

**BEG-6**  
**Block-2**



ଓଡ଼ିଶା ରାଜ୍ୟ ମୁକ୍ତ ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ, ସମ୍ବଲପୁର  
**Odisha State Open University**  
Sambalpur

# **BAEG**

*BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN*  
**ENGLISH**

**BRITISH LITERATURE:**  
**19TH CENTURY**

**19TH CENTURY POEMS**

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Odisha State Open University, Sambalpur, Odisha  
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# **BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN ENGLISH (BAEG)**

**BEG-6**

**British Literature: 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

## **BLOCK-2**

### **19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY POEMS**

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**UNIT 1 TENNYSON'S: "BREAK, BREAK, BREAK"**

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**UNIT 2 ROBERT BROWNING "MY LAST DUCHESS"**

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**UNIT 3 MATTHEW ARNOLD'S THE STUDY OF POETRY**

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## **UNIT 1 : TENNYSON’S: “BREAK, BREAK, BREAK”**

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### **Structure**

- 1.0 Objective
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Tennyson; Life and Works
- 1.3 The Lady of Shalott-Parts I and II
- 1.4 The Lotos-Eaters
- 1.5 Break. Break. Break
- 1.6 Discussion
- 1.7 Analysis
- 1.8 Meter of the Poem

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### **1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this Unit, we shall take up a few poems by Tennyson. 'The Lady of Shalott' is a long narrative poem in four parts. Due to constraints of time and space, we have only given you Parts I and II. Similarly, we have only been able to give you the concluding lines of 'The Lotos Eaters'. These lines are part of the celebrated 'Choric Song' that is a masterpiece of powerful description, verbal felicity and haunting rhythm. Read the opening lines of the Choric song aloud and you will know what we mean:

There is sweet music here that softer falls  
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,  
Or night dews on still waters between walls  
Of shadowy granite. in a gleaming pass;  
Music that gentler on the spirit lies,  
Than tired eyelids upon tired eye.

However, we hope you will read the complete poem on your own. You will also read 'Ulysses' in its complete form. Finally, we have selected a short lyric 'Break, Break, Break', for you.

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### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Before we discuss the poems, let us briefly look at some of the aspects of the Victorian age: This will give us an idea of the social and historical context from which these poems emerged. A quick look at the Life and Works of Tennyson will

not only introduce us to the poet will also facilitate our understanding of his poetry. Do please complete the necessary practice in critical appreciation.

Why do we study poetry? Try to think about this for a moment. Naturally your reasons may, be different from the next person's. Some of us enjoy poetry for its 'vision'. Poetry, like all great literature is the 'best that has been thought and said' over the ages. Others savour poetry for its sheer rhythm and use of language. Whatever be our reasons, poetry is meant to be enjoyed, an enjoyment that is heightened by our understanding of the poem and the various ways in which it relates to our own experiences, our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, loves and passions. We do hope you will enjoy working through this Block!

## **THE VICTORIAN AGE**

The reign of Queen Victoria which extended from 1837 to 1901 is referred to as the Victorian Age. As you can see, this covered the better part of the nineteenth century. How do we define the Victorian Age? It is difficult to characterize any age in one or two sentences because each epoch is a complex of various historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors. However, it would not be far from the truth to term the Victorian Age as a period of peace and prosperity. Seventeenth century England was rife with Civil War I and revolutions and the eighteenth century witnessed recurrent wars against France. However, during the nineteenth century the only wars were the Crimean War (1853.-54) against imperial Russia and the Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa which only served to enhance Britain's power and prestige which reached its zenith in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a period of imperial expansion. It was also a period of economic prosperity marked by a strong ethic of self-help. Hard work was regarded as the key to success. There was an 'intense feeling of national unity and optimism. The familiar image of Queen Victoria with her husband Prince Albert and their children only served to emphasize the importance of the family as a key social unit. The Victorian age was also rather moralistic and the Queen's soberly clad figure only stressed the propriety and decorum that marked nineteenth century English society. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) by expounding the theory of evolution, shook the foundations of religious faith.

The Victorian age is often referred to as 'an age of giants'. The writers of the period were confident and extremely prolific. The Elizabethan age can be seen as the age of drama, the Romantic age as the age of poetry, while the Victorian age can boast of the best English novels ever written. The novels of Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, G.M. Thackeray, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, as we know, are widely read even today. This is not to suggest that the poetry of the period was in any way inferior. The poetry of the age is a continuation of the Romantic tradition on one level, while on another, it is also an expression of the spirit of its age. In general terms, one might well say that while Romantic poetry emerged as a product of the poet's individual mind and experiences, Victorian poetry seems to evolve out of a more general spirit of the age. For example, Romantic poetry comes

straight from the heart, while Victorian poetry gives the impression that a poet is always aware of his/her own exalted status and this dictates the \* tone and the manner in which she/he addresses the reader. This does not mean that the Victorians did not express their emotions. Some of the lyrics are intensely personal as you will discover in the course of this Block.

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## **1.2 TENNYSON; LIFE AND WORKS**

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Let us now briefly look at the Life and works of Tennyson. After Wordsworth, it was Tennyson who became the Poet Laureate, the representative voice of Victorian England. Not only did he write several volumes of poems but Tennyson also wrote drama, though his fame rests primarily on his poetry. Most of us have read/heard his famous lines:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new  
And God fulfils himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world  
The passing of Arthur

### **LIFE**

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809- 1892), was born at a village in Lincolnshire, where his father was a rector. A rector, as you know, is a clergyman in charge of a parish. Tennyson was the fourth child in a large family of twelve children. Even as a child, he preferred solitude and I wrote his first poem at the age of eight. Most people think of Tennyson as a very serious person. Few know that he wrote a hilarious play 'The Devil and the Lady' when he was only fourteen.

Educated at the local grammar school, Tennyson went to Cambridge University in 1828 where he became close to Arthur Henry Hallam. Subsequently Hallam was engaged to Tennyson's sister. When his father died in 1830. Tennyson left the university without a 'degree and published his Poems, Chiefly Lyrical. His second volume The Lady of Shalott and Other Poems (1832) was viciously attacked much to the dismay of the sensitive poet. But the poet faced his darkest days on the death of his dear friend Arthur Hallam who died at the age of 22. The shattered Tennyson wrote In Memoriam (1850) which was published several years after Hallam's death. Tennyson married Emily Sellwood in 1850 and became the Poet Laureate after Wordsworth. He won much public acclaim but his gifts seemed to have declined after In Memoriam. As a later poet Laureate Alfred Austin put it 'his fame .... Increased precisely as his genuine poetical power ... steadily waned'. However, Tennyson's memorable verse has earned him a permanent place among the greatest writers the world has ever seen.

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### **1.3 THE LADY OF SHALOTT-PARTS I AND II**

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Tennyson, like many other Romantic and Victorian poets, often based his poems on medieval stories. Here the poet refers to the story of the legendary King Arthur. Developed in the Middle Ages, the story tells of the noble and generous king and his knights of the Round Table, all of whom are famous for their chivalry. But gradually the perfect scenario is somewhat disturbed by court intrigues and the illicit affair of Arthur's wife Guinevere, with his trusted knight Sir Lancelot. King Arthur was mortally wounded in a battle and carried away by fairy queens from where, according to legend, he will return when his country needs him. In this poem, reference is made to Camelot, the Court of King Arthur and to Sir Lancelot who was the most famous knight in Arthurian legends. As you can see, we have only given you Parts I & II of 'The Lady of Shalott'. But before we start reading the poem, let us give you an idea of what the whole poem is about. The poem tells us of the life and death of the beautiful Lady of Shalott, who lives all alone on a secluded island. In Part I, the background is described in some detail and we are told about the castle situated on an island in the middle of the river, in which the mysterious Lady of Shalott lives. Part II tells of how the lady spends her time observing the reflection of the outside world in a mirror and weaving her impressions in a colourful magic web. There is a strange curse on the lady according to which she is forbidden from looking out of her window and observing the real world directly. However, temptation to break this rule and look out of the window comes in the splendid shape of Sir Lancelot who one day goes riding past towards Camelot. It is at this point that Part I ends, as you can see. What happens after this? The dreaded curse befalls the lady, her mirror 'cracks from side to side' and the magic web flies out of the window. The lady goes down to the riverside, writes her name 'The Lady of Shalott' on a boat, and lies down in it, setting it adrift. By the time the boat passes by the palace of King Arthur, the lady is dead. Sir Lancelot and his merry-making fellow knights merely watch the mysterious lady with interest and awe. This extremely moving poem must be read in full, if you wish to experience its full intensity. This poem then tells us the story of the Lady of Shalott. It is a narrative poem. But as you will see, this poem also has beautiful descriptions that make the scene come alive as in a brilliant painting. In his word-pictures, Tennyson is like Keats. Can you recall the beautiful images in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' that you read in the previous Block? Tennyson's poetry, as you will discover, has this same sensuous quality. 'The Lady of Shalott' was first published in 1832. It was revised and included in the two-volumes of *Poems* of 1842. Let us now read the poem aloud if you can. A glossary provides you with explanations of certain difficult words and phrases.

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### **1.4 THE LOTOS-EATERS**

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Once again, in this poem Tennyson's interest in narrative verse is evident from his use of medieval stories and classical mythology. In 'The Lady of Shalott' he had taken up a story from the legend of King Arthur. Here he gives us an insight into the

philosophy of Ulysses the famous Greek hero who features in the great poet Homer's epic *Odyssey*. Who is Ulysses? Ulysses, the legendary Greek hero was the King of Ithaca, who after the siege of Troy set sail for home. On his way home, he was subjected to many storms and obstacles because of the wrath of the sea-god Poseidon.

