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Romantic Sensibility in the Major Poems of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson

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Abstract:

Like William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats and P.B. Shelley, Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson loved nature from the depth of heart and painted several pictures of the objects of nature with words. They too were highly imaginative though they had their legs on earth. They attached due importance to their emotions, feelings and passions and wrote appealing lyrics spontaneously. They were highly subjective in many poems as they failed to suppress their personal emotions. At times Tennyson mixed natural and supernatural objects. Like Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley, they wanted to establish a new society based on love, equality and fraternity. Tennyson won popularity in his life time though many poems of Browning were analyzed and illustrated by scholars in 20th century to establish his reputation. The validity of their works can't be questioned today inspite of a lot of unhealthy criticism against them. Their place is safe among the luminaries of world artists.

Keywords: Romantic, Sensibility, poems, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson.

Introduction:

The period from 1798 to 1832 is known as the age of Romantic Revival and Renaissance of Wonder. The period from 1832 to 1900 is regarded as Victorian Age or the Age of Compromise between reason and faith. The Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, John Keats, P.B. Shelley,

Lord Byron, Robert Southey etc. were great lovers of nature and found the presence of gods and goddesses in various natural objects. They were highly imaginative and attached importance to their emotions, feelings and passions. In other words, they were highly subjective. As they mixed natural and supernatural elements, their poems are remarkable for 'addition of strangeness to beauty'. Like Neo-Classical poets Alexander Pope and Dr. Johnson, they also learnt a lot from ancient poets of Greece and Rome, such as Homer, Virgil, Horace, Pindar, Dante, Lucretius, Theocritus, Ovid, etc. and revived lyric, ode, ballad and epic. William Wordsworth attached importance to spontaneity, emotions, recollection and tranquility. Apart from being lovers of Nature, they didn't close their eyes to hard realities of life and had soft corner for poor people and the rustics. Poets of this school were highly sensuous and often took inspiration from Greek tales and mythology. Romanticism is often regarded as 'liberalism in literature' as the romantic poets were not rigid in content as well as form. Of course, they expressed their thoughts in blank verse. But satire is not their tool. They identified beauty with truth, joy and power and like Greeks, loved grand architecture and sculpture. The contemporary French Revolution (1789) influenced their ideology and hence they advocated equality, liberty and fraternity. At times they had melancholy mood and felt disgusted with contemporary system. Yet they hoped for bright future of mankind as P.B. Shelley advocated: 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' (WW) Many lines of their poems are lyrical and hence readers recite them in their leisure hours.

Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson are regarded Victorian poets and their poems are full of Neo-Classical features as they advocate the need of good sense in life like Alexander Pope and Dr. Johnson. Yet they have an urge for liberty like Rousseau and really return to nature. Like John Keats, they have painted pictures of nature with words and can be regarded great pictorial artists. In the poem *The Princess*, Tennyson paints the pictures of the castles of king and that of women's college run by the Princess Ida. In this poem Tennyson describes the beautiful gardens that are found on all the four sides of the college. A new approach has been adopted by the Princess as she wants to give higher education to the girls in subjects of science and commerce. Tennyson accepts the concept of

change and advocates it in *Passing of Arthur*. 'Old order changeth yielding place to new.' In *The Idylls of The King* the emotions, feelings and passions of Arthur, Sir Lancelot, Guinevere, Enid, Sir Bedivere etc. have been described in details. The poet creates the medieval atmosphere of S.T. Coleridge's poems *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel* in *Idylls of The King*, *The Princess* etc. Adventures of Knights have been described minutely. In the book entitled *Romanticism* Lilian R. Frust remarks :

The vital changes that led up to the emergence of the Romantic Movement in literature occurred not with the appearance of the word as a term of literary criticism, but with the deep-seated modification of attitudes that evolved in the course of 18th century. For the term 'romantic' and the associated words 'originality' 'creation' and 'genius' could only come to the fore as a result of the basic re-orientation of human values that affected not only styles of writing but the total view of man and nature. (R 14)

S.A. Brooke's criticism of the poems of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning is in the above-mentioned light. He finds originality in the works of these two poets as they didn't totally survive in the utopian and imaginative world of art alone but dealt with the realities of life of 19th century. They modified the attitude of Victorian people with their touching poems and inspired them to adopt positive values of life. They don't confine themselves to the improbable world of fairies and demons and hence created a real world of musicians, artists, kings, queens, labourers, Haves and Have-Nots that they had observed in society.

