UNIT 8: “FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE” [FROM LYTON STRACHEY’S EMINENT VICTORIANS]

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

• examine the shifts and changes that took place in prose writing after World War I
• analyse the main developments in biography since 1901
• appreciate Lytton Strachey as a modern biographer
• discuss Strachey’s contribution to biography through his Eminent Victorians
• read the biography of Florence Nightingale from a new perspective

8.2 INTRODUCTION

The is yet another unit on biography in this Block. In this unit, you will be introduced to the Life of “Florence Nightingale” written by Lytton Strachey. The period of modern biography began mainly as a reaction against...
the 19th Century conventions. During the Victorian Age, biography had departed from the practice of writers like James Boswell, the faithful reporter who gave a pretty complete picture of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Victorian biographers conceived it as their duty to admit nothing about the career of a person, which would keep the readers from admiring him. The 20th century biographer, on the other hand, has been influenced by the pervasive ideals of science to seek the truth. He would throw as strong a light on a person’s faults and mistakes as on his virtues and achievements. He presents his subject as a human being rather than a statue on a pedestal. These changes in the field of biography are also connected to the advances in the field of psychology, and the search for new means of expression. The inventor of this type of biography is Lytton Strachey, and in this unit, you will be introduced to one such biography—the life of “Florence Nightingale” in his Eminent Victorians.

8.3 LYTTON STRACHEY: THE BIOGRAPHER

You must have learnt that Lytton Strachey was a founder member of the Bloomsbury Group, and is famous for his book Eminent Victorians. He is best known among the readers for establishing a new form of biography in which psychological insight and sympathy are combined with irreverence and wit may be for the first time. Here, in this section, we will briefly discuss the life and works of this renowned biographer.

8.3.1 His Life

Giles Lytton Strachey, born on 1 March 1880 at Stowey House, Clapham Common, London was an eminent British writer and critic. Eminent Victorians is his greatest work, which contains biographies of four famous personalities: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon and Dr. Thomas Arnold. Strachey was a member of the Bloomsbury Group though he was not as prolific as his other colleagues like Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster.

Lytton Strachey was the son (eleventh child out of thirteen children) of General Sir Richard Strachey, an officer in the colonial
British armed forces and Jane Grant who took deep interest in languages, literature and politics. He went to a number of schools in his lifetime, which included a school at Parkstone, Dorset and Abbotsholme School, Rochester in Derbyshire. However, he also received a part of his education at home, as his mother actively involved him in various literary activities and introduced him to many literary figures. Later in 1894, he went to Learnington College, then to the University of Liverpool in 1897, and after that to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1899. His friends during these years included Bertrand Russell, George Mallory, John Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf and Clive Bell among whom Leonard Woolf and Clive Bell were the closest. It was also during his years in Cambridge that he met and developed a strong liking for Walter Raleigh, a professor of English Literature and a well-known biographer. The Cambridge Period was the most productive period in Strachey’s life when he actively involved himself in writing verse and also remained an active member of a number of groups in Cambridge like “The Midnight Society”, “Conversazione Society” and “Cambridge Apostles”, etc. Such interest in literary discussions ultimately led to the formation of the Bloomsbury Group and Strachey is considered the nexus of the group. Strachey also wrote reviews and critical articles for periodicals like The Spectator. His Landmarks in French Literature (1912) is considered an important work in literary criticism, which brought him some recognition. In 1916, he wrote the first three parts of his most important work Eminent Victorians that revolutionised the art of writing a biography. Strachey was critical of the idealised characters of a biography and in his biographies, he focused on the shortcomings and drawbacks of the otherwise idealised characters. Eminent Victorians, ultimately got published in 1918, and was followed by another publication—Queen Victoria in 1921.

A glimpse on Lytton Strachey’s love life reveals that he had homosexual interests in men. He was in relationships with several men including John Maynard Keynes and Ralph Partridge. Michel
Holroyd, in his biography on Strachey entitled *Lytton Strachey: A Biography* (1971), declares Lytton Strachey’s homosexuality and his attraction towards John Maynard Keynes. However, Strachey was also loved and adored by a woman named Dora Carrington who lived with him in Oxfordshire from 1917 until his death. Strachey died of stomach cancer at the age of 51.

**LET US KNOW**

**Bloomsbury Group:** It was a group formed during the 20th century, whose members included personalities like Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E.M Forster and Lytton Strachey. Their highly influential ideas left an impact in various fields like literature, economics, criticism, and aesthetics as well as shaped modern attitudes towards feminism, sexuality, etc. The group is named after Bloomsbury in London as the group was mostly settled near Bloomsbury.

