VICTORIAN LITERATURE
(1832–1900)

Q. 1 Give a brief account of the social, political, economic and religious tendencies of the Victorian Age.

Ans. The Victorian age is one of the most remarkable periods in the history of England. It was an era of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, social unrest, educational expansion, empire building and religious uncertainty. There were a number of thinkers who were well satisfied with the progress made by the Victorians, while from a whole class of adverse critics could be heard a scathing criticism of the values held dear by the Victorians. While Macaulay trumpeted the progress that the Victorians had achieved, Ruskin and Carlyle, Lytton Strachey and Trollope raised frowns of disfavour against the soul-killing materialism of the age. Carlyle himself, a hostile critic of the age, admired L. H. Myer's reference to 'the deep-seated spiritual vulgarity that lies at the heart of our civilization.' Symonds detected in the Victorian period, whatever may be its buoyancy and promise, elements of 'world fatigue', which were quite alien to the Elizabethan age, with which the Victorian era is often compared. Whatever may be the defects of the Victorian way of life, it cannot be denied that it was in many ways a glorious epoch in the history of English literature, and the advancement made in the field of poetry, prose, and fiction was really commendable.

The Victorian age was essentially a period of peace and prosperity for England. The few colonial wars that broke out during this period exercised little adverse effect on the national life. The Crimean war, of course, caused a stir in England, but its effects were soon forgotten and the people regained the normal tenor of their lives without feeling the aftermath of war in their round of daily activities. In the earlier years of the age, the effect of the French Revolution was still felt, but by the middle of the century, it had almost completely dwindled and England felt safe from any revolutionary upsurge disturbing the placidity
and peaceful existence of its live. On the whole, “it was a comparatively peaceful reign when Englishmen, secure in their island base, could complete the transformation of all aspects of their industrial, commercial and social life without any risks of violent interruptions that gave quite a different quality to the history of continental nations.” It was an era when the ‘war drum throbbed no longer’, and the people felt safe and secure in their island homes.

Peace brought material advancement and industrial progress in the country. The Industrial Revolution of the age transformed the agrarian economy of England to an industrial economy. Mills and factories were established at important centres, and the whole of England hummed with the rattle of looms and the boom of weaving machines.

Industrial advancement created social unrest and economic distress among the masses. The Industrial Revolution while creating the privileged class of capitalists and millowners, rolling in wealth and riches, also brought in its wake the semi-starved and ill-clad class of labourers and factory workers who were thoroughly dissatisfied with their miserable lot. National wealth was increased but it was not equitably distributed. A new class of landed aristocracy and millowners sprang up who looked with eyes of disdain and withering contempt on the lot of the ragged and miserable factory hands. Conditions of life held no charm for labourers and workers in the field; for they were required to dwell in slum areas with no amenities of life attending them at any stage of their miserable existence. There were scenes of horrid despair witnessed in the lives of the poor. With the whirligig of time a wave of social unrest swept over England, and the ulcers of this apparently opulent society were brought to the surface by writers like Dickens, Ruskin, and Carlyle. “The deplorable state of the debtor’s Prison, the Fleet, and the Marshalsea; the dismal abysses of elementary education; the sorry type of nurses available in sickness; the oppression of little children; the prevalence of religious hypocrisy—these and many other dark corners in the life of England were illuminated by the searchlight of Dickens’ genius.”

The woeful and deplorable conditions of labourers, miners,
debtors, prisoners, soon caught the eyes of social reformers, and
a stage was prepared for ameliorating the lot of the down-trodden
and under dogs of an affluent society. The Victorian era, there-
fore, witnessed vigorous social reforms and a line of crusading
humanitarian reformers who sought to do away with the festering
sores and soothing maladies of the Victorian age. The Victorian
age is, therefore, an age of humanitarian considerations and
social uplift for the masses.

In the course of the Victorian era there developed consci-
ously amongst the increasingly large number of literary men and
women and philanthropic social reformers a humanist attitude to
life which was not a matter of creed and dogmas, but a recogni-
tion of the love and loyalty that the better-sensed people had for
their unfortunate brethren. In the works of Charles Dickens,
Mrs. Gaskell, Carlyle and Ruskin, we notice the crusading
zeal of the literary artists to bring about salutary reforms in the
social and economic life of the country.

The growing importance of the masses and the large number
of factory hands gave a spurt to Reform Bills, which heralded
the birth of democratic consciousness among the Victorian people.
The Victorian age witnessed a conflict between aristocracy and
plutocracy, on the one hand, and democracy and socialism on the
other side. The advance in the direction of democracy was well
marked out, and inspite of the protestations of Tennyson and
Carlyle, its sweeping tide could not be stemmed. "The long
struggle of the Anglo-Saxons for personal liberty is definitely
settled, and democracy becomes the established order of
the day. The king and the peers are both stripped of their
power and left as figure-heads of a past civilization. The last
vestige of personal government and the divine right of rulers
disappears; the House of Commons becomes the ruling power in
England and a series of new reform bills rapidly extend the suffrage
until the whole body of English people choose for themselves
the men who shall represent them."

England witnessed expansion in the field of education.
The passing of the Education Acts was a landmark in the history
of education in the country. A large reading public was prepared
to welcome the outpourings, of novelists, poets and social reformers.
The press also came into its own and became a potent force in awakening political consciousness among the people of this age.

There was a phenomenal growth in population during the Victorian age. The population of Great Britain at the time of the first census in 1801 was about ten and a half millions. By 1901 it had grown to thirty seven millions. More and more of territorial expansion was needed for the habitation of this growing population and England during this age launched on the course of empire building and establishing its hegemony in countries where the light of civilization had not yet advanced.

There was an unprecedented intellectual and scientific advancement during the Victorian age. It was a period of intellectual ferment, and scientific thinking. Science, once a sealed book save to an elect few, was democratised, and more and more scientific enthusiasts dedicated themselves to the popularisation of scientific works like Darwin’s Origin of Species. The man of science was regarded no more an academic recluse, but as a social figure exercising a deep and profound influence on the social and educational life of the age.

Inspite of the advance of science and scientific discoveries the general tenor of life was still governed by religious and moral considerations. The Victorians were moralists at heart, and religion was the sheet anchor of their lives. There was a marked conflict between religion and science, between moralists and scientists, each out doing the other in their orthodoxy, but the current of religious thought was not chilled. It was an age in which prime ministers raised echoes of a submerged religious vocabulary in their speeches and novels. The Oxford Movement represents the revival of the old Roman Catholic religion and the authority of the church at a time when science was challenging the religious thought of the age.

In domestic life the Victorians upheld the authority of parents over children. In the Barrets of Wimpole Street we have a vivid picture of parental authority and the subjugation of children to the will of the head of the family. Emphasis was laid on authority and reverence for the elders. Women were relegated to a lower place. They were expected to cultivate domestic virtues, rear up
children and look after the home and the hearth. Women were regarded inferior to men and Mrs. Ellis in The Women of England outlined the role of the female sex as being of service to the male members of the family. "The first thing of importance" she said, "was to be inferior to men, inferior in mental power in the same proportion that you are inferior in strength." Education was a closed book for most of the women, and the idea of establishing women's colleges was ridiculed by the national poet Tennyson in The Princess.

