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VICTORIAN POETRY-I

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VICTORIAN POETRY- I: BLOCK

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third Block of our course BEGC-110 (British Literature: 19th Century). This Block is entitled Victorian Poetry-I, and we have taken up two of the most representative poets of the age here. They are Tennyson and Browning.

In **Unit 1**, we have taken up three poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson. These are some lines from ‘The Lotos Eaters’, as this is a very long poem. We have also taken up the poems ‘Ulysses’, and ‘Break, Break, Break’. We have also given you a short background of the Victorian Age.

In **Unit 2**, we have taken up another two poems by Tennyson. These are ‘The Splendor Falls’ and a very interesting and famous poem ‘The Lady of Shallot’.

In **Unit 3** we have taken up three poems by Robert Browning. These are ‘Prospice’, ‘Meeting at Night’ and ‘Parting at Morning’.

Last but not the least in **Unit 4** we have taken up Browning’s very famous poem ‘My Last Duchess’.

We hope you enjoy studying all these poems.

Best of Luck.

UNIT 1 ALFRED LORD TENNYSON-1

Structure

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- 1.2 The Victorian Age
- 1.3 Tennyson: Life and Works
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 - 1.6.3 Discussion
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall discuss some poems by the eminent Victorian poet Tennyson. After reading this Unit carefully, you should be able to:

- describe the life and works of Alfred Lord Tennyson;
- understand certain aspects of the Victorian age;
- analyse the poems selected for you;
- explain lines with reference to their context;
- define Tennyson’s poetic technique.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we shall take up three poems by Tennyson. These are ‘The Lotos-Eaters’, ‘Ulysses’, and ‘Break, Break, Break’. We have only been able to give you the concluding lines of ‘The Lotos Eaters’. These lines are part of the celebrated ‘Choric Song’ that is a masterpiece of powerful description, verbal felicity and haunting rhythm. You will also read ‘Ulysses’ in its complete form. Finally, we have selected a short lyric ‘Break, Break, Break’, for you.

Before we discuss the poems, let us briefly look at some aspects of the Victorian age. This will give us an idea of the social and historical context

from which these poems emerged. A quick look at the life and works of Tennyson will not only introduce us to the poet but will also facilitate our understanding of his poetry.

1.2 THE VICTORIAN AGE

The reign of Queen Victoria which extended from 1837 to 1901 is referred to as the Victorian Age. As you can see, this covered the better part of the nineteenth century. How do we define the Victorian Age? It is difficult to characterize any age in one or two sentences because each epoch is a complex of various historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors. However, it would not be far from the truth to term the Victorian Age as a period of peace and prosperity. Seventeenth century England was rife with Civil War and revolutions and the eighteenth century witnessed recurrent wars against France.

However during the nineteenth century the only wars were the Crimean War (1853-54) against imperial Russia and the Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa which only served to enhance Britain's power and prestige which reached its zenith in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a period of imperial expansion. It was also a period of economic prosperity marked by a strong ethic of self-help. Hard work was regarded as the key to success. There was an intense feeling of national unity and optimism. The familiar image of Queen Victoria with her husband Prince Albert and their children only served to emphasize the importance of the family as a key social unit.

The Victorian age was also rather moralistic and the Queen's soberly clad figure only stressed the propriety and decorum that marked nineteenth century English society. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), by expounding the theory of evolution, shook the foundations of religious faith.

The Victorian age is often referred to as 'an age of giants'. The writers of the period were confident and extremely prolific. The Elizabethan age can be seen as the age of drama, the Romantic age as the age of poetry, while the Victorian age can boast of the best English novels ever written. The novels of Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, G.M. Thackeray, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, as we know, are widely read even today. This is not to suggest that the poetry of the period was in any way inferior. The poetry of the age is a continuation of the Romantic tradition on one level, while on another, it is also an expression of the spirit of its age. In general terms, one might well say that while Romantic poetry emerged as a product of the poet's individual mind and experiences, Victorian poetry seems to evolve out of a more general spirit of the age. For example, Romantic poetry comes straight from the heart, while Victorian poetry gives the impression that a poet is always aware of his/her own exalted status and this dictates the tone and the manner in which she/he addresses the reader. This does not mean that the Victorians did not express their emotions. Some of the lyrics are intensely personal as you will discover in the course of this Block.

1.3 TENNYSON: LIFE AND WORKS

Let us now briefly look at the life and works of Tennyson. After Wordsworth, it was Tennyson who became the Poet Laureate, the representative voice of

Victorian England. Not only did he write several volumes of poems but Tennyson also wrote drama, though his fame rests primarily on his poetry.

LIFE

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809- 1892), was born in a village in Lincolnshire, where his father was a rector. A rector, as you know, is a clergyman in charge of a parish. Tennyson was the fourth child in a large family of twelve children. Even as a child, he preferred solitude and wrote his first poem at the age of eight. Most people think of Tennyson as a very serious person. Few know that he wrote a hilarious play *The Devil and the Lady* when he was only fourteen.

Educated at the local grammar school, Tennyson went to Cambridge University in 1828 where he became close to Arthur Henry Hallam. Subsequently Hallam was engaged to Tennyson's sister. When his father died in 1830, Tennyson left the university without a degree and published his *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. His second volume *The Lady of Shalott and Other Poems* (1832) was viciously attacked much to the dismay of the sensitive poet. But the poet faced his darkest days on the death of his dear friend Arthur Hallam who died at the age of 22. The shattered Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam* (1850) which was published several years after Hallam's death. Tennyson married Emily Sellwood in 1850 and became the Poet Laureate after Wordsworth. He won much public acclaim but his gifts seemed to have declined after *In Memoriam*. As a later poet, Laureate Alfred Austin put it, 'his fame ... increased precisely as his genuine poetical power ... steadily waned'. However, Tennyson's memorable verse has earned him a permanent place among the greatest writers the world has ever seen.

SELECTED WORKS:

Poems

Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830)

The Lady of Shalott and Other Poems (1832)

Poems: 2 Volumes (1842)

The Princess: A Medley (1847)

In Memoriam A.H.H. (1850)

Maud, and Other Poems (1855) ;,

The Idylls of the King (1842-88)

Enoch Arden, Etc. (1864) ‘

Tiresias and Other Poems (1885) ,

Locksley Hall Sixty Years After (1886)

Drama

Queen Mary (1875)

Harold (1877)

The Cup and The Falcon (1884) .

1.4 LINES FROM ‘THE LOTOS-EATERS’

In this poem Tennyson’s interest in narrative verse is evident from his use of medieval stories and classical mythology. He gives us an insight into the philosophy of Ulysses the famous Greek hero who features in the great poet Homer’s epic *Odyssey*. Who is Ulysses? Ulysses, the legendary Greek hero was the King of Ithaca, who after the siege of Troy set sail for home. On his way home, he was subjected to many storms and obstacles because of the wrath of the sea-god Poseidon.

Once in 1830 while on holiday in the Pyrenees, the mountains between France and Switzerland, Tennyson composed the line ‘slow dropping veils of thinnest lawn’ which formed the germ of the poem ‘The Lotos-Eaters’. The poem was first published in the volume of 1833 and after being radically changed was included in the poems of 1842. As his biographer Robert Bernard Martin records:

Once he [Tennyson] was sitting smoking with his feet on the chimney-piece as he spouted ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ in its first form; unknown to him, Hallam darted around to a table behind him and took it all down as fast as he could to rescue it from oblivion.

We have only given you the grand finale of this poem for study. This in a way counterbalances the mood of languor which has been established in the earlier parts of the poem. ‘The Choric Song’ which is the most famous part of this poem is a masterpiece of metrical variation that suits the pace of the action and motion.

Ulysses and his mariners, after years of wandering have come upon this enchanted island full of sensuous delights. The whole poem is a debate in the mariners’ minds between the claims of duty on the one hand and the vague pleasures and idleness of the island life on the other. The strenuous life of the mariners is described in quick stanzas and these are contrasted with the more gentle pace stressing the beauty of a life of abandon and forgetfulness.

Let us now read the final part of the poem. In order to experience the full musical effect of the poem, it must be read aloud. The glossary will provide meanings of the difficult words and phrases.

1.4.1 Poem

LINES FROM ‘THE LOTOS-EATERS’

The Lotos blooms below the barren peak:

The Lotos **blows** by every winding **creek**:

All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone:

Thro’ every hollow cave and **alley lone**

Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown.

We have had enough of action, and of motion we,

Roll’d to **starboard**, roll’d to **larboard**, when the **surge** was **seething free**,

Where the **wallowing** monster spouted his foam-fountains in the sea.

Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,

In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined

On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.
 For they lie beside their nectar, and the **bolts** are hurl'd
 Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl'd
 Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world:
 Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, **roaring deeps** and **fiery sands**,
Clanging fights, and **flaming towns**, and **sinking ships**, and praying hands.
 But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
 Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,
 Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong;
 Chanted from an ill-used race of men that **cleave the soil**,
 Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,
 Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil;
 Till they perish and they suffer—some, 'tis whisper'd—down in hell
 Suffer endless anguish, others in **Elysian valleys** dwell,
 Resting weary limbs at last on beds of **asphodel**.
 Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
 Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
 O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

1.4.2 Glossary

blows	: blooms
creek:	inlet on a sea coast
alley lone	: lonely narrow passage
starboard	: right-hand side of a ship
larboard	: left side of a ship
surge	: a forward rolling movement like a wave
seething free	: greatly agitated, or here, stormy
wallowing	: indulging in gross sensual delights. The wallowing monster is a metaphor for the cruelly playful and destructive sea.
bolts :	arrows
blight	: disease
roaring deeps, fiery sands, ,	this catalogue of disturbance and destruction
clanging fights, flaming towns, sinking ships	is used to stress the wanton behaviour of the gods.
cleave the soil	: plough the land
Elysian valley	: (Greek mythology) abode of the blessed after death
asphodel	: immortal flower in Elysium.

