PGEG S2 03

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

SEMESTER 2

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3: VICTORIAN POETRY

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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SEMESTER 2
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 1: ENGLISH POETRY: ROMANTIC TO VICTORIAN
BLOCK 3: VICTORIAN POETRY

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BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

There are total 5 units in this Block. In these units, the learners will get some ideas on the Victorian poetry and the poets.

Unit 11 brings to you a reading of Victorian Poetry, which became a significant branch of literature. One important aspect of the period was the growing scientific developments. People in general were affected by the new scientific discoveries, which shook their belief in religion creating a crisis of 'faith versus doubt.' The poets of the Victorian age addressed the major concerns of their society in most of their poetic works.

Unit 12 deals with the poem "Ulysses" written by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson who is generally hailed as the most representative poet of the Victorian period. Tennyson perfectly voiced the relentless spirit of the age for gaining more and more knowledge of the unknown frontiers of the physical world of the time. Tennyson displayed a sweeping range of interests right from the imbroglio involving the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Human Species* (1859) resulting in the famous Victorian Compromise, the scientific innovations and inventions of the time, to the expansion of the British empire within the ambit of his poetic designs.

Units 13-14 deal with Robert Browning, and one of his most famous poems "Fra Lippo Lippi". Based on the life of a fifteenth century Italian painter and a Carmelite friar named Fra Filippo di Tommaso Lippi, the poem, which is also a dramatic monologue, raises various questions on the role of art and the artist in the aesthetic and spiritual life of an individual. In the poem, Browning tries to demarcate the differences in attitude and philosophy of the Medieval and Renaissance artists on art.

Unit 15, the last unit of the course, deals with Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach". The poem, despite all its brevity, is perhaps one of the most anthologized and the best known among Arnold's poetic works. The poet contemplates the sea, finding in it the melancholic reminders of the confusions and uncertainties of belief brought about by modern life. After you finish reading this unit, you will find that Arnold in this poem, turns to faith in human relationship against the Victorian problem of loss of faith.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READINGS" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 11: INTRODUCTION TO VICTORIAN POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE:

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 Different Forms of Victorian Poetry

11.4 Important Victorian Poets and their Works

11.5 Reception of Victorian Poetry

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.9 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an idea of Victorian poetry
- describe the various kinds of poetry that were produced the Victorian period
- discuss the major concerns of the poets
- relate your understanding of Victorian poetry to the temperament of the age
- discuss the major Victorian poets and their works
- critically analyse Victorian poetry with reference to its reception

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the Course on English Poetry: Romantic to Victorian. Block 3 of this course shall specifically deal with Victorian poetry, and the present unit shall deal with Victorian poetry in general providing you an outline of the period in which poetry became a significant branch of literature. In order to understand Victorian poetry, it is important that you must have an idea of the preoccupations of the poets who were immensely affected by the various factors that shaped their works. One significant aspect of the period was the growing scientific developments.

People in general were affected by the new scientific discoveries, which shook their belief in religion creating a crisis of 'faith versus doubt.' Moreover, with industrialization, the middle class rose to acquire power and position in the society, whereas the worst sufferers were the working class people who were exploited largely. In connection with the skeptical attitude of the people in the Victorian age, the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 was a major event. This book challenged the age—old religious beliefs of the people and triggered a sense of rationalism never before felt. Towards this ever-increasing crisis of the age, many writers turned towards the Church, while few others displayed an agnostic attitude in their writings; there were also writers who hold on to morality and some others turned towards nature. Hence, you must be able to realise that poetry was greatly affected by the drastic socio-economic, political and religious changes. Let us now move forward to read Victorian poetry, and see if the poets were directly influenced by the changing condition of the society or not, and if so, to what extent they are.

11.3 DIFFERENT FORMS OF VICTORIAN POETRY

Victorian poetry can be said to have retained some of the tendencies of its preceding age like individualism, relation with Nature, etc. However, the Victorian poets looked into these aspects with a different perspective. One of the significant aspects of Victorian poetry is that many poets turned to become prophets or guides. This group of poets tried to assure the people that the growing uncertainty was very common to all. Morality, if not didacticism, preoccupied these poets like Arnold, Tennyson, etc. We can also see a group of poets in the Victorian age who were obsessed with the pictorial description of nature. This group of poets led by D.G. Rossetti was called Pre-Raphaelites. There were also some writers who moved closer to the Church seeking to restore their lost religious beliefs and skepticism. The Oxford Movement, which was led by John Henry Newman, strived to put forward a belief system in the people amidst the rising crisis and increasing doubts of the age. However, it must be noted that all these varied reactions of the poets were rooted in the context of the age. The Victorian poets displayed a close connection to the social condition of their age.

Poetry in the Victorian times was considered an affair of 'high seriousness.' To the Victorians, poetry not only became an expression of the poet but also a medium to address the concerns of the age. Poetry's close relation to human life was a significant characteristic of Victorian poetry. Another chief feature of poetry during the Victorian times was it addressed and raised issues that had public appeal. The earlier approach to the role of a poet was taken over by poetry's social responsibility. The Victorian poet had to be thoughtful about the people and not himself. You must be aware that for the Romantic poets, "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" (Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) but except a few group of poets, the majority of the Victorian poets believed poetry to be a substitute for morality in a so called 'mechanical age' that was declining in moral values. Hence, for the Victorian poets, poetry was aimed for 'higher' ends. In "The Study of Poetry", Matthew Arnold, one of the leading poet and critic stated, "the strongest part of our religion to-day was its unconscious poetry". Victorian poetry led much emphasis to 'poetic truth' and 'poetic beauty' as stated by Arnold. The subject matter as well as the style was of primary concern for the Victorian poets.

Another common feature of Victorian poetry was, therefore, the importance laid on style. Succumbing to the invasion of science, the style of poetry became distinctively precise and specific. For example, accuracy of details while representing Nature, chiefly by the Pre-Raphaelites was of utmost importance. It can, therefore, be seen that akin to the Romantics. In Victorian poetry also, nature was given priority. However, it has to be remembered that the emphasis on nature in Victorian times was given in reference to its relation with man. Moreover, the Victorian poets laid down a scientific basis to the understanding of Nature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention any one of the significant features of Victorian poetry.

Q 2: What was the status of poetry in general during the Victorian period?

Q 3: Why did the style of poetry in the Victorian times become distinctively precise and specific?

It is no wonder that Victorian poetry portrayed a skeptical attitude. As you have already noted that poetry was a 'criticism of life', hence such an attitude on the part of the poets is justified. The evolutionary theory of Darwin created havoc in the Victorian age and shook the belief of the people. Being divided between a fading hope in religion and an increasing skepticism, Victorian poetry too displayed such tension. There were poets who were unabashedly skeptic like Fitzgerald, Clough, Matthew Arnold and James Thompson. In addition, there were also poets who laid emphasis on Nature and aesthetic qualities. However, of Tennyson and Browning, it can be said that their poetry portrayed an optimistic attitude towards the prevailing condition of the age.

As you have seen in the above discussion the mixed reaction of the various poets towards the complex situation of the age, it is obvious that Victorian poetry found its outlet in diverse ways, be it in thematic concerns or in style. Let us now consider the major poetic trends that dominated the Victorian period:

a) **The poetic output of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning** is worth mentioning in the context of Victorian poetry. Amidst the tensions of doubt and progress, Browning's poetry is marked for his optimism. Unaffected by the changes that were sweeping the minds of majority of the Victorians, Robert Browning's optimism was commendable for placing its central emphasis on the 'realities of life'. His firm belief in God is evident in his poems. Poems like "The Last Ride Together", "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Evelyn Hope", "Pippa Passes", etc. are all instances of Browning's optimistic attitude towards love, life and God. However, Alfred Lord Tennyson too was a representative of his age in the way he expressed doubt or faith. However, it must be noted that he was composed compared to many writers/poets of his time. Even though the advent of science affected the religious belief of man during the Victorian age, Tennyson's poetry, though at times have a pessimist tone, depicted his acceptance of scientific interventions but not at the cost of religious disbelief. Some of his best-known poems are "In Memoriam", "Ulysses", "The Lotus-Eaters", etc.

b) The Skeptics: As the name suggests, those poets were called the skeptics who were affected by the confusion and uncertainty that befell the Victorian society. Poets like Matthew Arnold, Edward Fitzgerald, Arthur Hugh Clough and James Thomson were prone to the bitterness of the age and hence through their poetry they expressed doubts and questioned their beliefs. Among them, Arnold was quite an influential figure of his age not only as a poet but also as a critic. As a poet, Arnold favoured the classicist's insistence on form and style. However, he was very critical about religion, scientific progress and politics in his poetry. We must also note his inclination towards Nature in his poems like "Thyrsis", "Sohrab and Rustum", "Lines Written in Kensington Garden", etc. We shall get an elaborate idea of the poetry of Arnold in the following section.

Out of the many translations of FitzGerald, the best remembered is *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859).This poem has tones of both optimism and pessimism and represents the tension surrounding the poet in relation to life as well as death. Arthur Hugh Clough's poems also reflect his religious doubts; dissatisfied with the prevailing Victorian crisis Clough has always been critical about the developments or the changes that took place then. Some of the poems by Clough are "Songs of Absence", "The Last Decalogue", "Say Not The Struggle Naught Availeth", "Through a Glass Darkly", etc. His long poems include *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich, Amours de Voyage* and *Dipsychus.* While the former two poems represent his doubts regarding love and the conflicts of the society, the latter one deals with his doubts on the changing attitude of the society towards spirituality. The last of the skeptics, that is, James Thomson is remembered as a pessimist poet for the poem titled "The City of Dreadful Night". This poem represents his despair and atheism. The two volumes written by him were *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* and *Vane's Story and Other Poems*.

c) Spasmodic poets: William Edmonstoune Aytoun first coined the term 'spasmodic' in his book titled *Firmilian: a Spasmodic Tragedy* to refer to a group of Victorian poets whose poetry was pompous in style and subject matter. The poets who are referred to by the term are P.J. Bailey,

Sydney Dobell, J. Marston and Alexander Smith. 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. Primarily, their works reflected the inner turmoil of the protagonists who were depicted as lonesome individuals or poets many a times. However, the depiction of the protagonists as lonely and depressed souls was very much in resonance with the age. However, excessive use of imagery and farfetched metaphors, use of bombastic words have resulted in the declining popularity of the spasmodic poets.

d) Pre-Raphaelites: The group of poets influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne and Christina Rossetti. The movement was originally called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood "of young, anti-Establishment painters (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, F. G. Stephens, and James Collinson) and one sculptor (Thomas Woolner). This movement had drawn up a scheme for revolutionising the pictorial arts in 1848…what they insisted was the superior directness of expression of those artists who worked before the time of Raphael". (Sanders, 435) The poets like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Keats inspired the Pre-Raphaelites. Through the journal titled *Germ,* the Pre-Raphaelites shared their interests, be it painting, prose, essay or prose. However, among the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the only one to have literary inclination was D.G. Rossetti. Some of the poems by Rossetti are "Autumn Idleness", "The House of Life", "A Half-Way Pause", "The Woodspurge", etc. However, Rossetti's well-known poem was "The Blessed Damozel". Rossetti was much enchanted by the female body and spirit as was evident from his poems as well as paintings. One of the chief characteristics of his poetry was his emphasis on ornamentation and minute description. Influenced by the aestheticism of the Pre- Raphaelite, Charles Algernon Swinburne and William Morris were also associated with this group. His two works that showed utmost influence of the Pre-Raphaelites were *Atlanta in Calydon* and *Poems and Ballads* (First Series). However, Swinburne was closely associated with the Italian cause, that is, its freedom from external domination. In

addition, it is evident from his works that "there runs a defined paganism and an instinctive libertarianism, shaped both by his profound understanding of the forms and styles of classical culture and by his distaste for Christian narrowness." (Sanders, 436) Some of his works include *Songs Before Sunrise, Songs of the Springtides* and poems like "The Garden of Prosperine", "A Forsaken Garden", etc.

Another poet belonging to this group was William Morris, who was also a painter and an architect. A lover of beauty, Morris was influenced by Chaucer in particular and by ancient Greek poets as well as poets of the Middle age in general. For him, poetry was "an extension of craft and a natural enhancement of the quality of life" (Sanders, 437). The important works by Morris are *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-87), *News From Nowhere* (1890), *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems, The Haystack in the Floods, The Life and Death of Jason,* etc. However, based on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* lacked the mastery of Chaucer and appeared "lifeless". One of the most notable poets associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement was D. G. Rossetti's sister, Christina Rossetti. Her well known poems are "When I am Dead my Dearest", "Sleep at Sea", "Promises like Pie-Crust", "Winter My Secret", "Remember", "Uphill", "My Heart is Like a Singing Bird", "The Convent Threshold", etc. Her major works include *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881), *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems,* etc. In her children book titled *Sing Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book,* her writing is plain and direct. It must also be noted that she was much influenced by George Herbert and was equally a devotional poet.

As a whole, it can be seen that the Pre-Raphaelites were all inclined to the Middle Ages, in painting as well as in poetry and were much influenced by the ballads and metrical romances. Most importantly, these poets were far removed from the social problems of their day, and laid emphasis on pictorial description as well as a sense of beauty to please their readers. The escapist tendency or the love of beauty that the Pre-Raphaelites shared was very much common to the Romantic poets. In fact, of the romantics, John Keats' poetry had a great influence on them.

e) The Decadents: The term 'decadence' referred to the French literary ideals of placing importance on the uglier and sad aspects and wore a markedly unconventional badge of immorality. The chief figures of this movement that originated in France were Charles Baudelaire and Gautier. The decadent poets were symbolists as they extensively used symbols to express their inner quests. Poets who were influenced by this literary movement were Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson. These poets came into action towards the end of Queen Victoria's regime and were referred to as poets of "naughty nineties" or *fin de siècle*, a term that was used to separate them from the rest of the century. Some of the well-known poems of Wilde are "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", "A Vision", "Apologia", "Her Voice", "Flower of Love", etc. Poems by Symons' include "Rain on the Down, Emmy", "The Shadow Credo", "The Street Singer", "Javanese Dancers", "The Ecstasy", etc. Among Dowson's poem, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion" and "Villanelle of Marguerites" may be cited as examples. Johnson's poems include "By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross", "The Dark Angel", etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Mention any two poems by Robert Browning.

Q 5: Who were called the 'skeptic' poets?

Q 6: Write a short note on the spasmodic poets.

Q 7: Point out a few features of Pre-Raphaelite poetry? Name the poets who were called by the name 'Pre-Raphaelite'.

Q 8: By the end of the century, a group of poets emerged in England who were influenced by French symbolism. Who were these poets?

11.4 IMPORTANT VICTORIAN POETS AND THEIR WORKS

The following are the important poets of the Victorian age.

Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Tennyson (1809-92) was one of the greatest poets of the Victorian

age. He was a man of his age who had shown interest and was concerned with the material developments as well as the various scientific discoveries of his age. His poems represented themes commonly faced by the age such as doubt, faith, immortality, etc. The most famous poem for which he was best remembered was the commemorative poem he wrote for Arthur Hallam, a close friend and a poet titled “In Memoriam” in 1849. Tennyson owed much of his artistic brilliance to Hallam’s critical perspectives that helped him mould his ideas both intellectually and emotionally in a world, which was rapidly witnessing a change in every aspect like religion, faith, etc. This poem particularly reflected Tennyson’s awareness of the various scientific discoveries as well as his hopes. However, at the same time the poem also asserted the doubts related to the advancement of science. As the literary historian, Andrew Sanders had put it: “Most powerfully, it recognises two conflicting validities, those of the reasoning mind, which comes to perceive ultimate purpose and the agnosticism of the feelings, which continue to crave for present comfort”. (434) The poems like “The Ballad of Oriana”, “The Lotos-Eaters”, “Mariana”, “The Kraken”, etc. dealt with themes of death. Tennyson also published the volume titled *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in 1830, *Poems* in 1841, *The Princess: A Medley* in 1847. The latter volume exposed Tennyson’s “commitment to a poetry of social purpose and communal concern”. (Sanders, 433)

After Wordsworth, Tennyson became the Poet Laureate immediately one year after the publication of “In Memoriam”. In accordance with his role as a laureate, Tennyson wrote *Maud and Idylls.* His “Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington” was perhaps regarded by critics as one of the best commemorative poems. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” was also a universally acclaimed poem that earned him much fame and praise. Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King* was a retelling of the legend of King Arthur spinning across twelve narrative poems. You must also take note of a few other poems of Tennyson like “Break, Break, Break” which was an “evocation of a desperate sense of exclusion, by private grieving, from a working, rejoicing human community” (Sanders, 432); “Crossing the Bar”, a poem representing the theme of death, etc. The poem “The Lady of Shalott” by Tennyson had a considerable influence on the Pre-Raphaelite painters as

well. As a poet, Tennyson's mastery over language and metre was evident in his works. The influence of the Romantics was also obvious in the way he described Nature with rich imagery. His popularity also rested on his political concerns of the age. Dealing with a vast range of subject matter such as death, melancholy, immortality, etc., Tennyson's poetry reflected his pessimism at times as well as his greatness as an experimental poet who could raise the issues of his age and provide a comfortable perspective to his readers so as to adjust with the uncertainties that marked the age. A few lines from "In Memoriam" may be quoted:

"And love will last as pure and whole
As when he loved me here in Time,
And at the spiritual prime
Rewaken with the dawning soul."

