

# The Cutting Age Literature, from Romanticism to Victorian Age: A Study on Victor Hugo and Alfred Tennyson.

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## ABSTRACT

This study compares the features of poetry works of Victor Hugo from the Romantic Movement to those of Alfred Lord Tennyson from the Victorian Age of literature who lived in cutting age of the two periods of literature. These two ages experienced great expansion of industrial and agricultural revolutions, expansion of British as a super power nation with many colonies and the French revolution which to a great extent influenced the writings of these authors. Romanticism style of portraying themes of imagination, natural beauty and individual emotions over reasoning and sense of intellect influenced the poets of the age of Victorian literature though they still addressed the problems of the Victorian age. Both poets composed short and long poems, used description and sentimental styles, used nature metaphorically to create imagery and describe the emotions of appreciating beauty of the nature and reflecting people's struggle in different situations of life.

**Key words:** *Alfred Tennyson, literature of the Romantic period, literature of the Victorian Age, Victor Hugo.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Romantic Movement period of literature dates from 1790 to 1830 in Britain. It was a period of writing, painting and composing music in which feelings imaginations and natural beauty were considered more important than anything else. They were not based on practical and bases of reality. The period reacted to the dominant 18<sup>th</sup> C ideals of order, calm, harmony, balance and rationality (Spiazzi, Tavella & Lytton, 2015, p. 14). Individual emotions were emphasized over reasoning and senses over intellect. Andrew Elfenbein mentions that the period rejected rigid forms and structures of the previous ages of literature instead; it placed great stress on the individual, unique experience of an artist and writer (Elfenbein, 2008, p.54). Romanticism gave great value to nature and deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature

and mystical experience. It was considered idealistic – a belief in greater ideals than materialism and rationalism. Artists too emphasized upon imagination gateway experience and spiritual truth that was beyond ordinary limits. It was preoccupied with a focus on passions and inner struggles. Authors and intellectuals really had a sense of responsibility to their fellow people; therefore, they used poetry to inform and inspire others and to change the society (Elfenbein, 2008, p.54).

On the other hand, the Victorian Age of literature began in 1830 to 1901. Queen Victoria, the daughter of George III ruled Britain under constitutional monarchy, hence the name Victorian Age. It was characterised by the height of the Industrial Revolution, development of science, and the expansion of the British Empire. During the Victorian age, there were a lot of radi-

cal social changes. England was the first industrialized country, but its transformation was painful. She was undergoing tremendous cultural upheavals, the acceptance of art, music and literature had to undergo radical change too to address the situations of this period. In his research, Rekha Devi describes this age as an age of faith and an age of doubt, an age of morality and hypocrisy of prosperity and poverty, of idealism and materialism of progress and decline, of splendor and squalor (Devi, 2016, pp. 28-29). Industrialization of this period brought wealth and influence to England, captured markets all over the globe and developed colonies (Hugh, 1921, pp.15-17).

Therefore, this study is concerned with the literatures of the two periods in Britain, paying attention to the similarities in some poet's their styles of composing poems. Examples will be drawn from the Romantic poet, Victor Hugo who lived across the Romantic Movement age of literature to Victorian age of literature. His poetry works will be compared to those of Alfred Lord Tennyson, a poet from the Victorian Age of literature.

### **The Literature of the Romantic Movement.**

The Romantic authors were interested in nature and in the feelings of man in solitude. Although some scholars and writers focused on the problems brought by industrial revolution<sup>1</sup> and French revolution<sup>2</sup>, to

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<sup>1</sup> The Industrial Revolution as defined by John Foster refers to a series of significant shifts in traditional practices of agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation, as well as the development of new mechanical technologies that took place during the late 18th and 19th centuries in much of the Western world. During this time, the United Kingdom, as well as the rest of Europe and the United States soon after, underwent drastic socio-economic and cultural changes. During the late 18th century, the United Kingdom's economic system of manual and animal based labor shifted toward a system of machine

a large extent, escaped the great social problems of their time and looked at the private world of the imagination finding personal solutions, rejected the neo-classical tradition, opposed and questioned everything of the previous age (Spiazzi, Tavella & Lytton, 2015, p. 15). They chose poetry as the main literary form because it was much linked to spirit and feelings. In his research on industrial revolution and literary imagination, Afreen Sultana mentions that the importance of an individual over social traditional values were exposed by poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, Shelly, Lord Byron who were the famous poets of the era (Sultana, 2016, p. 13). At this age, industries developed very fast and as a result, there emerged problems such as unemployment, poverty, the rise in the price of food and other commodities and poor working conditions in the factories. (Devi, 2016, p. 29, Elfenbein, 2008, p.54, Hamlili, p. 2017, p. 29).

