

# The Victorian versus Modern Poetry in the Poems of Tennyson, Browning and Hopkins

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**Abstract:** *The tensions between the Victorian and modern poetry produced by scientific and intellectual achievements, industrialism and technological achievements. A great deal of Victorian intellectual effort was spent in trying to hold together a universe which was exploding. It was an age of conflicting expiations and theories of scientific and economic confidence and of social and spiritual pessimism, of a sharpened awareness of which the inevitability of progress and of deep disquiet as to the nature of the present. In terms of pattern and spirit, Victorian poetry shares in common with Romantic tendencies. The most striking fact to mention here by the end of the nineteenth century, a transition took place in terms of the reaction shown towards middle class values. An anti-Victorian aestheticism grasped the general intelligentsia to make a gesture of independence from and resistance to the pressures and tensions of the time. The threat of unbelief is experienced by the people and it appeared that a literary faith was gradually replacing the dogmatic faith. Against the solidarity of the external world, the inner world appeared to be non-existent. The main aim of this paper is to explore or to discuss the conflicting demands and the tension between Victorian against the Modern in the poems of Tennyson Browning and Hopkins*

**Keyword:** Social and Spiritual Pessimism, Conflicts, Tensions, Victorian and Modern

## 1. Methodology

The Entire work is based on the secondary source which gave an immense motivation to undertake this work. Most of the secondary data have been collected through library works in the different universities of India, like Assam University, Guwahati University, Tejpur University of Assam and Sam Higginbotom Institute of Agriculture Science and Technology: Deemed University, Allahabad.

## 2. Review of Literature

The available literature on this topic are: i) by Daiches, David. (2004). *A Critical History of English Literature*, vol-iv Allied Publisher Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, India. ii) Pinto, Vivian de Sola (1951) *Crisis in English Poetry*, London Hutchinson University Library. iii) Priestley, F.E.L., "Tennyson's Idylls," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XIX (1994), 35-49. iv) B. Litzinger and

Smalley(ed.) (1970) *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, Critical Heritage series, B.C. Southam v. Hopkins, G.M.(2007) *Hopkins' Poetry* (Spark Notes Literature Guide Series) Publisher: Barnes & Noble. However above mentioned works have not clearly emphasis on the proposed topic. Hence the study has proposed to discussed the tensions of the conflicting demands in the poetry of Tennyson, Browning and Hopkins.

## 3. Introduction

A break between Victorian and modern conceptions of conflict is heralded by the first world war and cities have tended to opt for a series of poetic oppositions – the glorious versus the gruesome, the heroic versus the hellish, the romantic versus the realistic. But it is difficult to decide exactly as to when the modern age began and the Victorian

age ended. In literature there can be no water-tight compartments, and no definite lines of demarcation separating the past from the present. However, the year 1890 may be taken to be turning point, for by this date most of the great Victorians were either dead or had practically ceased to create. Much that is traditional and Victorian still persists and will continue to influence modern poetry but the new revolutionary forces become more and more prominent and it is clear that the future lies with them. But the entire Victorian poetry cannot be condemned for romantic conventionality and lack of adult male intelligence Victorian poetry was marked by wit, play of intelligent stress of cerebral muscle. Victorian poets realized to a considerable extent the limits of individualism, and the need for order and discipline. In its individualism, play of imagination, love of the picturesque and interest in nature and the past, Victorian poetry continued the Romantic tradition. But modern poetry is a revolt against Romantic tradition. That is why Roy Campbell describes modern poetry as, "an epidemic of intellectual and emotional diarrhea" and A.C. ward finds it, "eccentric, and way ward, puerile and commonplace." It cannot be denied that Modern age is an age of great poetry but not of such dominating poets, as Tennyson, Browning of the Victorian age.

## 4. Conflicts of Modern and Victorian Poetry

Victorian poetry came into conflict with Modern poetry, nurtured by a number of Victorian features. Victorian poetry should not be taken as completely apart from Romantic poetry. It is a continuation, in its very spirit as well as pattern; of the latter. On the other hand the Modern poetry is the revolt against the romantic Tradition. Victorian poetry, like other branches of Victorian literature is found to have been dominated by social thoughts of the age. The age of Victorian poetry is an age of ideological conflict that is why cardinal Newman in the idea of a University saw the period's controversies in these terms. "It is one great advantage of an

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age in which unbelief speaks out, that faith can speak out too, that if falsehood assails truth, truth can assail false hood". The Victorian poetry no doubt, witnessed some epoch stirring incidents. Yet it adhered, more or less, to certain accepted conventions. It had some convictions and ideals of life. While Modern poetry is seen a total break – down of old faith, idealism and convictions. Modern poetry appears quite skeptical of the old certainties and values, governing Victorian poetry modern poetry are dominated by the strong trend to question, examine and test whatever is accepted and followed consciously there is a clear revolt in the Modern poetry against its sense of stability. Its strife for order and its spiritual compliancy, again Victorian poetry is the exact opposite of the unconventionalism and modernism in Modern poetry. Therefore C.S. Hewis declares that modern poetry is not only a greater novelty than any other 'new poetry' but new in new way, almost in a 'new dimension'.

