

Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age

Samuel Taylor Coleridge • George Crabbe • John Keats
William Morris • Alfred, Lord Tennyson • William Wordsworth

Read by **John Moffatt • Samuel West • Sarah Woodward**



1	The Eve of St Agnes*†	26:06
2	Morte d'Arthur+	16:41
3	Michael*	26:28
4	Christabel Part 1+†	16:07
5	Christabel Part 2+†	16:07
6	The Haystack in the Floods†	9:53
7	Peter Grimes+	24:33

Total time: 2:16:07

John Moffatt + Samuel West * Sarah Woodward †

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Narrative poetry enjoyed an extraordinary revival during the Romantic period and throughout the Victorian age: almost all the great poets of the century made important contributions, many of which are represented in this anthology.

The medieval era had also been an age of narrative verse – Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* stands out, of course, but works like *Gawain and the Green Knight* and the great ballads of Scotland and the border country are almost as impressive in their vividness and artistry. The Renaissance period in England may be represented by Spenser’s *Faerie Queen* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, while we should also notice (for example) Pope’s mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* from the eighteenth century.

Yet the richness of narrative poetry from the nineteenth century remains outstanding. Many of these poets found particular inspiration in the Middle Ages, responding to a world in which life, death and religion – as well as the supernatural – were invested with a peculiar intensity, passion and significance. The sense of mystery – of ‘romance’ – appealed directly to the Romantic sensibility, reacting as it did to the apparently impersonal rationality of Augustan thought. But each poet responds differently and distinctively: Coleridge emphasises the struggle between

good and evil, between the Christian and the diabolic; Keats delights in a world of sensation encompassed by the threat of death; Tennyson depicts the tragic dissolution of a golden age; while Morris stresses the brutality beneath the heraldic charm of ‘medievalism’.

The Eve of St Agnes

John Keats (1795-1821)

Keats belongs to the second generation of Romantic poets. During his brief life he matured rapidly as a poet, producing not only the intense, philosophical and richly musical Odes but also a number of fine, narrative poems, of which *The Eve of St Agnes* has long been a favourite. The story owes something to *Romeo and Juliet* in its emphasis on young love threatened by a family feud, but Keats enriches his tale by creating a powerful series of polarities: dreams and reality, youth and age, warmth and cold, life and death...

Morte d’Arthur

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

Tennyson, after a tentative beginning, became the most popular and respected poet of Victorian England. His sensitive nature was bruised by a painful childhood dominated by domestic strife, and later by the tragically

early death of his closest Cambridge friend, Arthur Hallam. His best poetry is characterised by an exquisite musical and evocative power tempered by a conflict between post-Darwinian doubt and a longing to believe. *Morte d'Arthur* movingly dramatizes the passing of a golden age of noble deeds and aspirations, but the tragedy is mitigated by a faith in the future: perhaps the Victorian belief in progress struggling with a deep sense of loss?

Michael

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Wordsworth was born, brought up and lived in or near to the Lake District. His intention was to write a new kind of poetry which would come closer to the language and experience of ordinary people, and which would draw its inspiration from the sublime influence of Nature. *Michael*, written in a plain, blank verse, tells the moving story of a proud, industrious Cumberland farmer whose hard-won independence is threatened by the dissolute behaviour of his beloved only child.

Christabel

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Coleridge was born in Devonshire and educated at Jesus College, Cambridge. His life was in many ways a failure – he failed in love, failed financially, and became helplessly dependent on laudanum (a form of opium). Yet, especially in his association with

Wordsworth, he was a seminal influence on the growth of Romanticism in English culture. Their joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) marked the beginning of a new kind of poetry. *Christabel* is a fascinating (and unfinished) experiment in which Coleridge uses an unconventional metre to tell a tale of disturbing import: the beautiful and pure Christabel is exposed to the sinister influence of Geraldine, a demonic spirit who, seemingly as fair as Christabel herself, gains access to the latter's home and heart, with destructive effect.

The Haystack in the Floods

William Morris (1834-1896)

Morris was a man of extraordinary versatility: apart from being a poet and pamphleteer, he was also a highly influential designer and a radical thinker. He was profoundly moved and influenced by medieval life and art, but in *The Haystack in the Floods*, his view of the Middle Ages is surprisingly blunt and unsentimental, although we feel most powerfully for the dreadful plight of the lovers, Robert and Jehane. The language is strong and spare, the situation utterly bleak, its climax terrible. Morris based the poem on an actual incident of the Hundred Years' War.

Peter Grimes

George Crabbe (1754-1832)

Crabbe was born at Aldeburgh, a small fishing port on the Suffolk coast. He spent

most of his life as a country parson, but acquired a reputation as an original and powerful poet whose work was criticised by some for its 'disgusting representations' – in other words, his attempt to portray some of the more grimly realistic aspects of rural life.

Peter Grimes – a tale of cruelty and horror – brilliantly combines an intense (and highly concrete) evocation of place with profound psychological insight.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside



John Moffat's distinguished theatre career encompasses an astounding two hundred roles across the UK, forty-two major London productions and two Broadway appearances. He has played Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* at the Open-Air Theatre, Regents Park, appeared in Ingmar Bergman's production of *Hedda Gabler*, and in *Married Love* directed by Joan Plowright. Film credits include *Prick Up Your Ears* and he has been seen on UK TV in productions as varied as *Love in a Cold Climate* and *Maigret*.



Samuel West has been widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film, *Howard's End*. His other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on UK TV in *Persuasion*, *Heavy Weather* and the *Vacillations of Poppy Carew*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



Sarah Woodward joined the RSC after leaving RADA and has since appeared in many Shakespearean roles including Juliet directed by Declan Donnellan. Other theatre credits include *The Sea*, and *Kean*, directed by Sam Mendes, as well as the applauded Royal National Theatre production of *Wild Oats*. She also reads the part of the Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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Cover picture: La Morte d'Arthur by James Archer.
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Here are some of the finest narrative poems in the English language, dating from an age of rich inspiration: the nineteenth century. All tell powerful stories of human passion and endeavour, often reflected in vivid evocations of the medieval world. This recording includes *The Eve of St Agnes*, *Morte d'Arthur* and *Peter Grimes*.

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