
UNIT 36 THE VICTORIAN AGE : SELECTED STUDIES

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36.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- ◊ recognise the major and minor poets of the Victorian Age;
- examine the cultural background of the Victorian Age;
- ◊ answer critical questions on your examination paper in a better way; and
- write essays or term papers on this course.

36.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first units of previous blocks we have generally discussed the background of the respective periods in detail. However, we did not tell you how to answer examination questions or write essays for your counsellors. Some of you might need that kind of help. In this unit our focus would be on *your* style of writing for your examiners.

Most of you should be studying this block in all earnestness in August/September with the final exam just three or four months away. So we have fashioned this unit to cater to that need of yours. We are going to present a model short essay (or a note) and an answer of a critical question in this unit. Besides we are also going to provide you with a long essay or term-paper as we expect you to write some. Needless to say that in this unit we are going to prepare you for the final exam with respect to the Victorian Age in British poetry but you will be able to apply the skills you acquire here and the insights you gain while reading this unit to the subjects of other blocks and units of this course.

36.2 WRITING A SHORT ESSAY

If you are asked to write a short essay or a note on one of the topics out of three or four given on your question paper then how would you do it? You should prepare a number of topics on a given period and try to understand the focus of such a topic and ways and means of developing the central point. You may have to substantiate your

point with the help of your arguments, details of events, and examples from the poetry of that period. Below is a short essay on 'Victorian Complacency'. Please go through it.

36.2.1 Victorian Complacency

The Victorians in general and the mid-Victorians in particular have been criticised for complacency, self-satisfaction, squeamishness, and snobbery. If these were true, there they were good reasons for them. When the great exhibition opened in the year 1851, the whole nation suddenly realized that a unique thing had happened. Objects of art and curiosity from the entire world were assembled below one roof and London had become the center of the world, if not the hub of mankind. Tennyson, the poet laureate's lines in 'Locksley Hal' reflected the mood of the nation very well:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see
Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be.
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales:
Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furled
In the Parliament of man the Federation of the world.

The Victorians saw that they could call the 'parliament' of the world and preside over the federation of nations.

In architecture itself the Crystal Palace was a novelty to be built in the fourteenth year of Queen Victoria's reign. Thackeray, who had expressed his opinion in favour of Republicanism and against Chartism, wrote an ode on the Palace:

As though t'were by a wizard's rod
A blazing art of palace bright
Raised from the grass to meet the sun.

In many things, the Victorians saw that their dreams and their achievements were beyond the wildest dreams of mankind.

The industrial revolution had brought great wealth for all sections of the society. The Railways had transformed the country. Tennyson, seated in the first train from Liverpool to Birmingham wrote:

Let the great world spin for ever,
Down the singing grooves of change.

The railways had in fact brought about a great change. New houses made of red bricks, cement, lime and Welsh slate had sprung up; heavy and ugly in look, but nevertheless a proof of England's economic progress.

Victorian complacency comes to the surface when we witness their economic progress not being matched by their sense of beauty and their scientific discoveries not being commensurate with their ability to doubt their own ardours. The old light furniture of the eighteenth century, that was undoubtedly a proof of grace, good taste and social charm was upholstered and puffed up beyond all proportions. Painting and sculpture had devoted its energy at making likenesses but the invention of the photographic camera, with which they could not compete in portraying likenesses left them for a time without direction. It was with the experiments of Whistler in the United States that the Victorians set out to paint Impressionistic paintings. In music of course the great age found its peers which culminated in the 1870's with the Sullivan operas that made a dig against the peers and the poor alike.

The Victorian age was peculiarly religious. Perhaps the age can be understood better by an understanding of their religion and their social and political reforms. Evangelicalism permeated Anglicanism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, Catholicism, and all alike. The age produced Gladstone, General Gordon and Livingstone all pioneers in different fields but all held by their solid foundations in Christianity. Trevelyan in the last chapter of his *English Social History* says that the Victorians were truly Greek or Athenian in their pride and confidence in this period of their history and the following lines perhaps best express their self-confidence which in essence is a translation from the Greek writers:

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
But vaster.

The Victorians had unbounded faith in their learning and pride in their accomplishments. It was not surprising that they believed in a living Deity. The poor children in their Sunday Schools read:

A is for angel who praises the lord
B stands for Bible that teaches god's word
C stands for Church to which righteous men go
D stands for devil the cause of all woe.

These lines leave an impression of peculiar complacency among the poor.

Very much the same impression can be had from the books of Samuel Smiles who was the best seller of the year 1859. It was in that year that *Self-Help* was published and 120,000 copies were sold within a few weeks. In the next thirty years about 240,000 copies were sold. His other titles on similar themes were, *Character, Thrift* and *Duty*. The Victorians loved to hear long sermons in the church and preachings from their authors and the priests and writers of the time gave them instructions in profuse quantities.

This mood of self-satisfaction was not challenged at first even by the publication of *The Origin of the Species* of Charles Darwin; published in the same year as *Self-Help*. Besides socialism Science put forward before the Victorians, a new field of cooperation with Europe. Tennyson in *In Memoriam* (1851) surveyed the entire history of mankind from the time of creation to the fifty years of progress in the nineteenth century that was behind him. Asserting his faith in the scientists Tennyson wrote :

For they to eye an eye shall look
On knowledge; under whose command is earth
And earth's; and in their hand
Is nature like an open book.,

But this joy was punctured soon, by the revolutionary ideas on the descent of the human species on the one hand and the Higher Criticism of the Bible on the other, The new *Life of Jesus* presented by David Friedrich Strauss in Germany brought about a spiritual bewilderment in Victorian England. Tennyson gave voice to this spiritual uncertainty in his poetry :

I falter where I firmly trod
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world altar stairs
And slope through darkness upto god.

I stretch lame hands of faith and grope
And gather dust and chaff and call
To what I feel is lord of all
And faintly trust the larger hope

The hope now in God was weaker than before. The confidence in the Bible that teaches God's word was gone.

But it was not in Religion alone that the confidence was shaken. Carlyle showed how the Victorians had become 'Spinning Arachnes' and 'building beavers' who made money but at the cost of the sense of wonder. He suspected the liberal tendencies of his generation and like a Hebrew prophet warned that their regeneration did not lie in parliamentary reforms but in searching out their true god.

Matthew Arnold, the son of the great head master of Rugby, saw clearly in which sense his own age had lost in the bargain with the last. He pointed it out in the following lines of 'The Scholar Gypsy'.

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
And life ran gaily on the sparkling Thames:
Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry its divided aims,
Its head overtaxed, its palsied hearts, was rife –

The complacency of the previous years came to an end in 1870 when in a resounding victory of Prussia against France in the Battle of Sedan the emperor Napoleon III himself became a prisoner of Bismarck. Now onwards England could not dare attempt a victory like that at Crimea (1854-'56) in Europe. In Africa its position was challenged by Germany and the Victorian complacency was at an end. Besides Germany, Italy also emerged from the victory at Sedan as a unified powerful nation which could challenge France and England in North Africa. Across the Atlantic, the railways in the United States and the repealed Corn-law (in 1846) made it easy to flush English markets with cheap foreign corn and threaten English agriculture. The Industrial Revolution in other lands made the Victorians review their stand on free trade and demand fair trade instead. The protective tariff walls in Germany gave a direction to other countries on the continent and the scramble for an empire became a national imperative. The colonies were no longer considered mill stones round the neck of the mother country. Thus the Britishers reviewed the progress they had made in the previous twenty years and disapproved of most of it. The Victorians had been somewhat blind and complacent but soon woke up to reality.

Now that you have read the essay you can imagine and then plan what you would be required to do to write some essay of the above type on the Victorian age, or any other age for that matter. You need not panic because such preparations are often done on one or two periods and good examiners make sure that they do not leave out any one period on the question paper. You would be able to exercise your choice. What is, however, required in this case is that you must remember a few passages from the poetry of the period you are preparing for your final, i.e. term end examination.

Now do the exercise given below.

Self-Check Exercise-I

1. Find out about the Crimean War. What was it? Write in no more than 15 words

2. Who was Napoleon III?

3. In which year were *The Origin of the Species* and *Self-Help* published and who wrote them?

4. Did you discover any difference in the style of an essay and a lesson? What are those?

36.3 ANSWERING A CRITICAL QUESTION

The difference between an essay and a critical question is in their different foci. The essay has a well-defined focus of attention which is decided upon by the author (i.e. you). In a critical question a point of view is provided by the examiner. Such questions have a few twists and curves in them and you must understand all of them and not overlook any in your answer. It is not necessary either to agree or disagree with the point of view of the critic. However, you must substantiate your point of view with suitable examples (i.e. passages from poetry) and short and appropriate quotations. Inapt quotations will damage the quality of your answer. Below you will read one such answer. Go through it and then ask yourself how the pretended examinee has answered the critical question and how you would plan your own answers. Don't overlook the content either. Rather, your first reading should be for the content and not the style.

36.3.1 'The great Victorian poets lacked the fire and passion which we find in the poets of the Romantic Revival, but they excelled them in breadth of outlook and variety of method.' Discuss.

The great Victorian poets are undisputedly Tennyson, Browning and Matthew Arnold and each in his own way was influenced by the masters of the Romantic age. Early Tennyson was very powerfully under the influence of Keats and in certain respects even excelled him. The sensuousness that we find in 'moss'd cottage tree' of 'Ode to Autumn' becomes in 'Mariana' - 'The cluster'd marish-mosses crept'. 'The Lotus-Eaters', 'Recollections of the Arabian Nights' and 'Oenone' show Tennyson's proneness for the suave mellifluousness of Spenser through Keats. Keats had appreciated the 'Spenserian vowels that clope with ease' in his youthful 'Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke'. Tennyson constantly also kept working over the sonorousness of the English language and succeeded in exploring the musical quality of his native speech. Keats wrote in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds after he abandoned *Hyperion* - 'English must be kept'. While we find the influence of Keats on early Tennyson we do not fail to discern the latter's untiring experiment with sound, the result of which was the memorable lines of 'The Brook' which as it were, for its novelty, became a type in itself:

I come from haunts of coot and hern,
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down the valley.

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorps a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

Till last by Philip's farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever.



Lord Tennyson

- . Any one who sets out to cite lines from this poem **can hardly** check the temptation of **going** on. What, however, Tennyson gained in technique – the lines cited **convey** little to our intellect other than the thoughtless rush of **the** brook on a craggy path – he lost in the quality of sensuousness **that** Keats had, While **we** read lines from 'Autumn' we experience the 'ripeness to the core' or taste the grapes bursting against

our palate or look with attraction to the 'unravished bride of quietness' or the heaving heart of the beloved's breast in the 'Bright Star' sonnet. To say this is not to mean that Tennyson provides us with no compensation. Hardly did any Romantic poet, not even Shelley in 'Epipsychedion', attempt a variation on the theme of love as we find in 'Enoch Arden'. Wordsworth's 'Michael', if compared with 'Enoch Arden' from the point of narrative suffers on at least two grounds. The former narrative is less sustained and the philosophy or belief of Wordsworth is too obtrusive. As an extension of the range of poetry Tennyson's achievement in writing on themes like King Arthur or the Arabian Nights or the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' is really admirable.

If Tennyson's first poems were Keatsian, Browning wrote his early poems under the spell of Shelley. *Paracelsus* and *Pauline* are at least two most important poems of this phase. Soon, Browning was to become more confident and the liberal ideal, the scientific changes and a desire to explore the English language to its depths: not for the resonance and mellifluousness as Tennyson desired but for a nakedness of speech of a highly compelling quality, became his all consuming pursuit. Poems of *Men and Women* are all representative of this later phase. While one reads the account of his wife from the Duke of Ferrara, whose picture he got painted by some priest named Pandolf in 'My Last Duchess' one is teased into endless thought. Did the Duke get the Duchess murdered? Was it the infidelity of the Duchess that invited her end? Or, was it the pride –

She thanked men - good! but thanked
Somewhat - I know not how - as if she ranked,
My gift of a nine-hundred year-old name
With anybody's gift.

- that brought about her end? These are just some of the questions. Inquiries multiply as the poem unrolls, clothed in a language adequate to the subject –

This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

Even when read in their contexts there will perhaps be little in Romantic poetry that can be read with equal thrill than the haunting lines of the Duke :

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile?

And it was this quality – humility and culture perhaps - that was misinterpreted by the Duke with fatal consequences for the Duchess. In breadth of vision, in its wider sympathies, in its greater awareness of the social changes, Browning's poetry far outstrips the poetry of the Romantic poets. In its manipulation of the dramatic monologue, Browning has hardly anyone to match him. Wordsworth was involved with the early stages of the French Revolution but hardly any poem stands out from the corpus of his poetry as does 'Home thoughts from Abroad' or 'Home thoughts from Sea'. The *Ring and the Book* presents one murder from the point of view of nine characters who differ widely among themselves.

Compared with Tennyson Matthew Arnold presents a much sober picture. He, with his sympathy for the classical masters could not love the more fiery ones among the Romantics. His ideal was Wordsworth :

Time may restore us in his course
Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force
But where will Europe's latter hour
Again find Wordsworth's healing power

For Matthew Arnold, with Wordsworth's death the 'last poetic voice became dumb'.



Matthew Arnold

Goethe in Weimar sleeps, and Greece
Long since, saw Byron's struggle cease.
But one such death remained to come:

The last poetic voice is dumb -
We stand today by Wordsworth's tomb.

This influence was reflected in the serenity of Matthew Arnold's poems - 'Quiet Work'. 'A Question: To Fausta' and 'Switzerland'. But it is much more than what Wordsworth had heard in his 'Intimations of Immortality' – from the winds –

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

Somewhat like Sophocles on the shores of the Aegean, the disillusioned Arnold hears no soothing voice while he stands on Dover Bench –

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The thought that the sound of waves evokes is far more realistic than the winds spurred in Wordsworth or Keats. The latter wrote in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*:

'Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,
'Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
'Though it blows legend laden thro' the trees.

Matthew Arnold only heard the 'still sad music of humanity' as Wordsworth might have said.

The intensity born out of the association of the Romantic poets with nature and the individual passions of men is not to be found in the poetry of the 'Victorian poets but Tennyson's wider response to a variety of emotions attached with love, war, and medievalism; Browning's treatment of the themes of patriotism, liberation and the complex psychology of men; and Arnold's criticism of life with its portrait of the Victorian 'Sick hurry and divided aims' or his vision of his generation as hanging between "one dead and the other powerless to be born" is not to be found in the poetry of the Romantic Revival. What is also of the highest import is the fact that each of the Victorian poets discovered a suitable medium for himself – Tennyson's exquisite discovery of the music of the English language; Browning's discovery of the dramatic monologue and Arnold's reversion to the classical model, thus inflicting a simplicity over his medium are only some of the elements of the expanding range of themes and techniques used by the Victorian poets.

Self-check Exercise-I1

- 1 Who were the major Victorian poets and who were they most influenced by ?

2. Name at least five major minor and two minor Victorian poets.

36.5 ATTEMPTING A TERM-PAPER

In a note (or short essay) on a given topic on an examination question paper you don't have to give the exact reference such as the page number of your source from which you have cited a passage in prose or verse. We don't do that while teaching either in a face-to-face situation or through the distance mode. However, you have to cite your sources on a term-paper or long essay such as the one on 'The Religious Temper of the Victorian Age' that you are now going to read. The style of presentation in the essays that you read earlier and in the one you are now going to read remains more or less the same. However, a term-paper is written with access to books and journals while you are writing them so you don't have to remember the passages you quote. The danger, however, is to be unable to resist the temptation of copying in extension and fail to overcome the attraction of the passages of other people which will neither advance your argument nor provide another dimension to your thesis. In short, they will create a hodge-podge.

On this course we have favoured the idea of writing three term papers because we wish to encourage you to do some research and begin to learn to present your material in a scholarly fashion. This is a modest beginning but we believe that it would be useful for you in future. Now read the essay attentively.

36.4.1 The Religious Temper of the Victorian Age

If we just scan the figures of censuses; the number of churches and chapels that were built; the money that was spent on holy activities; the bills for the reform of church that were passed by the parliament; the propaganda that was carried out by the various denomination; the tracts loaded with controversies, that came frequently before the reading public; we will have no doubt left about the extraordinary activity that the English people indulged in on the issue of religion in the Victorian period: 111 matters of morality Prince Albert was a stickler, and it was he, 'who insisted on spotless character, the queen not caring a straw about it'. the Duke of Wellington told the diarist Charles Greville. The prince was 'extremely strait-laced' and royal dinner parties became a conspicuous model of decorum. Sunday observance" and Bible reading were works in which the whole nation took part. The prosperity of the English merchant was due to his honesty, his shrinking from ostentation and his thrifty ways. What he did not spend on pleasure he saved for investment in works both temporal and divine.

The most important aspect of the religious outlook of the Victorians was their emphasis on conduct. A sentence in the life of Cardinal Manning (1808-1892) by Leslie Shane is one that could be repeated *mutatis mutandis*, of the majority of the famous Victorians :

At Totteridge he learnt of the Book of *Judgment*, and endeavoured to conceal himself from God under a writing table⁴.

To a Victorian trader, Last Judgment appeared as real as the week's balance sheet. hell and heaven as certain as tomorrow's sunrise and evangelicalism made otherworldliness an everyday proposition, as real as his business enterprise.

Let all thy converse be sincere,
Thy conscience as the noonday clear;
For God's all seeing eye surveys
Thy secret thoughts, thy works and ways.⁵

could have been said by most Victorians.

Evangelicalism, however, was one creed that permeated all denominations. It emphasized the centrality and authority of the Bible. It laid stress on the faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. It revived the simplicity of the Gospel. The evangelists in the nineteenth century were descendants (in a way) of the Methodists in the eighteenth century, although the former was a movement inside the Church and the latter ramified into various small sects. It was the zealous attitude of the Methodists that all denominations adopted. Anthony Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-85) made his contribution to factory reforms, William Wilberforce (1759-1833) to the abolition of slavery and Hannah More (1745-1833) to education. On certain issues they could enlist the support of the entire nation and in this fashion went a long way in ending cynicism. Very few Victorians could regard the world's wickedness with equanimity. Lord Melbourne and Robert Surtees (1779-1834) appear rather as survivals from an earlier generation and Disraeli as a brilliant eccentric. This enthusiasm can be seen in certain reforms of Parliament, liberalism of Gladstone and the brilliant foreign policy of Palmerston and after him of Disraeli. The above mentioned facts, of course, had other influencing factors, like the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the American and the French revolutions, the European revolution of 1830 and 1848, progress of science in Europe in general and England in particular and Britain's comparative peace and supremacy in Europe. Evangelicalism itself might have been born out of these factors but it contributed not a little to embolden the society. Perhaps its best specimen is the Clapham Sect⁶. The distant influence of the sect can be seen on T.B. Macaulay, Fitzjames and Leslie Stephen. Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, and in a later generation, E.M Forster, and Virginia Woolf who were powerful people in handing down excellence as their inheritance, force as their prize, Dr. Johnson, who died in 1784, could be taken as a devout eighteenth-cent intellectual at his best. But even he believed with sad sincerity that schemes of improvement are generally absurd. Clapham in the nineteenth century, though well aware that the world is corrupt, believed that it could be changed.

The accent on the Bible as a source of guidance in life, underlined the importance of authority and an object of worship for all Englishmen. Somehow the Bible could not remain as sacrosanct as it was in the hands of the brothers John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield in the eighteenth century. The superstructure of a code of conduct built on the basis of a particular book of the Bible could clash with a similar one built on the basis of another. For the common man the authority of the Bible appeared confused. Darwin's theories on the origin of species, natural selection and descent of man on the one hand and the Tubingen school of Higher Criticism on the other, shook the faith of the more enlightened public in the Bible as the authentic word of God. Darwin's theory was reduced to the simple controversy over man's descent from monkeys. The researches of David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) in Germany and Ernest Emert Renan (1823-72) in France shook the foundations on which the reverence of the people for the Bible stood. The archaeologists and anthropologists produced evidence from their study of earth formation which revealed the inadequacy of the Biblical story of creation. Renan's extensive researches in Palestine convinced him that the Bible was no revealed word of God but the result of an evolutionary growth from primitive mythology and that Christ was an unhappy deluded man. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1863) was translated into English by George Eliot and of the three words – 'God, Immortality, Duty' – She pronounced with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second and yet how peremptory and absolute the third⁷. Duty, as

the Victorians conceived it was a strain in their religious makeup which remained even when their faith in Christianity vanished.