Once in 1830 while on holiday in the Pyrenees, the mountains between France and Switzerland, Tennyson composed the line 'slow dropping veils of thinnest lawn' which formed the germ of the poem 'The Lotos-Eaters'. The poem was first published in the volume of 1833 and after being radically changed was included in the poems of 1842. As his biographer Robert Bernard Martin records:

Once he [Tennyson] was sitting smoking with his feet on the chimney-piece as he spouted 'The Lotos-Eaters' in its first form; unknown to him, Hallam darted around to a table behind him and took it all down as fast as he could to rescue it from oblivion.

We have only given you the grand finale of this poem for study. This in a way counterbalances the mood of languor which has been established in the earlier parts of the poem. 'The Choric Song' which is the most famous part of this poem is a masterpiece of metrical variation that suits the pace of the action and motion.

Ulysses and his mariners, after years of wandering have come upon this enchanted island full of sensuous delights. The whole poem is a debate in the mariners' minds between the claims of duty on the one hand and the vague pleasures and idleness of the island life on the other. The strenuous life of the mariners is described in quick stanzas and these are contrasted with the gentler pace stressing the beauty of a life of abandon and forgetfulness.

In this poem, once again, the reader is greatly impressed with the musical beauty that Tennyson has created from his sensitive use of an arrangement of words. It is a perfect fusion of sound and sense. By skilful use of contrast, the poet is able to evoke both the present serene location of the mariners and their turbulent past. At the very outset, we are told of the lotus flower that blooms everywhere on the island, the yellow lotus dust that is blown in the breeze has a magical soporific effect on the sailors. The mariners then contrast this with their earlier life of toil on board ship when through calm and storm all they did was work. Remembering their earlier hardships, the mariners exhort each other to swear unanimously to stay on in this enchanted island. Living here would be nothing short of god-like. Just as the gods lie together in their gleaming abode drinking nectar and playfully and carelessly hurling bolts of disaster on the world, so they would live here unmindful of others. They then dwell upon the futility of human life. Men on earth sweat and toil throughout their lives and barely manage to make ends meet. And yet finally they die-some going to hell to suffer endlessly while others go to heaven and rest their tired bodies in Elysian Fields. What life would the mariners choose? They would rather be on shore than toil on the seas. They have also concluded that sleep is preferable to toil:



'Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more'. The theme of the poem is that human life is futile and if the end of all toil is to be the grave, then given the option one should choose a life of rest and peace rather than duty and hardships. This is exemplified in the mariners' debate about whether to return home or whether to stay on the enchanted lotus island and live a life of idyllic peace and restfulness. The debate is resolved in the final line when the mariners decide to stay on in that paradise. The end of this poem is quite different from that of 'Ulysses' as we shall see. As you have seen, this poem is a masterpiece of sheer poetry that results from a flexible and free handling, of the metre. It is written in iambic lines of varied length--of between three to seven feet. The rhythm is also varied by switching over to trochees and in the sixth line of section 8 it suddenly becomes entirely trochaic and one cannot miss the effect of:

'We have had enough of action and of motion we'.

Why does Tennyson do this? He adopts the rhythm to suit the sense of what he is saying in that particular line. For example when he talks about the mariners' life of toil, the lines become quick-paced but when reference is made to the indolent life of the island, the pace slackens, becoming more serene.

If we look at the opening lines of this section, we can at once appreciate its onomatopoeic excellence. He aims to evoke, mainly by the sounds of the words, the feeling of the 'sensuous life. The words flow effortlessly.

The Lotus blooms below the barren peak:

The Lotus blows by every winding creek:

All day the wind bathes low with mellower tone;

Through every hollow cave and alley lone

Round and round the spicy downs the yellow

Lotos-dust is blown.

The smooth flow of words heightens the feeling of imagined peace and languor. You must have noticed the predominance of the consonants, and b and long 'o' vowel sounds. 'Peak' and 'creek' fit in with the mellow rhymes of 'tone', 'lone' and 'blown'. Contrast this flowing tone with the vigorous movement of: 'Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands, Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands'. This gives you an idea of Tennyson's technique of versification. With alliteration and assonance combined with rhyme the verbal music is perfectly adapted to the poet's tone and the exotic scene. Note the effect of assonance--the suggestive 'lo' sound occurs 1 1 times in the first 5 lines. From your study of the two poems, the exquisite quality of Tennyson's poetry is quite clear. Let us now look at another poem--also based on the Ulysses legend in the next section. But before we do that, let us complete the exercise given below.

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## 1.5 BREAK. BREAK. BREAK

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Here is a short lyric by Tennyson that also happens to be one of his most famous short poems. We do not find any of Tennyson's opinions expressed here, only intense feeling. The earlier poems in this unit are narrative. Here is an intensely personal poem written to express his grief over the sad death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam. The sea is a powerful image that often recurs in English literature. This is because, England being an island, the sea is never far away. Let us imagine Tennyson standing on a beach watching the waves of the sea crashing against the rocks and grey stones. Beaches in England do not all have golden sands. In fact, many of them are full of grey pebbles. The poet's heart is heavy with grief over his friend's death and the scene in front of him only evokes a deep feeling of loss over what has gone forever.

### THE POEM; BREAK, BREAK, BREAK

Break, break, break,  
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!  
And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me.

O, well for the Fisherman's boy, '  
That he shouts with his sister at play!  
O, well for the sailor lad,  
That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on  
To their haven under the hill;  
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,  
And the sound of a voice that is still.

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## 1.6 DISCUSSION

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This is a simple poem expressing a deep sense of loss. The poet looks at the waves of the sea dashing against the cold gray stones and his latent anguish at the death of his friend Arthur Hallam surfaces once again. He wishes that he can give adequate expression to the thoughts that well up within him.

The poet can see the fisherman's children: a boy and his sister shouting as they play. Tennyson also sees the young sailor boy singing in his boat as he sails on the bay. The joyous and playful shouting of the brother and sister and the cheerful song of the sailor are contrasted with the poet's own grief.

Tennyson watches the impressive ships sailing towards their harbour below the hill. This sense of a journey slowly completed only induces the poet to acutely miss the

soothing touch of the hand of his dead friend—a touch that can never be experienced again. He longs to hear the voice of Hallam but knows that it is forever silent!

Tennyson observes the waves crashing against the base of its rocks. The sea seems to be in eternal motion, its waves continually dashing against the shore. The continuity in nature is in sharp contrast to the cruel finality of death and the passage of time. The pleasant days spent in the loving company of his friend are gone forever and will never return.

In this poem, Tennyson works by the use of contrast. By contrasting the joy of the scene around him, he is able to highlight his own grief and desolation. By depicting the continuous clashing of the waves against the shore by the use of the simple 'break, break, break', Tennyson stresses the eternal aspect of nature in contrast to the brevity of human life.

The poem has an irregular metre that moves slowly to capture the heavy rhythm of the poet's grief. The rhyme scheme is simple with the second line rhyming with the fourth in each stanza.

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## 1.7 ANALYSIS

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In 1892 *The Musical Times* published a tribute to the recently deceased Poet Laureate, entitled "Tennyson in Song": "To the genuine and widespread sorrow at Lord Tennyson's death must be added that of the musician, who, by the nature of his art, is not a little qualified to appreciate the melodic loveliness and the graceful imagery of the dead Laureate's verse. But was Tennyson a musician's poet? That is to say, did his lines attract the fancies of composers?"<sup>1</sup> To answer the question with a resounding yes, the article in *The Musical Times* enumerates various musical settings of Tennyson's poems, "all showing how the same words may appeal to the varied imaginations of 30 composers." Special mention is made of "Break, Break, Break," chosen by many composers to reimagine the figurative melodies of Tennyson's poetry as actual melodies, usually for solo voice and piano accompaniment; by the early twentieth century, ever more versions were circulating for performance in England, Europe, America, and around the world.<sup>2</sup> Although other poems of Tennyson were set to music as well, why did this one in particular provoke so many musical responses? And how did Tennyson come to be read as "a musician's poet"?

"I do not think any poet has ever had a finer ear for vowel sound," T. S. Eliot proclaimed in 1932, echoing a century of praise for Tennyson.<sup>3</sup> Already in 1830, Hallam's famous review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* had claimed that "his ear has a fairy fineness," and Hallam drew on a familiar analogy between poetry and music to introduce these early poems as "preludes of a loftier strain."<sup>4</sup> Hallam admired "the variety of lyric measures, and exquisite modulation of harmonious words and cadences to the swell and fall of the feelings expressed" (93), and he ranked Tennyson among the poets who produce their effect "by sound": "Not that

they sacrifice sense to sound, but that sound conveys their meaning, where words could not . . . . In music they find a medium through which they pass from heart to heart" (96-97). Hallam's review was itself a prelude to a long and lofty line of critics who sang their praises of Tennyson's fictional "song." As Elizabeth Helsinger has argued in "Song's Fictions," Hallam first proposed the notion that Tennyson "thinks through sound" by "embodying its shifts and gradations of affect in the aural movement of his verse, to create a wholly verbal music," and it is "this kind of poetic writing, arising . . . from the ability to think through the tones and cadences of metrical language," that made Tennyson an exemplary lyric poet for nineteenth-century readers: "For Hallam, Tennyson's early lyric poetry is song," Helsinger concludes. <sup>5</sup> Of course, because metrical language is not music, the identification of lyric with song is figurative; through a metaphorical transposition of musical "notes" and verbal "tones," readers were asked to imagine each word of a poem as if it were sound to be heard, and to imagine Tennyson's poetry as if it were a song to be sung. Tennyson appealed to the ear of nineteenth-century readers precisely because his poems gave them new ways to play out the "as if."

