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## **UNIT 4 VICTORIAN POETS: ROBERT BROWNING AND ALFRED TENNYSON**

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### **4.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- know about the Victorian Age;
- understand the term Dramatic Monologue;
- discuss the content of the poems of Browning and Tennyson.

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### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In this unit, we shall have a view of the Victorian poets with help from one poem each by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson. The presentation shall take us to the age in which the two poets lived. They were inspired by the developments of the age. At the same time, they charted a territory of poetic expression unique to their times. The Victorian Age followed the Romantic tradition that believed in dreaming big and recognizing the trends of the time as challenges. The time span between the eighteen forties till the end of the nineteenth century characterized stability. Yet, the age produced poets that left an impact on the cultural landscape. This will be highlighted in some detail in this unit. The unit will also provide to you the analysis of Browning’s “The Last Ride Together” and Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar”.

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## 4.2 THE VICTORIAN AGE

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Let us take a general view of the socio-cultural developments in the nineteenth century England. The period between 1837 and 1901 is considered to be the Victorian age, literally because Queen Victoria reigned during this period. However, the term refers to the larger phenomenon that changed England crucially. It also impacted Europe that reshaped and redefined itself in the nineteenth century. Clearly, different countries of Europe were interlinked economically and socially.

The Nineteenth century was a century of self-doubt and philosophical questioning. It saw the rise of important thinkers such as Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and Sigmund Freud making significant contributions to the thought of the day. The ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century had already made inroads into the thinking across countries in the continent. Rousseau gave a call for return to nature because the course of the existing society, according to him, had snatched away everything spontaneous from the common people. The masses were in the grip of the regulated life of the city with rules and principles that curbed processes of thought. For that reason, Rousseau would make sense in the previous century. In the nineteenth century, thinkers and writers engaged in intense debates on questions of science, technology, morality and religion. Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), focused upon the plight of the workers and the underprivileged. Marx's analysis hinged on the clash of interests between the proletariat and the capitalist class in a historical frame. Charles Darwin challenged the theory of creation with his evolutionary model in the book *On the Origin of Species* (1859). A deep questioning of God led to the Victorian crisis of faith as a result. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in the later years of the 19th century proclaimed that God was dead and the human being had to rely on his own resources for resolving questions of existence. The works of Sigmund Freud further sharpened the critique of society and God, as Freud connected the cause of anxiety and fear in life with the oppressive social institutions affecting the human mind. Rational observation and scientific analysis were the two methods to understand society, nature and human behaviour. Of these three, society loomed large in the Victorian period since it alone could give strength and stability to the common people needing resources to sustain them. That was the crux. Yet, matters could not be resolved on the social plane unless the governing social relations were upturned. The physical dimension of the existing dilemmas had made people sit up and wonder. Interestingly, these issues had become the staple of the nineteenth century fiction. Novels, philosophical treatises, political comments and analyses as well as scientific tracts were the order of the day. It appeared that poetry was losing ground to these new forms of expression. The Victorian dilemma was as much of society as it was of the literary expression.

The aims and objects of people in the nineteenth century were to look for intellectual support. Previously, the support came from belief systems and norms of tradition. Most of them were linked with philosophical thought that permeated entrenched principles of life.

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### 4.3 TRANSITION FROM ROMANTICISM TO VICTORIAN THINKING

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The nineteenth century was unique in the sense that it graduated from ideas of the past to the ones that were to be forged anew. This was seen specifically in the Romantic age that questioned social institutions and searched for resolution in nontraditional areas of life. Blake, Wordsworth and Keats as well as Shelley stand testimony to this. Romanticism became a precursor for changes that might visit the society later in the century. The concerned changes were in the process of coming up but were not yet visible to the eye. This question found clear mention in the poetry of the period. Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" (1867) comes to mind. It talks of absences of support, psychological and moral. In it, the poetic voice visualizes the sea at Dover appearing unconcerned about the society on the hard plain. The poem uses the metaphor of the sea reflecting the mechanical rising and falling of life irrespective of a goal. Did it indicate a crisis? For Arnold, the "Sea of faith" bound human life with its protective grip in the past. The turning of the poem into a melancholic song is unnerving. The poet bemoans the dwindling of faith in the present era when no "certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" exists. We may remember in the context that Arnold talked of the lofty place that poetry occupied in human affairs. For him, poetry was capable of "a high order of excellence." He observed that "The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can." (Enright, 261-2)

The Victorian crisis of faith is a commonly used phrase. It denotes the dilemma of the nineteenth century individual caught between personal belief and larger historical forces. The new scientific theories raised issues of morality, fellow feeling, and ease of living. At the other end of the spectrum stood upheavals, too daunting for comfort. Social revolution knocked at the door and if allowed in and to work for, they would spell untold violence. The background for such a circumstance was the rising gap between the rich and poor. The privileged stuck to dogma, thinking that would ensure stability. Yet, the number of those who wished to work and were without work threatened to shake up the apparent balance in life. Contrast it with the impatience of the Romantic poet in the preceding decades to only feel defeated since the new was not all that reassuring. Science questioned as faith wavered.