The two commandments of Christian morality – 'Love thy creator' and 'Love thy brothers' – remained important in some ways till the end. The father in the family was a terrible force to reckon with. This we observe in the biographies of the age. It was difficult to disagree with one's father. The second commandment took a unique expression in the activities of many nonconformist sects. The anti-slavery movement, the poor law, the factory and church reforms for the promotion of education, philosophic radicalism, Christian Socialism, Guild and Fabian Socialism were all expressions in various forms of the commandment that exhorts a good Christian to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Late in the century, when disillusionment and pessimism were fast descending on the once complacent Victorian people and when the elite took refuge in the cult of beauty, or imperialism, the moulds remained the same. Their new ideals continued to reinvigorate them and give them a sense of purpose with a force that the Bible had done before. The desire to obey the dictates of authority and a streak of selflessness was present in the philosophy of the imperialists. When Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) exhorted the Americans in 1899 to take up the 'White man's burden' in the Philippines, it was not for the benefit of the Filipinos but to test their own manhood:

Take up the White man's burden -
 Send forth the best ye breed -
 Go bind your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need:
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild -
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half devil and half child.⁸

He was convinced about the future of the people who were under the British that they would degenerate into chaos just as the British themselves did, after the withdrawal of the Romans, centuries ago. In the 'Recessional' (1897) he remembers the days of splendour of the Roman Empire with a haunting sense of a parallel:

Far-called, our navies melt away;
 On dune and headland sinks the fire:
 Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
 Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!⁹

Rudyard Kipling, William Henley (1849-1903) and Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938) felt an adoration for some authority. Occasionally it was the queen's but very often it was a vague ideal of the empire, the interests of the ruled, the Gods of the hosts, the need of conformity to principles even if the rules of the game became an end in themselves. The 'Recessional' is the haunting cry of an evangelical sensibility that has lost faith in God but not in the things that were taught by his faith.

If, drunk with sighs of power, we loose
 Wild tongues that have not thee in awe,
 Such boasting as the Gentiles use,
 Or lesser breeds without the Law -
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget - lest we forget!¹⁰

Kipling was a typical evangelist born late. And Kipling's generation was a product of the early evangelical *Zeitgeist*. There is a thread connecting the religious activists like Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and Charles Kingsley (1819-1936) who did have some faith in some type of God on the one hand and these stoic activities like Henley.

Housman (1859-1936), Newbolt and Kipling who accepted all the paraphernalia of the elder generation without, of course, the presiding deity on the other.

In this respect even the Aesthetes were not different from the others of their time. They insisted that technical processes were more important than the purpose or content. This is not different from Kipling's suggestion in 'The Galley-Slave':

It was merry in the galley, for we revelled now and then –
If they wore us down like cattle, faith we fought and loved like men!
As we snatched her through the water, so we snatched a minute's bliss.
And the mutter of the dying never spoiled the lover's kiss.

A little later he says;

Bear witness, once my comrades, what a hard hit gang were we –
The servants of the sweep-head, but the masters of the sea!
By the hands that drove her forward as she plunged and yawed and sheered.
Woman, Man, or God or Devil, was there anything we feared?¹¹

Somewhat alike the galley slaves and soldiers were the men and women in the plays of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The wit combats of Wilde's plays appear as an effort to reduce all life to style where as those in the Restoration comedies they can be seen to be in reaction to the over religious, even hypocritical atmosphere of the earlier generation. The love of the late Victorians for rules and of the Edwardians as well, for that matter, was not different in this respect – in the world of attitudes – and was a close cousin of Victorian public school civil service morality of holding on. The outlook that produced Sir Thomas Arnold and his students at Rugby was a part of the spirit of the age. In face of disgust and disillusionment, even apparent futility, a White Man had to obey the commands of the leader, if the empire was to remain a reality. 'Rugby Chapel' is a classic poem of the age that presents this outlook at its best:

Eyes rekindling, and prayers.
Follow your steps as ye go.
Ye fill up the gaps in our files
Strengthen the wavering line,
Stablish, continue our march,
On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the city of God."

The evangelical note of endurance, endeavour, and struggle can be seen coming to fruition in the late Victorian age among the imperialists and aesthetes. The sentiment, as it came to seed, is perfectly expressed in Henley's following lines from 'England, My England':

What have I done for you,
England, my England?
What is there I would not do,
England, my Own?¹³

Evangelicism, could, of course, not be expected to be the only force, no matter how popular it was. The tendencies that produced the Graveyard school of poets, the Gothic novel and revived the medieval motif in poetry and architecture, impelled religious minds to look for the roots in religion. In an earlier generation, the Methodist fanfare and their drawing the lots from the Bible could be seen as a product of the same tendency. In 1833 John Keble, cleric, poet, and theologian inaugurated the Oxford Movement by a sermon on 'National Apostasy'. Along with him were Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-82), William George Ward (1803-36), Frederick Oakeley (1802-80) and Isaac Williams (1802 -- 65) and of course Newman

and Manning. The Tractarian movement as it was also called – it took its name from the famous *Tracts for the Times* published in Oxford – was a High Church movement inside the church of England that emphasized the importance of clerical office, vestment and ritual. After the publication of tract 90, which tried to prove that the 30 articles of the Church of England had nothing contradictory to the Roman Catholic Church, many left the Anglican faith and joined Rome. Foremost among them were Newman and Manning. Newman wrote his spiritual biography *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* to show how his conversion to Roman Catholicism was a natural product of his spiritual progress. However his conversion in 1845 raised scarcely less outcry than Peel's conversion to free trade the following year. Such conversions, however, did not take place on a wide scale, even if they were symptomatic of the times.

The Tests and Corporations Act was abolished, the universities were opened to the dissenters but the growth in the catholic population and their places of worship was not however due to the popularity of Rome among common people. The 1851 census revealed that out of the 519,959 Irish living in England seventy-five per cent were Roman Catholics.

The more we analyze the facts with regard to the adherence to a particular dogma the more we get tempted to enquire about the emotional side of the problem. How did a common man, not very erudite, of middling sensibility, react to the issues? Not many must have noticed or felt the morality gap that Tennyson talked about in the seventh quatrain of the opening invocation, of *In Memoriam*:

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,
But vaster.¹⁴

To these lines Arnold Toynbee wrote, his uncle Percy would have reacted –

"Let knowledge grow from more to more" full mark. A recitation of the three lines would have made him restive. He would instead have pulled Goethe out of the shelf and pointed gleefully to Faust, part I. lines 1236-37:

Mir hift der Geist! Auf einmal seh' ich rat
Und schreibe getrost: 'Im Anfang war die tat!

('The spirit succours me ! All at once I see light and write confidently : "In the beginning was the deed" ')¹⁵

It was late in the day that most people became affected by a general loss in faith. The fault (in the geological sense of the world) was a typical erudite discovery.

The hope offered by Christianity was eroding and being replaced by that peculiarly Victorian liberal sensibility, but God, despite Darwin and Tübingen School of Higher Criticism was a reality for most Victorians and Jesus offered hope that was more than a silver lining in the dark cloud. An ordinary but typical Victorian would have agreed with Browning in *La Saisiaz*

...he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of god¹⁶

and would have criticized his age in the manner Browning did in 'Bishop Blougram's Apology':

What have we gained then by our unbelief
But a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt.
We called the chess-board white, - we call it black."

In this respect perhaps the twentieth century was in continuation with the nineteenth and not a break from it.

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4. Shane, L., *Henry Edward Manning* (1921), p.8
5. Eliot, George, *Adam Bede* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p.22
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11. RKV, 74
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13. Quiller-Gouch, Sir Arthur, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1957), No. 855, p. 1029
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16. *Browning: Poetry and Prose* ed., Simon Nowell-Smith (London: Rutpert-Davis. 1950), 636
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36.6 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit you read about the Victorian compromise between the various sections of the society; the major poets – Tennyson, Browning and Arnold – as they stood with

respect to their predecessors, the Romantic poets i.e. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley and finally you read an essay on the religious temper of the Victorian age. In the last essay we combined the influence of religion on literature, especially poetry and examined how they evolved as the century progressed. However, in this unit we discussed how YOU are to present your material for the examiners.

In this connection we examined three types of scripts – the short essay (or note), the critical question and the long essay or term paper.

36.7 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise-I

1. (Consult an atlas.) Crimea is a Russian peninsula lying between Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. The Crimean War (1854-56) was fought between Russia on the one hand and Turkey, France and Britain on the other. However, the Eastern Question still remained unresolved even after the War.
2. Napoleon III (Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, 1808-73) was nephew of Napoleon I (1769-1821). He was elected president of the French Republic in 1848 and proclaimed emperor four years later. His capture by the Germans at the Battle of Sedan (1870) brought about an end to his career.
3. Charles Darwin (1809-82) wrote *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Samuel Snell (1812-1904) wrote *Self-Help* (1859).
4. Discuss this with some other friend on the course.

Self-check Exercise-II

1. Broadly speaking, Alfred Tennyson was influenced by John Keats; Robert Browning by P.B. Shelley; and Matthew Arnold by William Wordsworth.
2. A.E. Housman (1859-1936) Professor of Latin at Cambridge wrote *A Shropshire Lad*. Edward Fitzgerald (1809-83) was very popular for his free translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859). William Morris's (1834-'96) *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-'70) was hugely popular in its day. You will read more about the Pre-Raphaelite poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti and their sister Christina Georgiana Rossetti in unit 40 and Oscar Wilde in Unit 41. You have already read about Thomas Hardy and Robert Bridges in *Understanding Poetry* (EEG06). Coventry Patmore and Arthur Hough Clough may be considered by some as minor poets of the Victorian era.

36.8 SUGGESTED READING

You must have noticed that in this unit we did not teach you facts the way we did in units 27, 22 or 12. Hence it becomes important for you to consult some book(s) on history of English literature. *English Literature: Its history and its significance...* by William Long covers Victorian poetry in the first part of chapter XI. However, he leaves out Arnold altogether. Among the major minor poets Elizabeth Barrett, D.G. Rossetti, William Morris and Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) have been discussed very briefly. On the whole the treatment is rather sketchy for you. Edward Albert in chapter XI of his *History of English Literature* examines Victorian poetry in about twenty pages; satisfactory but not exhaustive. Much more exhaustive

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than either of these is a *History of English Literature* by Emile Legouis. Book VI of part II of his book deals with the period 1832-75 and Book VII from 1875 to 1914. You may pick and choose what is of use to you from these two books.

Oliver Elton's *The English Muse: A Sketch* (1950) has long been acknowledged as a labour of love and I would strongly recommend Chapter XVIII, 'The First Victorians', chapter XIX, 'The Mid-Victorians' and chapter XX, 'Later Poetry (I)' to all serious students of Victorian Poetry. *From Dickens to Hardy*), volume VI of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, edited by Boris Ford must be glanced through for useful articles on any topic you propose to write your term paper on.

Among the scholarly works on the age is G.M.Young's *Portrait of an Age: Victorian England*. It was first published in 1936 but it is still useful though a little outdated. G.Kitson Clark's *The Making of Victorian England* (1961) and Asa Briggs' *Victorian People* (1955) may be delved into selectively. Basil Willey's essay on Matthew Arnold is a scholarly exploration, in *Nineteenth Century Studies* (1949). Heavily informed by the recent trends in literary theory are the studies of Prof, Isobel Armstrong. They deserve serious attention whenever you encounter any of her books and articles on Victorian poetry. One of her essays has been included in this block. However, don't try to read every-critical work that is mentioned above even if you have access to them all for you must remember that you have to concentrate your attention on the texts of the poems prescribed for detailed study.

UNIT 37 ROBERT BROWNING: LIFE AND ASPIRATIONS

Structure

- 37.0 Objectives
- 37.1 Introduction
- 37.2 Robert Browning: The man and the poet
- 37.3 *On Sordello*
 - 37.3.1 An Historical Perspective
 - 37.3.2 'Sordello in Mantua': An Explication
- 37.4 Let's sum up
- 37.5 Answers to exercises

37.0 OBJECTIVES

After a study of this unit you would be able to:

- speak on Robert Browning's life and work and the relationship between them;
- appreciate *Sordello*; and
- understand Browning's conception of the office of a poet.

37.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will read a brief sketch of Robert Browning's life. This would be helpful to you in writing your own term-paper. Still more, it will help you appreciate Browning's poetry.

Robert Browning is buried in Westminster Abbey where poets such as Chaucer and Spenser also lie interred. 'A good many' wrote Henry James about Browning, 'oddities and a good many great writers have been entombed in the Abbey; but none of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones so odd' (*The Speaker*, January 4, 1890). It is the combination of Browning's greatness and oddity that you should be able to appreciate finally after you have completed your study of the present and the two following units.

The excerpt from *Sordello* that you will also read in this unit will enable you to understand Browning's aims and aspirations as a poet. Hope you will enjoy reading about Robert Browning and a specimen of his poetry.

37.2 ROBERT BROWNING (b. MAY 7, 1812 – d. DEC 12, 1889)

The poet Robert Browning bore the name of his father and grandfather. As a young man Browning's father had been sent by his father to West Indies to take care of the family plantation. However, he revolted against the cruelty towards the slaves there, returned home and his father found him employment in the Bank of England as a clerk on a small salary. Robert Browning, Sr. (d. 1866) worked at the Bank until his retirement in 1852. He was a self-effacing person, mild and studious and had collected a library of 6000 books of Greek, Latin and recondite English writings. (A

recondite work, as you know, is about obscure, abstruse, out of the way or little known subjects.) The poet's father was more a man of learning than business and in his youth he had hoped to become an artist. All his life he drew sketches and illustrations to amuse his children and friends. The poet Browning could have inherited his aptitude for the visual arts from his father.

Robert Browning:
Life and Aspirations



Robert Browning

Browning's mother, Sarah Anna Wiedmann (d. 1849) was born in Scotland of a German father and Scottish mother. She was devoted to her family, her rose garden and the Congregational chapel and was thus a non-conformist. Her husband and children were also made to follow her to the Congregational chapel and not to the

Church of England. Her daughter Sarianna and her son, the poet, were passionately devoted to her.

Robert Browning, the poet, was born on May 7, 1812 at Camberwell, a suburb of London. He was raised there and at New Cross, further to the southeast from London. Browning was a restless child and his biographers record the public reproof of George Clayton, the preacher at his mother's chapel, for his 'restlessness and inattention'. He had rebelled from school and was later to rebel from London University. His education was conducted mainly by his father and a series of tutors of Greek, Latin, French, Italian and music. He became famous for his quaint learning which was acquired chiefly in his father's library. For his pleasures he roamed the fields, rode on horseback and spent time in Dulwich Gallery. He grew up to be passionate, brilliant but also indisciplined, with an inordinate estimate of his powers, which however, were indeed very great.

Browning's first volume of poems *Incondita* was a collection of lyrics. It was written when he was twelve years old. He later destroyed them; but two survive. *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* was published anonymously in 1833. It is marked by the influence of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley: whom he called 'sun-treader': 'Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!' However, it is also a work, which records his disavowal of Shelley who was not popular in the early nineteenth century. At the age of 14, Shelley had provided an exit for Browning from the middle class world of Camberwell and New Cross. The children there never went to Harrow and Rugby much less Oxford and Cambridge. Browning became a disciple of Shelley, took to vegetarianism, adopted liberalism of an extreme kind and also atheism. However, his mother Sarah Anna Wiedmann won her from atheism not through reason but by her tenderness and love, impairing his intellectual independence in religious matters forever. *Pauline* is a record of his faith in 'God and truth' rather than Shelley:

Sun-treader, I believe in god and truth
And love: and as one just escaped from death
Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel.
He lives indeed, so, I would lean on thee!
Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom
If such must come, but chiefly when I die.
For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark
To fight a giant: but live thou forever,
And be to all what thou has been to me!

Browning's exposure and exploitation of his own emotions and his 'intense and morbid self-consciousness' in *Pauline* was disliked by J.S. Mill (1806-73), a leading intellectual of his time. Perhaps it was Mill's criticism that discouraged him from confessing his own emotions and encouraged him to write objectively.

In 1834 Browning went on a tour of Russia with George de Benkhhausen, the consul general. In 1838 and '44 he made two short visits to Italy. In the meantime *Paracelsus*, Browning's first acknowledged work, was published in 1835. The career of the historical Paracelsus (1493-1541), the Swiss-born physician, served Browning as a stalking-horse or pretext for his exploration into the true felicity of a poet's endeavours, that is, in the conflicting claims of love (self-forgetting) and knowledge (self-assertion) in the mind of the poet. *Paracelsus* was a resounding critical success. It introduced him to the great artistic and literary world of London. At a dinner in 1836 Wordsworth, who in a few years was to become the Poet Laureate, proposed a toast to Browning and welcomed him to the company of the poets of England. (The event may remind you nearer home of the reception of Rabindranath Tagore by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya). Browning came to know not only Wordsworth but also Dickens, Henry James, Carlyle and Tennyson. The publication of *Sordello* in 1840, however, eclipsed Browning's reputation for over twenty years.

Fortunately *Paracelsus* had found him two friends: John Forster (1812-76) the drama critic, editor, biographer and later literary executor of W.S. Landor, Dickens and Carlyle, and William Charles Macready (1793-1873) actor and manager of both Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres at different times. They encouraged Browning to write for the theatre. *Strafford* (1837), a historical tragedy in blank verse, was written at the instigation of Macready who produced it on the day of its publication, in Covent Garden with himself in the title role. (If you have read British history you would recall that Sir Thomas Wentworth, first earl (1593-1641) of Strafford was the chief advisor of Charles I). In the meantime Browning helped Forster to write the biography of Strafford.

Browning found writing plays more congenial to his temper because it allowed him to escape his subjective emotions and for the next ten years he wrote plays that were published along with his shorter dramatic poems under the title *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-46). These were a series of eight pamphlets that were published as one volume after 1846. *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1843) and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846) were among the better known plays of his. As a playwright, however, Browning was not much successful. The reason, Browning himself pointed out, was his emphasis on 'Action in character, rather than character in Action.'

The third and seventh pamphlets in the series (1842, 1845) were devoted to short poems. These included 'My Last Duchess', 'Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister', 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', 'How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' (16 -), 'Pictor Ignotus', Florence 15 -, 'The Lost Leader', 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' and 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church'. These were lively, carried the force of emotion but were often learned. 'They' wrote a contemporary reviewer, 'look as though already packed up and on their way to posterity'. However, Landor opined thus:

... Since chaucer was alive and hale
No man has walked along our road with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse...

It was clear to Landor that Browning was in the tradition of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Donne.

The reason for the choice of his title *Bells and Pomegranates*, however, was not clear to anyone until Browning had explained it in the last number of the publication. It, indicated, Browning pointed out, 'an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought; which [looked] too ambitious, thus expressed, so the symbol was preferred'.

One of the contemporary poets who admired Browning's early poems was Elizabeth Barrett (1806-61) daughter and eldest of the twelve children of Edward Moulton Barrett, a rich proprietor of Jamaican plantations. She came to know Browning from his writing and sent her two volumes of her *Poems* (1844) which he received on his return from a trip to Italy. In some of the poems in these volumes she had praised Browning and the latter responded through a telegram on 10 January, 1845: 'I love your poems, dear Miss Barrett, and I love you too.' However, it was not until the May of 1845 that he was allowed to call.

Almost everything appeared to be unpropitious when Browning met Elizabeth Barrett in 1845. She was six years older than him. In 1838 she had fallen ill seriously due to a broken blood vessel and was sent to Torquay to recover. There her eldest brother Edward was drowned, to her lifelong grief. As a result she returned to London in 1841, still an invalid. On top of these Mr. Barrett was a tyrannical father and he had forbidden any of his children to marry. Browning found Elizabeth in her invalid's

dark room, chained by weakness to her couch, her dark, heavy hair framing her sensitive and sharp countenance. However, Browning, for that matter no man, could see her frequently as the suspicious father was quite against it. So Browning came when Mr. Barrett was out. There began a series of correspondence between the two lovers. Elizabeth was reluctant in the beginning to involve Browning in her sorrowful and invalid life. However, this state gave way to a conviction of his love and finally came the rapture of love and happiness. She recorded these experiences in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). The title was meant to hide the personal nature of her love. Browning had read her 'Catarina to Camoens' and from that gave her the nickname of 'the Portuguese'. The sonnet sequence described the Portuguese woman's devotion to her poet lover.



