UNIT 11: INTRODUCING VICTORIAN CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe and contextualise Victorian criticism
- write on the emerging trends of criticism in the Victorian age
- identify the major critics contributing towards Victorian criticism
- discuss the significance of criticism in the overall development of Victorian literature
- analyse the main concepts in Victorian criticism

11.2 INTRODUCTION

You may remember reading Wordsworth or Coleridge as a critic belonging to the preceding age, significantly called “romantic critics” and their contributions. However, quite interestingly, with the changes in priority of the writers because of the vast socio-economic changes in the intellectual scenario, Victorian criticism has opened up a new direction opening up prospects for the future dominance of criticism in terms of its importance in literary studies. This unit, therefore, intends to acquaint you with the ways criticism took its shape in the Victorian age. Further, the

unit shall emphasise on some of the prominent texts that have laid down the way for criticism its due prominence among scholars and critics alike.

You must be familiar to the Victorian way of life and the changes that had been brought about by industrialisation and the rapid growth of science. Age-old beliefs were challenged by the scientific ways of thinking most importantly it was the battle of faith versus doubt. A sceptical attitude overshadowed the Victorian period because of this, and it got reflected in literature. Religion that is “an extremely effective form of ideological control” (Eagleton, 20) was questioned and doubted, thereby forecasting a shift in the social structure. With the passing of the Reform Act of 1832, the status of the middle or working class was ultimately elevated as they became very powerful. Following this, the concept of “Popular Education” arose in England. To cater to the needs of the emerging and rapidly growing powerful working class, many new educational institutions including universities were set up as well as government “grants” were passed with respect to the “cost of education” (Newbolt Committee Report, 1921). Hence, education became accessible to a greater public thereby increasing the number of prospective readers and writers.

Naturally, people in general lost the flavour of the early age that laid emphasis on individuality and flexibility. Contradictorily, it can be seen that many writers became didactic and many others turned towards tackling the social condition and problems in their works. All these events shaped Victorian criticism mainly reflected in the form of literary writings such as reviews, essays, introduction to edited books, etc. Let us now in this unit, look forward to gain a better understanding of Victorian criticism by laying our focus on its development and the important figures associated to it. The following sections shall deal with a brief overview of the development of Victorian criticism.

11.3 HISTORY OF VICTORIAN CRITICISM

After getting a background of the Victorian crisis of doubt and faith and the emerging dominance of the middle class, here we shall concentrate upon the factors that initiated criticism. Notably, it was during

the Victorian period that 'criticism' as an individual area of study began to emerge. Primarily, the publication of *The Edinburgh Review* provided scope for the critics to voice out their concerns. Reviewers with strong individual opinions were encouraged through this magazine. The role of this magazine in the initiation of literary criticism in the nineteenth century was significant as works of literature such as poetry, drama and novels were widely reviewed. Gradually, the reputation of a literary work came to be measured by way of reviews. Along with *The Edinburgh Review*, there were other magazines, which promoted the early springs of criticism like *The Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, etc.

The Victorians like Matthew Arnold and a few others were greatly influenced by the French critics like Taine and Sainte-Beauve whose main insistence was on finding "a scientific system to assess the worth of a writer" (Prasad, 198). To assess a writer's worth, it was important for them to know about the writer's biographical details. Getting a personal touch would help the readers to measure the worth of a writer in a better way.

Victorian criticism has also paved the way for New Criticism. The influence of Victorian criticism was ardently felt in the way the literary texts, including the novels, were approached.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What changes did the Reform Act of 1832 bring about in the Victorian society with regard to educational opportunities?

Q 2: Give a list of the various reviews that initiated Victorian criticism.

Q 3: Which two French critics had a tremendous bearing upon the Victorian critics?