Where would poetic expression stand in those times of malaise in the thirties and the forties? The poets of the period had a great tradition of poetry behind them. In the shadow of Romanticism, the Victorian poet would find it difficult to get a subject of immediate relevance, something that would inspire him to engage with. The difference was that the challenges were haunting the powers that be, the state, the politics, as well as the thinkers. The crisis was predominantly economic. Increase in poverty and lawlessness were the issues keeping the administration on its toes. The writer was an abject spectator of the social scene unfolding in front.

Romantic expression derived strength from nature and an innocent past evoked by life in the village. The Victorian period, however, had not the same passion for creating a new perspective and waiting for a new dawn. The vision covering vistas of possibility, experiment and creativity had gone. The answers lay in complexities of the past driving society to a stalemate. The village structures

based on a sedate agriculture were being dismantled by the resource-hungry capitalism. The industrial revolution introduced factory-based production and it attracted large masses of people to the cities. Management of colonies far from England was another burden the metropolitan England had to bear. The colonies ensured regular supply of raw materials but that added to the schedule of production on a yet larger scale. That provides us with the background against which the two poems in your course can be interpreted. The poems are Browning's "The Last Ride Together" and Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." "The Last Ride Together." We begin with a short account of Robert Browning.

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#### 4.4 BROWNING: THE MAN AND THE POET

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(Image source: Wikipedia)

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was born in Camberwell, England. His writing career spanned the entire nineteenth century. Although he received limited formal education, he was well versed in both Greek and Latin. He began writing poems early in life and his first book of poems was published anonymously under the title *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* in 1833. He was twenty-one years old. One could discern in the poem his passion for the contemporary concerns. Later, he adopted an objective stance. That earned him appreciation in the literary circles. Soon, he was in touch with Elizabeth Barrett, a woman senior to him by six years. She wrote poems and had won acclaim before he came to know her. Finally, against the wishes of her family, she married Robert Browning secretly. This helped Browning decisively in many ways. Being fond of her, he wished to preserve her as a friend and beloved at any cost. She was seriously ill and needed a climate different than that prevailing in England for recovery. In 1846, the couple shifted to Florence, Italy and lived there for fifteen years. The life in that city influenced his poetry. The previous subjectivity in writing was gone and Browning wrote with a sense of detachment.

As we read Browning's poems, we note that even as he shares with the reader his sentiments and feelings, he sees to it that they are combined with an intellectual attitude. He consciously chooses to maintain distance from what he states. Such a distance equips him with dramatic skills to portray life's situations. In his poems, he seldom gives his own voice to the characters he chooses to present. He lets

them have their own. Browning also has the penchant for dwelling on psychological tendencies. He would elaborate them and give them a distinct shape. Gradually, such an attitude became the defining nature of Browning's poetry.

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## 4.5 BROWNING AS THE POET OF DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

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It was the use of the dramatic monologue in poetry that won Browning fame and renown. That also provided interiority to the form. His poetry contained portrayals with a specific thought content. Through the monologue form, he created characters gifted with capability to look inward. Later in his career he wrote verse drama as well. This was concretized in *Stafford* that he composed in 1837. His other plays in verse form include *Pippa Passes* (1841), *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1843) and *Luria* (1846).

