



ROBERT BROWNING AND ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: A COMPARATIVE STUDY



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ABSTRACT

Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson belong to the Victorian era occupying a prominent place as pre-eminent poets of their time. Browning had a remarkable sense of the historical past. Robert Browning was a cosmopolitan who was more interested in the universal, rather than in the national. It was an era of great changes in science and theology and the age also witnessed the rise of democracy. As a poets of human nature both of them stand wide apart. Tennyson is the poet of human nature in its noble, common and loving forms, as Browning is the closest to what is complex, subtle and uncommon in human nature. Browning often renders the simple and the loving in human nature - and such poem are among his masterpieces. Nevertheless, Tennyson does so more frequently and characteristically. Browning has been gifted with his own original style of composing poetry. He appears to be an original artist and in this respect he is more interesting than Tennyson. Even in the respect of melody and versification, Browning is negligent. He frequently sacrifices melody to his thought. This paper attempts to explore the similarities and differences between two great poets. It also throws light on Victorian era, their historical sense, patriotic sense, the clarity, versification, art, music and melody in their writings.

Keywords:- Robert Browning, Tennyson, Victorian, domestic atmosphere, immoral characters.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson belong to the Victorian era occupying a prominent place as a pre-eminent poets of their time. Both of them apply new techniques and

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style in writing a poetry, however, both these poets adopt their own style in their writing. “Browning focuses on the psyche of his frantic characters and tries to look into deep inside of such characters in his writings. Browning tries to understand human nature, religion and society properly. He studies the innermost psychology of characters. On the other hand, Tennyson draws material from external, specific realities, ideas, and objects and tries to express it through ornate language.”¹ Another significant difference is in their nature of expression. Browning’s writing is always energetic but Tennyson’s tone is generally melancholic where he gives touch of nostalgia. Both of them started creating their works simultaneously and towered above their contemporaries from 1830 to 1890, the entire period of the reign of Queen Victoria. Browning remained much more aloof from his era than did Tennyson. The new movements of science bothered Tennyson like Arnold and clough. Tennyson’s age is reflected in his work, but Browning’s poetry does not reflect the contemporary social changes and trends which shocked both theology and religion.

As a matter of fact, Tennyson was immediately popular with the publication of him Collected Poems in 1842, and his popularity continued to grow, till with the publication of In Memorium, in 1850, he came to be regarded as the greatest poet of his time. His poetry was read all over the English speaking world. Browning’s popularity and fame, on the contrary, was delayed and his fame was limited only to a limited cultured readers. He had small group of follower and imitators. Even such a great collection of poems, ‘Bells and Pomegranates,’ a rare combination of music, poetic pleasure, and serious thoughts failed to win public recognition. ‘In Memorium’ and ‘Bells and Pomegranates’ were published together, but their respective fates were entirely different. Browning continued to create, however, at the end his poetry could not receive any appreciation. He was neglected; nevertheless, he did not care the public. “He loved his mistress art, and his love made him always joyful in creating. He was a true artist who creates only because he loves his art, and not for any other reasons.”² Robert Browning’s is recognition and popularity emerged as late as 1870 twenty years after the publication of his collected poems in 1850. This means that Tennyson received fifty years of recognition and Browning only ten. Browning’s delayed popularity is even more surprising because he was interested in Catholic and Cosmopolitan and he wrote in his poetry all kinds and phases of human nature among different countries. The range of his subjects is greater than that of Tennyson.

The fact is that Browning was not a man of his age, but a man of all time. It appears that he was more interested in soul-dissection, in the analysis of the human mind and art. He was interested in the study of man’s motives and mental processes. The intellectual analysis of human nature was a part of the scientific movement of the age. Browning expected his age in this respect by thirty years. “So his poetry was not read at first; but, afterwards, the world having reached him, he became a favoured poet.”³ Browning was not exclusively interested



