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School of Humanities

BEGC 133
BRITISH LITERATURE

BLOCK

4

ALFRED TENNYSON: “MORTE D’ARTHUR”

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BLOCK 4: ALFRED TENNYSON: “MORTE D’ARTHUR”

Introduction

In previous blocks of the course, we studied the drama of Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw, and a novel by Thomas Hardy, and in this last block we move to poetry. This block introduces you to the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, an outstanding poet of the Victorian Age. The period of the reign of Queen Victoria (1837 -1901) was marked by commercial expansion, industrialization and growth of science and technology, in Britain. It was also a period that witnessed a conflict between science and religion, especially after Charles Darwin published his work on the theory of evolution. The writings of eminent Victorian poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mathew Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, reflect the intellectual and spiritual conflicts of the period.

This block focuses on Alfred Tennyson’s poem, “Morte d’Arthur”, which is based on one of Britain’s most popular legends – that of King Arthur.

Unit 1 of the block introduces you to the Victorian age and its characteristics.

Unit 2 discusses Tennyson’s work *Idylls of the King* and the legend of King Arthur.

Unit 3 discusses the text of “Morte d’Arthur” and its allegorical significance.

Unit 4 analysis the major themes and symbols of the poem.

UNIT 1 THE VICTORIAN AGE

Structure:

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Aims and Objectives
- 1.2 The Victorian Age and its Characteristics
 - 1.2.1 The Victorian Novel
 - 1.2.2 Victorian Prose
- 1.3 Differences between Romantic and Victorian poetry
 - 1.3.1 Romantic Poetry
 - 1.3.2 Victorian Poetry
- 1.4 Differences between Victorian and Modern Poetry
- 1.5 Victorian Poetry with special reference to Tennyson
- 1.6 Summing Up
- 1.7 Unit end Questions
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 References
- 1.10 Reading List

1.0 INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by the Victorian era? The Victorian Era is usually a reference to the period of the reign of Queen Victoria between 1837 and 1901. But when we talk about the Victorian era / Victorian age, we mean approximately the period between 1820 and 1914 i.e., a decade and a half prior to Queen Victoria's ascent to the British throne and similarly almost a decade and a half after her death. To place Victorian writings (which had great names in all forms of writing—prose, poetry and novel) in the history of English literature, it is necessary to recognize Victorian literature as sandwiched between the early 19th Century Romantic literature and the early 20th century Modern literature. Let us first explore the characteristics of the Victorian age before we delineate the special features of Victorian poetry through comparison and contrast with Romantic and Modern poetry.

1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit introduces you to the Victorian Age and Victorian Literature. At the end of your study of this Unit, you will be able to discuss:

- * the characteristics of the Victorian Age
- * the differences between Victorian poetry and its predecessor, Romantic poetry

- * the differences between Victorian and Modern poetry and
- * Victorian poetry with special reference to Lord Tennyson

1.2 THE VICTORIAN AGE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Queen Victoria was the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Empress of India. She ruled for half a century and the period of her rule (1837-1901) is known as the Victorian Age.



QUEEN VICTORIA (source www.wikipedia.org)

Queen Victoria has remained one of the iconic queens of Great Britain. From her childhood, she was brought up on a strict code of discipline which later gave the Victorian Age a strict code of morality. She was multilingual and knew French, Italian, Latin and German and also some key words and phrases of Hindustani, as that was the time when India was ruled by England.

The Victorian era was a time of rapid technological advancement and industrialization. Electricity started to become more common, photography became a popular medium, and rail systems spread across Britain. In 1842, Victoria became the first monarch to ride a train. Her reign for nearly 65 years is the second longest in British history, the first being that of Queen Elizabeth II, the present reigning monarch of England(1953-till date) i.e.67 years.

Activity:

Why do you think Queen Victoria is referred to as one of the iconic queens of Great Britain?

During Queen Victoria's reign, the British empire expanded and reached the zenith of power and prestige. Nearly one fourth of the world owed allegiance to the British Queen. During her reign, Britain witnessed the Industrial Revolution which brought a strong division between the working class and the wealthy. The wealthy grew wealthier and the poor poorer. Charles Dickens's novels like *Oliver Twist* illustrate this huge fissure in society.

Queen Victoria introduced new reforms in arts, science and politics, reforms that are still in effect today, chief among them being the ideal of Constitutional Monarchy, political reforms, industrial revolution and social changes. She gave attention to education and as Queen, she followed the policy of being close to the people to understand their lives and see what positive changes could be brought about. Victorian values were influenced to quite an extent by Queen Victoria herself. Victorian society put a premium on morals, duty, proper behaviour and women's modesty. Gender rules were made and men and women were expected to adhere to them. Men were to be the providers and women were to be homemakers who raised the family. All these get reflected in Victorian writings.

Activity

What were the reforms introduced by Queen Victoria?

1.2.1 The Victorian Novel:

Charles Dickens is the most famous Victorian novelist whose novels like *David Copperfield*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* offered commentary on social problems and in particular, the plight of the poor and the oppressed working class. William Makepiece Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* depicts as well as satirizes middle-class society. The Bronte sisters (Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and Anne Bronte), and George Eliot are among the most celebrated women novelists. Thomas Hardy's novels, like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* examine the social constraints on the lives of those living in Victorian England and criticise those beliefs, especially those relating to marriage, education and religion, that limited people's lives and caused unhappiness.

Activity: Read any novel of Charles Dickens and list out the social problems discussed in the novel.

1.2.2 Victorian Prose

Prose writings of this period are lengthy treatises and deal with many of the Victorian problems. They are in the nature of intellectual debates on issues of religion, philosophy, arts and politics. Just as the 18th century was known as the age of Prose and Reason, the Victorian age is seen as the age of Prose revival. In between the 18th century and the Victorian Age (the second half of the 19th century), was the Romantic age (the first quarter of the 19th century).

18th Century(Age of Prose and Reason) →Early 19th Century(Romantic period) →late 19th Century (the Victorian age).

These movements came into existence through revolt against the literary practice of the previous era and through revival of the medieval legends and stories.

Let us briefly look at the broad features of Victorian Prose:

1. Victorian Realism:

Realism was the chief characteristic of Victorian prose, very different from the highly imaginative prose of the Romantic Age.

2. Victorian Compromise:

The word 'Compromise' has many meanings. One of them is "something that combines qualities or elements of different things." Here 'Victorian compromise' relates to the combination of the positive and negative aspects of that period, of optimism and pessimism. The positives arose out of the changes in the standard of living that were brought about by the Industrial revolution and advancements in technology. Together they contributed to Britain's rising stature as a colonial power while the negatives related to poverty, starvation and poor living conditions of the working class. The positives could be seen in the objective and rational approach to issues that were once clouded by blind faith in religion.

3. Victorian Utilitarianism:

This was first propounded by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), but his concept of Utilitarianism came into force only during the Victorian era. Utilitarianism upheld the belief that the value of a thing or an action is determined by its utility. In other words, the principle behind Utilitarianism is to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number and that this is the measure of right and wrong of all that we do or attempt to do.

4. Agnosticism:

With the advent of science and the theory of Evolution by Charles Darwin, the belief in the existence of God became a question mark. To believe or not to believe was the dilemma of this period and gave rise to writings on agnosticism.

The great prose writers of this period include Thomas Carlyle (*Hero and Hero Worship, Sartor Resartus*), John Ruskin (*Unto this Last, Seven Lamps of Architecture*), Lord Macaulay (*History of England*), Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*), R.L. Stevenson (*Essays*), John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty, On the Subjection of Women*) and Walter Pater (*Imaginary Portraits*). Mention has been made here of a few of their popular and celebrated works. The one thing that unites all of them is that they were all involved in the conflicting issues of the day, such as Utilitarian ethics, political reforms, education, growth of democracy, and Science vs Faith. In fact the Victorian age is best

defined as an age of conflict between old and new ideas in respect of science and religion, faith and doubt, morality, rights of women etc.

To sum up, the chief characteristics of the Victorian Period were based on conflict- what is often described as ‘Victorian Conflict’- ensuing between economic progress and prosperity as against poverty and exploitation of the working class, between faith and doubt, between individualism as against collective and shared responsibility and Victorian morals as against moral decay in society.

Check Your Progress 1

- a) What are the characteristics of Victorian prose?
- b) Write short notes on the ‘Victorian Conflict’ and the ‘Victorian Compromise’.

1.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ROMANTIC AND VICTORIAN POETRY

1.3.1 Romantic poetry

As stated earlier, the Victorian age is sandwiched between the Romantic age of the early 19th century and the Modern age of the early 20th century. To understand Victorian poetry, let us begin with a look at the differences in the poetry of these three periods. Let us first see what distinguished Romantic from Victorian poetry.

The Romantic Age(1798-1830) is coterminous with the French revolution that happened between 1789 and 1799. Romantic Literature refers to the writings of the first three decades of 19th century Britain . The great poets associated with Romantic literature are William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

How do we define Romanticism? As a literary and intellectual movement, it originated in Europe coinciding with the French Revolution that supported the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The goal of the Revolution was to eliminate class divisions in the society, to do away with French monarchy and aristocracy and establish all people as citizens with access to equal rights. Romantic poetry turned against the elite society of the 18th century, whose emphasis was to follow conventions, traditions and rules governing poetry. It went counter to the neoclassical poetry which made reason and intellect the basis of all writings. In its place Romantic poetry valued emotions and imagination. Wordsworth and Coleridge defined poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and as “emotions recollected in tranquillity”. The key words, as you can see from these two definitions are emotion, imagination and tranquillity. When you read the poetry of the previous century that is the 18th century, the emphasis was on reason and logic. Even poetry that was written by poets like Dryden and Pope approximated to prose. The early 19th century poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge turned away from the Augustan ideals. They turned to Nature to inspire them. So the emphasis shifted from man and society to man and Nature in its pristine glory. The experience of joy in the presence of Nature provided them the creative and imaginative inspiration.

