

**Course on History of English Language and Literature**  
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**Lecture 19a**  
**The Age of Tennyson: Victorian Poetry**

Good morning everyone let me welcome you again to this NPTEL course the History of English language and Literature. In today's session having already given an introduction to the Victorian literature in the previous session, we move on to look at Victorian poetry also known as the age of Tennyson. Tennyson being the most representative figure of this age across genres it is also imperative that we began discussing Tennyson in detail.

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And before that we also take a look at the varied influences which had shaped Victorian poetry in the 19th century. These influences were quite diverse in nature we are also seen how many things were coming together in the beginning of the 19th century onwards to culminate in the eventuality of the Victorian literature which was inaugurated with the ascension of queen Victoria through the English throne.

Among this varied influences some of them deserve special mention those one being the influence of medievalism this significance of industrial revolution in shaping the literature and

also the temperament of the period. The floating of various kinds of Darwinian theories which challenged to the balance between faith, reason and scientific rationality and also the various ways in which the British empire was expanding across the world and the way in which the Britain was also beginning to emerge as a leading world power and finally it is important to note that this was also the period which witnessed the emergence of many genres it also saw the emergence of different kinds of styles of writing and various themes coming together as well.

And from the Victorian period onwards as we noted in the introductory session itself it is very difficult to concentrate only on one or two genres the influence being so varied and so diverse. So as Hudson began with a caveat when he began discussing the Victorian period we also begin this lecture with an attempt to provide a bare sketch of the entire period.

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**Major Victorian poets**

- Alfred Tennyson
- Robert Browning
- Matthew Arnold
- Arthur Hugh Clough
- George Meredith
- William Morris
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- Christina Rossetti
- Algernon Charles Swinburne

Victorian poetry is generally considered to be in the shadow of the popular genre of the novel; a reversal of the situation in the Romantic Age (Routledge)

The important Victorian poets include Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, George Meredith, William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Then of course many minor poets apart from these but however the central discussion has always been on Tennyson, Browning and Arnold and these three are considered as a most representative of the Victorian era in general. Talking about Victorian poetry is also useful to remember that the Victorian period was not really dominated by poetry the most dominant genre was novel. So as Routledge History of English Literature highlights at the outset, Victorian poetry is generally

considered to be in the shadow of the popular genre of the novel a reversal of the situation in the romantic age.

We have been noticing right from our beginning of our discussion throughout this course that various ages had different dominant genres but it really did not mean that the other genres sees to existed only meant that there was always a predominance of one genre over the other in most of the literary ages.

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### + Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

- Tennyson was to Victorian England what **Spenser** had been to Elizabethan England
  - The most conscientious and accomplished poetic artist after **Milton**
  - Early recognition – The Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge – "Timbuktu"
- Influenced by **Romanticism**, extremely erudite, wide breadth of classical learning
- The poetic exponent of the **cautious spirit** of Victorian liberalism – the most **representative** figure
- Preferred **tradition** to new belief systems – persistent belief in **evolution** – steadied and encouraged him
- Recluse and aristocrat – also interested in people and common things
- **Poet laureate** in 1850 (till 1892) – "decidedly the greatest of our living poets" (Wordsworth)

So with that note we begin our discussion on Alfred, Lord Tennyson who lived from 1809 till 1892 in that sense he is quite rightfully considered as most representative figure of the 19th century because he lived and wrote almost throughout the 19th century from 1809 till 1892. It is said about Tennyson's influence that Tennyson was to Victorian England what Spenser had been to Elizabeth in England and many other historians and critics were also very kind to compare him to Milton he is considered as a most conscientious and accomplished poetic artist after Milton. Tennyson began his writing career quite early in fact one of his first recognitions was when he was at the age of 20 and also still a student, he received the chancellor's gold medal at Cambridge for a poem that he wrote over there titled Timbuktu.

So thus became his literary career which spanned over decade and almost throughout the 19th century. Tennyson was significantly influenced by romanticism because he was living during a time when the romantic period also had reached its heights Tennyson was extremely erudite and

he could claim to his credit a wide breadth of classical learning which also heavily influence many of his writings and also has thematic and structural compositions.