The rise of the French Revolution changed the focus of the poets such as William Wordsworth and Thomas Coleridge. Wordsworth who had first supported

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manufacturing while more readily navigable roads, canals, and railroads for trade began to develop.

<sup>2</sup> The French Revolution as explained by Mohammad Rizwan Shekh was a series of violent political and social upheavals that rocked France between 1789 and 1799. It overthrew the French monarchy and installed a Consulate. The Revolution inaugurated the golden era for mankind in general. Its ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity remained as sources of inspiration for the European Liberals in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. The political thought of Rousseau remained the basis of political democrats of Europe. Rousseau's thought prefiguring the major trends, which were to converge in the Romantic Movement, he glorified nature, including human nature, favored feeling and emotion as against reason and formalism. The Principle of equality as adumbrated during the French Revolution greatly inspired the people all over Europe. Mankind was thought as one brotherhood. Thus, equality became a cardinal principle of social and political thought. Liberty was another significant tenet of the French Revolution. The revolution itself was a revolt against the oppression of the feudal monarchy in France.

French Revolution as the starved, poor and oppressed in France should stand up to overthrow the government; was later shocked by the terror and the rise of Napoleon was suppressing the ideals for which the French Revolution stood. Therefore, Wordsworth abandoned his revolutionary faith and sympathies over the French people, thus he was at that time, torn between two loyalties: his patriotic loyalty to Britain and his humanitarian loyalty to the rights of man. This confusion was treated by Wordsworth in his autobiographical poem, "The Prelude"<sup>3</sup> in great details (Shekh, 2014, p. 1). The wars of America too brought such effects to Britain and in Europe in general.

In addition to Wordsworth, some other authors of this period shifted in their ways of writing so that they could address the social difficulties of the time, including John Keats, P.B. Shelley and Byron (Shekh, 2014, p. 2). Some poets like William Wordsworth emphasized that poetry should be composed in the language spoken by men, no poetic dictions, and for this reason he voiced the silent voices of the marginalized and oppressed such as the rural poor, discharged soldiers, fallen women, the insane and children (Halpin, 2008, pp. 61-63).

William Blake was radical in his political views, frequently addressing social issues in his poems and expressing his concerns about the monarchy and the church. His poem "London" from "Songs of Innocence and Experience" (1794) draws attention to

the injustice of late 18th-century society and the desperation of the poor, suffering of chimney-sweeps, soldiers and prostitutes (Elfenbein, 2008, pp. 57-59). The poem "The Chimney Sweeper", Blake showed how life was being changed by the industries grown all over. A poor little boy was sold by his father because of money to the owner of the chimney. The boy was used to clean it though too young to do any labor work. The biased cruel society was neglecting many child labors like him of that time. The poem introduces this example of the victim of the industrialization that compelled readers to think of the impact of industrialization.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LITERATURE OF THE VICTORIAN AGE**

It's important to mention briefly what happened during the Victorian age so that we can connect the vents to the characteristics of the literature of this age. Victorian period lasted so long and because it was a time of such great change, it is hard to characterize it as a single phase; it was therefore divided in to three phases.

### **Phases in the Victorian Age of Literature**

#### ***The Early Period (1830-1848)***

It was also known as Time of Troubles because the advancement of science, industries and factories were built led to a large number of people to migrate from rural areas to urban areas to search for jobs. Walker Hugh asserts that this big population lacked employment as machines replaced the human labour (Hugh, 1921, pp. 12-19). In addition to that, there was an increase in poverty, high prices of bread, scarcity of food, rioting of workers, terrible working conditions of workers in factories and industries and workers and families crowded in slums experienced unsanitary housing (Devi, 2016, p.29). Women and children toiled in mines and factories for long un-