Romantic literature was greatly influenced by the French revolution, and its flagship slogan “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” made the poets celebrate the human spirit in individuals. A majority of the protagonists in Wordsworth’s poems come from the lower rungs of society, mainly the rural people and the lonely and the poor. For example, Wordsworth’s poems are about the Solitary Reaper, the Idiot Boy, Lucy Gray, the Leech Gatherer- simple, innocent, rustic, guileless people with a pristine purity very much like that of Nature. These simple characters revealed the human spirit of courage and endurance in the most trying circumstances. The Romantics revered and admired Nature and made Nature central to their poems. Pastoral life, medievalism, Hellenism and supernaturalism were some of the recurring themes in their poetry. In the introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge stated that their aim was to make the natural appear supernatural(we see the Spirit of Nature in Wordsworth’s poems exalted to the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe) and the supernatural appear natural (we see in Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, the supernatural elements being a part of the natural story of the mariner’s eerie experience).

1.3.2 Victorian Poetry

When we come to the second half of the 19th century, after the great Romantic poets had exhausted their poetic inspiration, we have a slightly different form of poetry. Victorian poetry is the poetry written during the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901). During the Victorian age, numerous poetic ideals were developed, such as the increased use of the sonnet as a poetic form. Some characteristics, or features, of Victorian poetry move it away from the Romantic era poets. We have shown how the Victorian era was characterized by a class-based society, with a growing state and economy, and a rise in Britain's status as the imperial power. The Victorian conflict that has been referred to is central to Victorian poetry. Its characteristics include realism, pessimism and optimism, morality, conflict between Science and Faith, interest in medieval legends etc.

	Romantic Poetry	Victorian Poetry
Time Period	1800- 1830	1837-1901
Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influenced by Nature Supernatural elements Wonderment, Romance, emotional aspects involved expressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influenced by science, innovations, and technology. Less emotional Down to earth Realistic Human misery was showcased Occasional poetry written to describe a particular event
Poets	John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth	Alfred Lord Tennyson, Mathew Arnold, Robert Browning
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conventional Expressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medieval text Modern Language

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise of nature • Emotionally charged • Flowery language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be easily understood • Industrialization, greyness of life is brought out • Realistic
Concentration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centers on the poet: poet's eye • Emphasized the power of imagination and man's relationship to the supernatural. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not just the views and experience of the poet; a second person can be involved • Man as not a part of nature but as the ruler of it
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary enlightenment • Liberalization • Artistic • Nature • Conventional women • Aristocracy • Middle-class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industrialization • Science and technology • Progress in medicine and communication • Women's larger role in society • Realistic portrayal of life • Economic hardships • Poverty • Working class struggle with politics and daily life

1

Check Your progress 2:

1) Explain with illustrations, the differences between Romantic and Victorian poetry.

1.4 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VICTORIAN AND MODERN POETRY

a) Modern poetry, ie. poetry written in the first three decades of the 20th century, was in alignment with the Modernist slogan "Make it New". This meant writing anew, going against all conventional forms of writing. Victorian poetry that preceded it was closely linked to the social thoughts and ideals that dominated the Victorian age. The main differences between the two are "tradition vs progression, nationalism vs revisionism and science vs faith".²

b) Literature of the Victorian age endorsed adherence to Victorian morals. In contrast, instead of traditional adherence to morals as emphasized by Queen Victoria, modern writers attempted a progressive outlook on life, unencumbered by traditional morals. In place of society and its imposition of set ideals, the modern movement laid emphasis on individualism.

c) There came about a distinct change in the attitude towards Nature. We have seen the difference between the Romantic approach to nature and that of the Victorian. The

Romantics had personified Nature and sought to find one to one correspondence between Nature and man. To the Romantics, the external aspects of Nature, its beauty and splendour corresponded to man's physical senses, in particular the eye and the ear. The inner glow of Nature, its harmony and tranquillity could be felt in the heart and feelings of man while the spirit in Nature and the spirit in man were both overarched by the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe. The Victorians were more concerned with man and society and related man to Nature as captured in the innocence of rural areas, far from the madding crowd of cities and towns. The Modern poet was more interested in science and preferred to express his / her thoughts through reason and logic. Thus we perceive a change in the social and cultural mores between the two eras.

- d) The two World Wars of the 20th century changed the outlook of the modern man who grew sceptical about existing unquestioning faith in God or the Essence of Creation. This led to a new philosophy called Existentialism as against Essentialism of the past. It was no longer an acceptable axiom that all creation originates from a universal essence which is more fundamental and immutable. In short, according to essentialism, our existence comes out of Essence and our goal should be to reach back to that Essence. Instead the Moderns looked at existence as the only fact that we recognize and it is for the individual to shape his essence. Many modern writers questioned all that had been said in the name of Faith and in the context of an Almighty God.
- e) The Victorian Age saw the rise of Great Britain as an imperial force. This also bred a sense of pride in the nation's achievement. Nationalism was a binding force bringing the British together. But in the Modernist period, the feelings of nationalism faded away. Many Modernist writers questioned government and authority in general. Modernists in Great Britain believed that the government was imperialist and responsible for wrong doing across the world.

To sum up, the characteristics of Victorian poetry are realism, pessimism, conflict between science and technology, nationalism, Victorian insistence on adherence to traditional morals, interest in medieval myths and folklore, humour, and use of the Dramatic Monologue.

The main feature of modern poetry is freedom. Modern and Post-modern poets exercise the freedom to write in any structure they choose - rhymed verse, blank verse, free verse, and they have the freedom to experiment with new hybrid structures. As for content, there is greater interest in individualism, science and reason, new approach to understanding the meaning of existence and a quizzical stance towards nationalism and authoritarianism.

Check Your progress 3

1. Discuss how Victorian poetry differs from Modern Poetry.

1.5 VICTORIAN POETRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TENNYSON

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) is regarded as the finest Victorian poet, a true representative of the Victorian Age. From his younger days, with his wide literary education, he wrote poems following the style of his predecessors, notably Shakespeare and Spenser (early 17th century), John Milton (late 17th century i.e., 1608-1674), Alexander Pope (18th century) and Walter Scott and Lord Byron (early 19th century). When he was at Cambridge, he formed a close friendship with fellow student Arthur Hallam. Six years later Hallam died and Tennyson wrote 'In Memoriam' mourning his death. This was the period when Tennyson's two brothers developed mental illness, yet surprisingly a few of Tennyson's masterpieces belong to this time - 'Two Voices', 'Ulysses' and 'Morte d' Arthur'.

In *In Memoriam*, Tennyson laments the loss of his close friend and the tragic loss makes him confront the Victorian conflict between religion and science. The modern theory of Evolution which explained evolution in terms of natural selection went against traditional faith in God and Immortality. The new theory stated that the evolutionary process took place with change in biological organisms over time in heritable physical and behavioural traits. Tennyson's poems reflected this conflict though he left it to the reader to form his own judgement. This period also saw some of his characteristic poems - "The Two Voices", "Ulysses," "St. Simeon Stylites," and, probably, the first draft of "Morte d' Arthur." 'Ulysses' is a good example of Tennyson's dilemma as to the function of art. The Romantics before him had made art as a subjective self expression of their feelings and emotions. In other words art was used distinctly for art's sake i.e., that art needs no justification, it need serve no political, didactic or other end. Ulysses depicted in the poem desires to abdicate his responsibility as the King of Ithaca in favour of his son, Telemachus and go on a journey in search of new knowledge, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The question is whether his quest for personal knowledge should be at the cost of his responsibility towards his people. The Victorian age with its attempts at reforms viewed art as the possible means to bring about a reformation of society. Tennyson earned his laurels as a National poet with his three poems - *Ode on the Death of Duke of Wellington*, *Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava* and *Maud*.

The poem prescribed in your course is "Morte d' Arthur", one of the poems included in his *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's poem on King Arthur was based on Book 21 of Thomas Malory's 15th century epic *Le Morte d' Arthur*. Malory was an English writer and he wrote this classic English-language chronicle of the Arthurian legend. 'In Memoriam' is a vast poem of 131 sections of varying length, with a prologue and epilogue. Inspired by the grief Tennyson felt at the untimely death of his friend Hallam, the poem touches on many intellectual issues of the period as the author searches for the meaning of life and death and tries to come to terms with his sense of loss.³ Tennyson was conscious of the schism between Romantic emphasis on emotion, its worship of Nature and beauty, and subjectivity and the Victorian ideals of objectivity, and a constant dialogue with the intellectual and critical thoughts of the time. In "Morte d' Arthur" Tennyson sets the narrative of Arthur's last battle within the frame of modern life.

One of the most important and obvious characteristics of Victorian poetry was the use of **sensory elements**. A majority of Victorian poets including Tennyson, used **imagery** and the **senses** to convey the scenes of struggles between Religion and Science, to make it possible for readers to comprehend the Victorian conflict. Alfred Tennyson lives up to this expected characteristic in most of his works.

1.6 SUMMING UP

In this Unit, we have learnt about: Queen Victoria's reign in Great Britain; characteristics of the Victorian Age; features of Victorian prose and Victorian novel; comparison between Romantic and Victorian Poetry; and the distinction between Victorian and Modern Poetry. We have also gained some insights into Tennyson's poems.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a short essay on the characteristics of Victorian poetry.
- 2) Explain how the 'Victorian Conflict' is evidenced in the poems of Tennyson.

1.8 GLOSSARY

Iconic: very famous and well known, and believed to represent a particular idea

Zenith: the highest point or state; culmination; peak

Alliance: Loyalty or the obligation of loyalty to a nation, sovereign or a cause

Fissure: split, crack, cleft

Constitutional Monarchy: a system of government in which a country is ruled by a king and queen whose power is limited by a Constitution.

Premium: In great demand or of high value

Utilitarianism: Based on the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, it advocates the belief that the value of a thing or an action is determined by its utility.

Agnosticism: the tenet that neither the existence nor the nature of God is known or knowable.

Pristine: pure, unspoiled, untouched

Flagship: a single item from a related group, considered as the most important

Pastoral: belonging to the countryside, rural

Hellenism: the principles and ideals associated with the ancient Greek civilization

Medievalism: strong fondness or admiration for the culture, mores, etc, of the

Middle Ages.

Supernaturalism: the condition or quality of existing outside the known experience of man or caused by forces beyond those of nature

Individualism: Belief in the primary importance of the individual and in the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence.

Personification: the attribution of human characteristics to things, abstract ideas, etc, as for literary or artistic effect.

Existentialism: a modern philosophical movement stressing the importance of personal

experience and responsibility and the demands that they make on the individual, who is seen as a free agent in a deterministic and seemingly meaningless universe

Essentialism: a philosophical theory giving priority to the inward nature, true substance, or constitution of something over its existence.