Another aspect of Browning's poetry is optimism. It reflects an attitude of acceptance and assertion. Interestingly, Browning stood apart from his times. He was not exactly critical of them (the times) but brought in awareness while dealing with them in poetry. This gave a special quality to his utterances. The best part of his poetic expression was its relative detachment from the context where it was placed. He stood on his own, defining shades and adding to his characteristic twists. Other poets of his period carried remnants of Romanticism, extending melancholy to a context that rested on soft language and easy sentimentality. That made the Victorian poetic expression weak and insipid. Browning's strong individualism stood him in good stead. He knew what he was saying since he went with confidence into the implications of the idiom current at the time. We do not see any sense of doubt or uncertainty in Browning. Nor is he particularly given to anxiety or helplessness that characterized the Victorian ethos. However, this is confined, as suggested, to his individual stance where he thinks and intellectualizes. The poet assumes the role of an interpreter. He represents a fascinating unity between a person who feels and the one who makes sense unto himself of the given circumstance. This lends subtlety to the poem. The dilemmas coming up in this process are the stuff of Browning's poetry. If that is what we witness, how could he be called a Victorian poet?

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## 4.6 ANALYSIS OF "THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER"

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The poem in your course is "The Last Ride Together." Its title hints at a few things. Why the last? And does it portray togetherness of two people ending in tragedy? An important feature of the poem is that it is a portrayal as well as a performance. If read by the poet to an audience, it will resemble a dramatic piece. The poem is in the voice of the lover drawing the reader into his inner world. We might also see that as the speaker "I" addresses the reader directly. Let us give the poem a read:

### The Last Ride Together

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,  
Since now at length my fate I know,  
Since nothing all my love avails,

Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,  
Since this was written and needs must be—  
My whole heart rises up to bless  
Your name in pride and thankfulness!  
Take back the hope you gave,—I claim  
—Only a memory of the same,  
—And this beside, if you will not blame,  
Your leave for one more last ride with me

**II.**

My mistress bent that brow of hers;  
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs  
When pity would be softening through,  
Fixed me, a breathing-while or two,  
With life or death in the balance: right!  
The blood replenished me again;  
My last thought was at least not vain:  
I and my mistress, side by side  
Shall be together, breathe and ride,  
So, one day more am I deified.  
Who knows but the world may end tonight?

**III.**

Hush! if you saw some western cloud  
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed  
By many benedictions—sun's  
And moon's and evening-star's at once—  
And so, you, looking and loving best,  
Conscious grew, your passion drew  
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,  
Down on you, near and yet more near,  
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—  
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!  
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

**IV.**

Then we began to ride. My soul  
Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll

Freshening and fluttering in the wind.  
Past hopes already lay behind.  
What need to strive with a life awry?  
Had I said that, had I done this,  
So might I gain, so might I miss.  
Might she have loved me? just as well  
She might have hated, who can tell!  
Where had I been now if the worst befell?  
And here we are riding, she and I.

V.

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?  
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?  
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,  
Saw other regions, cities new,  
As the world rushed by on either side.  
I thought,—All labour, yet no less  
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.  
Look at the end of work, contrast  
The petty done, the undone vast,  
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!  
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

VI.

What hand and brain went ever paired?  
What heart alike conceived and dared?  
What act proved all its thought had been?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen?  
We ride and I see her bosom heave.  
There's many a crown for who can reach,  
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!  
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,  
A soldier's doing! what atones?  
They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.  
My riding is better, by their leave.

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**VII.**

What does it all mean, poet? Well,  
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell  
What we felt only; you expressed  
You hold things beautiful the best,  
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.  
'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,  
Have you yourself what's best for men?  
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime  
Than we who never have turned a rhyme?  
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

**VIII.**

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave  
A score of years to Art, her slave,  
And that's your Venus, whence we turn  
To yonder girl that fords the burn!  
You acquiesce, and shall I repine?  
What, man of music, you grown grey  
With notes and nothing else to say,  
Is this your sole praise from a friend  
“Greatly his opera's strains intend,  
“Put in music we know how fashions end!”  
I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

**IX.**

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate  
Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
My being—had I signed the bond—  
Still one must lead some life beyond,  
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.  
This foot once planted on the goal,  
This glory-garland round my soul,  
Could I descry such? Try and test!  
I sink back shuddering from the quest.  
Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?  
Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.



X.

And yet—she has not spoke so long!  
What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
At life's best, with our eyes upturned  
Whither life's flower is first discerned,  
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?  
What if we still ride on, we two  
With life for ever old yet new,  
Changed not in kind but in degree,  
The instant made eternity,—  
And heaven just prove that I and she  
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

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#### 4.7 A GENERAL COMMENT ON THE POEM

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This poem has ten stanzas each of which contains eleven lines. In the title of the poem, the word “Last” has many meanings. It may be referring to the many rides in the past all of which were enjoyable. The obvious meaning of the word is that the lovers are meeting on this occasion for the last time. Connect that with the ending of the poem, “Ride, ride together, for ever ride.” Think of the word “ride” in the case. It could denote a relationship, a joining together at the physical level. Indeed, physicality is the crux. Not for a single moment are the lovers away or separate from each other. The lover is talking continuously either to her or his own self. The union between the two defines the central parameters of the poem.

