

Pre-Raphaelite Poetry

The Pre-Raphaelites were a group of Victorian poets who drew inspiration from Italian painters before Raphael. Pre-Raphaelite movement began as a movement in art but soon became a movement in poetry because a number of persons were both artists and writers. Like the Romantics the Pre-Raphaelites were also inspired by the Middle Ages. In the words of Leighton "They admired the Middle Ages, and thus, their reform led to the appearance of one of the principal elements in the earliest Romanticism". The Pre-Raphaelite movement was also in harmony with the aesthetic ideas of Ruskin who hailed the beginning of the movement. The first and the greatest of the Pre-Raphaelite poets was Dante Gabriel Rossetti who was a poet and a painter both. William Morris too "could use

brush as well as pen." The Pre-Raphaelites were worshippers of beauty and echoed the American aesthete Edgar Allan Poe. Among the Romantics, Keats was their greatest inspirer. They found their favourite models in the poems like 'La Belle Dame sans merci' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.

The famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 and included only three painters namely Holman Hunt, John ~~Millais~~ Millais, Rossetti and one sculptor Thomas Woolner. Soon others followed suit and became members of the group. Christina Georgina Rossetti and Coventry Patmore were not actually members but were very intimately associated with the group. Just as common interest in 'nature' bound the Romantics together, the string that bound the Pre-Raphaelites together was their interest in art and not an

infatuation with poetry. These poets and painters wanted a means to express their ideas in words. This desire gave birth to the magazine entitled 'The Germ' which published only four numbers because the maintenance of the magazine proved to be a costly affair. Ruskin loudly championed the cause of the Pre-Raphaelites in art and said of Rossetti and his friends that "they imitate no pictures, they paint from 'Nature' only. Every Pre-Raphaelite landscape background is painted to the last touch in the open air from the thing itself. Every minute accessory is painted in the same manner." The aim of the Pre-Raphaelites had been made clear once again by Ruskin "They are endeavouring to paint with the lightest possible degree of contemplation, what they see in 'Nature' without reference to

conventional or established rules but by no means to imitate the style of any past epoch." Another characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite ~~art~~ art was its love of Symbolism. There was a medieval note and Rossetti had learnt its secret from Dante. The main figures of Pre-Raphaelite poetry are :-

- (i) Dante Gabriel Rossetti :- He is the eldest of the poets belonging to this school of poetry. His poetic output is very small in bulk namely 'Poems' and 'Ballads and Sonnets'. These two small volumes may appear small in size but the quality of the poem is unquestionable. 'The Blessed Damozel' is his early poem which reflects the conflicting sides of his mind. There are material details though the subject is mystical and motive sensual. His sensuousness reminds us of Keats. As a ballad writer he is very successful especially when he is

~~works~~ dealing with themes of tragic intensity. 'The Bride's Prelude' has a painful theme. With regard to mystic suggestions he has no peer save in Coleridge. In the words of Rickett: "What Coleridge did for the earlier years, Rossetti did for the later years." Rossetti was both a poet and a painter and it is very remarkable that he had drawn two pictures to illustrate what he had done in 'The Blessed Demozel'. He translated Dante's 'vita Nuova' and fragments of old Italian poets. Both Morris and Swinburne came under his influence. In the words of Hugh Walker "In the case of Swinburne the influence was an inspiration, in the case of Morris, to some extent, at least, it was a misleading fire." D. G. Rossetti stands out to be the most representative poet of this school of poetry.

(ii) Christine Georgine Rossetti:-
She, the sister of D.G. Rossetti, started composing poems at the age of eleven and a small volume of poems was published by her grandfather in 1848. She wrote many poems for 'The Germ' also, the organ of the P.R.B. A deep religious tone pervades the works of C.G. Rossetti. Her principal works are 'Goblin market and other poems', 'The Princess's Progress', 'A Pageant and other poems', 'Verses', 'New poems' and a book of verse for the children entitled 'Sing Song'. Her poems are in minor key. A study of her poems reveals her pre-occupation with death and the futility of her life, intolerably sad and depressing. The only silver lining is the exquisiteness of her art and the subtle sense of beauty. As a writer of devotional verses she is com

parable to Crayshaw and Francis Thompson.

(iii) William Morris :- Gf Rossetti was one of his teachers, Ruskin was another. His first volume of poems is 'The Defence of Guenevere and other poems' and is experimental. 'The life and Death of Jason' is a long narrative poem. 'The earthly Paradise' like 'The Canterbury Tales' is a string of twenty four stories. Rossetti is interested in folk lore and Morris is in love with legends and sagas. His next work ~~is~~ 'Odyssey' shows his nearness to Homer in spirituality. 'Sigurd the Volsung' is a Scandinavian legend in epic form. The later years of Morris are marked by prose writings. 'The Dream of John Ball' and 'News from Nowhere' are romances of socialist propuganda.

(iv) Algernon Charles Swinburne :- He is more a musician than

a painter. There is music in Rossetti and Shelley too but they are primarily pictorial. It has been said that he is the most musical poet after Tennyson. At the age of twenty four he published his first volume of poems 'The Queen Mother and Rosemond'. We can trace the influence of Victor Hugo and Baudelaire in him. 'Songs before Sunrise' shows the influence of Hugo whereas 'Poems and Ballads' proclaims the influence of Baudelaire. The paganism of the poet can be seen in poems like 'Hymn to Proserpine'. He has composed poems on liberty too namely 'A Song of Italy' and 'Songs of Two Nations'.

The end.

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