Organism: a living thing that has (or can develop) the ability to act or function independently

Heritable: that can be inherited

1.9 REFERENCES

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1.10 READING LIST

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UNIT 2 “MORTE D’ARTHUR”: READING THE TEXT

Structure

- 2.0 Aims and Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*
- 2.3 Symbols and themes of the legend of King Arthur
- 2.4 The theme of Tennyson’s poem “Morte d’ Arthur”
- 2.5 “The Epic” and “Morte d’Arthur”
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 Glossary
- 2.8 Unit end Questions
- 2.9 References
- 2.10 Reading List

2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you will be able to discuss:

The basic characteristics of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (of which “Morte d’Arthur” is the eleventh book).

The theme of the original *Morte d’Arthur* by Thomas Malory.

Tennyson’s incorporation of the original poem in his “Morte d’Arthur” and
The twin poems “The Epic” and “Morte d’Arthur”

2.1 Introduction

Tennyson incorporated his poem “Morte d’Arthur” into his volume *Idylls of the King*, a cycle of twelve narrative poems which he published between 1859 and 1885, retelling the story of King Arthur and his knights and the rise and fall of his kingdom. The poem with the caption, “Morte d’Arthur” (“The Passing of Arthur”) is the first of Tennyson's poems to be based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Tennyson had earlier written ‘The Lady of Shalott’ in 1833, but that was not based on Thomas Malory’s work, even though it was inspired by an Arthurian legend. Tennyson claimed that he based the poem ‘The Lady of Shalott’ on an Italian work, “*Donna di Scalotta*”, which was from a collection called *Centro Novelle Antiche* (i.e. *One Hundred Ancient Novellae*). This poem represents Tennyson’s fascination for **medieval literature** and culture and his early contributions to **medievalism** in poetry. Tennyson was always drawn towards medieval codes of love and chivalry.

Check your progress 1

What is common between “The Lady of Shallott” and “Morte d’Arthur”?

As stated in the previous Unit (Unit 1), the figure of King Arthur in this poem, is to some extent based on his poet-friend Lord Arthur Hallam whose tragic death deeply affected Tennyson. Hallam is the subject of Tennyson’s poem *In Memoriam*. Tennyson met Hallam in 1829 and his friendship with him was only for four years, as Hallam died in his twenty second year in 1833. Christopher Ricks writes: “The friendship of Hallam and Tennyson was swift and deep.”¹ Hallam was a **precocious** young man, who at a young age had shown the promise of a poet with an active mind, more original and powerful than any of his peer group. Tennyson wrote: “He would have been known, if he had lived, as a great man but not as a great poet; he was as near perfection as mortal man could be.”² Hallam’s death was a significant influence on Tennyson’s poetry. Tennyson dedicated one of his most popular poems to Hallam (*In Memoriam*), and stated that the **dramatic monologue** “*Ulysses*” was “more written with the feeling of his [Hallam’s] loss upon me than many poems in (the publication) *In Memoriam*.”³

Activity

Read “*In Memoriam*” and “*Ulysses*” and find out how they connect with “Morte d’Arthur”.

In Memoriam A.H.H. (Arthur Henry Hallam) was written over a period of 17 years, from 1833 to 1850. Over the course of 133 cantos, it explores Alfred Lord Tennyson’s profound grief at the death of his close friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. After the initial lament, this poem along with ‘*Ulysses*’ and ‘*The Lotos Eaters*’ affirmed the need to move ahead with perseverance and optimism. Initially devastated and depressed by Hallam’s demise, Tennyson abandoned his idea of writing an epic on Arthurian legend. Slowly he got over it and based on the legends of King Arthur, he began a new poem “Morte d’ Arthur”. This poem also started sounding an **elegiac** note over the loss of Hallam, but as the poem progressed, the mournful note of despair gave way to a revival of the human spirit that exhorted him to proceed forward, undaunted by personal tragedy. The poem exemplifies the heroic spirit in man who understands “the need of going forward and to face with new hope the universal human problems of faith and impermanence”⁴. Tennyson published this along with “The Epic” providing the frame for “Morte d’Arthur” in 1842 in *Idylls of the King*. The poem “Morte d’Arthur” is a part of *Idylls of the King*.

Activity

What is the positive message that Tennyson gives through the poems discussed above?

2.2 TENNYSON’S IDYLLS OF THE KING

Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* is his longest and most ambitious work. It is a collection of twelve narrative poems, published between 1842 and 1888 about the legend of King Arthur and the rise and fall of Arthur’s kingdom. These were published in various fragments and combinations

between 1842 and 1888. Four books, “*Enid*,” “*Vivien*,” “*Elaine*,” and “*Guinevere*”, were published as *Idylls of the King* in 1859. *Idylls of the King* can be considered Tennyson’s **magnum opus**, his biggest achievement and subscribes in many aspects to the definition of an epic poem. The structure of an epic by definition is an extended narrative presented either in 12 or in multiples of 12 books. Tennyson was fascinated by Thomas Malory’s work *Le Morte d’Arthur* and based his poem on it. It traces the life and history of King Arthur, his lady love Guinevere, King Arthur’s famed Round Table with his twelve knights, symbolic of equal status enjoyed by each one of them and his final battle when he gets mortally wounded.

Why did Tennyson take up the Arthurian legend to compose the *Idylls*? An ‘Idyll’ refers to a narrative poem on a grand epic or romantic theme. In the earlier Unit, you have studied how under Queen Victoria, Britain had emerged as an imperial power and had made great advances in new scientific discoveries. It had become a growing state with a booming economy though it also witnessed the decline of rural England. It is a part of our human nature to glorify the past of the nation we are born in, its rich culture and civilization, its ancient history and its mythologies. Tennyson who was a **Poet Laureate**, felt he owed it to his nation to pay tribute to its glorious past and chose the Arthurian legend for his epic narrative *Idylls of the King* and make the people feel proud of their glorious inheritance.

“Tennyson sought to encapsulate the past and the present in the *Idylls*. Arthur in the story is often seen as an embodiment of Victorian ideals; he is said to be "ideal manhood closed in real man" and the "stainless gentleman." Arthur often has unrealistic expectations for the Knights of the Round Table and for Camelot itself, and despite his best efforts he is unable to uphold the Victorian ideal in his Camelot.”⁵

The Victorian age had its strict moral codes to follow. Any infringement of the codes evoked the anger of the society and the citizens. In such a context, Tennyson presents Arthur as the embodiment of the highest ideals of manhood and kingship. In the first part, ‘Dedication’, Arthur is described as modest, kindly, all-accomplished, wise, just and not swaying to this faction or to that, with no winged ambitions, and wearing the white flower of a blameless life. He was a simple knight among his knights. There were many in his kingdom who deemed him to be more than a man, someone who had dropped from heaven. To Queen Victoria and her husband Albert, the description of Arthur as an exemplary King and as an ideal man was highly flattering as it was obvious that Tennyson had modelled his Arthur on the British monarch and her consort.

The book is divided into twelve long poems, in keeping with the requirement of an epic. It starts with the coming of Arthur as the King of Camelot, his love for and his marriage with the beautiful Guinevere, and his setting up of the famous Round Table exemplifying the unique democratic ideal where the King is given the status as the first among equals. The Book introduces all the 12 knights, including Lancelot, the best among them.

The narrative through the twelve books is woven around the betrayal of King Arthur by Guinevere and Lancelot and the gradual disintegration of the Round Table. The last betrayal of the king was by the son of one of the Knights, Mordred. In a battle with Mordred, Arthur is grievously injured. Book11, “*Morte d’Arthur*” (The Passing of Arthur) as the heading shows,

deals with the death of Arthur. The detailed discussion of “Morte d’Arthur” will be taken up in the next Unit (Unit 3).

The entire work *Idylls of the King* is about Arthur’s failed efforts to usher in a new order to lift up mankind and create a perfect kingdom, when he dies at the hands of the traitor Mordred. The last book “To the Queen” is where Tennyson, the Poet Laureate praises Queen Victoria and her recently deceased Prince consort, Albert, after whom he had modelled Arthur, and prays that she, like Arthur, is remembered as a great ruler long after her reign is over.

In a nutshell, the story of King Arthur is one of the most popular legends in medieval history. There are a number of stories and pieces of literature written about King Arthur's reign. Among them is *Morte d’ Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory first published in 1485. Malory’s work is written in Middle English. It is a reworking of existing tales about the legendary King Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table. Although King Arthur tried to maintain structure and order as a king, betrayal by the people closest to him eventually led to his demise.

Check Your Progress 2

Why did Tennyson choose the Arthurian legend as the subject for his *Idylls of the King*?

2.3 SYMBOLS AND THEMES OF THE LEGEND OF KING ARTHUR

Major themes from the legend of King Arthur are deception, trust, betrayal, and love. There are also some symbols like the quest for the Holy Grail and the Round Table that are associated with King Arthur’s legend. The Holy Grail in European medieval legend, refers to the bowl or chalice with unusual powers that confers happiness and is therefore much sought after by medieval knights. It is identified with the bowl used by Jesus in his **Last Supper** and given to Joseph of Arimathea who brought it to Britain where it lay hidden for many centuries. Joseph had been given the responsibility of Jesus’s burial after his Crucifixion. The search for that miraculous chalice became the principal quest of Arthur’s knights. The Holy Grail in Arthur’s legend became symbolic not only of spiritual perfection, but also the human perfection which Arthur believed was fundamental to humanity. Hence the most repetitive theme in the Arthurian legend is that of a journey, or quest. Knights of King Arthur’s Round Table, the ablest and bravest in Arthur’s kingdom have a strong desire to seek adventure, to do noble deeds, and to find glory within the most difficult of circumstances. It is pertinent to remember that Tennyson, a Victorian poet used this theme of seeking knowledge in his poem “Ulysses”, a monologue where the protagonist Ulysses speaks of going on a quest: “To follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought...To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Yet another major symbol associated with the Arthurian legend is the Round Table, around which he and his knights congregate. As the name suggests, it has no head, implying that everyone who sits there has equal status. Arthur who sits with his choice selection of twelve knights, considers himself the first among equals. The beginnings of an ideal democratic monarchy can be seen best exemplified by the concept of the Round Table. Arthur created the

Round Table to prevent quarrels among his barons, none of whom would accept a lower place than the others, because only the most distinguished and valiant knights enjoyed the privilege of fellowship of the Round Table and therefore would not like to have anyone occupying a higher seat. The Knights thus had a distinctive identity of their own and also were a part of a collective personality. In course of time, the Round Table came to symbolise the code of chivalry, a code that inspired people from far off distant lands to follow it. The symbolism of the chivalric order was closely allied to Arthur's court and his Knights of the Round Table. The term chivalry has since then been associated with gallantry and honour that these Knights were expected to follow.