Victorians laid emphasis on order, decorum and decency. To talk of duty, honour, the obligation of being a gentleman, the responsibilities of matrimony, and the sacredness of religious belief was to be Victorian. "The Victorians," we are told, "were a poor, blind, complacent people"; yet they were torn by doubt, spiritually bewildered, lost in a troubled universe. They were crass materialists, wholly absorbed in the present, quite unconcerned "with abstract verities and eternal values"; but they were also excessively religious, lamentably idealistic, nostalgic for the past, and ready to forego present delights for a vision of a world beyond despite their slavish "conformity," their purblind respect for convention, they were, we learn, "rugged individualists," given to "doing as one likes," heedless of culture, careless of a great tradition; they were iconoclasts who worshipped the idols of authority. They were, besides, at once sentimental humanitarians and hard-boiled proponents of free enterprise. Politically, they were governed by narrow insular prejudice, but swayed by dark imperialistic designs. Intellectually and emotionally, they believed in progress, denied original sin, and affirmed the death of the Devil; yet by temperament they were patently Manichaean to whom living was a desperate struggle between the force of good and the power of darkness. While they professed "manliness", they yielded to feminine standards; if they emancipated woman from age-old bondage, they also robbed her of a vital place in society. Though they were sexually inhibited and even failed to consider the existence of physical love, they begot incredibly large families and flaunted in their verse a morbidly over-developed erotic sensibility. Their art constitutes a shameless record of both hypocrisy and ingenuousness. And their literature remains too
purposeful, propagandistic, didactive, aesthetic, with too palpable, a design upon the reader; yet it is clearly so romantic, aesthetic, 'escapist', that it carries to posterity but a tale of little meaning.”* “Whatever we may say of Europe between Waterloo and Sedan”, wrote John Morley “in our country at least it was an epoch of hearts lifted with hope, and brains active with sober and manly reason for the common good. Some ages are marked as sentimental, others stand conspicuous as rational. The Victorian age was happier than most in the flow of both these currents into a common stream of vigorous and effective talent. New truths were welcomed in free minds and free minds make brave men.”

Our study of Victorian background will not be complete without adding a few lines about the Victorian Compromise. The Victorians sought a happy compromise when they were faced with radical problems. They were not willing to be dominated by one extreme viewpoint, and in a welter of confusing issues they struck out a pleasing compromise. Victorian Compromise was particularly perceptible in three branches of life. In the field of political life, there was a compromise between democracy and aristocracy. While accepting the claims of the rising masses to political equality, they defended the rights of aristocracy. While reposing their faith in progress in the political sphere, they were not ready for revolutionary upsurges disturbing the settled order of life. Progressive ideals were reconciled with conservative leanings for an established order of society. In the field of religion and science, a satisfying compromise was affected. The advances made by new science were accepted, but the claims of old religion were not ignored. Victorians took up a compromising position between faith of religion and doubt created by science:

There remains more faith in honest doubt
Believe me than in half the creeds.

“They desired to be assured that all was for the best; they desired to discover some compromise which, while not outraging their intellect and their reason, would none the less soothe their conscience and restore their faith, if not completely, at least sufficiently to allow them to believe in some ultimate purpose and more important still, in the life after death. In voicing these doubts,

* Jerome Hamilton Buckley: Victorianism.
in phrasing the inevitable compromise Tennyson found, and
endeavoured passionately to fulfil his appointed mission.*

In the field of sex, the Victorians had their compromise.
The sex problem was the most blatant and persistent. In this field
their object was to discover "some middle course between the
unbridled licentiousness of previous ages and the complete negation
of the functions and purposes of nature." The Victorians permitted
indulgence in sex but restricted its sphere to conjugal felicity
and happy married life. They disfavoured physical passion and
illegal gratification of sex impulse. They could not contemplate
the possibility of any relation between man and woman other than
the conjugal. In Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* we are introduced to
'two young lovers' walking together in the moonlight, but we are
at once reassured by the statement that these two lovers were 'lately
wed.' The Victorian ideal was to achieve 'wedded bliss' rather than
satisfaction of the sex urge by illegal and unauthorised methods.

Q 2. What are the prominent literary tendencies of the Victo-
rian Age?

Ans. The Victorian age was one of the most remarkable
periods in the history of English Literature. It witnessed the
flowering of poetry in the hands of a host of poets, great and
small. It marked the growth of the English novel, and laid the
foundation of English prose on a surer footing.

The note of individuality was the hallmark of Victorian
literature. The literary figures of the Victorian age were endowed
with marked originality in outlook, character and style. "In
Macaulay there was much of the energy and enterprise of the
self-made man. Tennyson loved to sing the praises of sturdy
independence. In Dickens' books there are, perhaps, more origi-
nals than in those of any other novelist in the world. The Bronte
sisters pursued their lonely path in life with the pride and endurance
learned at the Haworth parsonage. Carlyle and Browning cultivated
manner full of eccentricity; and even Thackeray, though more
regular in style than his contemporaries, loved to follow a hapha-
azard path in the conduct of his stories, indulging in unbounded

* Harold Nicholson: Tennyson.
lience of comment and digression.”*

The Victorian age was essentially the age of prose and novel. “Though the age produced many poets, and two who deserve to rank among the greatest” says Long, “nevertheless this is emphatically an age of prose and novel. The novel in this age fills a place which the drama held in the days of Elizabeth; and never before, in any age, or language, has the novel appeared in such numbers and in such perfection.”**

Victorian literature in its varied aspects was marked by a deep moral note. “The second marked characteristic of the age is that literature, both in prose and poetry, seems to depart from the purely artistic standard of art’s sake and to be actuated by a definite moral purpose.”*** Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, Ruskin were primarily interested in their message to their countrymen. They were teachers of England and were inspired by a conscious moral purpose to uplift and instruct their fellowmen. Behind the fun and sentiment of Dickens, the social miniatures of Thackeray, the psychological studies of George Eliot, lay hidden a definite moral purpose to sweep away error and to bring out vividly and in unmistakable terms the underlying truth of human life.

The literature of the Victorian age was co-related to the social and political life of the age. The Victorian literary artists, leaving aside a few votaries of art for art’s sake represented by the Pre-Raphaelite school of poets, were inspired by a social zeal to represent the problem of their own age. Perhaps for this reason the Victorian literature is the literature of realism rather than of romance, not the realism of Zola and Ibsen, “but a deeper realism which strives to tell the whole truth, showing moral and physical diseases as they are, but holding up health and hope as the moral conditions of humanity.” Literature became an instrument of social reform and social propaganda and was marked with purposeful, propagandistic and didactic aims.