### 8.3.2 His Works

Lytton Strachey was not a prolific writer but his works ranges from poetry, reviews to biographies and so on. He started his career as a writer of verse in Cambridge, and later started writing reviews and articles for journals like *The Spectator*. At Cambridge, he worked on a dissertation on Warren Hastings, the controversial British Viceroy in India. Strachey hoped to win a fellowship at Trinity, Cambridge on the basis of the dissertation but it did not happen. Strachey’s most prominent work is the *Eminent Victorians*, a collection of biographies on some of the most prominent Victorian personalities—namely Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold and General Gordon. With this book, he introduced a new era in the art of writing biographies. In *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey reacted against the piestic “Life and Letters” of the 19th century. The traditional biography written during the Victorian Age showed the subject of a biography as someone who is ideal and free of
vices. The biographer refrained from speaking any ill about the subject with their imperfections generally glossed over but Strachey reacted against this idea and instead preferred to give a more realistic and human portrait of character by focusing on the subject’s vices and follies as well as strength.

It is to be noted here that Strachey’s earlier works did not have much to do with the Victorians. His *Landmarks in French literature* had nothing to do with England and of the 125 reviews and essays; he had written before the war very few dealt with the 19th century. However, in one of his reviews on Matthew Arnold for *The New Statesman*, dated 1st August 1914, he expressed his disdain for the Victorians and Matthew Arnold himself. This disdain seemed to have aggravated overtime, and had its fullest expression in the *Eminent Victorians*, which marked a major change in biography writing. Lytton Strachey criticised the work of the Victorians on grounds that they were incoherent, pretentious and lacked detachment, which outweighed its qualities of solidity and force. Strachey’s hatred for the First World War transformed his disdain for the Victorians into a much powerful emotion and inspired his desire to strip them of their pretentiousness. Strachey believed that a biographer should have a psychological insight of his character. In the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey says that the biographer should have a clear and definite point of view. He laid emphasis on employing “selection”, “proportion” and “emphasis” by the biographer in dealing with the facts relating to his subject and in this way to achieve the perspective, which a good portrait must always have. He also held the opinion that a biographer should be critical and evaluative and be able to analyse the truth about his character - his strengths and weaknesses, his goodness and follies, his wisdom and stupidity. A biographer must be ready to judge the complex behaviour of human beings or his subject. Strachey further expresses in the Preface that the biographer should enjoy freedom of mind and spirit. To Strachey, an artist was first of all a free
individual, and his individual freedom will be reflected in his work. He believed that life should be ruled by reason and humanity, and not by tyranny and superstition. He also believed in detachment, which can enable a biographer to give a fair account of the subject, free from any kind of prejudice. Such detachment in style is seen in his *Eminent Victorians*.

Lytton Strachey has also left behind a considerable amount of unpublished work. These unpublished pieces are great sources of pleasure to the reader and some of them even have literary merit. Most of them were experimental in nature and were therefore not published during the author’s lifetime, while some of them were not intended for publication at all and was written at leisure for the pleasure of his group of friends. These unpublished pieces were essentially “private and esoteric”, and reveals a different aspect of Strachey’s mind. It gives us an estimate of his character, of his life style and of his circle of friends. The list of his unpublished works includes the essays written at Cambridge for the “Apostles” and other University societies or for his circle of friends in London. There were plays, some of which were acted out before private audiences; political novels; dialogues and verses some of which were erotic and romantic. Correspondence also formed an important part of Strachey’s private work. Some of Strachey’s private letters to Virginia Woolf and Carrington had been published and it can be seen that he had taken great care and precision in his correspondence with them. Strachey’s correspondence with his brother James around the year 1916, deals with issues of war and politics. On the other hand, his shorter pieces like *Will It Come Right in the End, Art and Indecency*, and *He, She and It* deal with issues of morality in art and literature, on censorship, on role of women in society, relation between sexes, on marriage, on population, on birth control and on sexual morality and practices. Other pieces like *The Fruit of the Tree* and *An Arabian Night* deals with homosexual themes.
LET US KNOW

Eminent Victorians was first published on May 9, 1918. Soon it turned out to be a literary success as Strachey’s use of witty polemic attracted the younger generation of writers. The Preface written by Strachey himself is regarded as the manifesto for modern biographers as he writes: “Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal process—which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake”

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: In what ways does Strachey’s Eminent Victorians deviate from the form of biography practiced traditionally?

Q 2: What, according to Strachey, should be the qualities of a biographer?

8.4 READING THE TEXT

“Florence Nightingale” from Eminent Victorians is a biography on Florence Nightingale who is reverentially considered in history as a great nurse and writer. She is also popularly known as the “Lady with the Lamp” because she used to take rounds in the relief camp at night holding a lamp in her hand. The wounded soldiers of the Crimean War in the camp greatly admired and adored her and looked upon her as an Angel of the Crimea. Lytton Strachey in his biography on Florence Nightingale abandons the usual method of stressing only the favourable and good qualities of the subject and proceeds to make an in-depth and psychological study of Florence Nightingale.

