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## English Poetry: A Compass Charting Changes in the Social Space

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### Abstract:

Reading literature of any language or race opens window through which picture of a society is viewed, for literature is essentially said to mirror or at least represent or reproduce a society upon which it is written. The chronicle of literatures of the globe faithfully registers the ups and downs, and the good and the ghastly of the societies which it feeds on. It also deals with the passages of these societies towards modern "progress" through which, quite paradoxically, human being became inhuman and animal-like. In this chapter, I would spend my efforts to briefly outline the image of society— the backdrop of English literature— Age wise. Here my sole aim would be to crystallize the core factors for the changes that the society went through; and to map its march towards modern civilization and the gradual collapse of the moral and ethical base for which man fell from the crest of creation to the unplumbable depth of degeneration. This portion would also endeavor to document how eventually the problems of existence are rendered relevant and important today in English literature, particularly in poetry.

**Keywords:** poetry, represent, society, passage, degeneration etc.

“We cannot know our world until we find  
A compass that can chart what world we know.”  
—Theodore Spencer, *Poems 1940-1947*

Poetry occupies an acre of English Literature. It is poetry that was first to come to the cradle of all most all the literatures of the world. But the urge and interest behind the practice of this poetic art varies. Even the annals of the English Literature themselves record the graph of variations in the spark that kindled and prompted poetry. In the Anglo-Saxon or Old English Period (450-1066) English poetry was inspired only to sing them "at the feasts of the nobles".<sup>1</sup> The society was smooth **or less** complicated; and poetry documents nothing so beastly as compared **to** the ages that were to follow; rather it reflects genuine human passion harbouring pagan creeds. However, in the course of time as Christian ideas overcame the earlier paganism, poetry began to spring from the pulpit. Caedmon and Cynewulf, for instance, wrote mostly religious poems. But “With Cynewulf, Anglo-Saxon religious poetry moves beyond biblical paraphrase into the didactic, the devotional, and the mystical” (Daiches 17). Religious strain is also to be felt in the poetry of the Middle English Period (1066-1500). The poems of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe showcase brilliant handling of the religious subject as found in the previous poets. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, however, criticizes corruption in the Church. The same vain is to be found in some William Dunbar’s poems. William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* also exhibits the similar satiric nature on religion:

“Out from the West, a girl, it seemed to me, Came walking on that path; she looked towards hell.

The girl was named Mercy, gentle through and through, A very gracious lady, and humble of speech.

Her sister, so it seemed, came quietly walking Straight from the East, and she looked to the West. A very comely creature and pure, her name was Truth. Thanks to the quality that she stood for she was never afraid.

When these maidens met, Mercy and Truth, Each asked the other about this great wonder—

About the noise and the darkness, and how the day was unfolding. And how a light, and a glow lay before hell.

But like Chaucer’s *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman* too satirizes Langland’s contemporary political scenario. But it is also true that despite religious institutions or the religious aspects, the socio-political picture was more problematic than that which is depicted in the *Prologue*. To quote John Peck and Martin Coyle,

What, therefore, emerges in the poem overall is perhaps a rather reassuring and essentially positive picture of the Middle Ages. This is aided by the fact that Chaucer excludes uncomfortable evidence that might unsettle things. This was a bloody and violent period, in which no king could ever feel safe or established on the throne, but the poem offers no real sense of unrest in England. (27)

Coming to the Renaissance (1558-1660) stance, the social scenario is altered, and altered the pursuit of poetry. It became an art proper like other European arts of dancing, painting, sculpture and architecture to camouflage the imagination, the unending thirst for knowledge, the quest for power, and a curious sensibility towards beauty of the Renaissance man. Edmund Spenser, for example, could feel the romantic mood of the Elizabethan Era (1558-1603), "which is our first and greatest romantic epoch".<sup>2</sup> His *The Shepherd's Calendar* captures the carefree air of the time with its pastoral setting. Again he wrote *Amoretti*, eighty eight Petrarchan sonnets to flout the success and richness of his own love. Such was the social set-up that Spenser was paid enough scope to entertain "the lusty youth of the Elizabethan age" His *Epithalamion* elucidates the grandeur and festivity of the celebration of his marriage. Here he seems to worship his beloved, lending her a saintly status:

Open the temple gates unto my love,  
Open them wide that she may enter in,  
And all the posts adorn as doth behove,  
And all the pillars deck with garlands trim,  
For to receive this Saint with honour due.