1.4.3 Discussion

In this poem, the reader is greatly impressed with the musical beauty that Tennyson has created from his sensitive use of an arrangement of words. It is a perfect fusion of sound and sense. By skilful use of contrast, the poet

is able to evoke both the present serene location of the mariners and their turbulent past.

At the very outset, we are told of the lotus flower that blooms everywhere on the island, the yellow lotus dust that is blown in the breeze has a magical soporific effect on the sailors. The mariners then contrast this with their earlier life of toil on board the ship when through calm and storm all they did was work. Remembering their earlier hardships, the mariners exhort each other to swear unanimously to stay on in this enchanted island. Living here would be nothing short of god-like. Just as the gods lie together in their gleaming abode drinking nectar and playfully and carelessly hurling bolts of disaster on the world, so they would live here unmindful of others. They then dwell upon the futility of human life. Men on earth sweat and toil throughout their lives and barely manage to make ends meet. And yet finally they die---some go to hell to suffer endlessly while others go to heaven and rest their tired bodies in Elysian fields.

What life would the mariners choose? They would rather be on shore than toil on the seas. They have also concluded that sleep is preferable to toil: 'Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more'.

The theme of the poem is that human life is futile and if the end of all toil is to be the grave, then given the option one should choose a life of rest and peace rather than duty and hardships. This is exemplified in the mariners' debate about whether to return home or whether to stay on the enchanted lotus island and live a life of idyllic peace and restfulness. The debate is resolved in the final line when the mariners decide to stay on in that paradise. The end of this poem is quite different from that of 'Ulysses' as we shall see.

As you have seen, this poem is a masterpiece of sheer poetry that results from a flexible and free handling, of the metre. It is written in iambic lines of varied length--of between three to seven feet. The rhythm is also varied by switching over to trochees and in the sixth line of section 8 it suddenly becomes entirely trochaic and one cannot miss the effect of:

'We have had enough of action and of motion we'.

Why does Tennyson do this? He adopts the rhythm to suit the sense of what he is saying in that particular line. For example when he talks about the mariners' life of toil, the lines become quick-paced but when reference is made to the indolent life of the island, the pace slackens, becoming more serene.

If we look at the opening lines of this section, we can at once appreciate its onomatopoeic excellence. He aims to evoke, mainly by the sounds of the words, the feeling of the sensuous life. The words flow effortlessly.

The Lotus blooms below the barren peak:
The Lotus blows by every winding creek:
All day the wind bathes low with mellower tone;
Through every hollow cave and alley lone
Round and round the spicy downs the yellow
Lotos-dust is blown.

The smooth flow of words heightens the feeling of imagined peace and languor. You must have noticed the predominance of the consonants l and b and long ‘o’ vowel sounds. ‘Peak’ and ‘creek’ fit in with the mellow rhymes of ‘tone’, ‘lone’ and ‘blown’.

Contrast this flowing tone with the vigorous movement of:

‘Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands’.

This gives you an idea of Tennyson’s technique of versification. With alliteration and assonance combined with rhyme, the verbal music is perfectly adapted to the poet’s tone and the exotic scene. Note the effect of assonance—the suggestive ‘lo’ sound occurs 11 times in the first 5 lines.

From your study of this poem, the exquisite quality of Tennyson’s poetry is quite clear. Let us now look at another poem—also based on the Ulysses legend in the next section. But before we do that, let us complete the exercise given below.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Describe the theme of the passage from ‘The Lotos Eaters’ in about 50-60 words.

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- ii) Write a short note on the verbal music in the poem (100 words approx.)

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

1.5 ‘ULYSSES’

Before we read the poem, let us first briefly discuss who Ulysses was. Ulysses, the legendary Greek hero was the king of Ithaca, who after the seige of Troy, set sail for home. On his way home he was subjected, to many storms and obstacles because of the wrath of the sea-god Poseidon. He was forced to wander for another 10 years before he reached Ithaca, his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. But a sedentary life was not what he wanted and desired to travel again ‘to follow virtue and knowledge’ (Dante). In this

poem, Ulysses is about to set sail on a final voyage from which he will not return.

Tennyson wrote this poem in a single day on 20th October three weeks after he heard the news of Hallam's death in 1833. Tennyson said 'it was written under the sense of loss and all that had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end'. This is one of Tennyson's best poems in which there seems to be a balance between melancholy on the one hand and a sense of living life actively on the other.

The poem tells us that Ulysses is close to Ithaca. In spite of being so close to his home he is not happy. His wanderings have been quite fruitful as he came into contact with people of different countries from whom he gathered a lot of knowledge. He now has a feeling that he should continue this pursuit of knowledge. To lead a peaceful life at home would be quite a dull thing. He is also worried about his subjects who love only pleasure and care for material things. Ulysses however hopes that his son can be taught to handle the political affairs and give a new orientation to his people. And after his son is ready, Ulysses will have time for more wanderings in order to have more knowledge. This love for knowledge in a king who has suffered a lot not only makes the character of Ulysses distinguished, it gives a philosophical edge to the poem and takes us to a glorious aspect of Greek civilization. There is grandeur in this quest for knowledge which touches us.

Let us now read the poem.

1.5.1 Poem

ULYSSES

It little profits that an idle king,
 By this still hearth, among these **barren crags**,
 Match'd with an **aged wife**, I **mete and dole**
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
 I cannot rest from travel: I **will drink**
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
 Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
 That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
 Thro' **scudding drifts** the rainy **Hyades**
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
 For always roaming with a hungry heart
 Much have I seen and known; cities of men
 And manners, climates, councils, governments,
 Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
 And drunk delight of battle with my **peers**,
 Far on the **ringing plains of windy Troy**.
 I am a part of all that I have met;
 Yet all experience is an **arch** wherethro'
 Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades

For ever and forever when I move.
 How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
 To rust **unburnish'd**, not to shine in use!
 As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
 Were all too little, and of one to me
 Little remains: but every hour is saved
 From that eternal silence, something more,
 A bringer of new things; and vile it were
 For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
 And this gray spirit yearning in desire
 To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
 Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
 To whom I leave the **sceptre** and the **isle**,—
 Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
 This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
 A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
 Subdue them to the useful and the good.
 Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
 Of common duties, decent not to fail
 In offices of tenderness, and pay
 Meet adoration to my household gods,
 When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the **vessel puffs her sail**:
 There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
 Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
 That ever with a frolic welcome took
 The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
 Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
 Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
 Death closes all: but something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
 The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
 The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
 Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off, and sitting well in order **smite**
 The **sounding furrows**; for my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
 Of all the western stars, until I die.
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:

It may be we shall touch the **Happy Isles**,
 And see the great **Achilles**, whom we knew.
 Tho' much is taken, much **abides**; and tho'
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

1.5.2 Glossary

barren crags	: bare rocks. Here 'still hearth' and 'barren crags' signify a sedentary and meaningless life.
aged wife	: Penelope who has now grown old. She waited faithfully for her husband for twenty years.
mete and dole	: literally, distribute, here it means execute, (measure and share out)
I will drink life to the lees	: 'lees' literally means dregs. Here this means that Ulysses is determined to experience life to its full extent.
scudding drifts	: drifting waves
Hyades	: the nymphs, who in classical legend, formed the group of seven stars in the head of Taurus, the bull. This constellation which when rising with the sun was thought to be a sign of rain.
vext	: disturbed i.e. created a storm
peers	: equals
ringing plains of windy Troy	: Ulysses had been one of the principal Greek heroes in the wars against the Trojans. The Greeks besieged Troy to recover the beautiful Helen who had eloped with the Trojan prince Paris. Helen's beautiful face is said to have "launched a thousand ships" in the sense that it started the war between Greece and Troy.
arch	: curved structure
unburnish'd	: unpolished and dull because of being kept unused.
sceptre	: staff which is a symbol of royal authority
isle	: Ithaca
vessel puffs her sail	: the wind is favourable to embark on the journey
smite	: to strike
sounding furrows	: loud stormy waves
Happy Isles	: the island of the blest Greek paradise
Achilles	: the greatest of Greek soldiers killed during the siege of Troy. Achilles was invulnerable except in his heel. Thus the expression 'Achilles heel' means the weak or vulnerable point.
abides	: remains

1.5.3 Discussion

Alfred Lord Tennyson-1

Having wandered on many adventures, Ulysses returns to his island home of Ithaca to resume his life as a ruler. But he finds himself bored with the commonplace activities of daily life and longs to 'sail beyond the sunset' in search of a more fulfilling life. Where is Ulysses standing during his speech? The clue to this lies in 'By this still hearth' 'these barren crags' 'an aged wife'. This means that he is probably close to his home near some bare rocks. His dissatisfaction with his unexciting home, the surrounding area and his not-so-young wife is clear. This restlessness is further increased when Ulysses thinks about his own unenviable role of doling out justice to his subjects whose principal aim in life is to eat, sleep and hoard material things. Their preoccupation with the mundane prevents them from understanding the real nature of their ruler, who cannot lead a similar life. He craves an intense life full of excitement. Ulysses does not know the simple passions of the common man. His joys and sorrows whether experienced alone or in the company of his loved ones, have been equally intense.

Both on the stormy sea or the shore, Ulysses is now famous. With a great thirst for adventure he has travelled far and wide, experienced different climates, cultures and people of whom Ulysses found himself the most 'honoured'. He has faced the excitement of battle with his fellow countrymen on the troubled plains of Troy. He admits that he has absorbed all that he has seen and encountered and experienced. Yet experience is like an arch through which the world that he has not yet travelled to, is visible bright and shining. The more he sees, the more there is to see. If he stops now, he will become dull. To breathe is merely to exist but to act is to live. He has lived a full life but it was not enough. And the aging Ulysses feels that he has not many years to live. He would like to pack every hour of his remaining years with something new. As such it would be evil to waste his time stagnating in Ithaca. His yearning now is still to seek knowledge which even the human mind cannot conceive of.

