

Examine the nature of conflict between science and traditional faith in the Victorian Age with suitable literary illustrations.

In the Victorian period, the newborn science made its impact on the intellectual temper of the age. Of course, the average Englishmen was not much affected by the spirit of science, which questions, examines and tests everything and accepts nothing on authority or in blind faith. But the finer and more sensitive spirits of the age – that is, the poets and thinkers were deeply affected by it. Two factors stand out prominently: **a.** The steady advance of democratic ideals, **b.** The progress of scientific thought. Both of these powerfully affected and were affected in their turn by the literature of the age. The rapid advance of science and its momentous discoveries in the sphere of biology and geology transformed their whole outlook on life and the universe. Science which, since the 16th century, had been a growing rival force beside religion and art, had now come to hold the supreme sway over the minds of men.

The advance of science has transformed man's outlook upon life and has affected every channel of intellectual activity. And it has done this in two ways: **First**, it has fostered a spirit of restlessness; **second**, by increasing man's material resources, it has commercialized modern life. Wordsworth lamented its tendencies at the outset when he cried out:

*The world is too much with us late and soon;
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.*

While Ruskin at a later date flung out his sarcastic dictum that the compelling desire of the day was, 'where ever we are, to go some where else; whatever we have, to get something more'. But both Wordsworth and Ruskin looked too exclusively upon what was incidental to, rather than essential in, the scientific movement. Every fresh accession of human knowledge has a destructive as well as constructive side. The effects of geological and biological discovery shook to its depths the old cosmogony; and the general

spiritual unrest is reflected most remarkably in Mid-Victorian poetry.

Materially, science controlled the forces of nature and promoted man's comfort and happiness by its mechanical inventions. But its effect on the inner, the spiritual life of the age was terribly disturbing and unsettling. Darwin's **theory of evolution** runs counter to the traditional religious belief about the creation of man by God. Even God himself had been tested in the light of reason and found wanting. As the spirit invaded literature it produced some definite results. The questioning note in Clough, the pessimism of James Thomson, the wistful melancholy of Matthew Arnold, the fatalism of Fitzgerald, all testify to the skeptical tendencies evoked by scientific research. It did not kill poetry, but it stifled for a while the lyric impulse and outweighed verse with speculative thought.

The Theory of Evolution cut at the roots of the Christian faith. It resulted in 'a sad withering away of faith, and a paralysis of doubt gripped it'. The idea of Evolution ran counter to the biblical theory of creation. According to the Bible, the world was created in six days, and that the various kinds of living things, plants and beasts and birds and fishes were created during these days. The Evolution theory raised two disconcerting questions: a) the succession of life indicated that the act of creation must have been taken thousands, perhaps millions of years: it could not have been completed in six days, b) Each species was not created separately, but there was a scale of life, and man was only a link of the chain of evolution ever leading to higher and more complex forms of life. Thus the very divinity of Christ and the validity of Christian ethics were challenged. The Church fiercely opposed this theory and the controversy raged for thirty years. But the theory shattered old beliefs and ushered in an age of doubt and despair.

The cry over the decay of the faith rings in the works of **Arnold, Fitzgerald, James Thomson, Tennyson, Browning**, with a poignant note of pessimism that threatens even the will to live, not

to speak of the death of joy in life. **The Scholar Gipsy, Thyrsis, Rugby Chapel, Dover Beach** are some of the more remarkable poems of the group. Arnold found no shore to stand upon in tossed sea of faith. **Clough** the friend of Arnold, wrote poems which are charged with this deep-seated unrest and despondency. The most famous of his poems in this vein is **Dipsychus**, a philosophical poem par excellence. **James Thomson** gives a powerful expression to this in '**The Hound of Heaven**' and '**The City of Dreadful Night**'. The second poem contains the quintessence of melancholy: '*Life is a hell and Progress is an illusion*' – this is the main burden of this tremendous poem. This note turned Fitzgerald into a fatalist, whose main work is **Rubaiyat of Omar Khyam**. **Tennyson**, in his elegy **In Memoriam**, tries to reconcile religious conceptions, such as belief in immortality with the facts disclosed by science. He wanted to strike a compromise between doubt and faith. Robert Browning craves for analysis and moral criticism and treated of love and death in an energetic and optimistic nature.

In fiction, the scientific spirit is no less discernable: the problems of heredity and environment preoccupying the attention of the novelist. The social problems of the earlier Victorians, of **Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, Kingsley and Reade**, gave place to points in biology, psychology and pathology. The influence of **Herbert Spenser** and **Comte** meets us in the pages of **George Eliot**, while the analytical methods of science are even more subtly followed in the fiction of **Thomas Hardy**. The principle of induction – the essential scientific spirit is exhibited in **Carlyle's** biographical works.