



THE ROMANTIC CREED IN VICTORIAN ERA

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The Victorian Era had been marked by current religious and theological controversies. They evoked both by stresses within the churches and by the attacks of materialists. Towards the end of the period, religion was making its peace with philosophy. The readers of English literature were aware of a profound change of atmosphere as they moved from the mid-Victorian writers to the Edwardian. New genres and sub-genres in literature developed to cater to the tastes of new kinds of readers.

In the Western world, drama originated in ancient Greece and reached a more sophisticated stage of development. The inevitable tragedies of the great Greek tragic dramatists, Aeschylus (525-456 BC), Phrynichus (511-472 BC), Sophocles (495-406 BC) and Euripides (480-406 BC) were concerned with the correlation between Gods and men and usually had an instructive moral purpose. The research, "Forward Theatre: Future studies in Drama" states, "Drama as an activity may be as old as humanity and as diverse as human behavior" (Sabina Web). The stories were usually taken from a myth already well known to the audience. Aristotle was followed by many writers and his *Poetics* is a source of western drama.

The earliest English drama, of middle ages, is divided into three kinds: The Mystery plays -presented stories from the Bible, the Miracle plays -told stories from the lives of saints, and the Morality plays -were commonly performed on wagons, with the audience gathered around. In the Renaissance period, playwrights in England began to create five-act plays based on Roman models. The latter half of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth saw the greatest flowering of theatrical invention in English history. William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson were the talented playwrights of the time.

In England, certain plays which were conceived many centuries ago were recognizably based on fertility myths. In this period, admirers of the Greek playwrights followed the three unities and stage settings strictly. But Ben Jonson prefers to set his action solidly in London or in Venice and stay there for the whole play. In *The Alchemist*, (1988) he never even moves from the house where all the alchemical roguery takes place. Michael Alexander in his *A History of English Literature* says, "It is to the mysteries that Elizabethan drama owes a long-established communal participation in religious drama, civic, comedy and secular drama, recorded but not extent" (Alexander 66). Nothing prefigured the astonishing outburst of dramatic genius that transformed the stage from the late 1580s and 1630s. It began with two great dramatists, Shakespeare and Marlowe. But Shakespeare had no patience with these formal restrictions and the unities meant nothing to him.

The Morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries, showed the fate of a single person. Moralities survive in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (1592) with its soliloquizing protagonist, its good and bad angels and its final moral. The Victorian Era of British history was the period of Queen Victoria's reign from 20th June 1837 until her death, on 22nd January 1901. It was a long period of peace, prosperity, refined sensibilities and national self-confidence for Britain. Some scholars date the beginning of the period in terms of sensibilities and political concerns to the passage of the Reform Act 1832. The era was preceded by the Georgian period and followed by the Edwardian period.

Darwin's (1809-1882) theories threatened the citadels of orthodox Christianity. The theory of evolution shook many of the ideas which the Victorians had about themselves and their place in the world. It took a long time to be widely accepted. Novelists such as Arthur Conan Doyle(1859-1930), Rudyard Kipling(1865-1936), H. G. Wells(1866-1946), Bram Stoker(1847-1912), H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925), Jerome K. Jerome(1859-1927) and Joseph Conrad(1857-1924) contributed by some of their important works during Victoria's reign. The sensibility of their writing was frequently regarded as Edwardian.

Robert Browning (1812–1889) and Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) were Victorian England's most famous poets. Thomas Hardy, though he wrote poetry throughout his life, did not publish any collection until 1898, as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), whose poetry was published posthumously in 1918. Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) was also considered an important literary figure of the period, especially for his poems and critical writings. Early poetry of W. B. Yeats was also published in Victoria's reign. Charles Dickens, (1812–1870) the most famous Victorian novelist, was extraordinarily popular in his days because of his powerful characters. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) was written when he was twenty-five, and it was an overnight success. All his subsequent works sold extremely well. His most important works include *Oliver Twist* (1837–1838), *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), *Bleak House* (1852–1853), *Great Expectations*



(1860–1861), *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865) and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. There was a gradual trend in his fiction towards darker themes which mirrors a tendency in much of the writing of the 19th century.

Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë produced notable works of the period, although these were not immediately appreciated by the Victorian critics. Emily's only work, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is an example of Gothic Romanticism from a woman's point of view, which examines class, myth, and gender. Her sister Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was one of the major nineteenth century novels with gothic themes. Anne's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) was written in realistic rather than romantic style and was mainly considered to be the first sustained feminist novel. Later in this period George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), published *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860, and her most famous work *Middlemarch* in 1872.

Some of Swinburne's exquisite songs fail on the other hand, to satisfy the supreme requirement, because the readers instinctively feel that the inner meaning has been sacrificed to the glory of tumultuous words. Arthur Campton Rickett comments in his work entitled, *A History of English Literature from Earliest Times on 1916*, "The reclaiming of the past was a major part of Victorian literature with an interest in both classical literature but also the medieval literature of England" (Rickett 67). The Victorians loved the heroic, chivalrous stories of knights and they hoped to regain some of the noble, courtly behaviour and impress it upon the people both at home and in the wider empire.

The long and progressive reign of queen Victoria's first disturbing factor was Imperialism. The reawakening of a dominating spirit had seemingly been put to sleep by the proclamation of an imperial federation. Rickett adds, "Imperialism was in the air before he took it as his inspiration. Yet despite the brutal strain that has fitfully shown itself in his work, he has proved a strong, invigorating and on the whole salutary influence in English life and letters" (Rickett 669). Kipling was a genuine artist but the genius of his art lies in his power to express the sentiments and primal passion of men and the most significant thing in his work is the imperialistic note.