The next stanza is spoken in praise of his son Telemachus. He bequeaths his kingdom and his royal power to him. Ulysses admits his great affection for his son and knows that he will execute his duties with great diligence. He expects his son to guide his subjects gradually to an awareness not only of what is useful but also what is good. Not only will he perform his duties blamelessly but will also deal with his subjects tenderly in addition to paying suitable homage to their gods. With these words Ulysses assigns him these duties and gets ready to take up the pursuit of knowledge. What is Ulysses' attitude to his son? Don't you think there is a hint of irony here for he assigns those very duties to his son that he himself shuns? As we know Ulysses is making a speech. But whom is he addressing?

The second line in the final stanza provides the answer. It is his mariners that he is addressing. Pointing to the port and the ship with the wind in her sails, he also gestures towards the dark blue seas. (The extremely deep blue colour of the Mediterranean Sea is incredible and you would have to see it to believe it.). Ulysses and his mariners have shared many joys and sorrows and have now grown old together. Knowing that soon death will put an end to everything, they can jointly strive to achieve some noble task that befits

men who have worked with their trust in the gods. It is now evening as the day begins to end and the moon rises in the sky and the sound of the sea can be heard all around. He then urges his mariners that it is never too late and they could still hope to discover a new world. He then orders them to raise anchor and plough through the noisy waves.

Ulysses wishes to 'sail beyond the sunset'. This means that his route would lie west. This is further confirmed by the phrase 'western stars'. Their destination could well be the bottom of the sea, or paradise where all of them would be happy to meet Achilles, whom they know, as they had all fought together in Troy. He says that much of life is over but still plenty of it remains. And though they do not have the strength of youth which they once had when they could achieve the impossible, he says their spirit is still indomitable though they may have declined in physical strength. All of them are heroically inclined and their motto would be 'To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield'. This is quite different from the final line of 'The Lotos-Eaters' Where the decision is : 'Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more'.

What is the theme of the poem? Clearly Ulysses' desire to travel does not simply represent a desire for adventure. Tennyson used to say that it gives the 'feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life' Ulysses represents the human desire for striving beyond human limits to achieve something noble and great. Human beings must not simply live and die a mundane life but must try to achieve something great before death.

1.5.4 Poetic Technique and Appreciation

It is a wonderful poem in which Tennyson makes a historical speaker touch upon issues of contemporary life. It is a fact that Ulysses was a legendary wanderer, an adventurous, fearless person who was forced by circumstances to go to strange places and meet strange people. Tennyson, therefore, sees in him the prototype of the modern researcher or explorer. The scientific developments of his time were a thing of serious interest to him, and in his poetry he has paid tribute to the spirit of scientists and researchers who were expanding the area of human knowledge. In Ulysses, Tennyson sees such a figure who is willing to devote the whole of his life to exploration.

As far as possible Tennyson tries to recapture the Homeric idiom— simple similes, a vigorous narrative style with appropriate pauses and shifts of mood and characterization through a long speech. A lot of associations are there in the poem with the ship and the voyages – shore, scudding drifts, vessel, sail, dark broad seas, sounding furrows, gulfs. They form the register of an accomplished voyager, ringing with authenticity of experience. The command of blank verse is an important feature of the poem. It helps Tennyson follow every movement of the feelings and thoughts of Ulysses in a dramatic manner.

As you may have noticed, this poem does not have the sheer music of 'The Lotos-Eaters'. Here Tennyson achieves the rhythm of ordinary speech by the use of blank-verse. The poet works by suggestion and symbolism rather than detailed statement. What is symbolized by 'thunder and the sunshine' (48)? Thunder and the sunshine stand for troubles and joys, all of which were shared by Ulysses and the mariners. What metaphor is implied in line

23? . ‘To rust unburnished’ suggests that copper if left unpolished, will rust. Similarly, if Ulysses does not use his full potential he will become dull and stagnate.

This poem was written three weeks after Hallam died of brain hemorrhage on a trip to Vienna. Does this poem have any connection with that event? For one, it is melancholy in tone. Moreover, Tennyson uses the situation of Ulysses to explore his own emotional response to his friend’s death. On one level it is a desire for a voyage into seeking, on another the vessel is a metaphor for death in which he will travel to paradise and meet ‘Achilles whom we knew’. Achilles here may well stand, for Hallam. This connection becomes clearer when one recalls the fact that Tennyson had to wait for two months more before the body of Hallam was brought to England on an Italian ship. This perhaps also explains the reason for Ulysses’ desire to sail towards the west.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Characterize Ulysses. What kind of person is he? (100 words)
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- ii) Find evidence in the poem to show that Ulysses’ desire for travel represents more than a desire for adventure. (100 words)
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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

1.6 ‘BREAK, BREAK, BREAK’

Here is a short lyric by Tennyson that also happens to be one of his most famous short poems. We do not find any of Tennyson’s opinions expressed here, only intense feeling. The earlier poems in this unit are narratives. Here is an intensely personal poem written to express his grief over the sad death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam. The sea is a powerful image that often recurs in English literature. This is because, England being an island, the sea is never far away. Let us imagine Tennyson standing on a beach watching the waves of the sea crashing against the rocks and grey stones. Beaches in England do not all have golden sands. In fact, many of them are full of grey

pebbles. The poet's heart is heavy with grief over his friend's death and the scene in front of him only evokes a deep feeling of loss over what has gone forever. Let us now read the poem.

1.6.1 Poem

BREAK, BREAK, BREAK

Break, break, break,

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could **utter**

The thoughts that arise in me.

O, well for the fisherman's boy,

That he shouts with his sister at play!

O, well for the sailor lad,

That he sings in his boat on the **bay**!

And the **stately** ships go on

To their **haven** under the hill;

But O for the touch of a vanished hand,

And the sound of a voice that is still.

1.6.2 Glossary

Break, break, break : the dashing of the sea waves against the shore

utter : express

bay : part of the sea enclosed by a wide curve of the shore

stately : impressive

haven : harbour

1.6.3 Discussion

This is a simple poem expressing a deep sense of loss. The poet looks at the waves of the sea dashing against the cold gray stones and his latent anguish at the death of his friend Arthur Hallam surfaces once again. He wishes that he can give adequate expression to the thoughts that well up within him.

The poet can see the fisherman's children: a boy and his sister shouting as they play. Tennyson also sees the young sailor boy singing in his boat as he sails on the bay. The joyous and playful shouting of the brother and sister and the cheerful song of the sailor are contrasted with the poet's own grief.

Tennyson watches the impressive ships sailing towards their harbour below the hill. This sense of a journey safely completed, only induces the poet to acutely miss the soothing touch of the hand of his dead friend---a touch that can never be experienced again. He longs to hear the voice of Hallam but knows that it is forever silent!

Tennyson observes the waves crashing against the base of its rocks. The sea seems to be in eternal motion, its waves continually dashing against the shore. The continuity in nature is in sharp contrast to the cruel finality of death and the passage of time. The pleasant days spent in the loving company of his friend are gone forever and will never return.

In this poem, Tennyson works by the use of contrast. By contrasting the joy of the scene around him, he is able to highlight his own grief and desolation.

By depicting the continuous clashing of the waves against the shore by the use of the simple ‘break, break, break’, Tennyson stresses the eternal aspect of nature in contrast to the brevity of human life. The poem has an irregular metre that moves slowly to capture the heavy rhythm of the poet’s grief. The rhyme scheme is simple with the second line rhyming with the fourth in each stanza.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Explain with reference to the context the following lines:

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed:

- that the Victorian Age was a period of political peace and economic prosperity and imperial expansion. The consequent confidence of the nation is reflected in the increased literary activity of its writers, especially novelists and poets;
- the life and works of Alfred Lord Tennyson;
- extracts from ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ that exemplify the quality of Tennyson’s narrative art and his interest in medieval stories. These passages are celebrated for their verbal music and evocative imagery;
- the poem ‘Ulysses’ which is also based, like ‘The Lotos-Eaters’, on the adventures of the legendary Greek hero Ulysses. While in ‘The Lotos-Eaters’, we have Ulysses’ mariners settling for a life of ease and languor, in ‘Ulysses’ the dominant impulse is ‘to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield’;
- the short lyric ‘Break, Break. Break’ that is an intensely personal expression of the poet’s grief over the untimely death of his friend Arthur Hallam.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The theme of the passage is that human life is futile and if the end is to be the grave then given the option one should choose a restful and peaceful life rather than hardships.
- ii) Alliteration and assonance combine with rhyme.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) We hope you included the following traits: Ulysses' desire for a full adventurous life; ambition to achieve more laurels; strong unyielding spirit, a sense of his own destiny; unequalled heroism.
- ii) The following expressions reveal his desire to search for knowledge and a life of achievement rather than simple adventure:

‘How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unbumish’d, not to shine in use! ‘

‘And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought’.

‘Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done

‘... for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset ... ‘

‘To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield’.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) For answering any reference to the context question, you should give the poet's name, the name of the poem from where the lines have been taken, the background of the poem and then the explanation of the lines.

UNIT 2 ALFRED LORD TENNYSON-2

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Victorian Age and Tennyson
- 2.3 ‘The Splendour Falls’
 - 2.3.1 Poem
 - 2.3.2 Glossary
 - 2.3.3 Discussion
 - 2.3.4 Appreciation
- 2.4 ‘The Lady of Shallot’
 - 2.4.1 Poem
 - 2.4.2 Glossary
 - 2.4.3 Critical Summary
 - 2.4.4 Appreciation
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall discuss one lyric ‘Splendor Falls’ and one long poem, ‘The Lady of Shallot’ by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. After you have read this unit you should be able to:

- analyse both these poems;
- assess Tennyson as a lyric writer;
- assess his techniques of narration as well as
- discuss the poetic techniques of Tennyson

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Why do we study poetry? Try to think about this for a moment. Naturally your reasons may be different from the next person’s. Some of us enjoy poetry for its ‘vision’. Poetry, like all great literature is the ‘best that has been thought and said’ over the ages. Others savour poetry for its sheer rhythm and use of language. Whatever be our reasons, poetry is meant to be enjoyed, an enjoyment that is heightened by our understanding of the poem and the various ways in which it relates to our own experiences, our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, loves and passions.