A few literary artists of this age struck the note of revolt against the materialistic tendencies of the age, and sought to seek

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** W. J. Long: English Literature.
*** Ibid.
refuge in the overcharged atmosphere of the Middle Ages. An escapist note is also perceptible in Victorian literature, and this is particularly noticed in the works of Pre-Raphaelite poets. Rossetti delved in the folklore and diablerie of the Middle Ages. Morris busied himself in its legends and sagas. "There were some minor reversions to classicism, but taken largely, literature of the age continued to be romantic, in the novelty and variety of its form, in its search after undiscovered springs of truth and beauty, in its emotional and imaginative intensity."*

The literature of the Victorian age inspite of its insistence on rationality, and an order born out of reason, could not completely cut off from the main springs of Romanticism. The spirit of Romanticism continued to influence the innermost consciousness of the age. It affected the works of Tennyson, Thackeray, Browning and Arnold. It permeated almost every thought just as it colours almost every mode of expression. All literary artists of the age were impregnated with it. Carlyle's thundering denunciations were charged with the same emotional fire and visionary colouring as that of Shelley and Byron. New vibrations were added to the main chord of Romanticism. Between the years 1875 to 1880 the romantic inspiration was again in the ascendent.

A note of pessimism, doubt and despair runs through Victorian literature and is noticed especially in the poetry of Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough. Though a note of pessimism runs through the literature of the age, yet it cannot be dubbed as a literature of bleak pessimism and dark despair. A note of idealism and optimism is also struck by poets like Browning and prose writers like Ruskin. *Rabbi Ben Ezra* brings out the courageous optimism of the age. Stedman's *Victorian* Anthology is, on the whole, a most inspiring book of poetry. Great essayists like Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin, and great novelists like Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot inspire us with their faith in humanity and uplift us by their buoyancy and large charity.

The literature of the age is considerably modified by the impact of science. "It is the scientific spirit, and all that the

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scientific spirit implied, its certain doubt, its care for minuteness and truth of observation, its growing interest in social processes and the conditions under which life is lived that is the central fact in Victorian literature.”

The questioning spirit in Clough, the pessimism of James Thomson, the melancholy of Matthew Arnold, the fatalism of Fitzgerald, are all the outcome of the sceptical tendencies evoked by scientific research. Tennyson’s poetry is also considerably influenced by the advancement of science in the age and the undertones of scientific researches can be heard in *In Memoriam*.

“In fiction, the scientific spirit is no less discernible: the problems of heredity and environment preoccupy the attention of the novelist. The social problem of the earlier Victorians, of Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, Kingsley and Reade give place to points in biology, psychology, pathology. The influence of Herbert Spencer and of Comte meets us in the pages of George Eliot; while the analytical methods of science are even more subtly followed in the fiction of George Eliot, the early writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward, and the intimate Wessex studies of Thomas Hardy.”

A note of patriotism runs through Victorian literature. Tennyson, Dickens and Disraeli are inspired by a national pride and a sense of greatness in their country’s superiority over other nations. Tennyson strikes the patriotic note in the following lines:

*It is the land that freemen till*  
*That sober-suited freedom chose*  
*A land of settled government,*  
*A land of just and old renown,*  
*Where freedom slowly broadens down*  
*From precedent to precedent.*

In one direction the literature of the Victorian age achieved a salient and momentous advance over the literature of the Romantic Revival. The poets of the Romantic Revival were interested in nature, in the past, and in a lesser degree in art, but they were not intensively interested in men and women. To

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*Malr: Modern English Literature.*  
**Compton-Bickett: A History of English Literature.*
Wordsworth the dalesmen of the lakes were a part of the scenery they moved in. He treated human beings as natural objects and divested them of the complexities and passions of life as it is lived. The Victorian poets and novelists laid emphasis on men and women and imparted to them the same warmth and glow which the Romantic poets had given to nature. "The Victorian Age extended to the complexities of human life the imaginative sensibility which its predecessor had brought to bear on nature and history. The Victorian poets and novelists added humanity to nature and art as the subject matter of literature."*  

THE VICTORIAN POETS

Q. 3. Give a brief account of the prominent early Victorian poets before Tennyson.

Ans. The prominent early Victorian poets before Tennyson were Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49) and John Clare (1793-1864). Beddoes was a dramatist as well as a writer of short lyrics. He had a love for the morbid aspects of human life and his imagery was derived from the Jacobean dramatists. He tried to give the air of idealism to his poetry, but failed in the attempt. He had none of Shelley's buoyant idealism. For Beddoes, poetry had above all to be haunting, and he made an effort to achieve this quality in his poetry. He, however, failed in his attempt.

A simpler and purer inspiration is to be found in the poetry of John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant poet, who was considered mad by his contemporaries. He was essentially a poet of the countryside and presented rural scenes in a remarkable manner. "The quiet intensity of his observation in his descriptions of rural scenes, and the skill with which he organizes detail, combine to achieve a poetic utterance of remarkable power and control." His nature poetry was a little different from that of William Wordsworth. Whereas Wordsworth was interested in contemplation and mysticism, Clare imparted no mystic touch to the sights and scenes of nature. He had genuine love for the sights and scenes of nature and he presented them with a calm lucidity that distils its down kind of meaning. He could move

* Mair: Modern English Literature.
the reader by deploying simple objects and incidents in a remarkably eloquent manner. His diction had touches of eighteenth and nineteenth century poets. His poetry is Romantic in a sense, but it is classical as well in its control and poise (Signs of Writer) as can be seen from the following lines of the poem.

The cat runs races with her tail: The dog
Leaps o'er the orchard hedge and Knarls the grass
The swine run round and grunt and play with straw
Snatching out hasty mouthfuls from the stack.

Q. 4. Critically examine Alfred Tennyson’s (1809-92) Poetical and Dramatic works.

OR

‘Tennyson owed much of his contemporary fame to the variety of his work’ (Groom) Discuss.

Ans. Alfred Tennyson was undoubtedly one of the greatest poets of the Victorian age. He dominated the Victorian scene for a number of years in his life and was honoured with the high office of the poet laureate. Tennyson began his poetic career at quite an early age, and his early verses bear the stamp of Milton, Keats and even Virgil in a marked degree, yet he also carved one an independent line of his own. During the long span of his career as a poet he essayed every kind of poetry—the song, the idyll, the dramatic monologue, the dialect poem, the descriptive or pageant poem, the ballad, the war-ode, the threnody, the epic narrative and the drama. The extraordinary diversity of his work is itself typical of the strongly marked eclecticism of his age. He wrote on classical, romantic and modern subjects; on English history and Celtic legend; on the deepest problems of philosophy and religion, and the range of his method and style is scarcely less remarkable than that of his matter. In the wonderful variety of his verse he suggests all the qualities of England’s greatest poets. The dreaminess of Spenser, the majesty of Milton, the natural simplicity of Wordsworth, the fantasy of Blake and Coleridge, the melody of Keats and Shelley, the narrative vigour of Scott and Byron, are evident on the successive pages of Tennyson’s
poetry. The only thing lacking is the dramatic power of the Elizabethans.

The earliest collection of Tennyson’s poems was published in 1827, when he was seventeen years of age, in *Poems by Two Brothers*. The poems of this period are immature, but in some of them there is the same excellence of metrical skill and descriptive power which Tennyson later on developed in poems like *Lotos Eaters*, *The Lady of Shallot* and *O Enone*. In 1830 was published the second volume of poems—*Poems Chiefly Lyricall*. The poet makes some advance in poetical skill and in pieces like *Isabel* and *Madeline* we have faint glimpses of the pictorial effect and the sumptuous imagery of his maturer work. His volume of poems published in 1833 shows a steady advance in poetic form, and some of the poems of this volume, e.g. *The Lady of Shallot*, *O Enone*, *The Lotos Eaters*, and *The palace of Art* are really master pieces of poetic art and metrical skill. These poems can take their stand with the greatest of English Poems. “The chief defect of this early work” says Compton Rickett, “is a thinness of inspiration. There is too much sugar, and too little flour in these literary confections.”