Robert Browning:

The four major volumes that established Robert Browning's reputation as a poet were *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), *Men and Women* (1885) and Dramatis Personae (1864). Poems that encompassed his poetic career were "Fra Lippo Lippi", "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover", "Evelyn Hope", "The Last Ride Together", "The Bishop Orders his Tomb", "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "The Lost Leader", "One Word More", "Home Thoughts From Abroad", "The Pied Piper of Hamelin", "Two in the Campagna", etc. Browning was much concerned with the Victorian individual or the human psyche. By using 'dramatic monologue', the poet dwelt with the inner motives of his protagonists. Although his poetry lacked the dynamism of Tennyson, yet it has become popular for the use of dramatic monologues. Browning's poems showed his interest on the human character. Through his poetry, he sought to drive away the Victorian crisis of faith and doubt. He was an optimist at heart, moralist in tone and an admirer of the realities of life. In his philosophy, "God" held the central place. His optimism is quite evident through the crisis he developed in his poems and settled them at the end of the poems. He was a religious poet and hence the religious disbelief that was paralysing the society could not affect him. His faith was closely associated with his belief on the immortality of human soul. Battling pessimism, Browning's

poetry provided hope and a belief on human self and individualism. Out of the many themes like religion or art, Browning's poetic output constituted many poems on 'love' like "A Woman's Last Words", "Meeting at Night", etc. *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) is a good example of Browning's use of dramatic monologue. Depicting a disturbed dramatic monologue of Browning, lines from the poem "Porphyria's Lover" have been cited below:

"That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her."

Matthew Arnold:

Matthew Arnold is known as both a poet and a critic. He was very much inclined towards the classic poets like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, etc. and adopted the classical qualities of 'restraint' and 'precision'. His poetic output had shown evidence of his belief in "poetry as a criticism of life". As such, throughout his works, Arnold revealed his scepticism regarding the Victorian problems. Unlike Browning, Arnold was much shattered due to his loss of faith in religion. Therefore, it found an echo in his works too. Some of the poems by Arnold were "The Forsaken Merman", "The Scholar Gypsy", "Thyrsis", "Dover Beach", "Sohrab and Rustum", "Shakespeare", "Empedocles on Etna", "Lines Written in Kensington Garden", etc. You must note *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems. By A.* published in1849 as his first volume of poems. Other poetry volumes include *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* (1852) and *New Poems* (1867). However, it was seen that contradictory to his own criteria of poetry, his own works showed a Romantic spirit of nostalgia and sadness. The quote from his poem "Dover Beach" reflected his despair:

"The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

One of the prominent woman poets of the era was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wife of Robert Browning. She mostly dealt with contemporary issues of her time. Her reputation as a poet lies in works such as *Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), *Poems* (1844), *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Poems before Congress* (1860), the verse novel *Aurora Leigh* published in 1857, etc. Among her numerous poems, "The Cry of the Children" is notable for her empathy towards the children belonging to the working class and is evident of her political standpoint. The poem echoed Browning's enragement and her outlook towards the exploitation of the weaker section of the society– the children workers. Let us look at a few lines from the poem:

"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap —
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping —
We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,
Through the coal-dark, underground —
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.(Stanza VI)

11.5 RECEPTION OF VICTORIAN POETRY

Victorian poetry seen through the lens of contemporary critics deserves the mention of such literary theories like 'deconstruction', 'feminism' and 'Marxism'. In the book tilted *Alfred Tennyson: Rereading Literature* published in 1986, Alan Sinfield gives a Marxist interpretation of Tennyson and perceives him as a 'cultural materialist' and a 'conservative poet' and argues, "Tennyson's aesthetic solutions to political problems were

either timid or straightforwardly reactionary". Sinfield's analysis brought about a renewed interest in Victorian poetry with a materialist angle. Similarly, another critic Herbert Tucker tried to shed light upon the complex linguistic dimensions of Browning's poetry through deconstruction. (Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics* (e book)) E.D.H. Johnson's book *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* was an attempt to study Victorian poetry "in relation to an increasingly severe lesion between the poet and the society". (Armstrong) One of the modern poets, T. S Eliot was very critical of Tennyson and Browning. In his essay titled "The Metaphysical Poets", Eliot talked about 'dissociation of sensibility' and expressed his contemplation regarding the Victorian poets: "Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated." He further stated: "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." (Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets") Eliot did not have high regard for the Victorian poets as such. You are suggested to read up more on other critical writings of the Victorian poets by writers such as Harold Bloom, etc. in order to get a broader view of the reception of Victorian poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Write briefly on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's works.

Q 10: What did Eliot opine about the Victorian poets, Tennyson and Browning?



11.6 LET US SUM UP

After you have finished reading the unit, you have become fully aware of the importance attached to poetry in the Victorian age. The role of a poet was much more than mere personal experience. Since poetry was a medium to address or express the social problems, it was basically called the 'criticism of life'. Through poetry as a medium, the poets took recourse to morality or Church or Nature based on one's own personal expression towards the rising crisis of faith and doubt as well as industrialisation. You

have observed that many poets turned to become moral preachers. They intended to console their generation that the crisis or the uncertainty that was overshadowing every mind was a common sensation among the Victorians. In their poems, they raised issues to address such common problems and provided comfort and hope to their readers. You must have also read about the various kinds of attitudes that the poets had to such complexities. While there were poets who turned to Nature, few others moved closer to the Church in order to restore their lost beliefs. One thing common in all the poets was their style that was marked by precision and accuracy. By now, you have become familiar with the different forms of poetry that were popular during the Victorian times such as the Skeptics including poets like Fitzgerald, Arnold, etc.; the optimistic philosophy in Browning's poetry; the Spasmodics including Bailey, Dobell, etc.; the Pre-Raphaelites like D.G. Rossetti and the Decadents represented by poets as Oscar Wilde. You have gained a fair idea of some of the significant Victorian poets like Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, etc. In addition, you have been familiarised with the critical reception of Victorian poetry. It can very well be summed that Victorian poetry "is seen in terms of transition . . . It is either on the way from Romantic poetry, or on the way to modernism. It is situated between two kinds of excitement, in which it appears not to participate." (Armstrong)



11.7 FURTHER READING

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, poetics and politics*. London: Routledge. (e-book)

Collins, Thomas J. et al. (eds.) (2005 rpt.). *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory, Concise Edition*. Broadview Press. (e-book)

Matheikal, Tomichan. (2001). *English Poetry: From John Donne to Ted Hughes.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.

Sanders, Andrew. (2004 rtp.). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* Third Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Web Resources:

http://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/eliot_metaphysical_poets.htm

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: One of the significant aspects . . . poets turned to become prophets or guides . . . tried to assure the people that the growing uncertainty was very common to all.

Ans to Q 2: Poetry in the Victorian times was considered an affair of 'high seriousness'… …a medium to address the concerns of the age… …close relation to human life… …poetry during the Victorian times addressed and raised issues that had public appeal… …poetry's social responsibility… …majority of the Victorian poets believed poetry to be a substitute for morality in a so called 'mechanical age' that was declining in moral values… …poetry was aimed for 'higher' ends… …"the strongest part of our religion to-day was its unconscious poetry"… …Victorian poetry led much emphasis to 'poetic truth' and 'poetic beauty'.

Ans to Q 3: Owing to the invasion of science, the style of poetry became distinctively precise and specific. For example, accuracy of details while representing Nature, chiefly by the Pre-Raphaelites was an important feature of their style.

Ans to Q 4: "The Last Ride Together", "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Evelyn Hope", "Pippa Passes", etc.

Ans to Q 5: Matthew Arnold, Edward Fitzgerald, Arthur Hugh Clough and James Thomson.

Ans to Q 6: The term 'spasmodic'… …coined by William Edmonstoune Aytoun… … refer to a group of Victorian poets whose poetry was pompous in style and subject-matter . . . P.J. Bailey, Sydney Dobell, J. Marston and Alexander Smith . . . express their scepticism regarding the age in view of their emphasis on poetry as an expression of one's inner state . . .reflected the inner turmoil of the protagonists . . . the depiction of the protagonists as lonely and depressed souls was very much in resonance with the age . . . excessive use of imagery and farfetched metaphors, use of bombastic, etc.

Ans to Q 7: The Pre-Raphaelites were all inclined to the Middle Ages . . . were far removed from the social problems of their day and laid emphasis on pictorial description as well as a sense of beauty to please their readers . . . the escapist tendency or the love of beauty . . . was very much common to the Romantic poets. The Pre-Raphaelite poets were D. G. Rossetti, Charles Algernon Swinburne, William Morris and Christina Rossetti.

Ans to Q 8: Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson.

Ans to Q 9: *Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), *Poems* (1844), *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Poems before Congress* (1860), the verse novel *Aurora Leigh,* the poem "The Cry of the Children", etc.

Ans to Q 10: T. S Eliot…talked about 'dissociation of sensibility' and expressed his contemplation regarding the Victorian poets: "Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated." He further stated: "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the major Victorian poets with reference to their major works.

Q 2: What are major trends in Victorian poetry? Describe each of them in details.

Q 3: Analyse the characteristics of Victorian poetry. Do you agree that Victorian poetry was mechanical? Illustrate your answer.

Q 4: Discuss Tennyson as a representative poet of the Victorian age.

Q 5: Write a note on the women poets belonging to the Victorian period.

Q 6: Give a detailed explanation of Pre-Raphaelite poetry with special reference to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

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UNIT 12: ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: "ULYSSES"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Tennyson: The Poet

- 12.3.1 His Life
- 12.3.2 His Poetic Works

12.4 Reading the Poem

- 12.4.1 The Text of the Poem
- 12.4.2 Major Themes
- 12.4.3 Tennyson's Poetic Style

12.5 Critical Reception of Tennyson as a Victorian Poet

12.6 Let Us Sum up

12.7 Further Reading

12.8 Answer to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.9 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to

- describe the life and career of Alfred Tennyson
- discuss the poem "Ulysses" in terms of its different important aspects
- explain the underlying mythical pattern of the poem
- critically appreciate the significance of the poem "Ulysses" by Tennyson

12.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with the poem "Ulysses" written by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) who is generally hailed as the most representative poet of the Victorian period. Tennyson, as you will get to read, perfectly voiced relentless spirit of the age for gaining more and more knowledge of the unknown frontiers of the physical world of the time. While the other leading luminaries of Victorian poetry—Robert Browning (1812-

1887) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) remained preoccupied with their professed line of interests–Browning with dramatic monologue, and Arnold with moral deprivations often snubbed as 'philistinism', Tennyson focused on the different polarities of his time. Robert Browning has been much acclaimed for his innovative dramatic monologues like "My Last Duchess" and "The Last Ride Together" in which he tried to probe the inner minds of his characters, while at the same time advocating on their behalf. Matthew Arnold, who defined poetry as "criticism of life", embodied the role of a moral critic of the time. As exemplified in his poems like "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Dover Beach", Arnold felt disgust at the Victorian way of life particularly the corrupt and selfish pursuits of the age, and yearned for a peaceful, optimistic and spiritually tranquil society free from the 'philistines'. In contrast to these two great poets, Tennyson displayed a sweeping range of interests right from the imbroglio involving the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Human Species* (1859) resulting in the famous Victorian Compromise, the scientific innovations and inventions of the time, to the expansion of the British empire within the ambit of his poetic designs. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will be able to learn why he is often considered one of the most accomplished lyric poets in the history of English verse.

12.3 TENNYSON: THE POET

Alfred Tennyson remains the most representative poet of the Victorian era. Being the mouthpiece of the age, he expressed both the hopes and the doubts of his time. Like the great Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Tennyson too was a keen observer of nature. However, his specialty in this respect remains the fact that he was not biased in favour of only one particular dimension of nature; rather, he threw light on both the benevolent and malevolent aspects of it. Tennyson, to some extent, can be termed as a true descendent of Romantics like Shelly and Keats so far as the emotional thread of their poetic pieces is



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred,_Lord_Tennyson

concerned. His bosom friend and one of his earliest critics Arthur Henry Hallam first pointed out this aspect of Tennyson's poetry.

12.3.1 His Life

Alfred Tennyson, born on August 6, 1809 at Somersby Rectory in Lincolnshire, was the son of the rector of Somersby, Reverend George Clayton Tennyson. Tennyson had eleven siblings and his father was an alcoholic— factor that took a toll on their middle class existence in Tennyson's childhood. After his early education, mainly at home and at Louth Grammar School for a brief period, Tennyson went to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1827. He displayed his poetic competence at Trinity in 1829 by winning the Chancellor's Medal for his poem "Timbuctoo". In fact, admission into Trinity was sort of an escape for him from disturbed domestic environment marked by his father's bitter temperament resulting from his disinheritance. However, the chaotic atmosphere at home during his formative years had already left its mixed impetus on Tennyson's personality. The outcome of it was a dual personality displayed by the poet throughout his life—a personality prone to compromise that wavered between faith and doubt. However, his later life, particularly post the publication in 1842 of his *Poems*, a two-volume collection of poetry, was blissful.

In November 1850, Tennyson was appointed the Poet Laureate of England consequent to the death of William Wordsworth in April the same year and the refusal of the offer by Wordsworth and Coleridge's friend Samuel Rogers (1763-1855) on the ground of his senility. The year was also remarkable for the publication of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, an elegy triggered by the unfortunate and untimely death of Arthur Henry Hallam whom Tennyson had befriended at Trinity in 1828, and the beginning of his conjugal life with Emily Sellwood. The poet's personal fortunes saw a steep rise after 1850 and he was honoured with the title of Baron in 1884, which he had declined earlier on three occasions in 1865, 1874 and 1880. Tennyson suffered from serious illness in 1888 that posed a

threat to his life, which according to his doctor's version was as near death as a man could get.

He died at "Aldworth", his second country home, on 6th October 1892.

12.3.2 His Poetic Works [adapted from *Gale Encyclopaedia*]

In 1827, when Tennyson was almost eighteen years old, his first volume of poetry, *Poems by Two Brothers* was published. *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, published in 1830, was well received and marked the beginning of Tennyson's literary career. Another collection, *Poems* appeared in 1832. Many critics praised Tennyson's artistry but objected to what they considered an absence of intellectual substance. The latter volume was published following a request of Arthur Hallam, a brilliant Cambridge undergraduate who had become Tennyson's closest friend and who was an ardent admirer of his poetry. However, Hallam's premature death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising "In Memoriam", contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. For nearly a decade after Hallam's death, Tennyson published no further poetry.

As Tennyson was maturing, the political situation in England was also changing as Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, beginning a long reign (which ended in 1901) and setting the tone for an important era in British history. During the Victorian age, the Industrial Revolution reached its peak, providing a boost to British colonial and military expansion during the 19th century. On the one hand, there was a vast increase in the factory system, industrialization, and urbanization, changing the fabric of British society. On the other hand, reform and social justice were also emphasised. In such an environment, yielding to a friend's insistence, Tennyson published his two-volume collection *Poems* in 1842.

Following an unsuccessful financial venture for some time, in 1845, Tennyson was granted a Government pension in recognition of both his poetic achievements and his apparent need. Contributing to his financial stability, the first edition of his narrative poem "The

Princess: A Medley", published in 1847, sold out within two months. Moreover, the timely success of "In Memoriam", published in 1850, ensured Tennyson's appointment as poet laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. This assured Tennyson the opportunity to become the poetic voice of his generation, and in his ceremonial position he composed such poems as "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" and "The Charge of the Light Brigade", each of which is a celebration of heroism and public duty. *Idylls of the King* (1859), considered by Tennyson's contemporaries to be his masterpiece, and *Enoch Arden* (1864), which sold more than forty thousand copies upon publication, increased both his popularity and his wealth and earned him the designation "the people's poet."

Although the dramatic works written later in his career like *Queen Mary* (1875) and *The Foresters* (1892) were largely unsuccessful, Tennyson completed several additional collections of poems in the last decade of his life, all of which were well received. They included: *Ballads and Other Poems* (1880), *Tiresias, and Other Poems* (1885), and *Demeter, and Other Poems* (1889). In 1883, he accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honoured strictly based on literary achievement.

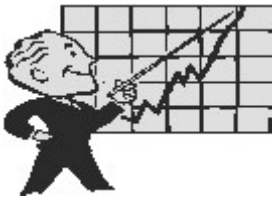


LET US KNOW

A quick look at the list of Tennyson's works

- *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827): It also contained poems written by his brothers Frederick and Charles.
- *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830)
- *Poems* (1832)
- *Poems* (1842), in two volumes. One of these volumes contained previously published poems in revised form and the other one presented fresh poems.
- *The Princess* (1847)
- *In Memoriam* (1850)
- *Maud and Other Poems* (1855)

- *Idylls of the King* (1859)
- *Enoch Arden* (1864). The publication of this volume brought to him the title "Poet of the People".
- *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* (1869)
- *Ballads, and Other Poems* (1880)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 1: What was Arthur Henry Hallam's role in Tennyson's early career besides being a friend?

Q 2: Which aspects of the Victorian society did Tennyson express in his poetry?

Q 3: What were the factors that affected Tennyson's early life at home?