2.2 THE VICTORIAN AGE AND TENNYSON

We have already spoken about the ethos of the Victorian Age in the previous Unit . It would be sufficient here to say that the Victorian Age was an age of great progress and of the consolidation of the powers of England. Naturally, a poet of this age is expected to be full of optimism. But Tennyson could see

beyond the political and economic achievements of his times. He studiously followed the advances of contemporary science which moved Victorian men and women to scrutinize the Biblical story of the origin of the creation on a rational basis. This instilled doubts in the realm of religion.

In view of such a spiritual crisis it would not be easy to sum up the Victorian age in a neat phrase. It was an age of prosperity, but also an age of gloomy forebodings; it was an age of imperial expansion, but also an age of colonial uprisings; above all it was an age of peace, but there was an undercurrent of sick hurry and divided aims.

Lord Tennyson is called a representative poet of the Victorian age. When we say this we mean that he is one poet in whose works the basic nature of the age--- its achievements, doubts and fears--- are best reflected. In the previous unit we have already spoken about his life and works. He is one poet who chose a number of medieval and Greek legends as subjects for his works. But in all his works he tried to interpret the life of his times. In other words, the sense of historical continuity gives his perception of modern issues a sharper edge. His poetry makes the readers feel that there exists a sure fusion between the past and the present. Extensive travels in England and other parts of Europe sharpened his vision. After a fulfilled life of a prolific poet, he died in 1892 at the age of 83.

2.3 ‘THE SPLENDOUR FALLS’

This lyric prescribed for you is an extract from *The Princess*, a poem that Tennyson wrote in his mature years when British political and social issues began to interest him seriously. It is said that *The Princess* covers a number of prominent issues related to women—their status, their field of action, their educational and political rights, legal rights of marriage and property. The protagonist of the poem is Ida, a princess who holds extreme feminist views. She has raised an academy for the training of women. Tennyson’s characterization of Ida gives a clue to his attitude towards women. Ida is independent minded but in her zeal she has developed attitudes and a temper that make her unfit for the reforms that she wishes to carry.

‘The Splendour Falls’ is a song that occurs after the narrator and others have had a magnificent view of the palace that the princess has shown them. The narrator is simply charmed by this view.

2.3.1 Poem

THE SPLENDOUR FALLS

The **splendour** falls on castle walls
 And snowy summits old in story:
 The long light shakes across the lakes,
 And the wild **cataract** leaps in glory.
 Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
 Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

 O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
 And thinner, clearer, farther going!
 O sweet and far from cliff and scar

The horns of **Elfland** faintly blowing!
 Blow, let us hear the purple **glens** replying:
 Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O love, they die in yon rich sky,
 They faint on hill or field or river:
 Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
 And grow forever and forever.
 Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
 And answer, echoes answer, dying, dying, dying.

2.3.2 Glossary

Splendour : grand and impressive beauty

Cataract : large steep waterfall

Elfland : an imaginary country where elves – small creatures with magical powers – are supposed to live

Glen : narrow valley

2.3.3 Discussion

The lyric is an essay in landscape painting. The scene is that of sunset transforming a castle and its surroundings. The speaker notices not only the fall of sunlight but also of a fall of splendour, of a glorious hue, on the walls of the castle. This initial perception is in itself a cause of ecstasy. But this is not all. Each moment that succeeds brings in bright vistas of everything around. The bright light makes the snowy towers of the castle shine gloriously and then travels to the lakes and the cataracts in course of which its dynamism is revealed. It shakes the waters of the lakes and makes the cataract leap in joy. So happy is the speaker in the enjoyment of this scene that he wants the bugle to be sounded, allowing a synchronization of light and sound to follow.

The important thing, you should notice, is the impact of this scene on the speaker. We see not only the light adding beauty and glory to the castle but also creating absolute cheerfulness. It is this cheerfulness that sharpens observation and stirs the speaker for further activity.

The second stanza hints at the presence of someone else who is asked to hear, by the speaker, the faintly blowing horns of the Elfland. The sounds are at first thin and clear, then thinner and clearer whose echoes can be heard in the fields lying across. There is apparently nothing to suggest a time-interval. But the thin sound and the Elfland point to the onset of twilight – the light is there still, but like sounds it is also dying, taking leave of the world.

The identity of the listener is finally revealed in the third stanza – the speaker is addressing his beloved. He asks her now to enjoy the fainting sound of the echoes. But he also asks her to observe how the echoes move not only from hill to field or to river, but from soul to soul where they grow eternally. This is a unique experience of something transient, acquiring eternity by sheer beauty.

2.3.4 Appreciation

The world of Nature maintains a course of life which is quite independent of an individual's way of life and experiences. And yet at times there may be an identity between the two. Tennyson captures such moments in his lyrics beautifully. A number of his lyrics are good examples of pathetic fallacy, of the world of Nature reflecting the moods of the poet or the persona. You must take note of the role of the dynamic verbs which Tennyson uses to describe the moment-to-moment changes in the scene – falls, shakes, leaps, flying, dying, blowing, replying, flying. The light and the sounds are not static. They have their own natural movement which, in turn, affects the objects within their range. But more important is the impact they have on the speaker.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Describe the scene of the poem in your words.

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- ii) Identify three lines of the poem in which there is use of alliteration.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.4 'THE LADY OF SHALOTT'

Tennyson, like many other Romantic and Victorian poets, often based his poems on medieval stories. Here the poet refers to the story of the legendary King Arthur. Developed in the Middle Ages, the story tells of the noble and generous king and his knights of the Round Table, all of whom are famous for their chivalry. But gradually the perfect scenario is somewhat disturbed by court intrigues and the illicit affair of Arthur's wife Guinevere, with his trusted knight Sir Lancelot. In this poem, reference is made to Camelot, the Court of King Arthur and to Sir Lancelot who was the most famous knight in Arthurian legends.

But before we start reading the poem, let us give you an idea of what the whole poem is about. The poem tells us of the life and death of the beautiful Lady of Shalott, who lives all alone on a secluded island. In Part I, the background is described in some detail and we are told about the castle situated on an island in the middle of the river, in which the mysterious Lady of Shalott lives. Part II tells of how the lady spends her time observing the reflection of the outside world in a mirror and weaving her impressions in a colourful magic web. There is a strange curse on the lady according to which she is forbidden from looking out of her window and observing the real world directly. In part III we get to know that temptation to break

this rule and look out of the window comes in the splendid shape of Sir Lancelot who one day goes riding past towards Camelot. This part describes Sir Lancelot; his shield, his bugle, his saddle and his stately demeanor.

It is at this point that Part III ends, as you can see. What happens after this? In part IV the dreaded curse befalls the lady, her mirror ‘cracks from side to side’ and the magic web flies out of the window. The lady goes down to the riverside, writes her name ‘The Lady of Shalott’ on a boat, lies down in it, setting it adrift. By the time the boat passes by the palace of King Arthur, the lady is dead. Sir Lancelot and his merrymaking fellow knights merely watch the mysterious lady with interest and awe.

The Lady of Shallot is a narrative poem and was first published in 1832. It was revised and included in the two-volumes of Poems of 1842. Let us now read the poem, aloud if you can. A glossary provides you with explanations of certain difficult words and phrases.

2.4.1 Poem

The Lady of Shalott

Part I

On either side the river lie
 Long fields of **barley and of rye**,
 That **clothe** the **wold** and meet the sky;
 And thro’ the field the road runs by
 To **many-tower’d Camelot**;
 And up and down the people go,
 Gazing where the **lilies blow**
 Round an island there below,
 The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
 Little breezes **dusk and shiver**
 Thro’ the wave that runs for ever
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.
 Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
 Overlook a space of flowers,
 And the silent isle **imbowers**
 The Lady of Shalott.

By the **margin, willow veil’d**,
 Slide the heavy **barges** trail’d
 By slow horses; and **unhail’d**
 The **shallop flitteth** silken-sail’d
 Skimming down to Camelot:
 But who hath seen her wave her hand?
 Or at the **casement** seen her stand?

Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the **bearded barley**,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling **sheaves** in **uplands airy**,
Listening, whispers " 'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott."

Part II

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the **highway** near
Winding down to Camelot:
There the river **eddy** whirls,
And there the **surly village-churls**,
And the red cloaks of **market girls**,
Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a **troop of damsels glad**,
An **abbot** on an **ambling pad**,
Sometimes a **curly shepherd-lad**,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the **mirror blue**
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,

For often thro' the silent nights
 A funeral, with **plumes** and lights
 And music, went to Camelot:
 Or when the moon was overhead,
 Came two young lovers lately wed:
 "I am **half sick** of shadows," said
 The Lady of Shalott.

Part III

A **bow-shot** from her **bower-eaves**,
 He rode between the barley-sheaves,
 The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
 And flamed upon the brazen **greaves**
 Of bold Sir **Lancelot**.
 A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
 To a lady in his shield,
 That sparkled on the yellow field,
 Beside remote Shalott.

The **gemmy bridle** glitter'd free,
 Like to some branch of stars we see
 Hung in the golden Galaxy.
 The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot:
 And from his blazon'd **baldric** slung
 A mighty silver bugle hung,
 And as he rode his armour rung,
 Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
 Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
 The helmet and the helmet-feather
 Burn'd like one burning flame together,
 As he rode down to Camelot.
 As often thro' the purple night,
 Below the starry clusters bright,
 Some **bearded meteor**, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
 On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;
 From underneath his helmet flow'd
 His coal-black curls as on he rode,
 As he rode down to Camelot.
 From the bank and from the river

He flash'd into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott.

Part IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over tower'd Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,

Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darken'd wholly,
Turn'd to tower'd Camelot.

For ere she reach'd upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and **gallery**,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
Silent into Camelot.

