

The Victorian Concept of Human Life

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It goes without saying that literature deals with experiences and events of human life, but choices and preferences of the poets of different ages tend to be different. From this angle of vision, the Victorian concept of human life seems to be different from the earlier romantic concept or later modern concept of life. The Victorian Age does not mean precisely the years during which Queen Victoria reigned in England. Victorianism means an attitude to life and things. It marked a period of great transition in many aspects of human life.

The onset of the industrial revolution changed the way of people. Industry and agriculture flourished more and more. Literature written during this period was changing as a result of the events that were happening. Religious beliefs were being challenged by many different viewpoints.

Charles Darwin's work "The Origin of Species" (1859) proposed the theory that man actually evolved from lower species rather than having been created by a higher power. This notion was devastating to many Victorians. This work conflicted with the teachings of the Bible. The Christian God was ever powerful, the creator of all things and was responsible for the fate of the world.

Alfred Tennyson was the most representative poet of the Victorian Age in the sense that his faith was shaken by Darwin's new theory about creation of the world. Quite often he experiences the conflict of doubt and faith. After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair. He ponders over the creation of the world in his "In Memoriam" and says that God is the creator of life and death in both human and animals world. Man cannot understand why he was created, but he must believe that he was not made simply to die.

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"Thou madest life in man and brute;
Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
Is on the skull which thou hast made
Thou wilt not leave us in the dust."

(I-iii-iv)

His friend Hallam's untimely death so shocked Tennyson that he sees the world as futile

"O life as futile then, as frail !
O for thy voice soothe and bless !
What hope of answer, or redress
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

(LVI-vii)

Tennyson further realized that man has limited power and nothing happens without the blessing of God. Man has control of his own will but this is only so that he might exert himself to do God's will

"Thou makest thine appeal to me
I bring to life, I bring to death
The spirit does but mean the breath
I know no more. And he, shall he."

(LVI - ii)

Whereas Tennyson passes through a period of doubt and uncertainty in his "In Memoriam" but in "Ulysses" he is enthusiastic and highly optimistic. Readers viewed Ulysses as resolute and heroic admiring him for his determination.

"To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield". (70)

Tennyson looks adventurous and extremely bold when Ulysses says :

...Come my friends.
Tis 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...

(56-61)

Robert Browning, the incorrigible optimist had an unshaken faith in human values. Hope, faith courage and God are the four pillars on which his philosophy of life rests. His "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is eminently significant as an exposition of his faith. He believes that man is not a

mere lump of clay. A divine element which resides within stirs him to strive towards a higher spirituality

“ Praise be thine
I see the whole design,
I, who saw power, see now love
Perfect too:
Perfect I call thy Plan:
Thanks that I was a man !
Maker, remake, complete - I trust
What thou shalt do !”

Influenced by the works of P.B.Shelley and Mary Shelley, Robert Browning had on certain occasions his feelings dissipated to some degree later in his life. His numerous criticisms of the workings of religious institutions show his dissatisfaction with the existing practice of religion are obvious in his poem “ Fra Lippo Lippi”. The narrator of the poem, “Fra Lippo Lippi” argues that his life in cloister has been unnatural and restraining and bemoans the lack of life he is allowed to experience. The mandatory celibacy is made even more absurd when Fra points out

“You should not take a fellow eight years old
And make him swear to never kiss the girls”
(224-225)

This kind of remark suggests that Browning wanted a free and unrestricted growth of human feelings and passions.

When Tennyson and Browning found so much beauty and glory in the Age, Matthew Arnold found many things dark and lurid. He expresses a feeling of extreme dejection in his poem, “Dover Beach”. He finds ‘the sea of faith’ drying fast and becomes so dejected and melancholic that he presents an extremely gloomy picture of the world by calling it ‘a land of dreams’ which:

“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”
(33-37)

Arnold’s poetry is a criticism of life. It probes into the heart of the mysterious disease of modern life. In “ The Scholar Gypsy” he describes

“ The strange disease of modern life
With its sick hurry, its divided aims.”

(203-04)

Thus, for the three major poets of the Victorian Age, pictures of life were different. For Tennyson, life was mostly full of pain, obstacles and conflicts. For Browning, life was mostly full of passion, love and optimism. For Matthew Arnold, life lacked moral values and enough resources to meet the needs of the community and ensure the fulfilment of their ambitions.

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