In spite of the many stages the poem passes through, the emotion of love is at its core, giving it great vigour. The poem is not sentimental or emotional. It is primarily of the intellectual kind. We see in it how different points are made about life, passion, time, various art forms and the human aspect of living. There are differences, contrasts, similarities, and strong or weak stresses on the arguments forwarded. The poet proves to his own satisfaction that arts such as music, sculpture, or poetry lack in the pleasure of the moment that can be prolonged to eternity. His own preference would be for poetry but there, too, love between man and woman scores over the act of composing a poem. The poem is in the classical mode where emotions work under the discipline of logic. We see this reflected in the speech. The command of the poem is in the hands of the speaker who argues, counter-argues, reaches conclusions, uses rhetoric, raises questions and proves the point of love as a supreme experience.

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#### 4.8 STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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I

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,  
Since now at length my fate I know,  
Since nothing all my love avails,  
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,

Since this was written and needs must be—  
 My whole heart rises up to bless  
 Your name in pride and thankfulness!  
 Take back the hope you gave,—I claim  
 —Only a memory of the same,  
 —And this beside, if you will not blame,  
 Your leave for one more last ride with me.

In this stanza, “since” is used five times. It serves the specific purpose of connecting with the lover’s long history of relationship with the woman. This affords him reasons to ask her for a favour—”Your leave for one more last ride with me.” In the past, he has had a good number of rides with her, the present one might be one more to add to them. What do you say about the reasons he has given? I believe he is both humorous and earnest. The jocular tone suggests that his bonding with her has lasted a long time. But where is the harm? He could enjoy her company one more time. He failed in his mission of being her companion all his life. Why? By the lover’s own admission, the woman decided to end the relationship. Can we call it the beginning of a narrative? After the episode of friendship, a new one of parting with her has begun. Will the woman oblige him and give him consent for one more ride with him? This creates curiosity and suspense for the reader. The question may be answered in the following stanza:

## II

My mistress bent that brow of hers;  
 Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs  
 When pity would be softening through,  
 Fixed me, a breathing-while or two,  
 With life or death in the balance: right!  
 The blood replenished me again;  
 My last thought was at least not vain:  
 I and my mistress, side by side  
 Shall be together, breathe and ride,  
 So, one day more am I deified.  
 Who knows but the world may end tonight?

The first five lines of this stanza are charged with uncertainty. Will the woman agree? After a struggle, she says, “Right!” The consent is hard earned for the lover, it became a question of life and death. Read the first five lines and guess what went on in the woman’s mind at the time. First, the lover saw pride in her “deep dark eyes.” The expression “pride demurs” conveys her rejection that was temporarily withdrawn. “Replenished me again” brings the half-dead lover back to life. He is excited that if the world ended as he rode with her, the ride would assume permanence. See the words used for the moment of togetherness, they make us aware of the predominance of the body in the poem. The love between the man and the woman bears the intensity of physicality. The association of the bodies being active in intimacy raises the two in level—the lover is “deified,” he

becomes a god. Because of the power generated in these lines, it takes us to the following lines:

### III

Hush! if you saw some western cloud  
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed  
By many benedictions—sun's  
And moon's and evening-star's at once—  
And so, you, looking and loving best,  
Conscious grew, your passion drew  
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,  
Down on you, near and yet more near,  
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—  
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!  
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

Mark “billowy-bosomed.” The comparison of the woman’s body with the cloud is to create a sense of beauty at many levels. The lover thinks of nothing else except nearness with the beloved in that moment. That means all to him. He enjoys it immensely, his imagination being at work in the moment. Its vocabulary is of the manner of day-to-day living, and at its back stands the poetic power. The beauty of the woman is compared with natural elements such as the cloud and the star. The comparison is not of one body part with the cloud or star, but in terms of human passion. The visualization is dreamy with the soft feel and lightness of the cloud having similarity with the woman’s bosom. Soon, this is achieved poetically, intimacy hinted at between the lover and beloved.

### IV

Then we began to ride. *My soul*  
*Smoothed itself out*, a long-cramped scroll  
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.  
Past hopes already lay behind.  
What need to strive with a life awry?  
Had I said that, had I done this,  
So might I gain, so might I miss.  
Might she have loved me? just as well  
She might have hated, who can tell!  
Where had I been now if the worst befell?  
And here we are riding, she and I.