12.4 READING THE POEM

"Ulysses" was published in *Poems*, the two-volume collection of poetry in 1842 that marked the beginning of Tennyson's rapid stride towards great success and fame. "Ulysses", in the words of Andrew Sanders, "emphatically embraces the idea of progressive development" (426) which was one of the important agenda of Victorian policymaking. Written after Arthur Hallam's death in 1833, the poem was of much significance. Speaking of it, Tennyson himself had said: "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses', which was written under the sense of loss…" and that the poem provided him with the "feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life…" (as qtd. in Hill, 82).

The poem is based on two mythical sources—Homer's the *Odyssey XI* and Dante's *Inferno* (Canto 26). However, Tennyson's "Ulysses" is not a mere reproduction from his mythical sources but a re-appropriation of these to give vent to a typical Victorian attitude to life and work.

12.4.1 The Text of the Poem

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,

That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees. All times I have enjoy’d
Greatly, have suffer’d greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro’ scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea. I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known, % cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour’d of them all,%
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use.
As tho’ to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro’ soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil’d, and wrought, and thought with me,—

That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads,— you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends.
’T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

(Source: *Tennyson’s Poetry*, edited by Robert W. Hill Jr.)

Ulysses, the speaker of the poem, dismisses the idea of leading a peaceful and idle life accompanied by his wife in his hilly kingdom of Ithaca. He is also not interested in ruling his subjects—a "savage race" in his view—who are ignorant of their king. He has been through many difficulties in life and have tremendously enjoyed and equally suffered while earning a reputation in the process. He has seen many a people in different countries and came to know their customs and manners. He acknowledges that wherever he has travelled to quench his thirst for knowledge, the people have honoured him. He has fought with valour along with his fellow warriors in the battle of Troy. He possesses much knowledge but the scope of knowledge knows no bound. One's experiences and knowledge appear just like an arch through which one can see the vast expanse of knowledge that remains unexplored.

Ulysses deems it foolish not to recognise the call of an active life preferring to lead a dull life of rest and comfort that resembles to him something made of iron that has lost the shine and rusted due to little use. According to him, lives piled on lives are inadequate to master knowledge of all the things available in the world. Since he has only one life at his disposal of which too only a few years are left, he cannot shy away from constant activity. He believes that an hour spent in meaningful and worthy pursuits of knowledge of new things equals to saving that time from death, which brings eternal silence to everyone. It will be mean on his part to waste another three years doing nothing and so he renews in old days his resolution to dedicate the rest of his life in the noble pursuit of knowledge.

Ulysses projects his son Telemachus as the future ruler. He possesses all the requisite qualities to govern the country during the absence of Ulysses. Telemachus is free from corruption and dutiful. He is expected to subdue the resilient people of his kingdom into efficient and law abiding citizens while at the same time he would offer prayers to the household gods when Ulysses is out on his mission.

In the last part of the poem, Ulysses addresses his mariners. He is well aware of his old age as well as that of the fellow-sailors.

However, it is his conviction that even old age has its honour to be won and work to be performed. Though death is inevitable, before it knocks them down, they can do some noble works that befit them who had fought with Gods in the Trojan War. As the daylight wanes and the moonrises, the roar of sea waves is heard. At such a juncture, Ulysses addresses his mariners to embark upon new voyages stressing that they are not too late to explore new things and newer opportunities. Ulysses is resolute to travel beyond the point in the horizon where the sun and all the western stars set. He wants to travel like that until his death. It may be that during the course of their journey they will get drowned in the sea or that they will be able to reach Elysium and meet the great hero Achilles whom they had known in Troy. Though they are now bereft of their youthful energy due to age, there remains with them the indomitable courage and the strong will "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

Ulysses postulates about the untraveled world, which holds a great store of knowledge unexplored. He is tempted to set out again and master this hidden knowledge. His urge to go for it is propelled by his realisation that he has already become old and he will not live long. He decides to put his son Telemachus at the helm of power to carry forward his legacy of kingship while he will be away. In the final section of the poem, he addresses his fellow mariners and gives them a wake-up call. He impresses upon them the fact that they have become senile but still possess the unconquerable will to achieve something great before they are silenced by death. He reiterates to them his resolution to sail beyond the utmost frontiers to attain his goal and ready to face his end if necessary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Why is Ulysses not interested in ruling his subjects?

Q 5: How does Ulysses project his son Telemachus?

12.4.2 Major Themes

The Ulysses Myth:

"Ulysses" is a reworking of the traditional myth in the backdrop of Tennyson's sense of personal loss. The myth is Homeric, but Homer's Ulysses (called Odysseus) is a whimsical military general of the battle of Troy. He is also the adventurer who takes, after the ten-year war of Troy is over, another ten years to reach back his home. Towards the end of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus reaches his land Ithaca, killed many suitors of his wife Penelope and sits at the helm of power in his country. The only hint of a last adventure, which is the theme of the Tennyson's "Ulysses", can be traced in Book IX of Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus goes to the underworld, meets Tiresias, the blind prophet, who reveals to him that he would reach Ithaca and that his end will come from the sea. Dante, in Canto 26 of his *Inferno*, picks up this last sea voyage as his subject and not only extends the Homeric myth but also brings the story of Ulysses to an end. In the process, the character of Ulysses undergoes certain changes—from a clever general and avenger he has become a symbol of intelligence, hungry for more and more knowledge. Therefore, it is more on Dante's work than on the Homeric myth that Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" is based on. No doubt, the character of Ulysses is Homeric but the theme of the poem is modelled after Dante's extension of Homeric myth.

Social Consciousness:

Contemporary social consciousness is a major theme of "Ulysses". It has been represented through the character of Ulysses. Tennyson's hero is different from the Ulysses of any myth or legend. He is a purely intellectual character imbibed with the 19th century scientific zeal. He yearns for more and more knowledge and is ready even to meet his death to fulfil his avowed objective. He can hardly rest from travel and proposes to "drink/ Life to the lees". He has travelled to different lands with a hungry heart and acquired

knowledge of the places he has been to. Still, his thirst for knowledge remains insatiable and he wants to explore more and more in the unknown zones of knowledge. The imagination of the people of England during the reign of Queen Victoria was fired by the new discoveries and inventions of science. In these developments, they got the much-needed boost to discover new lands and thereby add to the expansion of the British Empire, which was perhaps sailing at its best pace at that point of time. Tennyson's Ulysses embodies in himself this quest of Victorians for knowledge.

Ulysses as an Egoist:

Another theme of the poem is the presence of an egoist in Ulysses. An accommodative outlook does not match his noble intentions and never-ending hunger for knowledge so far household relation is concerned. He is disrespectful of his wife and his subordinate citizens. The very first lines of the poem present him as an egoist who feels it unprofitable to remain "an idle king" who wastes his time by the side of the "still hearth" accompanied with "an aged wife". He even calls his people "a savage race" who only "hoard, and sleep". Such views and words to describe his wife and citizens sufficiently hint that he is biased against them and holds them in little respect. Ulysses even does not appreciate much his own son

Telemachus beyond his traditional and homely responsibilities.

Conflict between Science and Tradition:

The conflict or compromise between science and tradition remains a remarkable theme of the poem "Ulysses". The Victorian era was an age of the problem of choice between the traditional Christian way of life and the scientific discourse that was bolstered by new discoveries and inventions. Industrialisation and the advancement of science necessitated ever-going activity whereas the foundation of life of a large number of people in the society

remained their religious faith. Tennyson, being one of the greatest poets of the age attempted to strike a balance between these two opposite poles of his time. "Ulysses" reveals this effort of the poet through the characters of Ulysses and his son Telemachus. The poem remains a celebration of the energy and resolution of the period to run after the ever-increasing horizon of the world of knowledge. In a sense, Ulysses is the cross-continental hero of the Victorian England, an adventurer, an explorer of the unknown realms of knowledge and culture. Contrary to his father, Telemachus' life is a life of contentment and he is expected to play to perfection the conventional duties Ulysses is about to assign to him. Unlike his father, he does not feel the stir to go exploring new places and would prefer to "subdue" his subjects and worship the "household gods". However, in the fields of their individual preferences, both Ulysses and Telemachus are in mutual collaboration. They are helping one another in their respective spheres of activities, which is in a way indicative of the post-1859 Victorian Compromise between the subscribers of the conflicting ideologies of the time. Without Ulysses willing to bequeath his kingdom to his son Telemachus to rule when he is gone or Telemachus' supposed acceptance to perform the responsibilities of the king assigned to him by his father, they would not have been able to do what Ulysses puts as "He works his work, I mine". Thus, the compromising or collaborating relationship between the scientific and the traditional domains of activity can be termed as another theme of the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 6: What are the mythical bases of Tennyson's "Ulysses"?

Q 7: How has Ulysses become a name?

Q 8: Why does Ulysses want to undertake a new voyage?

Q 9: How does the poem Ulysses display the Victorian conflict between science and tradition?

12.4.3 Tennyson's Poetic Style

"Ulysses", according to David Daiches, is "one of Tennyson's most controlled and perfectly wrought dramatic monologues …" (998). This opinion by Daiches is quite apt considering the fact that the poet presents Ulysses at a very crucial moment of his life. He has come back after a long period of absence spent in pursuit of hazardous adventures on sea and plays with the opposite ideas of whether to idle away the rest of his life at home or embark upon yet another journey. In deciding what he intends to do, his inner mind is revealed to the readers.

Tennyson beautifully delineates through the inner play of conflicting emotions the entire personality of his hero. To heighten the effect of the dramatic monologue the poet gives the poem an abrupt beginning that captures our attention—"It little profits that an idle king, / By this still hearth …" After such a dramatic abruptness, the poet takes his protagonist to the middle of the crisis where he has to decide again about his future course of action. The epic background is one of the subtle techniques of the poem that has sustained the readers' admiration for it even today. Using mythical allusions to the character of Ulysses, Tennyson contextualises the ceaseless zeal and hunger of his contemporary Victorians for more and more knowledge of the unknown that would in turn add to the glory of their nation. It is Tennyson's sheer craftsmanship that blends so well the legendary elements from Homer and Dante with the Victorian thirst for ever-expanding knowledge.

Another technical aspect of the poem is the autobiographical element in it. "Ulysses" is actually an outlet of the poet's feelings regarding the need to face life and continue one's march ahead, undaunted by personal tragedies besetting life, towards fulfilment of men's set objectives. Tennyson himself has acknowledged this autobiographical aspect of the poem while speaking of *In Memoriam* to James Knowles, the architect of Tennyson's second country home "Aldworth", in this manner: "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses', which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by,

but that still life must be fought out to the end" (as qtd. in Hill 82). Ulysses, the persona of the poem, reflects the spirit and personality of the poet himself. By infusing personal touches to the near objective speaker of the poem, Tennyson perhaps wanted to instil in the minds of his contemporaries the need for a sincere pursuance of the national interests of his times.

The poem "Ulysses" is written in blank verse and there is a pictorial quality in its language. In the poem, Tennyson uses the words in a very evocative way. As evident in "By this still hearth, among these barren crags", or "There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail; / There gloom the dark, broad seas", or even the lines "The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks; / The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep/ Moans round with many voices", the poem is a good example of how language can conjure up images that are like the real ones witnessed by the eyes. Such pictorial use of language appears intentional on the part of Tennyson with a view to appealing more and more to his contemporary citizens of England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 10: Comment on Tennyson's poetic style as reflected in the poem "Ulysses"?

12.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TENNYSON AS A VICTORIAN POET

While discussing the critical reception of Tennyson as a Victorian poet, one should be reminded of W.J. Long's comment on Tennyson as: "For nearly half a century Tennyson was not only a man and a poet; he was a voice, the voice of a whole people, expressing in exquisite melody their doubts and their faith, their grief and triumphs. In the wonderful variety of his verse he suggests all the qualities of England's greatest poets" (586). This comment is quite befitting to the merits that Tennyson had as a poet.

There is hardly any doubt that Tennyson has been the best among the Victorian poets in terms of addressing the different moods and issues

of his time. However, his reputation has not always enjoyed an easy ride. His critics dismissed his early poems. However, from the 1840s, he gradually established himself as a major voice of the Victorian poetry and after the publication of *In Memoriam*, his reputation became firmly cemented. The Poet Laureateship conferred upon him testifies to his status as a poet during his lifetime. However, in the early years of the 20th century, he received a mixed reception at the hands of the modernists. In their rejection of the entire Victorian ideology, the early modernists dismissed Tennyson too in that; he had betrayed a typical Victorian attitude through most of his poetic career. The damage to his reputation in the early 20th century was caused particularly by the didactic tone of his later poems for which he came to be looked at as a moral teacher besides being a great poet by his contemporaries.

It is not always so bleak for Tennyson so far the reaction of the 20th century critics is concerned. Some critics have praised him highly taking cognizance of his contribution towards art and craft he had practised with so much of mastery particularly from the 1830s. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, by situating Tennyson in the context of his time and subject matters, lauds him that "it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class" (613). Appreciating his lyric as "gorgeous", Sedgwick further opines that Tennyson had applied his lyric genius "with a regal impartiality that makes him seem like a Christmas present to the 20th century student of ideology" (613). Such accolades from Sedgwick highlight the importance of Tennyson for both the Victorian period and the 20th century.

Tennyson has been able to find appreciation even in the hands of T.S. Eliot. Being one of the greatest of the high modernist writers and a significant critic, Eliot's appreciation speaks volumes about Tennyson's position as a master poet of the Victorian era. Comparing between Tennyson's long poems and that of his contemporaries, Eliot writes, "Tennyson's long poems are not the long poems in quite the same sense as those of his contemporaries" (623). Pointing to his *Maud* and *In Memoriam*, Eliot also praises Tennyson's lyrical capacity as "*Maud* and *In Memoriam* are each a series of poems, given form by the greatest lyrical

resourcefulness that a poet has ever shown" (623). Such appreciation by modern critics proves Tennyson's importance as a Victorian poet who still continues to delight his readers. Though at times scoffed at for expressing the Victorian morality, one cannot deny Tennyson the status of a great poet of his times, which is again seconded by Eliot in the following way:

Tennyson is a great poet, for reasons that are perfectly clear. He has three qualities, which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety, and complete competence. We therefore cannot appreciate his work unless we read a good deal of it. We may not admire his aims: but whatever he sets out to do, he succeeds in doing, with a mastery, which gives us the sense of confidence that is one of the major pleasures of poetry. His variety of metrical accomplishment is astonishing. (621)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 11: How was Tennyson received as a poet in the 19th century?

Q 12: What type of critical reception did Tennyson enjoy in the 20th century?

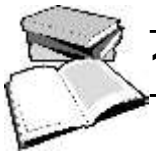


12.6 LET US SUM UP

Alfred Tennyson is one of the greatest poets of the Victorian period. Coming from a family of humble origins Tennyson had to face domestic troubles in his childhood. However, he comes over those early unpleasant patches of life after taking admission in Trinity College, and thereafter, he made his mark as a poet. He was way ahead of his contemporary poets like Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold in theme, technique and vision. Tennyson's "Ulysses" remains a representative poem of the Victorian spirit and social consciousness for a ceaseless campaign for more and more knowledge and might. Taking his cues from Homer and Dante's treatment of the story of Ulysses, Tennyson re-appropriates it to suit the Victorian socio-cultural ideal. Written on the wake of a great personal loss, which Tennyson frankly confesses, the poem also offers him a way to express

his resolution to carry forward his journey as a poet. The poem "Ulysses" begins with a dramatic abruptness that captures the readers' attention. Ulysses has returned home after a prolonged, tumultuous military engagement and equally eventful voyage. He expresses his unhappiness at the prospect of leading an idle life ruling over his people, which does not charm him at all. He recounts the wide range of experiences gathered during his adventurous journey and tells about his earning a name for himself.

You have read that critics have not always been unanimous in their support for Tennyson. In his initial career, he had to face adverse criticism. However, after the 1840s and 1850s, he was able to silence his critics through the merits of his poetic pieces. In the early years of the 20th century, he was criticised again for being a votary of Victorian orthodoxy. However, his reputation was redeemed after some of the greatest critics like Eliot offered a fair assessment of his poetic oeuvre.



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12.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Arthur Henry Hallam was an early critic of Tennyson.

Ans to Q 2: Tennyson expressed both hopes and doubts of the Victorian age.

Ans to Q 3: A large family of twelve children and an alcoholic father were the factors that affected Tennyson's early life.

Ans to Q 4: He is not interested in ruling his subjects who in his view are a "savage race" and who are ignorant of their king.

Ans to Q 5: Ulysses projects his son Telemachus as the future ruler… …he possesses all the requisite qualities to govern the country during the absence of his father Ulysses… … Telemachus is free from corruption and is dutiful… …he would subdue the resilient people of his kingdom into efficient and law abiding citizens… …at the same time, he would offer prayers to the household gods when Ulysses is out on his mission.

Ans to Q 6: Homer's Odysseus and Dante's Ulysses are the mythical bases for Tennyson's "Ulysses".

Ans to Q 7: Ulysses has travelled to many countries where he has met many people and learnt their cultures and habits. As an outcome of his encounter with these different people across countries, he has been able to become a name among them.

Ans to Q 8: Ulysses wants to undertake a new voyage in order to know the previously unexplored world of knowledge.

Ans to Q 9: The Victorian era was an age of the problem of choice between the traditional Christian way of life and the scientific discourse… …Industrialisation and the advancement of science necessitated ever-going activity whereas the foundation of life of a large number of people remained their religious faith…. …Tennyson, attempted to strike a balance between these two opposite poles of his time.