Out upon the **wharfs** they came,
Knight and **burgher**, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her **grace**,
The Lady of Shalott."

2.4.2 Glossary

PART I

barley and rye	: cereals used as food
clothe	: cover
wold	: open upland country
many-towered	: having buildings with many towers
Camelot	: seat of King Arthur's court
lilies	: large white or reddish or purplish, usually spotted flowers on tall stems (usually grows near water).
blow	: bloom
willows whiten	: the leaves of the willow trees shaken by the wind look white from a distance.
aspens quiver	: aspens are a kind of poplar (with leaves that shake easily in the breeze). Here again the reference is to the effect of the breeze on leaves.
dusk and shiver	: darken and break the waves in the river.
imbowers	: enclose in an inner room.

margin	: edge of the river
willow-veil'd	: covered with willows
barges	: flat-bottomed, boats for carrying freight (goods) across rivers-may or may not have sails.
unhail'd	: unnoticed
shallop	: small boat
flitteth	: passes lightly and rapidly
skimming	: passing lightly over
casement	: window
bearded barley	: here, it means ripe grain ready for harvest.
sheaves	: bundles
uplands airy	: higher parts exposed to the winds

PART II

shadows of the world	: reflections
highway	: main road
eddy	: small whirlpool
surly	: rude
village churls (archaic)	: peasants
market girls	: girls going to the market place
a troop of damsels glad	: a group of cheerful girls
abbot	: head of monastery where monks (men under religious vow) live.
ambling pad	: easy-paced horse
curly shepherd-lad	: curly-haired shepherd boy
mirror blue	: Is the mirror blue? No, it is probably a clear reflection of the blue sky.
she hath no loyal knight and true	: she had no true lover.
plumes	: decorative bunches of feathers.
half sick	: fed up

PART III

a bow-shot	: the distance an arrow might travel when fired from a bow.
bower-eaves	: the rooftop above where the lady resides.
greaves	: items of clothing or armour that protect the lower legs.
lancelot	: one of the principal knights of the Grail (the sacred, holy vessel).
gemmy bridle	: glittering bridle used to control the horse.
baldric	: a diagonal belt worn over the shoulder for attaching weapons or instruments.

bearded meteor	: prominent shooting star with a slow trail.
tirra lira	: a joyful exclamation of no particular meaning.
loom	: the frame or apparatus on which weaving is done.

PART IV

prow	: the front end of a boat.
seër	: a visionary or mystic.
carol	: a song. In medieval times not necessarily associated with Christmas.
gallery	: a long room, in this context located within a prestigious building or castle.
dead-pale	: a lifeless body
wharfs	: wooden jetties or platforms constructed between the shore and water.
burgher	: prominent or leading townsman or citizen.
grace	: a state of favour or forgiveness. A blessing of sorts.

Discussion

As we read the poem aloud, we are struck by the rhythmic quality of the verse. How is this effect achieved? As we have seen, each part has 4 stanzas. Each stanza has 7 lines. The first four lines rhyme and so do the last three. However, the rhyme ending of the last three lines is different from the first. There is a refrain after the first group of 4 lines and the second group of 3 lines, right? So the rhyme scheme is:

aaaa b ccc b

2.4.3 Critical Summary:

In the first part, the poet presents the background in some detail. This helps to create the atmosphere and the mood that follows, as we are transported from a mundane existence into a remote and isolated world where anything can happen. And so when we are finally introduced to the strange castle with its mysterious inmate, we are hardly surprised. The poet describes a river that runs towards Camelot and the towers of which are visible in the distance. The river is flanked on either side by fields through which runs a road. As people go up and down this road, they can see an island in the river full of flowers and a grey castle where the Lady of Shalott lives. No one has ever seen her. Her existence is only confirmed by her song that can sometimes be heard by reapers late at night. The busy road and the boats plying in the river suggest a normal life which is in direct contrast to the complete seclusion of the island. As you must have observed, we are not told anything directly about the lady. Yet we can form an initial impression about her. What is your impression and can you say how it emerges?

After giving us a panoramic view of the scene, by means of detailed description, contrast and suggestion, Tennyson has already established the mysterious atmosphere of the island. The poet then takes us inside the castle in Part II. Here we can ‘see’, so evocative is the description, a lady weaving a colourful magic web. The figures and scenes in the web represent the reflections of the outside world that she can see in the mirror that hangs on the wall opposite her window. She is vaguely aware of the fact that a strange

curse would befall her if she ventures to look out of her window. And so, she continues to weave ‘steadily’, having accepted her strange condition. But then one day she bursts out: ‘I am half sick of shadows’. Have these stanzas developed her sense of frustration or does this statement come as a surprise?

In Part III we are given a description of Sir Lancelot who rides by the tower where the Lady of Shalott is imprisoned. His appearance is described in detail. From his shield to his glittering bridle which is compared to the stars, his silver bugle, his shining saddle and helmet all add to his charm. His broad forehead and curly black hair make him a sight worthy of admiration. The Lady of Shalott sees his reflection in her mirror as he passes by singing a ditty. She is so moved by the handsome picture that he presents, that she throws caution to the winds and rushes to the window to see him clearly—hardly caring that she would be cursed for this act.

The description in Part 4 are in total contrast to the previous parts as even nature seems to take on the characteristics of the ominous events that are bound to follow. The sky becomes dark and a storm arises. The Lady of Shalott who is now totally aware of her dark destiny rushes down to the river and gets into a boat. She writes her name on the prow of the boat and lies down in it—allowing herself to drift down the river to Camelot. She sings a song which would perhaps be her last because before she reaches Camelot—we are told—she dies. As her boat reaches Camelot, the knights and Lords come down to look at the boat and wonder who the mysterious lady is. When they realize that she is dead they make the sign of the cross. The tragedy is that Lancelot for whom she invited the curse upon herself merely spares a glance at her and comments that she has a lovely face and that God should grant her mercy. Through this one indifferent sentence he shows the utter futility of the sacrifice that the Lady of Shalott had made for his sake.

2.4.4 Appreciation

What are some of the features of this poem that immediately arrest your attention? If you read the poem aloud, we are sure that you would have been drawn into the rhythm and melodious quality of the verse. In fact, all Tennyson’s poetry must be read aloud if we are to appreciate its word music. Tennyson himself would often read passages from his poems to his friends and as D.G. Rossetti (1828-82) the English poet and painter has recorded: ‘Whilst the fiery passages were delivered with a voice and vehemence which Tennyson alone of living men could compass, the softer passages and the songs made tears course down his cheeks’ (Charles Tennyson, *Six Tennyson Essays* London: Cassell & Co., 1954, p. 189)

Along with the musical quality, we are also struck by the rich details of the descriptions. Moreover, Tennyson’s skill as a narrator is evident from the way he sets the stage for the intriguing story of the mysterious Lady of Shalott. The Victorians, while acknowledging the sensuous musical and pictorial qualities of Tennyson’s verse, often complained that his poetry lacked any real meaning. Do you agree with this view? Is this poem simply a beautiful fairy tale? Or do you think it says something about the human condition? In short, what is the theme of the poem?

As we know, the story ends with a curse befalling the unfortunate lady. On one level the lady's existence can be seen to represent a world of dreams which is shattered when it comes face to face with reality. On another, the lady's activity can also be seen as symbolic of the artist's vision destroyed by a callous world. In addition, the poem may be read as a comment on the restrictions that society can impose upon women. Once the woman steps outside the boundaries imposed upon her, she will be doomed. What in your opinion is the main idea expressed? It is clear that human beings cannot live in isolation—to do so is unnatural—and anything that is unnaturally imposed cannot continue for long. Thus the lady, in spite of the curse, chooses death rather than a life of unnatural captivity. :

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Explain with reference to the context the following lines:

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot,
And by the moon the reaper weary
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers 'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott'?

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- ii) Explain with reference to the context the following lines:

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her **grace**,
The Lady of Shalott."

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we studied:

- the salient features of the Victorian age
- the lyric ‘The Splendor Falls’
- the narrative poem ‘The Lady of Shalott’.

2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The scene is that of sunset transforming a castle with its dying rays.
- ii) Line 2: snowy summits; line 3: long light; line 5: Blow bugle blow.

Check Your Progress 2

We can:

- a) start by saying which poem the lines are taken from and who is the author—one may briefly mention something about the specific characteristics of that poet’s techniques.
- b) explain the background of the poem and how these lines fit into its overall context:
- c) paraphrase the lines and
- d) in conclusion make some remarks about the style of the poem.

UNIT 3 ROBERT BROWNING-1

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Browning: Life and Works
- 3.3 ‘Prospice’
 - 3.3.1 Poem
 - 3.3.2 Glossary
 - 3.3.3 Critical Summary
 - 3.3.4 Poetic Devices
- 3.4 ‘Meeting at Night’
 - 3.4.1 Poem
 - 3.4.2 Glossary
 - 3.4.3 Discussion
 - 3.4.4 Poetic Devices
- 3.5 ‘Parting at Morning’
 - 3.5.1 Poem and Glossary
 - 3.5.2 Discussion
 - 3.5.3 Poetic Devices
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Answers to Exercises

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall introduce you to another eminent Victorian poet, Robert Browning. We have selected three poems for you which will give you an idea of some aspects of Browning’s poetic art. After reading this Unit carefully, you should be able to :

- distinguish between a lyric, dramatic lyric and dramatic monologue;
- explain the features of Browning’s poetic technique;
- appreciate the distinctive quality of Browning’s art;
- discuss the selected poems.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units, you read some poems by Tennyson. As you can see, Victorian poetry is different from the poetry of the Romantics. The Romantics were primarily interested in nature. On the other hand, while the Victorians were also interested in nature, they were more fascinated by human nature. You will find this tendency in the poetry of Browning, especially in his dramatic poems wherein there is a searching psychological analysis of his characters and their motives. Browning has often been considered a “difficult” poet. There may be several reasons for this “difficulty”. Let us have a look at some of them:

- a) Sometimes, Browning has the tendency to say too much in too few words. For the sake of achieving brevity and emphasis, several words are omitted. In technical terms this is called ‘ellipsis’. In such cases, the meaning has to be inferred from the overall context of the poem.
- b) At other times, there are sudden jumps from one thought to another in Browning’s poetry. It may then become difficult for the reader to keep pace, with these quick transitions.
- c) Browning was also a very learned man. He often supposed that his readers could easily understand the vast range of allusions that he introduced in his poems.