Here, the passion of the lover is intense—”Thus we began to ride.” The said ride is not of moving along a path, but is result of the active engagement of the lovers with each other. In riding, they attain closeness. The soul smoothening itself out refers to the previous and present states. Previously, the minds of the lovers were

tied to conventions, now they shed old inhibitions and are awakened. Living in the moment is different experience. The former does not go forward but generates passion from within. The writer mentions ifs and buts of social existence that stifle fulfilment. Categories of hate and love become irrelevant. Shall we call it the celebration of human senses in a circumstance the lovers created on strength of their conscious choice? Browning means precisely that at the end of this stanza.

V

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?  
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?  
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,  
Saw other regions, cities new,  
As the world rushed by on either side.  
I thought,—All labour, yet no less  
Bear up beneath their unsuccess.  
Look at the end of work, contrast  
The petty done, the undone vast,  
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!  
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

In these lines, the poet-lover raises the question of failure in life. This gives a sense of loss to human beings, whereas the important thing is the effort. Take, says the poet, the point of love that engages the lover and beloved into the unknown regions where attaining bliss is the sole aim. Making plans would not yield pleasure, only being active will result in satisfaction. Conversely, what one does is petty, whereas that which remains to do is vast. Also, success does not matter in such a context. Enlarged argument about success or failure is of no consequence against close companionship of the lovers. See how the poet establishes the value of love.

VI

What hand and brain went ever paired?  
What heart alike conceived and dared?  
What act proved all its thought had been?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen?  
We ride and I see her bosom heave.  
There's many a crown for who can reach,  
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!  
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,  
A soldier's doing! what atones?  
They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.  
My riding is better, by their leave.

Here, the poet juxtaposes love with other professions in society. What do statesmen and soldiers get at the end of their missions? In the poet-lover's opinion, they spend a whole life to get a mention in history books or a stone laid in their memory. That, however, will not amount to much when put next to the pleasure the lovers earn while riding together. Clearly, the poet-lover says in glee—"My riding is better." For the many associations of the "ride," refer to the previous stanzas where riding was elaborated as the enjoyment the lovers had in moments of intimacy.

## VII

What does it all mean, poet? Well,  
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell  
What we felt only; you expressed  
You hold things beautiful the best,  
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.  
'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,  
Have you yourself what's best for men?  
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime  
Than we who never have turned a rhyme?  
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

In this stanza, a ticklish question is asked. It is linked with the work of a poet. That makes the observation ironical. The writer gets here a chance to judge his own endeavour in light of that which he said in the appreciation of loving. He asks, who is better: the poet, or the lover? Browning gives the pride of voice to the lover, not to himself as a poet. We see a split here between Browning the poet and Browning the lover. That is the moment of judging oneself in the pursuit of doing and saying. Is there a gap between the two? If yes, who is the weightier of the two? There is no doubt in Browning's mind though. The poet is busy saying, assessing, rhyming and putting together emotions. It is the poet's life-long mission. However, it does not touch the ecstasies of love. For Browning, lovers do not compose poems. Instead, they do the very thing called love. The poet admits defeat in front of the lover.

## VIII

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave  
A score of years to Art, her slave,  
And that's your Venus, whence we turn  
To yonder girl that fords the burn!  
You acquiesce, and shall I repine?  
What, man of music, you grown grey  
With notes and nothing else to say,  
Is this your sole praise from a friend,  
"Greatly his opera's strains intend,

“Put in music we know how fashions end!”

I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

This stanza brings into the reference the sculptor and the musician. Both of them are men of the arts dealing in aesthetic affairs. The lover addresses each one of them and asks about their standing in broader life. His tone is that of a victor as if he stood on a higher pedestal, and rightly so. The arts are fine as they go, but the hard work and time spent on them by the artistes take their toll. Pleasure is the last thing that the artistes would think of. Their eye or ear would remain stuck to their work. The Venus in stone would not have the kind of admiration a young woman walking towards him might receive. And so far as the musician is concerned, he takes long to hone his skills to win appreciation from an audience. In both the cases, the years spent on the pursuit raise the issue of true joy. To a similar pursuit, of love, the lover gives “my youth; but we ride, in fine.” Obviously, there is no comparison.

