

THE IMPACT OF DARWINISM ON MAJOR VICTORIAN POETS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of Darwinism on major Victorian poets. Darwinism refers to the evolutionary insights of Charles Darwin, a great nineteenth century scientist. His scientific revelations not only energized the prevailing discourses but also added to an already charged atmosphere of doubts and debates. While science found in him a renewed expression, religion and human sciences were no less impacted. In his influential evolutionary texts, Darwin not only questioned the origin of man but also put him in struggle for survival. In decentering man as a superior and originary being, Darwin stunned and disturbed the Victorian society. This direct confrontation of science and religion caught the imagination of its intellectuals. Literary figures specifically the poets could not escape the heat of this tension. Writing exactly at times when Darwin published his works, it was but natural that major poets like Alfred Lord, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, and Thomas Hardy might have been affected and in turn responded. This brief analysis attempts to trace the Darwinian effect on these poets to show the extent they were impacted in writing their poetical works.

Keywords: Darwinism, Victorian poetry, evolutionary text

INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) in England is termed as Victorian age. Some historians, however, considers passage of the Reform Act (1832) as its proper beginning. Regardless of origin, it is a period of peace, prosperity, industrial consolidation and colonial expansion. At the same time, it is an age of doubts and debates. No singular label can accurately characterize the complexity and progress of the age. However, this complexity and progress may in part be attributed to the emergence and development of science.

Science exerted powerful influence on almost every walk of life. The evolutionary theories of Charles Lyell (1797-1875), Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (1744-1829), and specifically of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) revolutionized mankind and at the same time added to the prevailing discourse of doubts and debates. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* unfolded many circles of thoughts and beliefs.

Since, literature is the reflection of an age; the Victorian literary giants shaped and reshaped

their views in accordance with the familiar assertions of Darwin's evolutionary theory. The novelist, the poets, and other literary figures of the age got affected and as such responded to the sway of Darwinism. The present study deals with the reflection of Darwinism on the major Victorian poets to show how far their works addressed this issue.

While evolution proper is understood in Darwinian sense, theories of evolution were discussed long ago. In Greek, Aristotle (384-322 BC) noted resemblance in some species. Groups were made of particular organism and then divided into simple and complex. It was assumed then that they had the tendency of developing from good to better to best. The same practice of grouping together could be seen in the works of modern scientists as well. Considered a renowned evolutionary, the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (1744-1829) argued that that variation in species is the result of natural process. In this variation, no supernatural forces are involved, thereby challenging the reigning assumptions of priests and the bible. Likewise, Charles Lyell, another contemporary, had a great

contribution to the development of revolutionary discourse. In his geological treatise *The Principles of Geology* (1830) Lyell argues that with changing conditions species die down due to their inability of corresponding adaptation. These gradualist assumptions of Lyell also clashed with the prevailing religious discourses.

Regardless of clashes, the two theorists had significant impact on Charles Darwin who got inspiration from them in developing his evolutionary discourse. For Darwin, man has never been a superior divine creation but is the product of other species. Life has been created once and so are the species with origin in the same one source (318). This one source is like an unseen parent. Darwin argues that various forms of life were not the same as had been once. The modern day forms are naught but products of evolution from ancestors that in turn had their origins in mystery. Survival means adaptation to changing environment. In the *Origin of Species*, Darwin argues that variation and natural selections are something sure and are more powerful than man's fragile and frail labor (115). This definitely underscores man's worth in the universe. It is only vanity and pride that man's ancestors considered themselves superior and divinely created. In *The Descent of Man* Darwin argues:

I may be permitted to say, as some excuse, that I had two distinct objects in view; firstly to shew that species had not been separately created, and secondly, that natural selection had been the chief agent of change, though largely aided by the inherited effects of habit, and slightly by the direct action of surrounding conditions. (92)

Darwin thus deconstructed man as 'lord of creation but continuously stressed our profound ignorance on a variety of points' (Culler 224). Man's existence is justified by struggle; hence all about him is reduced to competition. It reduced the significance of man and life to a struggle for survival wherein he will fail to survive if he failed to compete, and may be replaced by an evolved specie. Man relies on dogmas and unfounded beliefs. Scriptural interpretation could not accurately trace his origin. Hence, nothing will save him from extinction. These evolutionary revelations about man were no doubt revolutionary for mankind in general and the Victorians in particular. Darwin was not without some instant effect: He made great followers that caught his line of thinking in a short time.

