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**Tennyson: His Relation to the Social and  
Political Conditions of his Age.**

**By**

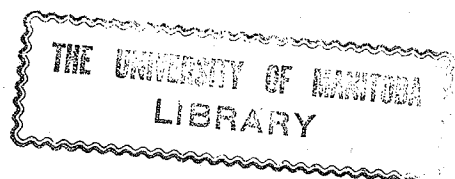
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## OUTLINE.

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## INTRODUCTION

Just as the growth and development of England may be divided into distinct periods, in which certain marked characteristics of the people are to be found, about which have been centered the various phases of England's democratic growth, so English literature may be divided into well defined periods. In each of these periods there can easily be traced through the literature, the deepest hopes, desires, and efforts of the people which have finally culminated in the England of today. Not always have these efforts brought the desired results within the lifetime of those laboring in their various spheres to bring them about; nor have the means and methods of one age always corresponded with those of another. Democracy and freedom was the great aim of Europe during the latter half of the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth century. But how different the methods! Even Wordsworth and Coleridge thought the French had found the one way of attaining it, until time had shown them their mistake; while Byron and Shelley were in deed and in truth Revolutionary poets in more ways than one. It is not difficult to see why many during the transitional period of the first part of the nineteenth century, did not consider democratic, those who were looking for different methods from those of the eighteenth century in continental Europe. These new ideas were not new, except in contrast with those of the previous century for from the beginning of the English history we can see,

" Freedom slowly broadens down  
From precedent to precedent".

and not by upheavals as had just taken place in Europe.

This democratic growth in England falls into three distinct phases; distinct, yet so closely related that at all times changes in one can be seen as a direct result of a change in another sphere of this great spirit of the age. Political reforms lead to the growth of education, while the growth of education lead to political reforms. Although at first sight we might say that the advancement of the new scientific spirit of the age was not democratic, we shall have to admit that its results were. For the great material effect of the new scientific movement upon man's ways of living, without doubt, had untold effect on every phase and in every sphere of the new movement. The ease with which man could now communicate with man, in itself alone, had more and greater results on the advancement of learning than we of the twentieth century can well imagine.

#### 1- Resume of the Period.

Let us turn for a while to some of the particular movements of the period with which we shall be greatly concerned in our later study. We see arising in the age of Wordsworth that love of man which finally resulted in the reform movement. Very closely connected with this was the new religious movement but with it we are not concer-

ned in our present study. By the Reform Bill of 1832 political powers were put into the hands of the middle class, while the Second and Third Reform Bills gave these same powers to the working people. So the realization of modern democracy really belongs to the Age of Tennyson. This realization was not marked by great upheavals of the French Revolution for the agitations brought about by these Reform Bills were kept within the limits of the law. The Chartist movement, probably the most formidable of all, was suppressed without becoming more than a ripple on the surface. Everywhere the great writers with which this period was filled, were echoing, or should we say, leading, the cry of the people. Carlyle was greatly influenced; Wood wrote his " Song of the Shirt "; Mrs Browning the " Cry of the Children "; Kingsley " Alton Locke "; while our great Tennyson was the spokesman. In addition to these definite reforms, the strong undercurrent was bringing many other things to the surface, trade unions were being formed and the great cooperative system introduced. Hurried on by the Irish famine, the Corn Laws were repealed and England became practically a country of free trade; the First and Second Irish land acts were passed which did much to alleviate the distress of the Irish peasant; the Oaths Act abolished all religious tests and the Jew for the first time took his seat in Parliament.

The advance in popular education was equal to the great political growth. In 1840 forty percent

of the adult inhabitants of England could not write their own names; in 1901 only one in ten could be placed in that class. There were many movements which tended to bring about this better condition. In 1870, with the opening of what were known as Board Schools, a national system of education began. A system of common schools was established throughout the kingdom, and elementary instruction was made compulsory. Later, Parliament made provision for those who were not able to pay for their own instruction and in 1871 all religious tests for degrees at Oxford and Cambridge were abolished.

Woman began to be recognized as part of the political system. Probably, for the first time in modern history, woman suffrage was granted by a legislative act, when in 1835 women who were taxpayers in cities, received the ballot in municipal elections. Later they were permitted to vote on the school board elections and to sit and vote in district and parish councils. A greater problem had arisen than " this world dreamed of ".

