuated self. Without a strong sense of self, a person easily merges with those who are stronger. Because he identifies so closely with his wife, the husband finds it hard to take action against her: "Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own / Beat thro' me?" (XIX, 4-5).

In XIX, the narrator seems to lose control of his narrative. The stanza shows his chaotic mind as he swings from discussing the state of other men, to his sympathetic closeness to his wife, to the possibility of hurting her cruelly. He wonders about taking a lover but decides that it would debase the sacredness of love. But he is unsure: "I see not plain," he says. (XIX, 10). He tries to clarify himself: "My meaning is, it must not be again. / Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart" (XIX, 11-12). He feels it would be madness to fall in love again. Finally, he begins to envy the simple life of an idiot:

If any state be enviable on earth,
 'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go be,
 Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
 In a queer sort of meditative mirth. (XIX, 13-16)

The ending of this stanza is ironic because the narrator's confusion and weak identity must, indeed, make him feel somewhat idiotic, at times.

The necessity of hiding his true feelings from others contributes to his loss of identity. His wife, whose sense of self is stronger, cannot easily maintain social pretenses and in stanza XXI, she faints. In a social situation attended by both his wife and his mistress, the husband's artificial social self so overwhelms his personality that he begins to forget his reality:

I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern
 My Lady's heel before me at each turn.
 Our tragedy, is it alive or dead? (XXXVII, 14-16)

The narrator begins his affair on the advice of a doctor. Once again, he needs direction and approval from a person outside of himself before he can act. In the narrator's affair, his "imperious desire" is to be flattered. He states this need twice. (XXVII, 15; XXVIII, 1). He needs flattery to build up his sense of self. He is aware that he has a low opinion of himself: "For I must shine / Envied, -- I, lessened in my proper sight!" (XXVIII, 7-8). By the time he meets "my Lady", his feelings of masculinity are so diminished that only the envy of other men can build him up:

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! (XXVIII, 12-14)

"My Lady" approves of him and accepts him the way he is.

She speaks to his inner self: _

when her mouth
 . . . 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! (XXXII, 5-9)

Her respect for him helps him to develop a sense of self as well as feelings of masculinity. He has separated from his wife emotionally and she can no longer control him. He expects his wife to be separate and self-reliant as well. In their tense exchange in stanza XXXIV, he tells her that in order to be happy, she has to take responsibility for her own happiness. He cannot make her happy anymore and he no longer needs to protect her.

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. (XXXIV)

Because of the strong sense of self that "my Lady" has helped him gain, he can withstand the force of his wife's personality and is not melted when they meet, whereas, earlier in the poem, contact between them would sicken him (II, IX), and drive him mad (II). He has become strong enough

to defer her tears ("Niagara") and her rage ("Vesuvius").

Strengthened by his new sense of self, he is able to demand what he needs from "my Lady" (XXXVIII). He is able to make the decision to abandon his affair when he realizes that it cannot really unite him to his mistress spiritually and permanently. His stronger sense of self also enables him to admit that his wife is no longer important to him, but that their reunion is necessary for his peace of mind and moral sense. Stanza XLV shows that his feeling of vitality and self-worth was inspired by "my Lady":

It is the season of the sweet wild rose,
My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!
So golden-crowned 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. (XLV, 1-7)

The intimate relationship with "my Lady" vitalized and energized the narrator's entire being. "My Lady's" respect and approval of the narrator's inner self strengthened his identity. With "my Lady" he feels he is "matched"; he feels he is a man. Conversely, his wife treats him like something ineffectual, impotent, and "tame". Because his sense of self was weak, he depended heavily on his wife for definition. He dared not challenge her view of him because he had no self-image to replace it with.

In spite of the strengthening effect of "my Lady", ultimately the narrator is dependent on others for any sense of himself. His return to his wife weakens him once

again because he longs for the sense of himself that "my Lady" made him feel. In her eyes, he stood alive (XLV, 7). Because he cannot define himself, he does not feel responsible for his share in his marital problems, and the poem ends attributing most of the blame for his marriage failure to powerful, unseen forces. He cannot blame himself until there is a consistent "self" to blame.