The modulation of lyric measures so admired by Hallam is figuratively replayed by Tennyson in "Break, Break, Break." Composed after the death of Hallam, the poem yearns for "the sound of a voice that is still" and projects the sound of that lost voice into the rhythmic cadence of waves that break on the stones of the sea:

Unable to articulate "the thoughts that arise in me," the poem creates an allegory of rhythm in the rising and falling waves that would somehow (echoing Hallam) correspond to "the swell and fall of the feelings expressed." Through a metrical performance of this rhythmic allegory, the poem preserves Hallam's reading of Tennyson while lamenting the loss of his voice--any voice--in the poem. Even the sound of the fisherman's boy who "shouts with his sister at play" or the sailor lad who "sings in his boat on the bay" in the second stanza fades in comparison to the silent voice that is no longer heard in the third stanza. The reiteration of "break, break, break" that returns in the final stanza allows us to read the waves breaking "at the foot" of the meter, ending the poem with an abstraction of sound measured by a time that "will never come back to me." Thus the poem calls our attention to the inversion of voice in verse, or what I would call the performance of "voice inverse," where the imagination of voice (including the "voice" of the poet or our "voicing" of the poem) is mediated by a series of metrical "breaks" that interrupt the utterance. What kind of metrical analysis do we need to measure the silent intervals in the breaking lines of the first and last stanzas? How, in other words, do we read the breaks between the breaks?

The meter of "Break, Break, Break" was a matter of much debate at the "Meter Matters" conference, where it was nominated by Isobel Armstrong as our adopted conference poem. She described its rhythm as "a somatic pressure encouraged by the sound system of the poem's language, abstracted by the mind, and returned to language and the body when the poem is read in real time," and she developed a

dialectical reading of meter as a multiplicity of rhythms interacting with each other. By marking different patterns of stresses in "Break, Break, Break," she stressed the making and breaking of meaning through an experience of "polyrhythmic" that is simultaneously idealized and materialized in the poem. Following Hegel (or perhaps, a Hegelian rereading of Hallam), Armstrong meditated on the concept of the caesura as a form of musical thinking: in her performative reading of "Break, Break, Break" as a poem that "is itself a synonym for the caesura, speaking the caesura in the three words of its first line," she sought to demonstrate how the caesura might be reintegrated into the pattern of the verse as a break that creates meaning. Thus she turned the poem into a figure for the musicality of thought, metrically embodied in (and as) "the thoughts that arise in me."

It is more than coincidence that the questions posed by Armstrong--"how meter means and what meter means for the nineteenth century"--coincide in a reading of "Break, Break, Break." These questions arise (so to speak) again and again in thinking about the relation between meter and music in Tennyson's poem, not only in nineteenth-century metrical theories but in musical settings of the poem as well. As we shall see, the poem was frequently cited by Victorian metrical theorists to illustrate musical notation for English meter. In these efforts to create a musical scansion of Tennyson's poem, and in numerous efforts to compose music for the poem, the musical figure produced by Tennyson's metrical language is curiously literalized, as if it could really be heard. Yet each attempt to describe, prescribe, or transcribe the "music" of his poem also leads to the recognition of Tennysonian song as a fiction that cannot be read literally: the more closely the meter is read by analogy to music, the more it measures its distance from a voice that would (almost) be heard.

In nineteenth-century ideas about the meter of Tennyson's poem, we encounter an idealization of music that is (or should be) of interest to historical prosodists. Rather than arriving at a correct scansion of "Break, Break, Break," I offer an exercise in historical prosody, analysing how late Victorian metrical discourses made possible the imagination of a poem "as if" it might be heard. What we can learn from these various, often idiosyncratic, ways to imagine the meter of "Break, Break, Break" is not the true meaning of meter but its fictions, allowing us to trace the historical emergence of a metrical imaginary that persists in many current discussions about meter and meaning, even if they have set aside nineteenth-century models of prosodic analysis. More recent accounts of the relation between meter and meaning are part of this longer history of describing meter to prescribe how we might learn to speak, feel, or imagine the verbal music of poetry. Such metrical imaginaries generate different ways to make poetry available for reading, especially among nineteenth-century readers eager (or anxious) to re-imagine how a poem might appeal to the ear and the eye through the silence of print. I argue that their metrical and musical mediations of "Break, Break, Break" self-consciously called into question the very voice that they also tried to call into being. Indeed, this is why

Tennyson appealed to nineteenth-century readers, as his poem revolves around the imagination of voice inverse, continually reversing it.

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## 1.8 METER OF THE POEM

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In *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (1982), Derek Attridge gives a useful overview of the history of metrical study in English, ranging from "the comically idiosyncratic to the most laboriously obvious," to identify the metrical assumptions that underlie most critical discussions of English poetry. While Attridge's ultimate concern is to assess what may be valuable or misleading in these accounts for our current understanding of prosody, his survey also opens up an approach to historical prosody that takes into account different ways of thinking about meter without discounting them: within the broader project of historical poetics, "doing" historical prosody would allow us to historicize and analyze discourses about meter as part of the cultural production and historical circulation of poetry in centuries preceding our own.

Among the "traditional" approaches to English meter discussed by Attridge is a section on prosodists who developed an alternative to classical foot-scansion by emphasizing the close relation of poetry to music. Rather than measuring the duration of syllables on the model of classical quantitative verse or counting the stresses on the model of English accentual verse, they used an analogy between meter and music to imagine a temporal approach to rhythm as a phenomenon that occurs in time. Joshua Steele's 1775 *Essay towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech*, revised in 1779 as *Prosodia Rationalis*, was an early attempt to rationalize the rhythms of speech by transcription into musical notes, and in the course of the nineteenth century more prosodists began to invent other musical notations as well. While such notational systems may seem idiosyncratic or laborious to us now, they elaborated a set of metrical assumptions that allowed nineteenth-century readers and poets to re-imagine poetry as a musical abstraction.

Musical approaches to metrical analysis divided the poetic line into temporally equal units, and attributed to stressed syllables the function of regular musical beats. In addition, as Attridge points out, "accounts of English verse using this approach frequently introduce the idea that measurable intervals of silence function as an integral part of the rhythmic structure, as rests do in music" (21). So, for example, Coventry Patmore's influential *Essay on English Metrical Law* (1857) identified isochronous intervals as a fundamental feature of English verse, and this theory of isochrones led him to claim that the beat (whether actual or mental) could be either heard in stressed syllables or felt in the pauses between syllables: the poetic line could be filled either with sound or with silence. <sup>8</sup> Writing from another perspective, J. J. Sylvester also took up this "principle of the silent syllable, or to speak more intelligibly, of the rest," and turned it into a musical law. In *The Laws of Verse* (1870), Sylvester transposed foot scansion into musical nomenclature ("an iambus with us is a quaver and crotchet; a trochee, a crotchet and quaver; an

anapaest . . . two semi-tone quavers followed by a crotchet; and a dactyl . . . a crotchet followed by two semiquavers") and he introduced "arithmetical schemes" with fractions to quantify the relation between notes in musical time. 9 Through Patmore and other theorists associated with "The New Prosody" in Victorian England, meter was increasingly theorized as a principle of spacing that could formalize temporal relations between abstract quantities, mentally perceived in the act of counting and not necessarily audible.

How then can musical notation be a practical approach to English scansion? This is the critical question posed by Calvin Brown in his 1965 article, "Can Musical Notation Help English Scansion?" Returning to several other musical metrists from the nineteenth century, he considers how they tried to scan English poetry by transposing its rhythms into musical notes. According to Brown, "the use of musical notation for English scansion assumes that we hear in either the physical or the mental ear, certain syllables which stand out from the rest and are spaced at very nearly equal intervals of time." He agrees with this basic assumption, but also notes the difficulty of putting such theories into practice: "This is the real dilemma. The musical scanners agree in most of their principles, but not in their practice. When, as not infrequently happens, they scan the same passage, fundamental disagreements usually appear. Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break,' with its obvious use of rests, cries out for a musical scansion--and gets a different one every time." For Brown, the variability of nineteenth-century musical notation for "Break, Break, Break" proves that it is impossible to agree on equal intervals of time, both for reading Tennyson's poem in particular and for reading poetry in general. Although he is willing to contemplate the possibility that "perhaps the mind's ear of some persons really hears all verse in fairly strict musical time," he concludes that "musical notation indicates a regularity that I do not hear, creates more problems than it solves, and is in general more of a nuisance than a help."

But for nineteenth-century musical metrists, this interplay between "the mind's ear" and "the physical ear" was less a problem of hearing than an opportunity for reading. If Tennyson's poem "cries out" for a musical scansion, each attempt to sound out "the sound of a voice that is still" had the effect of producing more readings rather than a single reading that could actually be heard. To illustrate their principle of reading, whatever it might be, the musical scanners increasingly turned to "Break, Break, Break" as their favourite example. Through various systems of musical notation, we can see not only how the same poem was read in different ways but also how it was recirculated for further reading in the nineteenth century.

"Break, Break, Break" is the very first example cited in John Ruskin's *Elements of English Prosody* (1880), an introductory treatise designed to explain his idea of music to students, "for use in St. George's schools." Beginning with a definition of verse as "graceful arrangement of the measured times of utterance," he offers a musical model for measuring how syllables ought to be spoken in a poem to maintain "the precision of its clear utterance." But in this measurement, Ruskin also

has to account for the intervals that are not spoken: "Each meter, in reality, consists either of actual syllables completely uttered each in its time, or of one or more of such syllables with measured rests, filling up the time required, as in bars of music. I shall use in the expression of time, therefore, the ordinary system of musical notation." 12 To demonstrate his system of musical notation, he measures the beginning of "Break Break Break" into two lines of three bars each.