In 1842 Tennyson produced two volumes of poetry containing some of the finest jewels of his poetic art such as *Ulysses*, and *Locksley Hall*. These two volumes placed Tennyson on that summit from which he was never dislodged in his life time. The poems of this volume bring him out as a thinker and register his progress as a metrical artist.

In 1847 Tennyson produced *The Princess a Medley*. It is the first long and elaborate poem on the subject of women’s education, and their claim to social and political equality with man. Tennyson ridicules the very conception of woman’s equality with man and his aspiration for higher education. He scoffs at the ‘new woman’ ideal and treats the whole subject in a jesting manner hovering between jest and earnest. The tone of the poem is serio-comic. It is diffusive in character and has no cogency in the treatment of the subject. It has no close-knit plan and is, in fact, a medley. To make it appealing to the readers Tennyson added a few lyrics of haunting melody to the second edition of the poem in 1850. The lyrics of the poems such as *Tears, Idle Tears,*
Splendour Falls on Castle Walls are exquisitely beautiful and are the special attraction of The Princess. "In these lyrics Tennyson expressed his favourite elegiac theme in a variety of metres and of contexts. The quietly singing lullaby, "Sweet and Low," the familiar modulation of heroic into melancholy in "The spendour falls on Castle Walls", the use of nature imagery to create a mood of loss and nostalgia in the unrhymed stanzas of "Tears, Idle Tears", and the dissolving of passion in a glimmering world of stars, sleeping flowers, and lake water that is suggested in "Now sleeps the crimson petal"—these are some of the successful experiments."

Three years later in 1850 Tennyson brought out the famous Elegy In Memoriam, written to mourn the death of Arthur Hallam, Tennyson’s College friend, who had died at Vienna in 1833. It consists of one hundred and thirty one lyrics, "short swallow flights of song", composed at intervals stretching over a long period. It is the result of deep brooding over the problems of life extending over a period of seventeen years. The note of grief is deep and poignant in the early part of the elegy, but gradually the personal pain merges into anxious speculation and the poet is lost in solving the mystery of death and the ultimate destiny of man in the universe. The poet marches triumphant from the state of despair, to a state of hope and optimism. Through states of doubt and despair, and anguished question, the poem mounts in a region of firm though saddened faith, and ends in a full hymnal music breathing hope and fortitude of heart.

There is no coherence and logical unity in the poem, and at certain places it becomes dull and monotonous. These defects can be glossed over considering the wealth of literary allusions, philosophical reflections on the problems of human life and the final note of triumph in the immortality of the soul. The monotony of the poem is also broken by the lyrical intensity of the stanzas, and their poetic appeal. "In Memoriam lives as poetry (as we might expect) by its lyrics which distil personal mood. Many of these can be taken out of their context and read as individual poems. Nevertheless, though these are the finest single poems in

the work *In Memoriam* when we read as a whole does impress and even more by its cumulative revelation of such a large tract of a man’s emotional life; it has an integrity as autobiography and exceeds its integrity as poetry.”*

With the publication of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson’s status as the poet of the age was assured. He was appointed Poet Laureate in the year of its publication, though he was not raised to the exalted rank of Lord Tennyson until 1883. In 1855 was published *Maud and other Poems*. “*Maud* is a monodrama, a rapid and feverish record, in a series of lyrics, of a love affair blasted by a tragic accident. It is true that at the end the crushed hero rouses himself to proclaim his patriotic determination to fight in the Crimean war which he sees as a salutary stirring up of a slothful materialist nation, but this jingoistic Coda has nothing to do with the monodrama as a whole. The speed and hothouse passion of the lyrics in *Maud* are impressive inspite of the almost morbid crowding of imagery.” The lyrics in *Maud* are marked with a frenzy, and are coloured by heat and fever. The rhythms swing and crash, and the natural images bring out the heavily scented atmosphere which surrounds the hero and his love.

In 1859, 1869, 1889 Tennyson brought out a series of *Idylls of the King* which centre round the personality of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. The subject had earlier attracted the attention of Spenser and Milton; but they did not celebrate the achievements of King Arthur in verse. It was left to Tennyson to make use of the rich material for poetic composition. His immediate source of inspiration was Malory’s *Morte’d Arthur*. Tennyson began to use these legends in his *Morte’d Arthur*. (1843). The epic idea probably came to his mind at a later stage, and when the twelve idylls were completed, the poet sought to give them an epic unity by combining them in a compact form. But it would not be proper to call the Idylls as an epic. They lack unity. They are twelve separate stories in blank verse grouped round the central figure of King Arthur. The absurdity of calling these idylls as epic would be clear if we consider their order of composition; they began at the end, reached the beginning in the middle and the middle at the close.
Tennyson used Malory’s *Morte’d Arthur* as his source but, he stripped the tales of Malory of their ‘bold bawdry’ to please the people of his times. He covered them with an allegorical and symbolic meaning, and decked them with his delicate and detailed ornamentation. The allegory in these *Idylls of the King* may not be clearly marked out, but an undercurrent of allegorical meaning can certainly be detected in the personalities of the Idylls. King Arthur stands for the ideal of perfection, and Sir Bedivere for worldly wisdom. The three Queens are the three Christian virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity.

It is one of the special characteristics of Tennyson’s Idylls that though the subject treated by him is medieval, yet the manner in which it has been treated is modern. The Arthurian legends expressed in the idiom of the nineteenth century were adapted to the sentiment of the Victorian age. King Arthur is a gentleman of the nineteenth century. His grave chiding of Guinevere at the discovery of her sin is like a gentleman of the Victorian era rather than a man belonging to the age of chivalry. In short, as Hugh Walker suggests, “Tennyson, made it the great end of his art to express the modern spirit in the Idylls of the king, and the delineation of other times only as a means to that end.” “The Idylls, therefore, spoke more eloquently to Victorian than to modern readers, many of whom prefer the robust and barbarous medieval originals to Tennyson’s decorous moralistic visions of them. The poet’s technical resourcefulness, his rich patterns of sounds and images, no longer veils the lack of passion and the presence of priggishness in these once famous tales.”

Entirely different in spirit is another collection of poems called *English Idylls*, which Tennyson began in 1842. In these English Idylls he intended to portray ideals of widely different types of English life. Of these varied poems, the most significant and worthy of study are *Dora*, *Ulysses*, *Locksley Hall* and *Enoch Arden*. His poem *Dora* is an experiment in Wordsworthian blank narrative, which is mildly skilful but lacks the Wordsworthian tone of intimate exploration of meaning. *Ulysses* is a poem of inspiration and exhorts young and old alike to be active and vigorous in life without letting the thought of death cramping their enthusiasm. *Locksley Hall* is a study of
contemporary social and political life and is marked with a note of optimism and progress. It takes the form of a monologue in which the speaker, revisiting Locksley Hall, the home of his youth, recalls his love for his beloved Anny, who out of deference to her parents had rejected his love and married a man of the world rolling in luxury and wealth. This leads him to conjure up again his youthful vision of the progress of the world in which he finally expresses his confidence.