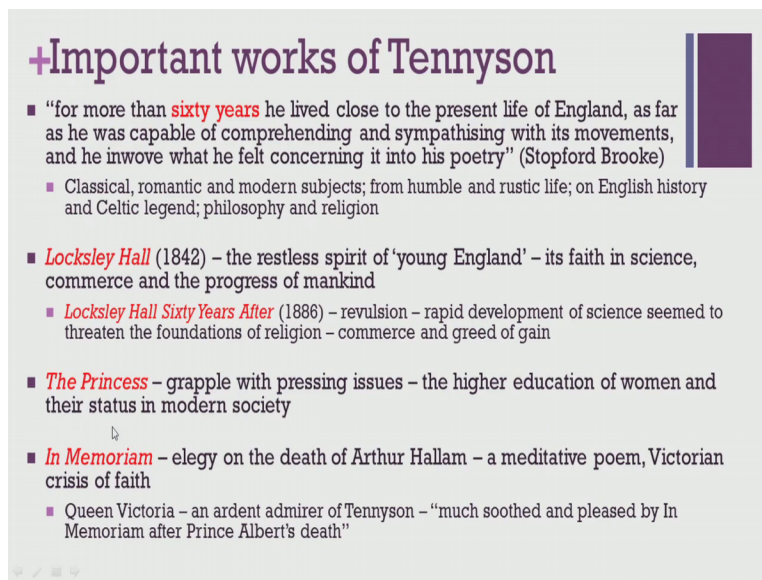
In Tennyson we can find the poetic exponent of the cautious spirit of Victorian liberalism and it was because of this reason as well that he is considered as a most representative figure of the 19th century. Though Tennyson lived at an age of transition where there was a tussle going on between the old and the new he was one of the very few who preferred and opted for the traditional belief systems over the modern ones.

And we also see that in spite of this preference of the tradition he was also extremely delighted and extremely fascinated by the new concepts of evolution which were getting presented from the 19th century onwards and we find him putting a very persistence belief in the idea of evolution but it did not really shake his faith and that was considered as a quite an interesting phenomena because that was a time when many of the writers and even the common people were losing faith in their belief systems and also in the tenants of religion because of the influence of the evolutionary ideas that Darwin had begun to propose but on the contrary we find that the ideas of evolution only cemented these beliefs in Tennyson thus interestingly we find that the beliefs in these new ideas of evolution only steadied and encouraged them further.

In fact since through his writing career and throughout his lifetime we do not find him losing faith like many others did during the Victorian period, he was also a combination of many different things put together he was recluse and an aristocrat but that did not mean that he was completely away from the real ground realities of common life he was also interested in people and common things of life he was rightly given the position of the poet laureate in 1850 after Wordsworth death and he also remained in that position till his death in 1892 this becoming one of the longest serving poets in this post.

Wordsworth considered him as one of the greatest living poets and wrote about him that he is decidedly the greatest of our living poets and we also tend to believe that this complement was given to Tennyson quite rightfully when we analyze the kind of literary output that he had during his lifetime.

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### +Important works of Tennyson

- “for more than **sixty years** he lived close to the present life of England, as far as he was capable of comprehending and sympathising with its movements, and he inwove what he felt concerning it into his poetry” (Stopford Brooke)
  - Classical, romantic and modern subjects; from humble and rustic life; on English history and Celtic legend; philosophy and religion
- **Locksley Hall** (1842) – the restless spirit of ‘young England’ – its faith in science, commerce and the progress of mankind
  - **Locksley Hall Sixty Years After** (1896) – revulsion – rapid development of science seemed to threaten the foundations of religion – commerce and greed of gain
- **The Princess** – grapple with pressing issues – the higher education of women and their status in modern society
- **In Memoriam** – elegy on the death of Arthur Hallam – a meditative poem, Victorian crisis of faith
  - Queen Victoria – an ardent admirer of Tennyson – “much soothed and pleased by In Memoriam after Prince Albert’s death”

It is very interesting and important to note that Tennyson wrote for more than 60 years and one of the critics of Tennyson Stopford Brooke he commence that for more than 60 years he lived to closed to the present life of England as far as he was capable of comprehending and sympathizing with its movements and he inwove what he felt concerning it into his poetry. So talking about the poetry concerned and the thematic concerns that he had as part of his writing career he was interested in the classical and romantic and also on modern subjects and he could also at the same time engage with humble and rustic life and he was also interested with English history and Celtic legends and he was also deeply engaged with philosophy and aspects of religion.