## MUSIC ON WORDS

Alongside multiple metrical readings of Tennyson's poem, musical settings raise similar questions about the performance of voice in verse. If this poem is a figure for the musicality of thought, how might the language of music serve to articulate "the thoughts that arise in me"? And what is the relationship between words and music in representing "the sound of a voice that is still"? By composing and performing music on the words of "Break, Break, Break," nineteenth-century musicians may seem to literalize the musical figure that allowed nineteenth-century readers to imagine "hearing" the poem, but this literalization turns out to be another musical figure. Rather than solving the problem of voice by making it audible in song, these songs revolve around the inversion of voice as well. Instead of going beyond the words, as if music could transcend language, each musical setting imagines another way to read between the words, asking yet again how to "hear" the breaks in "Break, Break, Break."

As a musician, Sidney Lanier attempted not only musical notation but also musical settings for English poetry. A decade before he started working on *The Science of English Verse*, he composed music on the words of several poems by Tennyson, including "Break, Break Break." Signed "Words: Tennyson. Music. S. L.," the manuscript of this song suggests that the words come before the music, but because the piano plays an instrumental introduction before the singer begins to sing, the music also comes before the words. Lanier's composition plays out the reversibility of this relation between words and music. As the vocal line modulates through various keys in relation to a series of metrical shifts in the piano, the song creates a counterpoint between the piano and the singing voice in order to imagine the "utterance" of the poem. This rhythmic counterpoint differs from the single lines of musical notation that Lanier used for the poem in *The Science of English Verse*, creating another way to think about the verbal "music" of "Break, Break, Break."

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## 1.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Why does the poet ask the sea waves to break in Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break"?

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2. Who is the poet addressing in the first stanza of "Break, Break, Break"?

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3. What is the central idea of the poem "Break, Break, Break" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson?

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4. Compare the feelings of the poet and the other people mentioned in the poem.

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5. Why isn't the grave a pleasant destination in "Break, Break, Break"?

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## **1.10 LET US SUM UP**

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This short poem carries the emotional impact of a person reflecting on the loss of someone he (or she) cared for. Written in 1834 right after the sudden death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam, the poem was published in 1842. Although some have interpreted the speaker's grief as sadness over a lost lover, it probably reflects the feeling at any loss of a beloved person in death, like Tennyson's dejection over losing Hallam.

(<http://www.songsofthevictorians.com/break/analysis.html>)

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## UNIT 2 : ROBERT BROWNING “MY LAST DUCHESS”

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objective
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 About the Poet
- 2.3 Analysis of the Poem
- 2.4 Discussion
- 2.5 Poetic Devices
- 2.6 Check Your Progress
- 2.7 Let us Sum up

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVE

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In the previous Unit, you read some poems by Tennyson. As you can see, Victorian poetry is different from the poetry of the Romantics. The Romantics were primarily interested in nature. On the other hand, while the Victorians were interested in nature, they were more fascinated by human nature. You will find this tendency in the poetry of Browning, especially in his dramatic poems wherein there is a searching psychological analysis of his characters and their motives.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Browning has often been considered a "difficult" poet. There may be several reasons for this "difficulty".

a) Sometimes, Browning has the tendency to say too much in too few words. For the sake of achieving brevity and emphasis, several words are omitted. In technical terms this is called 'ellipsis'. In such cases, the meaning has to be inferred from the overall context of the poem. b) At other times, there are sudden jumps from one thought to another in Browning's poetry. It may then become difficult for the reader to keep pace with these quick transitions.\*

c) Browning was also a very learned man. He often supposed that his readers could easily understand the vast range of allusions that he introduced in his poems.

All these factors contribute to some extent to the difficulty in understanding Browning. But after the initial difficulties have been solved, you will find the reading of Browning's poetry a rewarding experience. We have selected some of Browning's shorter poems for you. Are they easy or difficult? Response to poetry is something very individual and you may or may not agree with the comments of even renowned critics. Moreover, a poem can have different interpretations and therefore no single interpretation can qualify as the most authoritative or authentic one. As you

read the poems, try to monitor your responses, to them. You may require several readings before you feel you have understood the poem. You will notice that with each fresh reading, you will observe some beautiful poetic touch, some delightful phrase or some vivid image that had escaped you in your earlier readings. Poems are meant to be enjoyed! As we become more aware of the poet's art we find that our enjoyment increases with our awareness. Let us take a brief look at the poems we will read in this Unit You will recall that a lyric is a short poem that has a songlike quality. The subject matter is usually personal and the poem expresses deeply felt emotions and states of mind. We shall then take up another pair of lyrics 'Meeting at Night' and 'Parting at Morning'. These can be broadly called 'dramatic'. In this kind of poem; the poet does not speak in his own voice but the situation is described by an imaginary character. This is similar to a dramatic monologue. But a dramatic monologue is different because there the focus is not on the actions but on the character and motives of the speaker. Our final poem 'My Last Duchess' is a masterpiece of this kind. Browning, as you will see, is quite different from Tennyson. He is primarily a thinker. Moreover, his poems are more difficult than Tennyson's which are marked by clarity and simplicity. You will notice some more differences as you read selected poems.

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## **2.2 ABOUT THE POET**

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### **LIFE**

Robert Browning was born in 1812 to parents who introduced him to both literature and music at an early age. His youth coincided with the great spurt of writing by the Romantic poets. While still in his teens, he was so influenced by Shelley that he converted to atheism and vegetarianism. In 1828, Browning joined London University but left without taking a degree. He knew that he wanted to be a poet and had written poems at an early age but his first volume of poems was only published in 1833.

Browning was already a poet of some standing when he read some new poems by Elizabeth Barrett. He fell in love with her without seeing her and subsequently married her, remaining devoted to, her till her death in 1859. Browning dedicated his entire life to writing. Though primarily a poet, he also wrote 8 plays between 1837 and the time (1845) when he met Elizabeth Barrett. His letters too have been published. That he was successful is clear from the fact that during his lifetime, Browning Societies were formed to promote an understanding of his poetry. When he died in Venice in 1889 his body was taken back to England to be laid to rest in the Poet's Comer at Westminster Abbey. This is the ultimate honour for any English poet.

## MY LAST DUCHESS POEM

### FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's<sup>[1]</sup> hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)<sup>10</sup>  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps  
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or, 'Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough<sup>20</sup>  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart – how shall I say – too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace – all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,<sup>30</sup>  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men – good! but thanked  
Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set<sup>40</sup>

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
– E'en that would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence<sup>50</sup>  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck<sup>[1]</sup> cast in bronze for me!

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### 2.3 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

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This poem first appeared in *Dramatic Romances* (1842) and has now become a favourite anthology piece. Like many of Browning's best poems, 'My Last Duchess' is inspired in Italy. This poem is probably a dramatization of an account of Alfonso 11, the fifth Duke of Ferrara, (Ferrara is a place in Italy) that Browning had read around 1842. He married Lucrezia de' Medici the young daughter of the duke of Florence. They were a fairly new family compared with the count. Lucrezia died at the age of 17-she was poisoned. Three years later Alfonso contracted a marriage with Barbara, niece of the Count of Tyrol. The poem is set in Renaissance Italy (sixteenth century). . As we have pointed out earlier, this poem is a dramatic monologue. While reading it, we should be aware of its distinct features. What is a dramatic monologue? In a dramatic monologue:

- a) the narrative is related by one person;
- b) we can get an idea of the situation in which the person speaks;
- c) we can also infer what happened before this particular circumstance is described;
- d) the motives and character of the speaker are revealed. For example, the speaker may praise himself but from the context of the poem, we can infer whether this is justified or otherwise.
- e) the poet makes use of colloquial speech that is appropriate to the speaker (Michael Mason);

f) the treatment is serious (Mason);

g) the exotic nature of the speaker and the remoteness of the scene distances the dramatic monologue from both the author and the reader (Mason').

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## 2.4 DISCUSSION

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The Duke of Ferrara is speaking to a marriage broker, an envoy of a Count. The Duke of Ferrara has taken him upstairs ostensibly to show him his artistic treasures, away from the rest of the company assembled below. This gives him the opportunity of talking to him more intimately. It also gives him ample chance to soften him up so that his case for a larger dowry is represented before the Count his master, whose daughter he is to marry shortly. Let us paraphrase the poem.

The poem opens with the Duke of Ferrara pointing to a woman's portrait on the wall. This woman tie introduces as his previous duchess. He also remarks on the lifelike quality of the portrait. He then goes on to appreciate it as wonderful piece of art and commends the artistry of Fra Pandolf, who worked for one full day before the portrait assumed its present perfection. He then requests the envoy to sit down and admire the portrait. You must have noticed how adeptly Browning is dramatizing the situation by making quick digression's in the narrative. He continues that he had mentioned the name of Fra Pandolf on purpose. His experience so far had been that whoever saw the portrait always questioned him, if they dared, about how that particular expression came to the duchess' face. The duke, in yet another aside, says that no one else but him is allowed to draw the curtain that conceals the portrait. He assures the envoy that he was not the first to question him about it.

In a slightly ironical tone, the Duke tells the envoy that his duchess' face did not flush with pleasure in his presence alone. He says that the painter had probably made some routine remark about the position of the lady's mantle. Or it is possible that he had complimented her on her beauty saying that it would not be possible to capture the fading blush on her throat on canvas. The duchess was easily impressed with such courtesies and beamed with pleasure. The duke, a suave conversationalist pauses for a moment to choose the correct word to describe the lady's nature. He puts it most delicately saying that 'she had a heart ... too easily impressed'. This is sarcastically meant for he had no sympathy with or understanding of the young duchess' innocence. He complains that she liked all that she saw. He is shocked at her lack of discrimination. Whether she was wearing the ornament presented by her husband, or whether she was looking at the setting sun, or whether she I received a branch of cherries broken for her from the orchard by someone eager to please, or whether she rode the white mule round the terrace, the duchess would blush or express her pleasure to one and all equally. He could not get over the fact that since she thanked all equally she probably held his ancient family name in equal esteem with them.