The biography on Florence Nightingale in Eminent Victorians is divided into five parts.

Part I probes into the innermost thoughts and feelings of Florence Nightingale and tries to find the answer to the question as to why Florence
Nightingale chose to be a nurse. Strachey tries to prove the point that Florence Nightingale was a born nurse and the snobbish and luxurious environment in which she was born failed to have any impact on her. Strachey points out that Nightingale’s decision to be a nurse is not as simple as people consider it to be. He writes, “Miss Nightingale was not as facile as fancy painted her.”

In his account, Strachey gives a brief introduction of Nightingale’s family background and says that she belonged to a well-to-do family in Derbyshire. Nightingale could have easily led a happy life by getting married to an eligible gentleman, but why is it that Nightingale chose to be a nurse? To this question, Strachey logically tries to point out a few answers.

Firstly, he considers that Florence Nightingale always had a nurturing and caring attitude. He probes into her childhood and analyses how even as a child she had intense love for things animate and inanimate. As a child, while her sisters tore dolls to pieces, Nightingale, on the other hand, used to sew the broken parts together; she would nurse wounded dogs and indulged in the dream of turning their country house into a hospital. She would even imagine heaven as a place full of suffering people whom she would be serving there. According to Strachey, it was this feeling that Nightingale was born with that inspired her to take up nursing as her profession.

Secondly, Strachey believes that Nightingale had not taken up nursing simply because it was her fancy to nurse people, but it was a logical decision on her part, taken after much thought. Strachey brings it to the notice of the readers that the time in which Nightingale was born; much emphasis was given to society, respect and marriage. Nursing was considered a low and dirty profession, done mostly by the lower class of people. Nightingale’s family was also firmly against her idea of being a nurse and it was no easy task for her to convince them all regarding her choice. Strachey mentions how, therefore, Nightingale had considered every option available during those times and only after she had been able to logically discard them all did she go out to join nursing. She considered things like travelling, reading, education, making friends, partying, socialising and even marriage, but she rejected them all considering it all to be snobbish and artificial. She rejected
marriage calling it an "added burden and a mockery." She found something substantial and valuable only in becoming a nurse, and so she became a nurse leaving everything else behind.

Strachey thus allows a new vein of thought, which sees Nightingale’s activities as a nurse not only as admirable in itself, but also admirable for her decision of becoming a nurse. Nightingale’s individualism and application of reason in an age of snobbery and hypocrisy makes her stand out as an admirable personality.

In Part II of "Florence Nightingale" in Eminent Victorians, Strachey tries to justify that Nightingale could become a wonderful nurse because of the perfect timing between the need for a nurse like her and her ability to come to a decision to become a nurse. It was just at the time when she could make up her mind regarding her career that the Crimean War broke out and the pitiful conditions of the hospitals at Scutari demanded attention. These conditions perfectly justified Nightingale’s decision to be a nurse. Strachey writes: “there was a perfect co-ordination of events…if the war had fallen a few years earlier, she would have lacked the knowledge, perhaps even the power, for such a work; a few years later and she would, undoubt, have been fixed in the routine of some absorbing task and moreover, she would have been growing old.” Thus, Strachey dismisses the common belief that Nightingale became a nurse merely because of the will of Providence and nor could she become a great nurse in spite of her decision except in the context of the war.

In Part III of the biography, Strachey dismisses the common myth that Nightingale’s contribution is limited to her services at Scutari as the popular; “lady with the lamp” image lends her. Rather, he analyses and finds out deeper reasons for people to admire Nightingale although he claims that Nightingale’s reputation would not have been affected even if she had not "worked" at all after her days at Scutari. But, Florence Nightingale continued to work even in poor health after coming back from Scutari and embarked on a project which she considered was a more serious and important affair – to bring some sanitary reform in the state of the hospitals. But, Nightingale, disadvantaged as she was as a woman, did not have the
necessary power, position and the authority to bring about the changes. She faced opposition from those in power like Lord Panmure, the Secretary of State for war and Dr. Andrew Smith, the head of the Army Medical Department. The whole system was corrupt and there were people who were, “stubborn supporters of the out-of-date, the worshippers and the victims of War Office routine.” However, Nightingale, facing all odds, became successful in bringing about significant reforms.