in the internal history of a soul, however, he was interested in external action. Like the modern impressionists, he is concerned with sudden moments of human passion, with sudden impressions on the senses. Browning anticipated impressionism by about forty years. In this respect, he rises alone among his contemporaries. We could not find impressionism in Tennyson or Arnold or Rossetti. When impressionism arrived in literary movement, Browning's popularity was intensive and immediate. While Browning represents in his poetry the extraordinary complexity of human life, thought and emotion, Tennyson's smooth, melodious, simple development of his themes does not represent clashing complexity of human life and nature. In the poetry of Browning alone, the discords and complexities are resolved into a full harmony of thought and emotion. Browning represented this complexity of life from the very beginning, and when the society came to know about this complexity, it was surprised to find that there was a poet who had been expressing it for the last forty years. They also found that there was a poet who held out hopes of peace and harmony for the human soul, both for the individual and for the race. So this hope is the deepest element in Browning's religion. Tennyson also has this hope but he is uncertain and he often bewails this uncertainty. Browning was certain of this hope, and he does not break his faith. Even when he fails to resolve some kind of complexity, he is sure and certain that they can be solved. In this respect, he stands alone among his contemporaries. He stands firm and unmoved even in the midst of the doubts, the uncertainties, the scepticism, the conflicts and the contradictions of his age. This firmness of his faith shows the strength of his character. This popularity emerged at the end of the 19th century, and it has increased ever since.

Robert Browning had clear cut ideas of Man, Nature and God and held firmly to them throughout his long poetic career. On the contrary, Alfred Tennyson had no clear theory of Man, Nature and God. Tennyson had always spiritual doubts and conflicts. The result was that Tennyson could entirely represent his age in all its doubts and scepticism, and so could impart greater variety in his work, Browning could not do so. But while Tennyson could not give to his age faith in God and humanity, we get such faith and the consequent hope in Browning's poetry. The unique feature of Browning's poetry is a rare combination of unity with diversity. The unity arises from his philosophy, from his religious theories, which are always the same. However, there is no monotony in his poetry because there is also the immense variety of the subjects. He would always repeat his theory, but he never repeats his examples. The transient scenes and sights of the day touched him to write poetry. This also differentiates him from Tennyson, who often wanted freshness; who very rarely wrote on a sudden impulse, but only after long and careful thoughts. "Tennyson as a source for his poetry, used many subjects from domestic conditions to observation of atmosphere. Whereas, Browning takes an immoral character and challenges us to find out the moral excellence."⁴



Browning had a remarkable sense of the historical past. He could combine accuracy of knowledge with imaginative treatment. His 'Sordello' is the history of a soul, with all its scenery and history vividly medieval; his 'Grammarian's funeral' paints a historical period. He is equally successful in rendering the period and phases of religious history. In this respect, Tennyson was far his inferior. His Greek and medieval poems are modernized, and his imagination is always uncritical, as a result, he fails to capture the spirit of his time. Tennyson started his career with imitation as he wrote in the strain of the sentimental poets in the beginning. He achieved originality gradually and slowly. Browning, on the contrary, sprang into originality with his very first poem 'Pauline.' While Tennyson is conventional and conservative; Browning does not care for any traditions or social codes of conduct. Tennyson belonged to a particular class of English society and he rarely got out of it in his poetry. Browning as an artist is quite free from such restraints. His poetry does not belong to any particular or special class of society or morality. In this way, he set free the human soul from the restraints of convention, and lifted it to a higher level. Browning is a great emancipator of the human soul, while Tennyson is not. Tennyson's pride in England made him narrowly nationalistic, and he looked down with contempt upon other countries. He shared the English prejudices towards France, Ireland, Scotland and other European countries. His natural sights is of his own land, particularly of the place where he resided. Browning, on the other hand, never displays any special patriotism. Rather, he is more Italian than English. It was not that he did not love and honor his own nation, but that as an artist, he loved more the foreign lands; and that in his deepest life he belonged less to England than to the world of men.

Robert Browning was a cosmopolitan who was more interested in the universal, rather than in the national. It was an era of great changes in science and theology and the age also witnessed the rise of democracy. But these events are not reflected in his poetry as they are reflected in the poetry of Tennyson and this fact may also account for his delayed popularity. Browning was a complex character whose personality was made up of different racial elements. Tennyson was not complex. He did not have the catholicity of Browning. He was English and only English. No English poet has been so distinctively English as Tennyson, and none of them so outside of England as Browning. This is another reason why Browning was not read in his age but received recognition only with the closing years of the century. It is increasingly recognized that the key of human development and well-being lies in internationalism rather than in nationalism. Faith in the unity of mankind has increased and this faith is expressed in all its intensity in Browning's poetry. Tennyson, on the contrary, has nothing of this faith in mankind. As far as the social and political problems of the day are concerned, Tennyson frankly makes us know his views. Browning writes of the social and political problems but he simply renders them in his poetry. He does not express his own views about them. He writes of ideas and ideals which should govern men in their relations

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with each other rather than of particular social problems of the day. On the whole, he avoids the topical and concentrates on the universal and general.