So in his poetry we find the combination of all of these things coming together he has been rightfully called as the poet who could engage with all these digressing ideas and all of these diverse ideas which dominated the Victorian era. His important work Locksley Hall was published in 1842 and it many feel that the restless spirit of young England is (( ))(7:34) and it also talks about the faith and science, commerce and the progress of mankind.

So we continue to see a very different personality in Tennyson here is someone who is rotten in the traditional beliefs who never loses his religious faith and at the same time as (( ))(7:50) by the various ideas of progress and the various ideas of commerce which is also leading England to a

newer face in terms of world leadership. But however we do find that Tennyson had to move away and depart from some of these principles that he believed in.

A poem which could be considered as a sequel to the first poem Locksley Hall it was published in 1886 titled Locksley Hall Sixty Years After in this he begins to show a sense of revulsion towards a many things that he idealized in the beginning of his life and he also begin the sense that the rapid development of science was not always positive but it also began to threatened the very foundations of religion itself and he also began to realize that commerce was not always the good thing it also contributed to a lot of greed of gain as well.

So these shifting tendency was not particular or peculiar to Tennyson alone we find many of the others isolating between these different principles and these different idea because it was a very new vision which was getting open in front of the Victorian England and many did not even know how to engage with these diverse influences that they ended up losing their faith or just clinging on to faith in the in the face of many threatening things that were coming up.

Tennyson's work The Princess it grappled with pressing issues of the contemporary it also engaged with a very significant concern of those times the higher education of women and their status in modern society. In that sense we also find him and many others like him sympathizing with the many concerns that women had during those time. Tennyson is perhaps best remembered for his work in memoriam which is an elegy on the death of Arthur Hallam who is also a very close friend of him and also a poet.

There is a poem in memoriam was written as a meditative poem and it also in cased with the Victorian crisis of faith even when it was primarily concerned with the moaning of the loss of a dear friend. This poem was deeply admired by queen Victoria herself in fact the Victoria continue to be a very ardent admire of Tennyson throughout and her husband prince Albert was the one who even instated a Tennyson to the (10:00) of the poet (10:01). Queen Victoria is said to have remarked and even told Tennyson herself that she was much soothed than pleased by In Memoriam after Prince Albert's death.

So after the elegy written in the country church yard which is was product of the previous age in memoriam became the most celebrated elegy of these times.

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- *Maud, Idylls of the King, The May Queen, Enoch Garden, Dora*
- *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) – “Clarible”, “Mariana”
- “*The Lady of Shalott*”, “*Tears Idle Tears*”,
- Unlike Wordsworth saw nature with the eye of the poet and the scientist
  - Loved its beauty, felt its indifference and cruelty
- Reflections of the ‘two voices’ of the century – conflict of faith and doubt
- 3 historical plays – *Queen Mary, Harold, Becket*
- *The Ancient Sage* – challenged current materialism and asserted the eternal verities of God and immortality
- *Tithonus, The Lotos Eaters, Ulysses* – return to Greek and Roman legends

The other significant works of Tennyson include *Maud*, *Idylls of the King*, *The May Queen*, *Enoch Garden* and *Dora* but some he also wrote many short poems which were published together in 1830 under the title *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* they include poems just *Clarible* and *Mariana*.

And he is also best remembered for short poems such as *The Lady of Shalott* which also was a the cause of controversy for a while and he also wrote *Tears idle Tears* it was considered as a poem infused with the lot of pathos and emotion. We do find a strain of romanticism in Tennyson’s poetry but unlike Wordsworth Tennyson was a person who could nature with the eye of the poet and the scientist.

