

Victorian age and use of the Greek Mythology in Poetry

Abstract

Queen Victoria's reign in Great Britain from 20 June 1837 to her death in 1901 is an era of political reform, economic growth and industrialization, scientific discoveries, religious activities and rise of middle class etc. General society was progressing. But the other side of this 'progressive society' shows a clash between science and religion, crisis of faith (This crisis was reflected in Matthew Arnold's poem Dover Beach) Child labour like children working in coal mines (best represented by contemporary novelist Charles Dickens). Representative poet of Victorian age like Lord Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold wants to give its reading public something fresh and beautiful apart from the common themes of their time. So these poets looked towards the great Greek mythical world which was in their eyes harmonious, fresh, spiritually rich and beautiful in contrast to the Victorian World. These poets treated the Greek myths of Ulysses, Tiresias, Demeter and Persephone, Empedocles to name only a few in their poems with full enthusiasm.

Keywords: Contemporary Victorian Society, Political Democracy, Reform Bill, Industrialization, Ugly World, Greek Myths: Ulysses, Tiresias, Demeter and Persephone, Religious Doubt, Victorian Warrior, Scientific Discoveries Etc.

Introduction

The period of Queen Victoria in England from 1837 to 1901 is a period of flourishing of art and literature in its all forms. Apparently looking it is a period of peace, economic development emergence of the middle class, absence of any major war. General public seems to look satisfied with her queen and her reign. But a deep look in the contemporary society shows that all was not well.

Aim of the Study

The aim and purpose of this study is to show to the readers a picture of contemporary Victorian Society, and to justify that why some Victorian poets like Tennyson and Matthew Arnold looked towards Greek mythical world for the theme of their poems.

The age was alive with new activities in every field and spheres of life. It was a period of political democracy with the passing of the first reform bill in 1832, and the second reform act of 1846 and the repeal of Corn laws in 1846. England was fast turning from an agricultural into an industrial country. The basic inventions of power loom, the steam engine and the process of making iron with coal gave rise to industrialization. The result of this industrialization was that the machines which were invented to serve man, made men their slave, rather they were neglecting him. reflecting the Victorian society G.M. Yong says, "Machine had so reduced the value of labour that, at any moment, the workman might find himself working like a slave in the midst of plenty which his own hand had accepted to create"¹

There was a revolution in commercial enterprise, due to the great increase of available markets, and as a result of this, an immense advance in the use of mechanical devices. The new commercial energy was reflected in the great exhibition of 1851, which was hailed as the inauguration of a new era of prosperity. On the other side of this picture of commercial expansion we see the appalling social conditions of the new industrial cities, the squalid slums, and the exploitation of cheap labour. The evils of industrial revolution were vividly painted by such writer as Charles Dickens through his novels. Another aspect of this material progress was that it led to the rise of the middle class which had a worldly and rationalistic outlook towards life. This bourgeois which was mostly merchants class had changed the society and intellectual milieu of the age. The people of this class believed in hard work and worshipped both God and wealth. The average merchant class was God fearing but, at the same time, it was also comfort loving and for their comfort they could interpret



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even the Bible. Massinger's comment about this middle class phenomenon is important, he says, "The Victorian bourgeois (middle class) tired to give his earthly object spiritual wings.....They wanted money and power, but at the same time they wanted to believe it was manna (money) dropped from heaven. And they wanted their writers to sing so²"

We also absorb a unique phenomenon in the theology of the period. The theologians of the Victorian period can be categorized in four groups- The evangelicals, who at the starts were by far the most powerful; the Noetics, and their successors of the Broad Church, the followers of Coleridge; and then the most interesting of all, the exponents of the Catholic Reaction, which is known in England as the Oxford Movement. The Oxford movement was initiated in 1833. Edward Albert comment about this movement thus: "This movement had its source among the young and eager thinkers of the old university and was headed by the great Newman; who ultimately joined the Church of Rome. As a religious portent it marked the wide spread discontent with the existing beliefs of the Church of England; as a literary influence it affected many writers of note, including Newman himself, Fronde, Maurice, Kingsley and Gedstone³"

These religio-socio activities were somehow affecting sensitive Victorian mind and in the literature of the period find their due place. But it is science and its discoveries which influenced the society and human sensibility most. Hugh Walker says, "Since the beginning of the Victorian the spirit of science has permeated literature in every department. Its marks is to be seen in the poetry. It is seen too in imaginative prose.⁴" The publication of books such as Lyell's Principles of Geology (1830), First Principle (1864), Principles of Ethics (1892-1893) but most important book on science was the publication of the Origin of Species (1859) that has much influenced man and literature of the period. This book has disturbed the whole Victorian society. It gave a jolt to the well established religious doctrines. The religious faith was now being under mined by the spirit of sceptical inquiry directed at the Bible. The average Victorian was a worrier, he worried about God. about nature and about the very existence of God; and was in a state of utter confusion. Great historian Carter says, "The Victorians accepted the material benefits of 'Progress' with enthusiasm. Now however, it appeared that scientific thought was leading men to doubt the literal truth of the Bible"⁵

The picture that emerges from these facts shows that socially and economically society was progressing. Scientific temper has further intensified this progress. People were looking happy and satisfied, but a sensitive literary mind finds that something lacked from this so called 'Progressive Society'. It seemed to him that society was lacking in internal peace spiritual beauty and wholeness of life. Growing industrialization and scientific discoveries have shaken the very foundation of theology too.