S.A. Brooke admires Tennyson for his simplicity, clarity and directness of expression in the first chapter of his book *Tennyson His Art and Relation to Modern Life*. There is no denying the fact that Tennyson accepted Christian life in his personal life too. Both the poets inspire the readers to think seriously of the mercy of God. They inspire the readers to take it for granted that soul is immortal. It is body that dies with death as soul makes another beginning with new life. Only the animals and fools live for the physical pleasures and

satisfaction as scholars have to think of the validity of mercy, generosity, noble actions, righteousness, fortitude, right philosophy, right conduct, bright future of mankind, questions of future etc. They answer the questions relating to life. For example, Tennyson's *Ulysses* wants to bring new knowledge for the people of Ithaca. Even in old age he prepares himself for a life of adventures so that he may remove the difference between ignorance and knowledge. He has always lived for the welfare of his people. It is true that he has taken part in several battles so far and yet new light attracts him. Resting is rusting for him. Many Victorian merchants established trade relations outside England and managed several industries in the country. They remained busy in converting matter into matter and performed their duties as perfect men. Their poems have got to be admired for 'brightness of thought' and compact imagination. Browning and Tennyson have got to be admired for their clear thoughts, expressed in simple language. Regarding the clear poems of Tennyson S.A. Brooke remarks:

The invention, the pictures, the arrangement and colouring of the things wrought on the web were variable in excellence, but the stuff was uniform ... the workmanship is curiously level from youth to age; and that kind of simplicity has also its roots in character ... (TAR 11)

Like Lord Krishna, these two poets are never afraid of Death, the end of physical life means death. Death, the end of life of this physical world, means the beginning of a new life for the soul. In the poem *Rabbi Ben Ezra* Robert Browning asserts that God is 'potter' and soul is 'clay' and both of them 'endure' forever. In *Evelyn Hope* the lover hopes to be united with his beloved in the next world and gap of age does not make any difference for him. In *Idylls of The King* King Arthur forgives his unfaithful Queen and hopes to get her love in the next life. In *Crossing the Bar* Tennyson is prepared to begin his next journey after death. Like the hero of Browning's *Prospice*, he has ever been a fighter and hence ready to fight against death. Yet these poets don't support a life of inaction and passivity. Even old age is glorified by them in *Ulysses* and *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.

S.A. Brooke feels hurt as Tennyson had no sympathy for the down-trodden people of his times. These poor people suffered a lot during war-time as new taxes were imposed upon them. Yet Tennyson continued to glorify the growing materialism and industrialization of his times. The rich people remained selfish in times of crisis but S.A. Brooke feels sympathy for these innocent sufferers. In spite of Tennyson's poem *Locksley Hall*, the learned critic fails to understand as to why Tennyson remained ignorant of the sufferings of the poor.

In his lectures on the poems of Tennyson and Browning S.A. Brooke expresses the fact that these two poets analyzed the causes of the growing tensions and frustrations of Victorian people. The contemporary people were mad for material gains as there was no limit to their physical desires. S.A. Brooke says that it is not bad to have positive desires for growth and progress. But it is certainly disastrous to become extremely crazy for the fulfilment of one's particular ambitions. Due to the growth of industries people had unlimited desires for gold, silver and material assets. They felt tense and frustrated when their ambitions could not be fulfilled. New desires were born just after the fulfilment of previous desires and this cycle never ended. People felt a lot of pride when certain ambitions were fulfilled and regarded their struggle as grand success. Often they thanked their good luck for earthly success. But Tennyson and Browning reminded readers that the working of divine will can't be ignored at any cost. The whole system works with the Divine Will and nothing is beyond His Will. Let people thank God for their success. Let him control his uncontrolled material desires as the same are responsible for his sufferings. In the poem *The Princess* every character has his/her earthly ambitions. Same is the case with most of the people as mentioned in Browning's poems. The vanity of wishes has got to be accepted as the same leads to pain. Most of the people are highly ignorant of the hard realities of life and yet possess wishes which can't be easily fulfilled. Both the poets tell people that this earthly world is not real. Spirituality is the final truth. Men should struggle for positive values and survive in the ethical world. How can fulfilment of earthly desires provide real joy in the absence of truth, non-violence, righteousness and right conduct? Why to work in a manner that creates anger in human heart? Every one has to accept the validity

of detachment while living in this world. Many glamorous things do exist in this material world and they have got to be neglected for eternal bliss. Tennyson and Browning gave positive moral philosophy to define wisdom, prudence and right conduct and this is the reason that S.A. Brooke admires their poems.