_Enoch Arden_ (1864) is a popular work and poetises the life of the lowly people that make up the bulk of English life. Here the poet leaves the medieval Knights and Lords and deals with the story of Enoch who had married Arden. Enoch was reported to be drowned. He returned safe and found his wife happily married to another man. He regretfully returned without revealing his identity to his wife or her lover. The poem is rich in descriptions of nature and flights of poetic imagination. This long narrative poem, “tries to wring heroic significance out of a domestic situation treated with a moral feeling so "Victorian" (in the popular sense of the word) that all real life and complexity are lacking.”*

Tennyson’s later volumes, like the _Ballads_ (1880) and _Demeter_ (1889) should not be overlooked by the reader, since in them are found some of his best poems. _Locksley Hall Sixty Years After_ and the _Death of OEnone_ are some of the finest poems echoing the sumptuous imaginings of the years preceding 1842.

The study of Tennyson’s poetry exhibits the great variety of his verse. “Tennyson owed much of his cotemporary fame to the variety of his work. His verse was an instrument which could express every mood, from the airiness of a cradle song to the sonorous sorrow of a funeral ode. He could write for the many in the sentimental strains of the _May Queen_, and for the few in the noble verse of _Ulysses_ and _Tithonus_. He could express a national emotion with spirit and fire as in the _Charge of the Light Brigade_; he could delight men of science by his minute observation, as in the lines on the dragon fly in the _Two Voices_, and he could win the approval of philosophers by the profound experience of his elegiac and reflective verse. With this wide range he had also a

* David Daiches: A Critical History of English Literature (Volume II.)
perfection of technique which made his English not only wonderfully expressive but free from every offence of harshness and monotony."

Tennyson’s dramatic works are not of great significance. He wrote three historical plays—Queen Mary (1875), Harold (1876) and Becket (1884). In these plays he sought to dramatise the national history of England. They are not successful. "None, however, rank high as real dramatic efforts, though they show much care and skill." The Falcon (1879) is a comedy based on a story from Baccacio. The Cup (1881) owes its inspiration to Plutarch, and The Foresters is a dramatisation of the old Robin Hood theme.

Q, 5. "It will be right for the future historians to treat Tennyson as a representative of the Victorian period and to draw inferences from his work as to the general, intellectual and political tendencies of the nineteenth century" (Lyall). Discuss.

OR

"As a poet who expresses not so much a personal as a national spirit, Tennyson is probably the most representative literary man of the Victorian era." (W. J. Long). Discuss.

Ans. Tennyson stands in the same relation to his times as Chaucer does to the fourteenth century and Alexander Pope to the early eighteenth century. He is truly "the glass of fashion and the mould of form" of the Victorian period as Spenser was of the Elizabethan age. He is the typical Victorian poet voicing in his poetry the hopes and aspirations, the doubts and scepticism, the refined culture and the religious liberalism of the age. Like a detached but intent spectator he closely watched the ebb and flow of events happening in his country. He believed that it was the function of a poet to penetrate and interpret the spirit of his own age for the future generations, and true to his poetic creed, he presented flawlessly the Victorian age in its varied aspects in his poetry. "For nearly half a century" says W. J. Long, "Tennyson was not only a man and a poet, he was a voice, the voice of a
whole people, expressing in exquisite melody their doubts and their faith, griefs and their triumphs. As a poet who expresses not so much a personal as a national spirit, he is probably the most representative literary man of the Victorian era.” To quote Stopford A. Brook, “For more than sixty years he lived close to the present life of England, as far as he was capable of comprehending and sympathising with its movements; and he interwove what he felt concerning into his poetry. That Tennyson’s poetry was an epitome of his times, that it exhibited the society, the art, the philosophy, the religion of his day, was proved by the welcome which all classes gave it.”

Tennyson faithfully reflected the various aspects of Victorian life in his poetry. “The change which Tennyson’s thought underwent in regard to social and political questions itself reveals his curious sensitiveness to the tendencies of his time; for the sanguine temper of his early manhood, the doubt, the misgivings, and reactionary utterances of his middle age, and the chastened hopefulness of his last years, are alike reflections of successive moods which were widely characteristic of his generation.”* It will be our endeavour now to examine how faithfully the poet is the organ voice of his age.

The Victorian era was essentially an age of peace and settled government. The old fire of revolutionary enthusiasm had been quenched and the people of the age longed for a life of settled order, stability, and peace. “They did not want excitement. They wished to be soothed and assured. They had enough of tremendous thoughts in familiar shape. They now wanted familiar thoughts in tremendous shape.” The Victorians had a love for law, order and discipline. Tumult and storm and the revolutionary feelings upsetting established conventions were frowned by the Victorians. Tennyson reflects this craving of the age for the authority of law, and settled order. The dominant element in Tennyson’s thought is his sense of law. The thing which most pleases and impresses him is the spectacle of order in the universe. The highest praise showered by Tennyson on his country is that she is “a land of settled government where freedom is ever broadening down from precedent to precedent.”

The poet finds the working of law even in the sorrows and losses of humanity. 'Nothing is that errs from law.' This insistence on law and order constrains the poet to conform to certain established conventions of society rather than accept individualism and the unbridled freedom to act according to one's whims and fancies. Tennyson believed in slow progress and shunned revolution upsetting the order of society. He was essentially the poet of law and order as well as of progress; he held tenaciously to the great heritage of English tradition, and while he firmly believed in the divine scheme of things—

*The old order changeth, yielding place to new*

*And God fulfils Himself in many ways*

*Lest one good custom should corrupt the world,*

he was quite as firmly opposed to "raw haste" and rash experiments and everything that savoured of revolution.

Politically the age was striking a compromise between the growing tide of democracy and political freedom to the masses and the continuation of the old order of aristocracy. Tennyson presents this compromising spirit of the age in his poetry. While conceding the claims of coming democracy he upholds the old aristocracy. Recluse and aristocratic as he was, he was profoundly interested in common people and common things, and it is not the least significant feature of his work in the mass that along with *The princess, Maud, The Idylls of the King*, it contains such things as *The May Queen, Enoch Arden* and *Dora.*

Patriotism and love for the country were the significant features of the age. Victorians took pride in their nation and national glories. In Tennyson's poetry the sense of national pride and glory is well sounded. He represents English life and manners with utmost sincerity. *The Northern Farmer* is the true picture of Lincolnshire peasants and *The Northern Cobbler* and *Village Wife* are all national portraits depicting the rustic life of England. In the *English Idyls*, Tennyson reflects the ideals of widely different types of English life. His praise for his own country is the expression of a Victorian patriot who considered his country superior to other countries of the world. Speaking of England, Tennyson says—
It is the land that free men till
That sober-suited freedom choose,
The land where girl with friends and foes,
A man may speak the thing he will,
A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown.