As a poets of human nature both of them stand wide apart. Tennyson is the poet of human nature in its noble, common and loving forms, as Browning is the closest to what is complex, subtle and uncommon in human nature. He renders the complex, the abnormal, the unusual and the unnatural and so his appeal is a limited one. He does not deal with what is noble, simple and loving in man He deals with the treatment of the remote, the uncommon, the subtle which is more characteristic of him. He attempted to paint human nature in the whole, and it is for this reason that his picture of human life is more varied and more extensive than that of Tennyson. Tennyson was poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular British poets. Tennyson excelled at penning short lyrics, such as, "Break, Break, Break," and "The Charge of The Light Brigade," "Tears, Idle Tears" and "Crossing The Bar." His many verses were based on classical mythology such as Ulysses. All his poems are most probably based on imagery of nature and other natural elements. Browning, an English poet and play wright whose mastery of dramatic verse, especially dramatic monologues, made him one of the foremost Victorian poets. "Browning was famous for his dramatic monologues and commentary on social institutions. Browning aspires to redefine the aesthetic."⁵ Browning often renders the simple and the loving in human nature - and such poem are among his masterpieces. Nevertheless, Tennyson does so more frequently and characteristically. Then, it may be concluded, as a whole, that Browning is a lesser artist than Tennyson. A good poetry should have a lovely form, it should have a noble style, harmonious composition, varied but at unity, and a sweet melody and versification. Browning's composition is rarely careful. "There is lack of artistic selection and ordering of material, everything that comes to the poet's mind is haphazardly introduced and so the main impression is weakened."⁶ His writing, on the whole, is the result of intellect rather than of passion. Tennyson's composition is always excellent and careful.

Browning has been gifted with his own original style of composing poetry. He appears to be an original artist and in this respect he is more interesting than Tennyson. Browning did not take care of his style, he ignored the rules of his art and his freedom of degenerated into license. He is often fantastic and grotesque. He carelessly flung what he wrote at the head of the readers. His capriciousness is carried to an extreme and as a result beauty is lost. He lacks clarity and he is obscure not from any depth of thought, but from sheer laziness and caprice. He makes the easy, difficult. He has been difficult not by his thought but by his expression of it. Like other great poets, Tennyson is very clear in his tone. He applies the right word in the right place. "A poet may be distinguished and yet not use rhymes with any great degree of sharp significance and wealth of suggestion. Many critics would agree that Tennyson's best work depends mainly on the musical beauty he created from a sensitive and dexterous



management of words. At its best, this verbal music has an unquestionably individual accent.”⁷ On the contrary, Browning finds pleasure in continually putting his words at the wrong places. He leaves his words, and sometimes leaves his sentences unfinished. “So Browning conveys his feelings, not by telling us how fine and strong or deep or everlasting they are, but by the vivid and vigorous presentation of a situation through which the feeling emerges and, of course, the feelings are worth conveying: the poet’s aliveness is in the alive language.”⁸ The style is the man and no doubt, much of Browning’s power lies in his style, but he carries it to an excess. A slight care and control over his imagination would have made him really great poet. ‘Sordello’ is acknowledged to be the most difficult among his works. Everyone knows how Tennyson is said to have declared that there were only two lines in it which he understood. Carlyle affirmed that Mrs. Carlyle had read it through without being able to tell whether Sordello were a man, a city, or a book.

Even in the respect of melody and versification, Browning is negligent. He frequently sacrifices melody to his thought. He is happy in the quaint oddities of sound, in fantastic and difficult arrangements of rhyme, in the systematic use of double rhymes and frequently sacrifices melody and sweetness of versification. His work is intellectual, he is concerned with the torture of the soul, but these are qualities of prose, and not of poetry. Tennyson has much more noble qualities in composition; his work is uniformly poetic, and so he must be ranked as a greater artist, though not such a original one as Browning.

CONCLUSION: –

At the end it is to be concluded that both Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson were two main Victorian poets famous in dramatic monologue. Browning logically reveals the essence of a person whereas, Tennyson induce and plays a particular mood. Browning in his poetry attempts to realize human nature, society and religion, whereas Tennyson recalls the conscious mind and environment through ornate language. As a source of his poetry, Tennyson applied many subjects from domestic conditions to observation of atmosphere. Browning, on the contrary, takes immoral characters and challenges us to find out the moral excellence.



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