

Victorian Literary Criticism

Characteristics of Victorian Criticism

1. Criticism in the Victorian Age is conceived as a means of social regeneration. There was a "crisis of culture", and critics like Mathew Arnold felt that if criticism to be worthwhile, it must serve the ends of life, and promote a better understanding of cultural values and thus bring about social regeneration.
2. It seeks to search for order and balance. This, however, did not mean a return to old Neo-classical rules. If Romantic criticism was erratic and lawless, Neo-classical criticism allowed no freedom to the critic. It was too rigid and inflexible.
3. It emphasized realism and matter-of-factness and was influenced by the French critics, Hippolyte Taine (1828-1898) and Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) who propagated the importance of historical and biographical context for assessing a work of art. According to Taine, race, the milieu, and the moment are the three principal motives or conditioning factors behind any work of art so they must be studied thoroughly for the right understanding and appreciation.
4. Two opposite and contradictory tendencies existed side by side in Victorian Criticism: the rationalistic and materialistic tendency on the one hand and the romantic and idealistic tendency on the other. Macaulay, John Stuart Mill, Huxley, John Morley, and Herbert Spencer represent the rationalistic materialistic tendency, and Ruskin, Carlyle, Pater, Addington, Symonds, Arthur Symonds, and the Pre-Raphaelites represent the romantic-idealistic.

Periods in Victorian Literary Criticism

There are three distinct periods in the history of Victorian criticism:

1. The First Period: The Early Victorian Era (1835-1860).
2. The Middle Period: "Art for Life's Sake" (1860-1880).

3. The Later period: "Art for Art's Sake" (1880-1900).

The First Period: The Early Victorian Era (1835-1860)

This is a period of decay and decline in literary criticism. There is practically no talented critic and no outstanding work of literary criticism. The only names worth mentioning are those of Keble and Brimley. Of course, Macaulay, Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill belong to this period, but they are not literary critics. Their literary criticism is only incidental; their interests are historical, social, or philosophical.

The Middle Period: "Art for Life's Sake" (1860-1880)

To this period belong Arnold and Ruskin. Ruskin is more an art critic than a literary critic, though his literary criticism is illuminating and original. Ruskin achieved a compromise or synthesis between art and morality. Arnold believed that poetry should be a criticism of life, and that criticism should propagate the best that ever was thought or written.

The Later period: "Art for Art's Sake" (1880-1900)

In this period the synthesis between art and life was broken and the cult of "Art for Art's Sake" acquired prominence. Pater and Oscar Wilde are the most exponents of this cult. They made the pursuit of Beauty to the total exclusion of life and reality the main concern of their art. They sought refuge from the ugliness and harshness of reality in the realm of art. Their method of evaluation is largely individualistic and impressionistic.