It was below the dignity of the duke to put a stop to such frivolous behaviour. He then tries to enlist the envoy's sympathy by asking him how he could have handled such a situation without compromising his dignity. He simply says that he did not know how to express his desires to her. He could not tell her how her behaviour disgusted him or how she fell short of or exceeded the limits of decorum. He was not sure whether the 'duchess would allow herself to be corrected without defiance, it would still amount to having 'stooped'. And this is something the duke would permit himself to do on no account. He hastens to assure the envoy that she was fond of him for she smiled at him whenever he passed. But because of his extreme consciousness of his exclusive name he could not tolerate the fact that she smiled at others as well. As this increased, he gave the necessary commands so that her smiles may be stopped forever. Did he have her shut up in a convent, as Browning has I suggested elsewhere? Or did he have her killed? What is your reaction to this cruelty? Is the duke mad or is he just a proud and jealous husband?

After having narrated the fate of his unfortunate erstwhile wife, the duke once more turns to the portrait with the eye of a connoisseur. He then requests his guest to rise so that they may re-join the company assembled downstairs. But before they join the others, the duke shrewdly mentions the point he wishes to make. He hopes that the envoy's generous master I will be able to meet his demands for the dowry he hopes to receive on marrying his daughter. But ever one for propriety and decorum. The duke states that it is not for dowry that he is contemplating marriage but because he is fully impressed with the merits of the Count's daughter. At this point the envoy probably fell a step behind to allow the duke to descend first. The duke graciously insists on their going down side by side. As they walk down, the duke draws the envoy's attention to a rare bronze statue 'of Neptune. Taming a seahorse that had been cast by the famous sculptor Claus of Innsbruck. What is the symbolic significance of Neptune taming the sea horse? Does the poet suggest that the duke had by now 'tamed' the envoy? Or is it the usual habit of the duke to tame all--envoys as well as I wives, past and future?

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## 2.5 POETIC DEVICES

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The versification of the poem is marked by freedom of flow. The lines are arranged in rhyming couplets such as aa bb cc and so on. But these are not closed couplets which carry a complete thought or feeling. On the other hand, one line continues into the next line. This is thus an open couplet and the technique is called enjambment. This is more appropriate because the monologue form demands an unbroken flow of thought processes. It also caters to the digressions that are a necessary feature of thinking aloud. For example, if we look at the first two lines, we notice that while wall' and 'call' rhyme, the sense of 'I call\*' is only completed in the middle of the next line. The meter varies in different lines. But even so the rhythm is calm and stately, much in keeping with the character of the speaker.



Another element that recurs in Browning's poetry, as we have noticed, is alliteration. For example, 'Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt. Whenever I passed her; but who passed without much the same smile?' are not only musical but also stress the frequency of the offending smiles and the concomitant irritation that they caused. The voice of the duke almost turns to a venomous hiss that leads to his sinister commands. Can you pick out some more examples of alliteration? It is important to remember that the elements of poetic expression like rhyme rhythm metre alliteration are not an end in themselves. These elements have an artistic significance only in so far as they are an embodiment of the poet's thought. Therefore, when we pick out a poetic device we must be able to say in which way it helps the poet's thought, feeling and overall design.

Also notice the diction in this poem. By using words such as countenance, munificence, ' forsooth and durst, the poet has created an atmosphere of a bygone age, Renaissance Italy in this case. The duke speaks in an ironical tone whenever he refers to his last duchess. '... she smiled, no doubt, Whenever one passed her, but who passed without much the same smile?' His exclusive breeding and social finesse are evident in his reference to her death as 'Then all smiles stopped together'. The speech is terse-not a single word can be removed without affecting the whole poem. There are sudden transitions, changes of mood and shifts in argument induced by the silent envoy. These not only help to generate an impression of realistic portrayal, but they also reveal the character not only of the duke but also of the duchess whom he wishes to denigrate.

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## 2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- 1) What exactly does the duchess do that drives the duke so wild in "My Last Duchess"?

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- 2) What historical events and social issues of the time are connected to Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"?

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## UNIT 3 : MATTHEW ARNOLD'S THE STUDY OF POETRY

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *MATTHEW ARNOLD'S THE STUDY OF POETRY*
- 3.3 Let us Sum up
- 3.4. Check your progress

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVE

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Matthew Arnold, one of foremost critic of 19th century, is often regarded as father of modern English criticism. Arnold's work as a literary critic started with Preface to Poems in 1853. It is a kind of manifesto of his critical creed. It reflects classicism as well his views on grand poetic style. His most famous piece of literary criticism is his essay The Study of Poetry. In this work he talks about poetry's "high destiny". He believes "mankind will discover that we have to turn poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us". Arnold lived in a materialistic world where advancement of science has had led society in a strange darkness. Importance of religion was submerged. People were becoming fact seekers. A gap was being developed and Arnold believed poetry could fill that gap. In his words:

"Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, and the fact is now failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything, the rest is world of illusion, of divine illusion."

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the greatest name among the Victorian critics, was a poet turned critic. He started his literary career by writing poetry. It was only at the age of thirty-one that he published his first piece of criticism, Preface to the Poems, and then for the rest of his life, for full thirty-five years, he hardly wrote anything but criticism.

His literary criticism may itself be divided into two categories:

- (a) Theoretical criticism or literary aesthetics
- (b) Practical criticism

His theoretical criticism is contained largely in his Preface to the Poems and The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, standing at the head of the first series of his Essays in Criticism, and The Study of Poetry with which opens the second series of his Essays in Criticism. His practical criticism largely consists of his estimates of English and Continental poets contained in both the series of Essays in Criticism.

A number of influences operated upon Arnold from the earliest days and determined his views and attitudes.

First, Arnold owes much of his knowledge of Greek and Latin masters to his great father. His classicism was inspired by him, and it is to this fact that George Watson attributes the quality in his writing, the incongruity between the head and the heart.

The second powerful influence on him was that of the age in which he lived and created. Disgusted with the degenerate and decadent romanticism of the day, its mammon worship and false money-values, its cultural anarchy, its historicism, its provincialism, and its philistinism, he was critical of it and sought to bring about a cultural revolution.

Thirdly, Arnold was a man who read avidly, both the ancient and the moderns, and quite naturally, his reading influenced him profoundly. Love for the classics of ancient Greece and Rome was inculcated in him by his father, and he drank deep at the foundation of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Aristotle and many others. This passion of reading the Greek and Roman literature is reflected in all his works.

Fourthly, it was the critical method of Sainte-Beuve which appealed to him and which in the main, he made his own.

And lastly, professorship of poetry at Oxford gave him power to present his ideas.

All these factors mixed up and he formed his criticism in which the most important work is *The Study of Poetry*.

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the several myriad arguments of Arnold's critique. From Chaucer to Burns, this paper attempts to explain Arnold's views on many famous classics of English literature. Not only does Arnold present a commentary on different poets, but in doing so presents a way of critique and criticism which, according to him, is the most appropriate and effective one. The "touchstone method", for Arnold, was the only way of valorization and evaluation that is free from all fallacies and subjective prejudices. After presenting his conception of the best kind of poetry, he presents his case on how one can recognize this "best kind of poetry" and then goes on to give practical examples of such a system of criticism. All of this makes Arnold's work complete, comprehensive and exemplary, such that could be read from time to time as an instruction manual on recognizing great poetry and distinguishing it from the mediocre kind.

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## **3.2 MATTHEW ARNOLD'S THE STUDY OF POETRY**

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He starts with asserting that the future of poetry is immense. All our creed and religion have been shaken. They have grown too much tied down to facts. But for poetry the idea is everything. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. We should study poetry more and more, for poetry is capable of higher uses. We have to turn to poetry "to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us." Without poetry science will remain incomplete and much that passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

Poetry can fulfill its high function only if we keep a high standard for it. No charlatanism should be allowed to enter poetry. Arnold then defines poetry as:

“A criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.”

Only the best poetry is capable of performing this task. Only that poetry which is the criticism of life can be our support and stay, when other helps fail us. So, it is important that readers should learn to choose the best. In choosing the best, the readers are warned against two kinds of fallacious judgments:

The historic estimate and the personal estimate.

The readers should learn to value poetry as it really is in itself. The historic estimate is likely to affect our judgment when we are dealing with ancient poets, the personal estimate when we are dealing with our contemporary poets. Readers should insist on the real estimate, which means a recognition and discovery of the highest qualities which produce the best poetry. It should be a real classic and not a false classic. A true classic is one which belongs to the class of the very best and such poetry we must feel and enjoy as deeply as we can.

It is not necessary to lay down what in the abstract constitute the features of high quality of poetry. It is much better to study concrete examples, to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest qualities, and to say, the features of highest poetry are what we find here. Short passages and single lines from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and others may be memorized and applied as touchstones to test the worth of the poems we want to read. This other poetry must not be required to resemble them; but if the touchstone-quotations are used with tact, they will enable the reader to detect the presence or absence of the highest poetic quality.

However, in order to satisfy those who insist that some criteria of excellence should be laid down, Arnold points out that excellence of poetry lies “both in its matter or its substance and in its manner or style.” But matter and style must have the accent of high beauty, worth and power. But Arnold does not define what this mark or accent is. He says we would ourselves feel it, for it is the mark or accent of all high poetry. If the matter of a poet has truth and high seriousness, the manner and diction would also acquire the accent of superiority. The two are vitally connected together.

