

B.A (English - Hons)
Part - II
Paper - I

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Literary Tendencies of the Victorian Age

The Victorian age was one of the most remarkable periods in the history of English literature. It witnessed the flowering of poetry in the hands of a host of poets, great and small. It marked the growth of the English novel, and laid the foundation of English prose on a sure footing.

The Victorian age was essentially the age of prose and novel. The novel in this age fills a place which the drama held in the days of Elizabeth; and never before, in any age, or language, has the novel appeared in such numbers and in such perfection.

Victorian literature in its varied aspects was marked by a deep moral note. The second marked characteristic of the age is that literature, both in prose and poetry, seems to depart from the purely æsthetic standard of art for art's sake and to be actuated by a definite moral purpose. Tompkins, Browning, Carlyle and Ruskin were primarily interested in their message to their countrymen. They were teachers of England and were inspired by a conscious moral purpose to uplift and instruct their fellow men. Behind the fun and sentiment of Dickens, the social miniature of Thackeray, the psychological studies of George Eliot, lay hidden a definite moral purpose to sweep away error and to bring out vividly in unmistakable terms the underlying truth of human life.

The literature of the Victorian age was co-related to the social and political life of the age. It became an instrument of social reform and social propaganda and it was marked with

purposeful, propagandistic and didactic aims.

A few literary artists of this age struck the note of revolt against the materialistic tendencies of the age, and sought to seek refuge in the overcharged atmosphere of the middle ages. An escapist note is also perceptible in the Victorian literature, and this is particularly noticed in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite poets. Rossetti delved in the folklore and diablerie of the Middle Ages. Morris buried himself in its legends and sagas. There were some minor reversion to classicism, but taken largely, literature of the age continued to be romantic, in the novelty and variety of its form, in its search after undiscovered springs of truth and beauty, in its emotional and imaginative intensity.

The literature of the Victorian age, inspite of its insistence on rationality, and an order born out of reason, could not completely cut off from the main springs of Romanticism. The spirit of Romanticism continued to influence the innermost consciousness of the age. It affected the works of Tennyson, Thackeray, Browning and Arnold. It permeated almost every thought just as it coloured almost every mode of expression. All the literary artists of the age were impregnated with it. Carlyle's thundering denunciations were of Shelley and Byron. New vibrations were added to the main chord of Romanticism. Between the years 1875 to 1880 the romantic inspiration was again in the ascendant.

A note of pessimism, doubt and despair runs through Victorian literature and is noticed especially in the poetry of Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough. Though a note of pessimism runs through the literature of the age, yet it can not be dubbed as a literature of bleak pessimism and dark despair. A note of idealism and optimism is also struck by poets like Browning and prose writers like Ruskin. Rabbi Ben Ezra brings out the courageous optimism of the age. Great essayists like Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin, and great novelists like Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot inspire us with their

faith in humanity and uplift us by their buoyancy and large charity.

The literature of the age is considerably modified by the impact of science. It is the scientific spirit, and all that the scientific spirit implied, its certain doubt, its care for minuteness and truth of observation, its growing interest in social processes, and the conditions under which life is lived that is the central fact in Victorian literature. The questioning spirit in Clough, the pessimism of James Thomson, the melancholy of Matthew Arnold, the fatalism of Fitzgerald, are all the outcome of the sceptical tendencies evoked by scientific research. Tennyson's poetry is also considerably influenced by the advancement of science in the age, and the undertones of scientific researches can be heard in *In Memoriam*.

A note of patriotism runs through Victorian literature. Tennyson, Dickens and Disraeli are inspired by a national pride and a sense of greatness in their country's superiority over other nations. Tennyson strikes the patriotic note in the following lines:

" It is the land that freemen till
That sober-suited freedom chose
A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where freedom slowly broadens down.
From precedent to precedent"

In one direction the literature of the Victorian age achieved a salient and momentous advance over the literature of the Romantic Revival. The poets of the Romantic Revival were interested in nature, in the past, and in a lesser degree in art, but they were not intensely interested in men and women. To Wordsworth, the dealersmen of the lakes were a part of the scenery they moved in. He treated human beings as natural objects and divested them of the complexities

and passions of life as it is lived. The Victorian poets and novelists laid emphasis on men and women and imparted to them the same warmth and glow which the Romantic poets had given to nature. The Victorian age extended to the complexities of human life, the imaginative sensibility which its predecessor had brought to bear on nature and history. The Victorian poets and novelists added humanity to nature and art as the subject matter of literature.

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