Elizabeth Barrett Browning

It was clear that Browning and Elizabeth could not get married with her father's consent. So they married clandestinely in September 1846, and a week later left for Italy.

The Brownings took up residence in a flat in Casa Guidi in Florence. Elizabeth's health improved remarkably and their son Robert ("Pen") was born in 1849. Browning had always depended for his finances on his father and most of his works were published at his father's expense. Now Mrs. Browning supported the family with her small income (Her father remained unreconciled to her until his death. He used to return her letters to him unopened.) Mrs Browning's works had been a raving success, so much so that when Wordsworth died in 1850 her name was widely canvassed as his most appropriate successor as poet Laureate.

Her verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1857) was a tremendous critical success. Ruskin asserted that it was the greatest poem written in English. The poem is a female *Prehude*, the portrait of a young woman as an artist. According to Virginia Woolf 'Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work is the true place for the poet'. *Aurora Leigh* offers, as Woolf points out:

...a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry.

...Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age.

The Brownings were very happy in Italy. Elizabeth Barrett espoused the cause of Italian independence in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851). Browning published his most admired work *Men and Women* (1855) in two volumes. It is a collection of 51 poems. Some of the poems in these volumes are among Browning's most celebrated dramatic monologues – 'Karshish', 'Cleon', 'Adrea del Sarto', 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'A Grammarian's Funeral' and 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' – while others like 'Memorabilia', 'Love Among the Ruins', 'A Toccata of Galuppi's', 'Two in the Campagna' and 'One Word More' are warm personal poems. 'Memorabilia' records Browning's timeless respect for Shelley:

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems and new!

Italy and the Italians were dear to him as they were to Elizabeth. 'Italy was my university' wrote Browning. He recorded some of his memorable experience of Italy in 'De Gustibus':

Italy, my Italy!
Queen Mary's saying serves for me –
When fortune's malice lost her – Calais –
Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside it, "Italy"
Such lovers old are I and she:
So it always was, so shall ever be! (ll. 39-46)

In some of the poems in *Men and Women* Browning spoke about his love for his wife: obliquely in 'By the Fire-side' and openly in 'One Word More':

God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her.

In the next stanza he began,

This I say of me, but think of you, Love!
This to you—yourself my moon of poets!

However, *Men and Women* was not very successful except among the young people. The reviews were uncomprehending and unsympathetic. Even eight years after its publication Chapman and Hall, his publishers, still had unsold copies on their shelves. Browning got bitter and took refuge in drawing and clay modelling and the society of his friends.

However, a graver matter began to occupy his days. Mrs. Browning's health, which in the beginning had been remarkably restored, began to fail. On 29 June 1861 she died with her husband by her side. Browning was heartbroken. He decided to return to England. A few months later he left Florence, never to return and slowly travelled back to England with his son.

Back in England he prepared Elizabeth's *Last Poems* for publication and as usual the sale of her book much exceeded his own. He also took interest in Pen's education and in planning his career as an artist. *Dramatis Personae* (1864), Browning's next book of poems, was unexpectedly popular. It included some of his intricately argumentative monologues such as 'A Death in the Desert', 'Caliban upon Setebos' and 'Mr. Sludge "The Medium"'. A second edition of *Dramatis Personae* was brought out the same year. It now appeared that Browning had at long last overcome the mistrust of the British people. A selection of his poems and a volume of the collected edition published in 1863 had both sold off very well.

Browning had begun writing *The Ring and the Book* in 1860. It was a poem in over 21000 lines in blank verse divided in twelve books. It was published in four monthly instalments from November 1868 – February 1869. It is based on a collection of documents based on an Italian murder trial in the seventeenth century. The sale of this book was once again encouraging and a second edition of it was brought out in 1872.

Since the mid-sixties Browning's reputation remained on the ascendant and he remained prolific until the end. *Asolando: Fancies and Facts* (1889), his last book of poems, was a success. He caught cold, fell ill and died on 12 December, the same year.

Browning wished his poems to be read for their own sake. He thought that his works should rise or fall by their own merit, independent of his life and habits. Perhaps his Shakespeare spoke for him:

Which of you did I enable
Once to slip inside my breast,
There to catalogue and label
What I like least, what love best,
Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,
Seek and shun, respect-deride?
Who has right to make a rout of
Rarities he found inside?

(‘At the Mermaid’ V)

In 1969 Richard Howard, an American poet dedicated his volume of monologues to Browning: ‘to the great poet of otherness... who said, as I should like to say, ‘I’ll tell my state as though’t were none of mine.’ If we are ever to understand Browning – the man who lived humbly, like the poet in his ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’, but inwardly, as his poems speak so eloquently – it can be through a study of his poetry.

Self-Check Exercise-I

Robert Browning: Life and Aspirations

1. Why did Browning (in your own words) call his series of pamphlets *Bells and Pomegranates* ?

2. Who was the Portugues in the title *Sonnets from the Portuguese* ?

3. What did Virginia Woolf think about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and the poet herself ?

4. When was Browning finally able to gain the attention of the English people ?

5. Did Browning like his poetry to be read in connection with his life ?

37.3 SORDELLO

Robert Browning's thoughts about the office of a poet and his own role and future career as a poet can be understood from some of his early poems. *Sordello* is one of them. You will now read lines 475-693 from the second book of *Sordello*. The excerpt 'Sordello in Mantua' is given in the appendix. You may first familiarize yourself with the historical background of the work, then try to go through the excerpt and then read 37.3.2 in which the excerpt has been explicated. After having done that go on to the next two units and then return to 'Sordello in Mantua' once again in order to understand it fully. The poem would need more attention and concentration of mind than most other poems but the effort would be rewarding.

37.3.1 *Sordello*: An Historical Perspective

Browning began writing *Sordello* shortly after the publication of *Pauline* in March 1833. It was published on 7 March 1840 by Edward Moxon at the expense of Browning's father. The poem in 5800 lines, next in length only to *The Ring and the Book*, was received by the public with incomprehension and with derision by the critics. The poem was found notoriously obscure and caused severe and prolonged damage to Browning's reputation. Browning gave some thought to revising the poem before republication. However, it was not included in his canon in 1849. When Browning republished *Sordello* in 1863 he had added 85 lines to it and supplied quotation marks to the text, the lack of which had added to its obscurity. Besides

these, Browning supplied running titles designed to elucidate the action of the poem in the 1863 edition of his poem.

Browning seemed, at least publicly, to have no heart to defend *Sordello*. Tradition has it that the poet admitted that 'When the poem was written, two knew what it meant – God and Robert Browning. Now god alone knows !' (David Loth, *The Brownings: A Victorian Idyll*, p.47) part of the confusion crops up from its historical setting. It is loosely based on the life of Sordello (c.1200-69) who, according to one tradition, was the son of Elcorte, the archer; according to another of Taurello Salinguerra, a soldier, from his first wife Retrude, daughter of the German emperor Frederick II (1194-1250; emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220 until his death). Browning favours this latter story. Salinguerra at an advanced age married Sofia, fifth daughter of Eccelino Da Romano II (surnamed the Monk). Cunizza (Palma, in Browning's narrative) was daughter of Eccelino II from Agnes Este, his first wife who was a Guelph. In 1194 Eccelino II, who had allied himself with the Republics of Verona and Padua, was defeated by Podesta his enemy. The latter exiled him, his family and his faction from Vicenza. Eccelino before submitting to this sentence burned the neighbouring houses and a great part of the town. A son (Eccelino III) was born to him from Adelaide in the midst of this confusion. According to Browning the mother and child were saved by Elcorte, the archer, who died in the conflict. Retrude, wife of Salinguerra, present on this occasion, died soon after she was brought to Adelaide's castle at Goito. Her new born son, however, survived. Adelaide dreading his future rivalry with her son brought up Sordello as her page, declaring him to be Elcorte's son adopted out of gratitude. In due course of time there appeared an 'intrigue' between him and Palma (Cunizza) which was stronger on her side. Palma was determined to see Sordello restored to his rightful place. So she conspired with Salinguerra, her father's faithful ally, to break her marriage with the Guelph Richard, Count of San Bonifacio: she out of her love for Sordello and he out of his sense of loyalty for the Ghibellines to which her father belonged. In the meantime Eccelino had assumed the monastic habit in the first place owing to Adelaide, his second wife's death and in the second out of remorse for his connivance at the wrong done to Salinguerra by the concealment of his son by Adelaide, his second wife.

According to his biographers, Browning had prepared himself for this work by studying the chronicles of this period in Italian history. He also supplemented his reading by a visit to the places connected with his story. We should, however, hope to learn from *Sordello* historical truth not in letter but spirit.

Sordello's sole title to immortality rested on Dante's (1265-1321) mention of him in the Ante-Purgatory where he acts as a guide to Virgil (70-19 B.C.) and Dante in the valley of the Kings in 'Purgatorio' VII. He is recognized as a fellow-townsmen by Virgil. Dante in his treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* speaks of Sordello as having created the Italian language. Browning fully exploits Sordello's passion for his art in his poem. In real life Sordello had lived in Provence under the patronage of Charles of Anjou and wrote 'troubadour' poetry in Provençal. He thus became an important link between the love poetry of Provence and of Italy, which derived from it. A mysterious obscurity shrouds the life of Sordello and his violent death is remotely indicated by Dante.

Browning dedicated *Sordello* in 1863 to J. Milsand of Dijon. In his dedicatory letter of 9 June 1863 Browning pointed out:

The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study.

Browning, as John Pettigrew has pointed out, 'felt free to treat chronology with abandon...' Sordello and Salinguerra probably never knew about one another's

existence. Sordello's love was Cunizza, daughter of Eccelin and Adelaide, a lusty lady married five times. Palma, daughter of Eccelin and Agnes Este was her half-sister. G.K. Chesterton was right in thinking that Browning's poem was, 'The most glorious compliment that has ever been paid to the average man'.

**Robert Browning:
Life and Aspirations**

In the nineteenth century, *Sordello* was a seminal text for the Pre-Raphaelite poets. In the last century Arthur Symonds called it a 'psychological epic'. Perhaps *Sordello* should be read not for its medieval background narrative but as a veiled account of Browning's own explorations into the nature of art and the role of the artist in society. The contradictory claims of egoism and sympathy, contemplation and action finally kill the hero.

Early in the twentieth century, Ezra Pound (1885-1972) found *Sordello* a model of lucidity. In trying to write an epic, Pound found in *Sordello* a model to react against. The 'Three Cantos' which began publication in *Poetry* in June 1917 demonstrates that *The Cantos* adopted a method and style opposed to Browning's poem:

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello* !
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and says the thing's an art form,
Your *Sordello*, and the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in;
Say that I dump my catch, shiny silvery
As fresh sardines flopping and slipping on the marginal cobbles ?
I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth
Is inside this discourse - this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.
Give up th' intaglio method. ("Three Cantos" *Poetry* 10(1917), ll.1-10)

Pound does not think that Browning was right in suppressing his own voice; in keeping subjectivity at bay; in creating a persona to speak for him. Truth is not to be found anywhere outside the discourse but inside it. Besides, Pound would also discard Browning's intaglio method. When an artist digs on the surface of a rock to make a pattern he follows the intaglio method opposed to which is the cameo method in which he removes pieces of rock in order to raise a pattern against the background of the rock. Pound would use the cameo method because poetry for him is the impression of history on the present.

The above background on *Sordello* should help you appreciate the extract from the poem we have decided to discuss with you in this unit. Read 'Sordello at Mantua' printed in the appendix before reading the next section.

However, in order to make sure that you have understood the background properly do an exercise. Having written your answers compare them with the answers provided by me in this unit under 37.5. In case you feel you have not understood the background properly it may be a good idea to reread the section above.

Self-Check Exercise-II

1. Who was Sordello? How did Browning treat him in his *Sordello*?

2. What did nineteenth century readers of *Sordello* think about it?

3. What according to Ezra Pound was wrong with Browning's method in writing *Sordello*? How did he decide to rectify it?
-
-
-

37.3.2. 'Sordello in Mantua': An Explication

You have six verse paragraphs from the second book of *Sordello* prescribed for detailed study. *Sordello* consists of six books in all. In the first book we see Sordello as a refined and beautiful boy:

(The delicate nostril swerving wide and fine
A sharp and restless lip, so well combine
With that calm brow) a soul fit to receive
Delight at every sense;

Book I, ll 463-66

And he appears to be framed for spiritual delights only. He is an artist in the making who lives his imagination and partakes the joys of everything around him whether in the gloom of Goito castle or the sunny glades and woods around it. However, he has had one glimpse of Palma and she becomes his source of inspiration. As he is growing up he also longs for sympathy – which in reality is his craving for applause. He therefore makes a crowd of carved and tapestried figures around himself. It is at this point that he is invited to participate in a song contest at the court in Mantua.

The opening lines of the excerpt (printed in this block) effectively sets the tone:

The evening star was high
When he reached Mantua, but his fame arrived.
Before him: friends applauded, foes connived,
And Naddo looked an angel...

Through these lines, right at the outset, you come to know the way Sordello is being treated by his friends and well wishers i.e. with clapping and applause and by rivals and enemies by acquiescence. Naddo, Browning's biographers surmise, was fashioned after John Forster. Browning's attitude towards this character is best reflected in the following lines:

'The knowledge that you are a bard
Must constitute your prime, nay sole reward!
So prattled Naddo, busiest
Of the tribe of genius-hunters...

Naddo's high sounding words are meaningless for a poet such as Sordello. He utters bland 'common sense' which is of not much use to a true-poet that Sordello is. The way Naddo discusses Sordello's poetry with him shows how superficial his precepts are. 'Now, you're a bard, a bard past doubt,' Naddo tells Sordello, and goes on:

And no philosopher; why introduce
Crotchets like these? Fine, surely, but no use
In poetry – which still must be, to strike,
Based upon common sense; there's nothing like
Appealing to our nature! No tricks were tried
In that, no hollow thrills, affected throes!

Sordello replies:

"The man", said we," tells his own joys and woes:
We'll trust him."

To this Naddo responds:

Robert Browning:
Life and Aspirations

Would you have your songs endure?
Build on the human heart! – why to be sure
Yours is one sort of heart – but I mean theirs,
Ours, everyone's, the healthy heart one cares
To build on!

It shows according to Sordello (Browning) how poor an understanding of the true poet's creative process Naddo has. A true poet must not only write about himself/herself but must observe others also. However, Naddo tries to impress other poets such as Sordello. So he uses as high sounding language as he can command:

Central peace, mother of strength,
Ask those calm-hearted doers what they do
When they have got their calm! And is it true,
Fire rankles at the heart of every globe?

Naddo tries to impress his auditor by high sounding philosophical arguments.

Sordello participates in the song-contest, defeats the court poet Eglamor who dies soon after his defeat. However, Sordello the 'Goito-manufacture' soon finds that he won with the help of Eglamor's rhyme and by doing exactly what he disliked in people such as Naddo. The narrator points out:

Then he found,
(Casting about to satisfy the crowd)
That happy vehicle, so late allowed,
A sore annoyance; it was the song's effect
He cared for, scarce the song itself...

Sordello's success was in reality his failure. However, Naddo and 'every whelp of Naddo's litter' felt happy with Sordello's performance. Naddo calls him 'true bard':

"The master certes meant to waste
No effort, cautiously had probed the taste
He'd please anon: true bard, in short, - disturb
His title if they could; nor spur nor curb,
Fancy nor reason, wanting in him; whence
The staple of his verses, common sense;

However, Sordello feels alienated from the art that has won him the applause and the position of the court poet. He would prefer his Goito and the woods around it to Mantua and the glory of the court.

Sordello has won everything that his success as a poet can procure him. Power, money, fame and above all the love of women – Bianca and others. They observed Sordello's facility in his poetry:

Virtue took form, nor vice refused a shape;
Here heaven opened, there was hell agape,
As Saint this simpered past in sanctity,
Sinner the other flared portentous by
A greedy people.

Since Sordello was so successful, the narrator asks

Then why stop, surprised
At his success?

And goes on to answer:

He caught himself shamefully hankering
After the obvious petty joys that spring
From true life, fain relinquish pedestal
And condescend with pleasure – one and all
To be renounced, no doubt; for thus to chain
Himself to single joys and so refrain
From tasting their quintessence frustrates, sure,
His prime design; each joy must he abjure
Even for love of it.

Sordello would be glad to leave his elevated position at Mantua's royal palace and all the benefits that go with it in order to know the joys and sorrows and frustrations of common life in their true essence.

While the third paragraph describes the poet's slow transition from his life of popular success to that of his aspirations in poetry the fourth gives us an account of some of the achievements of Sordello in poetry. Sordello's first attempt was to perfect his language – 'the stuff/That held the imaged thing...' Sordello forged a people's language as against Latin.

We know that Provençal or *langue d'oc* the language of Southern France, the language of the troubadours was based on late Latin. The word for 'yes' in late Latin was *hoc ille* which became 'oc' in the South and 'o'il' in the North – and so the language was known as *langue d'o'il*. The chief languages of the Paris region in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were Norman, Picard and Francien. They enjoyed some independence. However, in course of time Francien became the predominant language and thus the ancestor of modern French.

Browning gives Sordello credit for forging Provençal or *langue d'oc*. Provençal was a class language which avoided marked regional features. Browning's Sordello.

sought
The cause, conceived a cure, and slow re-wrought
That language, - welding words into the crude
Mass from the new speech round him, till a rude
Armour was hammered out, in time to be
Approved beyond the Roman panoply

However, when Sordello came to use the language, to be able to give shape to his perceptions in it, then he found that it failed him:

Piece after piece that armour broke away,
Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
As language:

Browning points out that thought and arguments can ill afford to present perception to the reading public,

thought may take perception's place
But hardly co-exist in any case
Being its mere presentment...

Thought rationalizes experience; it does not present it which Browning thought made great poetry. (When you read 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. praxed's Church' in the next unit you will be able to understand what Browning is driving at.) These experiments of Sordello are a sweetly-painful experience for him. Browning clinches his portrayal of Sordello in the fourth paragraph with an *exemplum*.

**Robert Browning:
Life and Aspirations**

According to Greek mythology Apollo, the god of poetry, loved Hyacinthus and was playing quoit with him. Zephyrus, the greek Varuna, felt jealous of Apollo and blew the disk thrown by him toward Hyacinthus which killed him. Sordello's best efforts to perfect his language apparently, killed his art. However, unperturbed by his failure to please his audience the troubadour set off on his new task of celebrating the exploits of Simon de Montfort, the father of the famous English baron, who led the crusade against the heretical Albigenses in Southern France early in the thirteenth century. Browning, we can say, treated history with abandon. It is ironical that the defeat of the south in the Albigensian war led to the decline of Provençal as a literary language.

When Sordello sang the praise of Montfort to the Mantuan public they praised Montfort and considered Sordello's song a fair reward for the hero's valour but not the poet:

-Mantuan, the main of them admiring still
How a mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak
Had Montfort at completely (so to speak)
His finger's ends; while past the praise-tide swept
To Montfort, either's share distinctly kept.
The true need for true merit! -

This hostile attitude of the Mantuans towards himself incensed Sordello. He recalls the song contest in which he had participated. On that occasion, in one corner sat Palma, his Daphne, his source of inspiration and in the other Adelaide with her dark, funereal hair.

Ay, he strewed
A fairy dust upon the multitudes;
Although he feigned to take them by themselves;
His giants dignified those puny elves,
Sublimed their faint applause.

Sordello used artifice to flatter his audience. He called mischievous dwarfs giants. He tried to find in them a use, which they did not have.

This deception, however, had a harmful effect on him. It 'Sundered him in twain; each spectral part at strife with each';

One jarred against another life;
The poet thwarting hopelessly the Man -
Who, fooled no longer, free in fancy ran
Here, there:

The 'poet-half' was at war with the 'man-half'. The former disapproved of any compromise. The latter was

- not to be put off
With self-reflectings by the Poet's scheme,

The poet also pinioned the man-part in Sordello. Browning presents the image of a bird of which the pinions have been clipped and thus made unable to fly. In such a circumstance the poet-part grew, 'the Art/Developing his soul a thousand ways'. His

command over his language also grew to a bravest of expedients, too'. Browning compares Sordello once again with an Apollo who had thrown away his bow and quiver and retained the lyre alone. Sordello spent his days mastering the various forms of troubadour poetry such as tenzon, sirvent and rondel. However, his complete plunge into his art did not allow him to be a sociable person. He lost his audience and with it his due reward.

But the complete Sordello, man and Bard,
John's cloud-girt angel, this foot on the land.
That on the sea, with, open in his hand,
A bitter-sweetling of a book – was gone.

