

## **LORD TENNYSON**

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. As a matter of fact, 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 time. He was studiously following 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 first doubts in the realm of religion. Tennyson felt the emotional tremors of the people of his age. His poems document their anxiety; but Tennyson could also instill faith as he himself mastered a personal crisis and remained devoted to creativity. This balance is characteristic of his poetry and is also a great contribution to the Victorian age.

## **THE VICTORIAN AGE**

Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837 and introduced such economic and political measures, with the aid of her astute ministers that England was at the zenith of development. She did not hesitate in ending the monopoly of merchants – the old *laissez – faire* policy was replaced by just intervention and close scrutiny of market trends by state. The major industries of coal, iron, textiles and railway building continued to flourish. There were other European competitors like Germany, France and Belgium. But England left them far behind. Many new machines and gadgets were either invented by British scientists or perfected by them. Bicycle, camera, electric light and telephone not only made life comfortable for Britishers; they gave rise to new industries that considerably enhanced British exports and income. The rise of Limited Liability Companies was a new thing. It ended the monopoly of one-family firms; on the other hand, it gave birth to a new era of capitalism in which the British middle class had a definite share. These companies were managed by Board of Directors; but any individual might become a shareholder. Common people cultivated the habit of investing in industrial stock and a few depended entirely on the dividends from industry. The picture did not remain so bright for long. A series of conflicts jeopardized the Victorian peace and prosperity – there were troubles in Canada and India. However, Queen Victoria emerged stronger and her policies proved to be a mixture of toughness and liberality. The Sepoy Mutiny in India in 1857 compelled the queen to be sensitive to the demands of justice and trust. She rose to the challenge and in her proclamation in 1858 promised “It is our further will that so far as may be, our

subjects of whatever class or creed, be fully and freely admitted to any offices the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, abilities and integrity duly to discharge.” The assertion of her independence and fairness is evident in this. The presence of such a wise queen together with long strides in commerce and industry made the Victorian age one of the best ages for the English people. They enjoyed peace at home, their children got the best of education and they had a healthy social life. They worked hard; they had a grasp of the affairs of the world; they were constantly modifying technology for better communication and facilities. And they remained deeply religious. Yet the most serious crisis of the Victorian times occurred in the realm of religion. So far science had not disturbed their faith. But the publication of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, 1830 and of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, 1859 altered the scene. Charles Lyell only studied the fossils and spoke of the great antiquity of Creation; Darwin accepted it and accounted on its basis for the differentiation of animal species by theory of Natural Selection. This was in direct conflict with the story of creation given in *The Book of Genesis*. A storm rose and shook Christianity by roots. The Victorian intellectuals and writers, poets and novelists could not ignore the scientific basis of the theory of evolution propounded by Darwin. Faith was tinged with doubt; an attitudinal change had occurred, best expressed by Tennyson –

There remains more faith in honest doubt  
Believe me than in half the creeds.

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.’

## **THE POET AND HIS WORKS**

Alfred Tennyson was born in August 1809 in Lincolnshire where his father was a rector. It is said that the rectory had an enchanting landscape that moulded the aesthetic taste of Tennyson. Not only did he take in the beautiful topography of his birth place, he tried to compose lines that could match the sights and the sounds that he experienced as a child and as a young man. Tennyson’s father had an academic bent of mind. He made the young boy learn Latin and Greek classics seriously. So when Tennyson came to Cambridge University in 1828 he had sufficient intellectual training to cope with the studies and other challenges of the legendary educational institution. In Cambridge Tennyson became intimate with Arthur Hallam, the son of the eminent historian. Later on Mr. Hallam was engaged to Tennyson’s sister; he died, however, in Vienna on a trip with his father. Tennyson had already written poems that won distinction. But the death of Arthur Hallam shattered him. For some

time he was dumb with grief and melancholy. Yet in this period he found poetic composition as a means of psychic relief. He composed short lyrics as his moods dictated him. This continued for a couple of years and the result was *In Memoriam*, a great elegiac poem. The poem is supposed to reflect not only the intense personal sorrow of the poet, but also to represent the chief conflict of the Victorian age – the conflict between science and religion. The fact that Tennyson could transcend his personal losses and think in a systematic way about the larger concerns and issues of his age is of singular importance. It gives Tennyson's poetry a lasting appeal. The classical training that his father imparted to him remained a principal stimulus to Tennyson's poetic life. 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.

In 1850 Tennyson succeeded as the Poet Laureate and continued to publish poems some of which have political themes. Extensive travels in England and Europe – Holland, Belgium and Switzerland and – further sharpened his vision. He was able to think in a practical manner since he had first-hand experience of social, political and economic changes. After a fulfilled life of a prolific poet he died in 1892 at the age of 83.

#### Major Works

Poems, Chiefly Lyrical 1830

The Lady of Shallott and other poems 1832

The Princess 1847

In Memoriam 1847

Maud and other Poems 1855

Enoch Arden 1864

Locksley Hall Sixty Years After 1886

The Idylls of the King 1888

## ULYSSES

Ulysses is also known as Odysseus. He was a king of Ithaca and he participated in the Greek war against Troy. After the siege of Troy he was returning home along with a number of soldiers in a ship. But he had angered Poseidon who, in turn, caused tempests and many obstructions that forced Ulysses to wander to many places. His wife Penelope and his son Telemachus were anxiously waiting for his arrival. In fact, Telemachus had already left home in search of his father. 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 has now 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.