### IX

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate  
Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
My being—had I signed the bond—  
Still one must lead some life beyond,  
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.  
This foot once planted on the goal,  
This glory-garland round my soul,  
Could I descry such? Try and test!  
I sink back shuddering from the quest.  
Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?  
Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.

This stanza raises the level of the “The Last Ride Together” still higher. In it, the terms are philosophical. The concepts of the earth and heaven have been brought in. It is significant that Browning talks in this poem about the heights love can attain on the earth. Yet, we may consider that the reference to the divine adds worth to human passions. Interestingly, the reverse is suggested to be equally true. The implication is that the awakening about heaven is made possible through the route of humanity occupying the earth. The meaning of “a bliss to die with, dim-descried” is that humanity of the earth can give glimpses of heavenly bliss that are not easily seen.

### X

And yet—she has not spoke so long!  
What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
At life's best, with our eyes upturned  
Whither life's flower is first discerned,  
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?

What if we still ride on, we two  
With life for ever old yet new,  
Changed not in kind but in degree,  
The instant made eternity,—  
And heaven just prove that I and she  
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

This stanza has hidden in it a vague suggestion about eternity achievable in life. The two lovers have remained close to each other for some time and one of the lovers has not spoken for a while. What could be the reason for the two in tight embrace and the moment came to stand still? Vocal and impetuous as ever, the male lover dreams that they might have reached heaven, the final destination. This may be called the flight of imagination in which the wish-fulfilment occurred. Even if that were a make-believe, it was worth gloating over. See how the state of eternal bliss is visualized in words such as “with our eyes upturned” and “life for ever old yet new.” That is the image of eternity. The idea is reinforced with “Changed not in kind but in degree” and “instant made eternity.” That is as near bliss as the two lovers could reach. Has it happened or is the lover only believes to be the case? In the answer to this question can be found the resolution of the issue dealt with in the poem.

In the poem as a whole, the overall emphasis is on the pursuit of love in human life. The nature of the poem being the dramatic monologue, it conveys a mental state and an ideal that human beings wish to realize. Within the parameters of the monologue, a form of representation addressing one’s self and an imagined audience, the complexity of social surroundings and an escape route from them are being projected.

The surroundings are hinted at by the many areas engaging human attention. Those are of a statesman, a soldier, poet, sculptor, and musician. The final preoccupation is of religiosity. These are only examples. However, they point towards conscious choices one makes. Do these lead an individual anywhere? No, says the lover. They only catch a person in a web of activities. The escape route is that of emotions letting an individual receive inspiration from them. The central word is “ride.” It is repeated again and again in the poem. The word has rich associations. It stands for relationship and interaction. It also keeps life pure from day-to-day happenings, unaffected by the prevailing norms of living. Love is at the core of existence and gives full liberty to the individuals involved in it. See the way the lover in the poem begins with a no from his beloved and gains nearness with following rejection. He leaves it to her to go away from the scene or temporarily be with him for a short while. The point made is that temporary togetherness can be made intense and enriching. The message coming out of this is of quality living. The intensity of closeness conceals in it what the poet has called eternity. There is a whole argument behind the dialogue, a monologue in fact, that works on the dialectic of living and existing, of gaining selfhood and mechanically observing external norms. It is an intellectual poem in the best sense of the word.

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## 4.9 TENNYSON: THE POET

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(Image Source: Wikipedia)

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was poet laureate in the court of Queen Victoria. He was born in a middle-class family and his father was a clergyman. Tennyson completed his education from Trinity college, Cambridge and published his first collection of poems along with his brother while still in college in 1827 titled *Poems by Two Brothers*. Later in life, he became a leading poetic voice and wrote about the beauties hidden in nature as well as about important figure in culture and history. To the latter, he gave an independent voice. In his case, it was an amalgamation of the subjective and objective. He would write lyrics on one side that revealed his inner feelings and long verses that commented objectively upon the issues of his time. The works he is known for include “Ulysses”, *In Memoriam*, *The Lady of Shalott*, and *Idylls of the King*.

Even as Tennyson followed the Romantic poets who linked their role as voicing grievances of the common people, Tennyson listened to the middle-class preferences of sedateness and tolerance. He belonged to the period of relative stability, The repeal of the Corn Laws and a time of peace in the country sent waves of conservatism to its writers, enabling them to breathe easy and write about human feelings than radical aspirations. That took Tennyson away from politics and social dissent. He came to adopt a nationalist stance. It resulted in melancholy taking cognizance of loss of faith and the rise of scientific materialist thought. The former was to be promoted and the latter presented as an unsettling thought. Change in society was not the strong point of Tennyson. It disturbed him and left him restless. He was a Victorian poet in the true sense. Yet, he had his own areas of inspiration and emphasis.