11.4 MAJOR EXPONENTS OF VICTORIAN CRITICISM

Matthew Arnold:

Matthew Arnold– the poet critic is one of the major figures associated with Victorian criticism. Born in 1822, Matthew Arnold is

remembered not only as a poet but also an influential critic who also showed his concern for various issues such as culture, religion, education, etc. His "Preface" to the *Poems* of 1853 is a notable piece of literary criticism. In the Preface, Arnold's ideas such as his insistence upon 'grand style', his inclination towards the Classical form and his emphasis on art or poetry as a 'criticism of life' are reflected to a great extent. First of all, it must be mentioned that Matthew Arnold was an ardent advocate of Classical poets and considered them suitable for imitation by the Victorian poets. To be precise, the "Preface" was written as a reaction towards the extravagant poetry of the **Spasmodic** poets. Arnold believed that art or poetry as such should depict "joy". Hence, he rebelled against the Spasmodics for their inferior thematic concerns and poor treatment of their verses. Arnold was against their excessive use of metaphors through which they exaggerated their concerns in poetry. Another important work of literary criticism by Arnold is the essay titled "The Study of Poetry" which introduced his famous "Touchstone method". In this essay, he pointed out the higher values of poetry for it enables "to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us" (Arnold, "The Study of Poetry"). Arnold, however, noted that only the poetry, which is 'a criticism of life', could be considered great. In order to find out the worth of poetry, Arnold suggested that poets like Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer must be considered as examples because the essence of high poetry is present in their works. By high poetry, Arnold implied the inclusion of excellent subject matter and style. Talking about 'high seriousness' that is attached to these great classic poets, Arnold emphasised on the "Touchstone Method". He suggested that lines or passages from these poets must be used as 'touchstone' to find out the worth of poetry. Therefore, this essay primarily reflects Arnold's praise and high expectations from poetry. The Victorian crisis of religion that was triggered by scientific developments created an uncertainty in the lives of the people and for Arnold, poetry with its serious preoccupation with life was only capable of bringing stability through its high ideals and moral values. He was well known as a critic also for works like *On Translating Homer*, *The Study of Celtic Literature*, etc.

Apart from these, another significant contribution of Arnold is the essay titled "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" that appeared in his book *Essays in Criticism* in 1865. Here Arnold emphasised on the role of a critic and the function of criticism which is "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas." (Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"). As such, the first focus of Arnold is on knowledge of the critic that has to be developed with a sense of disinterestedness by trying to see the things as it really is. The critic has to acquire extensive knowledge in order to share his opinions and views and propagate the best that he has acquired. Thirdly, the critic's role is to promote creative genius by propagating the best ideals prevailing in the society. Arnold laid emphasis on creative faculty because to him it was higher than critical faculty. At the same time, he asserted that only a critic could best appreciate a creative work of literature.



LET US KNOW

The term 'spasmodic' coined by William Edmonstoune Aytoun is a term used to refer to poets namely, Philip James Bailey, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith. Their poetry was mainly notable for their use of bombastic words. These poets tried to express their scepticism regarding the age in view of their emphasis on poetry as an expression of one's inner state. Basically, their works reflected the inner turmoil of the protagonists who were mostly poets themselves. Pertaining to their pompous use of words, depiction of the protagonists as lonely and depressed souls, excessive use of imagery and metaphors, these poets lost the favour of their readers, mainly with Aytoun's parody titled *Firmilian* in 1854.

Walter Pater:

Walter Pater (1839-1894) was a famous literary critic, essayist and art critic. He also wrote fiction. Pater was primarily an advocate of

"art for art's sake". The works from which Pater's ideas regarding criticism can be derived are *Appreciations*, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *Plato and Platonism,* etc. In the Preface of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater clearly stated that the aim of criticism is "To see the object as in itself it really is" (viii) and "in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (viii).

Pater, however, did not favour didacticism; for him art must only seek to provide a purely aesthetic experience. He opposed Ruskin who emphasised on the reflection of life through art. We shall read in details about Ruskin in the following paragraph. Talking about style, Pater noted that 'Diction, Design and Personality' are the necessary qualities of a writer for offering a pleasurable experience to his readers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Who were the Spasmodics? Why did Arnold's disapprove of them?

