

2. Social Criticism in Victorian Poetry

The Victorian poetry is a mirror of the social, religious, and industrial upheavals of the Victorian age. Although the Victorian age was an age of material prosperity and scientific progress, it was an age of great problems. The industrial revolution came to its full bloom at the beginning of this age and caused great misery among the lower and working classes in particular. Capitalism and utilitarianism gave rise to materialism as materialistic values displaced traditional moral values. The darkening conditions of the poor and workers stimulated the Victorian poets to respond critically to the problems of their age. A sense of responsibility came to displace Romantic optimism. Critical realism dominated Victorian poetry as the pressing conditions of the age made Romantic idealism irrelevant. The chartist poets, Elizabeth Barrette Browning, William Morris, and the later Tennyson wrote powerful poetry of social criticism which tackles critically the problems of the industrial revolution in the Victorian age. Poems like “Cry of Children” and “City of Dreadful Night” are powerful attacks on the social problems that were caused by industrialism and capitalism in the Victorian age.

Other poets, notably, Matthew Arnold, preferred to engage with larger cultural issues of the Victorian age in a more reflective and philosophical manner. Arnold was responding to the problem of doubt and skepticism caused by the clash between science and religion. The publication of Charles Darwin’s book *origin of Species* in the middle of the Victorian age led to shake faith in Christianity. Darwin proved scientifically that humanity was not created by God but evolved slowly from lower species. This created a deep sense of doubt and uncertainty that dominated the intellectual frame of mind of the Victorian age.