The Round Table was supposedly patterned after a table made to commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. One of the seats at that table was left empty to symbolize **Judas**, the apostle who betrayed Jesus. Here also we have a parallel that covers the betrayal of King Arthur by Lancelot, one of the twelve Knights at the Round Table and also the greatest among them. He betrayed the trust Arthur had reposed in him by his relationship with Guinevere, who was Arthur's Queen. Lancelot's love for Guinevere and his betrayal is presented alongside similar unholy affairs of other Knights of the Round Table. The betrayal of the king by Lancelot, the usurpation of his kingdom by Mordred, the son of another of the twelve Knights, brought Arthur close to his death and led to the decline of the Round Table. King Arthur dies in the battle he fought with Mordred.

Apart from betrayal, the other factors that led to the fall of King Arthur was **evisceration** of trust. The two people, Guinevere and Lancelot whom King Arthur trusted the most betrayed him. Lancelot's deception in particular was instrumental in the collapse of honour, gallantry and chivalry which the Round Table had stood for. One more theme focused by the legend is that of 'Love' first shown in the relationship between King Arthur and Guinevere prior to her affair with Lancelot and then again between Lancelot and Guinevere. Thus the central theme of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* on which Tennyson modelled his *Idylls of the King* is loyalty and its expression in chivalry.

Check Your progress 3

1. What are the characteristic features of the Arthurian legend?
2. Discuss the symbols related to the Round Table with specific reference to King Arthur.

2.4 THE THEME OF TENNYSON'S POEM "MORTE D'ARTHUR"

The above background will enable you to place the poem "Morte d'Arthur" in the *Idylls of the King*. While Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, is in 21 books, Tennyson's poem is a retelling of the third, fourth and fifth chapters of the twenty-first book of Malory's romance that dealt with the legendary King Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and the Knights of the Round Table. While Tennyson wrote the first draft of the poem in 1835 and completed the final version in 1842, he included it in his *Idylls of the King* after fifteen years - in 1856-57. This poem is about the death ("morte") of King Arthur.

2.5 “THE EPIC”AND “MORTE D’ ARTHUR”

Tennyson published “Morte d’Arthur” within the framework of another poem, “The Epic”. “Morte d’Arthur” is sandwiched between two sections of “The Epic”. The first section comprises fifty-one lines and the second, thirty lines. The structure of the poem is:

“The Epic”(51lines)→ “Morte d’Arthur” → “The Epic” (30 lines).

Thus “The Epic” serves both as a Prologue and an Epilogue to “Morte d’Arthur”.

The poem is a personal statement of Tennyson, expressing his grief over the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson and Hallam while studying in Cambridge with a select circle of friends often felt the lack of spiritual values in their time. They turned to literature to sustain them in an arid world which was predominantly an age of science and its discoveries in all branches such as physics, astronomy, natural history, medicine and biology. With his love for poetry and medieval legends, Tennyson first conceived of the idea of an Arthurian epic in the 1830s in the context of his Cambridge circle of friends, which included Hallam.

Tennyson had begun to study Malory’s work in 1833 when news came of Hallam’s sudden death. Tennyson did not stop writing poetry in the months and years right after his friend’s death, but rather composed or began some of his most famous works, such as “Ulysses” and “Tithonus.” Then Tennyson started working on “Morte d’Arthur” by the end of the year. The first draft is deeply personal and, as critic Marcia Culver notes, it is “as if Tennyson released his darkest vision of death in this one poem.” The brotherhood of Arthur and Bedivere parallels the deep friendship of Tennyson and Hallam, and the profound grief of their severance is manifest in the utter lack of faith or hope Bedivere experiences at the poem’s close.

Tennyson continued to work on the poem over the decade;“the restrained consolations and weary peace Tennyson finally achieved ... evolved only gradually, with time and revision [and] over a period of many years, the “Morte d’Arthur” was transformed and enriched by the emergence of new dimensions of hope and ethical concern.” In particular, the second draft has the intimations of immortality of the King. This, of course, has biblical allusions, but it is also a meaningful and poignant wish for the immortality of Tennyson’s cherished friend.

As shown above, “Morte d’Arthur” is framed within another poem, “The Epic,” written in 1842. A poet, a clergyman and the narrator of the poem meet on Christmas Eve at a friend’s place for drinks. As they discuss about the gradual loss of faith and sanctity associated with Christmas, the narrator comes out with a suggestion that poetry can be a substitute for faith and religion. They recall the poet writing an Arthurian epic in twelve books and the host interjects saying that the poet had burnt all his books because he felt he had nothing new to say. The host however says he had salvaged the eleventh book and requests the poet to read it out. The Arthurian legend is made interesting as the poet adds modern touches to the classical story. The narrator goes to bed and dreams of Arthur: “And so to bed, where yet in sleep I seemed to sail with Arthur.” He dreams of a boat carrying Arthur back to the present like a modern gentleman as all the people gather

around him to welcome him as the harbinger of peace. Then, the narrator hears the sound of “a hundred bells” and wakes to the church bells on Christmas morning.

The poem “The Epic” serves as the frame for Tennyson’s “Morte d’Arthur” which he wrote as early as 1833. It is this poem that becomes the concluding part of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* that he published after another half a century. The poem is written in **blank verse** as blank verse is appropriate to detail the conversation between friends. In fact, the *Idylls* is also written in blank verse. But in the *Idylls* Tennyson only keeps the poem “Morte d’Arthur” and discards “The Epic” as it has nothing to do with the Arthurian legend.

According to the critic Angela O’Donnell, the conversational tone of “The Epic” is a counterpoint to the heroic language in which “Morte d’Arthur” has been written. What is important to note is that “The Epic” gives a modern touch as the loss of faith which the four friends speak of in the initial lament, gets restored as they listen to the heroic story of King Arthur. Their faith in God and humanity is revived as they listen to the story where Arthur is shown to achieve Christ-like immortality. J.S. Lawry writes, “the poem ends by driving its point of Christian revival so insistently that the other recoveries of faith may be missed. The faith of heroic ages in human greatness is recovered and validated through the ‘rapt’ response of a modern audience to the hero, Arthur.”⁶

2.6 SUMMING UP

In this Unit, we have placed “Morte d’Arthur” within the frame of Tennyson’s *magnum opus* *The Idylls of the King*. We discussed the theme of *The Idylls of the King*, its basic characteristics, the symbols and themes of the Arthurian legend, the framing of the poem “Morte d’Arthur” and the close connection between “The Epic” and “Morte d’Arthur”.

2.7 Glossary

Medieval Literature: Literature belonging to the Middle Ages, works written in Latin or the vernacular (English and European languages) between c. 476-1500 CE, including philosophy, religious treatises, legal texts, as well as works of the imagination.

Medievalism: strong fondness or admiration for the culture, mores, etc, of the Middle Ages.

Precocious: unusually advanced or mature in mental development or talent

Dramatic Monologue: a poem in the form of a speech or narrative by an imagined person, in which the speaker inadvertently reveals aspects of their character while describing a particular situation or series of events.

Elegiac: experiencing or expressing sorrow especially that associated with irreparable loss.

Magnum Opus: the greatest single work of a writer, or an artist or a composer.

Poet Laureate: an eminent poet appointed as a member of the British Royal household, the nation's poet.

Judas: Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, who betrayed his master to the authorities. This act led to the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus to the religious authorities for 30 pieces of silver.

The Last Supper: the final meal that, in the Gospel accounts (the Bible), Jesus shared with his apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion.

Evisceration: to take away a vital or essential part of; weaken, damage, destroy.

Blank Verse: unrhymed verse.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS:

1. Write a note on the theme of the *Idylls of the King* and place "Morte d'Arthur" within its frame.
2. Comment on the connection between "The Epic" and "Morte d'Arthur".

2.9 REFERENCES

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UNIT 3 TEXT AND ANALYSIS OF “MORTE D’ARTHUR”

Structure

- 3.0 Aims and Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Text
- 3.3 Summary of the poem
- 3.4. Line by line analysis of the poem
- 3.5 Summing Up
- 3.6 Unit end Questions
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 References

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

As we have already discussed in the previous unit, Tennyson’s poem “Morte d’Arthur” is part of his Arthurian epic which he titled *The Idylls of the King*. *The Idylls*, in keeping with the epic tradition, comprises twelve books of which “Morte d’Arthur” (“The Passing of Arthur”) is the eleventh Book.

After studying this Unit, you will be able to

- * critically analyse the poem “Morte d’Arthur”
- * discuss the main themes of the poem and
- * explain the link between the poem and the Victorian Age.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Tennyson is regarded as one of the greatest poets of Victorian England. He was made the Poet Laureate of Britain in 1850. He is referred to as Alfred *Lord* Tennyson because he was honoured with the title Baron and Barons were always known by their title, Lord.

As already mentioned, “Morte d’Arthur”, or “The *Death Of Arthur*”, is rated as the best among the twelve books in Tennyson’s epic, *The Idylls of the King*. *The Idylls* is based on Sir Thomas Malory’s medieval work of the same name, *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Sir Thomas Malory had translated it from French. King Arthur was a legendary British leader who is believed to have led the defence of Britain against Saxon invaders in the late 5th and early 6th centuries. He was a unifying force and loved by his people. Arthur, sometimes known as ‘the king that was and the king that shall be’, is recognised all over the world as one of the most famous figures of British myth and legend.

“The adventures of the legendary King Arthur, with his Round Table Fellowship of Knights based in the mythical city of Camelot, were told and retold between the 11th and 15th centuries in hundreds of manuscripts in at least a dozen languages. “What place is there within the bounds of the Empire of Christendom to which the winged praise of Arthur the Briton has not extended?” wrote the 12th-century chronicler Alanus ab Insulis (or Alain de Lille). Today Arthurian stories are told in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Icelandic, Dutch, Russian, and even Hebrew.”¹

The Round Table is a famous concept of the Arthurian legend. The table at which Arthur and his 12 knights are seated, is round, in the likeness of the world. The Knights who sat at the table are the bravest and truest knights who along with King Arthur are given the task of governing the subjects fairly and justly.

