

## Victorian Themes in Tennyson's Poetry

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Alfred Tennyson 1809-1892

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### Abstract

The Victorian Age was the time when men were considered higher than women and they need to remain chaste and live within the four walls. The husbands did not have any regards for their wives, who they thought are for cooking, cleaning and looking after the child. It was the period where the age-old beliefs came into contrast with the new theories and as such the conflict between science and religion became intense and wide spread. With the rapid scientific development, the thirst for more and more knowledge was insatiable which was followed by colonial expansion. It was also the period where the people showed strong nationalism expressing their love for the country.

**Keywords:** Victorian age, Women, Science & religion, colonial expansion.

### Victorian Age

The Victorian Age can be dated from 1837-1901, the year in which Queen Victoria ascended the throne of England and the year in which she died. Queen Victoria reigns from June 20, 1837 until her death on January 22, 1901. The Age was characterised by the rise of democracy and the

advancement of science. The first Reform Bill 1832 extended the franchise and gave more people the right to vote though it excluded the working class people by its insistence on property ownership. With the spread of popular education, newspapers, magazines and cheap books, facts and speculations of the experts were exposed to the reading public. A huge upheaval in thought was the result of this rapid progress and popularisation of knowledge; new theories came into conflict with old faiths; the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation.

**Literature - Mirror of the Society**

A work of literature is the product of the age which he lives in and that is why literature is said to be the mirror of society. But it does not simply reflect the society, but also it analyses it, and if possible, it guides the society. It opens up a vast scope of knowledge about people and place. The socio-cultural and historical aspects of a particular place can be known through the study of literature. The rise and fall of a civilization, the weakness and strength of a nation are told in graphic reality in the great literary works. It is even said that the truth of poetry (literature) is greater than the truth of history as history books are content to record the outward happenings only. Great works of literature studies judiciously the nature of human mind and spirit; it delves into the psychological realm of human relationship. The subtle part of human relationship is most exquisitely expressed in literature.

**Alfred Lord Tennyson**

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was the leading poet of the Victorian Age in England and he was considered as the representative poet of the Age. He became the poet laureate after the death of William Wordsworth in the year 1850. For about half a century he was the voice of the England, expressing the doubts and faith, the grief and triumphs of the people of his age. He reflects the restless spirit of his age as Pope voices the artificiality of the eighteenth century and Chaucer of the fourteenth century. He wrote on various issues as found in his age like war, patriotism, imperialism, the rights and higher education of woman, etc. besides the question of science and religion. Few poems where the leading issues of the time have been mentioned are selected in this paper.

**Women’s Sexuality and Their Place in the Victorian World**

The poem The Princess (1847) was written on the subject of women’s rights and education. Tennyson had handled finely the social problem of woman and her relations with the life of his time. The poem considered as the ‘herald melody’ of higher education for women (Gordon, 1906, p.80), was written to show that woman must fit herself to do the work that lies before her, that she must not train her memory alone but must cultivate her understanding and must be sympathetic towards all that is pure, noble, and beautiful. Only then will she ‘further the progress of humanity, then and then only men will continue to hold her in reverence (Memoir I, 1897, pp. 247-250).

In the Prologue, Lilia, in response to the query whether women of great nobleness existed answers:

There are thousands now  
Such women, but convention beats them down;  
It is but bringing *up*; no more than that.  
You men have done it--how I hate you all!

.....

O I wish

That I were same great princess, I would build  
Far off from men a college like a man’s,  
And I would teach them all that men are taught;



We are twice as quick! (Tennyson, 1899, pp. 156-157)  
In Part III, during a field trip the instructress recapitulates again the aim of the college:

To lift the woman's fallen divinity.  
Upon an even pedestal with man (Tennyson, 1899, p.175).

The point of view of the Princess regarding the role of her sex became a contrast with the tradition on how man and woman were thought at that time is shown by the father of the Prince in the letter sent to demand the freedom of his son:

You have our son; touch not a hair of his head;  
Render him up unscathed; give him your hand;  
Cleave to your contract - tho' indeed we hear  
You hold the woman is the better man;  
A rampant heresy, such as if it spread  
Would make all women kick against their lords  
Thro all the world, and which might well deserve  
That we this night should pluck your palace down; (Tennyson, 1899, p.185)

In Part VII, the Princess is of the opinion that man is not looking down upon women, but it is what the world follows at that time:

Blame not thy self too much, I said, nor blame  
Too much the sons of men and barbarous laws;  
These were the rough ways of the world till now (Tennyson, 1899, p.211)

It was during the Victorian period that men were seen as strong and powerful whereas women were seen as weak and frail. The women had to obey men because their life depends on them. The home was considered the centre of virtue and the proper life for women. The people had the perception that men are stronger and are to work in the field, need to hold sword and fight for the people and they have the power to command. Whereas women are considered weak and need to work by the side of the hearth, do household chores and obey commands of the men. Alfred Tennyson had clearly expressed in the poem *The Princess* when he says:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;  
for the sword, and for the needle she;  
Man with the head, and women with the heart;  
Man to command, and woman to obey;  
All else is confusion. (Tennyson, 1899, p.197)

Alfred Tennyson is of the view that woman is not undeveloped man but diverse and nevertheless as time goes by man and woman will grow more alike. It is the age where men were considered superior to women and they are expected to remain chaste and live within the four walls, cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. They thought of uplifting the status of the woman where they even prophesy that woman will work side by side with man in the future. In this poem, it had to be man who at last solved the problem, because the people of the nineteenth century believed that man was lord of all and women have to submit themselves to man.