W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) became the leading poet and dramatist of the late Victorian period respectively. Wilde's plays, in particular, stand apart from the many forgotten plays of Victorian times and have a closer relationship to Edwardian dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw, whose career began in the 1890s. Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) was a comic masterpiece, in which he held an ironic mirror to the aristocracy while displaying virtuosic mastery of wit and paradoxical wisdom. The Victorian Society was undergoing fundamental changes, outward and inward. Journalism has been so much dominated by a number of personalities with original or receptive minds who caught up the significant ideas of their time and communicated them to large numbers of readers. These men were propounding and arguing in public.

Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), H.G. Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), John Galsworthy (1867-1933), G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), H. Granville-Barker (1877-1946) and R. B. Cunningham Graham (1852-1936) were being made by their time. R.A. Scott in his book *Fifty years of English Literature 1900-1950* says, "Since society was changing so profoundly and quickly, and nineteenth-century conceptions of life in all its forms were under constant criticism, it was an age of incessant argument, and Shaw and Wells were foremost among the arguers" (Scott 14). Galsworthy was like Wells in his absorption in social problems but in other respects he was a finely cultured gentleman and a lover of solitude who refused the proffered honor of knighthood. William J. Long views, in his *English Literature: Its History and its significance for the life of the English-Speaking World*, "His thirty plays are nearly all of the problem type. His favorite method is to stage two contrasting individuals, as in *Justice*, or two contrasting groups, as in *Loyalties*, and let the audience weigh their conflicting claims as in a balance" (Long 581). Galsworthy's *The Man of Property* (1906) raised him to the front rank of living novelists.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was the most thorough going vindicator of the romantic imagination. Harry Blamers points out in his *Twentieth Century English Literature*, "For his prose fantasies Chesterton found themes that gave full play to this talent" (Blamers 26). Chesterton's strength as a writer does not rely on any profundity of thought, nor in any original point of view, but in the clear and witty way in which he expresses commonplace truths. Joseph Conrad became a master of impressionism who followed his revered master, Addison, by interrupting his tale to preach morality. Conrad contented to let a character speak for himself by his actions, and to save his soul or lose it by loyalty or disloyalty to a moral ideal.

Naturally there was an uproar amongst the conservative school of critics. But the effect of Ibsen's methods and his attitude towards life was unmistakable. Christopher Innes points out in his book entitled *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, "Ireland is something of a test case for defining British drama, since the relationship with English theatre is so close" (5). From the late Eighteenth century, English and much other European drama fell into a decline. But there was to be



no great improvement in serious drama until the influence of the Norwegian poet and dramatist Henric Ibsen (1828-1906) especially, of his twelve great social dramas of the period 1877 to 1899. The real breakthrough came with *A Doll's House* (1879), which dealt with a simple housewife's agony. Ibsen's ten social dramas continued to evolve and develop, breaking new ground, addressing old but hitherto ignored or suppressed social, moral, artistic, and spiritual problems.

Drama, unlike the other literary genres is a stage art. Although drama is most like fiction, it shares features with poetry as well. Plays are the vehicles of persuasion. Ibsen, Conrad, Eugene O'Neill, Bernard Shaw used the stage to dramatize their ideas realistically. The history of modern European theatre was largely the record of extreme and short-lived movements. "The weaknesses of the Victorians are more conspicuous in the drama of the period than in other forms of literature" (Rickett72). Theatre has always crossed boundaries, and in the Nineteenth century there was relatively little difference between drama in Manchester and Moscow.

Ibsen's influence on Western drama was widespread and profound. The western theatre was irreversibly changed after him. Despite the innumerable experiments in diverse directions, the age was likely to be recorded with the great master of laughter-George Bernard Shaw(1856-1950). In England, Ibsen's views were propagated by Bernard Shaw in the *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). Ibsen's techniques were highly followed by Shaw's most of the plays written between 1892 and 1948. Allardyce Nicoll points out in his book entitled, *World Drama*,

When a true dramatist lets his mind play over his chosen plot and its characters he enters into a paradoxical state: on the one hand, he is the god-creator, master of these figures of his imagination: on the other, the persons he has evoked out of the unknown begin to assume their own life. (Nicoll746)

In the nineteenth century the trivialization of theatre had made novels the main vehicle for social comment. It was partly due to the lack of copyright protection, which Shaw was instrumental in changing. When the situation was reversed in claiming a direct social function for theatre, Shaw not only gave a strong political cast to the mainstream of English drama but set its stylistic terms. Dramatists working in this line were effectively faced with the choice of reforming society by depicting its evils in naturalistic detail, or by attacking its ethos through the representative nature of a character of group. So, Galsworthy and Lawrence wrote even more photographically than Shaw. The same realistic emphasis carried through to the 'kitchen-sink' drama of Osborne's early plays. Alternatively, in the Agitprop movement of the 1930s, Joan Littlewood, and the younger generation of socialist realists developed plays together with English followers of Brecht, John Arden and Edward Bond, as well as less politically motivated populists such as Robert Bolt and Christopher Hampton.

The Edinburgh Review embodied the nineteenth-century with faith and spread knowledge and the power of argument as the motor of social progress. Like the French encyclopedists, its contributors established secular religion, which is based on a belief in reason and the perfectibility of man. The way the writers brought these polemic and contradictory principles together help to explain the combination of their logical and rationalistic style with romantic evolutionary ideas.

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