Darwin caught the imagination of Victorian writers as well that lost a sense of certainty in the wake of his disturbing theories. They gave voice to doubts and debates of the time. Some of them turned pessimistic while some other rejected Darwinism or found flaws in his theory of evolution. As stated, this brief analysis attempts to see the impact of Darwin on Victorian poets (Tennyson, Arnold, Browning and Hardy), to show how their poems accept or reject his evolutionary assertions.

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

Tennyson embodies the very identity of the age. In Tennyson's art, one finds the true spirit of the Victorian compromise. He was affected by Darwinism; yet he still remained an orthodox Christian. He had ordered for a copy of *On the Origin of Species* so that he might read it in advance. He was interested in transmutation in a general way. He was substituting ideas for the melancholic parts of *In Memoriam*. In it, he gave voice to the Victorian complexity. Stephen Jay Gould, a renowned evolutionist, says that T.H. Huxley paid tribute to Tennyson who is the only poet since Lucretius, having the capability to understand the work of the men of science (64). In Tennyson's *In Memoriam* we find the evolution of Darwin as well the geological uniformity of Charles Lyell.

The discoveries of science and the death of his friend Arthur Hallam enabled Tennyson to pen down his groping for a moral order in the universe which Darwin had left so dumb and headless. It took seventeen long years for him to complete his *In Memoriam* which is his representative poem. In it, the ultimate questions of life, death and immortality are probed into. The assertions of doubt and faith almost overlap each other. Tennyson's prologue uses traditional religious faith as a relief against the poet's acceptance of scientific criterion for knowledge. As he says, "We have but faith we cannot know, / For knowledge is of things we see" (21-22). Such lines in Tennyson reflect his belief in the traditional Christian faith and his adherence to it. Tennyson failed to find the benign God in *In the Origin of Species* that directs the world to some good ends. The world of *In the Origin* is dumb and dark. For Tennyson, the bleakest aspect of Darwin's work was the widespread cruelty in nature that must end in death. Tennyson, however, altered one of the biblical allusions in *In Memoriam*. For instance, the line "Since Adam left his garden yet" was adjusted to a

more scientifically as “Since our first sun arose and set” (xxiv 8). This shows how Tennyson displayed scientific thinking along religious lines.

Repeatedly, Tennyson points out that his theological beliefs do not necessarily underscore his notion of God: “I found Him not in the world or sun/ Or eagle’s wing, or insect’s eye” (cxxiv 56). After reviving Robert Chamber’s *Vestiges of Natural History of Creation* (1844), Tennyson urged that he already anticipated many of its speculations. Part cxviii of *In Memoriam* gives a glimpse of Chamber’s cosmology and presents the prospects of a possible future evolution. The structure of *In Memoriam* shows the evolution of the poet’s own heart and mind which flows with the march of the poem. There seem many shifts in his thoughts and feelings which show the changing character of human nature. A glaring example is the poet’s approach towards eternal life. The poet is convinced as the grief of Hallam gets lessened. This ‘unbelief’ is not because of the death of the friend but is the outcome of a skeptic era pre-dating Darwin. In the beginning, it seems as the poet is lost in favor of evolution but as the poem proceeds, the poet gets strong spiritual conviction. Tennyson speaks for the necessity of faith in an age of material science: “Ring out the want, the care, the sin, /The faithless coldness of the time” (cvi 17-18). The following lines speak in the strongest terms the challenge and assertions of material science:

Not only cunning casts in clay;
Let science prove we are, and then
What matter science unto men,
At least to me? I would not stay. (cxx 5-8)