Ans to Q No 10: This poem is one of Tennyson's most controlled and perfectly wrought dramatic monologues… …with a dramatic abruptness, the poet takes his protagonist to the middle of the crisis

where he has to decide again about his future course of action… …using mythical allusions to the character of Ulysses, Tennyson contextualises the ceaseless zeal and hunger of his contemporary Victorians for more and more knowledge… …"Ulysses" is actually an outlet of the poet's feelings regarding the need to face life and continue one's march ahead… …the poem is written in blank verse and there is a pictorial quality in its language

Ans to Q 11: His critics dismissed his early poems… …from the 1840s, he gradually established himself as a major voice of the Victorian poetry… …he also became the Poet Laureate which testifies to his status as a poet during his lifetime… …W J Long comments: "For nearly half a century Tennyson was not only a man and a poet; he was a voice, the voice of a whole people, expressing in exquisite melody their doubts and their faith, their grief and triumphs.

Ans to Q 12: In the 20th century, critics have praised Tennyson highly taking cognizance of his contribution towards art and craft he had practised… …Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lauded him that "it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class."… …another poet T.S. Eliot speaks volumes about Tennyson's position as a master poet of the Victorian era.



12.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss "Ulysses' as a typical Victorian poem with particular emphasis on the dichotomy between science and tradition.

Q 2: Can you state that Tennyson's "Ulysses" is an expression of his personality or of an ideology? Give reasons in support of your argument.

Q 3: It will not be an exaggeration to say that in "Ulysses" Tennyson celebrates the energy and resolution of the Victorian age. Discuss.

Q 4: Critically appreciate "Ulysses" as a poem on the basis of its various thematic elements.

Q 5: Discuss Tennyson's "Ulysses" in the context of its underlying mythical structure.

Q 6: Comment on Tennyson's poetic style and technique as found in the poem Ulysses.

Q 7: In what ways, does a poem like "Ulysses" reflect on the Victorian compromise between scientific progress and religious faith? Discuss.

* * *

UNIT 13: ROBERT BROWNING: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE:

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Robert Browning: The Poet

13.3.1 His Life

13.3.2 His Poetic Works

13.4 Critical Reception of Browning as a Victorian Poet

13.5 Let us Sum up

13.6 Further Reading

13.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.8 Possible Questions

13.1 EARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- identify Robert Browning as a significant Victorian poet along with Tennyson
- discuss the life and works of Robert Browning
- assess how Browning had been received as a Victorian poet

13.2 INTRODUCTION

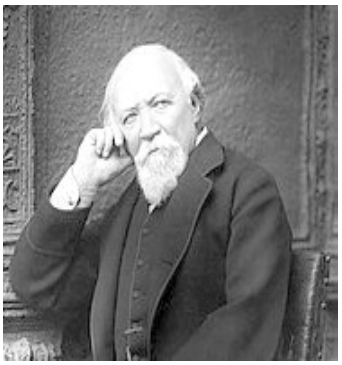
This unit deals with the life and works of Robert Browning who is considered one of the greatest Victorian poets. Popular for his poetry collection *Men and Women* (1855), Browning's poems show his interest in a wide range of themes and subjects. His philosophy of life and art is loosely interwoven in his extremely condensed and rugged expression, which often make his poetry difficult for the readers. However, his poetry is marked by his acute sense of lyric intensity and the subtle grasp of the human character. However, he is chiefly remembered for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and the range of his works. The dramatic monologues show his capacity to represent the meanderings of the individual mind through soliloquies. This unit shall help you to place Browning in the history of Victorian literature.

13.3 ROBERT BROWNING: THE POET

Robert Browning is considered one of the greatest poets of the Victorian England. His fame is spread as an erudite scholar and as one of the most prolific writers of his time. As a man of unchallengeable genius, he had tremendous hope and faith in the ability of man. His works are reflective of his philosophy of optimism, which marks the poet's worldview and aesthetics. In the following two sub sections, you will get to learn about the poet's life and his works.

13.3.1 His Life

Robert Browning was born on 7 May 1812 at the suburb of Camberwell, a district in South London, in a cultured middle class family. During his formative years of childhood, Browning received certain major influences from his parents. His father, who worked as a bank clerk, was highly interested in art. He was also an erudite reader and possessed a huge collection of rare books of varied interests. Both Browning and his father had a passion for tales of intrigues, crimes and violence, old and new, and they used to read a lot about them in the newspapers. This interest later influenced some of his famous poetic characters. Browning did not go to a formal school after the age of fourteen and it was his father's library that helped him develop himself with the required knowledge and intellect to get a seat in the University College of London. Before going to the University, he studied European history, the Classics and painting at home apart from books on various other disciplines. His mother had an important role in developing his taste in music, love for the natural world, and the deep sense of religiosity.



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Browning

While he was a teenager, he dreamt of writing poetry, plays and novels. By the age of twelve, Browning had written a book of

poetry. He later destroyed this collection when he found no publisher eager to publish it. By the age of 14, he had acquired a formidable knowledge of French, Greek, Italian and Latin. He developed a deep interest in Romantic poetry and P. B. Shelley had been one of his early inspirations to start his poetic ventures. Influenced by Shelley, he became an atheist and vegetarian, but could not stick to this resolution for a long time. When he was sixteen, he joined University College of London to study Greek, but did not continue his studies after the first year.

In the year of 1844, Elizabeth Barret, an emerging poet, six years his elder, published her poetry collection *Poems*. In one of the poems of this collection, Browning found an appraisal of him. This appraisal acted as a catalyst in the development of romance between the two poets. Browning eloped with Elizabeth Barrett in September 1846, and started their conjugal life in Italy. From the time of their marriage and until Elizabeth's death, they lived in Italy, residing a few months in Pisa, and then, within a year, shifting to Florence. Elizabeth Barrett was interested in writing poetry and with her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850); she acclaimed some fame for herself. After her death in 1861, Browning found it difficult to live in Italy. He left the city for good and came back to London to live with his son.

The death of his wife affected his creative mind; but he continued writing poetry until his death in 1889. In London, he spent the rest of his life, besides extensively travelling to France, Scotland, Italy and Switzerland. During this period, he wrote a number of dramatic poems, two series of Dramatic Idylls and a few poems like "Balaustion's Adventure" (1871) and "Aristophanes' Apology" (1875) primarily on classical subjects.

He died at his son's home in Venice on 12 December 1889. He was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, immediately next to the grave of Alfred Tennyson. In his lifetime, Browning received many honoured distinctions. He was made L.L.D. of Edinburgh as well as a life Governor of London University.

13.3.2 His Poetic Works

Robert Browning engaged his creative ventures as both a poet and a playwright. As a poet, he started his career at a very early age. His first book of verse *Incondita* was published in 1824. The influence of Lord Byron is clearly visible in this work. Besides *Incondita,* Byron's influence can also be traced in his other early works like the autobiographical poem *Pauline* (1833) and *Paracelsus* (1834). After Byron, it was the poems and aesthetics of Shelley that continued to rule Browning's poetic worlds for several years.

The publication of "Pippa Passes" in 1841 and *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, were two important events in his poetic career. These two works were part of his eight pamphlets published under the general title *Bells and Pomegranates.* The other pamphlets in this series include *King Victor and King Charles* (1842)*, The Return of the Druses* (1843)*, Colombe's Birthday* (1844)*, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845)*, Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846). Poems like "My Last Duchess", "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", and "Incident of the French Camp"; "Porphyria's Lover" in *Dramatic Lyrics* established his mastery over this newly developing technique of dramatic monologue. His *Sordello* (1840), based on the historical setting of the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in the 13th century Italy, had to receive severe criticism on account of the charges of obscurity of allusion and style. Arthur Symons has marked the poem as a 'psychological epic' where the chief focus lies on the developing of conflicts between art and society, egoism and sympathy, action and contemplation.

Browning was a great admirer of the then popular actor Edmund Kean, whose compelling influence encouraged the poet to try his hands with plays. He composed a few plays like *Colombe's Birthday*, *Strafford*, *A Blot in the Scutcheon* etc. It would be wrong to say that he was utterly unsuccessful as a playwright; in fact, most of these plays did a moderate business. However, Browning soon understood that playwriting was not the best option for him to cultivate his creative possibilities. His creative genius was much interested

in exploring the struggles, tensions and conflicts within the individual's mind; and he could not appropriate the form of a theatrical production to do justice to what he wanted to express. His gradual departure from the stage was followed by a few new experimentations with the form of poetic expression. It was his inclination towards the theatre that led him to juxtapose the dramatic with the lyric. These experimentations resulted in the development of a new mode of poetic expression, popularly known as the 'dramatic monologue', which has given Browning an identity of his own in the field of English literature.



LET US KNOW

Dramatic Monologue:

It is important for you to note that though the words in the phrase 'dramatic monologue' may refer to some forms of expression related to theatre, actually it is not so. 'Dramatic monologue' is a particular type of lyric poem. A monologue is a long speech by a single speaker or character through which an expression of the private thoughts is given. Perhaps you know that in plays, such monologues are called soliloquies. While discussing Browning's construction of dramatic monologues, M. H. Abrams observes that a dramatic monologue is basically characterised by three main features.

a. The entire poem is made up of the speech, made in a specific situation at a critical moment, by a person or a character who is not the poet.

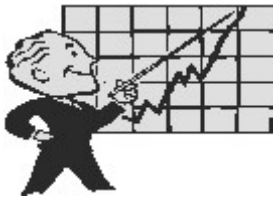
b. The speech of the speaker is made to one or more persons who converse with the speaker. The readers know about the presence of the author of the poem and other characters and their discussions only through the hints provided by the single speaker through his/her speech.

c. he motif behind the poet's formulation of the single speaker's speech is to reveal to the readers the temperament and

character of the speaker. Rather than thinking aloud, the speaker composes a self-defence, which the reader is challenged to see through.

Browning came to his eminence as a great master of dramatic monologue through the publication of *Men and Women* (1855). This collection showed Browning dealing with a wide range of themes and subjects with subtle and intense presentation of the individual's mind through soliloquies weaved in beautiful lyrics. This collection contained some of Browning's highly rated poems like "Love among the Ruins", "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", "A Toccata of Galuppi's". Besides these poems, the dramatic monologues like "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea Del Sarto" and "Bishop Blougram's Apology" are also published in this collection. It is to be noted that for his dramatic monologues, Browning chose some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally infamous characters, where the challenge for him was that of building a sympathetic case for a character that does not deserve one. This technique of poetic expression allowed the poet to raise serious questions over the intellectual and social atmosphere of the Victorian world without getting involved with them directly. The apparent dialogues in his monologues are reflective of the conflicts, tensions and contradictions of his age. Many of his poems were set against the backdrop of Italian Renaissance and depicted some of its major personalities. The context of Renaissance helped him to raise questions about his own times. This practice allowed the readers to posit themselves at a moral and historical position different from their times and look into the issues with the freedom to enter into the psychological realm of the characters. It also helped him to maintain an objective distance from the characters he created. Browning draws on different traditions, which includes the soliloquies of Shakespeare, the poetry of John Donne, and, later in the Victorian period, the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Such poets used language that is more colloquial, drew on the more discordant sounds of spoken language, and employed contrasting stylistic tones, which

are often shocking and unpredictable, but served to shock the readers with an awareness of a world of everyday realities.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why did Browning shift his interests from drama to dramatic lyrics?

Q 2: What do you think about the characteristics of a dramatic monologue, which make it 'dramatic'?

Q 3: What purpose do the dramatic monologues serve for Browning?

Q 4: In what way, did the contexts of the Renaissance help Browning to write his monologues?

Browning published his *Dramatis Personae* in the year of 1864. This volume included some of his most celebrated poems like "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Caliban upon Setebos", "A Death in the Desert", Mr. Sludge, "The Medium", "Prospice", "Abt Vogler", etc. "Caliban upon Setebos", which can be demanded as the most discussed poem in this collection, makes some important comments on the debates surrounding the relationship between God and man. Several critics have opined that Browning tries to satirise orthodox **Calvinism**, which holds man basically as corrupt, and God as the unquestionable and supreme power. Browning takes up man's attempt to construct God in his own image as the central theme of the poem. His other well-acclaimed poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is an imaginative exercise to express the ideal through the dramatic representation of a man. This poem repeatedly tries to assert the superiority and nobility of man. His *The Ring and the Book,* the poem of epic length in twelve books, was published in 1868-69 in four instalments. Based on an infamous triple murder that took place in Rome in the year of 1698, the poem takes up a long forgotten moment in Roman history and enlivens it through the portrayal of different characters. The poem marks Browning's ability to look at

the same incident through different distinct points of view, as we find his characters elaborating, emphasizing, and suppressing various elements of the same incident in accordance with their interests.

The achievement of Robert Browning lies in his breaking away from the post-Keatsian influence of handling sensory images and bringing back colloquial vigour to English poetry. He is renowned for his ability to build and explore complex character argumentatively that gave his verse robust individuality. Here, it has to be accepted that the personalities and attitudes that Browning projects in his dramatic monologues are not necessarily always accurate. Browning constructs the historical characters in order to present an area of his own thought and feeling, and as such, it does not make much difference for him in constructing the characters as imaginatively as he could. However, it does not mean that Browning never tried to realistically construct a historical moment; he is often seen at pains to capture the essence of a historical period in a particular character.

Throughout his poetic career, Browning appears before his readers in various avatars. Sometimes, he is a passionate singer of love, youth and the world of senses, sometimes a serious and curious investigator of human experiences and sometimes a valiant believer in the imperishable greatness of the soul of man. Moreover, he was one of the greatest humanists of his times. Out of all these avatars, Browning as a singer of love, youth and sensuousness is often seen as superior in his artistic and humanistic appeal. Browning's indulgence with his psychological power leads his poems into subtleties and complexities that strip them off from their poetic sensibility. The same is true when we find him dealing with religious and philosophical issues; in such cases he behaves like a theologian and a philosopher without any displaying of his poetic imagination. However, all his great poems show an acute juxtaposition of the poet in all his poetic characteristics as a singer, lover, thinker, fighter etc.

The poetic value of Browning's monologues lies in the violence and vividness with which the poet renders his characters and their personality. Browning tries to construct a confessional moment and crisis for the characters, which forces them to give vent to the truth of life and the world as they observe. It is often seen that, as in his collection *Men and Women,* Browning intertwines his personal experiences and intuitions with historical facts and moments. The dramatic mode was, for Browning, a way of qualifying his own emotional experiences and imaginative endeavours to poetic temperament. Browning's dramatic monologues enable him to explore extreme and usually extremely morbid states of mind. However, his use of different characters and a range of different voices does not allow the reader to identify the speaker with Browning the author. The dramatic monologues, which Browning developed after his experience of writing for the London theatre, act as a kind of mask. They anticipate the monologues of Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (for example, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*). The 'mask' allows the writer to explore the human soul without the soul-searching being too directly personal.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Name some of the important poetry collections of Robert Browning.

Q 6: Explain the causes of Browning's great poetic achievements.

Q 7: What usually contribute to the poetic value of Browning's monologues?

13.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BROWNING AS A VICTORIAN POET

Although Robert Browning's work consistently attracted critical attention, it was not always positive. The critical history of Browning's works initially shows a pattern of slow recognition followed by enormous popularity

and even adulation in the two decades prior to his death. His reputation subsequently declined, but gradually recovered with the appearance of important biographical and critical studies by William C. DeVane and other scholars in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Browning's early reviewers often complained about the obscurity, incomprehensibility, and awkward language of his works, an impression largely arising from Sordello. When Browning did achieve fame with *Dramatis Personae* and *The Ring and the Book*, the Victorian audience considered him a profound philosophical thinker and teacher who had chosen poetry as his medium of instruction. Critics often cite the influence of Browning's diction on the poetic language of modern poets like Ezra Pound, and the effect of his dramatic monologues on the pivotal works of T. S. Eliot. In addition to its considerable influence, the value of his works continue to be reassessed, with commentators focusing less on the philosophical aspects of his writings and more on his strengths as a genuinely original artist. Although his early poems were not successes, they are important for understanding his poetic aspirations and for the opportunity; they provide the reader to trace his developing philosophy and developing poetic techniques.

Browning's combination of dramatic and lyric expression gradually took the form of dramatic monologue. The scholars who have carried out extensive studies on Dramatic Monologue agree that Browning's place in English literature is based largely on his contribution to the poetic genre of the dramatic monologue, the form he adopted for a large number of his works. His diverse topics, striking use of language, and stylistic creativity, his accomplishments in this genre etc. constitute the basis of his reputation. Literary historians define the dramatic monologue as a poem in which the speaker's character is gradually disclosed in a dramatic situation through his or her own words. In "Fra Lippo Lippi," for example, the hypocritical nature of the narrator becomes increasingly apparent to the reader as the poem progresses. As the monk speaks, he reveals aspects of his personality of which even he is unaware; the voice of the poet is absent from the poem altogether. Whether Browning chose a historical or an imaginary figure, a reliable or an unreliable narrator, Browning evolved the techniques of

exposing a character's personality to an unprecedented degree of subtlety and psychological depth. As a few previous poets had done, he explored the makeup of the mind, scrutinizing the interior lives of his characters. His protagonists vary from sophisticated theologians and artists to simple peasant children, spanning a range of personalities from the pure and innocent to the borderline psychotic. A considerable number of Browning's men and women, however, exemplify his overriding interest in thwarted or twisted personalities whose lives are scarred by jealousy, lust, or avarice.