Q 5: In which essay did Arnold talk about Touchstone Method?

Q 6: Who, according to Arnold, were classic poets?

Q 7: What are the threefold functions of a critic according to Matthew Arnold?

Q 8: Mention some of the major works of literary criticism by Walter Pater.

John Ruskin:

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was one of the popular art critics of the Victorian times. Paintings in the Victorian period were one of the most important focuses with regard to the representation of reality. This was more vivid with the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood consisting of painters namely, W. H. Hunt, J. E. Millais and D. G. Rossetti also a poet who were highly influenced by John Ruskin's approach to art. The early Victorian paintings showed the influence of the idealised and sophisticated

masterpieces of the Italian painter, Raphael. It was against this practice that Ruskin revolted since he believed that artists must not idealise, rather the role of an artist is "truth to nature" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters*). Ruskin emphasised on the accuracy of details on the part of an artist while painting 'nature'. Like literature, Victorian art was also an important area of study. John Ruskin's criticism on art is another manifestation of the significance of pictorial aspect to the understanding of literature and criticism during the Victorian period. Few other works by John Ruskin are *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). All these three books of Ruskin had more than one volume. In the book titled *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, it has been rightly pointed out that "Nineteenth century aesthetic theory frequently makes the eye the predominant organ of truth" (xix-xx). Arts, literature or criticism–whatever might be the medium for a writer, depiction of reality became important. Therefore, it is relevant for us to have a brief overview on Victorian art too in order to examine the overall reputation of criticism during the time.

Algernon Charles Swinburne:

Swinburne (1837-1909) was another major figure in Victorian criticism who also wrote plays, novels and poems. He was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites and aestheticism. His *Poems and Ballads* was a very popular work owing to its controversial reception during the Victorian period. This volume dealing with homosexual themes brought him closer to the philosophy of aestheticism by challenging the prevailing cultural mores and importance of morality in the Victorian society. However, his critical output rested mainly on his defence of the above volume, which is titled *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in 1866.*Under the Microscope* is another significant critical work of Swinburne.

Henry James:

Henry James was a notable American born writer who later on acquired British citizenship. His literary output spread across various genres including novels, plays, biographical and autobiographical

writings, etc. In fact, James also contributed towards Victorian criticism by his numerous reviews and works like “The Art of Fiction”, “The future of the Novel”, etc. Apart from these, his critical works included *French Poets and Novelists*(I878), *Hawthorne* (I879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (I893), *Notes on Novelists* (1914), *Literary Essays and Reviews* (1957), etc. Rene Welleck noted, “James alone in his time and place in the English-speaking world holds fast to the insights of organistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism.” (p. 321). It must be noted that Henry James strived for ‘a revival of criticism’ mainly of the novel form. A fair idea about Henry James as a critic can be summed up in the words of Wellek:

James has an extraordinarily clear grasp of the nature of art, its relations to reality and the other activities of man; he has very definite, though often implicit, requirements for successful art and he has the power to apply his standards to the authors he examines. His theoretical position seems clear-cut and coherent. He is neither a “realist,’ the label pinned on him in most histories of literature, nor a “formalist,” a devotee of art for art’s sake for which he is often dismissed. (p. 299)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What, according to John Ruskin, is the role of an artist?

Q 10: Name any two major works of criticism by Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Q 11: What is your idea regarding Henry James as a literary critic? Explain.

11.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN VICTORIAN CRITICISM

Art for art’s sake:

‘Art for art’s sake’ was first coined by the French critic Benjamin Constant. However, it was the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant who

laid the basis or principles of Aestheticism. According to Kant, art stands for its own sake or its own beauty and not to mean anything else. Prior to the Victorian period, the romantic poet and critic –S.T. Coleridge supported this philosophy. However, in the Victorian times, this idea got echoed in the writings of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Charles Algernon Swinburne and D. G. Rossetti who were highly influenced by Kant. By following this doctrine of aestheticism, these critics sought a refuge from the crude depiction of reality prevailing in their society and hence they considered art as a pleasurable activity without succumbing to any morals. You must note here that among the Victorian critics who disregarded this doctrine, the chief among them were John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. They held a completely different view. Contrary to the followers of aestheticism, they believed that art must have a didactic purpose.