Perhaps, a kind of poetic detachment from the poet’s own opinion was in the air. Browning had laid the foundation of the dramatic monologue. In it, the poet spoke in the manner of another person, a figure picked up from the past. It was the dominant mode in Browning. Tennyson attempted the same. However, he would write equally emphatically about his own individual feelings and emotions. In this regard, Grierson’s view about Tennyson is worth noting:

Tennyson was the heir of the Romantic Revival; he had outgrown Byron, he found Shelley thin, but he had learned something from Coleridge and Keats, and



tried to learn something from Wordsworth; and he had a solid backing of classical scholarship than any of them. The Arthurian poems in particular suggest Keats by their pictorial quality. But Tennyson was not so richly endowed as Keats in the less

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#### 4.10 ANALYSIS OF “CROSSING THE BAR”

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Sunset and evening star,

And one clear call for me!

And may there be no moaning of the bar,

When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,

Too full for sound and foam,

When that which drew from out the boundless deep

Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,

And after that the dark!

And may there be no sadness of farewell,

When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place

The flood may bear me far,

I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar.

The central theme of the poem is death and specifically the poet's visualization of his death. It is a take on what he leaves behind and how his death might be received by those he knows. He wishes that “may there be no moaning of the bar, when I put out to sea”. The sea is the metaphor for death or an afterlife. At the same time though, Tennyson hides behind the narrator to achieve objective distance between the image and him. Thus, we are face to face with an onlooker who has a viewpoint of his own. The narrator, thus, constantly refers to the time of living that kept him steady and comfortable. The lines in the poem seem untouched by pain or anxiety felt by an individual or a section of society. The tone of the poem is philosophical that looks at the surroundings with vague curiosity. It soon turns into an idea one is to engage with.

For us, the lines in the poem present a state of mind that is impersonal and detached. The voice in the poem seldom looks inwards. It wishes to define a posture the poet may have evolved over time. In view of this, it matters little that one is leaving a place and going elsewhere or may stay back and see things the way they exist. In the title, “crossing” is reflective about the act of proceeding in a direction but avoids spending time upon what one might confront on reaching

the destination. Calmness and tranquility seem to be the stance the narrator has lived with all one's life. The question arises whether at the back of the poem stands a period of steady fulfilment that marked the temperament of the nineteenth century as the poet was witness to. Since tensions and doubts are not the issues one grapples with, it is an apt projection of what has been termed the steady character of Victorianism.

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## 4.11 STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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### I

Sunset and evening star,  
     And one clear call for me!  
 And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
     When I put out to sea,

In this stanza consisting of four lines, we find that the third and fourth lines do not form a whole sentence—the fourth line has a comma at its end. Interestingly though, we do not feel the need to rush to the fifth line for knowing what we are being led to. The reason is that this poem assigns no importance to a statement. Instead, it presents to us a couple of pointers. First, we begin thinking about the link between the first and the second line. The gap between the two is significant. If it is time of sunset, why should the poet make mention of a call? The third line expresses a wish that no bar should give out a cry of pain. The fourth line is half sentence. Soon, we move out of the stanza and guess the poetic intention. In the context, the poet talks to himself, saying the day has ended and it is time to rest. Also, he has perhaps been waiting for a message and a call. The bar in the next line is the curved surface of sand. That tells us the poet looks on a seashore. The picture is finally complete, with the poet completing his life's innings. As a result, he has to prepare for the journey beyond life. Do we not think that the poet has a quiet message to convey? He accepts death as a fact of life.

### II

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
     Too full for sound and foam,  
 When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
     Turns again home.

Here, we are made to observe the sea as the end of the earth. Does that mean the earth stands for life and the region beyond the sea is where the poet's journey would end? To make it clear, the poet reminds us of the call in the first stanza. We are told that the tide is "too full for sound and foam." It is quieter and deeper. It speaks about the temperament of the sea ready to envelop the poet in its folds. The poet praises the sea as turning "again home." Thus, the earth as home changes into a place that becomes "again home." There is a problem, yet. One says it since the initial impression was that the home was the region beyond the sea. Which is home then, the sea or the place beyond the sea? Or is it that the sea and the place beyond it are the same for the poet? Possibly, we shall get the answer in the next stanza.