In addition to its psychological depth, critics agree that one of the main strengths of Browning's work is its sheer abundance and variety in terms of subject matter, time, place, and character. His difficult subjects demand serious intellectual efforts from the reader, and they reflect the enormous breadth of his interests in science, history, art, and music. His primary source of inspiration was Renaissance Italy; its unsurpassed artistic accomplishments and rich religious and political history provided him with many of his themes and characters. Nevertheless, his settings range from the Middle Ages to his own era, reflecting a diverse assortment of cultures.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: How is Browning different from the previous English poets?

Q 9: Which are the main strengths of Robert Browning as a poet?



13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have read about the Victorian poet Robert Browning who is chiefly remembered for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and for the remarkable diversity and range of his works. By vividly portraying a central character against a social background, his poems probe complex human motives in a variety of historical periods. As a highly individual force in the history of English poetry, Browning made significant innovations in language and versification and had a profound influence on numerous 20th century poets, including such key figures as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.



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www.wikipaedia.org

http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/lippi/text.html



13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Browning understood that playwriting could not cultivate his creative possibilities… …he was much interested in exploring the struggles, tensions and conflicts within the individual's mind… …his gradual departure from the stage was followed by a few new experimentations with the form of poetic expression… …it was his inclination towards the theatre that led him to juxtapose the dramatic with the lyric.

Ans to Q 2: Similarity with soliloquy… …single character and assumed audience… …narrative in the form of speech… ... self expression of character… …apparent dialogue.

Ans to Q 3: Through his monologues, Browning chose some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally infamous characters… …his tried to build a sympathetic case for a character that does not deserve one… …this technique helped him to raise serious questions over the intellectual and social atmosphere of the Victorian world without getting involved with them directly… …the dialogues in his monologues are reflective of the conflicts, tensions and contradictions of his age.

Ans to Q 4: The context of Renaissance helped him to raise questions about his own times. This practice allowed the readers to posit themselves at a moral and historical position different from their times and look into the issues with the freedom to enter into the psychological realm of the characters. It also helped him to maintain an objective distance from the characters he created.

Ans to Q 5: *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) that includes poems like "My Last Duchess", "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", "Incident of the French Camp"; "Porphyria's Lover"… …*Men and Women* (1855) that includes poems like "Love among the Ruins", "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came", "A Toccata of Galuppi's", "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea Del Sarto" etc.… …*Dramatis Personae* in the year of 1864 which includes poems like poems like "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Caliban upon Setebos", "A Death in the Desert", "Mr. Sludge", Prospice", "Abt Vogler", "The Medium", "Caliban upon Setebos" etc.… … *The Ring and the Book* in 1868-69 that includes poems like

Ans to Q 6: Browning broke away from the post-Keatsian influence of handling sensory images and brought back colloquial vigour to English poetry… …his ability to build and explore complex characters argumentatively gave his verse robust individuality… …he constructed historical characters in order to present an area of his own thought and feeling.

Ans to Q 7: The poetic value of Browning's monologues lies in the violence and vividness with which the poet renders his characters and their personality. Browning tries to construct a confessional moment and crisis for the characters, which forces them to give vent to the truth of life and the world as they observe.

Ans to Q 8: Browning explored the makeup of the mind, scrutinizing the interior lives of his characters… …his protagonists vary from sophisticated theologians and artists to simple peasant children, spanning a range of personalities from the pure and innocent to the borderline psychotic… …Browning's men and women, exemplify his overriding interest in thwarted or twisted personalities whose lives are scarred by jealousy, lust, or avarice.

Ans to Q 9: Besides the psychological depths, critics agree that one of the main strengths of Browning's work is its sheer abundance and variety in terms of subject matter, time, place, and character… …his difficult subjects demand serious intellectual efforts from the reader and they reflect the enormous breadth of his interests in science, history, art, and music… … his unsurpassed artistic accomplishments and rich religious and political history provided him with many of his themes and characters… …his settings range from the Middle Ages to his own era, reflecting a diverse assortment of cultures.



13.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How could dramatic monologue be a useful tool for Browning in depicting the different tensions within a character and within its historical period?

Q 2: Describe the importance of Robert Browning as a poet in the context of Victorian poetry.

Q 3: Discuss the main causes behind the great poetic achievements of Browning as a Victorian poet.

Q 4: Provide a critical appreciation of Robert Browning as a poet of the Victorian era with special reference to his unique characteristics as a poet.

Q 5: Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the form of the dramatic monologue. What kinds of subject matter does dramatic monologue best address in Browning's poetry?

Q 6: Why does Browning so often choose painters as the speakers for his monologues? Discuss with reference to his Fra Lippo Lippi.

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UNIT 14: ROBERT BROWNING: "FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Reading the Poems

- 14.3.1 The Texts of the Poems
- 14.3.2 Major Themes
- 14.3.3 Browning's Poetic Style

14.4 Let us Sum up

14.5 Further Reading

14.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.7 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" and explore the various themes and ideas working in it
- explore the various themes and ideas in the poem and open up newer avenues for looking at the poem.
- discuss the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" in its nuanced totality

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit brings to you a reading of Robert Browning's famous poem "Fra Lippo Lippi". Based on the life of a 15th century Italian painter and a Carmelite friar named Fra Filippo di Tommaso Lippi, the poem raises various questions on the role of art and artist in the aesthetic and spiritual life of an individual as well as the society. The poem is a dramatic monologue where the poet tries to demarcate the differences in attitude and philosophy of the Medieval and Renaissance artists on art. This poem is a good example of Browning as a humourist in English poetry. This intellectually alluring poem, with references to a number of saints and many other contemporary

painters, makes a unique combination of caustic irony and cutting laughter with the sober discussions on the nature and role of art in the individual and social lives of Renaissance. As you read through this unit, you will understand how under the layer of the ludic (playful), Browning beautifully presents a discussion of some of the most serious debates on the idea of art in this poem.

14.3 READING THE POEM

In the following sections, we will find ourselves discussing, in some details, the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

14.3.1 The Texts of the Poems [Taken from http://www.victorianweb.org]

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.
Zooks, what’s to blame? you think you see a monk!
What, ’tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
And here you catch me at an alley’s end
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?
The Carmine’s my cloister: hunt it up,
Do — harry out, if you must show your zeal,
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
, , that’s crept to keep him company!
Aha, you know your betters! Then, you’ll take
Your hand away that’s fiddling on my throat,
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?
Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend
Three streets off — he’s a certain . . . how d’ye call?
Master — a . . . Cosimo of the Medici,
I’ the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!
Remember and tell me, the day you’re hanged,
How you affected such a gullet’s-gripe!
But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves
Pick up a manner nor discredit you:
Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets
And count fair prize what comes into their net?
He’s Judas to a tittle, that man is!
Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.
Lord, I’m not angry! Bid your hangdogs go
Drink out this quarter-florin to the health
Of the munificent House that harbors me
(And many more beside, lads! more beside!)
And all’s come square again. I’d like his face —
His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
With the pike and lantern — for the slave that holds
John Baptist’s head a-dangle by the hair
With one hand (“Look you, now,” as who should say)
And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!
It’s not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
Yes, I’m the painter, since you style me so.
What, brother Lippo’s doings, up and down,

You know them and they take you? like enough!
I saw the proper twinkle in your eye —
‘Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.
Let’s sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.
Here’s spring come, and the nights one makes up bands
To roam the town and sing out carnival,
And I’ve been three weeks shut within my mew,
A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
And saints again. I could not paint all night —
Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whifts of song —
Flower o’ the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
Flower o’ the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good is life since?
Flower o’ the thyme> — and so on. Round they went.
Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter
Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight— three slim shapes,
And a face that looked up . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood,
That’s all I’m made of! Into shreds it went,
Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
All the bed-furniture — a dozen knots,
There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,
And after them. I came up with the fun
Flower o’ the rose,
If I’ve been merry, what matter who knows ?
Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met —
And so as I was stealing back again
To get to bed and have a bit of sleep
Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work
On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast
With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,
You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head —
Mine’s shaved— a monk, you say — the sting’s in that!
If Master Cosimo announced himself,
Mum’s the word naturally; but a monk!
Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!
I was a baby when my mother died
And father died and left me in the street.
I starved there. God knows how, a year or two
On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
My stomach being empty as your hat,
The wind doubled me up and down I went.
Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
And so along the wall, over the bridge,
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
While I stood munching my first bread that month:
“So, boy, you’re minded,” quoth the good fat father
Wiping his own mouth, ‘t was refection-time —
“T quit this very miserable world?
Will you renounce” . . . “the mouthful of bread?” thoughtI;
By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
Have given their hearts to — all at eight years old.
Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
‘T was not for nothing — the good bellyful,
The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
And day-long blessed idleness beside!
“Let’s see what the urchin’s fit for” — that came next,
Not overmuch their way, I must confess.
Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:

Lord, they’d have taught me Latin in pure waste!
Flower o’ the clove,
All the Latin I construe is, “amo” I love!
But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
Eight years together, as my fortune was,
Watching folk’s faces to know who will fling
The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
And who will curse or kick him for his pains,
Which gentleman processional and fine,
Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
The droppings of the wax to sell again,
Or holla for the Eight and have him whippe
How say I? — nay, which dog bites?, which lets drop
His bone from the heap of offal in the street —
Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
He learns the look of things, and none the less
For admonition from the hunger-pinch.
I had a store of such remarks, be sure,
Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.
I drew men’s faces on my copy-books,
Scrawled them within the antiphonary’s marge,
Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
Found eyes and nose and chin for A’s and B’s,
And made a string of pictures of the world
Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks looked black.
“Nay,” quoth the Prior, “turn him out, d’ ye say?
In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.
What if at last we get our man of parts,
We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese
And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
And put the front on it that ought to be!”
And hereupon he bade me daub away.
Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,
Never was such prompt disemburdening.
First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
I drew them, fat and lean : then, folk at church,
From good old gossips waiting to confess
Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends —
To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
With the little children round him in a row
Of admiration, half for his beard and half
For that white anger of his victim’s son
Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
Signing himself with the other because of Christ
(Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
After the passion of a thousand years)
Till some poor girl, her apron o’er her head,
(Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve
On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,
Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers
(The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone,
I painted all, then cried “‘T is ask and have;
Choose, for more’s ready!” — laid the ladder flat,
And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
Being simple bodies — “That’s the very man!
Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
That woman’s like the Prior’s niece who comes
To care about his asthma: it’s the life!”
But there my triumph’s straw-fire flared and funked;
Their betters took their turn to see and say:
The Prior and the learned pulled a face
And stopped all that in no time. “How? what’s here?
Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!

Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! it’s devil’s-game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men —
Man’s soul, and it’s a fire, smoke . . . no, it’s not . . .
It’s vapor done up like a new-born babe —
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
It’s . . . well, what matters talking, it’s the soul!
Give us no more of body than shows soul!
Here’s Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,
That sets us praising — why not stop with him?
Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
With wonder at lines, colors, and what not?
Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
Rub all out, try at it a second time.
Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She’s just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say —
Who went and danced and got men’s heads cut off!
Have it all out! “Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can’t stop there, must go further
And can’t fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
When what you put for yellow’s simply black,
And any sort of meaning looks intense
When all beside itself means and looks naught.
Why can’t a painter lift each foot in turn,
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,
The Prior’s niece . . . patron-saint — is it so pretty
You can’t discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? won’t beauty go with these?
Suppose I’ve made her eyes all right and blue,
Can’t I take breath and try to add life’s flash,
And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?
Or say there’s beauty with no soul at all —
(I never saw it — put the case the same —)
If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents:
That’s somewhat: and you’ll find the soul you have missed,
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
“Rub all out! “Well, well, there’s my life, in short,
And so the thing has gone on ever since.
I’m grown a man no doubt, I’ve broken bounds:
You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
I’m my own master, paint now as I please —
Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!
Lord, it’s fast holding by the rings in front —
Those great rings serve more purposes than just
To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse!
And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
Are peeping o’er my shoulder as I work,
The heads shake still — “It’s art’s decline, my son!
You’re not of the true painters, great and old;
Brother Angelico’s the man, you’ll find;
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
Fag on at flesh, you’ll never make the third!”
Flower o’ the pine,
You keep your mistr ... manners, and I’ll stick to mine !
I’m not the third, then: bless us, they must know!
Don’t you think they’re the likeliest to know,
They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,
Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
To please them — sometimes do and sometimes don’t;

For, doing most, there’s pretty sure to come
A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints —
A laugh, a cry, the business of the world —
Flower o’ the peach,
Death for us all, and his own life for each!
And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
The world and life’s too big to pass for a dream,
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
And play the fooleries you catch me at,
In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass
After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
Although the miller does not preach to him
The only good of grass is to make chaff.
What would men have? Do they like grass or no —
May they or may n’t they? all I want’s the thing
Settled forever one way. As it is,
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don’t like what you only like too much,
You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man’s wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can’t unlearn ten minutes afterwards,
You understand me: I’m a beast, I know.
But see, now — why, I see as certainly
As that the morning-star’s about to shine,
What will hap some day. We’ve a youngster here
Comes to our convent, studies what I do,
Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
His name is Guidi — he’ll not mind the monks —
They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk —
He picks my practice up — he’ll paint apace,
I hope so — though I never live so long,
I know what’s sure to follow. You be judge!
You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
However, you’re my man, you’ve seen the world
— The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, — and God made it all!
— For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town’s face, yonder river’s line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to? What’s it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course! — you say.
But why not do as well as say — paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God’s works — paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don’t object, “His works
Are here already; nature is complete:
Suppose you reproduce her (which you can’t)
There’s no advantage! you must beat her, then.”
For, don’t you mark? we’re made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted — better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
Your cullion’s hanging face? A bit of chalk,
And trust me but you should, though! How much more,
If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior’s pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,
It makes me mad to see what men shall do

And we in our graves! This world’s no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
“Ay, but you don’t so instigate to prayer!”
Strikes in the Prior: “when your meaning’s plain
It does not say to folk — remember matins,
Or, mind you fast next Friday! “Why, for this
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what’s best,
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.
I painted a Saint Laurence six months since
At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
“How looks my painting, now the scaffold’s down?”
I ask a brother: “Hugely,” he returns —
“Already not one phiz of your three slaves
Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
But’s scratched and prodded to our heart’s content,
The pious people have so eased their own
With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
Expect another job this time next year,
For pity and religion grow i’ the crowd —
Your painting serves its purpose! Hang the fools!
— That is — you’ll not mistake an idle word
Spoke in a huff by a poor monk. God wot,
Tasting the air this spicy night which turns
The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!
Oh, the church knows! don’t misreport me, now!
It’s natural a poor monk out of bounds
Should have his apt word to excuse himself:
And hearken how I plot to make amends.
I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece
. . . There’s for you! Give me six months, then go, see
Something in Sant’ Ambrogio’s! Bless the nuns!
They want a cast o’ my office. I shall paint
God in the midst. Madonna and her babe,
Ringed by a bowery flowery angel-brood,
Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet
As puff on puff of grated orris-root
When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.
And then i’ the front, of course a saint or two —
Saint John, because he saves the Florentines,
Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white
The convent’s friends and gives them a long day,
And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
The man of Uz (and Us without the z,
Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
Secured at their devotion, up shall come
Out of a corner when you least expect,
As one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but Lippo! I! —
Mazed, motionless and moonstruck — I’m the man!
Back I shrink — what is this I see and hear?
I, caught up with my monk’s-things by mistake,
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
I, in this presence, this pure company!
Where’s a hole, where’s a corner for escape?
Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
Forward, puts out a soft palm — “Not so fast!”
— Addresses the celestial presence, “nay —
He made you and devised you, after all,
Though he’s none of you! Could Saint John there draw—
His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?
We come to brother Lippo for all that,
“*Iste perfecit opus*.” So, all smile —
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
Under the cover of a hundred wings
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you’re gay

And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go
The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.
And so all's saved for me, and for the church
A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!
The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,
Don't fear me! There's the gray beginning. Zooks!

5.4.2 Reading the Poem

Before you start reading the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi", it is important for you to have some idea about the context of the poem. This poem is based on the life of Fra Filipo di Tommaso Lippi (1406-69), an eminent painter of the 15th century Italy, who had a major influence in the moulding of intellectual and aesthetic environment in the early Renaissance Italy. Fra Lippo Lippi was one of the early painters to break away from the conventional forms of ecclesiastical painting practiced by the masters like Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico. You should note that the Italian Renaissance is a period of great cultural change and achievement that began in Italy around the end of the 13th century and lasted until the 16th century. It was the earliest manifestation of the general European Renaissance that marked a transition between Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Although the origins of the movement is confined largely to the literate culture of intellectual endeavour and patronage in the earlier part of the 14th century, many aspects of Italian culture and society remained largely Medieval at that time.