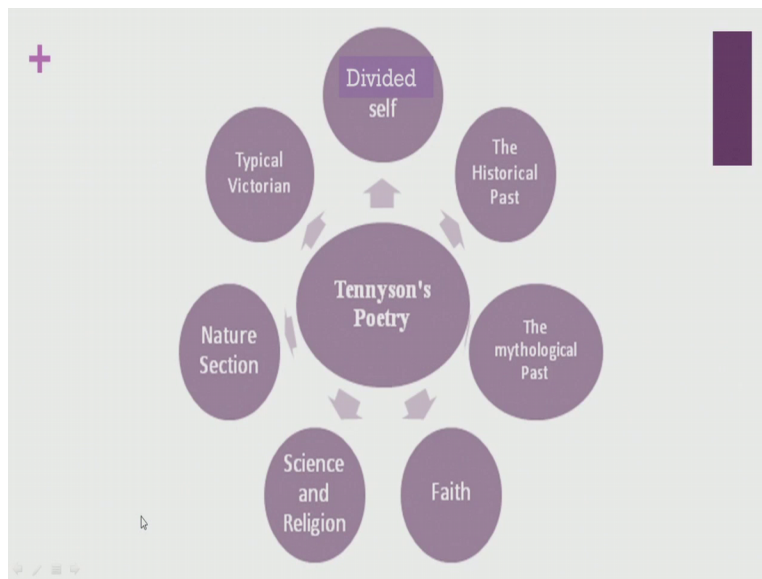
So repeatedly we find the influence of poetry and as well as a scientific temperament infusing Tennyson’s poetry with the new kind of spirit and a new kind of energy. It is said that Tennyson’s approach to nature was more realistic in the sense that he loved its beauty but he also was aware of indifference in cruelty that nature was capable of. So this rational temperament guided his poetry throughout and it also gave it a sense in which it could come closer to real life.

Many also feel that in Tennyson’s poetry we can find reflection of the two voices of the century the two dominant voices being voices of faith and doubt which were always in conflict with one another. And there was also a as in aid there was also the two events of democracy of rationality of scientific progress all of those also trying to increase this tussle between faith and doubt.

Tennyson was not just a poet he also experiment with other genres and other forms of writing we find him writing three historical place titled Queen Mary, Harold and Becket though none of these were staged they did prove his genius and his powers of experimentation.

His poem The Ancient Saga had challenged current materialism and asserted the eternal verities of God and immortality. We find him asserting his faith on eternity and his faith on God throughout and we do find that was the one thing that kept insane throughout the Victorian crisis of faith. The classicists in Tennyson could not help but keep returning to the Greek and Roman legends so as a result we find three significant works of this time titled Tithonus, The Lotos Eaters and Ulysses in these three are considered as one among the best works of the time and Ulysses continues to be celebrated as a supreme work of not just a Victorian period but as also as a work which four shadows many things which were about to happen in the modernist period.

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When we analyze Tennyson poetry we see a multiple kinds of influences on his poetry we find that his divided self gets reflected in it he is also interested in historical past and the mythological past his faith in religion his faith in god and eternity is quite strong and its quite evident throughout his work but he could also engage with science and religion in a way that it did not really take away his faith in humanity or his faith in religion. He was also interested in nature and all together he could be considered as a typical Victorian which makes it all the more right to make him the most representative figure of the century itself.



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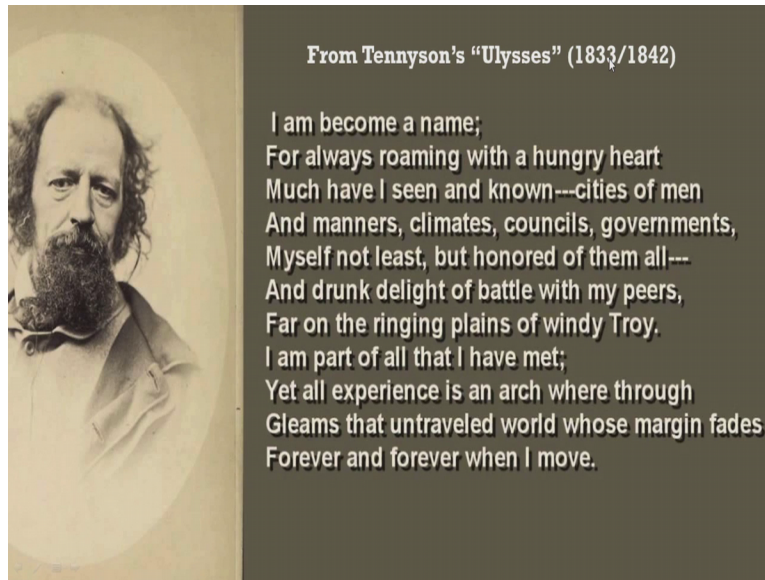
- 'Tis better to have loved and lost / than never to have loved at all'
- 'Thiers not to reason why / Theirs but to do and die'
- 'To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield'
- 'Knowledge comes, but Wisdom lingers'
- 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new'

A portrait of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, showing him with a long, dark beard and hair, wearing a dark coat and a white shirt with a cravat.