In this chapter, I have shown the narrator's conflicting feelings that arise from his wife's suspected infidelity. He is both attracted to her and repulsed by her; he wants both to hurt her and to protect her. His ambivalent feelings combined with his inability to express his inner self to his wife make it difficult for him to take meaningful action toward solving his problem. The actions he does take often result in effects opposite to those he intended. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that his weak sense of self makes him overly susceptible to the influence of others. His inner self only emerges under the affectionate approval of "my Lady." Although overtly blaming his wife for the death of love in their marriage, the narrator exposes his own character sufficiently to show how he may have assisted in destroying the marriage.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹See stanzas III, V, VI, IX, XIII, XIX, XXIV, XXVIII, XXXII, XXXIX, XL, and XLII for examples of how the narrator changes his opinion on an issue immediately following his formulation of the opinion.

²See stanzas VIII, XV, XIX, XXVII, XXXVI, XXXVIII, XLI, XLIV, and XLV for examples for how the narrator contradicts decisions he's made in a preceding stanza.

³Stanzas I, V, XIV, XX, XXIV, XXIX, XXX, XXXV, XXXIX, and XLII are the most ambiguous in language and syntax, but most stanzas in the poem have some very difficult passages.

⁴See stanzas IV, XIX, and XXXI for examples of stanzas which contain erratic incomplete discussion of several unrelated thoughts.

⁵I feel the shifting narrative voice is related to the narrator's problem of identity. He has such a weak sense of self that he does not know what position he is able to take in relating the story. He wants to be detached and to speak of his problems in the third person but he is not sufficiently strong to maintain the detached third person perspective. He slides evanescently between first and third person in the first nine stanzas of the poem. However, even when he is clearly speaking in the third person he is very involved --not detached --and speaks only from the point of view of the husband. As Willie D. Reader (1972) has shown, he ~~does~~ not seem omnisciently aware of the wife's inner life. In the last two stanzas he can speak in third person more confidently than in the early stanzas because of his strengthened identity.

⁶In stanzas IX, XV, XVI, XXXIV, XXXV, and XLII the speeches are in quotation marks.

⁷William Shakespeare, Hamlet Prince of Denmark, ed. Willard Farnham (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970), III,1,129, p. 91.

⁸This quote from an 1842 article may partly explain the term "pure light" as the Victorians understood it:

Though the time is racked and torn, men are 'struggling towards the light.' In the midst of promise and threatening, 'human society is, as it were, struggling to body itself forth anew, and so many coloured rays are springing up in this quarter and in that, which only by their union can produce pure light.'

(Taken from Houghton, p. 28; quotations within quotation are from John Sterling, "Poems by Alfred Tennyson", Quarterly Review, LXX [1842], 390. The italics are mine.)

The narrator in Modern Love is divided with conflict. He feels split into many coloured rays because his affair does not unite the spiritual aspects of male/female relationships with the physical pleasures. "Pure light" symbolizes that union.

⁹Joyce S. Cohen, Adoption Breakdown with Older Children (Toronto: University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work Monograph Service, 1981), pp. 19-20.

CONCLUSION

The Victorian era was an age of transition in which traditional values were challenged. Individuals were in conflict over which value system they should adopt. Often, according to A. N. Whitehead, an individual was "divided against himself" in his attempt to reconcile new ideas to old ones, and "their efforts at reconciliation produced inevitable confusion."¹ Modern Love is an example of reconciliation producing confusion. Masao Miyoshi observes that mid-Victorian poets looked to "moral commitment" to "solve" the problem of self-division.² The hero of Tennyson's Maud solved his problem of self-division by committing himself to patriotism. Arnold's narrator gives up imaginative escape with Obermann and Marguerite to do his "duty" and participate in society. He was not entirely happy and tried to keep half of his life in the imaginative realm but he adhered successfully to his sense of "moral commitment".

In Modern Love, Meredith's narrator resigns himself to a life with his wife because of his moral need to respect his marriage vows, even though the vows had become "lifeless". (XLI, 11). The irony of Modern Love, however, is that the narrator's moral "solution" does not solve his problems of self-division. In Modern Love, the moral decision made in order