In "Fra Lippo Lippi", Browning uses the historical figure in order to compare the writers and artists of his time with the artist of the 15th century. "Fra Lippo Lippi" is one of the many poems where Browning seeks to examine the condition of contemporary poetry and art. The poem starts with Lippi addressing the civil guards who have arrested the painter-monk in a drunken state in the dead of night on his way home after visiting one of his mistresses. The poem constitutes of Lippi's monologue. Lippi, while justifying his unsaintly behaviour, bursts out his discontentment against the prevalent conventions of arts and aesthetics and pours forth a spirited

explanation of his views. The guards, who have found the monk loitering in his neighbourhood ‘at an alley’s end/Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar’, are necessarily surprised at this unexpected disposition of a friar. Lippi introduces himself as the artist who is patronized by Cosimo de Medici, an influential political leader of Florence and a great patron of art in his time. As the guards recognise the artist, their attitude gradually changes and Lippi comes to ease and starts his conversation with the guards. However, by the very nature of a dramatic monologue, what you will get of the conversation is only the dialogues of Lippi. It is only from Lippi’s dialogues that you will gather your ideas of the speeches made by the other characters.

Lippi asserts that, despite his social identity as a monk, he prefers to indulge in the life of sensuality: “…flesh and blood, That’s all I’m made of!” He does not want to deprive his body of the pleasures it demands; so when he saw some people enjoying themselves in the carnival night, he stole himself from his work and participated in the merrymaking when the guards caught sight of him. Now Lippi opens up the story of his life–how he has become a monk not by his choice but by circumstances. Lippi lost his parents when he was a baby; he somehow survived on the streets for one or two years when somebody took him to the monastery. For the starving boy, the food and shelter that the church offered was the only source of life. Therefore, for the sake of his daily bread, he renounced the life of sensuality at the age of eight years.

> “So, boy, you’re minded,” quoth the good fat father
> Wiping his own mouth, ‘t was refection-time —
> “To quit this very miserable world?
> Will you renounce” . . . “the mouthful of bread?” thought I;
> By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
> I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
> Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
> Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici

Have given their hearts to — all at eight years old."

(Lines 93-101)

Lippi so emphatically tries to justify his transgressive sexuality:

"You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear never to kiss the girls"

(**Lines** 224-225)

At the monastery, the friars tried to teach him Latin, but it proved to be a useless project. He found no interest in the learning of Latin and the comprehending the abstract ideas that literature in Latin referred to. His life as a street urchin has sharpened his senses and his knowledge of life; as such, the physical world around him seemed more appealing for him. The faces of people on the streets, the animals, the shapes and colour of things have taught him to find meanings in the earthly objects and to think beyond what is visible.

Lippi gradually turns his discussions on to his experiences and reflections over his practice of painting. From his childhood, he developed the skills of drawing figures familiar to him and later started drawing the figures of people around him. The poem thematically centres round the discussion of art that Lippi starts here. The figures that he painted impress the people in his community. Everyone is pleasingly amazed at his talent; and this show of talent gains him a higher place at the monastery. However, his tendency to depict reality as it visibly is comes into conflict with the stated religious goals of the Church. The subjects of Lippi's paintings were drawn from the life he had seen and experienced. The friars fear that their parishioners may be distracted by witnessing people they know depicted within the painting. Therefore, the Prior reminds Lippi:

"Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,

Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men." (**Lines** 175-183)

The conflict between Lippi and the Prior echoes a few primary debates about the nature and purpose of art: is the primary purpose art—and, here, Lippi's art—to instruct, or to delight. If it is to instruct, is it better to provide men with ordinary scenes to which they can relate, or to offer them celestial visions to which they can aspire? Lippi vigorously rejects what the Prior claims to be the desired nature of art. While the friars plead him to renounce sensuality in his arts, he indulges himself deeply in depicting sensuous bodies in his paintings. Lippi portrays Prior's niece, who is actually Lippi's mistress, as the seductive Salome. In fact, as Lippi tries to assert, the objections from the Church authorities come not from any real religious concern, but from a concern for their own reputation. Lippi has appeared too close to the truthful depiction of the actual characters of persons around him.

Browning, through this debate between the Prior and Lippi, tries to reinforce the irony implicated in the gap between appearance and reality. The recurrent reference to the niece of the Prior serves Browning as a key structural element on this purpose. The niece first appears in the poem when the monks, marvelling over Lippi's ability to draw lifelike figures, notice a figure like her, "That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes/To care about his asthma: the life!" (170-171) The Prior vigorously rejects his paintings and advises him to concentrate on the soul of men:

"Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
Rub all out, try at it a second time.
Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say —
Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!
Have it all out! "Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further." (**Lines** 193-198)

The diction and punctuation of this passage shows some

amount of change of tone, as dramatised by Lippi, descriptive of the Prior's reaction to the discovery of his niece in the painting. He is annoyed at seeing his niece in such a sensuous disposition in the painting, whereas Lippi maintains that the beautiful creations of God, like the niece, should be given due respect in artistic creations, which will further open the doors for understanding the grandeur of soul. "If you get simple beauty and not else, / You get about the best thing that God invents:" (217-218)



LET US KNOW

The dramatic monologue that you are reading here tries to reconstruct the ethos of the Renaissance through the worldviews of a painter. Inspired by Vasari's *Lives*, Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi comes out as a complete embodiment of the Renaissance spirit. He is a bohemian artist who takes pleasure in depicting the sensuous and beautiful objects around him in his painting – an act that he perceives as the interpretations of the works of God for men. Contrasting sharply with the medieval outlook towards art, he holds that the portrayal of human forms and bodies is a superior path leading to God than the mere portrayal of the soul.

Every appearance of the Prior's niece heightens the implicit irony of the gap between appearance and reality to a newer level. The significance of the niece in the poem is not fully revealed until, in his final mention of her, Lippi hints at an illicit relationship where she is involved:

> "The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
> To some safe bench behind, not letting go
> The palm of her, the little lily thing
> That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
> Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say
> And so all's saved for me, and for the church
> A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!"

(**Lines** 383-387)

This is an outrageous passage, which is one of the most Chaucerian things that Browning ever wrote. The prior’s niece is representative of both sensual and earthily beauty which is intricately combined with illicit love. She exposes the blindness of the Prior in who fails to appreciate the place of beauty in art. Her portrayal by Lippo ridicules the Prior and the monastic order by hinting at their hypocrisy and pretensions in life.

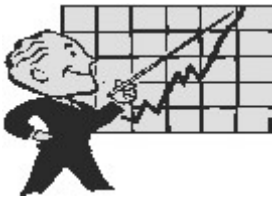
Browning’s Lippi comes out as a confusing, ambiguous and deceptive character. He is a heretic who blasphemes and visits brothels and a devout and serious artist who believes that all good art has a religious purpose. He believes that a painter should paint “God’s works”, and to overlook even the minutest truth of nature is a “crime” (295). Departing radically from many of his contemporary artists and teachers, Lippi refuses to follow the monastic ideal of painting. He does not think of ignoring the body, or what others think the “perishable clay”, in order to get to the souls of his subjects (180). Radically enough, Lippi believes that a painter can best represent the soul by concentrating on the body in its utmost detail: “the value and significance of flesh I can’t unlearn”.

Lippi has no aspirations beyond simple mimesis of the world as he understands, while the Prior has no respect for the importance of the ordinary objects of life. Lippi believes that meaning is always private and it can be derived only from the mundane. With this argument, he can easily disarm the worldly-wise guards like the Prior by rationalizing away moral scruples and averting a sexual dilemma. With sexually suggestive archetypes and rhetorical ploys, Lippi manipulates the unreconciled sensual and ethical concerns. While he “interprets God” (311), he creates Him in his own image, blurring distinctions between conscience and convenience. Radically enough, he reads Scriptural lessons to fit sexual inferences: The monk parodies the Prior’s ridiculous hypocrisy in the very language of his opponent’s windy and dogmatic manner:

“You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don’t like what you only like too much,

You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man’s wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can’t unlearn ten minutes afterwards.” (Lines 261-269)

This sharp satire immediately followed by the deeply felt solemn pronouncement “I always see the garden and God there / A-making man’s wife.” is the kind of truth that is perfectly accessible to and apprehended by the monk. His vision of God creating Eve rises instinctively, and releases that incorruptible and childlike impulse to glorify God and His creation. Lippi is presented as one of the most genuinely religious sensualists who ever found a place in English literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State the context in which Browning has set his poem “Fra Lippo Lippi.”

Q 2: What is the contradiction Lippi is facing because of his identity?

Q 3: In what ways, does Lippi’s primary skill face with challenges after his becoming a monk?

Q 4: How does Browning expose and criticise the pseudo-sainthood of the Prior?

Q 5: What impact of Renaissance Humanism do you find on the character of Lippo?

Q 6: Write briefly about the distinguishing features between Medieval and Renaissance art.

14.3.2 Major Themes

Although the poem revolves around the single most dominant theme of an individual’s reaction against certain set conventions of

the society, we may also think of the following points as major themes in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Renaissance Arts and Paintings:

“Fra Lippo Lippi” is one of the poems that display Browning’s abiding interest in the Renaissance civilization. The speaker Filippo Lippi is a Florentine painter and monk. He is on the pavement outside the Medici-Riccardi palace. He is paining an altarpiece for Cosimo Medici and by referring to the characters of the Carmine and San Lorenzo, the poem shows its background of the Renaissance Italy. Most of the material for the poem comes from the account of Filippo Lippi in Giorgio Vasari’s book *Live of the Painters*.

With the story of a painter’s life, the poet tries to express his own philosophy of art and aesthetics. The poem chiefly demarcates the conflict between Medieval and Renaissance viewpoints on arts and the role of the artist. The early days of Renaissance art saw a gradual shift from the ecclesiastical order to a secular worldview. The first art of Renaissance retained a great deal of faith and superstition, the philosophy, theology of the middle ages. The Medieval painting gave themselves chiefly to the representation of the soul upon the face, and the inspired human body under the influence of religious passion. At this time, painting dedicated its works to the representation of the heavenly life, either on earth in the stories of the gospels and in the lives of the saints, or in the circles of heaven. The expression of secular passion on the face, figures encaged in their social life and war and trade, were never regarded as worthy of representation. Gradually, in harmony with the changes in social and literary life, the art of Renaissance took a turn from the representation of the soul to the representation of the body, with all its beauty and vigour, engaged in its natural movements. This type of painting shows an acute blending of the reality and symbolism. The poem thus tries to reconstruct a particular historical ethos prevalent in the socio-cultural life of Renaissance Italy.

Art and Morality:

The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" raises several important questions regarding the role of art in society and its connection with morality. As you look at the history of literature and art, you will find that the question of morality in connection with artistic representations has always been a site for never ending debates among thinkers. You will find reference to these debates in classical Greek texts like Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. Through Lippi's life and paintings, Browning tries to raise the same question again. Fra Lippo Lippi's life as a painter and his painting would violate all the established norms of the relationship between art and morality. Making a sharp contrast to the medieval attitude of looking at art as a means to the realisation of God, Lippi paintings aim at gratifying the beauty of the mundane and phenomenal world with all its sensuousness. Instead of drawing 'inspired' faces, the characters in his paintings show secular expressions caught in their social lives. Instead of aiming at religious preaching and reflecting the soul, his paintings try to focus on gratifying the beauty of the naked human bodies. Browning shows Fra Lippo as a realist who deviated from the religious idealism of the earlier painters. The Church authorities criticized his paintings because they did not express religious feelings.

The Question of Realism:

Browning, through the characterisation of Lippi, tries to give vent to the concern for Realism. Throughout the poem, Browning is constantly making the monk, almost poignantly, attempting to represent the everyday and mundane phenomena expressed in: "A laugh, a cry, the business of the world," "this fair town's face.../The mountain round it and the sky above". This tendency has indissolubly linked Victorian poetry with that conception of the world, which was called Realism in the Middle Ages. In this sense, Lippi is instinctively and essentially a "realist." He looks for a "meaning" behind the "world" ("To find its meaning is my meat and drink"). By defining everything as the creations of God ("God made it all!"), Lippi tries to attribute

the highest value to the objects he perceives around him. Lippo defends his realism by declaring that one way of worshipping God is to take pleasure in the visible world, which God has created. Whereas, Lippo is orthodox in his theology, the austere Prior, with his pretensions to sainthood, stands convicted of a radical perversion of the realist philosophy. In order to discharge their pious ‘rage’ the Prior and his disciples have ‘scratched and prodded’ Lippi’s painting of the human forms. Their holy concepts have hardened into mere externalisms and they fail to find out the hidden meanings of the world. Because their ‘simplistic’ theology is rooted in a defective formalism, it is not, ironically, the ascetic Prior or his followers but the high-spirited ‘realist,’ Lippi, who is able to discover the religious meanings.

Human Nature and Significance of the Flesh:

The transitional phase between Medieval and Renaissance painting, or in other words, the beginning of Renaissance influenced Browning. This attitude is characteristic of Browning’s worldview and perception to life; his keenest sympathies always lie with the young rather than the old. “Fra Lippo Lippi” is representative of this attitude adopted by the poet. With the coming of the Renaissance, ‘the value and significance of flesh’ received greater appreciation and the depiction of human form was held no longer an impediment to spiritual progress. Through this poem, Browning expresses his sympathy with humanism and realism of Renaissance art, its protest against the asceticism of the Middle Ages, its conviction that ‘the world is too big to pass for a dream’. Through artistic recreation of the world of nature, Fra Lippo Lippi tries to pave a way to God. He is delighted to express the sensuous beauty of the world of which God is a part, the creator. This is in direct contrast to the medieval ascetic viewpoint, which holds that the artist should never try to recreate nature. To recreate nature is like trying to compete with God. However, Lippi holds that recreating is a means of interpretation; he believes that his task as a painter is to interpret the works of God for

men: "This world is no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat and drink."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

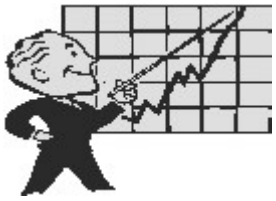
Q 7: How does Lippi's painting mark a transition from Medieval to Renaissance painting?

Q 8: Can we consider Lippi to be a realist?

14.3.3 Borrowing's Poetic Style

Browning was never considered a great poet by his contemporaries because his subjects were often obscure and lay beyond the tastes and cognitions of the great bulk of his contemporary readers. His extremely condensed and rugged expression maintains subtle links between the ideas and the manner through which he expresses them in his poetry. His treatment of the themes is often difficult and obscure though the keynote of his teaching is a wise and noble optimism. Browning is one of the greatest humourists of English poetry. His peculiar style of humour gives him a unique space in English literature. His humour covers a wide range of subjects starting from plain and pure fun to laughter from extremely sarcastic and critical expressions. In "Fra Lippo Lippi", composed in blank verse, we find the simplest humour and pure laughter occasionally infused with biting wit and stinging irony. However, the very nature of the character of Lippo Lippi, as a bohemian sensualist caught, compressed but not contained in the life of a monk, has conditioned such a restless and irrepressibly comic composition of the poem. Though the story of Fra Lippo Lippi has been taken from Vasari's *Lives*, Browning's portrayal of the painter can claim complete originality. What the historical fact has served Browning is to act merely as materials for his artistic creations. Browning, with the help of his jovial tone accompanied by its heart humour and high spirits and the breathless speed of the verse has rendered the painter to the life.

The style used by Browning in this poem is that of a dramatic monologue that Browning is famous for. You are already told that this style involves a speaker and an implied auditor, and the speaker subtly conveys meaning as well as directly revealing meaning. This poem, like many of his monologues, show an intricate mingling of the colloquial and the unusual that results in an effect of grotesqueness that adds life and a kind of humour to his characters. The cadences that he employs in the poem may not be as colloquial as they seem, but the artificial and archaic nature of the expressions distanced his character (Lippo Lippi) from Browning’s own time. This distancing gives an effect of an age and of individuality suggesting that this particular accent authentically belongs to the man at a particular moment of history in this place. Browning’s use of double rhymes, used almost in a comic way, helped him to avail such effect.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Comment very briefly on the poetic style of Browning from the reading of the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.



14.4 LET US SUM UP

As you have finished reading the unit, you must have developed a fair idea of the poetic world of Robert Browning and his poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”. You have learnt that Browning, because of his condensed expression, mastery over wit and humour, and the ability to create sharp irony, is regarded as one of the greatest Victorian poets. The poem “Fra Lippo Lippi” provides a beautiful example of the poet’s mastery over engaging in deep philosophical debates through plain and humorous expression. The poem is a dramatic monologue where the poet dramatises the tension between Medieval asceticism and Renaissance aesthetics on the idea of art. Through the portrayal of Fra Lippo Lippi as a bohemian, unsaintly, sensuous monk,

the poet creates cutting laughter in his attempt to expose and critique the hypocrisy, prejudices and pretensions of the medieval clergy. The poet celebrates Renaissance humanism and Renaissance art where, with stark contrast to the medieval attitude, importance is given on the portrayal of the body in all its beauty.



14.5 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

www.wikipaedia.org

http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/lippi/text.html



14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: This poem is based on the life of Fra Filipo di Tommaso Lippi (1406-69), an eminent painter of the 15th century Italy, who had a major influence in the moulding of intellectual and aesthetic environment in the early Renaissance Italy… …Lippi showed the courage to break away from the conventional forms of ecclesiastical painting practised by the masters like Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico.

Ans to Q 2: Lippi's contradiction was that despite his social identity as a

monk, he prefers to indulge in the life of sensuality: "…flesh and blood, That's all I'm made of!" He did not want to deprive his body of the pleasures it demands. So when he saw some people enjoying themselves in the carnival night, he stole himself from his work and participated in the merrymaking when the guards caught sight of him.