Browning's mother and wife were both devout Christians and so was he. One of his greatest appeals to the members of the Browning societies in England and America was his piety. In the lines quoted above he alludes to the angel in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Browning wants to say that Sordello for the time being could not achieve the unity between the man and poet, and he uses the image of Saint John to clinch his point. His *exemplum* shows his attitude towards Sordello i.e. the high esteem in which he holds him, i.e. his own ardours for the office of a poet that he has adopted for himself.

Sordello can be called Browning. The narrator, in the fifth book confesses it himself:

Man's inmost life shall have yet freer play;
Once more I cast external things away,
And nature composite, so decompose
That' ...why, he writes *Sordello*!

(ll.616-620)

Sordello writes Sordello i.e. Browning writes about himself in the poem. The story of Sordello against the background of thirteenth century Italy was a ruse for Browning to tell his own story. Sordello also helped him clarify his doubts and discover his intentioned stance as a poet of England and Europe.

Self-Check Exercise-III

1. Who was Palma?

2. Who was Eglamor?

3. Who was Naddo?

34.4 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit you read about Browning's life. Although he asserted that the readers of his poetry should not relate his poems to his life you saw that in his own poems he sometimes asserted quite the opposite. This issue is complex and can never be conclusively resolved either way. However, it offers you a helpful stand-point for an understanding of Browning's poetry. We have also suggested that you may need to read the poem 'Sordello in Mantua' a few times and follow the discussion on the poem in the unit closely before the poem becomes completely clear to you.

37.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Self-Check Exercise-I

1. Because he wanted to avoid a pedantic and pompous title such as *The Poetry of Thought and Emotion* or *The Poetry of Sense and Music*. Bells probably symbolised the music in his poetry and pomegranates the flesh of his feelings and emotions, thoughts and ideas.
2. Elizabeth Barrett, the poet who wrote her sonnets for her lover, a poet i.e. Robert Browning.
3. Virginia Woolf liked Mrs Browning's adoption of the drawing room as the scene of action of her poem and called her a 'true daughter of her age'.
4. In 1864, with the publication of *Dramatis Personae*.
5. From what you have read above you will say 'no'. However, wait until you've read the next section.

Self-Check Exercise-II

- (a) Sordello was a Troubadour poet who wrote in provençal and lived in Southern France. He found mention in *The Divine Comedy* of Alligheri Dante. Browning makes use of his life to explore his own ideas of a poet's joys and sorrows hopes and aspirations.
- (b) A majority of 19th century readers, including Mrs. Browning, found *Sordello* incomprehensible. However, for the Pre-Raphaelite poets it was a seminal text.
- (c) According to Pound Browning followed the intaglio method. However, according to him the cameo method was better for poetry which he followed himself.

Self-Check Exercise-III

1. Palma was Sordello's beloved and her source of inspiration at the song-contest.
2. Eglamor was the court-poet whom Sordello defeated at the song-contest in Mantua.
3. Naddo represents the mediocre poet. Perhaps John Forster was the original of Naddo in Browning's life.

UNIT 38 ROBERT BROWNING: TWO EARLY POEMS

Structure

- 38.0 Objectives
- 38.1 Introduction
- 38.2 'Porphyria's Lover'
 - 38.2.1 An Analysis
- 38.3 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church'
 - 38.3.1 An Appreciation
- 38.4 Let's sum up
- 38.5 Answers to exercises
- 38.6 Further reading

38.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you will be able to have an idea of and write on Browning's poetic art as evident from his early poetry. This would, however, be with special reference to 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church'. Your study would enable you to comment on selected passages from the two poems mentioned above.

38.1 INTRODUCTION .

Now that you are familiar with Robert Browning's life and early aspirations as evident from the passage you studied from *Sordello* you can go on to appreciate the development of Browning's art and craft as a poet. In this unit you are going to study two poems: 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's Church'. The former was published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and the latter in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). You should be able to see the development in Browning's art even within a period of three years. Artistically, the latter poem appears to be more sophisticated compared with the former.

38.2 'PORPHYRIA'S LOVER'

'Porphyria' was probably written in 1839 when Browning was on a brief visit to St. Petersburg, Russia. It was first published along with 'Johannes Agricola' anonymously (signed "Z") in *The Monthly Repository* (January 1836). The editor Mr. Fox also published a song from *Pippa Passes* and some verses later introduced in *James Lee's Wife*. He was, as Mrs. Sutherland Orr points out, 'the generous and very earliest encourager of Mr. Browning's boyish attempts at poetry'.

Browning grouped the two poems, i.e. 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola', under the general title 'Madhouse Cells' in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). He lengthened the titles to 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' and 'Porphyria's Lover' in 1849. However, the two poems were delinked in the collected poems of 1863 and in later collections. The linking together of the two poems under the title 'Madhouse Cells' offers a clue to our understanding of 'Porphyria's Lover'. Both, Porphyria's Lover and Johannes Agricola (1494-1566) the

founder of Antinomian heresy are extreme solipsists (one who pays too great attention to oneself rather than to relation with others) if not mad.

Robert Browning:
Two Early Poems

'Porphyria's Lover', is a soliloquy rather than a dramatic monologue. It is a simple lyrical and narrative poem, rich in visual details. You can appreciate it without the intervention of a teacher. So read it and THEN do the following exercise based on the poem.

Self-check Exercise-I

In order to answer the following questions you **may** be required to read the poem once again.

1. Who are the characters in the poem?

2. Record below the lines in which marks of exclamation occur,

3. Scan the following lines and comment on the chief prosodic features:

The rain set early in **tonight**

The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake:

I listened with heart fit to break

38.2.1 An Analysis

Browning wrote 'Porphyria' in his early twenties. It belongs to his exploratory period in which he was trying to discover his poetic ideology, medium and style through a number of long poems such as *Pauline* (1833), *Paracelsus* (1835) and *Sordello* (1840) and plays such as *Pippa Passes* (1841) and shorter dramatic lyrics such as 'Porphyria', 'Johannes Agricola', 'Cristina', 'Count Gismond', 'Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister' and 'In a Gondola'.

You must have noticed that Browning tells you the story of Porphyria's Lover with utmost economy. So much so that we don't even know his name. He must be an insignificant person, not just socially but also morally. He lives on the margins of the society, a cottager to whose house Porphyria could come only in a storm when there could not be a witness to her act of stealth. Her lover is not alert and vigilant like herself. When she enters her room she notices that the fire has not been properly stoked which she does and cheers up the room shutting both the storm and the cold out. Having brought life to the cheerless place she proceeds to ring the bells of existence into her lover's self. She removes, one by one, her clothes, in order to waken him up from his torpor. Her lover has refused to respond much less take the masculine lead in the love-act. She gives him a call. He does not reply. Then she takes the lead once again, puts his arm about her waist, bares her shoulder for him and when he is still unresponsive he makes his cheek lie on it and covers his head with her golden

locks. Having performed all these acts of love herself *she* confesses her love for him.

If you carefully examine the text once again you will find that after a description of the weather in the opening five lines, Browning, rather the lover, devotes the next fifteen lines describing Porphyria's acts – sensuous and warm – almost with vatsyayanian felicity. In its progression the narrative looked at from the heroine's point of view, has a lyrical charm from the opening through most of the twenty-first lines.

The anti-lyrical movement begins after the caesura in the twenty-first line. So far, the reader who has not been very clear about the role of the lover begins to get a better look into his character – diabolical? Not. Insane? Yes. He who has described his Porphyria's acts in all its telling details now proceeds to analyse her character as 'weak' and 'proud' and 'vain' – weak according to him, because she could not sever her ties with the false pride of her class and station in the society. She could come to his cottage that night partly because of her uncontrollable passion, infrequent as it was, and partly because she got a suitable cover for it by the 'wind and rain'. However, this rare blissful condition, provided by his beloved, brought a sudden thought to Porphyria's lover. He was pale owing to his unfulfilled desire for possessing her.

Having described his own wretched condition he now hurriedly describes the steps that led to the strangling of Porphyria at the end of the second section of the poem (which ends with line forty-one). The lover looked into the beloved's eyes – 'happy and proud'. Her pride indicates her station in life; while happiness tells us about her condition by the side of her lover. This told her in no unmistakable terms that Porphyria loved, no 'worshipped' him. The lover, finding that he had got something which neither his station nor his character entitled him to be 'swelled' in satisfaction and pride and perversely, rather in a fit of madness, began to plan what he could do. Right at the peak of his experience of bliss when she appeared to him to have been his completely and perfectly, in all her being, in all her perfection and purity and goodness he thought of strangling her to death with the 'String' of her golden hair.

The third section of the poem is even more eerie than the second. The narrator now goes on to justify the act and display composure which no one but the mad person can have. He asserts that Porphyria did not feel pain. However, his assertion in line forty-one is trivialized by the colloquial 'quite sure' in the succeeding line.

No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.

Like an innocent child that opens a bud into which a bee has entered with its tiny fingers, the murderer opens her eyelids and she appears to be laughing innocently. Next he untightens the tresses around her neck and feels that her blood has once again coursed through her veins and to her cheeks. While he did not once caress or kiss her when she was alive, he now offers her corpse his 'burning kiss' at which she even responds by blushing. However, the 'only' discordant note in the tune is struck by the head of the corpse, which 'droops' upon his shoulder.

Otherwise, the demented lover believes that the 'smiling rosy little head' (emphasis added) of his beloved is glad to have 'its utmost will'. However, it is noticeable that he is lying. While until line fifty-one he uses the personal pronoun 'her' for Porphyria in lines fifty-one through fifty-four she is referred to as 'it'. He is aware that a corpse is an inanimate thing and thus has no gender

However, his assertions regarding Porphyria in those very lines are meant to mislead others; those who are ready to overhear him.

Robert Browning:
Two Early Poems

The climax of the poem is gradually built towards the close i.e. in its sharply ironic statements of the poet:

Porphyria's love; she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred.

The lover's lurid romantic posturing at the close sharply contrasts Polyphra's healthy stance in lines six to twenty one. In fact the heroine's liveliness and vigour are set in sharp relief by the insane joyousness of her low and despicable lover. The ambiguity of the situation is perhaps best summed up in the last line of the poem:

And yet God has not said a word !

Does it mean that Browning holds here as in the famous lines in *Pippa Passes*:

God's in his heaven –
All's right with the world!

However, in that case Pippa was witness to an idyllic scene. In his words:

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;

Lad

The snail's on the thorn:

Should we assume that Porphyria's lover also imagines himself being in a perfect situation, with his beloved by his side, for perpetuity.

Or, is he also an antinomian, somewhat like Johannes Agricola who believed that he was exempt from all ethical considerations as he was a Christian. Agricola even went beyond it. He claimed to have been made even before the sun and the stars:

.... God said
This head this hand should rest upon
Thus, ere he fashioned star or sun.
And having thus created me,
Thus rooted me, he bade me grow;
Guiltless forever, like a tree
That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know
The law by which it prospers so:

Agricola is a solipsist like Porphyria's lover and the consequence is mania; delusion, paranoia and possession by the delusion of total power. In fact it is possible that Porphyria's lover is a fantasist who has conjured up the whole situation in his dream where he can see the process of his reduction.

Porphyria's lover, just like the Duke of Ferrara in 'My Last Duchess' is a jealous lover. While the former kills his beloved the latter probably has her.

killed and *possesses* her painting, so that he alone can savour her beauty. The Duke in 'My Last Duchess' tells the Count's messenger:

Oh Sir, she smiled, no doubt.
Whenever I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew: I gave commands:
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

Both Porphyria's lover and the Duke are neurotics. They wish to possess their beloveds in the **most** extreme sense and if **murder** is necessary for it they would go to the **extent** of committing even that. 'Porphyria's Lover' is a penetrating study of type of a neurosis.

Self-Check Exercise-I1

1. Porphyria's lover strangled her to death. Which other character in Browning's poetry had his wife murdered ?

2. What's common between Porphyria's lover and Browning's Johannes Agricola ?

38.3 THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB AT ST. PRAXED'S CHURCH

The poem was first published in *Hood's Magazine* (for March 1845) edited by F.O. Ward as 'The Tomb at St. Praxed's'. Browning appears to have felt dissatisfied with the title so when it was **published** in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) it **became** 'The Bishop orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church'. Browning does not tell us the Bishop's name, His archrival in the poem – **Gandolf** – is likewise fictitious. However, the poem could have been inspired by the little church of Santa Prassede (built **822**) which was restored just before Browning **visited** it in 1844. Santa Prassede, the virgin saint after whom it was named, was **daughter** of Pudens, a second century Roman **senator**.

The closest analogue to the Bishop in the monologue is the life of Cardinal Ippolito d'Este the Younger, a materialistic, **vain** and extremely stingy person. The effigy of Cardinal Cative (d. 1474) on top of his tomb is in front of one of the entrances of 'Garden of Paradise', a splendid chapel full of mosaics, It could also have inspired the poem. However, Browning does not describe either any person or the **structures** in detail.

While portraying the Bishop, as K.I.D. Meslen pointed out, Browning may have remembered Thomas Macaulay's (1800-'59) review of Leopold **Ranke's** (1795-1886) *Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome, during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (translated into English from the original in German by Sarah Austin) in the *Edinburgh Review* (October 1840). Macaulay deplored a pope such as Leo X (1531-'21) who along with the latinity of the **Augustan** age had also **acquired** its atheistical and disrespectful spirit. He spoke of the **Incarnation** of God in his Son Jesus Christ and the Christian ceremony of Eucharist (based on Christ's last supper on earth) or Mass in the **same** vein as Cotta and Velleius.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) the famous Victorian writer, scholar and sage was full of appreciation for 'The Bishop orders his Tomb'. His observations offer a valuable insight into the poem:

Robert Browning:
Two Early Poems

I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit - its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin.

Ruskin went on to add: ...

It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into as many lines, talked of the oracle of Delphi, or of the voice of Faunus in the wilderness.

Talking about the Popes

Macaulay deplored:

Their years glided by in a soft dream of sensual and intellectual voluptuousness. Choice cookery, delicious wines, lovely women, hounds, falcons, horses, newly-discovered manuscripts of the classics... These things were the delight and even the sensuous business of their lives. (Edinburgh Review, 72, Page 242)

Browning's poem reflects the mindset like that of Macaulay. When you read the poem you will find the influence of Macaulay's review published less than five years ago in the Edinburgh Review on it.

With this background knowledge you should read the poem (printed in this block) first and then do the following exercise.

Self-check Exercise-III

a. What kind of a person is the Bishop? Give at least three examples in support of your opinion.

b. Who was Gandolf ? What is the Bishop's attitude towards him?

c. Scan the following lines and comment briefly on the chief prosodic features:

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!

Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?

Nephews – sons mine... ah god, I Know not! Well –

She, men would have to be your mother once,

Old Gandolf envied me, so fair h e was!

38.3.1 A Discussion

The Bishop, who asks, rather orders his sons to make him a tomb in St. Praxed's Church is a sixteenth century Roman clergyman. It is significant that Browning avoids telling us about the specific date just as he omits the Bishop's name.

However, he tells us a lot about the Bishop's character, half-unconscious as he is in the last moments of a strifeful life. And yet, the Bishop in his state of delirium unveils his true life before his own sons, who probably know most, though not every detail of it already.

True to the person and character of a bishop, the poem begins with a well-known Biblical quotation from the Ecclesiastes:

Vanity of vanities, says The Teacher
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

However, the next sentence is in the imperative which effectively, if also ironically, expresses the Bishop's proud demeanour. Apparently, Anselm is the name of one of his sons. Perhaps he is his favourite and he wants him to be close to him. He addresses his sons first as his nephews as he always did in public and then making use of the familiar rhetorical device of *epanorthosis*, changes over to 'sons'. Browning uses a dash between 'Nephews' and 'sons' and suggests a break in speech thus making use of the rhetorical device of *aposiopesis*. Then there are three dots. The latter break is meant to indicate the momentary introspection when he, sort of, confesses falsely before his God. He pleads ignorance before Him: 'I know not!' In tune with his confession he remembers his 'wife' and almost in a tone of complaint utters:

She, men would have to be your mother once,

The next line (i.e. the fifth) informs us that another colleague of his – Gandolf – was competing with him to win her hand, nay clandestine love (because the clerics have to take a vow of chastity). And yet the Bishop appears to show no warmth of feeling for his late beloved. She was a prize object, which the Bishop won against a colleague just as the latter won the southern corner for his resting-place against him. Ironically, jealousy did not forsake these clergymen even in matters of intense life (i.e. love) and death. They truly represent the inordinate lust and acquisitive propensities of the Renaissance.

The Bishop's lustfulness finds expression not just in his affair with a woman who begat him many sons but more so in his words to them. He tells them that he had prayed to St. Praxed to grant them besides horses and Greek manuscripts 'mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs'. He appears to be such a confirmed epicurean that he does not see the irony of such a prayer. Not only that, he does not see the oddness of huddling

.... One pan
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off.

along with Moses with his tablets; Jesus, making his Sermon on the Mount and Saint Praxed with the nimbus round his head. It is interesting to point out that such an odd assemblage does exist on some of the friezes on the tombs in Rome, which Browning must have remembered vividly.

Howsoever ludicrous the Bishop may appear to us, Browning did not find him absurd. The Renaissance Bishop was a man of the world in the best sense of the term. He is a lover of the classics, which finds expression in his love of good attick Latin. He wants his sons to write his epitaph in the langttage of Cicero:

... Carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line –
Tully, my master ? Ulpian serves his need ! (ll. 76-79)

Domitius Ulpianus (d .228), a Roman jurist had a style that reflected the decadence, the fall from the urbanity and polish of the classical Roman style of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 RC). As the night advances the Bishop discloses that he had deliberately had Gandolf's epitaph written in the Ulpian language :

Aha, ELUCESBAT quoth our friend?
Nu Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best! (ll. 99-100)

Cicero would have written *elucebat* (i.e. he ~~was~~ illustrious) and not as the Bishop had it inscribed on Gandolf's tomb – *Elucesbat*.

Besides his appreciation for good Latin, it is also in his close familiarity with the classical culture that we discover the positive aspect of the Bishop's personality that Browning must have appreciated. This is best expressed in the telling *exemplum* of the lynx tied to a tripod:

... Ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a visor and a term,
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,
To comfort me on my entablature
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
'Do I live, am I dead?' (ll. 106-113)

The Bishop had a clear idea of what he wanted for his grave. Earlier on he had suggested: 'Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so ! (l. 58). It was not the utterance of a stupefied Bishop. When he comes back to the matter of his frieze he completes the picture in his mind. He wants the vase to be full of luscious grapes. The image of grapes suggests Dionysius, the god of wine, as does the lynx. He wants visors or masks of the helmet and a bust on a pedestal (term) to be part of the illustration on the frieze, Brisk movement is suggested by the struggle of the lynx, which lets the tripod fall to which it has been tied as it

lounges towards the Bishop to comfort him. While it does so the thyrsus, the ornamented staff carried in processions by the worshippers of Dionysus (or the Roman Bacchus), falls on the ground. A bacchanal, as you know, is a noisy feast at which a lot of drinking and disorderly behaviour, even sex, takes place. We thus find that without having either Dionysius or Bacchus on the frieze he has everything that suggests them: the grapes, the thyrsus and the lynx. The exemplum is highly suggestive of the character of the worldly, Renaissance Bishop. His thoughts are symbolized best by Dionysius the god of wine and love and the idea of festivity represented by the quick movement of the empathetic lynx which makes the Bishop ask himself 'Do I live, am I dead?' Brownings's words remind us of Keats' in 'Ode to a Nightingale'

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep'?

However, while Keats was inspired by the nightingale's song it is the dead Bishop's statue lying on the entablature that is expected by the dying Bishop to ask this question as he imagines all the props around him – unreal though real somewhat like Yeats' 'form' made by some Grecian goldsmith 'of hammered gold and gold enamelling':

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake:
Or set upon a golden bough to sing,
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past or passing or to come

However, Browning's image of the Bishop's statue delighting in his funerary artifacts is an art of greater poetic *tour de force* than either Keats' or Yeats'.

The Catholic clergymen are required to take the vow of chastity, obedience and poverty. However, the Bishop is a symbol of avarice. He has choice stallions and has secretly built lavish villas with baths. He wants to have his tomb made of jasper 'pure green as a pistachio-nut' basalt, agate and red marble:

'Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse. (ll. 29-30)

He divulges that he had stolen a precious lapis *lazuli* from a church and then probably burnt it to hide his theft. He buried the blue stone in the vineyard. He gives detailed description of its place of hiding and method of recovery. The Bishop wants this blue stone to be placed between his knees so that Gandolf may burst, of envy and disappointment.