However, his most important work, *The Faerie Queene* sheds light on moral principles, and is allegorically didactic. "[...] *The Faerie Queene* itself is an allegorical commentary on the religious, political, and social as well as a more general poetic exploration of the nature of virtue."

"Fool", said my muse to me, "look in thy heart and write" -thus most of the Elizabethan sonneteers, here, Sir Philip Sydney in his love poem, *Astrophel and Stella*, wrote not of the brain but of the heart as the society was not so corrupted as in the modern times. The theme of love became a recurrent motif among the Elizabethans. The poet Shakespeare is of no exception. He experimented and modified the English sonnet in terms of technique as well as thematic structure. His handling of the theme of Time and love is more humane and realistic. Here is an example:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more beautiful than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are done; If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white, But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. I love to hear her speak, yet well I know That music hath a far more pleasing sound; I grant I never saw a goddess go; My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare As any she belied with false compare. (Sonnet No. 130)

Thus the Elizabethan poetic background was quite peaceful. There was scientific growth, but "The attitude was unscientific only because wisdom was put before understanding. Scientific knowledge", people believed, "would not be the kind of knowledge appropriate for man's moral illumination." Therefore, the happy-go-lucky circumstances of the period under discussion were the actual impetus to give birth such poets who afforded to configure the romantic nature of the Elizabethan poetry.

John Donne is another poet who harnessed his talent in the winsome weather of the Jacobean Period (1603-1625), when majority of common people maintained the cult of "cultural primitivism", and were less burdened with social problems. Donne found his surrounding tension-free and lovely. He rhymed *Songs and Sonnets* which offers us an intense and pin-pointed analysis of the varied facets of a lover, "For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love", tunes Donne in his "The Canonization". Thus most of his poems are coloured with the hue of emotion and passion so characteristic of the age. In this context, some of Donne's poetical lines can be representative—

So let us melt, and make no noise, No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
'Twere profanation of our joys To tell the laity our love. ("A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning")

Andrew Marvel's poems also portrays *carpe diem*. His "To His Coy Mistress" is one of most sensuous love poem of his time:

Thy beauty shall no more be found, Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound  
My echoing song: then worms shall try That long preserved virginity,  
And your quaint honour turn to dust, And into ashes all my lust:..... ..  
At every pore with instant fires, Now let us sport us while we may,

Furthermore, if the blank verse of Thomas Dekker's plays is considered as poetry even his lines evoke no image of his age that is dangerously troublesome and anti-social; rather Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson were but to regale the court. In his *Magnificent Entertainer*, Dekker sings of King James I and his kingdom as:

[...] so rich an Empyre, whose fayre brest,  
Contaynes foure Kingdomes by your entrance blest  
By Brute divided, but by you alone,  
All are againe united and made One,  
Whose fruitfull glories shine so far and even  
They touch not only earth, but they kisse heaven

In the Caroline Age (1625-1649), however, Milton, "the last great Renaissance poet", tried to portray the inclination towards power, individualism, liberalism, dignity and proud logicity. "Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven" as spoken by Lucifer, the arch rival of God in *Paradise Lost*, reflects the true spirit of the Renaissance which is called by some historians as "Early Modern" for some of the complexities that it developed due to the passion for exploring the unknown, for viewing the unviewed, for the adventurous navigation of which a graphic description is found in Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*; for nourishing aesthetic perception, for the yearning for liberty and freedom and strong Individualism; laying more emphasis on logic and reason as expounded by the early empiricist philosophers; and on humanism neglecting and rebelliously challenging religious doctrines and institutions. In the Elizabethan time Marlowe, however, through his "mighty line" as Ben Jonson puts it, also attempted to hint at such "advancement" towards "modernism" that is summarized in Dr. Faustus' vision, the typically Renaissance reasoning for knowledge, and power -*I'auberge de I'impossible*-coupled with the quest for beauty. But, unlike Modern age, there was still restraint and order. "The greatness of the Elizabethan age was that it continued so much of new without bursting the noble form of the old order."

In the Neoclassical Period (1660-1785), the phase of the Restoration (1660-1700) was one of the most crucial historic factors responsible for the moral laxity and licentiousness of the then society as well as of the followings up to the Modern. In 1660 Charles II came back from his exile in France, and claimed the English throne which was under the Puritan government (1649-1660). He returned to England with the taste of the French court almost foreign to the native people. This borrowed "advanced" taste brought about a radical change in the life-style of the English society. The King himself ran rampantly licentious. To quote Prof. Andrew Sanders-

If the first Charles's [court] was characterized by what Clarendon calls "gravity and reverence in all mention of religion", the second Charles's was, despite its cloak of Anglican conformity, far more inclined to accept and enjoy sexual, religious, and verbal license. The restored king, who had been schooled in a certain kind of elegant cynicism by his years in exile, set the tone of a cultured but libidinous court.