### ***The Lady Of Shalott***

In the poem *The Lady Of Shalott*, the Lady perfectly represents the Victorian woman who is isolated from the world and remains dedicated only with her husband and remain within the four walls. The Lady's confinement and restriction of her life within the castle may be compared with the restrictions on the Victorian woman. The Victorian Woman does not have the right to contact the world other than through her husband. This has been vividly expressed in the poem where the Lady is forbidden to look outside other than through the reflections she sees in her mirror. It conveys that unconventional behavior of the Victorian woman will lead to tragedy and destruction. In the poem Tennyson says:

A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot.  
She knows not what the curse may be,  
And so she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear  
That hangs before her all the year,  
Shadows of the world appear.  
There she sees the highway near  
Winding down to Camelot (Tennyson, 1899, p.34)

It was during the Victorian period that women were considered a lesser man and they were compared to man as moonlight unto sunlight and as water unto wine. This notion of the Victorians in the subordinate position of women is also expressed by Tennyson in "Locksley Hall":

Weakness to be worth with weakness! woman's pleasure, woman's pain-  
Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain:  
Woman is the lesser man and all the passions, match'd with mine  
Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine. (Tennyson, 1899, pp.124-25)

### ***Ulysses***

In the poem 'Ulysses' the hero does not have any regard for his wife where he dismisses her with the phrase 'Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole'. He believes in the masculine superiority and considers woman as weak and incapable of courage required for the pursuit of knowledge. Women were robbed of their vital place in the society and had no role outside home. The mindset of the man during the period that women are lower and not equal to man and women should be confined at homes has also been expressed in this poem.

### **The Religious Questions – *In Memoriam***

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the religious faith of the people was firm and strong where they had a complete faith in the Bible. Even science and religion walked hand in hand and were considered as the two faces of a coin. The religious issues which shook the mid-Victorian Age are reflected through the sensibility of Alfred Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. Tennyson wrote the poem *In Memoriam* in honor of his beloved friend who died very young; and through him, he questioned his faith in God, in nature and in poetry. The poem reflects grief and despair which are typical emotions in Victorian era, and it leads the reader to doubt, hope and faith. In the Prologue Tennyson exposes the religious faith in the beginning of the Age where they live by absolute faith in God even if they cannot see nor prove its existence and not by sight.

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove; (Tennyson, 1899, p.217)

The nineteenth century was the age of rapid scientific development which kept pace with the progress of democracy. The rapid progress and acquisition of knowledge caused an upheaval in thought; new theories came into conflict with old faiths; the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation. It was marked by the spirit of inquiry and criticism, by skepticism and religious uncertainty and by spiritual struggle; it was an age of faith and doubt. The conflict between science and religion became intense and wide spread. Tennyson refused to neither abandon his faith in God nor reject the science but tried to maintain a balance between the two by acknowledging the scientific discoveries and at the same time maintained his religious faith.

Alfred Tennyson's attitude toward knowledge is shown here. He says that knowledge is like a light in the darkness which comes from God. Knowledge is never ending; it must grow and must be accompanied by faith and reverence. Alfred Tennyson does not worry about the threat posed by science to religion. He says that we should have more reverence for God. He wants the mind and the soul to work together in a spirit of mutual co-operation and form one harmonious whole like before modern science had created the gulf between intellectual 'knowledge' on the one hand and instinctive 'reverence' on the other:

We have but faith: we cannot know;  
For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow.  
Let knowledge grow from more to more,  
But more of reverence in us dwell;  
That mind and soul, according well,  
May make one music as before. (Tennyson, 1899, p.218)

The Victorians loved the poem, *In Memoriam* and were moved by it because the poem dealt with the very problems that most concerned them: problems arising from the gradual fading-out of the older spiritual lights in the harsh dawn of a new and more positive age. In the poem entitled, "The Two Voices," Tennyson refuses to believe that the grave is humanity's final goal (Swanwick, 1892, p.386). His faith in his own immortality strengthens this belief. Referring to Hallam, the voice says:

His palms are folded on his breast;  
There is no other thing express's  
But long disquiet merged in rest (Tennyson, 1899, p.40)

To this Alfred Tennyson answers:

Who forged that other influence,  
That heat of inward evidence  
By which he doubts against the sense? (Tennyson, 1899, p.41)

At the beginning of the poem the poet argues within himself whether life is worth living. It was hard to believe at first, but eventually the arguments turn in favour of hope; the voice of negation finds it harder to think of replies and as daylight comes, it sullenly withdraws from the fray. Alfred Tennyson concedes as in *In Memoriam* that immortal love does exist and that good is the ultimate goal of all. In the poem he exposes his spiritual dilemma after the death of his friend Hallam which represents the fluttering faith between the age-old Christianity and modern scientific thought of the Victorian Age.