### III

Twilight and evening bell,  
    And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
    When I embark;

The words in this stanza are soft and lyrical. Consider the rhyming of “bell” with “farewell” and “dark” with “embark.” Also, dark is associated with sadness, but the poet denies it, saying it is “no sadness” in the present case. The prospect of starting the journey, embarking on it has no trace of the sense of missing the place the poet inhabited all his life. Getting back to the first line, the evening bell might give us an idea of the church. Mark that bell is spoken of as if in passing. On the other hand, the last line has the word embark, literally using a boat for the journey. It is simple yet so subtle! The stanza as such captures a moment of utmost tranquility. Death in the case evokes fulfilment, not loss.

### IV

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
    The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
    When I have crost the bar.

“Bourne” means the final goal or destination in life. As such, “our bourne of Time and Place” has a transcendental dimension. Still, the poet does not explicitly suggest heaven, nor does “my Pilot” suggest God. It is worth appreciating that the direct and less than formal address in the use of “Pilot” denotes close relationship, as in between friends. It has respect and self-respect inbuilt in the phrase. Again, “face to face” is sensuous, hinting at a long wait preceding the final union. Both Time and Place with capital letters in the beginning are philosophical. They widen the scope of the message. Likewise, “flood” is not merely a rise in the tide but the mythical event in the dawn of human history. That makes the poet use “crost.” The lines in the stanza are tantalizing. They do not commit but provide pointers. It is an enriching description. It uplifts the sense and covers the details in glory. We are impressed by the control exercised by the poet. Let us bear in mind that the poem was the last Tennyson composed. The lyric has an unparalleled grace. It is a whole statement about living in the human and social world and bidding goodbye to it when the life in it has remained fulfilled. Tennyson lived a life of poetic and social success.

Tennyson was seldom taken by the current concerns of the age in which he lived—it was an age of doubt, turmoil and search. Tennyson remains stuck to the accepted and established, never bothering about to the visions of change and dynamic conduct. He should not be accused of avoiding the uncomfortable but of attesting to that which he normally confronted. His supposed conservatism had a dignity about it. He chose for inspiration the myths and legends of the medieval period. This was at the expense of newness and experimentation. Be that as it may, Tennyson will keep appealing to us on strength of maturity and sedateness he chose to adopt and put to use in his writing.

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## 4.12 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we discussed a poem each by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson. In them, we saw the questions that disturbed the Victorian mind. In “The Last Ride Together,” the lover sought answers to the problem of fulfilment absent in the existing period. For this reason, the poet explored the area of human preoccupation with self of the individual. In the same manner, Tennyson pondered over the life’s journey signified by the voice of the narrator—the journey in question met with peace and equanimity at the end. The happy ending of the two poems said with full clarity the message of values that sustained life in a major part of the nineteenth century. For grasping the nature of the dilemma in that period, a view of Romanticism helped, too. This was mentioned with emphasis in the unit.

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## 4.13 GLOSSARY

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<b>Regulated life of the city</b>	: Artificial life; the mechanical pattern followed by the people in a city.
<b>The evolutionary model</b>	: Associated with Charles Darwin that rejected the idea of creation of the world by a divine being.
<b>The sea of faith</b>	: A term used by Matthew Arnold for describing the confusing state of organized religion.
<b>The pleasure of the moment</b>	Moment as eternity is a paradox, the two seem opposite
<b>that can be prolonged to eternity</b>	: to each other but mean a specific thing in the context. In poetry, the moment is generally emphasized. The more intense its, the stronger becomes its appeal, everlasting and engaging.

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## 4.14 QUESTIONS

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- 1) What do you understand by the Victorian crisis of faith? Has it to do the emergence of science in the nineteenth century? Discuss.
- 2) Explain the main concerns of Victorian poetry as distinct from those of the Romantic poetry.
- 3) Discuss Browning’s “The Last Ride Together” as a dramatic monologue.
- 4) Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar” contains a vision of peace and tranquility. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.

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## 4.15 REFERENCES

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- Nietzsche, Friedrich *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. 1885.
- Enright, D.J. and Ernst De Chickera. Fp. 1962. *English Critical Texts*. New Delhi: OUP, 2010.

**A period of steady fulfilment:** It has negative connotations. Steady fulfilment lacks dynamism and is indeed static

**Victorian Poets: Robert  
Browning and Alfred  
Tennyson**

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## 4.16 SUGGESTED READINGS

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