The Touchstone Method:

With reference to Victorian criticism, the Touchstone Method is an important concept. The main figure behind this was the poet and critic, Matthew Arnold. In the essay titled “The Study of Poetry”, Arnold pointed out that in order to judge the value of a work it must be compared with the works of the classic poets as Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer. Arnold believed that the works of these classic poets were poetry of higher order. According to the Touchstone method of Arnold, a line or one passage of any of the classic poets must be used for assessing the worth of other poetic works. By this concept, Arnold led the path to ‘scientific objectivity’ in criticism. He also highlighted comparison as an important aspect of criticism. Some of the passages to be considered as touchstone that

> Arnold suggested were from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*—
> Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
> Seal up the ship-boy’s eyes, and rock his brains
> In cradle of the rude imperious surge . . .
> from John Milton’s Paradise Lost:

Darken'd so, yet shone
Above them all the archangel; but his face
Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care
Sat on his faded cheek . . .

from Dante's "Inferno":

[I wailed not, so of stone grew I within; / they wailed.]

and from Homer's Iliad:

[Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?]

The touchstone method for Arnold was helpful to overcome the false standards of judging a work. Pointing out personal estimate– judging poetry from a personal point of view; and historic estimate taking the circumstances of the poet into consideration, as insufficient for judging a poetic work, Arnold favoured the touchstone method.



ACTIVITY 11.1

Make a list of the relevant essays, lectures, preface to volumes, etc. or any other source of Victorian criticism by eminent Victorian critics while you are reading the unit. This will enable you to remember not only the important texts but also give you a clarified understanding of Victorian criticism as a whole.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: Which German philosopher is said to have initiated the principles of Aestheticism?

Q 13: Describe in brief the Touchstone method.

Q 14: Describe some of the important concepts in Victorian criticism.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have been familiarised with Victorian criticism and the background in which it has emerged. Swinging in between doubt and faith, the Victorian age is marked for providing inspiration for novel literary undertakings including criticism. To be specific, in this unit you have known that criticism became an important literary practice from the Victorian period onwards. Hence, critically viewed, the Victorian critics can be said to have laid down the basis for twentieth century critics. Since criticism was gradually taking its shape in the various works of the Victorian critics, it must be noted that Victorian criticism is mainly important as it served as the transitional phase for the establishment of criticism as an individual and reputed branch of knowledge and literary practice. As you have now finished reading the unit, you have acquired a fair idea on the socio-economic situation of the age that found its vent through criticism also along with the literature of the period. You have also read about many critics in this unit, some of them are Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Henry James, etc. Apart from this, the unit acquainted you with the various contributions of these critics whose works challenged the prevailing approach towards literature. You are now familiar with the concepts that dominated Victorian criticism like art for art's sake, touchstone method, etc. By and large, the unit has provided you with a broad idea on Victorian criticism. You are, however, advised to read the essays and consult the books mentioned in the unit for acquiring a better perception of Victorian criticism.



11.7 FURTHER READING

Christ, Carol T et al. (eds.) (1995). *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*. London: University of California Press.

Eagleton, Terry. (1983). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Second Edition. Minnesota: Blackwell Publishers.

Habib, M. A. R. (ed). (2013). *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 6 The Nineteenth Century c. 1830-1947*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pater, Walter H. (1873). "Preface" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. London: Macmillan & Co.

Prasad, Birjadish. (1965). *An Introduction to English Criticism*. New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.

Ruskin, John. (1888, 2nd edition).*Modern Painters*. Harvard University.