The greatest task undertaken by Arthur’s knights is the quest for the grail, a mysterious vessel linked to the story of Jesus Christ; it is believed to have been used by Christ at the Last Supper, and afterwards by Joseph of Arimathea, to collect the blood that flowed from the Saviour as his body was taken down from the cross. The grail became a holy relic sought by mystics and heroes – and most famously, by Arthur’s fellowship. Many knights perished and weakened both the Round Table and Arthur’s court, preparing the way for the dark days to come when Mordred rose up against Arthur, and ended the dream of Camelot.

Though his end was tragic, King Arthur is celebrated today as a heroic figure, and his story can be seen even today, depicted in the hallowed halls of the British Parliament. Thus this poem is about King Arthur and his chivalry and therefore it serves as a model to rulers who are given the task to rule in an equitable and just manner. The name of King Arthur had been a source of pride for Britain in the Middle Ages and the Arthurian legends were known as ‘The Matter Of Britain’. Tennyson brought the legend forward from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era and thereby illustrated through his poem the enduring appeal of the Arthurian legend. To the Victorians who were celebrating the greatness and expansiveness of Great Britain, this poem held a powerful inspiration.

3.2 TEXT OF THE POEM “MORTE D'ARTHUR”

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd 1
Among the mountains by the winter sea;
Until King Arthur's table, man by man,
Had fallen in Lyonesse about their Lord,
King Arthur: then, because his wound was deep, 5
The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,
Sir Bedivere, the last of all his knights,
And bore him to a nigh the field
A broken chancel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land. 10
On one side lay the ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
 "The sequel of to-day unsolder
 The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
 Whereof thisworld holds record. Such a sleep
 they sleep - the men I loved I think that we
 Shall never more, at any future time,
 Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
 Walking about the gardens and the halls 20
 Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
 I perish by this people which I made,—
 Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again
 To rule once more—but let what will be, be,
 I am so deeply smitten thro' the helm 25
 That without help I cannot last till morn.
 Thou therefore take my brand Excalibur,
 Which was my pride: for thou rememberest how
 In those old days, one summer noon, an arm 30
 Rose up from out the bosom of the lake,
 Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
 Holding the sword—and how I row'd across
 And took it, and have worn it, like a king:
 And, wheresoever I am sung or told
 In aftertime, this also shall be known: 35
 But now delay not: take Excalibur,
 And fling him far into the middle mere
 Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word."
 To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:
 "It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee thus, 40
 Aidless, alone, and smitten thro' the helm.
 A little thing may harm a wounded man.
 Yet I thy hest will all perform at full,
 Watch what I see, and lightly bring thee word."
 So saying, from the ruin'd shrine he stept 45
 And in the moon athwart the place of tombs,
 Where lay the mighty bones of ancient men,
 Old knights, and over them the sea-wind sang
 Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping down
 By zigzag paths, and juts of pointed rock, 50
 Came on the shining levels of the lake.
 There drew he forth the brand Excalibur,
 And o'er him, drawing it, the winter moon,
 Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth
 And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt: 55
 For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,
 Myriads of topaz-lights, and jacinth work

Of subtlest jewellery. He gazed so long
That both his eyes were dazzled, as he stood,
This way and that dividing the swift mind, 60
In act to throw: but at the last it seem'd
Better to leave Excalibur conceal'd
There in the many-knotted water-flags,
That whistled stiff and dry about the marge.
So strode he back slow to the wounded King. 65

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
"Hast thou perform'd my mission which I gave?
What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?"

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere: 70

"I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
And the wild water lapping on the crag."
To whom replied King Arthur, faint and pale:
"Thou hast betray'd thy nature and thy name,
Not rendering true answer, as beseem'd 75
Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:
For surer sign had follow'd, either hand,
Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.
This is a shameful thing for men to lie.
Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go again 80
As thou art lief and dear, and do the thing
I bade thee, watch, and lightly bring me word."

Then went Sir Bedivere the second time
Across the ridge, and paced beside the mere,
Counting the dewy pebbles, fixed in thought; 85
But when he saw the wonder of the hilt,
How curiously and strangely chased, he smote
His palms together, and he cried aloud,
"And if indeed I cast the brand away,
Surely a precious thing, one worthy note, 90
Should thus be lost forever from the earth,
Which might have pleased the eyes of many men.
What good should follow this, if this were done?
What harm, undone? deep harm to disobey,
Seeing obedience is the bond of rule. 95
Were it well to obey then, if a king demand
An act unprofitable, against himself?
The King is sick, and knows not what he does.
What record, or what relic of my lord
Should be to aftertime, but empty breath 100
And rumours of a doubt? but were this kept,

Stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings,
 Some one might show it at a joust of arms,
 Saying, 'King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,
 Wrought by the lonely maiden of the Lake; 105
 Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps
 Upon the hidden bases of the hills.'
 So might some old man speak in the aftertime
 To all the people, winning reverence.
 But now much honour and much fame were lost." 110
 So spake he, clouded with his own conceit,
 And hid Excalibur the second time,
 And so strode back slow to the wounded King.
 Then spoke King Arthur, breathing heavily:
 "What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?" 115
 And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
 "I heard the water lapping on the crag,
 And the long ripple washing in the reeds." 120
 To whom replied King Arthur, much in wrath:
 "Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,
 Unknightly, traitor-hearted! Woe is me!
 Authority forgets a dying king,
 Laid widow'd of the power in his eye 125
 That bow'd the will. I see thee what thou art,
 For thou, the latest-left of all my knights,
 In whom should meet the offices of all,
 Thou wouldst betray me for the precious hilt;
 Either from lust of gold, or like a
 Yet, for a man may fail in duty twice,
 And the third time may prosper, get thee hence:
 But, if thou spare to fling Excalibur,
 I will arise and slay thee with my hands." 135
 Then quickly rose Sir Bedivere, and ran,
 And, leaping down the ridges lightly, plunged
 Among the bulrush-beds, and clutch'd the sword,
 And strongly wheel'd and threw it. The great brand
 Madelightnings in the splendour of the moon, 140
 And flashing round and round, and whirl'd in an arch,
 Shot like a streamer of the northern morn,
 Seen where the moving isles of winter shock
 By night, with noises of the northern sea.
 Soflash'd and fell the brand Excalibur: 145
 But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm
 Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
 And caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him
 Three times, and drew him under in the mere.

And lightly went the other to the King. 150
Then spoke King Arthur, drawing thicker breath:
"Now see I by thine eyes that this is done.
Speak out: what is it thou hast heard, or seen?"

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
"Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest the gems 155
Should blind my purpose, for I never saw,
Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I die,
Not tho' I live three lives of mortal men,
So great a miracle as yonder hilt.

Then with both hands I flung him, wheeling him; 160
But when I look'd again, behold an arm,
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
That caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere."

And answer made King Arthur, breathing hard: 165
"My end draws nigh; 't is time that I were gone.
Make broad thy shoulders to receive my weight,
And bear me to the margin; yet I fear
My wound hath taken cold, and I shall die."

So saying, from the pavement he half rose, 170
Slowly, with pain, reclining on his arm,
And looking wistfully with wide blue eyes
As in a picture. Him Sir Bedivere

Remorsefully regarded thro' his tears,
And would have spoken, but he found not words, 175
Then took with care, and kneeling on one knee,
O'er both his shoulders drew the languid hands,
And rising bore him thro' the place of tombs.

But, as he walk'd, King Arthur panted hard,
Like one that feels a nightmare on his bed 180
When all the house is mute. Sosigh'd the King
Muttering and murmuring at his ear, "Quick, quick!
fear it is too late, and I shall die."

But the other swiftly strode from ridge to ridge,
Clothed with his breath, and looking, as he walk'd 185
Larger than human on the frozen hills.

He heard the deep behind him, and a cry
Before. His own thought drove him like a goad.
Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right 190
The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels—

And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,
 And the long glories of the winter moon 195
 Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge
 Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern,
 Beneath them; and descending they were ware
 That all the decks were dense with stately forms
 Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a dream—by these 200
 Three Queens with crowns of gold—and from them rose
 A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,
 And, as it were one voice, an agony
 Of lamentation, like a wind, that shrills
 All night in a waste land, where no one comes, 205
 Or hath come, since the making of the world.
 Then murmur'd Arthur, "Place me in the barge,"
 And to the barge they came. There those three Queens
 Put forth their hands, and took the King, and wept.
 But she that rose the tallest of them all 210
 And fairest, laid his head upon her lap,
 And loosed the shatter'd casque, and chafed his hands,
 And call'd him by his name, complaining loud
 And dropping bitter tears against his brow
 Striped with dark blood: for all his face was white
 And colourless, and like the wither'd moon
 Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east;
 And all his greaves and cuisses dash'd with drops
 Of onset; and the light and lustrous curls—
 That made his forehead like a rising sun 220
 High from the daïs-throne—were parch'd with dust;
 Or, clotted into points and hanging loose,
 Mix'd with the knightly growth that fringed his lips.
 So like a shatter'd column lay the King;
 Not like that Arthur who, with lance in rest,
 From spur to plume a star of tournament,
 Shot thro' the lists at Camelot, and charged
 Before the eyes of ladies and of kings.
 Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
 "Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? 230
 Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
 For now I see the true old times are dead,
 When every morning brought a noble chance,
 And every chance brought out a noble knight.
 Such times have been not since the light that led
 The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
 But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
 Which was an image of the mighty world;

And I, the last, go forth companionless,
 And the days darken round me, and the years,²⁴⁰
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds."
 And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
 "The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
 And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world. 245
 Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
 I have lived my life, and that which I have done
 May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
 If thou shouldst never see my face again,
 Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer 250
 Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
 Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
 For what are men better than sheep or goats
 That nourish a blind life within the brain,
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer 255
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
 For so the whole round earth is every way
 Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
 But now farewell. I am going a long way
 With these thou seest—if indeed I go 260
 (For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)
 To the island-valley of Avilion;
 Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
 Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
 Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard-lawns 265
 And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
 Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
 Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
 That, fluting a wild carol ere her death, 270
 Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
 With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
 Revolving many memories, till the hull
 Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,
 And on the mere the wailing died away. 275

3.3 SUMMARY

In the previous Unit, we had clubbed this poem with another poem by Tennyson, "The Epic". In "The Epic," we find a poet celebrating Christmas Eve with three of his friends. One of them says that the poet, for reasons best known to him had burnt all the books that he had written on the Arthurian legend, except one which was saved by him. He asks the poet to read out from that

book. This is the poem “Morte d’Arthur”, written about the death of King Arthur. The poet narrates the story of the dying moments of King Arthur, after his final battle with Mordred, the betrayer and usurper of his throne. The situation is grim as all Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table are already killed. Arthur himself is mortally wounded, and is borne by the last surviving knight, Sir Bedivere, to a ruined chapel near a lake.