to preserve the marriage, led, instead, to its destruction. The narrator's attempt to do the "right thing", to fulfil his vows, and to be honest led to the death of another person. This suggests strongly that commitment to legalistic vows might not be the panacea that the Victorians thought it should be. At the very least, the fatal end of the poem suggests that "moral commitment" is not a solution to marital problems in the "modern" world of the poem. A moral solution that involves two people must be made with the cooperation of both parties. In Modern Love, the wife will not accept a reunion if it is a loveless one; therefore, to "Madam" the narrator's selfless adherence to correct moral behavior is nothing more than "hypocrisy" (XLIV). He is not true to himself but true only to society's values. She is ahead of her time as, according to Miyoshi, "the men of the 1890's could see in High Victorian commitment, little else than self-delusion and hypocrisy."³ Her decision not to participate in the narrator's moral solution makes a mockery of his selflessness. He, therefore, wants to see her suicide as her moral solution--her self-sacrifice made in order to free him to live a "higher life" (XXXI). The narrator, fond of self-sacrifice for higher moral goals, calls his wife's suicide "nobleness" (XLVIII) which he "adores". He suddenly wonders if the "hard world" will appreciate her nobleness as he does, or merely condemn her for her adultery.

It is strange that the narrator should suddenly be

concerned with society after so great a tragedy as his wife's death. Society has been barely mentioned up to this point. He could only be concerned with the world's opinion here, if he needed society to recognize his moral sacrifice -- returning to a loveless marriage because of loyalty to the institution of marriage.

Some critics have accepted the narrator's point of view and see "Madam's" suicide as a sacrificial offering made in order for the husband to achieve rebirth and renewal. Her death has been seen as an appropriate Victorian punishment for her crime of adultery. It has even been suggested that the death of "Madam" was an expedient way to end a poem whose action had become circular. But more than these reasons, the wife's suicide is the result of the husband's problem-solving techniques. In problems that depend on two persons' co-operation, both parties must agree to the solution. She is not prepared to stay with her husband for moral reasons alone.

The narrator's conformity to society's idea of moral commitment and his need for society's approval is further evidence of his weak sense of identity that I have discussed in this study. His weak sense of identity is exhibited throughout the poem and is at the root of his reactions to his marital problems. This thesis first examines the narrator's method of allocating responsibility for his

problems. He first blames his wife and at the same time feels victimized and rejected by her. He "wakes" in stanza X and tries to take control of his life and face his problems. He looks more closely at his own responsibility for the marriage breakdown. The pain grows too great for him to continue in this manner and he seeks distraction from his problems by taking a mistress. Through her, he finds he needs his marriage to appease his conscience.

He returns to his wife, but does not attempt to examine his responsibility to her and merely assumes she will be acquiescent to his moral solution. The poem ends with the blame for the marriage failure put primarily on invisible forces.

In the second chapter, I examine the type and force of the action taken by the narrator. His conflicting feelings render him unable to act effectively. Ultimately, I find that his allocation of blame and his inaction are caused by his weak sense of self and his dependency on others for self-definition.

In light of this study, Modern Love can no longer be seen as the simple story of a wronged husband and an unfaithful wife. The husband participates equally in the dissolution of his marriage, although his participation has been revealed only "in tragic hints" (L, 13).

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

¹A. N. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York, 1925), p. 119, quoted in Masao Miyoshi, The Divided Self (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. ix.

²Miyoshi, p. xv.

³Miyoshi, p. xvi.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Primary Sources

- Meredith, George. The Poems of George Meredith. Ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett. 2 vols. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978.
- , Letters of George Meredith. Ed. C. L. Cline. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970

2. Secondary Sources

- Austin, Richard. "George Meredith and Mary Nicolls", Texas Quarterly, XXI (1978), 127-148.
- Bartlett, Phillis. "A Manuscript of Meredith's Modern Love", Yale University Library Gazette, XL (1966), 185-187.
- Beer, Gillian. Meredith: A Change of Masks. London: The Athlone Press, 1970.
- Benet, William Rose. The Reader's Encyclopedia. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965.
- Bernstein, Carol. Precarious Enchantment: A Reading of Meredith's Poetry. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979.
- Booth, Wayne C. The Rhetoric of Fiction. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Casten, C. "The Influence of Muller's 'German Love' on George Meredith's Modern Love", English Language Notes, X (1972), 282-286.
- Chambers, Sir E. K. A Sheaf of Studies. London: Oxford University Press, 1942.
- Evans, B. Ifor. English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century. London: Methuen and CO. Ltd., 1933.