As he is unmindful of his vows and acts contrary to them so is his conduct in discord with even the norms of good behaviour for laymen. He is seen trying to bribe his sons. He has promised to pray to St. Praxed on their behalf. He reminds them of his patrimony of the villas at Frascati, in the fashionable resort town in the Alban Hills, some fifteen miles south of Rome:

Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath, (ll. 45-46)

And if they do not obey his 'orders' he even threatens to tell the Pope about his villas in which case they would revert to him and not to them:

Else I give the Pope
My Villas! (ll. 102-3)

The poem is a brilliant account of the changing moods of the Bishop. He appears at the outset to be downcast and depressed to feel that he is dying. So much so that in line 13 he asks himself 'Do I live, am I dead?' Even while alive he feels dead, as the inner precincts of the church is too quiet for the man of activity that the Bishop was. However, he soon overcomes this mood and begins to recall his strife with Gandolf and the thought that the richness of his tomb would, for all times to come, raise his status above Gandolf, his rival, cheers up his spirits. In his exhilaration he goes on to give all the details of his sarcophagus and tomb.

He discloses the way he got the big piece of lapis lazuli, and compares its size with a Jew's head and its colour with the blue vein on Mary's breast. Significantly, Mary is no less sacred for the Catholics than Jesus Christ Himself, and John the Baptist was the first great Roman Catholic martyr and the representation of his severed head in the European pictorial art is a common place. However, to the Bishop he is no more than a piece of stone to be poised between his knees. In the great Jesuit church in Rome, the altar of St. Ignatius (1491-1556), the leader of the Counter Reformation is adorned with a group of the Trinity. The Father there holds a globe in his hand, which is said to be the largest piece of lapis lazuli in existence. The Bishop in the poem seems to recall it and his nonchalant manner seems to suggest that that might be a matter of emulation, not piety, for him.

However, as the poem draws to a close the candles of his sons 'dwindle' and the memory of their 'tall pale mother with her talking eyes' rekindles in the Bishop's mind. It strikes a discordant note in the flow of the Bishop's great ideas about his tomb. He discovers that they would not heed his requests, much less care for his commands,

... Will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul, (ll. 103-5)

From this low of his disposition he does momentarily rise to a high but then again relapses into despondence:

There leave me there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death— (ll. 113-15)

He does not hope now that his tomb would be built of anything other than mere sandstone ('Gritstone, a-crumble !').

'In a parody of Dante's tripartite scheme' wrote John Woolford, 'the Bishop distinguishes grades of 'afterlife' on the basis of grades of 'stone.' (p.116) If Gandolf's 'paltry onion stone' represents the purgatory his imagined basalt and agate and lapis lazuli would bequeath upon him an eternal paradisaal existence which he could not enjoy even in life. However, as it is, the sandstone sarcophagus with its 'clammy squares, which sweat/As if the corpse they keep were oozing through - 'would offer him the slimy afterlife, a state of rotting as not even in Hell, The Bishop's rich imagination and fulsome, if not true Christian, life finds expression in the multitude of details assembled paratactically in the poem. The Bishop remains his true self till the end. Nevertheless he is reconciled to his fate and tells his children:

Well go! I bless ye. (l. 119)

Gregg Hecimovich in his paper entitled 'Just the thing for the time'. Contextualizing Religion in Browning's "The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" (*Victorian Poetry* vol. 36, No. 3, Fall 1998) has convincingly read the poem as Browning's contribution to the Oxford Movement. However, notwithstanding his worldly picture of the contemporary Bishop, in tune with the Protestant temper, Browning was no Catholic knitter. In fact, though 'a staunch non-conformist his whole life' according to Hecimovich, 'Browning found in the history of the Catholic Church and its sacraments matters of spiritual moment'. To conclude, 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb...' is one of Browning's great early Poems that would sustain many readings and yet succeed in offering a rich, complex, and ever fresh poetic delight.

38.4 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit you studied two early poems of Robert Browning. You scanned two passages from the poems in order to understand their rhythm. These were meant to give you a feel for the early evolution in the art of the poet. These analyses should be helpful to you in writing your third assignment on this course which could be on just one work of art, i.e. a poem.

38.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Self-Check Exercise-I

1. Porphyria and her lover who strangles her to death.
2. Twice: in lines 55 and 60
3. The passage is in regular iambic tetrameter.

The rain set early in tonight /
 The sullen wind was soon awake, /
 It tore the elm-tops down for spite, /
 And did its worst to the lake: /
 I listened with heart fit to break

Self-check Exercise-II

1. Probably the Duke of Ferrara in 'My Last Duchess' had his wife murdered.
2. They are both solipsists of the extreme kind.

Self-check Exercise-III

- a. The Bishop, contrary to his accepted vocation, is a worldly person who values wealth, sensual pleasures and does not hesitate even to steal and lie.
- b. Gandolf was a fellow priest of the Bishop. The latter is jealous of the former even when he is dead though in life he had won the love of a woman whom Gandolf wished to make his own.

c. Vanity saith the preacher vanity !
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews— sons mine— Ah God, I know not ! Well—
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!

The dominant meter of the above passage is iambic pentameter. However, the first is a tetrameter line with the first foot being an amphimacer which is succeeded by an anapaest. The first foot of the third line is a trochaic inversion and in the fourth line Browning substitutes a spondee in the first foot for an iambus. The lines do not rhyme. The passage is a good example of the vitality of iambic pentameter poetry.

38.6 FURTHER READING

In case you are interested in reading more poems of this period you may read 'My Last Duchess', 'Count Gismond', 'Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister', 'In a Gondola' published in *Dramatic Lyrics* and 'Pictor Ignatus' and 'The Laboratory' in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. These would be available in any good anthology such as Norton's or the *Oxford Book of Victorian Poetry*. *The Works of Robert Browning* ed. F G. Kenyon (New York: Barnes & Nobles 1966) may be very useful but difficult to lay your hands on. *Browning: Poetry and Prose* selected by Simon Nowell-Smith (London: Rupert-Davis, 1950) is an easily available selection of Browning's poems. *Robert Browning: The Poems in 2 volumes* edited by John Pettigrew (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) is an authoritative collection of Browning's poems.

Among the critical works, I have referred to in 38.3.1 above is John Woolford's. *Browning the Revisionary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) and you may consult it if it's readily available.

UNIT 39 TWO POEMS FROM *MEN AND WOMEN* (1855)

Structure

- 39.0 Objectives
- 39.1 Introduction
- 39.2 Reading '*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*'
 - 39.2.1 Introducing 'Childe Roland'
 - 39.2.2 The plan and purpose of 'Childe Roland'
- 39.3 Reading 'Fra Lippo Lippi'
 - 39.3.1 Giorgio Vasari and his Life of Fra **Filippo Lippi**
 - 39.3.2 Introduction to 'Fra Lippo Lippi'
- 39.4 Let's sum up
- 39.5 Answers to exercises
- 39.6 **Further** reading

39.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you would be able to appreciate two of Browning's poems first published in *Men and Women* (1855). They are:

- '*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*' and
- 'Fra Lippo Lippi'.

By learning to appreciate them you will gain the ability to read and appreciate any other poem of Browning with the help of criticism available on **them**. on your own

39.1 INTRODUCTION

In two **earlier** units you read two poems of Browning and **an** excerpt from *Sordello*. In this unit you will read two more poems written in the early fifties of the nineteenth century.. With the help of these three units you should be able to **appreciate** the growth and development of Browning's poetic art,

In this unit you will be prepared to **analyse** another poem of your choice of Browning such as 'Andrea del **Sarto**', 'The Grammarian's Funeral', 'Abt Vogler', 'Karshish' and 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' with the help of articles and other reference material.

Don't try to read more than a major subsection such as 39.2.1 or 39.2.2 at a time. . Give yourself a break after you've read something weighty and follow the suggestions for reading from 'supplementary reading', **printed** in this block, offered **from** time to time.

39.2 READING '*CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER-CAME*'

In this section first we will introduce you to the poem and then encourage you to read it **on** your own before you read my discussion on it.

39.2.1 Introducing 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'

You may have read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* prescribed for you in B.A. on your *Understanding Poetry* (EEG06) course. Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' is a dream poem like *The Rime*, 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel', three of the most celebrated poems of Coleridge and it has the same eerie, gloomy, and weird atmosphere. When some stranger asked Browning about 'Childe Roland' in 1887 he admitted:

...Childe Roland came upon me as a kind of dream. I had to write it; then and there, and I finished it in the same day, I believe. But it was simply that I had to do it. I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know now. But I'm very fond of it.

Browning remained fond of 'Childe Roland' till the end of his life. 'Childe Roland' was written on January 2, 1852 in Paris in fulfilment of a new year resolution to write a poem a day. On the previous day he had written 'Women and Roses' and 'Love among the Ruins' the day after. All the three poems were published in *Men and Women* (1853). However, Browning placed 'Childe Roland' among the *Dramatic Romances* in 1863. Browning disapproved of any allegorical interpretations of the poem with the words 'Oh, no not at all,' but went on, 'I don't repudiate it, either. I only mean I was conscious of no allegorical intention in writing it.'

Browning also denied that there were any sources for the poem other than the line in *King Lear*, uttered by Edgar which gave the poem its title. Edgar's song in *King Lear* runs thus:

Childe Rowland to the dark tower came,
His word was still, 'Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man.

However, we know that Childe Rowland is a much older figure in European literature and folk tales than even Shakespeare. According to James Orchard Halliwell (1820-89), a noted Shakespearean scholar, Shakespeare above was quoting from two different compositions: the first line was from an old Scottish ballad in which Roland was the son of King Arthur. He rescued his sister Burd Ellen who had been carried away by the fairies to the castle of the king Elfland. The first line of the quotation above and the title of Browning's poem thus comes remotely from the Scottish ballad. The succeeding two lines, Halliwell pointed out, were from the nursery tale of 'Jack the Giant Killer'. It is also a tale of Northern origin but was known in England since very early times. You may have read it in your nursery class. Still, let me briefly tell you about it.

Jack lived about the time of Arthur (a chieftain or general in the fifth or sixth century). Jack's father was a Cornish fanner. He got known to his people when he killed the giant of Mount Cornwall. For this he dug a pit and covered it with branches, leaves and earth. Then he lured the giant towards it in which he fell and died. From another giant Jack acquired a coat that made him invisible, shoes that gave him superhuman speed, and a sword of magical powers. With the help of these he succeeded in ridding his land of all the giants.

Harold Golder in his article 'Browning's *Childe Roland*' (PMLA, 39,963-78) has shown that Browning must have drawn unconsciously upon several fairy tales such as 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'Hap-0'-my-Thumb' and 'The Seven Champions of Christendom' apart from 'Jack the Giant-Killer'. You may like to read this article provided as supplementary reading in this block.

A 'Childe' in its medieval meaning is a young warrior serving his apprenticeship to Knighthood. Roland was a hero of the medieval French romance *Chanson de Roland*

(early 12th century) and was the commander of the rearguard, appointed to the post by Charlemagne on the advice of his traitor uncle Ganelon. Ganelon was in league with the Saracen king Marsile. (For the later Greeks and Romans, a Saracen was a nomadic tribe of the Syro-Arabian desert. By extension, during the Crusades, it meant a Muslim.) Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), the Italian poet, continued the story of Orlando (the Roland of the Charlemagne cycle) and his beloved Angelica begun by Boiardo (?1441-94) in *Orlando Innamorato* 1487. Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* was influenced by Ariosto in both its form and content. It is almost certain that Browning was influenced by the European tradition of Roland, even if remotely, who appeared in the French romances weaved around Charlemagne: the Arthurian legends of his own country and Orlando in Italian epic poems of Boiardo and Ariosto.

Scholars have also tried to trace some of the imagery in the poem back to Browning's early readings, life and travels. Browning wrote to A.W. Hunt, the painter who had done a watercolour of the scene in 'Childe Roland' in 1866: 'My own "marsh" was made out of my head, - with some recollection of a strange solitary little tower I have come upon more than once in Massa-Carrara ...' The figure of the horse in the poem, Browning told Mrs. Sutherland Orr, was 'the figure of a horse in the tapestry in his own drawing room'. Regarding the landscape of 'Childe Roland' William Clyde DeVane, a well known Browning scholar, has pointed out that when Browning wrote 'Childe Roland' he had forgotten that most of its imagery came from the seventeenth chapter of Gerard de Lairese's *The Art of Painting in All its Branches*. According to DeVane, in the chapter called 'Of Things Deformed and Broken, Falsely called Painter-like' one could find

...the old cripple, the pathless field, the desperate vegetation, the spiteful little river, the killing of the water-rat, the enclosing mountains, the leering sunset, and many other details of *Childe Roland*...

While these details of source hunting scholarship does throw some light on certain aspects of the poem they do not tell us much about the meaning of the poem as a whole.

Browning himself was reluctant to explain what the dream (or nightmare) signified. Once when a churchman asked him if the meaning of the poem could be summed up in the phrase, 'He that endureth till the end shall be saved'. Browning replied, 'Yes just about that.' 'Childe Roland' offers, as Mrs Orr pointed out,

...a poetic vision of life: with its conflicts, contradictions, and mockeries: its difficulties which give way when they seem most insuperable: its successes which look like failures, and its failures which look like success.

Mrs. Orr warned against trying to draw an imagined lesson from the poem, for it offers none.

You are now familiar with my method and you would expect now to be advised to read the poem, printed in this block yourself. 'Childe Roland' is a poem about which it has been said that every reader can be her/his own allegorist. Having read the poem it may be a good idea also to read Harold Golder's article on the poem supplied to you in this block as supplementary reading. This, however, is optional.

Having read the poem you may like to find out how well you have understood what you've read. The exercise below will help you do that. Try to do it before going on to the next section.

1. What is an allegory?

2. Record below three lines from 'Childe Roland' in which Browning describes the horse.

3. Note down three literary works in which Roland figures as a character.

4. Mention three folk tales by which Browning could be remotely influenced in his poem.

39.2.2 The Plan and Purpose of 'Childe Roland'

Rhetoric is born out of our quarrels with other people; poetry, from our quarrels with ourselves. The epistles of *Vinay Patrika* (Petitions to Ram) recorded Tulsidas's frequent ascesis for self-control and petitions to his god to help him overcome his unruly passions:

माधव मोह-फाँस क्यो टूटै।
बाहि कोटि उपाय करिय, अभ्यंतर ग्रन्थि न छूटै॥१॥
अंतर मलिन विषय मन अति, तन पावन करिय पखारे।
मरइ न उरग अनेक जतन बलमीकि बिबिध बिधि मारे॥ ४॥

In another petition he again says

माधव! मो समान जग माहीं।
सब बिधि हीन, मलीन, दीन अति, लीन-विषय कोउ नाहीं॥१॥

Tulsidas admits to be deeply immersed in carnal desires and wants Ram to pull him out of the slough of such cravings. In another poem he calls Ram by the name of Hrishikesh i.e. master of the senses and exhorts him to relieve him of the pain engendered by them.

हृषीकेश सुनि नाउँ जाउँ बलि, अति भरोस जिय मोरे।
तुलसिदास इंद्रिय-संभव दुख, हरे बनिहि प्रभु तोरे॥५॥

Tulsidas was a contemporary of Shakespeare and just as the latter wrote in England, during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) the former wrote during that of Akbar (1556-1605) in India. There is a relative simplicity in the quality of experience that

Tulsidas, or for that matter Shakespeare, records *vis-à-vis* those of nineteenth and twentieth century poets whether of the United Kingdom or India.

'*Childe Roland / a the Dark Tower Came*' is a complex record of a poet's ascesis in his profession. Some critics have compared it with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. However, while Eliot talks about his age and the European society in that poem, Browning talks primarily, if not entirely, about himself, just like Tulsidas in some of the verses of *Vinay Patika* and W.B. Yeats in 'Meditations in Times of Civil War' and 'Nineteen Nineteen'. The atmosphere in 'Childe Roland' is no doubt eerie just as it is in Eliot's poem or in some of those of Coleridge but the intention is self-discovery, an examination of his office of a poet with respect to others', more active more involved in the daily business of life such as Yeats suspected his descendants could become:

And what if my descendants lose the flower
Through natural declension of the soul.
Through too much business with the passing hour.
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?

Most human beings busy themselves in solving routine mundane problems of life, not in creating 'monuments of unageing intellect' or artifices of eternity. However, the poet is not *always* sure that what he is doing is of as great an importance as he imagines. Yeats's own Thoor Ballylee tower was founded by a man-at-arms, a violent man:

A man-at-arms
Gathered a score of horse and spent his days
In this tumultuous spot,
Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
Forgetting and forgot;

However, before recognising the violent man's achievement, Yeats had laughed at the 'benighted travellers' who had laughed at him sitting in his 'chamber arched with stone' in front of,

A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.

Yeats imagines that before him Milton also must have 'toiled on/in some like chamber' on his 'Il Penseroso', significantly a poem in which Milton was examining his choice of profession in life just as Yeats was examining his own in his 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'.

Browning's 'Childe Roland' records the introspections of a mid-Victorian poet in the middle of his career. Milton wrote his twin poems 'L' Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' when he was around 23 years old; Yeats (1865-1939) when he published his 'Meditations' in the *Tower* (1928) was around 63; and Browning was an unsuccessful poet, unknown to the world at 40 when he wrote 'Childe Roland'. He was known to the American tourists as husband of the much more successful Elizabeth Barrett. Hence we discover a tone of futility in Browning's voice and an atmosphere of deceit, decay and death in the poem. Did I choose the right profession? is what the poet asks himself. And yet it is not a rhetorical question, for Browning was a stubborn optimist.

The opening of the poem reconciles the dichotomy in the image of the 'hoary cripple':

My first thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple with malicious eye

Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scorcel
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

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The portrait is highly ironical. The man is a 'cripple' and yet venerable – 'hoary'. His physical deformity is manifestation of his moral defect. He looks suspiciously sideways, and when Roland takes the path suggested by him he is scarce able to suppress his joy for having gained one more victim by deceiving a lusty youth.

The introductory section of the poem - i.e. from stanza I to VIII – records the ironical situation in which the inscription of the poem is made. Roland is aware that the cripple sat there on the road with staff in hand only to waylay travellers who might seek his direction. However, all agreed that it was that 'ominous tract' that '[hid]' the Dark Tower. Why should Roland want to follow an 'ominous' tract? Why should he wish to go to a "dark" tower?

Roland's condition is described with the help of an *exemplum* of an old man on his death bed who would rather die in order to please his kin than survive and disappoint them. Roland's kin are his 'Band', namely

The Knights who to the Dark tower's search addressed
Their steps – that just to fail as they, seemed best,

And Roland's fear now is if he is 'fit' to follow that 'ominous tract' on which many knights went before him.

Notwithstanding the fact that many knights had followed the path to the tower, possibly on the advice of the cripple Roland still finds him 'hateful' and takes the path, away from the highway, pointed out by him.

The first section of the poem of the first eight stanzas ends with an eerie picture of the youthful man as an estray i.e. a domestic animal that has strayed away from home:

All the day
Had been a dreary one at best, and dim
Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim
Red leer to see the plain catch its cstray.

The heath has caught its 'cstray' once again. The coming of Roland is thus a home-coming of a quester, a traveller, and a knight. The picture so far is full of tropes; nothing really appears to match its description; words seem to have lost their communicative talent; all is irony and paradox. Poetry here is at its ironical best.

The ninth to the twentieth stanza forms the middle section of the poem. It is a harrowing tale of the poetic landscape. Outsiders notice only the triumphs of the poets, their laurels and the rare applause but the real experience that the poet has is of cockle and spurge (plants of acrid milky juice) and a burr becomes his 'treasure trove'. Nature that is rich elsewhere and for other people looks peevishly towards the poet.

'See
Or shut your eyes', said Nature peevishly,
'It nothing skills; I cannot help my case;
'Tis the last judgement's fire must cure his place,
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free.'

To Browning in his early forties, the poetic landscape appeared a dead and dreary place where

The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

to borrow Eliot's words in *The Waste Land*. While the land in Eliot's poem is dry, and parched, in Browning's grass grows as scantily as hair on a leper's skin and the ground appears to be 'kneaded up with blood.' In the midst of death and destruction all around stands a 'blind horse' apparently thrown out of the devil's stable. 'Alive?' asks Roland about the horse and goes on to answer,

...he might be dead for ought I know,
With that red gaunt and calloped neck a-strain.
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane:

Like a true soldier, Roland, overcoming despair, prepares himself for a fight.