Wellek, René. (1958). "Henry James's Literary Criticism and Theory."*American Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 3. Pp. 293-321.

Reports:

"The Teaching of English in England" (Report Of The Departmental Committee Appointed By The President Of The Board Of Education To Inquire Into The Position Of English In The Educational System Of England). (1921). London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.

Web1 Resources:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273382855_VICTORIAN_CRITICS_AND_METACRITICS_ARNOLD_PATER_RUSKIN_AND_THE_INDEPENDENCE_OF_LITERARY_CRITICISM [accessed Aug 9, 2017] victorianweb.org [accessed September 4, 2017]

http://www.bartleby.com

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: With the passing of the Reform Act of 1832, the status of the middle or working class… …became very powerful. and the concept of "Popular Education" arose in England. To cater to the needs of the emerging and rapidly growing powerful working class, many new educational institutions including universities were set up… …education became accessible to a greater public thereby increasing the number of prospective readers and writers.

Ans to Q No 2: *Edinburgh Review*, *The Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine*, etc.

Ans to Q No 3: Taine and Sainte-Beauve.

Ans to Q No 4: Philip James Bailey, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith were the Spasmodic poets . . . use of bombastic words . . . tried to express their scepticism regarding the age in view of their emphasis on poetry as an expression of one's inner state. Arnold believed that art or poetry as such should depict "joy" . . . he rebelled against the Spasmodics for their inferior thematic concerns and poor treatment of their verses . . . against their excessive use of metaphors through which they exaggerated their concerns in poetry.

Ans to Q No 5: "The Study of Poetry".

Ans to Q No 6: Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer.

Ans to Q No 7: The critic has to be developed . . . a sense of disinterestedness . . . see the things as it really is . . . acquire extensive knowledge in order to share his opinions and views and propagate the best that he has acquired . . . to promote creative genius by propagating the best ideals prevailing in the society.

Ans to Q No 8: *Appreciations*, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *Plato and Platonism,* etc.

Ans to Q 9 No 9: Artists must not idealise . . . the role of an artist is "truth to nature" . . . Ruskin emphasised on the accuracy of details on the part of an artist while painting 'nature'.

Ans to Q No 10: *Notes on Poems and Reviews* and *Under the Microscope.*

Ans to Q No 11: James contributed towards Victorian criticism . . . "The Art of Fiction", "The future of the Novel", *French Poets and Novelists*(I878), *Hawthorne* (I879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (I893), *Notes on Novelists* (1914), *Literary Essays and Reviews* (1957), etc. Rene Wellek noted . . . "James alone in his time and place in the English-speaking world

holds fast to the insights of organistic aesthetics and thus constitutes a bridge from the early nineteenth century to modern criticism" . . . Henry James strived for 'a revival of criticism' mainly of the novel form.

Ans to Q No 12: Immanuel Kant.

Ans to Q 13: To judge the value of a work it must be compared with the works of the classic poets as Milton, Shakespeare, Dante and Homer . . . the Touchstone method of Arnold, a line or one passage of any of the classic poets must be used for assessing the worth of other poetic works . . . led the path to 'scientific objectivity' in criticism.

Ans to Q 14: Refer to Section 11.5



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the important characteristics of Victorian Criticism? Discuss briefly.

Q 2: Analyse the influence of Matthew Arnold as a critic with special reference to his major contributions in the field of criticism.

Q 3: Consider the factors that contributed towards the development of criticism in the Victorian age.

Q 4: Give an idea of Victorian criticism with reference to the major critics. How did their works influence the conception of Victorian literature in general?

Q 5: Discuss the major concepts that were predominant in Victorian criticism and highlight its importance in relation to the scope of criticism in the succeeding age.

Q 6: Briefly describe the following with reference to Victorian criticism: "Art for art's sake".

Q 7: Highlight the significance of art criticism in the Victorian age. Illustrate your answer by giving examples.

Q 8: Critically comment on the concept of aestheticism in the Victorian context.

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