Arnold then undertakes a brief review of English poetry from Chaucer to Burns in order to apply practically the general principles laid down above and so to demonstrate their truth. The substance of Chaucer’s poetry—his view of things and his criticism of life—has “largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity.” He surveys the world from a truly human point of view. But his poetry is wanting in “high seriousness”. His language, no doubt, causes difficulty, but this difficulty can be easily overcome. Chaucer will be read more and more with the passing of time. But he is not a classic; his poetry lacks the accent of a real classic. This can be easily verified through a comparison of a passage from Chaucer with one from Dante, the first poetic classic of Christendom. This is so because he has the truth of substance but not “high seriousness”.

Shakespeare and Milton are our great poetical classics, but Dryden and Pope are not poetical classics.

“Dryden was the puissant and glorious founder; Pope was the splendid high priest of the age of reason and prose, of our excellent and indispensable 18th century.”

But theirs is not the verse of men whose criticism of life has a serious seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity. Their application of ideas to life is not poetic application, they are not classics of English poetry; they are classics of English prose.

The most singular and unique poet of the age of Pope and Dryden is Gray. Gray is a poetic classic, but lie is the scantiest of classics. He lived in the company of great classics of Greece, and he caught their manners, and their views of life. His work is slighter and less perfect than it would have been, had he lived in a congenial age. Elsewhere, Arnold tells us that the difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Pope, Dryden, and other poets of their school, is briefly this:

“Their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits; genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul.”

Gray’s poetry was so composed.

Next coming to Burns, Arnold points out that his real merit is to be found in his Scottish poems. In his poetry, we do find the application of ideas to life, and also that his application is a powerful one, made by a man of vigorous understanding and master of language. He also has truth of substance. Burns is by far the greater force than Chaucer, though he has less charm. But we do not find in Burns that accent of high seriousness which is born out of absolute sincerity, and which characterizes the poetry of the great classics. The poetry of Burns has truth of matter and truth of manner, but not the accent of the poetic virtue of the highest masters. Even in the case of Burns, one is likely to be misguided by the personal estimate. This danger is even greater in the case of Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth. Estimates of their poetry are likely not only to be personal, but also “personal with passion”. So Arnold does not take them up for consideration.

Having illustrated practically his touchstone method, Arnold expresses the view that good literature will never lose its currency. There might be some vulgarization and cheapening of literary values, as a result of the increase in numbers of the common sort of readers, but the currency of good literature is ensured by “the instinct of self-preservation in humanity”. So strong is Arnold’s faith in the value of poetry of the highest kind. Hence, he believes that only in the spirit of poetry our race will find its last source of consolation and stay.

Poetry as Superior to All Knowledge:

The Study of Poetry is Arnold’s most famous work of literary criticism as it is fundamentally concerned with poetry’s high destiny. He is of the view that poetry can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. As discussed above, Arnold lived in a materialistic world where advancement of science had led society in a strange darkness. Importance of religion was

submerged. People were becoming fact seekers. A gap was being developed and he believed that poetry could fill that gap by noble and profound application of ideas to life which should be of moral nature. Therefore, he believes that with the passing of time mankind will discover that they have to turn to poetry in order to interpret life and to console and sustain themselves as science and philosophy will eventually prove flimsy and unstable. He demanded that poetry should serve a greater purpose instead of becoming a mere medium of gaining pleasure and appreciating beauty. He claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science and religion because religion attaches its emotions to ideas and ideas are infallible and science in his view is incomplete without poetry.

One of the characteristic qualities of poetry mentioned by Arnold in this essay is a sound representation of life and ideas without any attempt to falsify the facts. He further points out that another characteristic of great poetry is the application of ideas to criticism of life. He endorses Wordsworth's view that "poetry is the impassioned expression which is the countenance of all science" and calls poetry the breath and finer spirit of knowledge. According to Arnold, the greatness of Wordsworth lies in his powerful application of the subject of ideas to man, nature and human life. Another quality attributed to great poetry by him is that of high seriousness. Aristotle was of the view that poetry was superior to history due to the former's qualities of higher truth and higher seriousness. What we judge from Arnold's essay is that "high seriousness" is concerned with sad reality and this quality is possessed by the poetry which deals with the tragic aspects of life. Arnold further illustrates this view by giving examples of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton's poetry.

Therefore we must know how to distinguish the best poetry from the inferior, the genuine from the counterfeit and to do this we must steep ourselves in the work of the acknowledged masters.

Charlatanism and the Fallacies:

Arnold, after apotheosizing poetry in his essay, suggests that poetry must be of high order of excellence to fulfill its high destinies. The Study of Poetry clearly enunciates that the people must accustom themselves with "high standards" and "strict judgments", in order to avoid fallacies of highly regarding certain poems and poet. Poetry should not be valued on basis of the value of certain poets in history. It must not be evaluated on the basis of personal affinities or likings. It presents methods for discerning only the classical and the best poets and poetry.

Arnold analyses the role of the critic while judging any poetry. Before Mathew Arnold, the critics valued poetry based on the beauties and defects in it. While Mathew Arnold sees the critic as the social benefactor who strictly judges the poetry of higher order of excellence. Aristotle analyzes the work of art, but Mathew Arnold in study of poetry analyzes the role of critic. Aristotle gives us the principles which govern the making of the poem, the other gives principles by which poems should be selected as superior or inferior and made known to the world. Aristotle's critics own allegiance to the artist but Arnold's critic own allegiance to the art (poetry) and the society. Art should be given value which it possesses in itself. Arnold views poetry as the criticism of life.

According to Arnold, there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. A charlatan is defined as the flamboyant deceiver who attracts others with tricks or jokes. Charlatanism in poetry confuses or removes the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound, true and untrue or only half true. In this essay, Arnold clearly rejects charlatanism in poetry in following words:

“In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honor that charlatanism finds no entrance that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable.”

Arnold supports his idea for the nobility in poetry by recalling the Saint Beuve’s reply to Napoleon, Arnold states the Saint Beuve’s reply to Napoleon when he said him that charlatanism is found in everything. Saint Beuve replied to this that charlatanism might be found in everything except poetry, because in poetry the distinction between the superior and inferior and noble and ignoble is of paramount importance. Arnold regards poetry as criticism of life in true sense. Poetry can reflect the true spirits of life when it will be free of any kind of corruption or ignobility. He regards poetry as “the criticism of life governed by poetic truth and poetic beauty”. According to him the spirits of our age will find stay and consolation by this true criticism of life. The extent to which the consolation, comfort, solace in poetry is obtained is proportional to the power of poem’s criticism of life. It means that the measure to which a poem is genuine and noble, and free from charlatanism.

Arnold then defines the true canons for the best poetry. The best poetry is that which is according to the reader’s desire or wish. Arnold illustrates this in following words:

“The best poetry is what we want, the best poetry will be found to have power of forming, sustaining and delighting us and nothing else can.”

Arnold states three different kinds of estimates that govern the reader’s mind while evaluating any piece of literature, especially poetry. These are:

Real estimate

Historical estimate

Personal estimate

According to him the most precious benefit to be collected from best poetry is “clearer and deeper sense of best” and “the strength and joy to be drawn from it”. This sense must be present in every reader’s mind while searching for the best in poetry, and to enjoy it. This sense should govern our estimate that what should we read. This estimate is called the real estimate of poetry.

Arnold contrasts the real estimate to “two other kinds of estimate”, the historic estimate and the personal estimate. The real estimate of the poetry can be superseded by these two “fallacious” estimates. He says that these two estimates should be discarded while evaluating poetry; he cautions the critic that in forming a genuine and disinterested estimate of the poet under consideration, he should not be influenced by historical or personal judgments.



Historical estimate is regarded fallacious, because we regard ancient poet excessive veneration. It calculates the poet's merit on "historical grounds", that is, by regarding a poet's work as a stage in the course of development of nation's language, thought and poetry. The historical estimate is likely to affect our judgments and language when we are analyzing ancient poets. Arnold states this in essay, in following words:

"The course of development of nation's language, thought and poetry, is profoundly interesting, and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development, we may easily bring to ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticizing it; in short, to over rate it."

Personal estimate is another fallacy while criticizing poetry. It calculates a poet's merit on the basis of personal affinities, liking or circumstances, which may make us over-rate the object of personal interest because the work in question "is, or has been of high importance to us personally". We may over-rate the object of our interest, and can praise it in quite exaggerated language and grant it more value or importance than it really possess. Personal estimate is regarded fallacious, because it makes people biased towards their contemporary poets.

As example of erroneous judgments, he says that the 17th century French court tragedies were spoken with exaggerated praise, until Pellison reproached them for want of free poetic stamp, and another critic Charles d' Hericault, said that the 17th century French poetry had received excessive veneration. Arnold says that the critic seems to substitute, a halo for physiognomy, and a statue in place, where there was once a man.

Many people, Arnold argues, skip in obedience to mere tradition and habit, from one famous name or work in its national poetry to another, ignorant of what it misses, and of the reason for keeping what it keeps, and of the whole process of growth in poetry. All this misses, however the indispensability of recognizing the "reality of poet's classical character" that is' the test whether it belongs to the class of very best and that appreciation of the wide difference between it and all the works which has not the same character. Arnold points out that tracing historical origins in works of poetry is not totally unimportant and that to some degrees personal choice enters into any attempt to anthologize the works. However, the 'real estimate', from which derives the benefit of clearly feeling and deeply enjoying the very best, the true classic in poetry ought to be the literary historian's objective.

### Poetry as the Criticism of Life

In his essay, 'The Study of Poetry' Matthew Arnold has presented poetry as a criticism of life. In the beginning of his essay he states: "In poetry as criticism of life, under conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, as time goes by and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay." Thus, according to him poetry is governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.