### **5. Tensions of the Conflicting demands in Tennyson, Browning and Hopkins**

The tensions of the conflicting demands are seen both in the form and content of poetry. The Victorian are is an era of the ideo-logical conflict. It is an am era in which the conflict between science and faith, rationality and mysticism, and the technical progress and religious orthodoxy is found kun and clear. This revolt is best exemplified in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The poet sees life in its naked realism, and even the most prosaic and commonplace subjects are considered suitable. The heavy thud of bus traffic, the creaking of tramcars, the rattling noise of railway trains, the drone of an aeroplane, all these find their echo in modern poetry. Secondly use of natural images to achieve a drawn landscape is again characteristic of Victorian poetry like Romantic poetry. The details are often well observed: "A land of streams! Some like a downward smoke, Slow-dropping veils thinnest lawn, did go" Great Victorian poet Tennyson has something in common with Keats in the description of nature. Tennyson was worrying about a God who is careful of the type but careless of the single life. But at a certain point he opines that man was born to a nobler future. 'Nature red in tooth and claw; might appear to frustrate the belief in the God of love, but God was love indeed, and God existed in hearts of men; 'I found him not in world or sun, or eagle's wing, of insects eye, nor through the questions men may try Tennyson's compromise was one which allowed him to combine the two often contradictory duties which he believed to lie upon him. For Tennyson, science was both fruitful and important, science was both fruitful and important, but Tennyson asserted that man would continue to live and perpetually refine himself. For the modern poet nature is a box of toys which delights his heart and which is very dear to him. But the modern poet does not spiritualize nature, like words worth, nor does he intellectualize her, like Shelley. Again, the Wordsworthian spiritual concept of pantheism has continuity with a new interest in Browning's spiritual optimism and Tennyson's rationalistic interpretation of god's way – "The old order changeth yielding place to the new and god fulfils Himself In many ways." However, Eliot does not write of nature or the countryside. His poetry is strictly urban. Thirdly, Victorian poetry worried about God and nature and man, great Victorian poet Tennyson was a worrier of God. But as a result of science and the spirit of rationalism, the modern poetry is

skeptical about God. Hardy laughs ironically at Him. And Housman does not hesitate to call him a "brute or a background". Lastly, like Romantic poetry in Victorian poetry there is the similar continuity in the matter of the poetical technique and pattern. The lyrical gifts of the Romantic poets are found bequeathed on the Victorian poets. Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti, Mrs. E.B. Brewster, Clough Matthew Arnold are all eminent lyricists. While, the modern poet is constantly experimenting with new verse forms and poetic techniques, symbols, often purely personal, are used in abundance to express, 'pure sensations' and visions, and the result is increased vagueness and obscurity of such modern poets as Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

The poems of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Hopkins reflect the conflicts in many of its phases and facets. But Tennyson is chiefly remembered as the most representative poet of the Victorian age. With the publication of *In Memoriam* Tennyson's status as the poet of the Victorian age was assured. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is his magnum opus that represents the conflicts of doubt and faith. In some sections of *In Memoriam* Tennyson sought to reconcile traditional faith with the new ideas of evolutionary science but in others faith and reason are opposed. Like Wordsworth and Shelly, Tennyson, too may be called a poet of nature. But there is a difference. He did not spiritualize nature; neither did he conceive it as alive. Living in an age of conflict between science and religion, he believed in the operation of a spirit, in nature culminating in "One God, one law, one element / And one far-off divine event./ To which the whole creation moves". Thus *In Memoriam* sympathized with the conclusions of contemporary science. Unlike the modern poets, the Victorian poets does not use free – verse in the poems, the Victorian poets, like the Romantic poets, were more adventurous in stanza forms. Tennyson likes to use fairly elaborate stanzas in which he could swing his lines with the mood, for example in the concluding stanza of *In Memoriam*.

He is not here; but far away  
The noise of life beings again,  
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain  
On the bald streets breaks the blank day.

Thus Tennyson's famous poem *In Memoriam* reflects the Victorian "Struggle" between the conflicting aspects of science and religion, faith and doubt, hope and a sense of annihilation.

Another preeminent figure of Victorian poetry was Robert Browning, who was also Tennyson's contemporary. Never have two products of the same age been so widely diverse as Browning and Tennyson. Browning remains uninfluenced by the element of doubt that had entered the Victorian era as a result of the scientific and industrial advantage of the age. The element of doubt and skepticism find no place in the poetry of Browning. He speaks of outright faith.

Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* is a delightful poem. The conclusion of *Fra Lippo Lippi* is that the world is good because God made it. This shows Browning's clear optimism, which goes against Victorian pessimism: 'This world's no blot for us.' *Fra Lippo Lippi* expresses Browning's strongest

word of pure faith to an age of doubt. Like *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the opening line of A

Grammarians' Funeral also presents a dramatic Situation in the poem:

Let us begin and carry up this corpse  
Singing together.

The poem describes that the grammarian has the optimistic belief in a benevolent God and immortality of the soul. Thus *A Grammarian's Funerals* reflects Browning's robust optimism, which was a strong opposing element of Victorians, for example: "Straight get by heart that book to its learned; we found him"(line, 51- 52). In the poem the mountain peak on which the Grammarian is to be buried achieves a symbolic value. The plains, which suffice for the common masses, symbolize low aims. The poem admits allegorical interpretation throughout. Thus poem finds a modern element, which was absent in Victorian poems. Like the modern poets Browning does not follow the established rules of poetry. *A Grammarian's Funeral* is also written in blank verse like *Fra Lippo Lippi* and other poems of Browning. The poem is indeed, a "psalm of life, the mighty optimistic song of a life lived in the life of eternity, rather than within the limits of time."

Like Browning, Hopkins is also the Product of the Victorian age. Though Hopkins belonged chronologically to the Victorian age, his poetry marks a complete departure from the Victorian tradition. He freed both meter and language from the bonds of convention and paved the way for the emergency of modern poetry. Hopkins poetry is a reaction to the spiritual crisis and unrest of Victorian age. He regrets human failure to establish faith in self and knowledge. An anthology of modern poetry begins with Hopkins. His faith in Creator and His creation and its dappled manifestations is a necessary reaction to the crisis ridden Victorian period. *The Wind hover, God's Grandeur and Pied Beauty* are some remarkable nature poems where nature is held as a mirror to depict the conflict of the poet's mind. The spiritual crises, sense of alienation from God are dominant themes of these poems. The self is constantly struggling in quest of comfort and salvation. *The Wind hover* is regarded as a masterpiece. The poem demands multiple interpretations because of its rich imagery. The poet considers the falcon as symbol of Christ, the savior. With the sestet the poet addresses the divine flacon directly and craves for its mastery. He exclaims in ecstasy,

" Here/Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier.

In *God's Grandeur*, the first line is awe-struck outcry of joy at the omnipresent grandeur of God:

" The world is charged with the grandeur of God"

The next seven lines however, contain a pessimistic picture of world. In the sestet the feeling of joy re-asserts itself, and the innate glory of the world and the loving presence of the Holy Ghost are stated in an emphatic manner. The language used in the whole sonnet is forceful. *God's Grandeur* is celebrated and valorized wit all its manifestations in "God's Grandeur". The poem,

*Pied Beauty* begins like a hymn in ecstatic praise of god, " Glory be to God for dappled things".

This sonnet contains a whole catalogue of dappled things. Each presenting a vivid image: Fresh – fire coal chest nest falls," 'fold' and plough, etc. One prominent theme in Hopkins poetry is the glory of god reflected in nature. In poems like *Pied Beauty; 'God's Grandeur'* and *'The Wind hover'*, Hopkins appears as a devotee of Christ who established a faith in the 'Heraclitean Fire'. The tension between the physical & the spiritual is essentially creative in Hopkins.

## 6. Implication

- 1) By the late 1950s the reception of In Memoriam in literary spear had undergone a reversal as scholars began to detect continuity rather than conflict between Victorian and Modern.
- 2) Reference can be made to Walter Pater's studies in the history of the Renaissance (1873) where emphasis was given to 'experience', not the fruit of experience.
- 3) John Wain even makes an important observation that Hopkins' poetry satisfies the two chief modern poetic principals- irreducibility and simultaneity.
- 4) The psycho analytical interests of the poetry of Browning make him a trendsetter for the techniques of the modern impressionists belonging to the school of the 'steam of consciousness technique '

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude this, it can be said that the tensions of the conflicting demand rise because of the scene of the Victorian world is not the same in the Modern world. The age is one of the interrogations, and there is a total break down of old faith, idealism and conviction. In fact the modern age appears quite skeptical of the old certainties and values, governing Victorian life. The modern age is labeled, and rightly perhaps, as the age of interrogation. Old prejudices and old moralities are challenged sharply. There is a clear revolt against the conventionalism, Victorianism,- against its sense of stability, its strife for order and its spiritual complacency and the conflicting demands between the Victorian and the modern poetry were reflected clearly and aptly by Tennyson's poetry, Browning's poetry and Hopkins' poetry.

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