Tennyson is best known for some of his off quoted lines from his poetry, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Thiers not to reason why / Theirs but to do and die. To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers. The old order changeth, yielding place to new. We find that all of these lines from his poetry they have been oft quoted and even misquoted.

And this also has contributed much to the development of language and also for enriching the kind of writing that where to follow in the coming decades and the coming centuries.

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As we wrap up our discussion on Tennyson let us also quote from one of his well-known poems Ulysses which was written in 1833 but was published only by 1842 this is considered as one of the representative writings of the age itself because it captured the essence of what it meant to be a Victorian during that time.

I am become a name; For always roaming with hungry heart Much have I seen and known – cities of men And manners, climates, councils, governments, Myself not least, but honored of them all --- And drunk delight of battle with the peers, Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy. I am part of all that I have met; Yet all experience is an arch where through Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades Forever and forever when I move.

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## + Robert Browning (1812-1889)



- *Pauline* - 1833 - an early start - devoted his entire life to writing
  - Career paralleled Tennyson
- *Paracelsus* - 1835 (classical allusions, obscure imagery), *Sordello* - 1840
- *Strafford* - a tragedy produced by Macready at Covent Garden - 1837
- *Bells and Pomegranates* - miscellaneous poems - 1841-1846
- Married Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 - had a better reputation than him as a poet - spent 15 happy years in Italy till Elizabeth's death in 1861
- *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* (1850); *Men and Women* (1855)
- Back in England - *Dramatis Personae* (1864), *The Ring and the Book* - dramatic narrative poem - 4 vols - (1868-69)
- *Asolando* - his last volume of poems - published on the very day he died - 12 Dec, 1889

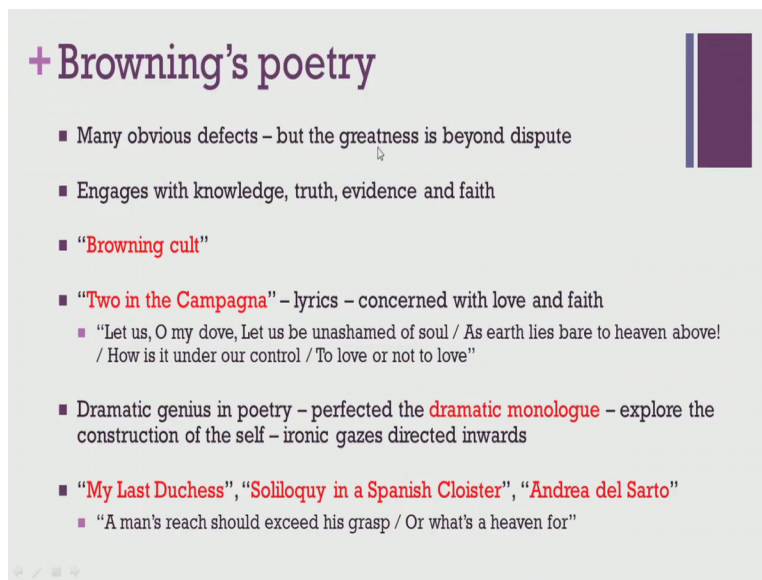
With this we move to the next important figure Robert Browning who lived from 1812 till 1889 here also we find that he dominated the century in almost a same way that Tennyson did, his first work was published in 1833 that sense he also got an early start quite like Tennyson his first work *Pauline* was quite successful and it also let him to devote his entire life to writing we find his career paralleling that of Tennyson. *Paracelsus* published in 1835 was one of the works which ensured his literary reputation for ever.