Great Victorian poets like Lord Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and some few other wants to give it's reading public something fresh and new apart from the contemporary themes. To quench their poetic sensibility these poets looked back towards the

Greek mythological world which seems to them harmonious whole, ideal, beautiful and fresh in comparison to the Victorian 'ugly' world.

Lord Alfred Tennyson, often called as the representative poet of the Victorian age, because of his touching best the nerve of the society, has treated Greek myths in some of his important poems. Ulysses can be taken as a good example, where poet described Greek myth of Ulysses, king of mythical Ithaca, his son his wife. The poem presents the ideals of indomitable will, energy, courage and optimism of an old king. This energy and optimism of Ulysses was very much required in the society.

'Tiresias' of Tennyson treats Greek myth of Tiresias, a Theban who was transformed for a time into a woman for killing the female of a pair of snakes. Zeus and Hera referred to him the question whether man or woman derives more pleasure from, and when Tiresias supported the opinion of Zeus, Hera struck him with blindness but Zeus gave him long life and the gift of prophecy. Tennyson interpreted the myth to prove that a mere continuation of breathing is not life as he seems to be witnessing in the contemporary society.

Demeter and Persephone is again based on the Greek myth. The myth of season mother (Demeter) and her beautiful daughter (Persephone) reflect the emotional harmony, incidently we don't find this harmony in the contemporary society. This may be one of the reason that the myth of Demeter and Persephone attracted attention of the poet. Victorians give value to material and earthy things, whereas the myth of Demeter and Persephone established value of true love for man James Kissane. A critic says, "As a study of material bereavement and love the poem (Demeter and Persephone) owes much to its distinction to its emotional portraiture"⁶

Lucretius presents symbolically the agony of Victorian mind. In this poem he took the myth of great Roman philosophical poet of 99 C 55 BC Tennyson used Greek myth in some other poems also like Hero to Leader, Oenone, Semele, The Death of Oenone, Tithonus, Lotus-Eaters etc.

Matthew Arnold, another great melancholic poet of the Victorian era, turn towards Greek mythology for the theme of his some celebrated poems. Arnold was a philosophical poet who was not satisfied with his age, he was a worrier in the true sense. The poet's view was that Victorian society's rational outlook was driving towards a bleak future.

He always seems thoughtful somber and grave in his poems. These thoughts turned him sometime pessimistic and melancholic. Perhaps to take a sigh of relief he turned towards the Greek mythological world and in some of his poems treated Greek myth substantially. For example take his poem Empedocles. In Empedocles Arnold chose a figure of a philosopher and scientist of Acragos in Sicily born in the 5th century BC who had thrown himself, according to one story, into the craters of Mt. Etna. Empedocles, in his lost moments recalls an olden day when thought had not killed the sense but lived in happy harmony with it. Arnold uses the myth with certain purpose. In the character of Empedocles the poet shares a figure who is tormented by the pressure of world problems.

Arnold chose a figure from mythical world and made it comprehensive and sympathetic to thousands of readers who have felt something of it themselves and can identify themselves more easily with a vague legendary and universal figure. In the poem the philosopher chants the rational and scientific facts of painful unharmonious life. The poet continues to sing in the rich and fluent verse of the ancient world. Victorian rationalism and materialism have destroyed mystery by 'rule and line, have clipped the angel's wings and emptied the once haunted air, Empledocels feels that life is in no longer to be supported.

In his poem 'Philolmela' Arnold based his theme on the Greek myth of philolmela who was the daughter of Pandion, a legendery king of Athens. The poem can be seen as showing a struggle between good and evil. Here we can see that Arnold finds a contrast between Greek and Victorian word. In the Greek world nature is animate and vital where as in the 'Victorian world nature is neutral and devoid of morality. About Arnold's liking for the Greek myths J.A.K Thomson says, "The essence of his (Arnold) criticism in literature as in other things was this, that we should concern ourselves only with the best and model ourselves as much as we could upon them. This best he was prepared to recognize wharever it could be found, but he thought that it was to be found, most abundantly and with the least admixture of less excellent element in Greek literature of the fifth century before Christ"⁷.

Besides these great Victorian there are other poets who frequently uses Greeks myths in their work for eg. Robert Bridges's Promethous the Fireviber, Charles Kingley's Andromeda, Watson Dixson's The Birth of Apollow, William Marris 'The Story of Cupid

and Psyche, Rossetti's Hero's Lamp and the list of poems dealing with Greek myths goes on.

To conclude, we can say that for the sensitive victorian poets Greek myths were substantial source of beauty, harmony, freshless and spiritual fertility against the not so harmonious and beautiful world of Queen Victoria.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study justifies that for Victorian poets Greek mythical world was ideal and fresh and these poets wants to give their public something new and fresh apart from the repetitive themes with which general public was fed up. To study poems of Tennyson and Arnold dealing with mythical themes against the Victorian society, I hope will be a fresh study.

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