

## THE VICTORIAN POETRY (1832-1880)

The Victorian Age (1832-1887) is one of the most remarkable periods in the history of England. It was an era of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, local unrest, educational expansion, empire-building, and religious uncertainty. It witnessed the flowering of poetry in the hands of a host of poets, great and small. It marked the growth of the English novel and laid the foundation of English prose on a surer footing.

The note of individuality was the hallmark of Victorian literature. The literary figures of the Victorian age were endowed with marked originality in outlook, character, and style. Victorian literature in its varied aspects was marked by a deep moral note. The marked characteristic of the age is that literature, both in prose and poetry, seems to depart from the purely artistic standard of art's sake and to be actuated by a definite moral purpose. TENNYSON, BROWNING, RUSKIN were primarily interested in their message to their countrymen. They were teachers of England and were inspired by a conscious moral purpose to uplift and instruct their fellowmen. The literature of the Victorian age was co-related to the social and political life of the age. A few literary artists of this age struck the note of revolt against the materialistic tendencies of the age and sought to seek refuge in the overcharged atmosphere of the Middle Ages. An escapist note is also perceptible in the Victorian literature and this is particularly noticed in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Poets.

The literature of the Victorian age could not completely out of form the mainsprings of Romanticism. The spirit of Romanticism continued to influence the innermost consciousness of the age. It affected the works of TENNYSON, THACKERAY, BROWNING, and ARNOLD. It has been said that the Victorian literature was only a continuation of Romantic ideals in theme; in style and rather than a fresh start. The poetry of the Victorian Age bears traces of the Romantic influence which cannot be doubted and in many cases, the themes of this poetry are identical with those treated by the poets of the Romantic era yet the climate of the age being quite different from the Romantics.

Besides a note of pessimism doubt and despair runs through Victorian literature and notice especially in the poetry of MATTHEW ARNOLD and A.H.CLOUGH. Though a note of pessimism runs through the literature of the age it cannot be considered as literature of bleak and optimism is also struck by poets like BROWNING and TENNYSON. 'RABBI BEN EZRA' brings out the courageous optimism of the age. The Victorian poetry is considered by modified by the impact of the scientific spirit, and all that the scientific spirit implied, its certain doubt, its care for minuteness and truth of the observation, its growing interest in social processes, and conditions under which life is lived that is the central fact in Victorian literature. The questioning spirit in CLOUGH, the pessimism of JAMES THOMSON, the melancholy of MATTHEW ARNOLD the fatalism of FITZGERALD, are all the outcome of the skeptical tendencies evoked by scientific research. TENNYSON'S poetry is also considerably influenced by the advancement of science in the age, and the undertones of scientific researches can be heard in "IN MEMORIAM".

The most important poets of the Victorian Ages are- ALFRED LORD TENNYSON, MATTHEW ARNOLD, ROBERT BROWNING, ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH, MRS. ELIZABETH BROWNING etc.

LORD TENNYSON (1809-92)

ALFRED TENNYSON was undoubtedly one of the greatest poets of the Victorian age. He is a representative poet of the Victorian age of the 19th century, one who represents his age, not in fragments but completely in all its manifold variety and number of years in his life and was honored with the high office of the Poet Laureate. Tennyson began his poetic career at quite an early age, as his early verses bear the stamp of Milton, Keats and even Virgil in a marked degree, but he also carved an independent line of his own. During the long span of his career as a poet, he wrote every kind of poetry- the song, the idyll, the dramatic monologue, the dialect poem, the descriptive, the ballad, the war ode, the epic, narrative, and the drama. He wrote on classical romantic and modern subjects: on English history and legend, on the deepest problems of philosophy and religion and the range of his method and style is scarcely less remarkable than that of his matter.

The earliest collection of TENNYSON'S poems was published in 1827- "POEMS BY TWO BROTHER'S". The poems of this period are immature later he developed in poems like "THE LOTUS BATTERS", "THE LADY OF SHALLOT" and "O E none". In

1880 was published the second volume of poems- "POEMS CHIEFLY LYRICAL". In 1842, Tennyson produced two volumes of poetry containing some of the finest jewels of his poetic art such as "ULYSSES" and "LOCKSLEY HALL". In 1847, Tennyson produces "THE PRINCESS A MEDLEY". It is the first long and elaborate poem on the subject of woman's education and their claim to social and political equality with men. Tennyson ridicules the very conception of woman's equality with a man and her aspiration for higher education. Three years later in 1850, Tennyson brought out the famous elegy "IN MEMORIAM", written to mourn the death of ARTHUR HALLAM, Tennyson's college friend and betrothed to her sister. It is his masterpiece and most representative of the Victorian age. It consists of 131 lyrics. Here Tennyson deals with all the phases of personal griefs and sorrows and discusses the conflict between knowledge and science on one side and faith/religion on the other. The poet marches triumphantly from the state of despair to a state of hope and optimism. In 1855 was published "MAUD and OTHER POEMS". "MAUD" is a monodrama, a rapid and feverish record, in a series of lyrics of love affairs blasted by a tragic accident. Besides these long poems, Tennyson has written several lyrics like- "IDYLLS OF THE KINGS", "MORTE D' ARTHUR", "ENGLISH IDYLLS", "ENOCH ARDEN", "BALLADS" "BREAK, BREAK, BREAK", "CROSSING THE BAR", "HAROLD" etc.

Tennyson presented in his poetry all the essential features of Victorian life, the ideas, and tastes, moderation in politics, refined culture religious liberalism a lively interest in the advance of scientific discovery, increasing sympathy with poverty and distress- all these Victorian feelings find expression in Tennyson's poems. But Tennyson lacks originality and depth as a thinker. Today he is valued not as a thinker but a consummate literary artist.

MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-1888)

MATTHEW ARNOLD was one of the greatest poets of the Victorian Age but he was considered more a critic than a poet. A poet who is at heart a critic and whose poetry is "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty". Matthew Arnold belonged to the group of the reflective, thoughtful and intellectual poets of the Victorian age. His poetical works are not very bulky. As early as 1849 he had published "THE STRAYED REVELLER and OTHER POEMS". In 1852 was published "EMPEDOCLES ON ETNA" and "OTHER POEMS"

by "A". then followed "POEMS" in 1853 with a remarkable preface. This volume contained famous poems of Arnold such as "SOHRAR AND RUSTAM", "THE SCHOLAR GIPSY". In 1855 was issued "POEMS BY MATTHEW ARNOLD", second series containing many old and published poems and a few new ones such as "BLADER DEAD" and "SEPARATION". In 1867 "NEW POEMS" was published. This volume contained "THYRSIS RUGBY CHAPEL", "DOVER BEACH", "A SOUTHERN NIGHT" etc.

The poems of Matthew Arnold can broadly be classified into the narrative, dramatic, elegiac and lyrical poems besides a few sonnets which he wrote from time to time. Arnold was not a born poet like Shelley whom he criticized as an "ineffectual angel", but a man who wrote poetry for it served as a good and helpful medium of expressing his views about life and its problems. But Arnold's poetry lacks spontaneity, passion, rapture, qualities by which great poetry is judged.

ROBERT BROWNING (1812-89)

ROBERT BROWNING was another important poet of the Victorian era. Browning began his poetic career under the inspiring example of P.B. Shelley. His earliest work in poetry is "PAULINE"(1833). The poem is a monologue addressed by Pauline on the development of a soul. In 1840 Browning produced "SORDELLO" representing the life of a little known Italian poet. In 1842, Browning produced "DRAMATICS LYRICS" followed by "DRAMATIC ROMANCES AND LYRICS" in 1845. In 1855, Browning brought out "MEN AND WOMEN" which was dedicated to Elizabeth Barret Browning. In "DRAMATIC PERSONAE" (1864) Browning carried forward his study of human beings and produced several dramatic monologues. In 1868-69, Browning produced "THE RING AND THE BOOK". Besides composing lyrics and dramatic monologues Browning also penned a few dramas at intervals. He brought all his dramas in a collection known as "BELLS AND POMEGRANATES". Browning is the author of eight plays.

The most characteristic of Browning's poetry is his profound interest in the character. He is a great master of the art of presenting the inner side of human beings, their mental and moral qualities. It is in his dramatic monologues that Browning is seen at his best. He uses the dramatic monologues for the study of character, of particular mental states, and moral crisis in the soul of the characters concerned. Browning is an optimist to the core. Browning's optimism is best seen in his treatment of love.

Browning is one of the greatest love poets in the English language. Browning was a highly original genius right from the beginning.

## **ARTHUR CLOUGH (1819-1861)**

**ARTHUR CLUGH** was another poet of the Victorian Age. He was also a representative Victorian poet expressing in his narratives, descriptive and lyric verses of doubts, the uncertain questioning, and criticism of the Victorian Age. He was the truest expression in verse of moral and intellectual tendencies. The doubt and struggle towards settled convictions of the period in which he lived. His entire work in poetry is intellectual and is marked with introspective self-analysis and self declination. Clough's important works are- "THE BOTH OF TOBER- NO VOUBET", "AMOURS De", "VOYAGE", "DIP TYCHUS" etc.

## **ELIZABETH BARETT BROWNING (1806-61)**

The wife of Robert Browning was another important figure and occupies a place of her own among the poets of the Victorian Age. She was a few years older than her husband and began composing poems, which were rather old fashioned in form and showed a curious mingling of her influence of the Bible, the Greeks, Byron, and Shelley. Her important works are- "THE COY OF CHILDREN", "LADY GERALDINE'S COURTSHIP", "SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE", "AURORA LEIGH", "COWPER'S GRAVE" etc. Mrs. Browning is the poetess of humanitarianism and deep pity. Her poems evoke the chords of sympathy in our hearts and bring tears to our eyes. Her love poems are rich in emotion and exhibit the intensity of her passion and love for Browning. But her poetry suffers from numerous and defects.

## **JAMES THOMSON (1834-1882)**

JAMES THOMSON is one of the minor poets of the Victorian Era. His "THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT" strikes a note of unrelieved pessimism, largely subjective. In the words of HUGE WALKER, "His pessimism was founded on the conviction that there was no hope for humanity any more than for himself and that the appearance of progress was a more illusion." The gloom and depression that envisage the poem

are due largely to the many disappointments he had suffered, intensified by his constitutional intemperances.

## EDWARD FITZGERALD (1809-1888)

FITZGERALD is remembered for his translation of the Persian work, the “RUBAIYAT” of OMAR KHAYYAM. The translation has the force and beauty, of original work. “Like Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’, the Rubaiyat is also a criticism of lifeless explicit, less polemical in its form but definite. In its outlook, Tennyson’s poem stands between Fitzgerald’s ‘Rubaiyat’ and Browning’s ‘Easter Day’, blending the two characteristics of the day- a wistful hesitancy and a religious optimism- in a way that proved by its very compromise extremely welcome and soothing to many minds”. No English writer has expressed so beautifully the Epicurean philosophy as Fitzgerald. The translation is remarkable for its artistic beauty and its fine sincerity of utterance.

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