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Reflection of Victorian Age in Browning's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: The Victorian Age lasted from 1837 to 1901, Queen Victoria lived from 1837 to 1901. This era continued the romantic ideals of promoting love and nature. However, scientific advances social upheavals seen around the world had a profound effect on literature. There was greater use of political and social themes as well as many attempts to educate the populous. Scientific discoveries that seemed to refute certain religious beliefs inspired many writers to conquer the topics of faith and truth in their works. This era saw significant advances in nonfiction works and the invention of the modern novel. The poetry of this period was a direct reflection of the popular attitudes of the time. Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote poetry that dealt with all of the hot topics of the era. His poems were both lyrical and mechanical in their structure. Conversely, Robert Browning was noted for his harsh style and cerebral subject matter.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Age, social upheavals, religious beliefs, Science, poetry, faith, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era of the United Kingdom refers to Queen Victoria's rule which began in 1837 and concluded in 1901. Under the rule of Queen Victoria, the British people enjoyed a long period of prosperity. Profits gained from the overseas British Empire, as well as from industrial improvement at home, allowed a large, educated middle class to develop. Some scholars would extend the beginning of the period as defined by a variety of sensibilities and political concerns that have come to be associated with the Victorians - back five years to the passage of Reform Act 1832.

economic, industrial and scientific changes that occurred during her reign were remarkable. When Victoria ascended to the throne, Britain was primarily agrarian and rural (though it was even then the most industrialized country in the world); upon her death, the country was highly industrialized and connected by an expansive railway network. The first decades of Victoria's reign witnessed a series of epidemics (typhus and cholera, most notably), crop failures and economic collapses. There were riots over enfranchisement and the repeal of the Corn Laws, which had been established to protect British agriculture during the Napoleonic Wars in the early part of the 19th century.

Discoveries by Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin began to examine centuries of the assumptions about humanity and the world, about science and history and finally, about religion and philosophy. As the country grew increasingly connected by an expansive network of railway lines, small, previously isolated communities were exposed and entire economies shifted as cities became more and more accessible.

The period is often characterized as a long period of peace and economic, colonial, and industrial consolidation, temporarily disrupted by the Crimean War, although Britain was at war every year during this period. Towards the end of the century, the policies of New Imperialism led to increasing colonial conflicts and eventually the Anglo-Zanzibar War and the Boer War. Domestically, the agenda was increasingly liberal with a number of shifts in the direction of gradual political reform and the widening of the franchise.

In the early part of the era the House of Commons was dominated by the two parties, the Whigs and the Tories. From the late 1850s onwards, the Whigs became the Liberals even as the Tories became known as the conservatives. Many prominent statesmen led one or other of the parties, including Lord Melbourne, Sir Robert Peel, Lord Derby, Lord Palmerston, Villam Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Salisbury. The unsolved problems relating to Irish Home Rule played a great part in politics in the later Victorian era, particularly in view of Gladstone's determination to achieve a political settlement.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTORIAN AGE

Amid the multitude of social and political forces of this great age, four things stand out clearly. First, the long struggle of the Anglo-Saxons for personal liberty is definitely settled, and democracy becomes the established order of the day.

Second, because it is an age of democracy, it is an age of popular education of religious tolerance of growing brotherhood and of profound social unrest.



Third, because it is an age of democracy and education, it is an age of comparative peace. England begins to think less of the pomp and false glitter of fighting and more of its moral evils, as the nation realizes that it is the common people who bear the burden and the sorrow and the poverty of war, while the privilege classes reap most of the financial and political rewards.

Fourth, the Victorian age is especially remarkable because of its rapid progress in all the arts and sciences and in mechanical inventions. All of the aforementioned characteristics had a great reflection in Robert Browning's poetry.

III. REFLECTION OF VICTORIAN AGE IN BROWNING'S POETRY

Robert Browning (1812 - 1889) was especially noted for perfecting the dramatic monologue. Browning was born in Camberwell and was largely self-taught. In 1846, he married fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett. He wrote many plays that were unsuccessful. Following his wife's death, he wrote *Dramatis Personae* which were considered to be his masterpiece. Although his wife's reputation as a poet was greater than his own during his lifetime, Robert Browning today is considered one of the Victorian era. He is most famous for the development of the dramatic monologue, for his psychological insight and for his forceful, colloquial poetic style. We're not very familiar with his work, but he comes highly recommended by stuffy English teachers everywhere.

Browning established his eminence among Victorian poets with four volumes published over a period of twenty years in mid-century. *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* were followed by two additional collections of short poems: *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864). In the ensuing discussion no attempt is made to adhere to the chronological order of these four collections. The fact that for the edition of his poems in 1863 Browning retained the original titles of his first three volumes of short pieces, but completely redistributed their contents is evidence enough that he did not attach any significance to dates of composition within this body of work.