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<sup>3</sup> "The Prelude" is an autobiographical poem in blank verse by the English poet William Wordsworth. It is an extremely personal and revealing work on the details of Wordsworth's life. Wordsworth began "The Prelude" in 1798 at the age of 28 and continued to work on it throughout his life. The poem was unknown to the general public until published three months after Wordsworth's death in 1850. "The Prelude" is widely regarded as Wordsworth's greatest work.

bearable hours and were paid lowly; wages that did not sustain the expensive lives in towns. Women were often abused and exploited at their working place. As a result, a number of unmarried pregnant women increased and the mortality of unborn child increased as well. It left children crippled, deformed and without a future employment for the rest of their lives. This greatly affected not only the child, but the family as well. There was no compensation or laws to support these families affected by the terrible working conditions from the Industrial Revolution (Hamlili, 2017, p.28). Many women used to die by giving birth to their children (Sultana, 2016, p. 19).

### ***The Mid Victorian Period (1848-1870)***

It was known as a period of Economic Prosperity and Religious Controversy. England as a whole began to enjoy greater prosperity, but still there were too many harassing problems similar to the Early Victorian period. In spite all these miseries, free trade was enriching their estates, agriculture flourished together with trade and industry (Devi, 2016, p. 28). Trade unions were also allowed by passing the trade Union Act in parliament in 1871.

In this phase, Factory Act in parliament was amended to restrict child labor and limited hours of employment and improved the working conditions of workers. For example, Rabab Hamlili explains that, there was the Factory Act of 1802 called "The Health and Morals of Apprentices" was promoted by Sir Robert Peel, an MP focused on humane standards of treatment were established for the increasing numbers of 'pauper apprentices' employed in factories like his own. Moreover, the Factory Act of 1833 was passed to improve conditions for children, working in factories; the act established criteria for a normal working day in one industry. Chimney Sweeps Act of 1834 was passed outlawing the apprenticing of any child below the age of ten (Hamlili, 2017, pp.36-38). Science and

technology became more advanced. For example, Crystal Palace, one of the first buildings to be constructed using modern technology became centerpiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Spiazzi & Marina, 2009, p.14). It became a show off of industrialized, rich and powerful British Empire.

### ***The Late Period (1870-1901)***

It was known as Decay of Victorian Values. In this period, the apex of British imperialism was reached. It also saw rebellions, massacres, bungled wars in various colonies. The sudden emergence British imperialism, Bore War and Irish question of Bismarck's Germany after the defeat of France in 1871 was progressively to confront England with powerful treats to their rival and military position. The recovery of the US after the civil war of 1862-1865 too brought new and serious competition. There was also the threat to domestic balance of power. It became a time to hold England to account for the ways in which it had generated wealth on the backs of so many, both at home and throughout the empire (Devi, 2016, p. 28).

The problems and prosperity discussed above were largely developed as themes by the Victorian literary intellectuals. Victorian intellectuals who were devoted in to literature were characterized by interests in the society and its troubles, concerned with moral problems and questions of life because they were aware of living in an uncertain age which was preparing a new society. Tanya Agatheocleus and Jason Rudy discuss that the authors of this period faced the world around them and took care of the weakest individuals by trying to help them in their daily worries. They tried to unite both the neo-classical traditions of literature and the romantic one. The former had, through the power of reason, freed man from ignorance; the latter, discovering the spiritual side of man, had given new importance to his feelings and aspirations (Agatheocleus & Jason, 2010, pp.394-396).

The Victorian era is often regarded as a high point in English literature and it is the literature that covers the whole of the nineteenth century. It is a literature that speaks of an age which witnessed great change, it reflects the intellectual patterns of the Victorian age dealing with the status question through on the examination of society, the law, industrialism and historical ideals, it has no main mission point the finger at social problems to raise people consciousness (Hamlili, 2017, p.14).

Moreover, the Victorian authors chose the novel more than poetry to give voice to the claim of social justice and could analyze in details the inhuman standards of industrial society. The literary intellects of this age were Elizabeth Barrett, Thomas Hobbes, Carlyle, John Ruskin, Charles Dickens and Alfred Lord Tennyson, Christiana Rossetti, Robert Browning, Bernard Show and Thomas Hardy. They exposed the unpleasant truth of urban life which is a result of industrial growth. During the late Victorian period, the aftermath of industrial revolution reflected through the materialistic and urbanized life of people writers like Thomas Hardy started creating rural based fictions (Sultan, 2016, p.9).