3.4 LINE BY LINE ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

Lines 1-38

King Arthur reminisces about the glorious days of the past as he tells Bedivere that there will never be another place as great as Camelot. Camelot in the Arthurian legend is a mythical castled city in Great Britain, where King Arthur held court. It is important because it is the location of Arthur’s round table and his knights.

Arthur says he is so badly wounded that he may not survive till the next morning and so he asks Bedivere to take his sword, Excalibur, throw it into the middle of the lake, and watch what happens. Years ago, Arthur had obtained this iconic sword from a white silk-clad arm, holding it out of the same lake. The sword gains power when wielded by a skilled warrior like King Arthur and since his time, has retained its legendary reputation in every story which features it. This mythological sword is identified with a single hero and the hero has to take care that it should not fall into the hands of an enemy owing to its inherent power. Hence King Arthur at the moment of his death calls the only surviving loyal knight, Sir Bedivere and hands him the sword with his order that it should be returned to the Lady of the Lake, the source from where it came rather than be entrusted to whichever knight - no matter how noble - might succeed Arthur as king.

Lines 39-65

Bedivere doesn't want to leave Arthur alone, but he obeys. He walks in the moonlight through a graveyard to the edge of the lake. When he draws out Excalibur, the jewels on the hilt sparkle in the moonlight. It appears to be so precious, that he prefers to hide the sword than to throw it into the lake as ordered by King Arthur.

Lines 66-82

When he returns, Arthur asks if he did as commanded and asked him what he heard and saw. Bedivere tells a lie that he heard the sound of a ripple and the wild water hitting the crag as though he had thrown the sword into the water. King Arthur knows that the sword cannot fall into water because it will be caught by an arm rising from the water. He admonishes Bedivere for lying because had he thrown the sword as he was told, he would have got another sign almost like a miracle. So Arthur tells Bedivere to go again and do as commanded.

Lines 83-113

The sword is such a beautiful piece that Bedivere feels it a terrible thing to lose it forever. It has a history of having been shaped for nine years before it was given to Arthur. If the sword disappears forever when thrown into the lake waters, it will not be seen by anyone who can tell the story of the sword to future generations. He wonders what harm will accrue if he does not carry out his King's orders as the sick King does not know what he does. While implicit obedience is the rule of law, when the King's orders may not prove profitable to the King, Bedivere feels that there is nothing wrong in going against the King's command. He returns to the King a second time without accomplishing the task his master had given him.

Lines 114-150

He answers in much the same way when the King asks him if he had done as he was asked to do. The King gets angry and sad that his one surviving Knight has also turned disloyal and has failed to execute the authority of the King. He reprimands him for his disobedience and asks him again to go back to the lake once more and fling the sword into it. Bedivere then runs and flings the sword over the lake, where it whirls and flashes like lightning before being caught by an arm clad in white silk. The arm brandishes Excalibur three times before drawing it down into the water.

Lines 151-164

When Bedivere returns to Arthur, the king asks him what he has seen or heard. Bedivere answers that this time he deliberately closed his eyes to escape the temptation of holding back the beautiful sword and threw it into the lake. When he opened his eyes again, he saw an arm catching and brandishing the sword.

Lines 164-206

Then Arthur asks Bedivere to carry him to the lake before he dies. Bedivere, in tears, carries Arthur through the graveyard. They go along the rocky path until they finally reach the lake. There they see a large black barge filled with black-clad forms and three gold-crowned queens. They hear a great cry of lamentation "like a wind, that shrills / All night in a waste land."

Lines 206-228

Arthur tells Bedivere to place him on the barge. The three queens take him. One of them, the tallest, places his head on her lap, loosens his helmet, and calls him by name, crying. Arthur looks lifeless "like a shatter'd column," not like the king he was.

Lines 229-241

Bedivere then asks Arthur where he should go: "For now I see the true old times are dead / When every morning brought a noble chance." He realizes what has been lost with the end of the Round

Table and despairs of the dark days ahead. He is left companionless and dreads the future where he will be thrown among new men, strange faces and other minds.

Lines 242-275

Arthur answers things are meant to change. The old order changes for the new, says King Arthur. He tells Bedivere to pray for his soul, for men are no better than sheep or goats if they do not pray. He says "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." The king asks him to pray for his soul, and then tells Bedivere that he is going to Avilion, a kind of paradise, where his wound will be healed. The barge sails across the lake and into the distance, while Bedivere looks on, until the wailing dies away

3.4.2 Analysis of the poem

This narrative poem, written in blank verse, is based on an episode in Arthurian legend and told most memorably in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, a prose compilation of Arthurian legend first published in 1485. Tennyson uses some archaic diction to lend the narrative a sense of antiquity, for example, words like "spake," "thou," "thee," and "hast."

The poem is semi-autobiographical. It is inspired by the personal loss suffered by Tennyson after the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam. Arthur Henry Hallam, died suddenly at the age of 22 in 1833. This was the time Tennyson had decided to write a poem on the Arthurian legend. Hence one can feel the sense of sadness and despair when Bedivere loses his King Arthur: "Ah! My Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? / ... For now I see the true old times are dead".

The events of the poem take place after Arthur's war with the traitorous Mordred. In the battle, though Mordred is killed, King Arthur is also left mortally wounded. All his Knights of the Round Table except for Sir Bedivere are dead. The battle has led to the destruction of the Round Table and the glory that was Camelot. Arthur mournfully affirms there will never again be a place like Camelot. Tennyson, the Victorian poet is here providing the inspiration to the people of his times who looked for legends from the ancient days, that spoke about the glory of Britain. Such chivalric deeds were represented in the Arthurian legends and hence Tennyson's choice of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* on which he based his poem.

Sir Bedivere is the model of a loyal follower. He tries to obey his lord even when it goes against his better judgment. He carries the Excalibur through an ancient graveyard, in cold winds, over sharp rocks, in obedience to King Arthur's orders. But Bedivere's loyalty is put to test when the beauty and richness of the sword's hilt make him hesitant to throw it into the lake and lose it forever. He finds himself rationalizing why he should disobey his king. But King Arthur is hurt that the last loyal soldier Bedivere has also turned against him, signalling his own waning authority as king: "Authority forgets a king, / Laid widow'd of the power in his eye / That bow'd the will." But Bedivere proves his loyalty after his two initial hesitant attempts. Arthur is pleased and makes one more request to take him to the lake before he dies. Tennyson highlights the difficulty of the journey through his evocative use of harsh words: "The bare black cliff clang'd

round him, as he based / His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang / Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels."

In Malory's story, there were three queens on the barge. These queens would carry Arthur to **Avilion**. There they would supposedly heal his wound so that he may one day return to rule Britain once more. Tennyson evokes a clear image of the mortally wounded Arthur being wailed over by the weeping women. This image and the suggestion that he will be healed and will return to power, suggests a comparison to the story of Jesus after the crucifixion.

Bedivere's understanding of what is lost with the departure of Arthur ends the poem. But Arthur had earlier offered him reassurance that change is natural: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." The poem ends on that note of hope and optimism where the inevitability of change heralds the arrival of a new order.

3.4.2 Allegorical Significance

Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of Britain desired to kindle the national pride of fellow Englishmen and showcase the ideals that Victorians identified themselves with. He chose the Arthurian legend as his theme, since King Arthur embodied those ideals far back in his days before the Norman conquest of 1066. King Arthur was celebrated in all the medieval legends as an exemplary ruler. Tennyson transposes the past onto the present to make the ideal Arthurian monarchy illustrative of Queen Victoria's rule. Arthur is said to be "ideal manhood closed in real man" and the "stainless gentleman." His idea of the Round Table where he sat with his Knights is an example of his democratic concept of the King as the first among equal knights. Arthur thus was a democratic monarch whose round table was itself a democratic institution. Thus King Arthur was looked upon as the prototype of a good monarch.

Through the presentation of King Arthur, Tennyson sought to project Queen Victoria as an ideal monarch. Those who know British history will understand that Queen Victoria was the matriarch of the British Empire. She epitomised the values of the era and carved out a new role for the monarchy. During her 63-year reign, a length surpassed only by the current Queen (Queen Elizabeth II), Victoria presided over the social and industrial transformation of Britain, as well as expansion of the empire. But at the end, Arthur was disappointed and betrayed by the Knights. To his dismay he realized his expectations from them were unrealistic and he could not uphold the ideals he had established for himself and the Knights.

3.5 SUMMING UP

In this Unit, we have discussed a brief summary of the poem followed by textual analysis. The main features of the Arthurian legend and its recreation in Tennyson's poem are also discussed. The allegorical significance of this poem for Victorian society is also brought out in this unit.

3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the concept of King Arthur's Round Table.

2. How are Arthur's final lines "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" personally significant for Tennyson?
3. Write a note on the poem as an allegory of Victorian ideals.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Medieval: Relating or belonging to the Middle Ages.

Legendary: celebrated in fable or legend (an unverified story handed down from earlier times, especially one popularly believed to be historical).

Nigh: close to

Chancel: the space around the altar of a church for the clergy and sometimes the choir, often enclosed by a lattice or railing.

Saxon: Germanic tribal groups from Northern Germany that invaded Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Unsolder: remove

Sware: swore

Samite: a heavy silk fabric interwoven with gold or silver and worn in the Middle Ages.

Hest: Command

Athwart: from one side to the other, across

Haft: the handle of an axe or knife

Myriad: innumerable

Topaz: a gemstone in yellow colour

Jacinth: red colour hyacinth flower. Here used to refer to gem of this colour.

Marge (here used in its old meaning) : margin

Beseem: befit

Fealty: loyalty, allegiance

Lief: really, willingly

Casque: helmet, armour worn to protect the head

Greaves: residue left behind after removal of fat

Cuisses: medieval armour worn to protect the thigh

Plume: a large fluffy feather- a token of achievement

Avillion: described by Tennyson as an island valley with ideal weather and fertile land.