Ans to Q 3: From his childhood, he developed the skills of drawing human figures… …Lippi's show of this talent gains him a higher place at the monastery… …but his tendency to depict reality as it visibly is comes into conflict with the stated religious goals of the Church… …the friars feared that their parishioners may be distracted by witnessing the people they know depicted within the painting.

Ans to Q 4: Lippi's paintings of human figures… …the Prior's reactions… …portrayal of the Prior's niece in all her sensuality… …hint at a possible adultery… …the Prior's reaction at the discovery of his niece on the painting… …exposes the hypocrisy of the Prior.

Ans to Q 5: Lippi's emphasis on the body rather than on the soul… …critique of medieval scholasticism… …ridiculing the Prior, his niece and the life of a monk… …depicting people and experience from his day to day life.

Ans to Q 6: Medieval asceticism vs. Renaissance humanism… …the soul vs. the body… …question of beauty, nature… …role of art and aesthetics.

Ans to Q 7: Depiction of men in their social life, war and trade… …secular expression on faces… …emphasis on the beauty and sensuality of the body… …the Prior's niece.

Ans to Q 8: Representation of men in their social life… … importance on everyday and mundane phenomena… …looking for 'meaning' behind the 'world'… …drawing of objects around him… …rejection of overt spiritualism and asceticism… …treatment of men as bodied beings with all desires of the flesh.

Ans to Q 9: Condensed and rugged expression… …use of cutting humour and sharp irony… …character portrayal conditioning his mode of expression… …lyric sensibility.



14.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Do you think that Browning is successful in reflecting the ironic contemplation and intensity of feeling through his dramatic monologues? Discuss with reference to the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 2: Discuss “Fra Lippo Lippi” as a treatise on the Renaissance art and worldview in contrast with the medieval attitude towards art.

Q 3: It is often said that Browning’s dramatic monologues reflect the psychology of the characters he portrays. How are the inner-conflicts of characters reflected in his monologues?

Q 4: Discuss how Browning sympathises with the aesthetics and the philosophy of Renaissance art in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 5: Write your views on Browning’s handling of poetic style and characterisation as he dramatizes the conflict between medieval asceticism and Renaissance worldview in the poem “Fra Lippo Lippi”.

Q 6: Write a note on the importance of the painting of Prior’s niece in the thematic development of the poem.

Q 7: Attempt an analysis of the character of Friar Lippo in the light of the inner conflicts that he is undergoing.

* * *

UNIT 15: MATTHEW ARNOLD: "DOVER BEACH"

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Matthew Arnold: The Poet

15.3.1 His Life

15.3.2 His Poetic Works

15.4 Reading the Poem

15.4.1 The Text of the Sonnets

15.4.2 Major Themes

15.4.3 Arnold's Poetic Style

15.5 Critical Reception of Arnold as a Victorian Poet

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Further Reading

15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.9 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss Matthew Arnold as one of the important poet critics in the history of English literature
- identify Arnold's "Dover Beach" as a representative poem of the late Victorian period
- explain the significance of the poem in the context of the Victorian loss of faith
- enlist the specific themes that assign the poem the status of a contextually very relevant poem
- assess the importance of Matthew Arnold as an important literary critic.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

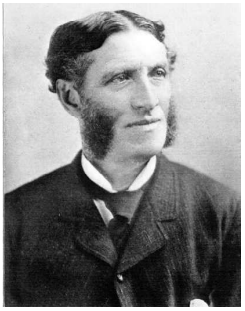
This is the last unit of this course. In this unit, you will read about the poem "Dover Beach" written by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and make a

critical assessment of the poem highlighting the importance of Arnold as a poet critic. Perhaps, you already know that Matthew Arnold is one of the greatest poets of the late Victorian period. However, he was also one who represented his age in a most visible way by throwing his radical voice as a sensitive Victorian intellectual on a number of social and cultural issues of his times. The poem "Dover Beach" was written in the shore of the English ferry port of Dover, Kent, facing Calais, France, at the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part of the English Channel, where Arnold honeymooned in 1851.The poem, despite all its brevity, is perhaps one of the best known of all his poetic works. It was published in his anthology *New Poems* in 1867. In this poem, the poet contemplates the sea, finding in it the melancholy reminders of the confusions and uncertainties of belief brought about by modern life. After you finish reading this unit, you will find why the poet instead turns to faith in human relationship. You will finally find that in this poem the Victorian problem of loss of faith is given its most memorable utterance to describe the disappearance of public values, a context in which the only retreat for human beings remains to the world of private affection.

15.3 MATTHEW ARNOLD: THE POET

Matthew Arnold is considered one of the most significant writers of the late Victorian period. However, it was through his prose writing that Arnold asserted his greatest influence on literature. In the following subsections, you will get an opportunity to read about the life and works of this great writer.

15.3.1 His Life



Source: https://www.mediawiki.org

Matthew Arnold was born near Staines on December 24, 1822. His father Dr. Thomas Arnold was the head master of the famous Rugby School. Arnold received his education at Winchester, Rugby and then entered Balliol College, Oxford, where he won several prizes in poetry. Arnold reflects the spirit of his university in works like "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Thyrsis".

After leaving the University Arnold first taught the classics at Rugby, and then in 1847, he became the private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, who appointed the young poet to the position of Inspector of Schools under his Government. In this position, Arnold worked patiently for the next thirty-five years and travelling the country and examining the teachers. For ten years, he was professor of poetry at Oxford, where his famous lecture "On Translating Homer" was given. He made numerous reports on English and foreign schools, and was three times sent abroad to study educational methods. Thus, Arnold led a busy and active life.

Arnold's literary works are often divided into three periods, which are called as **the poetical**, **the critical** and **the practical**. He wrote poetry since his school days. In a letter to his sister he correctly assessed himself as a poet: "It might be fairly argued that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning: yet because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them; I am likely to have my turn as they have theirs." In 1849, he published his first volume of poems, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*, and three years later, he published *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* in 1852. In 1853-1855, he published *Poems* and twelve years later, in 1867, he published his *New Poems, which* is also his last volume of poetry. Arnold then abandoned poetry in favour of literary criticism.

The important works of his critical period are the lectures "On Translating Homer" (1861) and the two volumes of *Essays in Criticism* (1865-1888), which made Arnold one of the best-known literary men in England. Then, he turned to practical questions and his *Friendship's Garland* (1871) was intended to satirise and reform the great middle class of England, whom he called the '**Philistines**'. His critical prose was collected in 1865 and published under the title of *Essays in Criticism*. This was followed by *Lectures on the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877), *Mixed Essays* (1879) and *Irish Essays* (1882).In 1857, he had been elected Professor of Poetry at

Oxford. He received a pension a year in 1883, and then died suddenly at Liverpool in April 1888. Matthew Arnold was the greatest poet after Tennyson and Browning. He was famous also as critic, educationist and lecturer. Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism.

Arnold's poetry is reflective of the major concerns of his age and he is to be judged not so much by his 'natural magic' as by his moral profundity, the two qualities he set up for evaluation of poetry. Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism. His age was an age of democracy, science and industrialism, with none of which he had any sympathy. What was the remedy for all this, Arnold's poetry does not make clear. He only advises us not to be caught in its meshes. His incapability to find a solution for the ills of his age could be cited as the cause of his deep-seated melancholy, which is the prevailing note of his poetry.

The American Academy of Arts and Science in its proceedings in between May 1887 and May, 1888, describes the importance of Matthew Arnold like this: "Among the eminent men of letters whose names have been borne on the roll of Foreign Honorary Members of the Academy during the past generation, not one has done more to affect the course of the deeper currents of thought in his time than Matthew Arnold. The writings of some others have, indeed, been more popular than his, and more widely read. However, he has specially addressed the minds capable of receiving and of propagating the highest influences. No other English writer has attained such distinction in prose and in poetry alike, or displayed such equality of power as poet and as critic. Alike in poetry and in prose his aim has been 'the moral interpretation, from an independent point of view, of man and of the world.' In fidelity to this aim is the unity of his work as poet and as critic; for such interpretation is the great business of both."



LET US KNOW

Matthew Arnold's poetry possesses three characteristics, which make it unique in 19th century poetry. These three are fused; they are recurrent; and, although not everywhere apparent, they are his predominant characteristics as a Victorian poet. These characteristics are:

a) The mastery of mood-creating detail,
b) The sacrifice of narrative to philosophical ideas, and
c) A very special type of Hellenism.

For example, the poem "The Strayed Reveller", most illustrates Arnold's **Hellenism**. It indicates Arnold's independence of spirit in writing of a Greek theme in a Greek manner. That is to say, in this poem he wrote of a traditional Greek theme without a suspicion of what he himself called "Hebraism": the alteration of the story to achieve a moral lesson.

(Adapted from "Some Aspects of Matthew Arnold's Poetry" by Stanley T. Williams.)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State some of the important aspects of Arnold's life history.

Q 2: What are the three most obvious characteristics of Arnold as a poet?

Q 3: What does Arnold's poetry usually reflect?

15.3.2 His Poetic Works

Arnold's first volume of poetry *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* was written when Arnold was only 26. However, it was published anonymously and was withdrawn from circulation. In 1852, Arnold published his second volume of poems *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems*. In 1853, he published *Poems: A New Edition*, a selection from the two earlier volumes famously excluding

"Empedocles of Etna", but adding new poems like "Sohrab and Rustam" and "Scholar Gipsy". He explained in the Preface to *Poems* of 1853 that situations "in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done," cannot be fit subjects for poetry. In the same Preface, addressing the eternal objects of poetry, among all nations and at all times, Arnold holds them to be the "actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet." You would notice in Arnold's works some conflict between his creative and critical faculties, along with the view that the main duty of a writer is to present as richly and broadly as possible, in whatever medium he can, his 'criticism of life'. In 1855, his *Poems, Second Series* appeared and in 1858, appeared *Merope*– an inferior attempt at a Greek tragedy. After these, in 1867, he published only one small volume of poetry *New Poems.* In between 1861 and 1888, he produced almost twenty volumes of prose.

"To Marguerite", "Grande Chartreuse", "Rugby Chapel", "Dover Beach" etc. are some of Arnold's most memorable poems as they reflect many of the concerns of Arnold both as a writer and as a critic. "To Marguerite" is a moving expression to a modern malaise like the isolation of the individual; "Grande Chartreuse" projects the fears, hopes and despairs of the thoughtful and sensitive man in a world of rapid change; "Rugby Chapel", based on Arnold's headmaster father Dr. Thomas Arnold, meditates on the sadness that lies at the heart of man; and "Dover Beach" deals with the loss of faith followed by a disappearance of public values. Of Arnold's narrative poems, the two best known are "Balder Dead" (1855), an incursion into the field of Norse mythology which is suggestive of Gray; and "Sohrab and Rustum" (1853), which takes us into the field of legendary Persian history. Using some interesting materials,

Arnold produced these poems, which have the rare combination of classic reserve and romantic feeling.

Two other best known poems of Matthew Arnold are “The Scholar Gypsy” and “Thyrsis”. The first poem is the story of a 17th century Oxford scholar who disappeared among the gypsies. In one sense, it is an autobiographical poem as the poet describes his own position and his own state of problems. “Thyrsis”, on the other hand, is written to commemorate Arnold’s dead friend Arthur Hugh Clough. In both these poems, the influence of the Greek pastoral poets is clearly discernible. Arnold, who spent much of his time in train journey between one provincial town and the other as a School Inspector, saw in the English countryside a source of refreshment and regeneration. Perhaps, it was none other than Wordsworth who taught him the ways to get back to the countryside for relief and comfort. In one of his *Memorial Verses*, Arnold eloquently conveyed what Wordsworth meant to the Victorians. It is interesting to note that Arnold, who had been torn by the Victorian doubts and problems, was also illuminated by a vision of the ancient Athenian, and the Wordsworthian vision of the relation between men and nature.

The first place among Arnold’s prose work must be given to the *Essays in Criticism* (1865). In this book, Arnold’s views of criticism appeal to us strongly. In one of the essays, “Function of Criticism in Present Times” included in the volume, he views criticism as a disinterested and flexible mode of thought. Such a view also leads to the consideration of the dilemmas of the English society in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) where culture is recommended as ‘the great help out of our present difficulties’ and defined as ‘the pursuit of total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world’. By 1870s, he joined hands with other Victorian thinkers who turned their attention to the theological controversies of the Victorian Age. *Literature and Dogma* (1873) is, in general, a plea for liberality in religion.



LET US KNOW

Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) contains most of the familiar terms such as culture, sweetness and light, Barbarism, Philistine, Hebraism and many others which are now associated with Arnold's work and influence. The term, "Barbarian" refers to the Aristocratic classes, whom Arnold thought to be essentially crude in soul, notwithstanding their good clothes and superficial graces. "Philistine" refers to the middle classes, narrow-minded and self-satisfied people. "Hebraism" is Arnold's term for moral education. Arnold undertook to preach the Hellenic or intellectual element, which welcomes new ideas, and delights in the arts that reflect the beauty of the world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Name some of the important poetry collections written by Arnold.

Q 5: How does Arnold view the idea of Culture?

15.4 READING THE POEM

15.4.1 The Text of the Sonnets

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair.
Upon the straits; —on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand.
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. 5
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long of line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-balanced land,
Listen! You hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin.
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.
The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

"Dover Beach" is often considered to be one of the best lyrics of Matthew Arnold. Written probably around June 1851, the poem deals with one of Arnold's most important themes—the loss of Christian faith. In a sense, this poem stands on the crossroad between an age of faith and the emptiness of the modern world. The advances of science created a kind of spiritual vacuum but the

final affirmation was to be sought out in human love. Therefore, taking this theme as the starting point, “Dover Beach” best reflects Arnold’s ideals and methods as a poet.

The **first** stanza opens with the description of a nightly scene at the seaside. The poet calls his beloved near the window to share the visual beauty of the seashore. Then he calls her attention to his own feelings of melancholy, which he relates to the seashore, which has caused an emotion of sadness inside him.

> “Listen! You hear the grating roar
> Of pebbles which the waves drawback, and fling,
> At their return, up the high strand,
> Begin, and cease, and then again begin.
> With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
> The eternal note of sadness in.”

The **second** stanza introduces the Greek tragedian Sophocles’ idea of “the ebb and flow of human misery.” Sophocles also heard the similar sound at the ‘Aegean’ sea and thus developed his ideas on the miseries of humanity.

> “Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
> Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
> Of human misery…”

Arnold then reconnects this idea to the present to show the universality of certain feelings that are not confined in time and space. You should note that the study of the classics has been constant throughout his life, as is clear from his Notebooks as well as from his own poems, essays, and letters. In “Dover Beach”, which is one of the most philosophical and personal of his poems, he gives direct expression to his feeling of kinship with the Greeks. But in the mood of his “Dover Beach”, as the reviewer John Robert Moore opines, Arnold is much nearer to William Lisle Bowles, one of the lesser known poets of the English Romantic Movement, or to

Coleridge of "Dejection: An Ode", than to his favourite Greek tragedian Sophocles.

In the **third** stanza, the sea turns into the sea of faith, which is a metaphor for a time in which religion could still be experienced without doubt in the modern days of change brought about through Darwinism, the Industrial revolution, Imperialism, and a crisis in religion. Arnold illustrates this issue by using an image of clothes, when religion was still intact, the world was dressed "like the folds of a bright girdled furled." Now that faith is gone, the world lies there stripped naked and bleak as the poet writes: "the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world." in the following lines:

"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."

The **fourth** and final stanza begins with a dramatic statement. He asks his beloved to be true and faithful: "Ah, Love, let us be true/ To one another". However, the pleasant scenery turns into a "darkling plain, where only hostile, frightening sounds of fighting armies can be heard. The loss of religious faith made him aware of yet another and a vaster danger that the universe itself was without any direction. That prompts him to sing:

"And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Therefore, you find that the poem starts like a dramatic monologue in which the poet urges his companion to "Come to the window" when "the night-air is sweet". It is that time of the night in which the chalk-mountain becomes whiter and the seashore

becomes mystically white because of the moonlight. The seawater is dashing against seashore; the pebbles are being thrown and drawn back by waves, thereby creating a sweet musical sound. However, these measured sounds, created by the movement of the pebbles, also bring a note of melancholy or sadness to the poet's mind. In this context, the poet refers to Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, who also heard this similar note of sadness long ago in Aegean, a sea between Mediterranean and Asia, and which brought into his mind the misery and unhappiness of human life. The poet then observes the sea forming a beautiful girdle around the land. However, you should note that through the sea of faith, Arnold expresses religious, metaphysical and romantic anguish, which he wanted to share with his preceding romantic poets. This also brings his mind back from the present stage to taking shelter in past. In the final lines of the poem, Arnold thinks that love between two persons is the only way to strengthen human existence. However, in the human world, there is no faith or conviction. Keeping these views, Arnold compares the world to a battlefield where it is tough to distinguish if one is a friend or a foe. This poem sincerely gives the memorable utterance of the Victorian problem of loss of faith. For a poet like Matthew Arnold, the search for some stability becomes a part of the agony he is undergoing. The agony is best reflected in the following lines of the poem:

"And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night"

The image of the ignorant armies significantly echoes Thucydides' descriptions of the last disastrous war between Athenians and Spartans in Sicily, fought at night between darkness and confusion that virtually crushed the Athenians, in Book VII of his *History of the Peloponnesian War.* Thus, this poem also echoes that Periclean Athens remained Arnold's ideal of civilisation.