Tennyson is eminently a Victorian in his concept of love and his high regard for domestic virtues. In his attitude towards women he is a true Victorian. The Victorians did not approve of women's struggling for rights of franchise and equality with man. Women were created for looking after the household. This faith of the Victorians in the subordinate position of women is expressed by Tennyson in The Princess (1847) wherein he suggests that woman's role is to be a good housewife and enjoy the blessed good life of the home. Woman's place was the hearth. Nature had ordained:

*Man for the field and woman for the hearth,*
*Man for the sword and for the needle she,*
*Man to command and woman to obey*
*All else confusion.*

Coming to the subject of Love and Sex the Victorians sought a compromise between unbridled licentiousness of previous ages and the complete negation of the functions and purposes of nature. The Victorians condemned illegal gratification of the sex urge. Tennyson reflects this spirit of the age by pointing out again and again in his love poems that true love can be found nowhere else save in married life. He cannot even contemplate the possibility of any relation between man and woman other than the conjugal. He emphasises the cultivation of domestic virtues of the home. He idealises married life. The kind of love that Tennyson upholds and likes is well exemplified in The Miller's Daughter. It is a simple story of true sweet-hearting and married love, but raised into a steady and grave emotion worthy of a love-built to last for life betwixt a man and a woman. This was the kind of love that Tennyson eulogises and the Victorians very much thanked the poet for presenting the higher sense of love. Tennyson concentrates very firmly upon the advantages of spiritual as opposed to physical love, and the age felt satisfaction in his deli-
emotion of love. The Victorian feeling is voiced by the poet when he says—

Arise and fly
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast,
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.

This inevitably leads us to the 'Victorian priggishness, which Tennyson reflects in his longer poems.

The Victorians who upheld moral virtues in domestic life were at heart moralists. They had a particular fascination for moralising and teaching lessons of morality to the younger generations. In this respect Tennyson is the mouthpiece of the Victorians. In Tennyson's poetry there is a strong feeling for moral preaching and ethical edification. He is a moralist giving to his readers the proper guidance for the wise conduct of life. Tennyson, to quote Grierson, "was determined to add the tin kettle of a didactic intention to the tails of his poem." He turned to the Greek legends not so much for the sake of their beauty as for their ethical significance. The legendary Ulysses imparts the message of action and urges the readers.

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Tennyson believes that the aim of the poet should not be to provide aesthetic delight only. He is also a seer and a prophet, and as such his poetry should serve as an animating and enlivening force for his generation. In The Palace of Art the poet describes and condemns the spirit of aestheticism whose sole religion is the worship of Beauty and Knowledge for their own sake.

"While, however, Tennyson's poetry is thus historically interesting on the social and political sides, it is even more important as a record of the intellectual and spiritual life of the time. A careful student of science and philosophy, he was deeply impressed by the far-reaching meaning of the new discoveries and speculation by which the edifice of the old thought had been undermined, and especially by the wide bearings of the doctrine of evolution; and at once sceptical and mystical in his own temper, he was peculiarly fitted to become the mouthpiece
of his century’s doubts, difficulties, and craving for the certainties of religious faith. The two voices of that century are perpetually heard in his work; in *In Memoriam*, more than in any contemporary piece of verse or prose, we may read of its great conflict of doubt and faith; while in many later poems as notably in *The Ancient Sage* we may see how the poet challenged the current materialism and asserted the eternal verities of God and immortality."

*There remains more faith in honest doubt*

*Believe me than in half the creeds.*

But Tennyson does not, thereby, surrender the claims of religion, God and soul. He triumphantly declares his faith in God and the immortality of the soul and in a life beyond death. He advises the people of his age to cling to faith beyond all forms of faith, to trust in the large hope, to look to—

*One far-off divine event*

*To which the who e creation moves.*

In the *Higher Pantheism* he declares the ‘supremacy of God and regards Him as the supreme controller of the universe—

*God is law, say the wise: O Soul, and let us rejoice*

*For if He thunder by law the thunder is yet his voice.*

In every object of Nature and also in the sun, the moon and the stars the poet sees the vision of God—

*The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and*

*the plains*

*Are not those a Soul! the vision of Him who reigns.*

One result of the advance of science was the almost disappearance of imagination and emotion from the life of the age. This lack of imagination is found in Tennyson’s descriptions of Nature, where nothing is left for the imagination and every object is minutely described with the precision and exactness of a scientist. In this respect Tennyson upholds the claim of science, though he sounds the final triumph of faith. It is, in fact, after passing through the vale of pessimism brought forth by the theories of science in *Maud* and *Locksley Hall* that Tennyson arrives at the truth of religion and declares in *In Memoriam—*

*Oh, yet we trust that some how good*

*Will be the final goal of ill.*
The poet starts looking for some purpose behind the entire creation, and comes to the conclusion—

*That nothing walks with aimless feet*
*That not one life shall be destroyed.*

Tennyson thus gives expression to the scientific spirit of the age, the unrest that is brought in *Maud* and *Locksley Hall*, and ultimately arrives at the haven of peace in *Higher Pantheism* and *In Memoriam*. In all these aspects it will be right for the future historian to treat Tennyson as a representative of the Victorian period. His finest poetry is undoubtedly “an illustrative record of the prevailing spirit, of the temperament, and to some degree of the national character of his period.” In his verse he is truly “the glass of fashion and the mould of form” of the Victorian generation in the nineteenth century as Spenser was of the Elizabethan Court, Milton of the Protectorate and Pope of the reign of Queen Anne.

He presented in his poetry all the essential features of Victorian life, “the ideas and tastes, the inherited predilections belonging to his class and generation; moderation in politics, refined culture, religious liberalism chequered by doubt, a lively interest in the advance of scientific discovery coupled with alarm lest it should lead us astray, attachments to ancient institutions, larger views of duty, of state towards its people, and increasing sympathy with poverty and distress—all these Victorian feelings find expression in Tennyson’s poems.”

**Q 6. Write a note on Tennyson as a Thinker with particular reference to his social outlook and attitude towards human life, his political views and his religious and philosophical thoughts.**

A. “As a thinker” says Albert, “Tennyson lacked depth and originality.” His social, political, religious, and philosophical thoughts were governed and dominated by the tendencies of his age. His thoughts fail to attract the modern readers for in them they scarcely find any spark of originality or progressive thinking. With these remarks let us now examine Tennyson’s attitude towards different aspects and thoughts of his age.
Social outlook and attitude towards human life

In his social outlook and general attitude towards human life Tennyson was a conservative, an old fashioned gentleman, who looked with eyes of disfavour at any social progress that the masses might be able to achieve under the inspiring idealism of a democratic life. He was pretty conscious of the social problems rising out of the transformation of England from an agricultural country to an industrial country. The miseries and sufferings of the poor workers and labourers were before his eyes, but he was not sympathetically moved by their sufferings. Being a national poet, he apparently showed his concern with them and gave expression to his sympathy in such poems as *The Northern Cobbler*, *The Princess*, *Children's Hospital*, *Rizpah*, but his sympathy was merely lip-sympathy never emerging from a sincere feeling for their distress. Instead of holding the perverse social system responsible for the sufferings of the poor and the down-trodden, Tennyson considered that the sins of men were ultimately responsible for their sufferings. The tragedy of Rizpah was the result of robbery; the calamities of Oenone were the outcome of a husband who was an adulterer. The remedy that the poet suggested for removing social sufferings was not any reform in the malpractices and wrong adjustments of social life, but a reform of the moral conduct of the depraved human beings. If a man strictly followed the law of morality and led a disciplined life, he could pass through life's voyage smoothly.