It is not our purpose to deal with the scientific spirit of the age, so we shall not dwell upon it, except to call attention to the great influence its material results had upon democratic growth. Through the inventions resulting from the power discovered in steam and electricity, man's ways of living were as much revolutionized as his old ways of thinking were by Darwin's statement of his theory of evolution. He came into closer contact with his fel-

lowman; understood better his thoughts and feelings; was lead to think and feel more deeply, not as an isolated individual, but rather in relation to the whole. Thus a strong feeling of oneness, or shall we say patriotism, sprung up, centering about the much loved representative of the nation, the Queen.

This feeling of brotherhood must not be confined to the British Isles alone, for it reached out and embraced the colonies, and there arose that feeling which we now call Imperialism. A greater prominence in the Empire was given the premiers of the colonies and closer union brought about, not through despotic rule, but a common feeling of patriotism for the Empire. England took her part in the Crimean War and strongly expressed her attitude toward the despot of France. She sent out her brave men to put down Indian rebellions and bring quiet to the Sudan. It is not our purpose to criticise England's policy in her foreign affairs of this period, but to roughly sketch the setting in which Tennyson found himself placed to play the drama of life.

Such was the England of the nineteenth century. Europe had emerged from the Napoleonic struggles exhausted, but doubtless with a stronger feeling of the complexity of the social problems with which it had to deal. Man's minds needed to be fit to the new conditions,

for the French Revolution had exploded many of the old ideas. But out of the chaos a new order emerged, the old had changed "yielding place to new".

Carlyle tells us that a true biography is one which shows the effect of the age on the man and the influence of the man on the age. With a little alteration we might ask; What effect had all this on the literature of the age and what influence had the literature on the age?

## 2- Tennyson's position in the Period.

Every age of literature has had its spokesman; the spirit of adventure, the love of the romantic and beautiful, together with a deep seriousness sometimes found in the Age of Elizabeth, reached their climax in Shakespeare; the classicism of the eighteenth century is best seen in Johnson; while the most serious aspect of the Puritan period united with its deepest feelings, thoughts, and efforts is found in Milton. Just so Tennyson represents the Victorian Age. There are others who appeal more strongly to the limited classes- Clough, who represents the spiritual unrest, Arnold with his strong appeal to the intellect, Browning with his great optimistic spirit- but these are restricted in the classes to which they appeal. "Tennyson is the Victorian Age". He was interested in politics, scientific thought and invention, philosophy and theology. He denounced evil in all its forms; not that he set forth a philosophy,



of life, but he denounced the evils as individual and called upon each man to mend his ways. He seized upon the disquieting doctrine of evolution, recognizing the necessity of reconciling it with the old religious faith.

He was deeply interested in politics, not as so many of our modern politicians, but because through politics he saw the only possibility of reform. Indeed, we might say his entire attitude toward the Age was due to his patriotism and his patriotism the result of his love, not for country alone, but for his fellowman. We are reminded by some that at the time of his death he still retained his old ideas, that he had not kept pace with the world, so much the more was he the Victorian poet, the old age was passing and he was not of the new.

But did Tennyson's poetry have any noticeable effect on the Age? Does literature have a material value on the efforts of the race? In looking back it is easy to see the evils of an age, the causes bringing these about, and the reforms necessary to right them. But we have before us a chart, as it were, with cause, evil, reform tabulated, the reform removes the cause and the evil is eradicated. But life is not a chess board with a ruling hand moving men into the desired places. Men are masters of their own destinies and they must be made to feel before they are led to act. The great function of literature is to make men feel and if

he is made to feel, he is next lead to act. But there is danger of us forgetting the part played by literature in the first instance, in watching the various stages of legislative reform.

The great artist was not given his genius for his own pleasure alone, for a great purpose should underlie his work. The greater the artist, we maintain, the more need of a deep purpose, for his very art is the medium between his purpose and man. We hear a great cry these days for "art for art's sake". We do not deny people the right of the love of the beautiful. But if back of the mere superficial beauty we find a beauty of purpose and ideals, is it not all enhanced? Are not the attractive powers doubled? By adding beauty of another kind we are not detracting from that of the first. To Tennyson belongs this double quality. No one will deny his sense of the beautiful in sound or color, and no one can deny his beauty of purpose after a detailed study of his poetry. His sense of beauty, and color, and sound was instinctive, while his beauty of purpose came with the years.