Thus the earlier Puritanical values such as strict morality, decency and decorum in everything withered away resulting in the levity, infidelity and other immoralities that started feeding the fashion of the day. To quote David Daiches,

The reaction against Puritan manners and morals was inevitable. It was all the more violent... because the King himself, an indolent sensualist possessed of both wit and cunning, encouraged an atmosphere of hedonistic liveliness at court. (538)

And all this got well enrolled in the Restoration poetry of John Dryden, the major poet and critic of the age, Samuel Butler and so on. Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* was occasioned by the political corruption of his age. Some lines from the above text are entertained below:

Then, Israel's monarch, after Heaven's own heart, His vigorous warmth did variously impart To wives and slaves: and, wide as his command, Scatter'd his Maker's image through the land.

Michal, of royal blood, the crown did wear; A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care: Not so the rest; for several mothers bore To god-like David, several sons before. But since like slaves his bed they did ascend, No true succession could their seed attend.

Of all this numerous progeny was none So beautiful, so brave, as Absalom: Whether, inspir'd by some diviner lust, His father got him with a greater gust;

Some critics feel Restoration poetry objectionable and immoral. But, one can frame argument to arm such poetry against this sort of critical attack saying that the age was itself morally mean, and relieved of Puritanical tyranny, people was throbbing to enjoy the "libertine philosophy" -"Eat, drink, and be merry." So its reflection in poetry is to be justified. As here the couplets of the Earl of Rochester, a Restoration poet, criticizing the king read like:

Nor are his high desires above his strength:

His scepter and his prick are of a length.

and-

Restless he rolls about from whore to whore,

A merry Monarch scandalous and poor.

However, it is too not untrue that the paid poets had to dish out poetry that was to serve the "libidinous" king as well as the growing taste charged with moral depravity of the time, which gradually passed on to the threshold of the following periods, and, however, heavily influenced the poetry of the ages to follow, aiding it to arrive at the apex of its saturation in the Modern Period (1914- ).

Though the Augustan Age or the Age of Pope (1700-1745) is marked by its pinnacle of civilization wherein "personal and social relationships contribute to the agreeableness of existence", the libertine philosophy of the Restoration England cast its effect on the life and mannerism of the later part of the period. The gradual shift of the earlier society towards a fashionable one full of fake gallantry, immoral love or rather lust, intrigue and show of aristocracy is beautifully represented by Pope's mock-heroic poem, *The Rape of the Lock*. Some lines from the poem can shed light on such a social environment—

Two Handmaids wait the Throne: Alike in place, But diff'ring far in Figure and in Face. Here stood *ill-nature* like an *ancient Maid*, Her wrinkle Form in *Black* and *White* array'd; With store of Pray'rs, for Mornings, Nights, and Noons, Her hands is fill'd; her Bosom with Lampoons.

There *Affection* with a sickly Mein Shows in her Check the Roses of Eighteen, Practic'd to Lisp, and hang the head aside, Faints into Airs, and languishes with Pride; On the rich Quilt sinks with becoming Woe, Wrapt in a Gown, for Sickness, and for Show. The Fair ones feel such Maladies as these, When each new Night-Dress gives a new Disease.

In the course of time, wealth became the pivot of the society. The dictum –“Earn money, and drink life”- occasioned by the industrial Revaluation, and the rise of the Middle class, figured an important thread in the fabric of society, amounting to the “gross corruption in religion”. Swift wrote:

Vain human kind! Fantastic race! Thy various follies who can trace?  
Self-love, ambition, envy, pride, Their empire in our hearts divide.  
Give other riches, power, and station, 'Tis all on me a usurpation.

The changes in the society became so rampant and huge that he forced to articulate his existential angst further—

[...] Behold the fatal day arrive!  
How is the Dean?—“He is Just alive.”  
Now the departing prayer is dead;  
“He hardly breaths,”—“The Dean is dead.”  
Before the passing-bell begun  
The news through half the town has run.  
“Oh! May we all for death prepare!  
What has he left? And who is his heir?”