For example, the novel *Oliver Twist* (1839) by Charles Dickens is one among many writings of Victorian age that reveals harsh face of the cruel society. Dickens showed the condition of human life and society affected by the Industrial revolution through the scenes and incidents experienced by a young orphan in the novel. Malnutrition and high mortality rate was a common phenomenon during the period of Industrial revolution. In the very first chapter it is seen that Oliver is born in the Parish and his mother died while giving birth to him. The description of Oliver's mother shows that she was suffering from malnutrition which was a consequence of industrialization (Dickens, 1838).

### **The Cutting age of Literature: A focus on Victor Hugo and Alfred Lord Tennyson.**

During the Victorian Age, there were some literary scholars of the Romantic Movement who were still alive and continued publishing new works in the Victorian Age of literature. Some of them include William Wordsworth, Victor Hugo, Honore de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas and Gustave Flaubert.

Victor Hugo, a Romantic literature author, cuts through Romantic Movement period of literature to early Victorian Age of literature. He was born in 1802 in France and lived until 1885. He was the greatest French poet, a novelist and a playwright. Some of his works include; *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), and *The Miserable* (1862). His famous collections of poetry were "The Legend of the Ages" (1859) and "The Contemplations" (1856). His poetry works will be compared to Alfred Lord Tennyson, who was born in 1809 and lived until 1892 in England (Josephson, 1942, pp. 1-3). As a British greatest poet of the Victorian Age, Tennyson was greatly concerned with the moral and social values of Victorian society. Some of his works include "Ulysses", "Idylls of the King" (1859), "Tears, Idle, Tears" (1847), "The Charge of The Light Brigade" and "Break, Break, Break". Though Victorian Age is identified with the novel, it also produced poets of some standing Tennyson being among (Hugh, 121, p.374). The most part of them still had, however, an essentially Romantic characteristics for tastes, tendencies towards fantasy, sensibility and style. The poets express their doubts and conflicts on Victorian society and criticize its emphasis on science, progress and materialism at the expense of spiritual sentiment.

The poetry of these two figures has some similar modes of composing poems though their compositions were influenced by different ideologies of their respective litera-

ture ages. Like the Romantic poets who composed very long poems, mostly lyrics and ballads to reflect their experiences of expressing the beauty of the nature and how it influenced the human value, so was the Victorian poetry (Elfenbein, 2008, p. 63). For example, Tennyson composed the poem "Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur" (1859), a narrative poem with 34 short and very long stanzas, the longest stanzas ranging from 22 to 24 verses. It is followed by the poem "Demeter and Persephone" which has 8 long stanzas, one stanza comprising of 22 verses. The length of the poems was determined by the topic at hand. For example the narrative poems, ballads and elegy are very long for the poets have to give details of the events they describe.

In spite the composition of those long poems, Hugo and Tennyson composed short poems to express sudden feelings of sadness and joy they encountered in the course of their lives. For example the poem "Crossing the Bar", "Cxxv: Spring" and "Duet" by Tennyson have four, five and one short stanzas respectively. Similarly, Victor Hugo's "The Ocean's Song", "Sun Set" and "The Poor Children" has five, eight and five short stanzas respectively. In the poem "The Poor Children", for example, Victor Hugo is sympathetic to the innocent children who come in to the world of bitter wrongs and sins but God still protect and have mercy on them when they repent.

Moreover, Hugo uses butterfly, flowers, roses, jasmine, the sky, water and dew in the poem "The Genesis of Butterflies" (1844). The poet uses these natural metaphors to refer to the lovers, who like the butterflies play, hide, smile, sniff and fly around with joy and happiness in their being. Verse one, two, four, sixteen, eighteen and twenty have the words;

Both poets use descriptive styles to paint the images from which their emotions are

reflected from. For example, Hugo in the poem "The Genesis of Butterflies" describes the movements of the two happy lovers which are compared to the life of butterflies. They move from place to place, playing, talking, and the messages of love they write to each other. Their days are smiling like the fresh roses and jasmines, but later their love vanishes, and fly away again like the butterfly. Verse one, two, five, eight, eleven, thirteen, nineteen and twenty points out the descriptions of the two lovers;

HE dawn is smiling on the dew that covers  
The tearful roses; lo, the little lovers,  
That go and come, and fly, and peep and  
hide,  
The dreamy lovers send to dreamy mays,  
The messages of love that mortals write  
Written in April and before the May time.  
Are but torn love-letters, that through the  
skiesFlutter, and float, and change to but-  
terflies.