Blank Verse: Unrhymed verse in Iambic pentameters. Iambic pentameter refers to the pattern or rhythm of a line of poetry or verse and has to do with the number of syllables in the line and the emphasis placed on those syllables.

Prototype: An original type or form serving as a standard

Archetype: Something that serves as a model

Everyman: an allegorical figure who represents all of mankind

3.8 REFERENCES

1. [www.historyextra.com>period>medieval](http://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval)

UNIT 4 “MORTE D’ARTHUR”:THEMES AND SYMBOLS

Structure

- 4.0 Aims and Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Themes of the poem “Morte d’Arthur”
- 4.3 Symbols and their significance in “Morte d’Arthur”
- 4.4 Characters in the poem
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 Unit end Questions
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 References

4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After studying this concluding Unit on “Morte d’Arthur”, you will be able to discuss:

- The themes of the poem and their relevance to the Victorian Age
- The significance of the symbols and allusions in the poem
- The two central characters, King Arthur and Sir Bedivere.

The aim is to critically understand and appreciate the poem by interweaving the themes, symbols and characters with the story and show how the early Arthurian period is **transposed** to the Victorian period when Tennyson wrote the poem. You will have to read this Unit alongside the poem that is given in the previous Unit (Unit 3).

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Tennyson’s poem “Morte d’Arthur” is the eleventh book in his **magnum opus** *The Idylls of the King*, an epic narrative in twelve books. Though this is the eleventh book, this can also be read as a stand-alone poem without linking it to the rest of the epic. This is because the poem is remarkable for its presentation of King Arthur and his final dialogue with his last loyal knight Sir Bedivere. The poem marks both an end and a beginning for Tennyson - it is a poem that deals with Tennyson’s personal grief over the death of his friend Arthur Hallam and when he included it in the epic *The Idylls of the King*, it seems to signal the beginning of a new creative period in Tennyson’s life. What begins as a lament over the loss of a close friend, ends with an affirmation that life has to go on where the old order changes and gives birth to a new order.

The idea of writing an epic on King Arthur is due to the interest Tennyson and his Cambridge companions had developed towards medieval values which they felt were missing in their times, i.e. the Victorian Age. Tennyson was greatly influenced by **medievalism** and the values it represented. These were values such as valour, loyalty, personal honour, and chivalry. Tennyson decided to write an epic poem based on the Arthurian legend, but this was cut short when Hallam

died, leaving Tennyson in a state of depression. But when he returned to the story of King Arthur (as narrated by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485 in the medieval period), he discovered the significance of King Arthur's last courageous words to his loyal knight, Sir Bedivere. It made him realize the need to courageously march on and not surrender to personal grief such as that caused by his friend's death. This poem thus marks an important section of his epic *The Idylls of the King* as it inducts the medieval values onto his contemporary times.

Tennyson understood that there was no option but to face the universal problem of life that affects every human being - the **impermanence** of life, the undeniable fact of **mortality** summed up in the proverb "here today and gone tomorrow". The courage to face the timeless recurrence of death that hangs over life is possible through recourse to faith in God and spiritual values. The poem presents this theme of facing death by revealing Sir Bedivere's mental agitation over the impending death of his King and his own survival thereafter. The symbols Tennyson uses are those of the Round Table and the sword Excalibur while the themes are those of loyalty to the King and acceptance of death as signaling the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

4.2 THEMES OF THE POEM "MORTE D' ARTHUR"

"Morte d'Arthur" is the most well known poem in *The Idylls of the King*. This poem deals with the death of the legendary British king Arthur, and King Arthur's last command to his loyal knight Sir Bedivere to deposit his sword Excalibur in the lake from where he had first received it. Sir Bedivere hesitates to throw the sword on finding it to be elegant and beautiful and feels it should not be lost in the lake thereby denying future generations the chance to experience its splendour. He also feels that it should be preserved as a reminder of the glory of the King who possessed it. King Arthur's insists and commands for the third time that it should be thrown in the lake, as Sir Bedivere had failed to obey him twice earlier. Sir Bedivere executes his King's command when he discovers that the sword thrown into the lake is grasped by an arm clothed in white that rises from the lake and disappears with it under the water. Arthur requests Sir Bedivere to place him on a barge where three queens attend on Arthur and all of them sail off to the isle of Avilion, leaving Sir Bedivere to accept the truth that the old order is over and has yielded to a new one.

If this poem is read alongside Tennyson's life, we will discover that just as Sir Bedivere finally accepts a new order in the place of the old order of King Arthur, Tennyson reconciles himself to the death of his friend Arthur Hallam and moves on. Christopher Ricks in his biographical study of the poet, wrote that "Morte d'Arthur" endeavours "to imagine and depict a person left alone after Arthur's death as Tennyson was after his *Arthur's*."¹(Tennyson's Arthur is Arthur Hallam).

Hence the theme that is central to the poem is acceptance of human mortality and the acceptance of a new life that displaces the old by a new order- in short acceptance of transition to different phases of life, with courage and equanimity. This is conveyed first by King Arthur who recognizes the passing of a golden era that he had established- the era of the Round Table and loyal Knights, the era of chivalry and ideal governance, the era of glory and success he had personally attained during his kingship. "Morte d'Arthur" is a poem about the passing of not only a great man, but also of a great period in history. An important phase in Tennyson's personal

history had also come to an end. The opening lines of King Arthur that start the dialogue between King Arthur and Sir Bedivere makes clear the theme that an era is about to an end and that this will mark the beginning of a new era.

“The sequel of to-day unsolders all
The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep
They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we
Shall never more, at any future time,
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
Walking about the gardens and the halls
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
I perish by this people which I made,—
Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again
To rule once more—but let what will be, be.”

These are his first words to Sir Bedivere expressing the end of an era which begins with a summary of the loss of his beloved knights and an acceptance “but let what will be, be”. These six words hint at the change that has come over Tennyson as he strives to overcome his grief over Hallam’s death and starts afresh his poetic career. Hallam’s death takes place at the beginning of Tennyson’s career and the loss of his friend brought with him a tragic sense of a loss of all meaning in life. Twenty years later around 1850, Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam* which begins on a note of sadness similar to Arthur’s opening speech to Sir Bedivere quoted above. But the poem ends on a strong and confident note that Hallam will live on in heaven and Tennyson will join him there. This poem *In Memoriam* ends on a hopeful note that with faith and love, grief can be overcome:

I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

This poem is a truly Victorian poem that affirms that we can overcome grief by faith and faith alone. “*In Memoriam* reflects the Victorian struggle to reconcile traditional religious faith with the emerging theories of evolution and modern biology. The verses show the development over three years and the poet’s acceptance and understanding of his friend’s death.”² In the later poem *In Memoriam*, we recognize the theme of acceptance of mortality as an unalterable fact of life and the theme of cultivating optimism to look forward to a new life that comes thereafter. Tennyson’s “Morte d’Arthur” ends with a similar message when Sir Bedivere feels **traumatised** at the thought of a future life without his King.

When loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
"Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,

When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

King Arthur's reply sums up the basic theme of the poem:

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.

Accepting change, accepting a new order of life is a part of our existence. What keeps men strong and courageous in the light of change into an unknown future is faith in God: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

Faith in God, having an optimistic outlook on what shall come hereafter is a difficult proposition. Tennyson is aware of the Victorian struggle between science and religion, reason and faith, biological theory of evolution and religious theory of Creation, individual aspiration and social responsibility. The underlying hope that with faith in God, one can overcome grief is a classic example of the Victorian attempt to hold on to religion despite the **scepticism** over its **efficacy** engendered by scientific- in particular biological advancement. Tennyson's poetry reflects the uneasiness of the Victorian age, torn between established Christian faith and science and modern progress. But what comes out at the end is a feeling of reassurance and serene acceptance of life and its **oddity**. Tennyson is praised as the first great English poet to be fully aware of the new picture of man's place in the universe revealed by modern science. He wrestles with the new biological theories that disputed the earlier faith in God and religion; this reflection and the assured optimism of the dawn of a new world order were in consonance with Queen Victoria's reign.

Like King Arthur, Queen Victoria is associated with the glory of England, and an age that is celebrated as the great age of industrial advancement, scientific and economic progress, and expansion of the British empire. Her reign of more than sixty-three years was also a period of,

cultural, political, and moral change in Great Britain. She is looked upon as an icon of the strictest standards of morality. Tennyson transposes the medieval story from the Arthurian legend to his times and gives it an **allegorical** significance. The common theme that runs through the medieval legend and the Victorian age is the emphasis on loyalty, obedience, faithfulness and discipline. Faithfulness and loyalty are integral to sustain the moral fibre of society. Disloyalty and **infidelity** bring about the decay and collapse of society. The illicit love between Arthur's wife, Guinevere and his loyal and celebrated Knight Lancelot and the treachery of Mordred result in the dissolution of the society of the knights of the Round Table and the death of Arthur. The chivalry and heroism of the Knights of the Round table get evaporated slowly and the poem "Morte d'Arthur" begins with the wounded King Arthur with his only surviving, loyal knight Sir Bedivere. King Arthur is a symbolic representation of a God-like man who throughout his life led a righteous life and aspired continuously to reach greater perfection both as a King and as a man. Arthur thus stands for aspirations towards the ideal of a higher life. Tennyson seeks to enhance Victorian life symbolized by Queen Victoria towards higher perfection.

The theme of loyalty is the second theme of the poem. As stated above, the poem though set in the medieval period is essentially Victorian. Sir Bedivere's loyalty to the King even when he has lost power and is on his deathbed, is to be seen as paralleling the Victorian's admiration and pride in their Queen and their deep sense of loyalty to her and to the nation. Let us take these lines uttered by Arthur to Sir Bedivere after he laments the demise of the Knights of the Round Table:

And wheresoever I am sung or told
In aftertime, this also shall be known:
But now delay not: take Excalibur,
And fling him far into the middle mere:
Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word."
To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:
"It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee thus,
Aidless, alone, and smitten thro' the helm.
A little thing may harm a wounded man.
Yet I thy hest will all perform at full,
Watch what I see, and lightly bring thee word.
So saying, from the ruin'd shrine he stept."