All these factors contribute to the difficulty in understanding Browning. But after the initial difficulties have been solved, you will find the reading of Browning’s poetry a rewarding experience. We have selected some of Browning’s shorter poems for you. Are they easy or difficult? Response to poetry is something very individual and you may or may not agree with the comments of even renowned critics. Moreover, a poem can have different interpretations and therefore, no single interpretation can qualify as the most authoritative or authentic one. As you read the poems, try to monitor your responses, to them. You may require several readings before you feel you have understood the poem. You will notice that with each fresh reading, you will observe some beautiful poetic touch, some delightful phrase or some vivid image that had escaped you in your earlier readings. Poems are meant to be enjoyed! As we become more aware of the poet’s art we find that our enjoyment increases with our awareness.

Let us take a brief look at the poems we will read in this Unit. First we will read the lyric ‘Prospice’ (a Latin word that is pronounced “prospikay”). You will recall that a lyric is a short poem that has a songlike quality. The subject matter is usually personal and the poem expresses deeply felt emotions and states of mind. We shall then take up another pair of lyrics ‘Meeting at Night’ and ‘Parting at Morning’. These can be broadly called ‘dramatic’. In this kind of poem, the poet does not speak in his own voice but the situation is described by an imaginary character. This is similar to a dramatic monologue. But a dramatic monologue is different because there the focus is not on the actions but on the character and motives of the speaker. Browning, as you will see, is quite different from Tennyson. He is primarily a thinker. Moreover, his poems are more difficult than Tennyson’s which are marked by clarity and simplicity. You will notice some more differences as you read selected poems.

3.2 BROWNING : LIFE AND WORKS

LIFE:

Robert Browning was born in 1812 to parents who introduced him to both literature and music at an early age. His youth coincided with the great spurt of writing by the Romantic poets. While still in his teens, he was so influenced by Shelley that he converted to atheism and vegetarianism. In 1828, Browning joined London University but left without taking a degree. He knew that he wanted to be a poet and had written poems at an early age but his first volume of poems was only published in 1833.

Browning was already a poet of some standing when he read some new poems by Elizabeth Barrett. He fell in love with her without seeing her and subsequently married her, remaining devoted to her till her death in 1861. Browning dedicated his entire life to writing. Though primarily a poet, he also wrote 8 plays between 1837 and the time (1845) when he met Elizabeth Barrett. His letters too have been published. That he was successful, is clear from the fact that during his lifetime, Browning Societies were formed to promote an understanding of his poetry. When he died in Venice in 1889 his body was taken back to England to be laid to rest in the Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey. This is the ultimate honour for any English poet.

SELECTED WORKS :

Poems

Poems Pauline (1833)

Paracelsus (1835)

Sordello . (1840)

Men and Women. (1855)

Dramatis Personae (1864)

The Ring and the Book (1869)

Fifine at the Fair (1872)

La Saisiaz (1878)

Asolando (1889)

Plays

Strafford (1837)

Colombe's Birthday

Pippa Passes (1841)

A Blot in the Scutcheon

3.3 'PROSPICE'

This poem was first published in *Dramatis Personae* (1864). *Prospice*, a Latin word, means 'to look forward'. The poet speaks in his own voice. Death, as you know, has often preoccupied the meditations of poets and philosophers. John Donne defied and challenged death in the famous words 'Death, be not proud! ' He regarded death as one long sleep and nothing as powerful or dreadful as it is often made out to be. In this poem, Browning too discards fear of death. Death for him is something to be faced bravely. It is only after death, that Browning can hope to be restored to his beloved wife, the poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning who had died after a long and persistent illness. (She died in Italy in 1861. Their intense love has become almost legendary!) In this poem, we find a sample of Browning's optimism. Perhaps you have come across his oft-quoted lines from the poem 'Pippa Passes' which reads:

God's in His heaven

All's right with the world.

Browning's optimism rested on his enthusiasm for life and on his belief in God. Let us now read the poem, as many times as necessary. The glossary that follows should be helpful.

3.3.1 Poem

PROSPICE

Fear death?—to feel the **fog** in my throat,
 The mist in my face,
 When the snows begin, and the **blasts** denote
 I am nearing the place,
 The power of the night, the press of the storm,
 The **post** of the **foe**;
 Where he stands, the **Arch Fear** in a visible form,
 Yet the strong man must go:
 For the journey is done and the summit attained,
 And the barriers fall,
 Though a battle's to fight **ere** the **guerdon** be gained,
 The reward of it all.
 I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
 The best and the last!
 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and **forbore**,
 And bade me creep past.
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my **peers**
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the **brunt**, in a minute pay glad life's **arrears**
 Of pain, darkness and cold.
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that **rave**,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest!

3.3.2 Glossary

fog	: thick mist, here it refers to the suffocation of death
blasts	: violent gusts of wind, which the poet imagines must announce the approach of death
post	: place or position
foe	: enemy, that is, death
Arch Fear	: chief fear, death is personified
ere	: before
guerdon	: reward
forbore	: refrain

peers	: equals in status. The poet probably refers to the other poets of earlier ages
brunt	: full impact
arrears	: debts
rave	: talk wildly

3.3.3 Critical Summary

Let us first look at the poem critically and then analyse Browning's use of poetic devices.

The poem begins with a rhetorical question. 'Fear death?'--clearly the poet does not. What does the poet suggest in the next eight lines? He compares imminent death with a journey up a steep mountain. A climber must experience a feeling of suffocation and shortness of breath as he climbs through the mists. As he goes higher up the mountain, the snowfall and the stormy blasts of wind seem to signify that the summit is approaching. In the same way, a man passes through several trials and tribulations before he comes face to face with death. The poet continues with the image of the climber toiling up a mountain, all turns dark, the storm rages fiercely as he approaches the position of the enemy. And who is this 'foe' that the poet refers to? This foe is none other than the 'Arch Fear' death. Death is the enemy that all human beings fear. The poet speculates on the stages that one must pass through before one's death. The darkness will intensify, and the storms will increase as he nears the stronghold of death, the enemy of life. There he will actually see death standing in his fearful form. But even the strong and brave must finally succumb to him. Just as the journey ends when the climber reaches the summit after surmounting all difficulties similarly the poet will overcome all hardships and face death bravely. All must eventually die.

In the next eight lines, the poet ponders over how life's battles are won after great struggle. Even in life one achieves the highest point at the end of a difficult journey, which one must face and overcome many obstacles. The reward can only be had after a fierce struggle. The poet recalls that he has always been a fighter in life and would like to face death in a final and glorious battle. He wants to embrace death bravely and will not have his eyes bandaged so that he avoids looking death in the eye. In other words he would not like to slip into death with his eyes closed. He does not expect any concessions from death. He would not like death to gently take him away. He does not want to slink away quietly.

The poet would like to savour death in the manner of his equals, the other great poets of the past. He would like to face death head-on, without the slightest fear or hesitation. By facing the pangs of death, he will instantly pay back all the debts that he owes to life. What does Browning mean by 'glad life'? He seems to say that as he has had a happy life and as he has not suffered in life, he will be happy to undergo pain, cold and darkness so that he is able to finish the share of suffering that life might have assigned to him.

Browning believes that the brave person is able to turn even the worst situation to his own advantage. The moment of despair will soon end. And

even though the storm may blow in all its fury and strange wild voices may be heard, all will gradually subside. What does he wish to say? He simply means that the worst calamities die down if faced bravely. This then shall be his attitude to death. After the tumult, there will be peace and calm. It seems as if the poet will then emerge from darkness and despair to light and hope. The poet will then be restored to his beloved whom he addresses as 'thou soul of my soul!' He will embrace her and forget all else which he leaves unto the care of God.

The poet moves from images of darkness to light, from despair to hope, from the pain of loss to the ecstasy of reunion with the beloved. All this is possible with confidence in himself and faith in God. The poet literally looks beyond death to eternal and joyous life. Death thus is rendered powerless and ineffective. Not only is this poem about the conquest of death but also about his love for his wife, for this poem was written shortly after her death. The prospect of being re-united with his beloved, even if it is in death, charges the poet with the courage to face death. It is a loving tribute to the memory of his beloved wife.

3.3.4 Poetic Devices

Death is an abstract concept. Browning has personified it giving it a 'visible form' that inspires fear. Death is thus a dreaded enemy who inhabits a stormy, pitch-dark place. The process of dying is likened to a journey through the cold, dark and dreary slopes of a steep mountain. The personification is sustained throughout the poem. The images of mists, storms and darkness capture the fearful aspect of death. These word pictures serve to make an abstract concept like death into a concrete fact that can be easily visualized. The metaphor of the journey is extended to stand for the struggles of life as well. In the lines 'For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave. The black minute's at end', you will notice, that 'sudden' means 'suddenly'. Also notice the economy of the sentence 'The black minute's at end'. As we pointed out in the introduction, this tendency to pack a lot into a few words is a specific trait of Browning's art.

The lines rhyme alternately and the rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef and so on. The metre is more difficult to determine. The pentameter lines alternate with trimeter lines thus creating an impression of quick forward movement that ties up with the journey metaphor. As you can notice, Browning makes extensive use of alliteration. Read these lines aloud and savour the sheer music of the s and p sounds. 'Shall dwindle, shall blend, Shall change, shall become first a piece out of pain

Check Your Progress 1

Explain the following lines with reference to the context :

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,

The black minute's at end,

O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,

And God be with the rest!

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.....