Similarly, Tennyson uses descriptions in the poem "Tears, Idle Tears" (1847), Tennyson describes the persona who sings with tears in his heart that pour forth his eyes when he looks out in the fields in autumn and thinks of the past time when he was in Tintern Abbey. The persona declares the past to be dear, sweet, deep and wild. The past that is no more is described as fresh and strange. The second stanza of the poem depicts the nostalgia of those days;

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,  
That brings our friends up from the under-  
world,  
Sad as the last which reddens over one  
That sinks with all we love below the  
verge;  
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Both poets used imagery and the sensory elements to convey the scenes of struggles between religion and science, and ideas about nature and romance, realms, imaginative feelings and the beauty of nature which

transport the readers into the minds and hearts of the people of the two ages. Hugo applies these elements in the poem "The Genesis of Butterflies" whereby sensory and imaginative elements such as fly, peep, hide, smiling, murmur, float, go and come. Hugo writes;

That go and come, and fly, and peep, and hide,  
We muffled music, murmured far and wide,  
He dawn is smiling on the dew that covers  
The tearful roses; lo, the little lovers

The collection of these images and senses draw the clear picture of the life of enjoyment the two lovers lead when together in the blooming of their youth courtship. Likewise, Tennyson applies the same elements such as "the dancing lights, winding stream, distance sea, happy birds changing their sky". The third stanza of poem "Cxxv: Spring" depicts the elements as quoted below;

Now dance the lights on lawn and lea,  
The flocks are whiter down the vale,  
And milkier every milky sail,  
On winding stream or distant sea;  
The happy birds, that change their sky

All these images and sensory elements used by Tennyson work together to create the vivid image of the end of the winter period and the welcoming summer season.

The two poets use the sentimental style, whereby they are affected by emotions of love, sympathy and sadness. Hugo expresses the mercy and sympathy of God to the people of the world who live in the world of wrong. In the poem "The Poor Children", in the second stanza the persona says,

In our light bitter world of wrong  
They come; God gives us them while.  
His speech is in their stammering tongue,  
And his forgiveness in their smile.

Tennyson too express the deep feeling of love that is very strong and felt like the winds of the sea, love that can awaken the dead, love that can shape or shatter a life. In the poem "Duet", Tennyson writes;

2. Love that is born of the deep coming  
up with the sun from the sea.

1. Love that can shape or can shatter a  
life till the life shall have fled?

2. Nay, let us welcome him, Love that  
can lift up a life from the dead.

1. Keep him away from the lone little isle.  
Let us be, let us be.

2. Nay, let him make it his own, let him  
reign in it - he, it is he,

Love that is born of the deep coming  
up with the sun from the sea.

## CONCLUSION

The 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> C period of literature in Britain witnessed many changes as a result of the Industrial Revolution which therefore led to the great progress of England in every field. On the other side, the industrial revolution caused many problems such as child labor and poverty, workers oppression and exploitation by the bourgeoisies which led to a significant discrepancy between social classes. Therefore, these events and many others played a great role in shaping the literature of the Romantic period and that of the Victorian era. Unlike the literary intellectuals of the Romantic Movement who focused on fantasy, imagination over reasoning and reality, the Victorian Age literary scholars paid much attention to the social reality. The aftermath of the industrial revolution and the development of science and technology shaped their literature in terms of themes and styles. Paradoxically, most poets of this age, Alfred Tennyson being the leader wrote from the styles of the Romantic Movement but reflecting the experiences of the Age of Victoria. Ironically, Victor Hugo's poetry doesn't address the problems of the Victorian Age, he sticks to the old style and content of the Romanticism, expressing

imaginations, the beauty of nature and how it influence the development of one's personality - a belief in greater ideals than materialism and rationalism. Both poets compose short and long poems, use description and sentimental styles and use nature metaphorically to bring imagery and describe the emotions of appreciating beauty of the nature or reflecting people's struggle in different situations of life.

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