Though initially Sir Bedivere is hesitant to leave his King wounded and dying, he agrees to perform all that he had commanded ("yet thy hest will all perform at full") and so saying he steps out in obedience to his King. This is true loyalty, as Sir Bedivere does not refuse to obey a defeated and wounded king who is a king only in name and not a king in action. But when he finds the sword Excalibur beautiful and bright, he decides not to throw the sword into the lake, but he does not want to hurt his King to mistake him as a disobedient soldier. So he tells a falsehood that he had done as he was ordered.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
"Hast thou perform'd my mission which I gave?"

What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?"
And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
"I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
And the wild water lapping on the crag."
To whom replied King Arthur, faint and pale:
"Thou hast betray'd thy nature and thy name,
Not rendering true answer, as beseem'd
Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:
For surer sign had follow'd, either hand,
Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.
This is a shameful thing for men to lie.
Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go again
As thou art lief and dear, and do the thing
I bade thee, watch, and lightly bring me word

Sir Bedivere tells a lie and the King catches him, chiding him that it is a shameful thing for men to lie. He again asks him to go a second time to do his bidding. Sir Bedivere wrestles within himself and wonders

What good should follow this, if this were done?
What harm, undone? deep harm to disobey,
Seeing obedience is the bond of rule.
Were it well to obey then, if a king demand
An act unprofitable, against himself?
The King is sick, and knows not what he does.

He returns and once again utters a lie. King Arthur knows that if the sword had been thrown, Sir Bedivere would have seen a miracle. Hence he repeatedly asks him "What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?" King Arthur gets angry that Sir Bedivere had been disloyal and chides him that he, who was the only knight left of his circle has also proved a traitor and behaved in an 'unknightly' manner. Arthur is deeply hurt that the King who has lost his power and is dying is forgotten and disobeyed.

"Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,
Unknightly, traitor-hearted! Woe is me!
Authority forgets a dying king,
Laid widow'd of the power in his eye
That bow'd the will. I see thee what thou art,
For thou, the latest-left of all my knights,
In whom should meet the offices of all,
Thou wouldst betray me for the precious hilt;

For a third time, Arthur bids him to do his command and angrily says that if Sir Bedivere failed to do so, the king would slay him. When Sir Bedivere returns after accomplishing the task given to him, the King is pleased:

"Then spoke King Arthur, drawing thicker breath:
"Now see I by thine eyes that this is done.
Speak out: what is it thou hast heard, or seen?"

Sworn loyalty to the King as seen in the lines quoted above, is Tennyson's call to his fellow Victorians to owe allegiance to her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

Thus, the three themes of the poem are

- Change and the courage to accept it when the old order dies giving way to a new order. Change is necessary for progress, for orderly evolution
- Morality that binds the social and familial fabric of the society and
- Loyalty and obedience to the monarch

'Tennyson's poem deals with characteristics of Victorian age, reflected through the prism of the Arthurian legend. The immortality he confers on Arthur's greatness as a King is a pious wish for his friend Arthur Hallam, and contained in it is the wish for the immortality of men of special calibre like Arthur Hallam.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Explain the phrase "let what will be, be". Who says this and in what context?
2. Explain the main themes of the poem "Morte d'Arthur". Quote lines from the poem, supporting your answer.

4.3 SYMBOLS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN "MORTE D'ARTHUR"

What is a symbol in Literature? A symbol is literary device to give several meanings to a word more than its dictionary meaning. This meaning does not appear on a first reading of a line, but when it is read in the context of the whole poem, the different layers of meaning become clear as it is representative of the theme, idea, concept and other features of the poem. As a result, it enhances the meaning and **tenor** of the poem. We have the symbols of the Round Table, and the Excalibur, King Arthur's sword in "Morte d' Arthur. The Round Table with its circular design where all the Knights sat with King Arthur is symbolic of a true democratic spirit of participation, where the King is first among equals. Sitting at the head of a table is to assume an exclusive role of leadership in an environment of diversity. Here King Arthur's Round Table clearly represents the spirit of equality where every knight has his place that is neither superior nor inferior to the others.

The Round Table says a lot about the values that were developing during the Middle Ages. This period was basically a violent period. The Middle ages were fraught with wars against barbarian hordes and many other problems such as the plague, famine, distress and the normal mode of operation was to take something by force. This is what the kings, knights and lords did. The bravery of the King and his knights were hailed as acts of chivalry and heroism. Everyone played his role in the success of the wars that were fought. But through Arthur's reign, there came a shift where there was recognition of the worth of every individual whether he wielded weapons or not.. And the Round Table is a good example of this raising of the individual's value.

King Arthur through the Round Table shifts power from himself to give equal weight to all the knights seated at the table. It is truly democratic despite the fact that it was the rule of monarchy and not democracy in Britain at that time. The King was still the king and only distinguished Knights were at the table. But it was a move toward the belief that everyone is important and everyone equally valuable. King Arthur and his knights met at Arthur's Round Table in Camelot to discuss important issues of the kingdom.

Excalibur is the magic sword of King Arthur. The sword, is regarded as a powerful weapon in the hands of a skilled warrior and retains that reputation. In short, the sword has a magical power only when it is in the hands of a deserving warrior like King Arthur. This is the reason why King Arthur in his dying moments, orders Sir Bedivere to return it to its source-the Lady of the Lake by flinging it into the lake. According to mythological legends, the sword is identified with a single hero and should not be allowed to fall into the hands of an enemy owing to its inherent power, or to another knight - no matter how noble -who might succeed Arthur as king. The sword is a symbol of Arthur's virtue and power. The supernaturalism and mystery of these remote ages, their belief in magic and witchcraft, is seen in the magic sword of King Arthur, and the mystic hand which rises out of the lake at his death to take it away. Tennyson transposes the medieval reference to the mystic "lady of the lake" to his times by speaking about the church or religion and the Excalibur as representing spiritual power.

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
But now farewell. I am going a long way.

After Sir Bedivere completes the task, he tells Arthur that he had seen a great miracle he would never forget, the rise of the arm from the lake to grasp the sword. The painful and arduous journey of King Arthur with the help of his loyal Knight towards the lake gives it a mystical touch, as the journey is his final one to a higher and a spiritual plane. Three elegant Queens with gold crowns wait onboard and cry in one voice a moan of agony. This lamentation is like the wind "that shrills / All night in a waste land." Arthur asks to be placed in the barge, and Bedivere

complies. Arthur lays his head in the lap of the tallest Queen, and she loosens his casque (helmet) and calls him by his name. Her tears drop on his bloody pale face. He lies like a “shatter’d column,” very much unlike the heroic figure he once cut. But King Arthur is calm and in his parting speech, he tells Sir Bedivere that he is moving to a peaceful and quiet place, Avillon, an island valley which is a kind of paradise with ideal weather and fertile land.

Lastly the brotherhood of Arthur and Bedivere symbolizes the deep friendship of Tennyson and Hallam, and the profound grief of their severance is manifest in the utter lack of faith or hope that Bedivere is shown to experience at the end of the poem. King Arthur’ final journey to a resting place in a far-off land, invisible to him and accompanied by the mystical figures of the lake gives hope and comfort that Arthur has achieved immortality. This is a poignant wish Tennyson holds for the immortality of Arthur Hallam, his cherished friend about whom he says: I trust he lives in thee, and there / I find him worthier to be loved.

Tennyson in “Morte d’ Arthur” comes to the conclusion that “Somewhere far off, [he is seen to] pass on and on, and go / From less to less and vanish into light’. The poem ends on a note of faith that augurs the onset of the renewal of fresh life of hope and optimism, a beautiful new beginning: “And the new sun rose bringing the new year” (line 469).

Check your progress 2

Explain the symbols and their significance in “Morte d’Arthur” .

4.4 CHARACTERS IN THE POEM

From the analysis given above, you can deduce the characters of King Arthur and Sir Bedivere. Many of Tennyson’s poems were written in the form of **dramatic monologues**. This poem, which marks the conclusion of the epic narrative is not a monologue, but in the form of a dialogue between the two principal characters. King Arthur is seen as a great hero who deserves to possess Excalibur, the glittering, beautiful sword. He behaves like a King even in his dying moments. He commands obedience from Sir Bedivere, the last surviving Knight. His kingly demeanour, his courage and heroic endurance of pain and his graceful passage into the barge to start his journey to a land of calm and peace reveal his valour and courageous acceptance of a new life. His advice to Sir Bedivere who is filled with fear and anxiety not only of losing his King but also of the prospect of an unknown, uncertain future order is at the core of the poem. Sir Bedivere’s loyalty, his genuine concern not to hurt his King in his dying moments, his implicit obedience to the orders of his King and his awe and wonder over the mystical quality of the sword are in conformity with the character of a faithful Knight belonging to King Arthur’s Round Table.

Activity

Read the poem and identify the passages that reveal the characters of King Arthur and Sir Bedivere.

4.5 SUMMING UP

This Unit is a continuation of the earlier Unit 3 and therefore should be read in conjunction with the poem that is given there. In this Unit, we have discussed the poem's themes and Tennyson's skilful use of symbols to convey them. We have explained in this Unit that the poem is in the form of a dialogue that highlights loyalty and obedience to the authority and a mature, philosophical understanding of life where change is constant and therefore to be accepted. We have also looked at the ways in which Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of Britain, transposes medieval values onto his own period, the Victorian Age.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. What are the medieval values highlighted in this poem, and how does the poet relate them to the Victorian age?
2. What is the central theme of the poem? Explain this by comparing it with *In Memoriam*.
3. How does Tennyson praise Queen Victoria, seen through the prism of King Arthur?
4. Give a brief sketch of the two principal characters in the poem.

4.7 GLOSSARY

Transpose: exchange positions without a change in value

Magnum Opus: A great work, a literary or artistic masterpiece

Medievalism: The spirit or the body of beliefs, customs, or practices of the Middle Ages

Impermanence: Not permanent, not lasting.

Mortality: the state or condition of being subject to death

Traumatized: devastated, dismayed

Tenuous: weak, lacking a sound basis

Scepticism: the disbelief in any claims to ultimate knowledge

Efficacy: effectiveness, power or capacity to produce effect

Oddity: strangeness

Allegorical: symbolic, figurative

Infidelity: unfaithfulness to one's spouse or partner

Tenor: the course of thought or meaning that runs through something written or spoken; purport; drift. continuous course, progress, or movement.

4.9 References

1. Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, University of California Press.
2. www.britannica.com › Literature › Poetry