Indeed, “the fatal day” has arrived. The lines quoted above typically represent the materialistic mood of the period. In this contextual juncture, Henry Vaughan voiced a similar concern over the gradual shift of the individual from religious and materialism and so he felt it would be quite difficult to return to the earlier religious fold. Vaughan recalls and compares thus:

Happy those early days! when I Shin'd in my angel infancy.  
Before I understood this place Appoint'd for my second race, .....  
Before I taught my tongue to wound My conscience with a sinful sound, Or had the black art to dispense A sev'ral sin to ev'ry sense,

O how I long to travel back

The Age of Johnson (1745-1785) also witnessed some changes in the society. An unhappy time of the then society is felt in

Thomas Gray's “Hymn to Adversity” as is expressed by the following lines:

O! gently on thy suppliant's head Dredd Goddess, lay thy chastening hand!  
Not in thy Gorgon terrors clad, Nor circle with the vengeful band  
(As by impious thou art seen) With thundering voice, and threatening mien,  
With screaming Horror's funeral cry, Despair, and fell Debase, and ghastly Poverty,—

Alteration in the earlier social climate is also depicted by *The Task* by William Cowper. His one of the most famous and often-quoted line: God made the country, man made the town, beautifully captures the changed climate of the era. A more accurate response to the gradual changes in the social aspace is recorded in Oliver Goldsmith's poem “The Deserted Village”. Here some representative lines are given below to ascertain this contextual claim:

Ah, no. To distant climes, a dreary scene. Where half the convex world intrudes between.  
Through torrid tracts with fainting steps they go, Where wild Altama murmurs to their woe. Far different there from all that charmed before,  
The various terror of that horrid shore; Those blazing suns that dart a downward ray, And fiercely shed intolerable day;  
Those matted woods where birds forget to sing, But silent bats in drowsy clusters cling; Those poisonous fields with rank luxurious crowned,  
Where the dark scorpion gathers death around; Where at each step terrors of the vengeful snake; Where crouching tigers wait their hapless prey, And savage men more murderous still than they;

The lines quoted above initiate the bearings in the march to what we call modernity in our contemporary time.

In the transitional period, William Blake also noticed the negative changes that were assimilating in the earlier cultural set-up. In his poem entitled “London” he tries to express his concern overt such societal changes—

In every cry of every man, In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban, The mind-forged manacles I hear: .....  
But most, through midnight streets I hear How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear, And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.

About Blake's depiction of the issues addressed above, Karren Lawrence, Betsy Seifter and Lois Ratner state:

In the realm of experience, social injustice becomes the overt target of a narrator who is an unbeliever and a skeptic. In the realm of innocence, cruelty and miser are criticized only indirectly by the discrepancy between the speaker's optimism and his terrible tale. This later approach is perhaps more highly charged emotionally because it increases the poignancy of the child's situation; he is more completely the victim in his vulnerability and credulity. (11)

To enliven life with freshness and to revive human quality in the on-growing materialistic attitude of man came the Romantics. The most prominent figures among the Romantic poets include William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley and John Keats. Wordsworth, the high priest of nature, wrote about his pagan cult in his "Tintern Abbey"—

And I have felt A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused, Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, And the round ocean, and the living air, And the blue sky, and in the mind of man, A motion and a spirit, that impels All thinking things, all objects of all thought, And roll through all things.

The lines which I have quoted above match James Thomson's followings—

God is ever present, ever felt, In the void waste as in the city full,

And where he vital breathes there must be joy. ("A Hymn")

Some critics think that Wordsworth might have heard about these lines before he composed "Tintern Abbey". But Wordsworth's originality in bringing freshness to the previous vogue social atmosphere cannot be denied or demeaned. His reaction to materialism of the age figures in his poem "World is too much with us". The following lines claim the poets reaction to the growing materialistic attitude of the time:

The world is too much with us Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

In this respect Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is citable. Byron's satiric edge is also directed to this seamy side of life in a number of his poems. But reaction to corruption, exploitation and other inhumanity is more pronounced in some of Shelley's poems. His revolutionary poetic passion finds expression in the lines that follow:

As thus with thee in my prayer in my sore need. Oh! Lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life I bleed!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth! And, by the incantation of this verse,  
("Ode to the West Wind")

And then comes his final prophecy—"The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, /If Winter comes can Spring be far behind? Keats' similar concern over the complexities and corruption of life lived in his age is mostly found in his "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark". In "Ode to a Skylark", Shelley versifies his generalization about his thought of sadness prevailing in the society of his time:

We look before and after, And pine for what is not:  
Our sincerest laughter With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell us saddest thought.