Poetic truth is a characteristic quality of the matter and substance of poetry. It means a sound representation of life. In other words, it is a true depiction of life without any

attempt to falsify the facts. Poetic beauty is contained in the manner and style. It is marked by excellence of diction and flow of verse. While talking of Chaucer, Arnold mentions fluidity of diction and verse. Poetic beauty springs from right words in the right order.

Poetic truth and poetic beauty are inter-related and cannot be separated from one another.” The superior character of truth and seriousness in the matter and substance of best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its manner and style”, says Arnold. If a poem is lacking in the qualities of poetic truth and high seriousness, it cannot possess the excellence of diction and movement, and vice-versa

In his estimate of Burns and Wordsworth, Arnold points out that another characteristic of great poetry is application of ideas to criticism of life. The greatness of Wordsworth lies in his powerful application of the subject of ideas to man, nature and human life. Ideas according to Arnold are moral ideas.

Another quality attributed to great poetry by Arnold is that of ‘high seriousness’. Although he does not fully explain the term, we gather quite a lot of information from his statement. Aristotle was of the view that poetry is superior to history due to the former’s qualities of higher truth and higher seriousness. What we judge from Arnold’s essay is that high-seriousness is concerned with the sad reality. This quality is possessed by poetry which deals with the tragic aspects of life. Even the examples given by Arnold from Dante, Shakespeare and Milton’s poetry illustrate this view. For instance, dying Hamlet’s request to Horatio:

“If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story...”

Regarding the concept of criticism of life, it needs to be understood what Arnold meant by the phrase – “criticism of life”. It does not mean carping at or unnecessarily finding faults with life. The suggestion itself is unsound that it means a criticism of society and its follies. Criticism of life means a healthy interpretation of life. It means an evaluation, sympathetic sharing in and feeling for. The theory of poetry given Arnold has been challenged on many accounts. Arnold does not consider Burns a great poet because in his poetry Burns presents an ugly life. Arnold was of the view that a poet has the advantage of portraying a beautiful life in his poetry. Eliot attacked this opinion. He believed that the poet has not the advantage of describing a beautiful life but has rather an advantage of having the capacity to look beneath both ugliness and beauty. It is the power to look beyond boredom, horror and glory.

While teaching of the concept of poetic beauty, Arnold mentions excellence of diction but does not explain what it is. As regards the flow in verse or the fluidity in movement, Arnold probably does not realize that the use of coarseness is sometimes intentional to create a specific effect. Smoothness need not be the only one;

harshness and ruggedness are equally great qualities, when used to create special effects.

Matthew Arnold does not fully explain the term 'high seriousness'. It should also be remembered here that seriousness should not at all be considered synonymous with solemnity. The serious and humorous can exist together.

Another view put forward by Arnold that has been under the shadow of criticism is that of 'ideas'. We might very well like to believe that what Arnold wants to say is that an author, while interpreting life for us, might also use a moral idea to convey a moral lesson. But what Arnold believes is that there is a pre-conceived idea on which the poet bases his evaluation.

Eliot also criticizes Arnold on the latter's occupation with only great poetry. Adhering to this principle, we might end up dealing with only a small part of the total poetry.

Matthew Arnold talks of deriving pleasure from poetry. But according to critics he is actually biased towards morality – a fact that is evident from his view that poetry would replace religion. "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us", he writes. Apart from all the negative criticism directed against Arnold we cannot deny that he has very beautifully related literature to life. As Douglas Bush rightly points out that literature is not an end in itself for Arnold. It only adds to the beauty of life and answers the question 'How to live?' Arnold is such a person, who does not live to read, but reads to live.

The Touchstone Method:

"Poetry is interpretative by having natural magic in it, and moral profundity."

Arnold's touchstone method is a comparative method of criticism. According to this method, in order to judge a poet's work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose. If the other work moves us in the same way as these lines and expressions do, then it is really a great work, otherwise not. This method was recommended by Arnold to overcome the shortcomings of the personal and historical estimates of a poem. Both historical and personal estimate go in vain. In personal estimate, we cannot wholly leave out the personal and subjective factors. In historical estimate, historical importance often makes us rate a work as higher than it really deserves. In order to form a real estimate, one should have the ability to distinguish a real classic. At this point, Arnold offers his theory of Touchstone Method. A real classic, says Arnold, is a work, which belongs to the class of the very best. It can be recognized by placing it beside the known classics of the world. Those known classics can serve as the touchstone by which the merit of contemporary poetic work can be tested.

The best way to know the class, to which a work belongs in terms of the excellence of art, Arnold recommends, is:

“... to have always in one’s mind lines and expression of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to the poetry.” This is the central idea of Arnold’s Touchstone Method.

Matthew Arnold’s Touchstone Method of Criticism was really a comparative system of criticism. Arnold was basically a classicist. He admired the ancient Greek, Roman and French authors as the models to be followed by the modern English authors. The old English like Shakespeare, Spenser or Milton were also to be taken as models. Arnold took selected passages from the modern authors and compared them with selected passages from the ancient authors and thus decided their merits. This method was called Arnold’s Touchstone Method.

However, this system of judgment has its own limitations. The method of comparing passage with a passage is not a sufficient test for determining the value of a work as a whole. Arnold himself insisted that we must judge a poem by the ‘total impression’ and not by its fragments. But we can further extend this method of comparison from passages to the poems as whole units. The comparative method is an invaluable aid to appreciation of any kind of art. It is helpful not merely thus to compare the masterpiece and the lesser work, but the good with the not so good, the sincere with the not quite sincere, and so on.

Those who do not agree with this theory of comparative criticism say that Arnold is too austere, too exacting in comparing a simple modern poet with the ancient master poet. It is not fair to expect that all hills may be Alps. The mass of current literature is much better disregarded. By this method we can set apart the alive, the vital, the sincere from the shoddy, the showy and the insincere.

Arnold’s view of greatness in poetry and what a literary critic should look for are summed up as follows:

“... it is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: how to live.”

On Chaucer:

Matthew Arnold is an admirer of Chaucer’s poetry. He remarks that Chaucer’s power of fascination is enduring.

“He will be read far more generally than he is read now.”

The only problem that we come across is the difficulty of following his language. Chaucer’s superiority lies in the fact that “we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world”. His superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry.

“His view of life [weltanschauung] is large, free, simple, clear and kindly. He has shown the power to survey the world from a central, a human point of view.”

The best example is his Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Matthew Arnold quotes here the words of Dryden who remarked about it; “Here is God’s plenty”. Arnold continues to remark that Chaucer is a perpetual fountain of good sense. Chaucer’s

poetry has truth of substance; “Chaucer is the father of our splendid English poetry.” By the lovely charm of his diction, the lovely charm of his movement, he makes an epoch and founds a tradition. We follow this tradition in Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Keats. “In these poets we feel the virtue.” And the virtue is irresistible.

In spite of all these merits, Arnold says that Chaucer is not one of the greatest classics. He has not their accent. To strengthen his argument Arnold compares Chaucer with the Italian classic Dante. Arnold says that Chaucer lacks not only the accent of Dante but also the high seriousness.

“Homer’s criticism of life has it, Shakespeare’s has it, Dante’s has it. But Chaucer’s has not.”

Thus in his critical essay *The Study of Poetry* Matthew Arnold comments not only on the merits of Chaucer’s poetry, but also on the short-comings. He glorifies Chaucer with the remark, “With him is born our real poetry.” According to Matthew Arnold, Chaucer’s criticism of life has “largeness, freedom, shrewdness and benignity”, but it lacks “high seriousness”. The term “high seriousness” which Arnold says marks the works of Homer. Also, Dante and Milton and Wordsworth, apparently employed this “high seriousness” which entails a sustained magnificence of artistic conception and execution accompanied by deep morality and spiritual values.

It must be remembered that Arnold laid a great deal of importance on the “human actions” as the proper subjects of poetry. His contention of “high seriousness” is inevitably bound up with this. His concept of poetry being a “criticism of life” is quite satisfied by Chaucer. Chaucer’s poetry is steeped with life, and yet there is basic sanity and order in his vision which Arnold should not have missed.

The fun and comedy in Chaucer’s writing often blinds one to his basic greatness. His vision is truly Christian in its broad and forgiving tolerance. His vision of the earth ranges from one of amused delight to one of grave compassion. His fresh goodwill and kindly common sense, his sense of joy and warmth are communicated through his poetry especially in *The Canterbury Tales*. But behind the fun and tolerance there is a sane moral view. Chaucer’s tolerance is not born of moral leniency or from a desire to excuse or mitigate the worldliness of the characters as he saw them. The Monk’s travesty of the cloister in the name of gracious living finds no exoneration from Chaucer, nor is Chaucer appreciative of the wickedness of the Summoner and the Pardoner. His tolerance is based on deep conviction of human frailty, and his medium of looking at it is irony, not inventiveness.

When we read the pen portraits of the pilgrims, we can see how clearly Chaucer has suggested the values they live by and what they look for. In these values—the chivalry of the Knight, the Monk’s love for hunting, the Doctor’s love of gold, the poor Parson’s holy thought and work, the Clerk’s love for learning and teaching—lies Chaucer’s subtle moral judgment.

When Arnold quotes a line from Chaucer as truly classic, he chooses a line expressive of stoic resignation. “O martyr seeded to virginity” from the Prioress’s tale. Indeed, all the lines quoted by Arnold as “touchstones” have the ring of stoic

resignation. Thus, Arnold's own view seems biased in favor of the obviously solemn and didactic.