In this we find him getting increasingly fascinated by classical allusions and obscure imagery. His work in *Sordello* in 1840 further cemented this reputation that Browning had. Like Tennyson we find Browning also experimenting with various genres accordingly *Strafford* was a tragedy produced by Macready at Covent Garden it was in 1837 his collection of miscellaneous poem was published around the time 1814 and 1846 it was titled *Bells and Pomegranates*.

In 1846 a life turning event happened to Robert Browning he married rather eloped with Elizabeth Barrett and moved to Italy for a while and in fact Elizabeth Barrett was also renowned poet of those times and she had a better reputation than Robert Browning as a poet then and together they spend 15 happy years in Italy till Elizabeth death in 1861. So during the time that they spent together it was also a fruitful poetic period for Browning he published *Christmas eve and Easter day* in 1850 and *Men and Women* in 1855 and after Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death he also written to England and continued writing his *Dramatis Personae* was published in

1864 and *The Ring and the Book* which was a collection of dramatic narrative poems published in sequential form it also ran into 4 volumes it was published in 1868 to 69. Significantly Browning's last volume of poems titled *Asolando* was published on the very day that he died on 12 December 1889.

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### + Browning's poetry

- Many obvious defects – but the greatness is beyond dispute
- Engages with knowledge, truth, evidence and faith
- “Browning cult”
- “Two in the Campagna” – lyrics – concerned with love and faith
  - “Let us, O my dove, Let us be unashamed of soul / As earth lies bare to heaven above! / How is it under our control / To love or not to love”
- Dramatic genius in poetry – perfected the **dramatic monologue** – explore the construction of the self – ironic gazes directed inwards
- “My Last Duchess”, “Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister”, “Andrea del Sarto”
  - “A man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for”

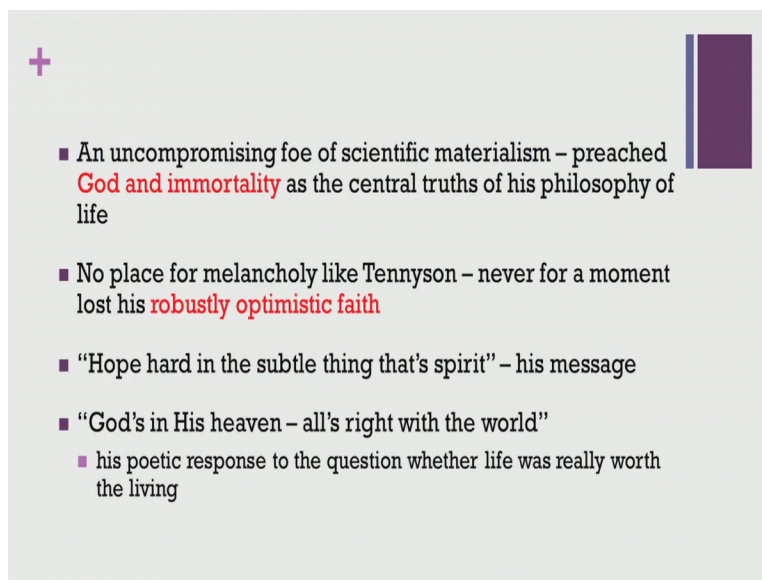
Browning poetry many critics and historians feel that they had many obvious defects but his greatness is beyond dispute. He is someone through his poetry try to engage with aspects of knowledge, truth, evidence and faith and the aspect of faith was quite common to most of the writers who were writing during Victorian England. There is also a group of ardent supporters who came up with the Browning cult who continued to support and continued to celebrate whatever Browning wrote and published. And his important lyrical work include *Two in the Campagna* which was concerned with love and faith, we find that the aspects of love and faith continued to be two dominant themes around which most of Browning's poetry as constructed.

And if we could quote from a line in *Two in the Campagna*, Let us, O my dove, Let us be unashamed of soul / As earth lies bare to heaven above! / How is it under our control / To love or not to love. So one could not help but be amazed by the poetic genius through he could connect aspects of love, religion and faith in a world which was getting extremely torn apart through the crisis of faith and through various doubt inflecting events. When we talk about dramatic genius of Browning it is useful to remember that he almost perfected the aspect of dramatic monologue.