Victorian Period (1832-1901) records more problematic existentialist crisis due to the conflict between science and religion as occasioned by Darwin's theory of evolution. Most of the works of the representative poets of the age reflect upon this corroding conflict. Major poets of this period are Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins et al. in his "In Memoriam" Tennyson tries to portray the conflicting mood of the situation felt in his time:

O living will that shalt endure When all that seems shall suffer shock,  
Rise in the spiritual rock, Flow thro' our deeds and make them pure, That we may lift from out of dust A voice unto him that he hears,  
A cry above the conquer'd years To one that with us works, and trust, With faith that comes of self-control, The truths that never can be proved  
Until we close with all we love, And all we flow from, soul to soul.

Amidst such a spiritual crisis Robert Browning is the only poet who spoke of the optimism in his poetry. Most of his poetry do not depict the conflict between science and religion as is dwelt upon by other contemporaries like Tennyson and Arnold for particular. His wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning also uttered the same optimistic glance of life. Arnold, however, was most serious poets among his contemporaries. His most celebrated poem "Dover Beach" reflects upon the earlier religious society and the new one he lives in—

The sea of faith Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd. But now I only hear Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear And naked shingles of the world.

Hopkins turned to it differently. Like the Romantics he also perhaps wanted men to focus upon the natural beauty that is the creation of the Almighty. His curtail sonnet with its sprung rhythmic nature he beautifully praises the Creation of God. But the optimistic or escapist behavioral pattern of his poem, in fact, surrendered to the onslaught of changed fabric of the then society. Therefore, the corruption in the society remained unchecked.

That the existentialist problems still dominated the prevailing or later period is discernible in the poetical works of the Edwardian Period (1901-1914). The end of the period witnessed the preparatory mood of the First World War (1914-1918). Relying on the essential humanism, Thomas Hardy sang of the universal lastingness of love beyond the cruelty and horror of the forth coming war:

Yonder a maid and her wight Come whispering by:

War's annals will cloud into night Ere their story die. ("In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"")

Response to the impending catastrophe is more vigorous in some of the poems of Alfred Noyes. His "The Loom of Years", "The Admiral's Ghost" and "A Prayer in Time of War" unflinchingly document the pathos about the war. Even the each title of the poems itself denotes the critical juncture of the time. His "The Loom of Years" reveals the situation through a series of references to images drawn from the animal kingdom:

The hound, the fawn, and the hawk, and the doves that croon and coo, We are all one woof of the weaving and the one wrap threads us through, One flying cloud on the shuttle that carries our hopes and fears

As it goes thro; the Loom of the Weaver that weaves the Web of Years.

Other poets worth mentioning are W. B. Yeats and Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's "The Storm Cone" and "The Broken Man" are important in this concern. Among other poems, the later poem provided a clue for the title of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.

The Georgian poets, however, overlooked the naked reality around them. Most of the Georgian poems flute the easier aspects of life and are "traditional rather than experimental" (Abrams 216) in terms of theme and technique. Georgian poems primarily deal with rural life and have an almost pastoral touch. When poets like Hardy and Noyes tried to highlight the cruelty and meaninglessness of war, Rupert Brook undertook to glorify war, depicting soldiers as heroes and the killed ones as martyrs. In his poem, "1914 V: The Soldier" he, through the speaker of the poem tries to justify death of the speaking persona who is perhaps a soldier:

If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field That is for ever England. There shall be In that rich earth a richer dust concealed; A dust whom England bore,

Alteration in the society is, perhaps, most successfully and accurately captured by the modern poets. Most of the poets of this period responded to the *avant-garde*. To that end, this period, which is held to have started since the beginning of the WWI in 1914. has experienced a wide range of literary experimentations in terms of theme as well as techniques and forms. To quote Abrams, "This period has been marked by persistent and multidimensioned experiments in subject matter, form, and style, and has produced major achievements in all literary genres" (216). W. B. Yeats, Wilfred Owen, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas and Seamus Heaney. Some of Yeats poems depict the problems of existence suffered by the modern generation. In his "The Realities" he, through metaphorical texture of the poem portrays the existentialist angst. His "The Second Coming" is more pronounced in this context. It has accurate depiction of the on-growing evils in the modern civilization. "Sailing to Byzantium" is also noteworthy for its handling of the degradation of modern society, especially the concern over the surrender of spirituality to merely pleasure of the flesh.