Tennyson's treatment of social evils such as unemployment, low wages, drunkenness, poverty, squalor was unsatisfactory. His sympathies for the poor might have been genuine, but they have been put in the mouths of weak characters like the neurotic lover of Maud or the young but dismal prig in Locksley Hall. The feelings expressed by them do not appear to be the spontaneous feelings of a poet's heart. Commenting on the unsatisfactory handling of social problems a critic has very aptly remarked, "When (Tennyson) brings himself face to face with the actual details of life lived in poverty, squalor, and crime, he is sullenly uphopeful. In fact, he looks upon the whole question from the point of view of the comfortable burgess, not of the poor man himself who stand the grim of the actual sacrifice. He gazes
down from his sunny vantage ground of aesthetic refinement where no wind blows roughly. He never steps down into the thick of the struggle, and never makes those unjustly suffer feel that in him they have a comrade and a champion."

Tennyson’s treatment of the one single burning problem of the ‘new woman’ and her position in human society in *The Princess* (1847) clearly shows that he was not prepared to grant women the same political and economic rights as man had in Victorian Society. In his view the role of woman was to look after the household and enjoy happy married life rather than vex her head with political rights and responsibilities. We hear the poet singing—

*Man for the field and woman for the hearth*
*Man for the sword and for needle she*
*Man with the head and woman with the heart*
*Man to command and woman to obey.*

Tennyson’s general attitude towards the masses and the poorer section of the community was one of supercilious disregard rather than genuine appreciation and sympathy. He had no real, warm and intimate sympathy with the common people. At heart Tennyson was an aristocratic English man and he insisted on maintaining social differences between the rich and the poor. He opposed the idea of levelling down all social distinctions. In fact, he was more interested in kings, princes, men and women of intellectual power and delicate refinement than with mediocres and common people having no standard and intellectual brilliance in them. He was drawn to an environment of culture and good lineage. King Arthur was obviously his ideal of manhood. The women whom he adored were gentle, patient and enduring souls. “When he touched the lives of the poor there was just a suspicion of the average well meaning district visitor about his tone.” If he was attracted by the rank and file, it was only with the people who were quaint and eccentric particularly in their old age. He could laugh with the Northern Farmer for he was an old man with eccentric feelings. Eccentric youth only roused his impatience. If he treated the youthful idealist as in *Laysley Hall,* he only made him a prig. He was not at all attracted by the hot-blooded revolutionary, nor a visionary idealist. Elemental emo-
tions of youth had no attraction for him. "In his general outlook on life, he grew to distrust more and more, passion as an elemental force and strove to idealise and spiritualise it, whether as a force in political society or in sexual relationships."

In his attitude towards human life, Tennyson laid emphasis on law, order and discipline. Cultivation of moral values could alone bring about the salvation of human life. In his view:

*Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control
These three alone lead life to sovereign power.*

**Tennyson's Political Views**

In his political views Tennyson was a conservative disdain of revolutionary changes in human society. While admitting the necessity of change, he insisted that change should be gradual and evolutionary in character. He was not at all in favour of a revolution that might upset the settled order of law and usher in the unhealthy rule of the mob. The sweeping tide of democracy bringing the common man to the forefront was looked upon with frowning eyes by the poet. He had no faith in democracy, equality or fraternity. He had something of a contempt for the people whom he designed as the 'rabblement'. He wrote in *Locksley Hall*—

*Slowly comes a hungry people as lion creeping nigher
Glares at one that nods and winks behind slowly dying fire.*

He had none of the revolutionary enthusiasm of Byron, nor could he breathe a feeling of righteous indignation at the deplorable state of the people sunk in the mire of poverty and disease. He upheld the old order based on class division rather than accepted a classless society. The radical democratic passion of Shelley, that sought to obliterate class division in the main, found no response in Tennyson's breast. "He was" to quote Compton-Rickett, "an aristocrat in feeling, and though quick to resent the abuse of class privileges had no more confidence in the voice of the people than Carlyle himself. Tennyson believed in the Great Man theory, though he never confounded 'Might with Right' to the same extent as the author of the *Latter Day Pamphlets.*"

Tennyson believed in law, order and settled government. He loved and liked England for it was—

*A land of settled government*
A land of first and old renown
Where freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

To quote Lyall, "In Tennyson we have the Englishman's ingrained abhorrence of unruly disorder, the tradition of a State well balanced, of liberty fenced in by laws, of veneration for the past; we have hatred of fanaticism in any shape, political or clerical, the distrust of popular impatience, the belief in the gradual betterment of human ills. When he was asked what politics he held, he answered characteristically, "I am of the same politics as Shakespeare, Bacon and every sane man."

Tennyson believed in the cultivation of one virtue, patriotism and love for England. In this respect he was a thoroughgoing Englishman. The sentiment of patriotism flourished best in his mind and we hear echoes of this patriotic love for his country in such lines as—

There is no land like England
Where'er the light of day be,
There are no hearts like English hearts,
Such hearts of Oak as they be
There is no land like England
Where'er the light of day be
There are no men like Englishmen
So tall and bold as they be.

He showed the bulldog qualities of the English race and the militant nationalism of a powerful nation in such poems as The Charge of the Light Brigade, Ballad of the Fleet, The Defence of Lucknow, The Revenge. "It is really a pity that Tennyson's patriotism should subserve so exclusively the rampart and battleaxe and neglect the triumphs won outside of the battlefield."

In his foreign and imperial politics Tennyson had the vision of a narrow insular patriot who considered all foreigners as devils and all democratic movements on the continents as devilish. "The blind hysterics of the Celt" and "The blood on Seine" showed a grave narrowness of vision and limitation of sympathy. "It would have been better and the sweeter" says Compton-Rickett, "If Tennyson had understood other nationalities as well as he did his own race, since cosmopolitan sympathies strengthen in place of
weakening the spirit of patriotism.” But Tennyson could not grow out his narrow nationalism and insular patriotism and if he had any praise, it was for his country only which he expressed with the air of a proud Englishman—

It is the land that free men till
That sober-suited Freedom chose
The land, where girl with friends or foes
A man may speak the thing he will.

Tennyson’s Religious and Philosophical Outlook

“Harm has been done by those who have spoken of Tennyson’s philosophy whether to exalt or belittle him”, says Bradley, “for he was not a philosopher, any more than Wordsworth was or Browning or Meredith, though he shows, I think, more signs than they of the gift that makes a philosopher.” As a religious and philosophical thinker Tennyson has expressed his thoughts on soul, God, union of the soul with the Divine Being, immortality of the soul, progress of the human race and the ultimate destiny of man and nature in the universe.