In fact, Arnold's concept of poetry does not seem to include the genre of comedy. The term "high seriousness" has been interpreted to mean seriousness in the more obvious sense. The poet's criticism of life is not only to be serious, but also seen to be serious. Arnold seems to demand solemn rhetoric. If we interpret "high seriousness" in this light, we can only say that Chaucer's poetry lacks it, for Chaucer was anything but "solemn". However, if we consider "high seriousness" in a broader light, Chaucer's observation of life, his insight into its passions and weaknesses, its virtues and strength is truly great. If we strictly accept Matthew Arnold's contention, then we will have to deny "high seriousness" to all comic writers, even to Moliere and Cervantes.

On the Age of Dryden:

"The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this; their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul." – Matthew Arnold

John Dryden (1631–1700) was an English poet, literary critic, translator and playwright who was made Poet Laureate in 1668. He is seen as dominating the literary life of Restoration England to such a point that the period came to be known in literary circles as the "Age of Dryden". Walter Scott called him "Glorious John". John Dryden was the greatest English poet of the seventeenth century. After William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, he was the greatest playwright. And he has no peer as a writer of prose, especially literary criticism, and as a translator. John Dryden was an English writer who was the dominant literary figure in Restoration England. Most of his contemporaries based their style of writing on innovations introduced by Dryden in poetry, drama, and literary criticism. The age of Dryden is regarded as superior to that of the others for "sweetness of poetry". Arnold asks whether Dryden and Pope, poets of great merit, are truly the poetical classics of the 18th century. He says Dryden's post-script to the readers in his translation of *The Aeneid* reveals the fact that in prose writing he is even better than Milton and Chapman. Just as the laxity in religious matters during the Restoration period was a direct outcome of the strict discipline of the Puritans, in the same way in order to control the dangerous sway of imagination found in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, to counteract "the dangerous prevalence of imagination", the poets of the 18th century introduced certain regulations. The restrictions that were imposed on the poets were "uniformity, regularity, precision, and balance". These restrictions curbed the growth of poetry, and encouraged the growth of prose.

Hence we can regard Dryden "as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid high priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century." Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the "prose classics" of the 18th century

On Thomas Gray:

“He is the scantiest and frailest of the classics in our poetry, but he is a classic.” – Matthew Arnold

Born in eighteenth-century London, Thomas Gray became one of those few names in English literature that despite a considerably short oeuvre are remembered and celebrated to this date. Often said to have been born in the wrong age and time, Gray led a highly troubled and dissatisfied life, and suffered from frequent bouts of melancholia and depression. But troubled as he was and the little which he wrote, he wrote incredibly well. Mostly remembered for his magnum opus, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Gray wrote the kind of poetry where substance and form, thought and structure perfectly corroborate each other.

Often the subject of many critical evaluations, Arnold, in his *Study of Poetry* and in several other commentaries, argue that Thomas Gray, often misunderstood and wrongly judged, belonged to the rare species of writers who never “spoke out”.

“”He never spoke out.” In these four words is contained the whole history of Gray, both as a man and as a poet.” – Matthew Arnold

For Arnold, Gray never “spoke out” rather words fell naturally and spontaneously from his pen. During his evaluation of the eighteenth-century, Arnold argues that it was not Dryden and Pope who were the poetical classics representative of their age, rather Gray who could be called the ultimate poetical classic of his century. In another commentary, Arnold enumerates different opinions that critics over time have had about Gray:

“Cowper writes: “I have been reading Gray’s works, and think him the only poet since Shakespeare entitled to the character of sublime. Perhaps you will remember that I once had a different opinion of him. I was prejudiced.” Adam Smith says: “Gray joins to the sublimity of Milton the elegance and harmony of Pope; and nothing is wanting to render him, perhaps, the first poet in the English language, but to have written a little more.” And, to come nearer to our own times, Sir James Mackintosh speaks of Gray thus: “Of all English poets he was the most finished artist. He attained the highest degree of splendor of which poetical style seemed to be capable.””

Another reason for Gray not “speaking out” or writing enough is often said to be due to his being born in the wrong age. Eighteenth-century literature was gradually discovering the genre of prose and its possibilities. The greatest writers that the century produced were prose writers, as Arnold states in his discussion on the age of Dryden. In such an age, Gray, who was a born poet, could not blossom or flower the way he deserved to. Thus, Arnold writes:

“Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose. He fell upon an age whose task was such as to call forth in general men’s powers of understanding, wit and cleverness, rather than their deepest powers of mind and soul. As regards literary production, the task of the eighteenth century in England was not the poetic interpretation of the world; its task was to create a plain, clear, straightforward, efficient prose.”

And so:

“Coming when he did and endowed as he was, he was a man born out of date, a man whose full spiritual flowering was impossible.”

But despite the fact that Gray did not enjoy a satisfying and long literary career, he managed to leave the coming generations with a small treasure of some of the finest verse ever written in the English language. For Arnold, Gray remains the most representative poet of the early eighteenth-century before the Romantics. Thomas Gray never “spoke out” because he never had to and because he couldn’t bring himself to. His poetry flowed from him naturally, expectantly and inevitably. Arnold comments:

“Compared, not with the work of the great masters of the golden ages of poetry, but with the poetry of his own contemporaries in general, Gray may be said to have reached, in his style, the excellence at which he aimed.”

Passed away at the age of 54, Gray’s *Elegy* is the poet’s most loved work, and a poem that could be safely attributed to the poet and to the man himself.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

On Burns:

Robert Burns, as Douglas Bush and R. H. Super observed, gets a surprising amount of attention in Arnold’s discussion of poets in *The Study of Poetry*. There are three explanations of the prominence of Burns in Arnold’s major essay on poetry. Firstly, Arnold is returning to the question that had interested him in exchanges with Clough, the connection between emotion and artistic form. In a letter in which Arnold touched on revolution and the relations between labor and capital, he breaks off abruptly to discuss Burns as an artist. Apparently in reply to Clough, Arnold says, “Burns is certainly an artist implicitly”. The “fiery, reckless energy” of Burns is noted in *The Study of Poetry* as well as his “sense of the pathos of things”.

Arnold’s concern with the admirers of Burns, however, suggests a second explanation, that Arnold is responding to the work of his old friend John Campbell Shairp. Shairp, as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, had given an Oxford lecture on Burns, and in 1879 had published a monograph on Burns; in both, Shairp praised Burns as the Scottish national poet and the poet who celebrated the Scottish peasantry. Arnold’s discussion of Burns in *The Study of Poetry* may be seen as a part of an argument connected with a larger question that had concerned Arnold in all of his criticism: the kind of poetry that was necessary for a democratic age. Shairp had indeed seen Burns as a poet sympathetic to the people and to the cause of democracy and equality. Arnold seizes the chance to talk about Burns because he wants to say, as he does at the end of the essay, that only the best poetry is adequate for a democratic age. Along with the names of Dryden and Pope, Matthew Arnold also



mentions the name of Robert Burns. Burns' English poems are simple to read. But the real Burns is of course in his Scottish poems.

“By his English poetry Burns in general belongs to the 18th century, and has little importance for us. Evidently this is not the real Burns, or his name and fame would have disappeared long ago. Nor in Clarinda's love-poet, Sylvander, the real Burns either. The real Burns is of course in his Scottish poems. Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scottish drink, Scottish religion and Scottish manners; he has a tenderness for it. Many of his admirers will tell us that we have Burns, convivial, genuine, delightful, here.”

Burns' “real poems”, according to Arnold, are those that deal with “Scottish way of life, Scottish drinks, Scottish religion and Scottish manners.” A Scottish man may be familiar with such things, but for an outsider these may sound personal. For supreme practical success more is required. In the opinion of Arnold, Burns comes short of the high seriousness of the great classics, and something remains wanting in his poetry.

Leeze me on drink! It gies us mair Than either school or college; It kindles wit, it waukens lair, It pangs us fou'o knowledge Be't whisky gill or penny wheep Or any stronger potion, It never fails, on drinking deep, To kittle up our notion

According to Arnold, there is an element of bacchanalianism in Burn's poetry. He refers to many of Burns' stanzas, and comments:

“There is a great deal of that sort of thing in Burns, and it is unsatisfactory, not because it is bacchanalian poetry, but because it has not that accent of sincerity which bacchanalian poetry, to do it justice, very often has. There is something in it of bravado, something which makes us feel that we have not the man speaking to us with his real voice; as in the famous song For a' that and a' that:

A prince can make a belted knight, A marquis, duke, and a' that; But an honest man's aboon his might, Guid faith he mauna fa' that! For a' that, and a' that, Their dignities and a' that, Are higher rank than a' that.

To sum up Arnold's views on Burns, Arnold does not see Burns as belonging to the rank of the ultimate classics in English literature, as, once again, Burns' poetry lacks “high seriousness”. Burn's poetry is frivolous, bacchanalian and passionate and is devoid of all the merits that characterize classic poetry. But despite his flaws, Burns remains one of those poets in whose work intensity of passion and spirit merge splendidly and whose work astounds as well as please.

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### **3.3 LET US SUM UP**

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The essay despite claims towards absolute markers of poetic worth refuses to engage with any formal qualities of ‘good’ poetry. Arnold seems to be suggesting that if the content of a poem is sufficiently “serious,” it will automatically find expression in a serious form. This is his primary objection with Burns' poetry; it is not serious enough. Arnold also refuses to place the poet and the poem within its historical context. This is deliberately done so as to maintain the idea that art is ameliorative.

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### 3.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Arnold literary criticism may itself be divided into two categories. What are they?

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2. Arnold then defines poetry as:

“A criticism of life under the conditions fixed for that criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty.” Elucidate

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3. What are the two kinds of fallacious judgments?

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4. Poetry as Superior to All Knowledge. Justify

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5. What are the three different kinds of estimates that govern the reader's mind while evaluating any piece of literature, especially poetry?

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6. Poetry as the Criticism of Life. Discuss

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7. Explain the Touchstone Method?

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