This is no country for old man. The young In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

—Those dying generations—at their song.

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh, or fowl,

Unlike Rupert Brook, Wilfred Owen tried to tear asunder the romantic veil of war. As he has first-hand experience of the brutality of war, his poetry expresses the naked reality of war and deals with the fact that there is nothing heroic in the death of a soldier. Most of the soldier want to live peacefully rather than dying. His "Anthem for the Doomed Youth", "Arms and the Boy", "Dolce et Decorum Est", "At a Cavalry Near the Ancre" and "Strange Meeting" are among the most important. Here some of the lines from his "At a Cavalry Near the Ancre" given below reflect the harsh reality of war:

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.

In this war He too lost a limb, But his disciples hide apart;

And now the soldiers bear with Him.

The lines quoted above arise pathos in the reader. These lines are charged with reality that is very much shocking and at the same time inspire speculation over the futility of war in a larger scale, which perhaps the poet aims at.

To expose the modern existential predicament due to the loss of religious hold of society and the consequent cultural chaos T. S. Eliot is the most important of all modern poets. His "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, *Ash-Wednesday*, *Choruses from 'The Rock'* all provide a realistic picture of the existentialist problems and their causes in an elaborate yet succinct manner. Among the poems mentioned above his *The Waste Land* is the most important and mostly enjoyed poem. "The fragmentary form of the poem is itself one projection of a modern myth that the world is moving toward crisis and chaos" (Lawrence et al 322). The following lines from *The Waste Land* can be considered in this respect:

"What is that noise?" The wind under the door. "What is the noise now? What is the wind doing?" Nothing again nothing.

"Do "You remember nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember "Nothing?"

I remember Those are pearls that were his eyes.

"Are you alive, or not?" (II, "A Game of Chess")

Auden is another important modern poet who deals with the cultural crisis of the age. He can be called a disciple of Eliot and he follows Eliotic poetic style and he often acknowledged it. His "Musee des Beaux Arts", "The Unknown Citizen", "The Shield of Achilles", "The Exiles", "Diaspora" all afford us a picturesque description of the cultural degradation of the modern world. In "Musee

des Beaux Arts” Auden reveals how modern men are indifferent to other’s sufferings which eventually has made people feel alienated and lonely. “The Shield of Achilles” provides a comparative study of the glorious past and the inglorious and corrupt present—  
She looked over his shoulder

For ritual pieties,  
White flower-garlanded heifers, Libation and sacrifice, But there on the shining metal  
Where the altar should have been, She saw by his flickering forge-light Quite another scene.

In “Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love”, Auden also criticizes the materialistic attitude to life, which is one of the major problem and simultaneously one of the major cause of modern existentialist predicament.

The Postmodern period is a term, which is often applied to the time after the WWI. Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes are two major poets of this period. They can also be called modern poets because Modern period has started in 1914 but has not ended still. So it can be said that both the periods: Modern and Postmodern are going simultaneously. Among Larkin’s collection of poems “Church Going” is a more serious poem that addresses this issue of moral or religious decline in the contemporary world. The following lines from the poem can consolidate this hypothesis:

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unsplit So long and equally what since is found  
Only in separation—marriage, and birth, And death, and thoughts of these—m for whom was built  
This special shell?

Through his images drawn from the animal kingdom, quite ingeniously Hughes’ poetry tries to express his angst over the modern civilization. Through the inscrutable forces of Nature, he has projected human nature as violent as well as helpless victim to Nature at the same time. Through an image of an all-powerful hawk, he has essayed to expose the energy and violence enshrined in the force of Nature. This is apparent in the poem, “Hawk Roosting”:

he allotment of death. For the one path of my flight is direct through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:  
The sun is behind me. Nothing has changed since I began. My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

His “Thought Fox” is also composed for similar vein. His *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* bitterly satirizes modern man’s materialistic pursuit, especially man’s proneness to illegal or rather atheistic sex.

In the conclusion it can be stated that English poetry can be interpreted as a compass, which charts various changes in the society down the decades. The analysis of a wide range of poems belonging to different segments of time has strengthened the claim with which this paper begins and it is also proved that literature particularly English poetry has faithfully registered the variegated picture of human happenings through the passage of time. In the above detailed assessment it is also learnt that the chronicle of English poetry has also shown the basic causes that prompted such changes.

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