Browning's fame today rests mainly on his dramatic monologues, in which the words not only convey setting and action but also reveal the speaker's character. Unlike a soliloquy, the meaning in a Browning dramatic monologue is not what the speaker directly reveals but what he inadvertently "gives away" about himself in the process of rationalizing past actions or "special pleading" his case to a silent auditor in the poem. Rather than thinking out loud, the character composes a self-defense which the reader, as "juror" is challenged to see through. Browning chooses some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally psychotic characters, no doubt for the challenge of building a sympathetic case for a character who doesn't deserve one and to cause the reader to squirm at the temptation to acquit a character who may be a homicidal psychopath. One of his more sensational monologues (though not a dramatic monologue, by definition) is "Porphyria's Lover". The opening lines provide a sinister setting for the macabre events that follow. It is plain that the speaker is insane, as he strangles his lover with her own hair to try and preserve forever the moment of perfect love, she has shown him.

Yet it is by carefully reading the far more sophisticated and cultivated rhetoric of the aristocratic and civilized Duke of "My Last Duchess" perhaps the most frequently cited example of the poet's dramatic monologue form, that the attentive reader discovers the most horrific example of a mind totally mad despite its eloquence in expressing itself.

Ironically, Browning's style, which seemed modern and experimental to Victorian readers, owes much to his love of the seventeenth century poems of John Donne with their abrupt openings, colloquial phrasing and irregular rhythms. But he remains too much the prophet-poet and descendant of Percy Shelley to settle for the conceits, puns and verbal play of the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. He is a modern sensibility, all too aware of the arguments against the vulnerable position of one of his simple characters, who recites: "God's in His Heaven; All's right with the world". Browning endorses such a position because he sees an immanent deity that, far from remaining in a transcendent heaven, is indivisible from temporal process assuring that in the fullness of theological time there is ample cause for celebrating life. Browning's is assuredly at once the most incarnate and dynamic of deities, in Christianity and perhaps in any of the world's great religions.

Browning invented the dramatic monologue, particularly that form of it in which the speaker does not represent the poet and therefore, his statements were certainly not those that the poet himself believed. Accustomed to taking it for granted that the first-person speaker was either the poet or his idealized persona, audiences did not know what to do when they encountered the homicidal maniac of "Porphyria's Lover" and the even more terrifying Duke in "My Last Duchess". It's as hard to over-estimate the importance of this point as it is even to realize it after so many years of teaching Browning in secondary schools as an exercise in close reading: Early and mid-Victorian readers simply had no clue what to do first when encountering a speaker in a poem who did not serve as an obvious stand-in for the author and whose statements therefore had to be received with skepticism or at least reservation of judgment. If this statement



doesn't seem obvious, go back to those two famous Browning dramatic monologues and take note of the point at which your first realized you could not trust the speakers. Browning as contemporary anecdotes demonstrate, was simply unreadable for most in his intended audience: all biographies of Browning tell the story of a well-known person who was given a copy of Browning's admittedly difficult *Paracelsus* while recovering from an illness; horrified by the fact that he could not understand the poem at all, the invalid thought that the illness had destroyed his mind and was considering suicide until others assured him they couldn't understand it either. On such grouping, it has been suggested, would include all those characters whose ways of life are conditioned by some clearly defined set of conventions. Superficially dissimilar though they are *My Last Duchess* and *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* present versions of a single conflict. Just as the duke in the former is motivated in all he does by punctilious pride of rank, so the hypocritical friar who soliloquizes in the second poem appeals to the minutiae of religious observance. And just as the dead duchess in her childlike response to all innocent pleasures unknowingly made a mockery of her husband's ceremoniousness, so Brother Lawrence's every spontaneous action criticizes religious formalism. In both poems the central irony grows out of the fact that the speaker damns himself in endeavoring to cast discredit on his unsuspecting adversary.

So, in poem after poem representing every kind of career, the protagonist must make his decision between the practical inducements to worldly success and lonely integrity of spirit. The Lost Leader, who sold out "just for a handful of silver ... just for a riband to stick in his coat", stands in telling contrast to the Italian in England who, even in exile, remains loyal to the patriot's dream.

Browning's intuitionism announces itself most ardently when he writes about love, this being a subject which he handles with greater candor and penetration than any other poet of the early and mid-victorian periods. It is not hard to understand why he should have thought the experience of love so important.

IV. CONCLUSION

such as democracy, social unrest, the ideal of peace and arts and sciences had a profound reflection in Robert Browning's poetry. Robert is perhaps best-known for his dramatic monologue technique. In his monologues, he spoke in the voice of an imaginary or historical character. Robert had a fondness for people who lived during the Renaissance. Most of his monologues portray persons at dramatic moments in their lives. Browning obviously did not only write dramatic monologues, functioning mostly as love letters in verse to Elizabeth Barrett (who is also famous for answering to her poetic husband in the same manner. Browning composed a lot of epistle-poems about Shelley, his main inspirer ("The Lost Leader" or "Memorabilia") who is also behind the monologue "How it strikes a contemporary", about the figure of the poet rendered as the imaginary poet of Valladolid (who may be Browning himself as a Shelleyan mouthpiece). He wrote another set of culture-tinged nature poems with Italy in the background or the foreground ("Home-Thoughts, from Abroad", "Home Thoughts, from the Sea"). But most importantly, Browning is one of the best and interesting modern Christian poets, being equally dramatic and eccentric in matters of Christianity as in his approach to the other branches of (cultural) life.

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