Thus, "Dover Beach" is undoubtedly a love poem, but, instead of love being idealised, Arnold only sees the problems that

stand on its way. The mood of Arnold's poetry tends to be of plaintive reflection, and he is restrained in expressing emotion. He felt that poetry should be the 'criticism of life' and express a philosophy. Arnold's philosophy is that true happiness comes from within, and that people should seek within themselves for good, while being resigned in acceptance of outward things and avoiding the pointless turmoil of the world. However, he argues that we should not live in the belief that we shall one day inherit eternal bliss. This philosophy is clearly expressed in such poems as "Dover Beach" and in these lines from "Stanzas from the "Grande Chartreuse":

"Wandering between two worlds, one dead
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Try to capture briefly the changing mood of the poet in the different stanzas of the poem "Dover Beach".

Q 7: What purpose does the allusion of Sophocles serve in the context of the poem?

Q 8: What, according to Arnold, is the role of poetry in his time?

15.4.2 Major Themes

The major themes of Arnold's poetry can be explained under the following headings.

The Issue involving loss of faith:

In the world of English poetry, Arnold occupies an important position as a critic and a teacher. In his poetry, he reflects the doubt of an age, which witnessed the conflict between science and revealed religion. One important theme, which runs through the poetry of Matthew Arnold, is the issue of faith and the sense of loss that man can feel without faith. This theme is evident in poems such

as “Dover Beach”. Though he appeared to be a man of lively and enthusiastic temper, there was in him a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism. Though religious by nature, he was sceptical of dogma; he was dismayed by the Oxford movement, the theological and liturgical disputes which afflicted the Christian churches in mid century. So, meditative and rhetorical, Arnold’s poetry often depicts the problems of religious faith and psychological isolation. For example, in “To Marguerite–continued”, Arnold reiterates Donne’s assertion that “No-man is an island”, suggesting that we ‘mortals’ are indeed “in the sea of life enisled”. In several essays, Arnold tries to project the essential truth of Christianity. He also argues for a renewed religious faith and an adoption of classical aesthetics and morals, which should represent Victorian intellectual concerns. Arnold’s new approach had attracted almost every major English critic including T.S Eliot, Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom. His poetry reflects the issue of faith and the sense of isolation that man can feel without faith.

The Theme of Love:

In “Dover Beach” the world invokes is that of the medieval Christendom when the sea of faith lay round ‘earth’s shore’ like the folded garment of a mediaeval picture (“like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d). That was a secured world in contrast to the present world (“Where the ignorant armies clash by night”). Arnold wrote later on the possibility of a renewed Christianity in *St Paul and Protestantism* (1870) and *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and held that such a new world might be born. However, in “Dover Beach”, his main alternative to loss of faith is ‘love’ at the personal level. In the beach at Dover the poet hears the noise of the waves that reminds him of Sophocles who wrote at the early days of Western civilisation about human misery. In addition, the poet also thinks of misery. By why, on this lovely night with his ‘love’ by his side should he feel miserable? ‘A thought’ destroys his peace of mind. Therefore, the poet’s problem is ‘intellectual’ not emotional. Too much thinking

has destroyed his sense of serenity, which can be provided by only an authentic personal relationship. Therefore, love is also an important theme in the poem.



LET US KNOW

In his essay "The Study of Poetry", Arnold regarded poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." According to Arnold, each poem should be a unit, and he protested against the tendency of English poets to use brilliant phrases and figures of speech, which only detract attention from the poem as whole. Arnold is more indebted than he thinks to English masters, especially to Wordsworth and Milton, whose influence is noticeable in a large part of his poetry.

Portrayal of Nature:

Portrayal of landscape was a feature of much of the English Romantic poetry beginning with James Thomson and culminating with Wordsworth. With the latter, Nature took a distinct place of her own as a subject and a particular landscape used to lend a particular significance to his treatment of Nature. Arnold's treatment of a particular scene in Dover Beach, however, is not so much related to any larger philosophy of Nature as to creating a particular mood. As Ferris Lockwood observes Arnold seems to be very fond of furnishing a natural setting for the human element of his poem. His success here is largely due to what is known as pictorial art. The poem provides an imaginative insight to not only perceive clearly and feel intensely the beauty and the power of a scene, but also to discern upon what these qualities connote. This results from a process of selecting and arranging, of subordinating or rejecting, of heightening or emphasising that, which, while preserving its unity, shall also give a sharp, clear impression of the characteristics of a scene. "Dover Beach" thus briefly but clearly suggests the beauty of a scene by means of a few vigorous, telling touches. Some even

consider Arnold to be the bridge between Romanticism and Modernism. His use of the landscapes was typical of the Romantic era, and in “Dover Beach”, the seascape portrayed in faithful detail corresponds to the mood of despair and pessimism and becomes a symbol of modern man’s sense of alienation in the face of the Victorian ethos of progress. Therefore, depiction of Nature is one of the important aspects we find in the poem “Dover Beach”.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What does Arnold tell his readers about the loss of faith in the poem “Dover Beach”?

Q 10: Why, according to you, natural landscape is so central to the poem “Dover Beach”?

15.4.3 Arnold’s Poetic Style

The poem “Dover Beach” consists of four stanzas, each containing a variable number of verses. The first stanza has 14 lines, the second 6, the third 8 and the fourth 9. As for the metrical scheme, there is no apparent rhyme scheme, but rather a free handling of the basic iambic pattern. In stanza 3, there is a series of open vowels “Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”. A generally falling syntactical rhythm can be detected and continues into stanza 4. In this last stanza, one can find seven lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme of abbacddcc. According to Ruth Pitman, this poem can be seen as “a series of incomplete sonnets”. David G. Riede adds: The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that suggest but do not achieve strict sonnet form, and except for a short (three foot) opening line, the last section emulates the octave of a sonnet, but closes with a single, climactic line instead of a sestet– as though the final five lines had been eroded. The thoughts of the poet do not appear as obviously structured and organised. They are accentuated by the fact that run-on lines are mixed with end-stopped

lines. In the first stanza, the rhythm of the poem imitates the "movement of the tide."

Along with the use of alliteration, Arnold, in this poem, makes varied use of Figures of Speech. The very first few lines of the poem "Dover Beach" are alliterative to a great extent:

> ''The sea is calm tonight.
> The tide is full, the moon lies fair.
> Upon the straits; —on the French coast the light
> Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand.'' (**Lines**, 1-4)

However, his use of other Figures of Speech can be seen in different expressions. For example, while comparing the human misery to ebb and flow of the sea, Arnold uses Metaphors *turbid ebb and flow of human misery*. Similarly, while comparing the sea to a griddle, he uses a Simile: *The Sea of Faith…lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled*. Other Figures of Speech includes the use of Anaphora and Hyperbole. He uses Hyperbole in *grating roar of pebbles* and Anaphora in *So various, so beautiful, so new* (repetition of *so*) and in *nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain* (repetition of *nor*).

15.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ARNOLD AS A VICTORIAN POET

Arnold's work as a literary critic began with the 1853 "Preface to the Poems" in which Arnold put emphasis on the importance of the subject in poetry, on "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, and simplicity of style", which he learned from the Greeks, Goethe and Wordsworth. However, criticism began to take first place in Arnold's writing with his appointment in 1857 as a Professor at Oxford. Arnold in his essay entitled "The Study of Poetry', regarded poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." He also said, "without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry." He considered the most important criteria used to judge

the value of a poem to be 'high truth' and 'high seriousness'. We can assess the significance of Arnoldian criticism in terms of three categories: Literary Criticism, Social Criticism and Religious Criticism.

Literary Criticism

With the emphasis on the subject in poetry as "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, simplicity of style" which he learned from the Greeks, from Goethe and Wordsworth, Arnold embodies nearly all the essential elements in his critical theory. In 1861, his lectures *On Translating Homer* were published. This was followed by *Last Words on Translating Homer* in 1862. More than anything else Arnold is famous for introducing a methodology of literary criticism based on the historical and the personal approach. His *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1888), remains a significant influence on critics till today. It is mentionable that in one of his most famous essays "The Study of Poetry", Arnold wrote that, "Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry". He considered the most important criteria used to judge the value of a poem were "high truth" and "high seriousness". By this standard, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* did not deserve Arnold's approval. He also sought for literary criticism to remain disinterested, and said that the appreciation should be of "the object as in itself it really is."

Social Criticism

Arnold is also famous for his Social criticism. In his book *Culture and Anarchy,* we find the word "Philistines", which he adapted and applied to denote anti-intellectualism. A philistine as conceived by Matthew Arnold is a person who is smugly narrow minded and of conventional morality, and whose materialistic views and tastes indicate a lack of and indifference to cultural and aesthetic values. In another way, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* reflects his intelligent criticism of modern social life.

Religious Criticism

Critics and scholars of Arnold's works disagree on the nature of Arnold's personal and religious beliefs. Under the influence of Baruch Spinoza and his father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, he rejected the supernatural elements in

religion, even while retaining a fascination for church rituals. Arnold seems to belong to a pragmatic middle ground that is more concerned with the poetry of religion and its virtues and values for society than with the existence of God. He wrote in the preface of *God and the Bible* in 1875— ‘‘The personages of the Christian heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus and their conversations.” He also wrote in *Literature and Dogma*: “The word ‘God’ is used in most cases as by no means a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence.” He defined religion as “morality touched with emotion.”

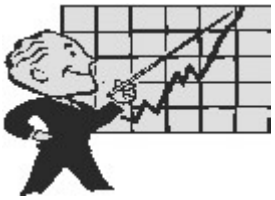


LET US KNOW

You should note that Matthew Arnold is the first of English critics who seldom or never takes his eye off’ the object. He is the first, moreover, to make a systematic attempt to appeal from what he felt were merely personal or insular literary verdicts, to “the great Amphictyonic Court of European opinion.” He kept himself “at the centre” as he phrases it; he knew what the brightest and wisest people in Germany, France, Italy, were thinking and saying, and by constantly quoting them, he set going “a current of true and fresh ideas.” In this way, he contributed largely to the task of making English judgments, whether literary or moral, less rigid and liberal.

You must however note that Arnold’s conception of culture, for which some critics also tend to call him a conservative, has recently been revaluated as suggesting a model of contemporary critical and literary theory. In discussing Arnold’s place in modern literature studies, Timothy Peltason notes that although Arnold’s name has long been considered “shorthand … for … cultural conservatism,” there is a misunderstanding among many scholars and critics regarding what Arnold actually wrote and said. According to Peltason, Arnold did not endorse “received cultural values,” nor did he passively accept the value of accredited masterpieces. Arnold instead focused his writing and scholarship on an examination of how things “work for us here and now.” This interest in maintaining the value of culture and

using criticism to stress that value to society was a central theme in Arnold's prose works. In an essay comparing Arnold's "The Function of Criticism" to T. S. Eliot's essay of the same name, critic Terence Hawkes notes that both writers considered criticism a seminal tool in helping society objectively examine its failures and successes. Hawkes related that the role of criticism, as described by Arnold and his contemporaries, is often haunted by the notion that it is secondary to the actual happening. Instead, says Hawkes, Arnold himself viewed criticism as a necessary and complementary act to the primary text or idea it was examining, often serving to illustrate uncanny and noteworthy aspects not inherent in the original text or incident. Recent scholarship on Arnold has acknowledged that Arnold's writing reflects the tensions of modern literature, particularly his remarks on aesthetic judgment, and his attempts to formulate a theory of the role of criticism in culture. His integration of social criticism and literary analysis, says Stefan Collini, is acknowledged as his most significant and lasting achievement. In Collini's words, Arnold "characterised in unforgettable ways the role that criticism—that kind of literary criticism that is also cultural criticism, and thus … a sort of informal political theory—can and must play in modern societies."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: What was Arnold's view on poetry as a literary critic?

Q 12: What are the three categories under which Arnold's criticism can be studied?

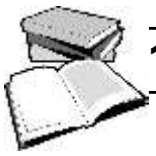
Q 13: How have the critics received Arnold's views on culture in subsequent times?



15.6 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you have learnt that "Dover Beach" depicts an occasion of a brief trip across the channel. Love is described as an anchorage in a chaotic world. The poem was published in *New Poems* (1867). Arnold is sometimes called the third great Victorian poet, along with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. His early poetic works like

Empedocles on Etna (1852) and *Poems* (1853). These established his reputation as a poet. In 1857, he was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford University, which he continued for ten years. During his time as Professor of poetry at Oxford, Matthew Arnold produced many essays of literary criticism such as "On translating Homer" (1861 and 1862), "On the study of Celtic Literature" (1867) and *Essays in Celtic Literature*. You have read that Arnold's poetic works are characterised by many of the Victorian beliefs with regard to religious faith and morality. However, one significant feature of the poem "Dover Beach" is that it is essentially a modern, or as one critic calls 'the first modern poem', not so much in diction and technique but in psychological orientation. The poem consists of four stanzas, each containing a variable number of verses. The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that also suggest the sonnet form.



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15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: He was famous as critic, educationist and lecturer… …his father Dr. Thomas Arnold was the Headmaster of the famous Public School of Rugby… …his poems began to be published in 1849… …his important poems were mostly written between 1843-53 and published between 1849-54… …Arnold was an inspector of schools and professor of poetry at Oxford for ten years(1857-1867)… …his election as Professor of poetry at oxford in may 1857 led to much of his well-known prose including *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869.

Ans to Q 2: The mastery of mood-creating detail… …the sacrifice of narrative to philosophical ideas… …a very special type of Hellenism.

Ans to Q 3: Arnold's poetry is reflective of the major concerns of his age… …his moral profundity… …a deep strain of melancholy and pessimism.

Ans to Q 4: *New Poems… …Empedocles on Etna and Other poems… …Poems: A New Edition… …Poems… …Poems, Second Series… …The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems.*

Ans to Q 5: In his book *Culture and Anarchy* Culture is 'the great help out of our present difficulties'… …it is also 'the pursuit of total perfection

by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world'.

Ans to Q 6: The **first** stanza opens with the description of the serene atmosphere of the night time sea shore… …the **second** stanza introduces the Greek tragedian Sophocles' idea of "the ebb and flow of human misery" a feeling that the poet is undergoing at the present times… …In the **third** stanza, the sea turns into the sea of faith, which is a metaphor for a time in which religion could still be experienced without doubt in the modern days of change… …The **fourth** and final stanza the poet tends to think that the only consolation is human love.

Ans to Q 7: With the help of the allusion, the poet assigns universality to the note of melancholy or sadness in the mind of a poet… …Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, too heard this similar note of sadness long ago in Aegean, a sea between Meditarianian and Asia, and which brought into his mind the misery and unhappiness of human life.

Ans to Q 8: Poetry is plaintive reflection of the tormented soul of the poet… …poetry is also the 'criticism of life'… …poetry expresses a philosophy that comes from within the poet.

Ans to Q 9: This poem reflects the doubt of an age which witnessed the conflict between science and revealed religion… …in this poem, Arnold beautifully expresses the problems of religious faith and psychological isolation… …he also argues for a renewed religious faith and an adoption of classical aesthetics and morals which should represent Victorian intellectual concerns.

Ans to Q 10: Through the poetry of James Thompson and William Wordsworth Nature took a distinct place of her own as a subject of poetry… …Arnold too portray nature… …but he portrays particular scenes rather than projecting any larger philosophy of nature… …Ferris Lockwood observes that Arnold is fond of furnishing a natural setting for the human element of his poem.

Ans to Q 11: For Arnold the main subject in poetry was "clearness of

arrangement, rigor of development, and simplicity of style", which he observed among the Greeks, Goethe and Wordsworth… …in his essay entitled "The Study of Poetry', he regarded poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty."… …he further considered 'high truth' and 'high seriousness' as the most important criteria to judge the value of a poem.

Ans to Q 12: Literary Criticism mainly cantered on the subject of poetry… …Social Criticism based on his idea of philistinism… …Religious Criticism based on Arnold's rejection of the supernatural elements in religion.

Ans to Q 13: Arnold's conception of culture has suggested a model for contemporary critical and literary theory… …against the allegation of conservatism, Timothy Peltason noted that Arnold never endorsed "received cultural values,"… …Terence Hawkes noted that Arnold considered criticism a seminal tool in helping society objectively examine its failures and successes… .. Recent scholarship on Arnold also discusses how Arnold's writing reflects the tensions of modern literature.



15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What is the central message of the poem 'Dover Beach'? Illustrate with exact references taken from the poem.

Q 2: Do you think that Matthew Arnold is at his best in describing the Victorian Dilemma in the poem "Dover Beach"? How finally does the poet resolve issues of loss of faith?

Q 3: Trace the basic ideas underlying Arnold's criticism with special reference to the poem "Dover Beach".

Q 4: What, according to you, are the major allusions in the poem? How do they help in spreading certain universal human predicaments?

Q 5: Would you like to call "Dover Beach" a love poem? Elaborate.

Q 6: Landscape is an important element in the poem “Dover Beach”. In what ways, does Matthew Arnold trace the melancholy underlying the serene atmosphere of the moonlit night?

Q 7: “Poetry is a criticism of life.” Illustrate this point with specific references from the poem “Dover Beach”.

* * *

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