Dramatic monologue is something that he continued to write throughout his lifetime and we find many of the modernist writers also experimenting a lot with this technique of dramatic monologue and many critics also feel that perhaps there was a significant element of dramatic genius built into the poetic abilities of Robert Browning. In many of his poems we find that Browning had wonderful capacity to explore the construction of the self and we also find that his ironic gaze was often directed inwards.

And some of his successful dramatic monologues include My Last Duchess, Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister and Andre del Sarto and Andre del Sarto also has this much quoted line a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for. This was a kind of optimism that (19:03) from most of Browning's poetry.

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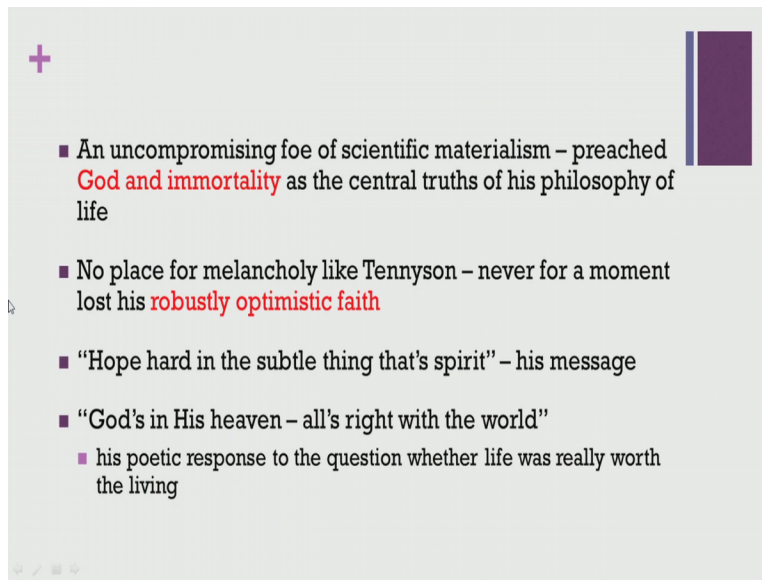


- An uncompromising foe of scientific materialism – preached **God and immortality** as the central truths of his philosophy of life
- No place for melancholy like Tennyson – never for a moment lost his **robustly optimistic faith**
- “Hope hard in the subtle thing that's spirit” – his message
- “God's in His heaven – all's right with the world”
  - his poetic response to the question whether life was really worth the living

Browning was an uncompromising foe of scientific materialism in that sense we also find a contrasting trait in him compared to that of Tennyson, he continued to preach God and immortality as the central truths of his philosophy of life.

And in his poetry and in his life there was no place for something like (19:23) and that also made him quite different from poetic genius of Tennyson.

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- An uncompromising foe of scientific materialism – preached **God and immortality** as the central truths of his philosophy of life
- No place for melancholy like Tennyson – never for a moment lost his **robustly optimistic faith**
- “Hope hard in the subtle thing that’s spirit” – his message
- “God’s in His heaven – all’s right with the world”
  - his poetic response to the question whether life was really worth the living

And we do not find him even for a moment losing his robustly optimistic faith and this was a huge reassurance for many of those times who was struggling to hold down to their faith in the middle of the many kinds of crisis which was irrupting in Victorian England.

And some of his best quoted lines also profess this faith that he had in the energy and the kind of belief system that he could gain through religion and through Christianity and his message to the contemporary society was to Hope hard in the subtle thing that’s spirit. Browning spirit could be best summed up in this single line which is part of his poetry God’s in his heaven all’s right with the world and this is in fact his poetic response to the question which was dominating Victorian England whether life was really worth the living.