Tennyson lived at a time when the conflict between religion and science was coming to a head. Materialism was growing apace and shaking the very roots of religious faith and morality. People were fascinated more and more by the artificial glamour of material progress. Many religious men were tottering in their faith in face of the revolutionary and evolutionary theories of science. Tennyson, essentially a religious man at heart, was also affected by the new theories of science particularly by the theory of Evolution propounded by Darwin. The scientific ideas of the age affected him. “No poet was more exercised by religious problems than he; and no poet was more sensitive to scientific thought than he. But his attitude is an attitude of compromise; he propounds a via media between the materialistic science of his day and dogmatic Christianity.” Tennyson’s attitude was neither purely scientific nor purely religious. He equally welcomed the influence of historic Christianity and modern scientific thoughts. He stated—

There remains more faith in honest doubt
Believe me than in half the creeds.
In an age when more of Science was colouring man’s thoughts and demolishing his faith in God and His supremacy in
the universe, Tennyson had the courage to declare that God, the Almighty was the creator of the universe and the reflection of His personality was visible in all the physical and spiritual aspects of life. Man’s soul was a part of the divine soul and had its being from the soul of God. The ultimate redemption of the human soul lay in its final merger with the divine soul of the universe. Man’s birth upon the earth marked his division from the Divine:

*Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb
Are they not the sign and symbol of thy division from Him?*

On one occasion Tennyson is reported to have said to a friend, “There is something that watches over us and our individuality endures; that is my faith, and that is all my faith.”

Man should strive to be once again with the Almighty God and thereby attain the goal of union with the soul of the universe. This union of the human soul with the divine soul could be possible if man followed the path of morality, truth, righteousness and virtue. Only a life of morality and virtue could once again bring about the union of the human soul with divine soul, and his great effort in *In Memoriam* had been to prove that the dust returns to the dust, but the divine spark in man seeks to unite with the divine soul of the universe. He could never believe that the individual world may one day come to an end.

Tennyson confidently asserted that at the back of the universe there was God, who ruled over the entire world. In the *Higher Pantheism* he made his position very clear when he

*The sun, the moon, the stars the seas, the hills and the plains
Are not these, O Soul, the vision of Him who reigns.*

Tennyson went a step further and admitted divine intervention in all the affairs of man. It was a debatable question whether God was in any way interested or interfered in the affairs of man. Scientists were not prepared to accept any divine intervention in human affairs; Tennyson upheld the view that God was interested in the affairs of man and His power was visible in human life. There was something like divine help or anger which human beings felt in their lives. “There is something that watches over us, and our individuality endures; that’s my faith, and that’s all my faith” he is reported to have said on one occasion to a friend.

In the *Ancient Sage* we have the feeling that the activities of
human life were the result of the Divine presence sustaining the entire system of being:

If the Nameless should withdraw from all
Thy frailty counts most real, all thy world
Might vanish like the shadow in the dark.

All the visible things were the signs and shadows of the invisible, the intimations of some eternal power or Divinity. If He withdraws Himself from the objects of the world, the entire cosmos shall vanish like a shadow vanishing in the darkness.

Tennyson believed that so long as the universe was governed by God, the progress of the human race was certain, though the course of progress might be chequered. Progress would be slow, but ultimately man would rise to heights of his spiritual glory. In the posthumous volume he wrote of a time when the moans of the earth which now whirls through space would have grown 'sphere' music, and man would evolve to higher heights—

While the races flower and fade
Prophet eyes may catch a glory slowly gaining on the shade
Till the people all are one, and all their voice's blend in choric

Hallelujah to the Maker, 'It is finished, man is Made.'

But this hope for the ultimate perfectability of man was by no means the main element of Tennyson's faith. The main pillars of his faith were his belief in the guidance of the universe by a God who is Love, in the revelation of God's love and the divine law through Christ; in the immortality of the human spirit, leading to some kind of 'closing' with the divine personality, and in the freedom of the human will.

"Tennyson has been called a mystic; it would be more correct to say he was mystical" says Compton-Rickett; for we do not find in Tennyson the kind of mysticism we notice in Vaughan, George Herbert and Blake. He was at his best "a rationalist with a tenacious strain of mysticism in his nature. No thoroughgoing mystic would have dealt at such length and with such significant emphasis, upon the difficulties of religious faith; no thoroughgoing rationalist would have tried to solve the difficulties by claiming for the intuition of the heart, a way out of the morass of scepticism." The only trace of mysticism to be found in his
poetry is his faith, in the power of intuition to solve all difficulties coming in the way of a man of faith. In his mystical way Tennyson thought that intuition could solve all the problems of human life.

Tennyson was through and through a religious minded man. He believed that “somehow good will be the final goal of ill.” It was not a philosophy of faith so much as a philosophy of hope. The poet hoped that things would take a turn for the good. Tennyson had to struggle hard for his faith against personal doubts raised by Science. His ultimate faith was,

That God, which ever lives and loves
One God, one law, one element,
The far-off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.

Tennyson had certain philosophical thoughts which he had expressed with great force in Ulysses and In Memoriam. He believed in action and Ulysses is a standing monument in the glorification of action even in the face of death and decay. He laid emphasis on ‘to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’ He advocated pursuit of knowledge and higher values of life—

To follow knowledge, like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Tennyson laid equal emphasis on the cultivation of love. He conceived of God as the embodiment of love. In Memoriam opens with the line:—

Strong Son of God, immortal love.

As a philosopher Tennyson believed in the freedom of Human will. In In Memoriam he expressed his faith in free will in the following line:—

Our wills are ours, we know not how.

He propagated the doctrine of free will because without granting the principle of the free will, the doctrine of moral responsibility would be meaningless.

Another aspect of his philosophy was that ‘men may rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things.’ This is well expressed in In Memoriam. Tennyson believed in the gospel of progress and advancement in human life. He believed in evolution rather than revolution. It was his faith that man and
things were imperceptibly aspiring to a higher state. This evolutionary process of moral progress is the sheet anchor of Tennyson's transcendentalism. His faith in life beyond life and life beyond death is expressed in *Sir Galahad, Enoch Arden*, and *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*.

Q. 7. Write a note on Tennyson as an Artist touching upon his achievements as (1) A Metrical artist (2) A Pictorial artist (3) An Artist in general.

Or

Do you agree with the view that Tennyson inspite of his merits as a Thinker was essentially a poet and an artist?

Ans. Tennyson was primarily a poet and an artist, and it is as a poet and skilled craftsman in verse that he will be remembered in future years to come. No doubt his poetry is a clear reflection of his thoughts on the social, economic and political problems of his day, yet his fame does not rest on his thoughts, but on his achievements as an Artist. As a thinker he was not of the first order. Albert says, "As a thinker Tennyson lacked depth and originality." Harold Nicholson points out, "Tennyson was unfortunately a very inferior intellectual thinker." His thoughts on the political, social, and religious problems do not have any depth, profundity and originality. All his thoughts are of his age and were commonly shared by the people of his time. The merit of Tennyson lies in giving them a poetic form and shape. There is nothing impressive about them. Inspite of his treatment of the problem of democracy, rights and position of women, commercial aristocracy, immortality of the soul, the supremacy of God as creator of the universe, we do not seem to be satisfied with what he says except in a general way. Some of his views, as for example, on the position and privilege of women and the common people have become outmoded and unprogressive. They have no appeal to the modern men and women. Hence if the greatness of Tennyson is to be judged purely on the basis of his thoughts and ideas on the problems of his age, he will not be able to occupy a significant place in the galaxy of English poets. We will call him a chronicler of his times, who just chose to be a poetic bard of his age and nothing more. But that is