- Forman, Maurice Buxton, ed. George Meredith: Some Early Appreciations. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1909.
- Friedman, Norman. "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love", Modern Language Quarterly, XVIII (1957), 9-26.
- Golden, Arline. "'The Game of Sentiment': Tradition and Innovation in Meredith's Modern Love", ELH, XL (1973), 264-284.
- Goldfarb, Russell M. Sexual Repression and Victorian Literature. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970.
- Henderson, M. Sturge. George Meredith, Novelist, Poet, Reformer. Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1907.
- Hergenham, L. T. "George Meredith and 'the Snuffling Moralists'", Balcony, V (1966), 3-12.
- Hough, Graham, ed. "Introduction" to Selected Poems of George Meredith. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Houghton, Walter E. The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Johnson, Diane. The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1973.
- Johnson, Wendell Stacy. Sex and Marriage in Victorian Poetry. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Kelvin, Norman. A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith. Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961.
- Ketcham, Carl H. Explicator, XVII (1958), n. 7.
- Kowalczyk, Richard L. "Moral Relativism and the Cult of Love in Meredith's Modern Love", Research Studies, XXXVII (1969), 38-53.
- Kwinn, David. "Meredith's Psychological Insight in Modern Love XXIII", Victorian Poetry, VII (1969), 151-153.
- Leavis, F. R. New Bearings in English Poetry. London: Chatto and Windus, 1932.
- Le Gallienne, Richard. George Meredith: Some Characteristics. New York, 1890.

- Levine, Richard A. Backgrounds to Victorian Literature. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1967.
- Lewis, C. Day. "Introduction" to Modern Love. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959.
- . Notable Images of Virtue. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1954.
- . The Poetic Image. London: Jonathan Cape, 1947.
- Lindsay, Jack. George Meredith: His Life and Work. London: The Bodley Head, 1956.
- Lucas, John. "Meredith as Poet", in Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays. Ed. Ian Fletcher. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Lund, Michael. "Space and Spiritual Crisis in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Poetry, XVI (1978), 376-382.
- McGhee, Richard D. Marriage, Duty and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama. Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980.
- McKay, Kenneth M. "Theme and the Myth of Lilith in Meredith's 'Modern Love'", Humanities Association Bulletin, XIX (1968), 3-16.
- Mermin, Dorothy M. "Poetry as Fiction: Meredith's Modern Love", ELH, XLIII (1976), 100-119.
- Miller, J. Hillis. The Disappearance of God. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1963.
- Miyoshi, Masao. The Divided Self. New York: New York University Press, 1969.
- Monkhouse, Allen. Books and Plays. 1894. rpt. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1972.
- Monroe, Harriet. "Meredith as a Poet", Poetry, XXXII (1928), 210-216.
- Perkus, G. H. "Meredith's Unhappy Love Life: Worthy of the Muse", Cithara, IX (1970), 32-46.
- . "Toward Disengagement: A Neglected Early Meredith Manuscript Poem", Victorian Poetry, VIII (1970), 268-272.

Plunkett, P. M. "Meredith's Modern Love I", Explicator, XXVIII (1970), no. 42.

Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur. Studies in Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924.

Reader, Willie D. "The Autobiographical Author as Fictional Character: Point of View in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Poetry, X (1972), 131-143.

-----, "Stanza Form in Modern Love", Victorian Newsletter, XXXVIII (1970), 26-27.

Sassoon, S. Meredith. London: Arrow Books, 1948.

Simpson, Jr., A. L. "Meredith's Pessimistic Humanism: A New Reading of Modern Love", Modern Philology LXVII (1970), 341-356.

Smith, John Henry. Hiding the Skeleton: Imagery in FEVERAL and Modern Love. Lincoln: Wesleyan University Press, 1966.

Stevenson, Lionel. The Ordeal of George Meredith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Trevelyan, G. M. The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith. London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1920.

Tucker, Cynthia Grant. "Meredith's Broken Laurel: Modern Love and the Renaissance Sonnet Tradition", Victorian Poetry, X (1972), 351-365.

Watson, William. Excursions in Criticism. London, 1893.

Williams, David. George Meredith: His Life and Lost Love. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977.

Wilson, Philip E. "Affective Coherence, a Principle of Abated Action, and Meredith's Modern Love", Modern Philology, LXXII (1974), 151-171.

Wright, Elizabeth Cox. "The Significance of the Image Patterns in Meredith's Modern Love", Victorian Newsletter, XIII (1958), 1-9.

Wright, Walter. Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953.