 (Check your answer with that given at the end of this Unit)

3.4 ‘MEETING AT NIGHT’

We shall take up these two short poems together as they complement each other. These early poems were published in *Bells and Pomegranates* (1842) and written presumably before meeting Elizabeth Barrett. These are not necessarily based on the poet’s experience but are extremely vivid. Nor are they spoken in the poet’s own voice. They read almost like a short story and can be taken as characteristic examples of dramatic lyrics.

In the first lyric, the speaker describes his eager journey by sea and land till he reaches the house of his beloved on a remote farm in the dead of the night. The second lyric, regards the inevitable parting in an unsentimental objective way. The retrospective tone of this poem is calm in comparison with the eager breathless quality of the earlier one where the lover is motivated by the single thought of seeing his beloved. You will notice that both poems are marked by an extreme economy of detail. Here Browning achieves his effect more by suggestion than by explanation. Now let us examine each poem separately.

3.4.1 Poem

MEETING AT NIGHT

THE grey sea and the long black land;
 And the yellow half-moon large and low;
 And the startled little waves that leap
 In **fiery ringlets** from their sleep,
 As I gain the **cove** with pushing **prows**,
 And quench its speed i’ the slushy sand.
 Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
 And blue spurt of a lighted match,
 And a voice less loud, thro’ its joys and fears,
 Than the two hearts beating each to each!

3.4.2 Glossary

fiery : looking like fire; flaming; here the reference is to the moonlight reflected on the waves that makes them assume the colour of flames

ringlets : curls; the waves look like curly hair
cove : part of the sea sheltered by a wide curve of the shore
prow : the pointed front part of the boat.

3.4.3 Discussion

The poem opens without a preamble. We are transported straight to the narrator's boat being rowed in the grey sea. In the distance, the long line of the shore looks dark in the night. The golden half-moon seems suspended low in the sky. The reflection of the moonlight on the waves gives them the appearance of the tousled golden curls of someone who has suddenly woken up from sleep. The narrator's boat reaches a small bay. The prow of the speeding boat comes to a stop in the soft, wet sand.

The narrator then continues his eager journey on foot, walking along for about a mile on the warm beach that smells of salt water and fish (In literature, you will find in general that warmth and summer and pleasant smells are associated with happy and fulfilled love whereas winter and cold are associated with parting and sorrow). The lover then crosses three fields till he comes to a farm. He taps at a particular window. He can hear the sound of a matchstick striking a box after which a blue flame of a lighted match becomes visible. He then hears his beloved's voice which is softer than their heart beats. The voice is full of joy and fear—joy at his arrival but fear? It is probably the fear of being discovered. The journey concludes happily as the two lovers join in a passionate embrace.

3.4.4 Poetic Devices

The first feature of the poem to strike you is its brevity and intensity. The lady is not described, the meeting is barely mentioned. It is only through selective details of the journey that the excitement of the meeting is built up. The eagerness with which the lover anticipates the meeting with his beloved is conveyed in the quick pace and rhythm of the poem. The rhyme scheme of the two short stanzas is ab cc ba; de ff ed. The lines are in pentameter though you will notice that the metre is quite irregular and therefore it is difficult to determine its exact category. For example, it is fairly simple to determine the metre in Alexander Pope's poetry.

Let's take the lines :

True wit is nature to advantage dres't;

What oft was thought but ne'er so well exprest.

Take the first two lines of Browning's poem. You will find that the rhythm is much more elusive.

The musical quality of Browning's poem is ensured, however, by his extensive use of alliteration; Look at 'long black land', 'yellow half-moon large and low' 'startled little waves that leap'. The persistent 'l' sound conveys a liquid lilting effect that captures the peace and quiet of the moonlit night. Can you pick out similar phrases for alliterative effect? Read aloud the line 'And quench its speed in the slushy sand'--don't you find that the recurring 's' sound conveys the feel of the actual sound produced when the boat ploughs into the slush producing a squelching sound? This is called the onomatopoeiac effect. A similar effect can be found in 'sharp scratch' of the matchstick.

Let us now look at lines 3 and 4. The reflection of the moonlight on the waves is conveyed in the effective image of a head of curly golden hair of someone who has woken up with a start. The poem is almost like a painting with its vivid portrayal of a 'grey' sea, 'black' land and 'yellow' moon. The subdued colours of the first two lines give way to a more vivid image in lines 3 and 4 as the pace of the lover's journey is conveyed. Not only does Browning make us see but he also makes us smell the 'sea-scented beach'. He makes us hear the 'sharp scratch' of the lighted match and finally makes us feel the 'two hearts beating'. In short, the poem is richly sensuous—an effect that is suited to its romantic theme.

3.5 'PARTING AT MORNING'

Now let us turn to the next poem. Read the poem keeping in mind the question : Who is the speaker in this lyric?

3.5.1 Poem and Glossary

PARTING AT MORNING

Round the **cape** of a sudden came the sea,
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim :
And straight was a path of gold for him,
And the need of a world of men for me.

Glossary

cape : part of land jutting out into the sea.

3.5.2 Discussion

First to the question: who is the speaker in this poem? Taking our clues from lines 3 and 4 we might pose the following questions. Is it the woman this time? Is it the cry of a ruined and betrayed woman or is it the lament of a woman missing her parted lover? According to Browning, it is neither. It is the man again and as Browning puts it '.....it is his confession of how fleeting is the belief (implied in the first part) that such raptures are self-sufficient and enduring-as for the time they appear' (*New Poems*, p. 176).

The night of rapture passes all too quickly. The narrator tells us that the high tide coming over the cape and the rising sun visible over the edge of the mountain announce the advent of morning. It also means that the time has come to part. In the third line we are told 'And straight was the path of gold for him'. Who is the 'him' referred to? The 'him' refers to none other than the speaker—the eager lover of the night before, who was rushing to the arms of his beloved. To him the long journey over sea and land had presented no problem. That was his situation on the night before. Now, on the morning after, he is confronted with reality and the raptures and excitement of the previous night are only a memory. In short, he realizes that the joys of love are fleeting. He must now turn to the material world of men where duty beckons.

3.5.3 Poetic Devices

What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? Turn to the poem and indicate it at the end of each line. Its quite simple, isnt it? a bb a. What about the rhythm?

As we mentioned earlier, the rhythm of Browning's poetry is more rugged and difficult to categorize. However, you may have recognized that these lines are decasyllabic.

Consider the line: 'And the sun looked over the mountain's rim'. What is the poetic device used here? The sun is personified. The image created is that of someone peeping in to disturb the lovers. Compare this with similar lines in John Donne's poem 'The Rising Sun' in which the poet chides 'Busie old foole, unruly Sunne. Why dost thou thus, Through windows, and through curtains call on us?' Donne resents the interfering rays of the sun that disturb the lovers by signalling the approach of day.

In this poem, both sea and sun seem determined to end the lovers' idyll. 'Path of gold' is an effective metaphor that succinctly connotes the pursuit of wealth and material goods that the lover must now turn to after the ecstasy of the previous night. Similarly the phrase 'world of men' provides a contrast that highlights the changed situation of the speaker.

You may have noticed that this poem is dramatic as well as lyrical. To sum up in the words of Browning himself: 'Such poems for the most part lyric in expression, always 'dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine' (Advertisement to *Dramatic Lyrics* (1843,))

Check Your Progress 2

- i) In a few lines write down a critical appreciation of 'Meeting at Night'

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- ii) Write a short note on Browning's use of poetic devices in 'Parting at Morning'.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have:

- discussed 'Prospice', a lyric on love and death. Here the poet expresses his wish to face death bravely and heroically and without fear. For death would only help to unite him forever with his departed wife;
- read the two short poems 'Meeting at Night' and 'Parting at Morning' that dramatize and capture the excitement of a lover's visit to his beloved in the dead of night and the parting of the lovers the next morning. Duty, not love is the final destiny of the lover;

- been able to understand Browning's poetic techniques : his pictorial art, his use of metaphor, alliteration, imagery, the rugged rhythm and the musical rhyme of his stanzas that make the experience of his poetry so memorable.

Robert Browning-1

3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

In the previous unit we have already given you some guidelines regarding explanation of a passage with reference to its context. You may refer to that in case of difficulty.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The poet describes his eager journey by sea and land to reach his beloved's house. There is a breathless quality to the poem marked by economy of detail. It is an intense poem full of alliterations.
- ii) In 'Parting at Morning' the rhythm is rugged. There is personification (sun is personified) and there is a use of metaphors ('path of gold') and imagery.

UNIT 4 ROBERT BROWNING-2

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Dramatic Monologue
- 4.3 ‘My Last Duchess’
 - 4.3.1 Poem
 - 4.3.2 Glossary
- 4.4 Critical Analysis
 - 4.4.1 Paraphrase
 - 4.4.2 Poetic Devices
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will be taking up a very famous poem ‘My Last Duchess’. The poem is a dramatic monologue— a form that Browning perfected. By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

- assess what a dramatic monologue is;
- comment on selected passages from the poem;
- appreciate Browning’s contribution as a poet.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit we have already spoken about Browning’s life and works and introduced you to some of his poems. All this will help you to appreciate the development of Browning’s art and craft as a poet. This poem first appeared in *Dramatic Romances* (1842) and has now become a favourite anthology piece.

Like many of Browning’s best poems, ‘My Last Duchess’ was inspired in Italy. This poem is probably a dramatization of an account of Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara, (Ferrara is a place in Italy) that Browning had read, around 1842. He married Lucrezia de’ Medici the young daughter of the Duke of Florence. They were a fairly new family compared with the count. Lucrezia died at the age of 17—she was poisoned. Three years later Alfonso contracted a marriage with Barbara, the niece of the Count of Tyrol. The poem is set in Renaissance Italy in the sixteenth century

4.2 DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

As we have pointed out earlier, this poem is a dramatic monologue. While reading it, we should be aware of its distinct features. What is a dramatic monologue? In a dramatic monologue:

- a) the narrative is related by one person;

- b) we can get an idea of the situation in which the person speaks;
- c) we can also infer what happened before this particular circumstance is described;
- d) the motives and character of the speaker are revealed. For example, the speaker may praise himself but from the context of the poem, we can infer whether this is justified or otherwise;
- e) the poet makes use of colloquial speech that is appropriate to the speaker
- f) the treatment is serious
- g) the exotic nature of the speaker and the remoteness of the scene distances the dramatic monologue from both the author and the reader.

