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The Pre-Raphaelite Movement - Poets - Poetry

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement was an idealistic reaction against the didacticism, moral fervour and pre-occupation of the poets with the material problems of their age. During the Victorian age, literature was virtually made an instrument for the propaganda of moral and spiritual ideas. It was used just as a vehicle of the social, political and religious problems of the age. As a reaction against this trend, some artists formed a group, known as Pre-Raphaelite. They sought to escape from the world of vulgar realities to the land of beauty, art and business. They tried to take refuge in the romance and mysticism of the Middle Ages. They were not satisfied with the tradition of Raphael. So, they got inspiration from the Italian artists before Raphael. That is why they are called Pre-Raphaelites.

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Originally, this movement was an attempt to revive simplicity, freshness and freedom in painting. But, soon it included the revival of poetry. The Pre-Raphaelite poets revolted against the existing practice of using poetry as a means for the varied problems of the age. They introduced new standards of glorification of art rather than the glorification of the values of the contemporary life. They were all artists and art were their religion. They preached the doctrine of 'Art for Art Sake'. Their only aim was to burn incense at the altar of art and worship art for its own glorification. They had no morality to preach and no reform to introduce through poetry. Love of beauty was their creed. They turned their eyes to the

good old days of medievalism, when Chivalry and Knighthood, adventure and heroism were applauded.

The Pre-Raphaelites were pictorial poets and their paintings and poems were symphonies in colour. Their works seem to be rhythmic pageant of colour. Pictures are drawn with the richness of a painter's brush. They used to present elaborate and precise details. They painted every blade of grass and every part of the body with scrupulous care and precision. It is this finger over every detail that exposed them to the charge of fleshliness. Their poems are also rich in melody and sensuousness. They often sacrificed dense at the altar of sound!

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The leading spirit of this school was Rossetti. The true aesthetic spirit of art finds its best expression in his sonnets and ballads. His poetic world is a rare world of mystery, wonder and beauty. It is far removed from the hectic world of sordidness. His poetry gives the glimpses of an unearthly spirit that haunts Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and that magical touch which is the glory of Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'A Last Confession' and 'The Blessed Damozel' exhibit his flight of imagination and pictorial qualities. 'My Sister's Sleep' and 'Rose Mary' make us roam in the world of Romance, mysticism and Supernaturals. But his 'Troy Town' and the 'House of Life' display some taints of fleshliness. However, the charges of sensuality against him cannot stand for he considered the physical expression as the visible power that could mould life.

William Morris also belongs to this school. He was an artist and remained so through out his life. His love for the past and disgust with the modernity is reflected.

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in 'Earthly Paradise'. He goes to the Middle Ages not as an aesthetic scholar but as a child. His poem import the readers to an enchanted region, a world of beautiful illusions, where everything is bathed in the atmosphere of magic, witchery and romanticism. A.C Swinburne is another pillar of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry. His subject matters are derived from romanticism, medievalism and his hatred is directed against the conventional morality. Unlike other Pre-Raphaelites, he is a musician rather than pictorial, displaying his gift of lyricism and melody. He had made thought musically sensuous. Homan Hunt and T.E Mallai are two other poets whose poems exhibit the Pre-Raphaelite spirit. C.G. Rossetti, a Victorian poetess of exceptional repute can also be named with the Pre-Raphaelites.

Thus, we see that the Pre-Raphaelites rendered a distinct service to art by advocating an escape from the existing social problems to the medieval world of romance. But, the complete withdrawal from the contemporary life and mere sensuousness and decorative beauty made their Poetry thin and bodiless. This is why the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry had its day during the days of its exponents and soon after their death it declined like anything. However, it cannot be denied that the Pre-Raphaelites gave a new colour to English Poetry

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