### **Thirst for Knowledge and Imperialism**

Alfred Tennyson was reflecting about the indomitable spirit of the people of his time as found in his famous poem “Ulysses”. The spirit of the age expresses the insatiable thirst of the human soul for more and more knowledge. Alfred Tennyson has presented the spirit of the Italian Renaissance that made modern Europe with what his country of his time was. Here we notice that Ulysses has spent twenty years of his life in battles and adventures. He has seen and learnt many things, yet he is not satisfied and his thirst for knowledge is unquenchable. He is not even upset by the passing away of his youth and his bodily strength which is an embodiment or a symbol of the modern passion for knowledge, exploration of limitless fields and conquest of new regions of science and thought and wishes to undertake more adventures. He says:

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unfurnished, not to shine in use! (Tennyson, 1899, p.118)

The reign of Queen Victoria is recorded in the history of England as the era of the highest colonial expansion, which also saw the colonies starting to stir against being or remaining colonized. The writers of the time managed to influence public opinion by manipulating the British ideas about the natives with accounts of ruthless and uncultured savages that needed the advanced western society and the superior British understanding to become civilized. Alfred Tennyson as a Poet Laureate of Great Britain fulfilled the requirements of this position by bringing out appropriate work that argued for the value of Britain’s colonies. Alfred Tennyson in *Ulysses* expresses the conceited belief of the Victorians that they were far better than those they had conquered and were thus perfectly justified in subjugating their colonised people. It gives the glimpse into how the Victorians looked down upon the people of other cultures. Tennyson’s *Ulysses* himself found and considered the colonized people of the British Empire:

... a savage race  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed.... (Tennyson, 1899, p.117)

Hence, Alfred Tennyson’s perception as found in ‘Ulysses’ the subjects of the British Empire were villainous rustics but were only just saved from total barbarism by the intervention of the colonizers. Alfred Tennyson’s patronizing attitudes towards the British colonies are also seen from the following lines:

... to make mild  
A rugged people, and thro’ soft degrees  
Subdue them to the useful and the good. (Tennyson, 1899, p.118)

His advocacy of the concept of liberal imperialism with a reform agenda, which was his way of selling the idea of preserving British culture and political hegemony in the colonies which, in fact, the concept of liberal imperialism was the primary argument the British government made to justify her invasion and subsequent occupation of many Asian and African nations.

'Ulysses' with the theme of journey also deals with the spread of imperialism and building up of the British Empire. It is through the pursuit of journey that the Englishmen were able to discover more lands, expand one's horizons and also acquire more knowledge. The Victorians were proud that their society was undergoing many changes. Almost all the major Victorian thinkers hailed their time as bringing in new order to replace old systems of thought. They were proud of the fact that their Age was witnessing the dissolution of the earlier feudal system, and the corresponding rise in education among the masses. 'Ulysses' expresses the driving forces of the Victorian's desire to journey to far-off lands. The ageing Ulysses appeals to the sailors:

... come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. (Tennyson, 1899, p.118)

'Newer world' became a phrase common during the Renaissance for the Victorians were closely related with the subject of exploration and conquest. Alfred Tennyson's Victorian spirit is completely reflected when he says that even in old age his ambition is:

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (Tennyson, 1899, p.118)

The Victorian Age was a period of scientific discoveries where people yearn for more and more knowledge. The spirit of activity was very much in their blood that they travel to the ends of the earth to explore and discover more lands. It was the period of highest colonial expansion in the history of England. It was the period where they consider themselves superior to other races and considered it their duty to colonize them. The poem exposes the spirit of imperialism of the British Empire during the Victorian Age.

### **Love for the Country**

The poem 'The Charge Of The Light Brigade' based upon the Crimean War describes the marvelous courage of the British soldiers in which Alfred Tennyson pays his great homage to them. Harmony and order were important topics of the Victorian Age, but war was also necessary to preserve that harmony and the order and is a part of that strong nationalism prevailing in this period. The soldiers knew that it was a risky charge but their love for the country did not stop them from charging.

All in the valley of death  
Rode the six hundred  
Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!' he said:  
Into the valley of Death. (Tennyson, 1899, p.292)

A soldier should be ready to fight for any war at any time, he has to go to the battlefield and fight to defend his country against the enemies or invaders of the land, and if necessary, he has to lay down his life in the defence of his country. It is an honourable task to take orders and serve one's country. Tennyson makes use of the sacrifices of the soldiers in the war as a message of glory and bravery for one's country a noble and desirable end. Tennyson used his poetry to express his love for England. In the poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" he praises the fortitude and courage of English soldiers during a battle of the Crimean War in which roughly 200 men were killed.

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