Keeping these points in mind, let us now read the poem.

4.3 ‘MY LAST DUCHESS’

Please keep the following questions in mind while reading the poem: Who is the speaker in the poem? Who is he speaking to? What is the time and place? What does he describe? On what note does the poem end? What sort of person does he emerge as? Who engages our sympathy? Try and answer these questions by yourself— however tentatively, after you read the poem. To help you understand the poem better we are giving you the answers to these questions also: The Duke of Ferrara is speaking to a marriage broker, an envoy of a Count. The Duke of Ferrara has taken him upstairs ostensibly to show him his artistic treasures, away from the rest of the company assembled below. This gives him the opportunity of talking to him more intimately. It also gives him ample chance to soften him up so that his case for a larger dowry is represented before the Count his master, whose daughter he is to marry shortly

4.3.1 Poem

MY LAST DUCHESS

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now; **Fra Pandolf's** hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured **countenance**,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they **durst**,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not

Her husband's presence only, called that **spot**
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her **mantle** laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy.
She had a heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My **favour** at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some **officious** fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, **forsooth**, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er 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. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known **munificence**
Is ample **warrant** that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice **Neptune**, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which **Claus of Innsbruck** cast in bronze for me!

4.3.2 Glossary

ferrara	: a place in Italy
fra Pandolf	: a fictitious painter
countenance	: face
durst	: dare
spot of joy	: flush of pleasure
mantle	: loose, sleeveless cloak
favour	: ornament
officious	: one who is too eager to help
forsooth	: no doubt; in truth
munificence	: extreme generosity
warrant	: guarantee
Neptune	: ancient Roman god of the sea. Also called Poseidon in Greek mythology
claus of Innsbruck	: imaginary sculptor.

4.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.4.1 Paraphrase

Let us now paraphrase the poem.

The poem opens with the Duke of Ferrara pointing to a woman's portrait on the wall. This woman he introduces as his previous Duchess. He also remarks on the lifelike quality of the portrait. He then goes on to appreciate it as a wonderful piece of art and commends the artistry of Fra Pandolf, who worked for one full day before the portrait assumed its present perfection. He then requests the envoy to sit down and admire the portrait. You must have noticed how adeptly Browning is dramatizing the situation by making quick digressions in the narrative. He continues that he had mentioned the name of Fra Pandolf on purpose. His experience so far had been that whoever saw the portrait always questioned him, if they dared, about how that particular expression came to the Duchess' face. The Duke, in yet another aside, says that no one else but him is allowed to draw the curtain that conceals the portrait. He assures the envoy that he was not the first to question him about it.

In a slightly ironical tone, the Duke tells the envoy that his Duchess' face did not flush with pleasure in his presence alone. He says that the painter had probably made some routine remark about the position of the lady's mantle. Or it is possible that he had complimented her on her beauty saying that it would not be possible to capture the fading blush on her throat, on canvas. The Duchess was easily impressed with such courtesies and beamed with pleasure. The Duke, a suave conversationalist pauses for a moment to choose the correct word to describe the lady's nature. He puts it most delicately saying that 'she had a heart ... too easily impressed'. This is sarcastically meant, for he had no sympathy with or understanding of the young Duchess' innocence. He complains that she liked all that she saw. He is shocked at her lack of discrimination. Whether she was wearing the ornaments presented by her husband, or whether she was looking at the setting sun, or whether she received a branch of cherries broken for her

from the orchard by someone eager to please, or whether she rode the white mule round the terrace, the Duchess would blush or express her pleasure to one and all equally. He could not get over the fact that since she thanked all equally she probably held his ancient family name in equal esteem with them. It was below the dignity of the Duke to put a stop to such frivolous behaviour.

He then tries to enlist the envoy's sympathy by asking him how he could have handled such a situation without compromising his dignity. He simply says that he did not know how to express his desires to her. He could not tell her how her behaviour disgusted him or how she fell short of or exceeded the limits of decorum. He was not sure whether the Duchess would allow herself to be corrected without defiance, it would still amount to having 'stooped'. And this is something the Duke would not permit himself to do on any account. He hastens to assure the envoy that she was fond of him for she smiled at him whenever he passed. But because of his extreme consciousness of his exclusive name he could not tolerate the fact that she smiled at others as well. As this increased, he gave the necessary commands so that her smiles may be stopped forever. Did he have her shut up in a convent, as Browning has suggested elsewhere? Or did he have her killed? What is your reaction to this cruelty? Is the Duke mad or is he just a proud and jealous husband?

After having narrated the fate of his unfortunate erstwhile wife, the Duke once more turns to the portrait with the eye of a connoisseur. He then requests his guest to rise so that they may rejoin the company assembled downstairs. But before they join the others, the Duke shrewdly mentions the point he wishes to make. He hopes that the envoy's generous master will be able to meet his demands for the dowry he hopes to receive on marrying his daughter. But ever one for propriety and decorum the Duke states that it is not for dowry that he is contemplating marriage but because he is fully impressed with the merits of the Count's daughter. At this point the envoy probably falls a step behind to allow the Duke to descend first. The Duke graciously insists on their going down side by side. As they walk down, the Duke draws the envoy's attention to a rare bronze statue of Neptune, taming a seahorse that had been cast by the famous sculptor Claus of Innsbruck. What do you think is the symbolic significance of Neptune taming the sea horse? Does the poet suggest that the Duke had by now 'tamed' the envoy? Or is it the usual habit of the Duke to tame all—envoys as well as wives, past and future?

4.4.2 Poetic Devices

The versification of the poem is marked by freedom of flow. The lines are arranged in rhyming couplets such as aa bb cc and so on. But these are not closed couplets which carry a complete thought or feeling. On the other hand, one line continues into the next line. This is thus an open couplet and the technique is called **enjambment**. This is more appropriate because the monologue form demands an unbroken flow of thought processes. It also caters to the digressions that are a necessary feature of thinking aloud. For example, if we look at the first two lines, we notice that while 'wall' and 'call' rhyme, the sense of 'I call' is only completed in the middle of the next

line. The meter varies in different lines. But even so the rhythm is calm and stately, much in keeping with the character of the speaker.

Another element that recurs in Browning's poetry, as we have noticed, is alliteration. For example, 'Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt. When'er I passed her; but who passed without much the same smile?' are not only musical but also stress the frequency of the offending smiles and the concomitant irritation that they caused. The voice of the Duke almost turns to a venomous hiss that leads to his sinister commands. Can you pick out some more examples of alliteration? It is important to remember that the elements of poetic expression like rhyme, rhythm, metre, alliteration are not an end in themselves. These elements have an artistic significance only in so far as they are an embodiment of the poet's thought. Therefore, when we pick out a poetic device we must be able to say in which way it helps the poet's thought, feeling and overall design.

Also notice the diction in this poem. By using words such as countenance, munificence, forsooth and durst, the poet has created an atmosphere of a bygone age, Renaissance Italy in this case. The Duke speaks in an ironical tone whenever he refers to his last Duchess. '... she smiled, no doubt, Whene'er I passed her, but who passed without much the same smile?' His exclusive breeding and social finesse are evident in his reference to her death as 'Then all smiles stopped together'. The speech is terse—not a single word can be removed without affecting the whole poem. There are sudden transitions, changes of mood and shifts in argument induced by the silent envoy. These not only help to generate an impression of a realistic portrayal, but they also reveal the character not only of the Duke but also of the Duchess whom he wishes to denigrate.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Pick out the words and phrases that convey the Duke's arrogance. Does he refer to his dead wife's beauty? Is he aware of his crime? What is your attitude towards him? Does he evoke sympathy, respect, or hatred?

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- ii) Do you think that the Duke's speech is an indirect threat to his next wife? If so, give reasons to support your answer.

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- iii) Briefly describe the characters of the Duke and Duchess from your reading of 'My Last Duchess'.

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- iv) Explain with reference to the context the following lines:

- a) That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; **Fra Pandolf's** hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
- b) She had A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
- c) Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.
- d) Notice **Neptune**, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which **Claus of Innsbruck** cast in bronze for me!

(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied Browning's famous dramatic monologue, 'My Last Duchess' that provides a glimpse into the warped mind of a sixteenth century Italian Duke. We have also talked about Browning's poetic techniques that make the experience of his poetry so memorable. We have given you some questions on reference to the context, which you should attempt in all seriousness.

4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The Duke's arrogance is conveyed by the following words and phrases:
- 'She thanked men----good! but thanked
Somehow---I know not how---as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift'.
'... I choose
Never to stoop.'
'... I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together ...'

The Duke does not refer to his wife's beauty but only to its representation, commenting on the painter's expertise.

The Duke is totally unaware of his crime or else he would not refer to his wife's murder simply as 'I gave commands. Then all smiles stopped together' Is the man perverted? His cold-blooded attitude can hardly fail to evoke a feeling of disgust in the reader.

- ii) The Duke's monologue certainly lays down the code of behaviour that he expects from any woman that he condescends to marry. A veiled threat lurks under his words.
- iii) In outlining the Duke's character, we hope you've included the following traits: his extreme arrogance; his cold-bloodedness; intolerance; greed; love for art, hatred of spontaneous feeling, politeness, and ruthless power.

The Duchess seems to be an innocent young girl; easily pleased; simple; easily impressed; unaware of her husband's proud lineage; full of life.

- iv) For all the four reference to the context stanzas, (a, b, c and d) you need to refer to the hints that we have given you in Unit 2 point 2.6. Please attempt these reference questions seriously as these are important from the point of view of examinations.