He does so by remembering his better days. (It appears that Browning wishes to recall those days when he was welcomed by Macready and Forster and above all Dictens.) But even *that* he is not granted. Cuthbert left him cold by his treatment:

I almost felt him fold
An arm in mine to fix me to the place,
That way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace!
Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

Giles, the soul of honour, was treated shabbily by his peers. He was called a traitor, spat upon and cursed. On the one hand Browning is metonymically speaking of gallants – one fake, i.e. Cuthbert, and the other genuine i.e. Giles – but metaphorically they stand for genuine and fake poets as Keats before him had talked about in 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Fragment' (1818).

To revert to the narrative, Roland is deep in despair somewhat like the Irish Airman of Yeats:

The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind

The plight of the Knights such as Cuthbert and Giles makes him prefer his waste land to that of valourous fight for honour. 'Better' he affirms, 'this present than a past like that;' and he commits himself to the 'darkening path'. He hears no sound nor can he have a sight and is afraid that he could be attacked by an owl (howlet) or a sharp toothed bat: 'Will the night send a howlet or a bat?'

Within the middle section stanza nineteen starts a description of a still more ghostly atmosphere reminiscent of those lines from Coleridge's *Rime*:

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.

Roland is taken by surprise by the appearance of a 'little river' which comes as unexpectedly as a serpent. The simile performs more than the trope promises. Browning makes use of it to heighten the effect of the atmosphere. Stroke after stroke the weird milieu grows more and more dim as Browning describes the dark river ('black eddy') spattered with white 'flakes and spumes' making the river look like a dark monster baring its teeth. The river is further endowed with tyrannical power as it is metonymically shown carrying animals and vegetables along its course.

... a suicidal throng:
The river which had done them all the wrong,
Whatever that was, rolled by, deterred no whit

Roland's experience of crossing the river is no less gruesome:

... While I forded – good saints, how I feared
To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
Each step, or feel the spear I trust to seek
For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
It may have been a water rat I speared,
But, ough! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

Having crossed the river Roland expects to witness a better terrain. However, the loam below his feet tells him of some war that must have been fought on that ground. 'Childe Roland' is a dream poem like 'Kubla Khan' and images often symbolise the human condition that the poet wants to portray.

'Toads in a poisoned tank,
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage-

the fight if animals in the dreadful circular arena – 'fell cirque' – which no animal seems to leave represents the mad fight of poets and men of letters in life. There are besides, the difficult systems of the society, meaningless but painful, created by no one one knows who. These institutions appear in Browning's dream as a 'brake' or machine for separating fiber such as flax or hemp:

And more than that – a furlong on – why, there!
'What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,
Or brake, not wheel – that harrow fit to reel
Men's bodies out like silk'?, With all the air
Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,
Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

The image of the machine or brake hauntingly suggests the painful torment Browning must have gone through as a poet. Dr. Johnson had known poverty. was even about to be sent to a debtor's prison but was fortunate in his large group of friends, though not of the patrons such as Lord Chesterfield. However, early in his life adversity did not spare him which elicited those memorable lines from him in *London* (1738):

Quick let us rise, the happy scats explore,
And bear oppression's insolence no more.
This mournful truth is everywhere confessed
SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESSED:
But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,
Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold;

Johnson had not yet turned thirty while he had just begun his service with Edward Cave on *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Probably Browning's case, more than a hundred years later, was much more difficult with the social fabric of London no longer the same and his own social intercourse being less close and intimate than Johnson's.

Literary texts, we know, are complex by nature, which means that they are not easily decipherable and are not isotropic. Speaking in the context of 'Childe Roland', we can say that this complexity crops up due to interweaving of several motifs i.e. those of the narrative needs of the Roland legend, the metaphoric need of translating Browning's personal message into the overall plan of the narrative, and finally the

aesthetic demand of the appropriate metonymic choice of images which may give an appearance of unity to the poem.

After Roland had witnessed the various forms of fear and tribulations on the heath he began to look for a new direction in which he could take his steps.

At the thought,
A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom friend.
Sailed past, not beat his wide wing dragon-penned
That brushed my cap - perchance the guide I sought.

Roland is not the folk hero but Browning himself because he is not shown the direction by Apollyon, an angel of the bottomless pit' in the 'Book of Revelation' and in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-'84) himself but by his 'bosom friend.' Browning the devout Christian that he was would have considered it profane and an expression of his pride to have a Biblical character guide his steps. Bunyan's Apollyon 'had wings like a dragon' and the direction of the fall of the cap showed him the direction in which he could go.

And so it happened. Instead of the heath and waste land Roland now found himself surrounded by mountains, or more appropriately from Roland's point of view, 'ugly heights'. However, Roland recounts:

Here ended, then,
Progress this way. When, in the very nick
Of giving up, one time more came a click
As when a trap shuts - you're inside the den!

With these words end Roland's difficult journey and Browning's nightmare.

Somewhat as in Shelley's 'Triumph of Life' Browning receives the epiphany of witnessing the poets whose path he had followed all his life:

There they stood, ranged along the Hill-sides - met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! In a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all.

The last section of the poem i.e. consisting of the last five stanzas is a preparation for this end. If Browning is to feel blessed in their company, the poets of yester years are also to feel alive through him. The poetic undertone, as it were, finally becomes the dominant tune in the last lines of the poem:

And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower.Came.*"

A poetic act is an act of sound and music. The last words are a poetic quotation just as the 'slug-horn' is a poetic coinage (for slogan) of Thomas Chatterton, the marvellous boy. And yet it is poetry that is a sluggish instrument as Browning must have seen it in his early forties. Browning here as Roland is a hero determined to win just as in 'Prospice' he was prepared to face death bravely.

Harold Bloom considered 'Childe Roland' Browning's 'finest' poem (*The Ringers in the Tower*, p,157). Whether finest or not, it is certainly an example of 'strong' poetry as Bloom would call it and operates at many levels, the most important of which is the autobiographical.

While teaching Browning's poems earlier in this and the previous two units we had adopted the method of first providing a background to the study of the poem: then asking you to read it and finally presenting you with an analysis and appreciation of the poem. In the present case we are going to adopt a slightly different strategy.

The poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' published in *Men and Women* for the first time was based on the life of the painter Filippo di Tommaso Lippi (c.1406-1469) written by Giorgio Vasari. An English translation of the 'Life' by Julia Conway and Peter Bondanella is printed in this block. You may go through it before reading the poem. If you wish to know about Giorgio Vasari please read the following sub-section.

39.3.1 Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)

Giorgio Vasari was an Italian painter, architect and celebrated author of *The Lives of the most excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors* (1550 and 1568). This work ranked him along with Machiavelli and Ariosto, as a leading Italian literary artist. Vasari claimed that he had learnt his art in the first place from Michelangelo in Florence, a story which has been disputed, and after his departure for Rome, from Andrea del Sarto (1484-1530) and Baccio Bandinelli. However, later assessments of Vasari have confirmed his titanlike energy as an architect but not as a painter. Michelangelo doubted the quality of Vasari's inspiration in his paintings and posterity is in agreement with him. Nonetheless, when the first edition of Vasari's *Lives* was published in 1550 Michelangelo, the century's greatest artist and lyric poet wrote a sonnet on him.

No true reference work existed for Vasari to consult and base his *Lives* upon. So, in a way, he invented the discipline of art history. However, art critics have pointed out that Vasari's technical vocabulary is often inadequate. For instance, he too frequently uses the word beautiful which shows his lack of discrimination.

Notwithstanding his faults, which were of his time, his encyclopaedic knowledge of the major and minor Italian artists, his understanding of the trends in the development of Italian art and his insights into the technical aspects of art counterbalance his deficiencies which seem trivial in comparison. To give you an example of Vasari's insight into the technical aspects: he pointed out that Titian lacked a sound knowledge of human anatomy which was fundamental to the reproduction of the human figure. Vasari valued design in art because he believed that an artist must have a clear *idea* of what he wanted to say through a particular piece of art. Vasari's *Lives* are enriched by the anecdotes from the lives of the painters which at the same time significantly illustrate their characters and make an indelible mark on our memory.

For instance Vasari tells us that Fra Filippo Lippi had lost his mother at his birth and his father two years later. So he had to be brought up by Mona Lapaccia, the sister of his father Tommaso. As she found it difficult to bear the costs so Vasari tells us, Filippo had to be made a friar at the Carmine church at the age of eight. (The footnote to the 'Life' would tell you that Filippo took the vows not in 1414 but in 1421 when he was fifteen. Vasari is often careless about his dates. However, considering the scale on which he was working and the documents so few on which he could base his researches Vasari deserved the praise of the posterity that he got.)

You would enjoy reading the 'Life of Fra Filippo Lippi'. If we had been in the classroom we would have discussed it. We would still do the same through the following check-your-progress exercises.

Self-check Exercise-I1

1. Who was Filippo's first teacher of art at Florence?

2. How did Filippo elicit 'compassion and freedom, from the Moors of Barbary?

3. Who was Cosimo de' Medici? What did he do to Filippo and Why? How did the artist respond and what was his master's reaction to his act?

4. Who was Lucrezia Buti?

39.3.2 Introduction to 'Fra Lippo Lippi'

Now that you have read Vasari's life of Fra Filippo Lippi you are ready to read Browning's verse narrative which was based on that life.

Browning must have seen in and around Florence many of Lippi's works. In lines 344-77 of the poem he tells the watchmen about his plan to paint 'The Coronation of the Virgin' for St. Aimbrose's Convent. There is another reference to Lippi's painting in line 73 of the poem of St. Jerome (340-420), which he did for Cosimo, his patron. Lippi was rebelling against the work of painters such as Giotto (whom you met in the first block of this course), Fra Angelico, Giovanni da Fiesole (1387-1455), and Lorenzo Monaco (c.1370-c.1425). Angelico was the model Medieval painter who took painting as an act of piety and painted the portraits of the saints kneeling down. Lippi talks about another type of piety. The world of beauty according to him was God's creation and was not to be passed by unheeded:

Oh, oh,
It makes me mad to see what men shall do
And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

Lippi's life and career, it appears, provided Browning with a perfect objective correlative, to use Eliot's term in *The Sared Wood* (1920), for the expression of his own beliefs and ideals.

**Two Poems from
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FRA FILIPPO LIPPI. *MADONNA ENTHRONED*.
1437. Panel, 45×25½" (114.7×64.8 cm).
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

Read the poem first and then, read Isobel Armstrong's article on Browning afforded in this block for supplementary reading.

39.4 LET'S SUM UP

With this unit you come to the end of the discussion on Browning on this course. We could have made this block one entirely on Robert Browning as we did earlier in the

first, second and fourth blocks on Chaucer, Spenser and Milton. However, we decided to take up one major along with three more major/minor poets of the Victorian period. These will be discussed in the succeeding two units. It was our endeavour to examine texts closely and if you could get a hang of this method of close analysis we would consider our task accomplished.

39.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Self-Check Exercise-I

1. An allegory is a figurative narrative or description meant to convey a veiled moral. It is in a way an extended metaphor. *The Faerie Queene*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress* personify abstract qualities. *Absalom and Achitophel* is a political allegory. Fables usually have a more well-defined moral and the characters in it are animals. Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a political satire in the form of a fable.
2. One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare.
Stood stupefied, however he came there;
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

Above are the last three lines of the 13th stanza. The first three lines of the 14th stanza also describe the horse. A stud is a stable. Notice how well Browning creates the weird atmosphere with the help of the image of the grotesque that is the horse.
3. Shakespeare's *King Lear* which Browning admitted to have provided him with the title of his poem; the early twelfth-century French romance *Chanson de Roland*, and the Italian *Orlando Innamorato* by Boiardo and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* have Roland as the hero.
4. 'Jack the Giant Killer', 'Jack and the Beanstalk' and 'The Seven Champions of Christendom'.

Self-check Exercise-II

1. Masaccio was doing the frescoes (pictures painted on fresh plaster) on the walls of Brancacci chapel of Sta. Maria del Carmine. These were going to be some of the most influential paintings of the Renaissance. Filippo thus got his first lessons from a master artist of Renaissance Italy.
2. Later researches have shown that Vasari's story about the kidnapping of Filippo and his friends while they were amusing themselves in the March of Ancona was fanciful. In 1434 Filippo was at Padua and art historians have felt the effect of his presence there on the art of that period on the paintings at Padua, especially those of Mantegna.
3. The story narrated in the fifth paragraph of the 'Life' has been found to be broadly true by later scholarship.

The last few words of the paragraph – 'rare geniuses are celestial forms and not beasts of burden' – are memorable.
4. Lucrezia Buti, daughter of Francesco Buti (a Florentine citizen), was a nun at the convent of the nuns of Sta. Margherita. He fled with her in 1456 from Prato causing much harm to the reputation of the convent and shock to her father. The Pope, however, granted him permission to marry her and from this union was born Filippo, called Filippino, one of the most renowned Florentine painters of the latter half of the fifteenth century.

39.6 FURTHER READING

You have several articles in this block which you may like to go through. In this unit we have referred to Harold Bloom's 'Browning's *Childe Roland: All things deformed and broken*' (pp.157-167) published in *The Ringers in The Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (University of Chicago P: Chicago, London, 1971) and to 'Testing the Map: Browning's *Childe Roland*' (pp. 106-122) published in *A Map of Misreading* (O.U.P.:Oxford, New York, 1975, 1980) by the same author.

It would be useful to consult any of the following three books if you are going to attempt a poem for your term paper not discussed on this course. The books are as below:

1. Mrs. Sutherland Orr. *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning* (G. Bell & Sons: London, 1919)
2. William Clyde DeVane. *A Browning Handbook* (1935, Appleton- Century – Crofts, Inc.; New York, 1955)
3. Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1973)

Those who don't have access to a good library may write sessional essay on 'Fra Lippo Lippi'

UNIT 40 THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD:DANTE GABRIEL AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Structure

- 40:0 Objectives
- 40.1 Introduction
- 40.2 The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: A Movement in Art and Literature
- 40.3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti
 - 40.3.1 Early Works
 - 40.3.2 Personal Experiences
 - 40.3.3 Portrayal of Women
 - 40.3.4 Literary Endeavours
- 40.4 The Poems
 - 40.4.1 "My Sister's Sleep,"
 - 40.4.2 "The Blessed Damozel"
- 40.5 Christina Rossetti
 - 40.5.1 "Goblin Market"
- 40.6 Let's sum up
- 40.7 Suggested Readings
- 40.8 Bibliography

40.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- write about the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in art and literature in the nineteenth century.
- understand the work and achievements of two of its practitioners, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister, Christina Rossetti.
- be acquainted with some of their poems.

40.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will first familiarize you with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement that took place in the nineteenth century. Then it will speak of two poets of the movement, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti, analyzing two of the former's poems and one by the latter.

40.2 THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD :A MOVEMENT IN ART AND LITERATURE

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement was not a movement confined to literature. In fact, it started with painting. In 1848 a group of young British painters banded together in a reaction to what they conceived as the unimaginative painting of the Royal Academy. They purportedly sought to express a new moral seriousness and sincerity in their works. They were inspired by Italian art of the 14th and 15th centuries, and their adoption of the name Pre-Raphaelite expressed their admiration for what they saw as the direct and uncomplicated depiction of nature typical of Italian painting before the

High Renaissance and, particularly, before the time of **Raphael**.^{*} Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's active life lasted less than 10 years, its influence on painting in Britain, and ultimately on the decorative arts and interior design, was profound.

Apart from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood comprised Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais. They were all under 25. The painter James Collinson, the painter and critic F.G. Stephens, the sculptor Thomas Woolner, and the critic William Michael Rossetti (Dante Gabriel's brother) joined them by invitation. William Dyce and Ford Madox Brown were also notable practitioners of the Pre-Raphaelite style in painting.

Paintings:

The Brotherhood immediately began to produce highly 'convincing and significant works. Their pictures of religious and medieval subjects emulated the deep religious feeling and naive, unadorned directness of 15th-century Florentine and Siennese painting. The style that Hunt and Millais evolved featured sharp and brilliant lighting, a clear atmosphere, and a near-photographic reproduction of minute details. They also frequently introduced a private poetic symbolism into their representations of Biblical subjects and medieval literary themes. Vitality and freshness of vision are the most admirable qualities of these early Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

At first the Brotherhood exhibited together anonymously, signing all their paintings with the monogram PRB. When their identity and youth were discovered in 1850, their work was harshly criticized by the novelist Charles Dickens, among others, not only for its disregard of academic ideals of beauty but also for its apparent irreverence in treating religious themes with an uncompromising realism. Nevertheless, the leading art critic of the day, John Ruskin, stoutly defended Pre-Raphaelite art, and the members of the group were never without patrons.

40.3 DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI: INTRODUCTION TO THE POET

D. G. Rossetti [original name GABRIEL CHARLES DANTE ROSSETTI] (1828--1882), was an English painter and poet who helped found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was educated at King's College before he went to "Sass's," an old-fashioned drawing school in Bloomsbury (central London), and thence to the Royal Academy schools, where he became a full student. A voracious reader, he was well read in William Shakespeare, J.W. von Goethe, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott. He was fascinated by Gothic tales of horror and the work of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. In 1847 he discovered the 18th-century English painter-poet William Blake whose diatribes against the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds encouraged Rossetti to attempt lampoons of his own against the triviality of early Victorian paintings.

By the time Rossetti was 20, he had already done a number of translations of Italian poets and had also composed some original verse. Simultaneously, he was in and out of artists' studios and for a short time was, in an informal way, a pupil of the painter Ford Madox Brown. He acquired some of Brown's admiration for the German "Pre-

^{*} RAPHAEL (1483-1520) Italian artist, master painter and architect of the Italian High Renaissance. He was a disciple of artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Raphael is best known for his Madonnas and for his large figure compositions in the Vatican in Rome. His work is admired for its clarity of form, ease of composition and for its visual achievement.

Raphaellites," the nickname of the austere Nazarenes,¹⁰⁰ who had sought to bring back into German art a pre-Renaissance purity of style and aim.



D. G. Rossetti

Largely through Rossetti's efforts, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848 with seven members, all Royal Academy students except for William Michael Rossetti. They aimed at "truth to nature," which was to be achieved by minuteness of

¹⁰⁰ The Nazarenes (so called because they sported the biblical style of hair and dress) was an association of German painters, formed in 1809, who wished to revive the medieval spirit in art through fresco painting. It was anti-academic movement that reacted against the 18th century Neoclassicism. The Nazarenes' belief in the honest expression of deeply felt ideals had an important influence on the English Pre-Raphaelite movement of the mid-nineteenth century.

detail and painting from nature outdoors. This was, more especially, the purpose of the two other principal members, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. Rossetti expanded the Brotherhood's aims by linking poetry, painting, and social idealism and by interpreting the term Pre-Raphaelite as synonymous with a romanticized medieval past.

40.3.1 Early Works

Rossetti's early oil paintings were simple in style but elaborate in symbolism. Some of the same atmosphere is felt in the rich word-painting and emotional force of his poem "The **Blessed Damozel**," published in 1850 in the first issue of *The Germ*,^{***} the Pre-Raphaelite magazine. When it was exhibited in 1850, his painting "Ecce Ancilla Domini" received severe criticism, which Rossetti could never bear with equanimity. In consequence, he ceased to show in public and gave up oils in favour of watercolours, which he could more easily dispose of to personal acquaintances. He also turned from traditional religious themes to painting scenes from Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and Dante, which allowed more freedom of imaginative treatment.

40.3.2 Personal experiences

Much of Rossetti's work has its roots in his personal life. His paintings and poems are based on lived events and experiences and the persons they immortalize are generally intimately connected with his life and work: the public and the personal are not separate. Hence, some awareness of his personal life, and the people he came into close contact with, is essential for a proper understanding of his work.