The poem begins with the early formulations of thoughts of Ulysses as he nears Ithaca. His memory of his wife, country and his people is clearer – he sees his wife now as an old woman; his own country not so flourishing as he left; and he is quite unhappy with his subjects whose life is centered in physical and material pleasures. He cannot imagine himself now becoming part of this listless scene in his country. It is true that he has suffered; but what he has seen by way of people and civilizations has filled him with great curiosity – he has learnt much that has transformed him from a mere king and a fighter to a man who wishes to understand the forces of this creation. He has met all classes of beings, peculiar men, gods and goddesses and this experience has already enriched him. He cannot think of being settled in a place and taking care of mundane things. He fondly remembers the things that he has seen and thinks of his personality as being moulded by them all. Has he seen all? He is convinced that this universe does not allow any body to see all – it is so constructed that only a part of the vast universe can come to a man's view. He visualizes his ideas in the form of similes and metaphors – all experience is an arch, to follow knowledge, like a sinking star. The horizon is symbolized in the arch, the visible junction of the earth and the sky. There is a definite hint that this small view is not the full view; its imperfection is quite perceptible. And the sinking star is Ulysses himself, battered by war, age and sundry worries of the world. Yet the task of gathering more and more knowledge seems to him the only proper goal of life. There is a nobility in this craving that sets Ulysses quite apart not only from his subjects but also from other kings who have been interested

in mere territorial conquests. Had it been merely a wish it would not have been of any importance. But the thoughts of Ulysses are backed by determination – he has made up his mind to hand over the rule of the kingdom to his son, Telemachus, in whose abilities he has full confidence; he has also a hope that his subjects may be subdued by Telemachus in due course and their energies could be channelized in the right direction. He is also certain that Telemachus would be fulfilling all religious duties after his death. Finally, he addresses his fellow mariners who have given their best to all his undertakings and exhorts them to seek a newer world. That is, he wants them not to be satisfied with a dull domestic life, but to explore new worlds that would broaden their view of life. He knows very well that they are also getting old like him. But it is better to end this life in the pursuit of greater knowledge than of material happiness.

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 that is willing to devote the whole of his life to exploration. The poem has a dramatic structure – the development of the speech of Ulysses is entirely guided by the progress of his thoughts in course of his journey to Ithaca. The first point is the coming of the landmarks of Ithaca into his sight which stirs his memory; the second point is the rise of a conflict in his mind between his kingly duties and his appetite for knowledge which he acquired in the course of his wanderings; the third forms his decision in the fulfillment of which he seeks cooperation from his mariners. 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.

#### **ULYSSES AS A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE**

The dramatic monologue is a peculiar combination of dramatic properties and poetic faculties with the dramatic quality predominating. The **Victorian Era** (1830-1900), which is known for its objective outlook as opposed to the subjectivity of the **Romantic Age** (1798-1830), manifests itself

in dramatic writings attempted by Browning and others; but cannot come out with success. To dissipate the sense of failure which these writers experience in their drama, they wanted to introduce a new element in English poetry—and the result is a dramatic monologue of which Browning is the champion. Consequently, when Tennyson takes up the poetic form of a dramatic monologue, he is aware of the development in contemporary theatre and often uses subtle nuances of it in his writing. His well-made poem *Ulysses* (through writing completed in 20th October 1833, published in 1842) is a very good example of dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue is a lyrical-dramatic-narrative hybrid. It absorbs an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from the narrative. In a drama, we are familiar with soliloquy and the poetic rendering of this soliloquy is the monologue where the speaker is caught at a crucial moment of life in a certain background. The difference between a monologue a soliloquy is that while the former has a passive listener which is felt from little hints, the later has nothing as such. *Ulysses* is a dramatic monologue: as such, it reads like a speech from Act III of *Hamlet* or Book II of *Paradise Lost*. The monologue takes the form of retrospection; in the poem, Ulysses, the great hero from the Trojan wars, is an old man who, having returned to Ithaca, is looking back upon his Odyssey:

Much have I seen and known

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For on the ringing plain of windy Troy

I am part of all that I have met;

It is Christopher Rick who explains that Tennyson might have read H. F. Cary's translation of *Inferno* and points out that the speaker of the monologue finds himself in a situation more recognizable to Dante's hero. In *Inferno*, Ulysses—who once "explore[d] the world" (H. F. Cray's translation of Dante) and has been living in Ithaca for several years and expresses his desire to travel the world. From this point, Tennyson begins his poem. The first sentence—"It little profits that an idle King"—suggests that Ulysses no longer find worth living retirement life. Therefore, he insists his fellow mariners again for a journey to explore "new things" and accumulate knowledge. What is complex about Ulysses' thought lies in his sustained attempt to arrive at a sense of personal identity in his old age: "who am I now?". Decoded through Ulysses, as such Tennyson is asking himself who he is without Hallam and how he can find the enthusiasm to rise out of his despondency and live the remaining years of his life.

## QUESTIONS

1. How does Ulysses think about his present life (ll. 1-5), his past experience (ll. 7-21), and what life should and should not be like (ll. 22-32)? Why does Ulysses compare himself to "gray spirit" and "a sinking star"?
2. What does Ulysses mean when he said "He works his work, I mine." How does he distinguish his work from his son's?
3. Is Ulysses a dramatic monologue? Give your reasons.