S.A. Brooke admires the poem *The Idylls Of The King* as its basic theme is the victory of tolerance against intolerance. King Arthur wants to get rid of daily tensions though he knows about his Queen's relations with the Knight Lancelot. He does not desert her due to his extreme tolerance power. Had he not tolerated Queen's conduct with Sir Lancelot, he would have personally suffered a lot of tensions in his personal life. At the same time Sir Lancelot does not quarrel with King Arthur and departs from the royal palace peacefully. His beloved Queen also takes shelter in a monastery to lead a peaceful and ethical life with nuns. It is never too late to mend one's ways. When people develop the quality of tolerance, they solve major problems of life. Tolerance is opposed to anger, hatred and malice. It is a great positive moral virtue that suppresses negative thoughts. In *The Idylls Of The King*, the ethical purpose of the poet is very clear. All the actions of King Arthur are based upon his positive approach to life. He is far above the struggle between negative and positive values. His tolerance shows his moral strength and maturity of thought. Lancelot, Queen and King Arthur don't fall a prey to pride due to their mutual tolerance. They now feel the pleasures of the theory of co-existence and humility. Tolerance is a quality that awakens intellectual wisdom in a person and protects him from useless tensions. King Arthur maintains a balance between sorrows and joys of life due to his tolerance.

The question arises — What is the basis of non-violence, optimism and hope? Every wise fellow knows that violence creates problems and does not solve major conflicts of life. Same approach has been preached by Tennyson in the poem *The Princess* though Ida realizes it a bit late. Violence paves the way for a life of discomforts and enmities. It creates violent feelings in one's heart regularly. As a wise man King Arthur controls his anger against the Queen and Sir Lancelot. Intolerance is the root cause of many things that we don't digest in life. It continues to disturb us mentally. So Tennyson aptly regards tolerance as

the synonym of non-violence and then wins admiration of his courtiers. Why to pollute one's life with hatred and violence and pride? Many civilizations got devastated due to intolerance. Many healthy traditions get uprooted due to violence. Same lesson has been advocated by Browning in his poems with the help of various Bishops.

Nucleus:

S.A. Brooke admires the various characters of Tennyson and Robert Browning due to their zeal, enthusiasm, zest for life and spirit of struggle against the oddities of life. Like Prospero and Ulysses, they are ever prepared to struggle in life and don't blame the situation due to oddities of life. Due to their faith in the infinite mercy and generosity of God, they struggle and come with flying colours. In *The Princess* almost all the characters believe: 'let the past be past ... A trumpet in the distance pealing news of better and hope ... (P) Princess Ida aptly believes in the 'hues of promise'. She also hopes for the bright future against all oddities. She hopes to establish a new society with self-illumination and sense of awakening with the help of new education to women. In the poem *Enoch Arden*, the heroine does not lose interest in life even after the departure of her husband against her desires. She accepts the proposal of her lover and starts leading a life of joy and prosperity. Philip's house gives her all the pleasures of life and she soon forgets the gloominess of her previous home. Enoch finally decides to give up his interest in wife Annie and his children.

Similarly, King Ulysses hopes to discover new unknown lands even in old age and regards homely life dull and boring. He plans to strive and struggle even now as life is another name for adventure. Hopeful people find opportunities for success and don't surrender before problems. The major characters of Tennyson and Browning are not weak and hence don't surrender before hurdles. They hope to be rewarded by God for their courage and heroic life, S.A. Brooke admires their poems boldly. An important question arises here — Were these two poets not torchbearers for the people? The answer is in affirmative.