An important chapter in Rossetti's life began in the 1850s with the introduction into the Pre-Raphaelite circle of the beautiful **Elizabeth Siddal**, who served at first as model for the whole group but was soon attached to Rossetti alone and, in 1860, married him. Many portrait drawings testify to his affection for her. In 1854 Rossetti gained a powerful but exacting patron in the art critic John Ruskin. By then the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was at an end, splintered by the different interests and temperaments of its members, but Rossetti's magnetic personality aroused a fresh wave of enthusiasm. In 1856 he came into contact with the then-Oxford undergraduates Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. With these two young disciples he initiated a second phase of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

From 1860 onward, trials were part of Rossetti's much-disturbed life. His marriage to Elizabeth Siddal, clouded by her constant ill health, ended tragically in 1862 with her death from an overdose of laudanum. He was so stricken with grief and remorse that he buried with her the only complete manuscript of his poems. That he considered his love for his wife similar to Dante's mystical and idealized love for Beatrice is evident from the symbolic "Beata Beatrix," painted in 1863 and now in the Tate Gallery.

40.3.3 Portrayal of women

Under the influence of new friends --- Algernon Charles Swinburne and the American painter James McNeill Whistler --- Rossetti explored a more aesthetic and sensuous approach to art. In particular, he focused on portrayals of female beauty,

^{***} *The Germ*: A periodical edited by W. M. Rossetti, of which the first issue appeared on Jan 1, 1850. *The Germ* was the spokesman of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but survived only four issues, the last appearing on April 30, 1850. The last two issues of the journal were renamed **Art and Poetry, being Thoughts Towards Nature**. *The Germ* published the poems of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and is believed to have inspired William Morris's *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) which continued the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Such as his mistress; Fanny Cornforth, gorgeously appareled and painted. Among these works is "The Blessed Damsel" (1871-79). The luxuriant colours and rhythmic design of these paintings enhance the effect of their languid, sensuous female subjects, all of whom bear a distinctive "Pre-Raphaelite" facial type. The paintings proved popular with collectors, and Rossetti grew affluent enough to employ studio assistants to make copies and replicas.

40.3.4 Literary Endeavours

Rossetti had enjoyed a modest success in 1861 with his published translations. *The Early Italian Poets*; and toward the end of the 1860s his thoughts turned to poetry again. He began composing new poems and planned the recovery of the manuscript poems buried with his wife in Highgate Cemetery. Carried out in 1869 through the agency of his unconventional man of business, Charles Augustus Howell, the exhumation greatly distressed the superstitious Rossetti. The publication of these poems followed in 1870.

The Poems were well enough received until a misdirected: savage onslaught by "Thomas Maitland" (pseudonym of the journalist-critic Robert Buchanan) on "The Fleshly School of Poetry" singled out Rossetti for attack. Rossetti responded temperately in "The Stealthy School of Criticism," published in the *Athenaeum*; but the attack, combined with remorse and the amount of drugs and alcohol he now took for insomnia: brought about his collapse in 1872. He recovered sufficiently to paint and write, but his life was subsequently that of a semi-invalid and recluse. In the early 1880s Rossetti occupied himself with a replica of an early watercolour, "Dante's Dream" (1880), a revised edition of *Poems* (1881), and *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881), containing the completed sonnet sequence of "The House of Life," in which he described the love between man and woman with tragic intensity. From a visit to Keswick (in northwestern England) in 1881, Rossetti returned in worse health than before, and he died the following spring.

Rossetti remains an important figure in the history of 19th-century English art and literature because he broke with tradition and experimented with new themes. What is remarkable in his work is his eye for detail, through his painting as well as his poems. In his poetry, through the accumulation of details and the building up of a deep emotional intensity, he is able to create the desired atmosphere effectively. This is what he does in his poem "My Sister's Sleep" where one can almost feel the silence and sickness of the woman's room and the sense of doom that prevails. In other poems, too, he employs similar effects, as in "The Wood Spurge" and the lyric "I have been here before." "The Stream's Secret," haunted by the ghost of his dead wife, evokes pity and regret by the power of its verbal music. This theme of death, grief and longing is a prominent one in the work of Rossetti. The relation between life and death, the physical and the spiritual, haunted him throughout, heightened particularly by the tragic loss of his wife.

Rossetti's poetic art had other, less subjective aspects. "The Last Confession," a tragic episode set against a background of the Italian Risorgimento (the movement for the liberation and unification of Italy, 1750-1870), is a powerful dramatic monologue that can bear comparison with those of Robert Browning. With his feeling for medieval subjects, Rossetti also caught the spirit of the ballad as in his "Sister Helen" and "Eden Bower." "The White Ship" and "The King's Tragedy" are outstanding re-creations of the historical ballad. Early in Rossetti's career, the sight of the great winged bulls in the British Museum evoked his poem "Burden of Nineveh" (1850), a meditation on the unpredictable course of history that is rich in word-music and far-ranging in imaginative vision.

In this section you will read two poems of D.G. Rossetti. They are 'My Sister's Sleep' and 'The Blessed Damozel'.

40.4.1 "My Sister's Sleep"

In "My Sister's Sleep" Rossetti attempts with the help of words what the Pre-Raphaelite painters did with paintbrush and easel in their paintings: he uses verbal effects where they use colours and paints to evoke a realistic scene in the minutest detail. The setting appears to be the Rossetti home but the dying sister is a figment of his imagination.

The poem is remarkable for its creation of a hushed atmosphere, its concentration of detail, and its visual images. There is in the poem the sorrow that is inevitably related to death and the idea of dying. But the sorrow does not become claustrophobically unbearable as there is an element of equanimity that pervades the poem, a calmness that makes sorrow an acceptable reality,

Rossetti's, poetic style needs a special mention. He tends to use monosyllabic words and his lines are short, composed in simple iambic (an unstressed and a stressed syllable) tetrameter (three feet in each line). The stanzaic pattern is rhymed *abba* quatrains. What holds the attention most, however, is not the technicalities of the poem but the play of light and colour throughout. Rossetti remains a painter even in his poems, creating visual art with words. His poetry appeals more through the images it evokes than the ideas it contains.

As is evident from "My Sister's Sleep," Pre-Raphaelite poetry generally focuses on a single female figure: its beauty, grace, and divinity is evoked in sensuous detail. One may notice a romantic idealization of womanhood in these portrayals. The women, as in romantic poetry, are frail, weak, weeping, pining, swooning or dying. They need to be looked after, to be supported, to be protected. True, this is a chauvinistic view, but such was the stereotype favoured in the nineteenth century. Anything different was seen as an anomaly. Such is also the female figure presented in Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel."

40.4.2 "The Blessed Damozel"

"The Blessed Damozel" was first written in 1847, when Rossetti was 19, and published in *The Germ* in 1850. There is also a painting by Rossetti of the same subject which dates much later (between 1875 and 1879). The poem, as Rossetti himself said, is inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in which speaks of a grief-stricken lover. The Rossettis were familiar with foreign literatures and had discovered Poe's work much before it hit the European scene. As Rossetti was to state later in life, "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the condition, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven."

So, in Rossetti's poem, the beloved is in heaven, longing for her lover who has survived her on earth. One may trace in the poem the obvious influence of Dante. Just as Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, glorifies his beloved, Beatrice, and looks on her as a medium that will take him to divinity, so too, Rossetti looks upon the woman in the poem as some kind of a divine creature, looking down at her mortal lover: Like Dante's poem, "The Blessed Damozel" combines physical love with the spiritual, seeking a plane that transcends earthly bonds.

The manner in which Rossetti turns to heaven and to a spiritual after-life would convey the idea that his is religious poetry. In fact, the title of his poem ("The

Blessed Damsel") brings to mind the Virgin Mary. But Rossetti's intention was never to write for religious purposes. On the contrary, whereas religion believes in a shedding of all earthly bonds following a union with God, the idea Rossetti presents in "The Blessed Damsel" is that earthly love survives in heaven. There is also a lot that the religious-minded would object to in his portrayal of the disconsolate woman's indifference to all heavenly delights in her disconsolate, grief-stricken state.

The poem begins with a picture of the beloved in her heavenly abode. But she is discontented and sorrowful. Oblivious of all the beauties that surround her, she looks down at the earth below:

The blessed damsel leaned out
From the gold bar of heaven;
Waters were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

This opening stanza of the poem prepares us for what is to follow. It "locates" the poem, so to speak, identifies its main character, and points a cue to the stylistic devices the poet uses.

Location-wise, the scene is heaven. But there is an ambivalence in Rossetti's portrayal of heaven: the "gold bar" brings to mind the bars of a prison, it suggests a lack of freedom. For the woman, no doubt, heaven is a prison that keeps her away from her true love. (The last stanza of the poem will tell us that they are "golden barriers.") Similarly, there is irony in the poet's use of the adjective "blessed" for the girl. A blessed state generally connotes contentment, bliss, peace, shades of divinity. In the girl's case, however, there is neither peace nor happiness. Even though her sorrow is not outlined in the opening lines, a suggestion of it is present in the "bar" that confines her to heaven and in the mysterious depths of her eyes (1.3).

The description of the girl merits some more attention. The three lilies in her hand and seven stars in her hair are a statement on the Pre-Raphaelite poetic method: its concentration on minute detail in order to create a realistic picture. There is also a romantic element in the description of the girl with languid, deep eyes, adorned with flowers and stars, leaning over the gold bar. It reminds us of idealized female figures in romantic poetry. As we proceed further into the poem, this impression is reinforced when we are told that the woman pining for her lover. This brings to mind the woman waiting for her demon lover in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." But the situation is somewhat different because in Rossetti's poem it is the woman who is divine ("blessed") while her lover is mortal.

The poem may be divided into two almost equal parts. The first half (65 lines) of the poem concentrates on the forlorn woman's elysian surroundings while the second half comprises mainly her monologue, her yearning for her lost lover.

In the first half of the poem there is a constant play on the polarities of this world that the girl now inhabits (heaven) and the other world (the earth) that she has left far behind, that lies way below. It may be noted that whereas the first is described in detail, the second (the earth) is not described at all and there is a constant reference to the gap, the chasm that separates the two. Even though the girl tries hard to see what is happening in the world below, she is unable to do so. All she sees is mists and darkness, both symbolic of her unmitigated despair.

The poem does not end on a note of hope even though there is a temporary calming of grief in the penultimate stanza when the girl is "Less sad of speech" and she smiles. It is almost as she consoles herself, reconciling herself to her present forlornness. Perhaps in her heart of hearts she knows that reunion is impossible, and

she realizes the futility of her longing, because the concluding stanza tells us again that she weeps with her face buried in her hands.

Despair, in Rossetti's vision, is also to be found in heaven! Despair and longing for earthly bliss, for human love.

Simple exercises for comprehension:

1. Show how Rossetti in his poems uses words the way a painter uses colours. [You will have to look at the poems carefully and study the images they describe, their concentration on detail, the use of colour, light, and shadows. You will also assess the symbolic value of the images and their appropriateness in the given context.]

2. Explain how Rossetti is concerned with the connection between this physical world and the other world of afterlife. Do you find traces of romanticism in this concern? Illustrate your answer with the help of the themes and images employed in his poems. [For this question you will first speak of the theme of death in both the poems that have been discussed in this unit. Then you will show how death has been treated. You will try to figure out in what way it is connected with earthly existence. Which of the two, in your opinion, seems more satisfying to the poet? Life or death?]

3. With the help of the two poems you have read by Rossetti, comment on the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of women. [Keep in mind that the important women in Rossetti's life were initially models who posed for the young painters. So, for the Pre-Raphaelites they were tools that could take them towards success. Paradoxically, even though they could be "hired" in the commercial sense, these women were idealized by the Pre-Raphaelites. They were not visualized as drab, ordinary women, but as divine, ethereal creatures. So the women they painted or wrote about were transformed from ordinary, realistic human beings into extraordinary, "blessed" creatures who, by virtue of their suffering or by dying, acquired a halo of divinity. The poets seemed to believe in the romantic concept of women as creatures who are frail and may swoon, faint or die. This point may be easily illustrated with the help of Rossetti's work.]

40.5 CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI, pseudonym ELLEN ALLEYNE (b. 1830--1894), one of the most important of nineteenth-century English women poets both in range and quality. Christina was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti and was the

sister of the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In 1847 her grandfather, Gaetano Polidori, printed on his private press a volume of her *Verses*, in which signs of poetic talent' are already visible. In 1850, under the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, she contributed seven poems to the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*. In 1853, when the Rossetti family was in financial difficulties, Christina helped her mother keep a school at Frome, Somerset, but it was not a success, and in 1854 the pair returned to London, where Christina's father died. In straitened circumstances, Christina entered on her life work of companionship to her mother, devotion to her religion, and the writing of her poetry. She was a firm High Church Anglican, and in 1850 she broke her engagement to the artist James Collinson, an original member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, because he had become a Roman Catholic. For similar reasons she resented Charles Bagot Cayley in 1864, though a warm friendship remained between them.



In 1862 Christina Rossetti published *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and in 1866 *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, both with frontispiece and decorations by her brother Dante Gabriel. These two collections, which contain most of her finest work, established her among the poets of her day.

In 1871 Christina was stricken by Graves' disease, a thyroid disorder that marred her appearance and left her life in danger. She accepted her affliction with courage and resignation, sustained by religious faith, and she continued to publish, issuing one collection of poems in 1875 and *A Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881. But after the onset of her illness she mostly concentrated on devotional prose writings. *Time Flies* (1885), a reading diary of mixed verse and prose, is the most personal of these works. Christina was considered a possible successor to Lord Alfred Tennyson, as poet laureate, but she developed a fatal cancer in 1891. *New Poems* (1896), published by her brother, contained unprinted and previously uncollected poems.

Though she was haunted by an ideal of spiritual purity that demanded self-denial, Christina resembled her brother Dante Gabriel in certain ways, for beneath her humility, her devotion, and her quiet, saintlike life lay a passionate and sensuous temperament, a keen critical perception, and a lively sense of humour. Part of her success as a poet arises from the fact that she apparently succeeded in uniting these two seemingly contradictory sides of her nature. There is a vein of the sentimental and didactic in her weaker verse, but at its best her poetry is strong, personal, and unforced, with a metrical cadence that is unmistakably her own. The transience of material things is a theme that recurs throughout her poetry, and the resigned but passionate sadness of unhappy love is often a dominant note.

While looking at Christina Rossetti's poetry, one must keep certain factors in mind. In the first place, it is important to remember that in the nineteenth-century Victorian Age there were several repressive forces constantly operating on women. Women were not supposed to be opinionated. They were conventionally required to simply conform to the male line of thought. Christina Rossetti was gifted with a sharp, intelligent mind but the keenness of her mind was suppressed by the pressures of social propriety. She lived a more or less sheltered life with little contact with the world outside except through her brothers and their bohemian friends. She was not learned, unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and remained unexposed to scholastic theories. Above all, what governed her actions throughout her life was her deep religious belief.

40.5.1 "Goblin Market"

"Goblin Market" is Christina Rossetti's best known poem. Unfortunately, it is only in recent decades that it has received the attention it deserves. Formerly it was generally relegated to the children's literature or fantasy literature category. The reason for its neglect was partly because its main characters are two young girls and partly because Christina Rossetti's talents remained undiscovered until she was resurrected by contemporary feminist critics.

On the surface level "Goblin Market" (henceforth, "GM") is what may be called a "story poem." Loosely speaking, it may be placed in the ballad tradition. It is a narrative that follows a swift, racy pace, revolves around a given character and her fate, leads up to a central event, and apparently underscores a (then) socially acceptable moral lesson. The distinctive feature lies in that this poem is about a female character, her fall from grace, and subsequent redemption. If we look at the theme we find similarities with the ambitious project tackled by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*. There are, however, significant differences: Christina Rossetti's poem speaks of no male characters, except for the goblins who are not human but half-animals; whereas Milton's epic speaks of the fall of Adam, "GM" speaks of transgression by a female protagonist: the role of a Christ-like saviour is taken up by

another female character, the erring girl's sister. The central motif remains the same succumbing to temptation, suffering as punishment, sacrifice and redemption

In the very first lines (11.1-50), the poem lays bare the situation: there are two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, both young, innocent, and virginal. And there is temptation that lurks everywhere in the form of strange, deformed goblins who appear as fruit-sellers to seduce and destroy the innocence of unsuspecting girls. The goblins are fearsome, yet fascinating. One of the sisters, Laura, finds herself being drawn towards them despite her sibling's admonishments.

Lines 81-140 speak of Laura's transgression: she partakes of the goblins' fruit, paying for them with a symbolic lock of her golden hair, and returns home satiated. A wise Lizzie upbraids her and reminds her of the harm the goblins did to a certain Jeanie who had tasted their fruit and died in her youth. Laura, however, is sort of intoxicated with the goblin's feast and pays little attention (81-183). As they fall asleep, they present a pretty picture (184-198), typically Pre-Raphaelite in its detailed description.

The following day, a change comes over the errant girl. She goes about her chores as usual but pines for the night when the goblins would appear again with their wares. However, when twilight gathers, her sister, Lizzie can hear the goblins' call but not Laura. This makes Laura realize that her desire for more fruit from the goblins would never be satisfied and that she is now doomed to a life of frustrated desire (199-268).

Lines 269 to 328 describe Laura's suffering and decline. It appears that she will now suffer a fate as miserable as Jeanie's. Finally, when she is at death's door, Lizzie decides to save her somehow, so she goes to the goblin men and asks for some fruit. The goblins insist that she should eat the fruit in their presence but she refuses to do so. Thereupon they are enraged and attack her with the fruit, trying to force her to eat. She stands stoically, braving their assaults and is covered with juices (329-446). In this disheveled state, drenched with fruit-juices, Lizzie runs home and tells Laura to lick the juices off her. The ailing sister does so, and is saved but only after suffering a raging fever (447-542).

The concluding lines of the poem (543-567) shift the focus into the future and speak of the two sisters as grown women, contented with their home and children, warning their daughters of the dangers that may befall them if they go astray, advising them to stand by each other in time of need.

This is the narrative on the obvious level. Writing in times when women were supposed to be angels in the house, it appears as though Christina Rossetti is reinforcing the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Laura is innocent and happy as long as she remains within the confines of domesticity, away from temptations of the outside world, particularly temptations related to female desire. Accepting the repressive norms of society, she may ensure for herself a trouble-free existence. However, when she breaks the social taboo, she has to suffer. Lizzie, who admonishes her from time to time, acts as the moral voice of her times, repeating the socially correct message.

Some critics, referring to the poet's personal life and her rejection of men and marriage, read the poem as an expression of Christina Rossetti's underlying fear of sexuality. The goblins, in their evil, distorted guise, represent the latent fear of men that Christina Rossetti probably lived with. This may be related to the fact that there are no other normal men in the narrative. Even when, in the final stanza, "GM" tells of Laura and Lizzie in their maturer years, neither their husbands nor their sons are mentioned. They are shown only in the company of their daughters and the close bonding between them is stressed. The concluding lines are:

For there's no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,

To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.'

These lines further strengthen the theme that sisterhood is powerful and make "GM" an unmistakably feminist poem. No wonder, therefore, that feminist critics discovered much to be lauded in the poem.

The two sisters of the poem, it has been argued, may be taken to represent two sides of the poct: one stem, self-denying and ascetic, the other sensuous, hedonistic, and self-indulgent. Lizzie represents the society with its repressive norms while Laura is the rebel, questioning and transgressing those norms. In keeping with the Victorian ideology, Laura suffers because she breaks the rules. She pays a heavy price for not observing the moral code. And when she regains life and vitality through her sister by symbolically "eating" her, she is in a way ingesting the moral code, reconciling to and accepting the social norms she had earlier transgressed. Consequently, she can be happy once more.

Like the women portrayed by the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, "GM" also gives us a picture of a woman who is weak and vulnerable. Laura, as she wilts away, is very close to the kind of women immortalized on the canvas by Rossetti and his followers. Christina Rossetti was far too conditioned by her social milieu not to be influenced by the stereotype. And yet, being an intelligent, thinking, person, she could not rest with merely the conventional portrait of a woman. So her protagonist is given other traits: a questioning mind (like her creator's), a spirit of adventure, and the courage to face the consequences of rebellion. Similarly, Laura, even though she represents the patriarchal order, is presented as an individual that one may not break: for instance when she stands firm as a rock facing the onslaughts of the goblins. Contrasted with the evil role played by the (male) goblins, she takes on a positive, nurturing role as she risks her own life to save her sister and nurse her back to health once more. For this reason "GM" remains a strong, woman-centered poem.

The poem may be compared to Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" where a loitering knight encounters a beautiful woman and succumbs to her charms. The woman betrays him and he is doomed to pine forever more. Whereas Keats portrays a *femme fatale* (a deadly woman), Christina Rossetti in "GM" portrays *les hommes fatales* (dangerous men) in the horrendous band of goblins. She is concerned with how men manage to seduce women and then discard them once their object is fulfilled. According to the patriarchal Victorian ideology, women are attractive as long as they are virginal, but once "fallen," they are of no use and lose their charm. These are rules laid down by men (goblins in the poem) who are the lawmakers.