The poet reconciles doubt with faith as he prolongs his arguments. While he is aware of the Victorian mind, he nevertheless attempts to find faith in honest doubt and philosophical inquiries. He says:

Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds,
At least he beats his music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me than in half the creeds. (xcvi 9-13)

Tennyson, after all, solaced himself with the conclusion that evolution, if it was true, indicated that better would come in the afterlife. He ended up thinking that the evolutionary theory of Darwin was for the most part true but that mankind stood on one of the lowest rings of the ladder.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

Arnold is seen as a consistent pessimist and as such the most elegiac of all the Victorian writers. Although his greatest elegiac poem is “Thyrsis”, yet all the rest of his poems have a melancholic brooding. The advance of science, especially the evolutionary theory of Darwin and his predecessors, shook his traditional theological foundation. This spiritual disturbance compelled him for a searching introspection combined with a groping for moral stance. Arnold, like Tennyson, was distressed by the complexity of his time sought a life of primitive faith. He was in quest for simplicity and spiritual wholeness. Like *In Memoriam*, Arnold’s “Dover Beach” is considered to be the representative poem of the Victorian age. It represents a spiritual decay and a shattering of faith in the wake of scientific discoveries. “Dover Beach” is in the form of monologue. The addressee in the poem is “Love”. It starts with a meditation upon calm and serene natural beauty in a Wordsworthian tone:

The sea is calm to-night
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone. (1-4)

The stanza starts in a serene mode. However, in the last two lines we see that the light is gone and can be seen no more, leaving the poet in darkness. With the darkness comes uncertainty and the poet is not sure whether light and certainty will come again. In stanza three, the sea becomes a ‘Sea of Faith’. Arnold is probably referring to some medieval times where the tenets of Christianity were strictly observed. This pursuit is not possible now because of the shock caused by science, specifically evolution. Faith then was intact and as such was folded in respect and earnestness. However, since the strong conviction is gone and the glory of religion vanished; the world appears naked in darkness. Arnold, in such situation emphasizes the faithfulness of love which alone could fill the gap created by darkness.

Arnold was affected by the prevailing scientific developments, although the Darwinian effect is not very marked since he wrote his poems earlier than *On the Origin of Species*. Therefore, it is more probable to observe Lyell’s influence on his poetry. Geological revelations of time and history lent fresh insight to Arnold in locating humankind in a vast, mysterious universe. Despite his overtly Christian upbringing, Arnold appreciates science and its truth but could not get through in finding

permanent consolation. Unlike Tennyson, in Arnold there seems no obvious and clear appraisal or a marked effect of science in specific terms. Tennyson explores deeper questions in the wake of scientific theories. His existential probing is very much distinct in the loss of his friend, Hallam. Nevertheless, Arnold's tone overall reflects the reigning supremacy and sway of contemporary science.

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

Browning for the most remained unaffected in the age of spiritual turmoil. He is considered as the only available optimistic poet of the Victorian age. Browning stands as a defender of Christian faith, pronounced through his poetic personae. However just as religion and science were shifting in their roles, certain artists and critics too were moving towards what is called as 'art for art's sake'. Browning, one of them, dedicated himself to that end. Browning responded to this disruption and turmoil in his early poetry. However in his later poems especially in "Caliban Upon Setebos" Browning treats the prevailing tussle of science and religion.

Browning's *Dramatis Personae* got published after five years of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. This collection broadly deals with serious spiritual uncertainties brought in part by his wife's death in 1861. There came a re-positioning in his faith with his "Caliban Upon Setebos" published in *Dramatis Personae* in which the world appears as a plaything devoid of any significance. Browning was aware of the evolutionary theories. This awareness can be seen in his poem "Paracelsus" where there is progressive development from senseless matter to an organized whole. However, in Caliban, he shares Darwinism by combining the human and non-human characteristics as:

Will sprawl

Flat on his belly in the pit's much more
With elbows wide, fists clinched
And while he kicks both feet in the cool
slush. (1-4)
Thinketh, He made there at the sun, this isles,
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping

You otter, sleek wet, black, lithe as a leach,
You oak, one fire-eye in a ball of foam. (44-47)

Browning in these lines have combined the human and animal in one organism. By doing so he seems to

be reflecting Darwin in his revelations that count human and non-humans in struggle for survival. By combining the humans and animals in one body, Browning groups the animal and the human together as Darwin did. Both take the human out of its exclusive domain and put it alongside (207) and in these terms both are identical in certain ways.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Hardy is a great poet and an equally great novelist of the Victorian age. Though he is famous as a novelist yet his poetry is more than that of Wordsworth and Coleridge put together. The impact of Darwin on Hardy as poet may not be that great as compared to Hardy as novelist. He seems to have been under Darwin's effect since childhood. Hardy cites "Darwin, Huxley, Spenser.....and others" as supreme inspirational (Robinson 1980:128).

Darwin talks about nature and the beauty of natural world. In Hardy's work we find the same natural co-existence since Hardy's world also teems with plant and animal, and it is here that his appreciation for the affinities and mutual co-existence is starkly found. Beer argues how "Hardy like Darwin places himself in his texts as observer, traveler, a conditional presence, capable of seeing things from multiple distances and diverse perspectives almost in the same moment" (230). Hardy offers intricate detail of natural surroundings.

The late Victorian era is characterized by a general disturbance affecting wide range of people. This was due to the advancement of science and a loosening of the Christian faith. Science forecasted a somewhat bleak future. Man had to face the extinction of human species one day. There was this new awareness caused by Darwinism. Hardy in his poem "Before Life and After" seems to lament this new awareness:

A time there was- as one may guess
And as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell-
Before the birth of consciousness
When all went well

But the disease of feeling germed
And primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;
Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed
How long, how long? (260).

Hardy believes that the time before birth was better. Every aspect of life seemed going well. The

new awareness has caused a psychological unease. Man is no longer in his own control, but is in the grip of outside forces which are unseen. Hardy calls these forces as Providence, Nature etc. The Victorians themselves were uncertain whether God existed or not. Belief in God was in a sorry state in the contemporary life. Hardy's poem "God's Funeral" shows the poet's participation in the funeral procession:

Almost before I knew I bent
Towards the moving columns without a
word;
They, growing in bulk and numbers as they
went,
Struck out sick thoughts that could be
overheard:-
O man-projected figure, of late
Imaged as we. They knell who shall survive?
Whence came it we were tempted to create
One who we can no longer keep alive? (v,vi:
21-28)

In his poem "The Hap" as the title suggests happening, chance and fate, Hardy portrays the suffering of man and a vengeful immortal is a reason for it. The poem shows the poet's tussle with the omnipotent. Hardy says that Hap alone is responsible for man's casualty: Thou suffering things/Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy/ Know that thy love's loss is my hate's profiting. (2-4). Hardy was aware of the bleaker aspects of Darwinism. He sought amelioration in Darwinism. There shall be mutual co-existence. The species shall have affinities. Human must be sympathetic to natural life. Hardy argued for cooperation among species. Certainly, this is his evolutionary amelioration and Darwin's' benign impact on him.

Conclusion

Darwinism influenced the Victorian poets to a great extent. In his influential work *On The Origin of Species*, he argues that natural selection is what makes evolution possible. This leads to a hectic struggle among species for existence. His evolutionary insights also complicated the position of man as a superior creation in the universe. The

most obvious impact of Darwinism on Victorian poets was religious disturbance. His theory negated a benign God allied with a true Christian faith. The poets confronted creations without a creator. Poets like Tennyson and Browning tried constantly to uphold the traditional faith, while poets like Hardy remained indifferent to certain degrees. If on the one hand, his theory enlightened the Victorian poets, at the same time, it caused them spiritual disturbance amounted to pessimism and a spiritual vacuum. However, some of them did resist the advances and reconciled to what is famously called the 'Victorian Compromise'.

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