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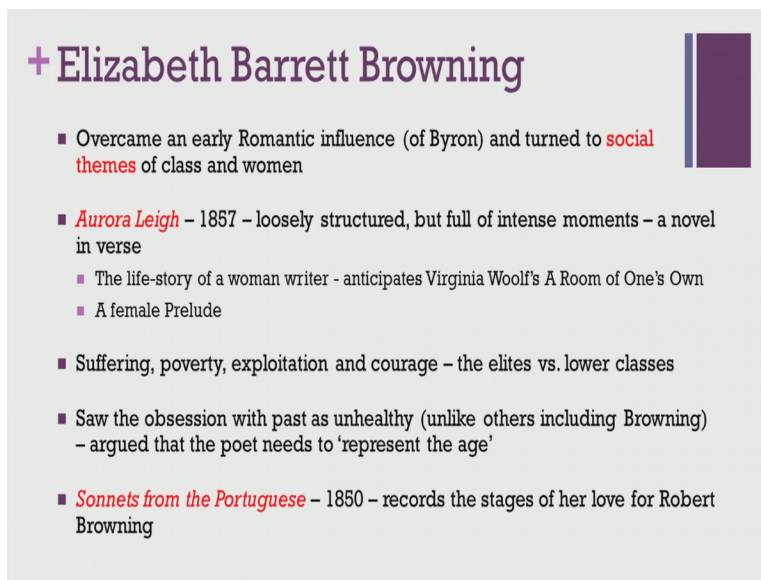
+ Browning's *Childe Roland* – treated as an allegory of Victorian heroism in the face of Spiritual uncertainty

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There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides — met  
To view the last of me, a living frame  
For one more picture ! in a sheet of flame  
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet  
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set  
And blew. “ *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*”

Let us wrap up our discussion on Browning with one of his famous poems Childe Roland, Childe in fact was a term used for an (( ))(20:26) of knight this was a medieval term we find many of the romantic and the Victorian poets using and getting influenced by this term. This poem the Childe Roland was treated as an allegory of Victorian heroism and the face of Spiritual uncertainty. There they stood, ranges along the hill-sides – met To view the last of me, a living frame For one more picture ! in a sheet of flame I saw them and I knew them all. And yet Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set And blew. “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came”.

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## + Elizabeth Barrett Browning

- Overcame an early Romantic influence (of Byron) and turned to **social themes** of class and women
- **Aurora Leigh** - 1857 - loosely structured, but full of intense moments - a novel in verse
  - The life-story of a woman writer - anticipates Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*
  - A female Prelude
- Suffering, poverty, exploitation and courage - the elites vs. lower classes
- Saw the obsession with past as unhealthy (unlike others including Browning) - argued that the poet needs to 'represent the age'
- **Sonnets from the Portuguese** - 1850 - records the stages of her love for Robert Browning

It only appropriate that we move on to discuss Elizabeth Barrett Browning who was also the wife of Robert Browning, she overcame an early romantic influence specially that of Byron and turned to social themes of class and women. She in that sense could be considered as a different kind of poet with their very different temperament particularly because of the gender differences and we also find him not following the major tenants of the day and also departing significantly to talk about class differences and also gender parity.

Her most important work *Aurora Leigh* was published in 1857 it was a loosely structured work it is said that she never had the firm coherence that her husband Browning had but however it was full of intense moments and there is also a made *Aurora Leigh* an instant success, though she did not live throughout her lifetime within England she was a very popular poet and she enjoyed much popularity during her lifetime itself. But however later when the canon was shaped we do not find here being accorded the status that Browning later got.

*Aurora Leigh* was considered as a novel in verse and it was also about the life story of a women writer and many feel that *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning anticipates Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* which was a modernist text to be published in the 20th century. And many celebrated this also as a female Prelude, Prelude being one of the important works by Wordsworth. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work had a very significant concern which also made her different from most of the Victorian writers of the day, she engaged with suffering, poverty,



exploitation and courage did not invest much for energy to talk about the many dilemmas of many abstract dilemmas of faith and reason and doubt.

And we also find her talking about the differences between the elites and the lower classes and trying to highlight the need to somehow overcome all of these differences to progress towards a more democratic and a secular kind of world. In fact was very interesting that she saw this obsession with the past as unhealthy and we find her being quite unlike others including Browning in this aspect because in Tennyson's and Browning's poetry we noticed that there is a continued fascination with the past and we find most of them continuing to live in the past and almost looking at all of those things quite nostalgically but Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a poet who argued that the poet needs to represent the age and accordingly live in the contemporary or talk about the present age rather than looming in the past.

Her important work published in 1850 titled *Sonnets from the Portuguese* though it was a translated work it was also a record of the stage of her love for Robert Browning. So having taken a look at the three important poets Tennyson, Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning we try to wrap up today's session and we will also continue the discussion of the same in the following session. Thank you for listening and look forward to seeing you in the next session where we continue to look at the other major Victorian poets.