The parallel between the consumption of the fruit and the loss of chastity, thus, is obvious through the poem. And yet the theme is subtly dealt with, in keeping with the Victorian taboo of female sexuality. Christina Rossetti, even though she tackles a bold theme, does not openly flout convention. She veils her point so successfully through this allegory that "GM" is often mistaken for children's literature.

Self-Check Exercises

1. Make a list of the animals mentioned in the poem and note how they are all connected with the goblins. Try and assess the symbolic value of the animal imagery.

2. Do you think the goblins of "GM" represent the male world? If so, is the poem an attack on patriarchy? Illustrate your answer with the help of the appearance, habitat, and profession of the goblins. [Note that they inhabit a glen --- a shady, mysterious place --- and only emerge in the dark, after sundown. Also take into account that theirs is a forbidden world into which, maidens may stray only at the risk of their lives. Besides, they are merchants engaged in selling fruit that is not normal or seasonal, but enchanted, which has a disastrous effect on anyone (any girl) who eats it. This fruit is given not at an honest price, but for a lock of hair (to Laura) or forcibly thrust (so attempted in Lizzie's case), The girls are either helplessly caught in the game the goblins play or else they, like Lizzie, must remain strong and ward them off.]

3. Highlight the connection between poetry and painting in "Goblin Market." [Compare the images and colours Christina Rossetti uses for the goblins with those used for the two sisters. Note how, like Dante Gabriel, she uses words the way an artist would use paints.]

40.6 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit you have been told about the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, how it originated and made a mark on the literary and artistic scene. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina Rossetti, two of the main proponents of the movement have been discussed in detail. You should now be able to write about the movement and also about the works of these two poets,

40.7 SUGGESTED READING

Critical analyses of her writing include Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (1986); David A. Kent (ed.), *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (1987), a collection of essays; Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (1988); and Katherine J. Mayberry, *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (1989). Edna Kotin Charles, *Christina Rossetti: Critical Perspectives. 1862-1982* (1985), surveys critical responses to her poetry over 120 years. Sandra Ghiblert and Susan Gubar have made a detailed study of "Goblin Market" in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

40.8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (1928, reprinted 1978). gave an unsympathetic view of him; it was followed by the overt hostility of Violet Hunt. *The Wife of Rossetti* (1932). Against this prejudice the daughter of W.M. Rossetti

came to her uncle's defense: Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies* (1949, reprinted 1977). *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* by Lionel Stevenson (1972) speaks of the movement and the main artist-poets.

The Pre-Raphaelites

Assessments of Rossetti's achievements are found in Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (1976); Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (1981); David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (1983); and David G. Riede (ed.), *Critical Essays on Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1992), which includes several contemporary responses to his poetry as well as more modern critiques.

UNIT 41 OSCAR WILDE: *THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL*

Structure

- 41.0 Objectives
- 41.1 Introduction
- 41.2 Historical, Biographical and Ideological Perspective
- 41.3 *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* – A Discussion
- 41.4 Summing Up
- 41.5 Suggested Reading

41.0 OBJECTIVES

The Objectives of this unit is to familiarise the reader with the times and works of Oscar Wilde (1856-1900). Coming as it does at the end of the century, the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1896) encapsulates the literary movements and controversies of the age. Dealing as it does with the themes of sin, guilt and redemption it cannot escape comparison with another landmark poem written about a hundred years earlier, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). A extensive comparative analysis of the two poems will be undertaken later in the unit. The attempt will be not only to evoke appreciation for the poem *per se* but to place it in the context of dominant social, political, religious and ideological issues of the day.

41.2 INTRODUCTION

The reader is advised to read the unit from the end first. Begin by reading the text of the poem and see how much you can understand. It is always better to approach a text without any preconceived notions and information. After that come back and read the biographical, historical and contextual discussions provided in the unit. This reading will enhance your appreciation and understanding of the text and provide additional insights to your initial reading of the text.

41.2 HISTORICAL, BIOGRAPHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Oscar Wilde is difficult to place in literary history since as he himself admitted, he devoted his genius to life rather than to his art. Wilde today survives as a figure of fascinating mythology, where the works inevitably seem secondary to the legend of the man.

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, the son of an eminent surgeon. He attended Trinity College, Dublin and then Magdalene College, Oxford, where in the last years of the seventies he started the cult of Aestheticism, of making an art of life. His first book *Poems* was published in 1881 and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* followed in 1891. His first stage successes came in 1892 with *Lady Windermere's Fan*. More acclaim came with *A Woman of Substance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* and *The*

Importance of Being Ernest both in 1895. *Salomé* was refused license in England but was published in France in 1893.

Oscar Wilde



Oscar Wilde

Most of his significant works occupy the last two decades of the nineteenth century. A few words about the times would not be out of place since Wilde's works are inextricably linked with the social and moral atmosphere of the age. It has been said that "the nineties" was not a period but a state of mind – that is, there are many writers who chronologically speaking were most productive in that decade, yet had nothing in common with its supposed spirit. It is therefore difficult to comprehend nineteenth century England on the basis of a single philosophy. Numerous philosophies began to take shape, making it an age of tremendous initiative, upheaval

and contradiction. The general upheaval in society originated from the gap between what man wanted and what he achieved.

Scientific philosophies and fact philosophies emerged from the then dominant empiricist world view. They however failed to provide an adequate alternative for belief, for man to withdraw his faith in God and posit all his hopes on the Benthamite philosophy of utilitarianism

Men like Coleridge, Mill, Arnold, Carlyle tried to provide adequate solution to the battle between science and religion, God and Mammon, truth and half-truth. They believed that all suffering results from ignorance and hence the need to acquire the right knowledge. Coleridge's philosophy was a reaction to the empiricist ideological framework. The epistemological shift from the visible to the invisible emphasised that the highest truths are those which are beyond the range of empirical experience. Coleridge's doctrine expressed the revolt of the human mind against the mental and physical finities of society. His philosophy is grounded in a conformity to human and religious values and belief in the predominance of the mind for acquiring knowledge,

With time however the Coleridgean principles of integrity, transcendental knowledge and Christian values of love and prayer began to crack under pressure from socio-economic realities. The possibility of ultimate truth and value seemed doubtful and conviction in all kinds of moral, intellectual and social certainties was vanishing. Hence towards the end of the nineteenth century a belief gained ground that art and morality/society were two separate realms and the former was considered completely independent of the latter. Thus art and literature had moved into a new phase. through critics remained divided over how to best describe this phase of cultural history. To refer to it as a homogeneous and uniform decade would be misleading, since many of the essential attitudes of the nineties had their roots in the seventies and eighties: specifically the Aesthetic Movement which has often become synonymous with the innovations of the nineties. The word *Decadence* has broader application but suffers from an ambiguity – suggesting sometimes a combination of physical lassitude and psychological and moral perversity, exemplified for example in J-K. Huysman's novel *A Rebours*. The phrase *fin de siècle* is a more useful term for it points to the preoccupations of the last years of the nineteenth century without being limited to a single decade and can also cover particular manifestations such as *decadence* or aestheticism.

In so far as *fin de siècle* refers to a serious and consistent cultural attitude it has two essential characteristics : the conviction that all established forms of intellectual and moral certainties are vanishing, and that the new situation requires new attitudes in life and art, and the related belief that art and morality are entirely separate realms and the former must be regarded as wholly autonomous. Hence the doctrine arose of art for art's sake. It must however be noted that "the nineties" was a state of mind that originated in Europe. One has to go to French literature to observe the genesis of this psychological phenomena.

If *fin de siècle* tried to establish a break with established Victorian attitudes, then the break was not particularly clean, for in a literary sense there are lines of development that link the *fin de siècle* poets with the Romantics – Keats, Blake and particularly Coleridge.

One writer who absorbed the lessons of the age not wisely but only too well, who achieved a tragic celebrity with relatively slender talents and whose name is still a symbol for the whole *fin de siècle* period and state of mind is Oscar Wilde. Mistrust of theory and system, and a corresponding stress on sensation and impression is perhaps the best description of Oscar Wilde's art.

1. Give a brief account of Wilde's life and works.

2. What was the mental and ideological condition of the age in which Wilde was writing?

3. What were the major movements of the age?

41.3 THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL: A DISCUSSION

The Ballad of Reading Gaol was written in 1896. Almost a hundred years earlier, 1798 to be precise, came a poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge which built the foundation on which Wilde was to build a hundred years later. So any exclusive discussion of the former, without putting it in the perspective of the latter will not be unfair to the poem; it will also fail to provide any glimpse of the intellectual movement of the age. *The Rime* was Coleridge's chief contribution to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798). It is a long poem written in the ballad form and divided into seven sections: The Mariner either out of anger or irritation shoots the albatross; for this heinous crime he is punished by the curse of life in death. However when love gushes from his heart at the sight of the water snakes, the horrible spell breaks and the albatross falls from his neck. To kill the albatross is a sin, therefore, the rest of the action follows with an inexorable fatality. *The Rime* is a tale of guilt, penance and expiation and each section of the poem reveals a new stage of the act of expiation; it is the saga of a guilty soul and the poem marks in clear stages the passage from crime through punishment to such redemption as is possible in this world.

The Rime is essentially a religious poem deeply rooted in Christian ethics. Several kinds of religious feelings are merged as Coleridge deals with sin, remorse, penance, punishment, confession, grace and redemption at successive stages of the narrative. The validity of the gospel is affirmed and re-affirmed vis-a-vis the progress of events. Killing the albatross is a sin and the Mariner is punished for it in myriad ways. However his act of love in admiring the water snakes saves him from the curse and there is a return to the old world after the resolution. However the world to which he returns is a different one, for the Mariner is now an enlightened man, a man with knowledge.

More than physical woes, the Mariner suffers from existential loneliness typical of Romantic heroes. The other members of the crew have rejected him and he suffers alone and in silence. The lack of certitude in the Mariner, his solipsistic fear is understandable keeping in mind the trial he is undergoing. But what is noteworthy is the note of hope – not only does penance deliver him from his torturous physical condition, but also from solitude and ignorance. In fact his suffering is a process of spiritual growth and enlightenment. His expiation is possible only because of his love, again a Christian concept of life. When he can see beauty in the deadly water snakes – he is at once released and he is able to pray, the body of the albatross falls into the sea and he is refreshed with a gentle sleep. The different episodes of the narrative can be seen as components of "something great, something one and

indivisible" – the phenomena of sin, penitence and resolution i.e. the phenomena of life according to Christian philosophy. The suffering of the Mariner becomes meaningless unless it is seen as a part of his penance – "The man hath penance done, and penance more will do". Even his fantasies, dreams and nightmares harmonise to evoke a sense of grace that saves the Mariner.

The heavy religious imperative behind the symbols and images strengthens Coleridge's argument for the validity and adequacy of religious norms. The albatross is a symbol, existing between the literal and the metaphorical. It is supposed to be a harbinger of peace and prosperity and to take away its life is an act of sin which endangers one's own being and that of one's companions. Coleridge in fact suggests a pantheistic oneness with nature as the albatross is a symbol of God's presence for the Mariner. The shooting of the bird becomes significant only in the context of this fact. Coleridge thought of nature as an "eternal language which spoke of God's presence". Drought and a pitiless sun suggest a state of spiritual waste. The "blood! sun" however is later replaced by a gentle light. It is a positive linear movement from death to life, darkness to light, despair to hope, from guilt to explanation, from despair to redemption, from suffering in isolation to a return to the world of men. The Mariner however fails to achieve a final salvation – "I pass, like night from land to land". Yet the discourse moves around the theme of conformity to divine legislation. By shaping the symbols into a consistent whole and subordinating them to a single plan Coleridge communicates a spiritual myth of a dark and despairing crisis in the human soul.

The poem progresses in a symbiotic relation of action as *cause* and the condition of the spirit as *effect*; subsequently the spiritual condition becomes the cause, and actions the effect. There can be separation in Coleridge's philosophy between the moral and the spiritual, no possibility of spiritual regeneration without corresponding growth in understanding human behaviour.

The era which began with the *Lyrical Ballads* came to a close with the Aesthetic Movement of the 80's and the 90's. One of the major writers of the period/movement was Oscar Wilde whose works had strong Romantic undertones conveying messages of love and despair. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1896) is a ballad in six sections. It tells of the hanging of a murderer for killing the woman he loved. Like *The Rime* it is also a tale of crime and punishment. The tale is narrated by a fellow prisoner whose sympathies are clearly with the condemned man for he is powerfully aware of the arbitrariness of man-made laws. Like life-in-death of *The Rime*, *The Ballad* is a discourse on waiting for death in the presence of palpable and actual death. The first three sections narrate the six weeks spent waiting for death, the fourth describes the execution and its effects on the other prisoners. The next section is devoted to the poet's reflections on execution and the prison as a place for reform and repentance. The concluding part is a kind of an epilogue which reiterates the central theme of the poem – "All men kill the thing they love".

In strict contrast to *The Rime*, Wilde's *The Ballad* suggests loss of faith in Christian ideology and the futility of Christian ethics for the English society. *The Ballad* is a story of crime and punishment but aims at no salvation or redemption. In fact the attempts at setting things right is mocked at and ridiculed. The man has murdered the woman he loves and spends the first three sections waiting "to swing". The agony and despair of the criminal is however shared by his fellow prisoners (unlike in *The Rime*). There is however no movement towards spiritual growth or enlightenment; despite deep mental and physical agony there is no confession or prayer; he accepts everything. Stoically –

He did not wring his hands nor weep
And again –
And strange it was to see him pass
 With a step so light and gay,
And strange it was to see him look

*So wistfully at the day,
And strange it was to think that he
Had such a debt to pay.*

Oscar Wilde

There is only "Black Despair" and "crooked shapes of Terror" in the Goal. Not only for the condemned, but also for his fellow prisoners hope is dead for they

'wondered if each one of us would end the self-same way'

The agony of prison life and the inhuman treatment of the Governor, the prison Wardens, the Doctor and the Chaplain constitute of his suffering. Yet in spite of his penance there is no grace and redemption – he is hanged like a beast and there isn't any requiem for his soul either ... He has no redemption at the end because "he does not win who plays with sin 7 In the secret House of Shame". In fact at every step Christian ideology fails to save him.

While in *The Rime* love is the means of salvation and redemption, in *The Ballad* it leads to destruction and despair. Love is treated cynically by the poet – "*For each man kills the thing he loves / Yet each man does not die*" – he kills the woman he loves. Cruelty has three dimensions here – the cruelty of the crime, the strong impression that such cruelty is pervasive and the cruelty of his punishment by an equally guilty society.

Wilde departs from the supernatural world of Coleridge and situates his poem against the nineteenth century English social background. The miserable living conditions in the prison, the stifling overwhelming presence of authority (state) and the inequity of justice are highlighted in the fifth section. The poem shows total cynicism and irrelevance, if not total rejection of institutions – both man-made and divine. The arbitrariness of law is emphasised and hence the possibility of redemption through penance is also bleak. The end of the era mood of despair is reflected in repeated use of such terms as "yellow face of Doom", "Cave of Black Despair", "dead was hope", "Man's grim Justice". A society perched on the edge of corruption and despair finds graphic illustration. Unlike *The Rime* which abounds in supernatural elements, *The Ballad* has a predominantly gothic touch – the macabre details of the grave, quicklime dissolving the body, religion too takes on a gothic face. The prison is a place of horror and shame where man mistreats man – Christ would have been ashamed to see the actions of his children.

The effective use of symbols is as much strategy in Wilde as it is in Coleridge. While in *The Rime* symbols are used to establish the validity and efficacy of the Christian world view, in *The Ballad* they become symbols of the inefficacy of Christianity. Nature and religion become symbols of fear, despair and dissolution, That is how the profound and the sublime are made profane in *The Ballad* – "*God's dreadful dawn*", the Chaplain symbolise the utter irrelevance of the divine. The central issue of destruction is reiterated repeatedly through the system of symbols.

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

A morbid preoccupation with death and destruction is noticeable in the poem – beginning with capital punishment, the graphic details of the execution, to the horror of the corpse in the grave. *The Ballad* is nearly an anarchist's poem where even a noble emotion like love is treated with violence, and a deep undertone of faithlessness and cynicism permeates everything. The narrative of *The Ballad* moves

in an opposite direction to that of *The Rime* – a movement from life to death, light to darkness, hope to despair.

The human condition in the two poems have been dealt with differently. Yet the crux of the problem is the same in both the poems – the problem of the essential loneliness of man, though again the nature of the loneliness is different. The Mariner kills an albatross which is an act of sin and has grave cosmological effect – death, starvation and havoc on the seas. Yet the same act also leads to salvation. Unlike the killing of the bird, the murder of the woman in *The Ballad* is not an act of sin and the poet almost sympathises with the murderer, defending the criminal's act – every man kills the things he loves, yet every man does not die. But behind this statement is a philosophy – that man is by nature cruel and destructive, and his act of love is also an act of destruction. This murder has no cosmological implication. The prison conditions continue to be as inhuman as before, he also suffers the fruit of his actions, though his fellow prisoners offer him silent sympathy. The Christian apparatus is overwhelmed by the socio-political apparatus. The poem alternates between an elegy on the human condition and a protest against the inhumanity of man-made laws. Wilde's prison house is a micro-cosmic version of the doomed finality of the larger world. Wilde expresses serious reservations about theories and systems – the law fails to distinguish between the guilty and the innocence and hence to deliver justice. *The Rime* on the other hand progresses through a belief in systems and rules. Conformity to order enables man to easily distinguish between right and wrong. And it is this belief in a system which makes it easier to categorise the killing of the bird as sin for which the fellow prisoners curse the Mariner. But in *The Ballad* the fellow prisoners are lost without any philosophy of life and have no choice but to sympathise with the criminal and sail in the same boat. If we assume that by sympathising with the criminal they identify with him, then the murder acquires a collective dimension. *The Ballad* explores the perplexities of these moral desperation – things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold.

The poem under discussion is a ballad which has a forceful and direct effect. Emphasis is achieved by repetition of words, phrases, sentences and stanzas though at places these repetitions become both tiresome and puerile. An atmosphere of despair and gloom is established by repeated use of words like "alone", "terror", "impotent despair", "Pale anguish", "degraded" etc. The total effect of this poem of 660 lines is one of 'death' which is essentially the theme of the poem. While *The Rime* has four line stanzas, *The Ballad* progresses through six line stanzas.

Endnotes:

1. Basil Willey. *Nineteenth Century Studies* – Essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
2. *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* - Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
3. *Ibid.*

Exercises

1. What are the points of similarity between *The Rime* and *The Ballad*?

2. What are the points of difference between *The Rime* and *The Ballad*?

41.4 SUMMING UP

Wilde achieved his effect by appealing directly to the emotion to prove superiority of art over nature – this was his proclaimed aim in literature. He strove to refine sensations and impressions and believed in perfection and sensibility.

The change from *The Rime* to *The Ballad* may be summed up in terms of religion, philosophy, human conditions and technique. Coleridge is a conformist in religious matters and believed that redemption is possible even in this ugly world, the main cause of which is ignorance. His technique is more symbolic and suggestive.

Wilde on the contrary is more sceptical and shows more irrelevance towards all institutions – human and divine. He is an aesthetic and therefore has faith only in aesthetic values. The ultimate (spiritual) values of life have no place in his creative world, keeping in mind the contemporary socio-political-economic situation. His solution to the ugliness of life is the acquisition of aesthetic/sensory perfection. Nevertheless he like Coleridge aims at greater human happiness and the eradication of the ugliness of life.

41.5 SUGGESTED READING

- 1) Rower, C.M. *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford, 1969)
Studies of major Romantic poets underlining the socio-political impacts and the play of language in the early Romantic Age.
- 2) Pollard, Arthur. *The Victorians* (Barric & Jenkins 1970)
Essays on major Victorian writers and on the major socio-political issues of the age.
- 3) Trevelyan, G.M. *English Social History* (Macmillan 1977)
History of English Literature against the backdrop of history of English society from Chaucer to Victorians.
- 4) Willey, Basil. *Nineteenth Century Studies* (Cambridge University press, 1980)
Essays on major Victorian writers.
- 5) Ellman Richard. *Oscar Wilde* (Hamish I-Inmilton. 1985)
Life and Works of Oscar Wilde.