Like Plato, Browning and Tennyson accepted that noble ideas are the source of self-illumination and social growth. Men are nothing if they don't have lofty thoughts. Grand thoughts strike the scholars and they develop them for the regular development of society. People accept the grandeur of their thoughts and then lead a noble life. Of course, the purity of thoughts is most essential because negative thoughts create a dark society full of pessimism. Dark as well as bright thoughts visit human mind and the nobility of noble mind lies in trusting the sublime thoughts. Browning and Tennyson controlled their dark thoughts and inspired people to think and act on right lines. They asked people to trust the infinite mercy and generosity of omniscient God. They asserted that God is potter and soul is clay and the process of soul's creation goes on forever. As a matter of fact many complex thoughts come to the mind of scholar too. He is superb when he comes out of the spider's net and leads a pure life with his lofty thoughts. Pessimists become the victim of their gloomy thoughts and lead a life of despair. One of the artists of Robert Browning got bored in the monastery as he painted soul every day. As he peeps out of the window, he feels interested in the real life of the street and then deserts the monastery. So, real life is watched by a real artist. In the poems on *Poet* Tennyson mentions the function of a grand poet and his dedication to society. S.A. Brooke admires Tennyson's poems on poet. Let everybody listen to the dictates of his soul and perform noble deeds. In the poem *Two Voices* Tennyson asserts that suicide is no solution to the problems of life. After all everybody must see the evolution of society. New developments are definitely expected in a changing society in future. These two poets inspired the readers to give a practical shape to their thoughts. For example, a single grand thought may create a revolution in society. Rousseau gave the theory — 'Man is born free and yet finds himself in chains?' This idea paved the way for the popularity of the slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity. There is no denying the fact that the personality of a person depends upon his thoughts. Good thoughts carry people towards righteousness, gratitude, nobility, mercy, illumination and awakening. Many stanzas from *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Ulysses* can be quoted here to confirm this theory. Of course, one has to struggle to achieve the goal of life.

It is an accepted fact now — If Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson had not written lofty poems, the 21st century would have a time of intellectual poverty. Existence on earth would have been dull without their grand thoughts. After all they made serious efforts to revive the faith of people in spiritual and ethical values. In the poem *The Last Ride Together* Browning refers to the superiority of love in comparison to political contribution, poetic creation, sculpture and music. Yet the utility and supremacy of creativity can't be ignored at any cost. In every poem these two poets develop a new idea and establish the validity of that idea properly. In the poem *Ulysses* Tennyson aptly asserts that new knowledge is as essential as the spirit of adventure. In the poem *Lotos Eaters* he condemns the theory of excessive work though he does not condemn work at all. In the poem *Tithonus* he condemns human folly of becoming immortal without eternal youth. In the poem *Two Voices* he establishes the utility of life on earth inspite of human problems and sufferings. In the poem *The Princess* he gives his advanced theory that female education is equally important for advancement and human progress. In *Enoch Arden* he describes the misery of a young man who deserts his wife and children for material gains. Importance of domestic love is described here in a pathetic manner. In the poem *St. Simon Stylites* he mentions the hard realities of life and tells people the importance of divine mercy.

Conclusion:

While analyzing the validity of the poems of Browning and Tennyson, a few questions arise such as — What is the importance of New York without the Statue of Liberty? What is importance of Washington D.C. without the statue of Abraham Lincoln? Is Greece not remembered for its poets like Homer and Pindar? Is Rome not regarded great due to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*? Do the people not visit Rome for its Catholic Church? What is London without the Globe Theatre? Is France complete without Rousseau's *The Confessions*? Is India dignified without *The Vedas, The Upanishads, The Ramayana, The Mahbharata, The Gita* etc? The people of the world keep the books of grand authors with full respect and devotion and this habit will continue even in future. Society is rich so long as authors write novels, epics, plays, poems etc. Still, the general people

expect a lot of new discoveries from the scientists. No society can make progress if inventions are not made. People attach importance to the creativity of Browning and Tennyson as they inspired readers for a healthy, prosperous, dynamic and positive life and make efforts to suppress their negative thoughts. The artists like Tennyson and Browning had a lot of time full of emotional unrest, turmoil as life was not easy for them. Yet they didn't surrender before the hurdles of their way. Their poems still inspire us to get rid of emotional stress, tensions, dementia and lead a life of hope. So, they can be put in the category of romantic poets.

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