Now the question is: Can all the achievements be attributed to Nightingale alone? Strachey doubts this and points out how Nightingale got the support of a host of people – admirers, friends, well-wishers and disciples who had of course a lot to do with her earlier services at Scutari. Among the important people who supported Nightingale was Sidney Herbert, Arthur Clough and of course her aunt without whom it would have been impossible for Nightingale to even think of working. However, Strachey admires Nightingale for other things – her outspokenness, her ability to inspire others, almost forcing them to work which brings out yet another dimension of Nightingale’s character, i.e the “demon” in her. Nightingale shared a lifelong alliance with Sidney Herbert and imposed heavy duties and responsibilities on his shoulder, which he had to undertake until his health failed when he could take no more. Similarly, she demanded the undivided attention of many other people. For example, her aunt devoted almost her whole life at her service sacrificing her own family life. But, Strachey is also careful enough to point out that Nightingale did not even spare herself and wore herself at work and thereby brought some necessary changes in the state of hospitals. The Army Medical School was established, a sub-commission was re-organised in order to maintain the medical statistics of the Army and “finally the Army Medical Department itself was completely re-organised; an administrative code was drawn up; and the great and novel principle was established that it was as much a part and duty of the authorities to look after the soldier’s health as to look after his sickness.” She also got into writing and her Notes on Hospitals (1859) is considered an important book, which had revolutionised the theory of hospital construction and management. Thus, Nightingale is not only admirable for her services at Scutari but who for the impact she left in the field of health and hospitality.
In Part IV of “Florence Nightingale” in *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey discusses the final days of Florence Nightingale and throws some light on the nature of her character. Florence Nightingale was 91 when she had accomplished almost all her ambitions. By that time, she had successfully brought reforms and improved the conditions of hospitals and workhouses. She had set up a training school for nurses and extended her work to places like India. However, even at her old age and despite ill health, her enthusiasm and love for work did not die out and it was after much hesitation that she agreed to settle down in a small house in South Street. Strachey also points out her dominating and egoistic nature even at her old age. Subsequently, Nightingale had a great fan following but she never took advantage of people’s love and admiration for her. In fact, even when her body failed her she plunged into work in terms of philosophy if not in terms of action. She still thought that she had a lot to do for mankind in general. Nightingale believed in the existence of God but her conception of God was not orthodox. She wanted to cure the society of some of the evils of religion, as she believed that not even Christianity was free from “defects and errors”. She believed in work more than in some divine grace. She was also highly critical of society where women were discriminated and were bound up with marriage and family life. She had written a great deal in protest of such social systems. Strachey establishes Nightingale as a rational human being who believed what she saw. When Nightingale saw in Scutari that fresh air was beneficial to the sick and the wounded, she argued that the bedrooms of the patients should be well ventilated to allow in fresh air. On the other hand, she refused to believe in the existence of ‘infection’ as she could not see it. Nightingale was firm in her beliefs and refused to bow down under pressure. Strachey, however, is critical of this stubborn character of Nightingale as he thought that too much self-righteousness is not good. He explains this by saying that as opposed to Nightingale’s beliefs, exposing patients to fresh air may not be beneficial at all times. However, as Strachey points out, Nightingale was too “positive, realistic and ultra practical and had moods of mysticism and doubt.” Even in her old age, she was critical of herself and her works. She was not satisfied with the works of the nurses.
and her own. She sought comfort in religious writings and kept in touch with one Mr. Jowett who tried to calm down her rebellious nature.

In Part V of the biography, Strachey discusses how Nightingale was gradually transformed into a more kind, humble and cheerful person which added charm to her achievements. Strachey believes it to be the plan of the Providence to give Nightingale such a long life so that she actually becomes the most deserving of all the praises and admiration showered on her. At her old age, Nightingale looked back at her achievements with mixed feelings. Sometimes, she was frustrated but at other times, she was happy about her contribution to the changes that had occurred since the Crimean War. She was comforted most by the fact that more and more trained nurses were coming up and that she had played her part in bringing about this change. It was only gradually that she slowly started to regain her belief in God, and understood God’s divine plan in using her for His own purposes. This realisation dawned on her with age, and she was no longer her egoistic and proud self. Instead, she learnt how to be more grateful and how to make friendships. Even her taste in writing had changed, and she no longer wrote texts like “Notes on Nursing” but spent time in composing sympathetic texts like Addresses to Probationers. She became more sensitive, senile and soft. In 1907, at the age of eighty-seven when she was offered the Order of Merit, she accepted the insignia of the Order by saying “Too kind - too kind” which shows Florence Nightingale’s humility.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 4:** How many sections are there in “Life of Florence Nightingale?” What distinguishes this biography from other accounts of Nightingale?

**Q 5:** What are the good qualities of Florence Nightingale that are mentioned by Strachey?

**Q 6:** On what grounds does Strachey criticise the “Lady with the lamp?”

**Q 7:** From your reading of this section, what ideas do you gain of Strachey as a biographer?
8.4.1 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes that you might find important while reading the life of Florence Nightingale.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Nightingale’s Character:**

Strachey’s iconoclastic manner of writing in “Florence Nightingale” has stressed more the character of Nightingale than her achievements. There was an attempt on the part of Strachey to establish new identities for those personalities who belonged to the professional class and those associated with the world of public service. In the older world, people got power, wealth and position through law, birth, marriage, etc. Strachey tries to establish how personalities like Nightingale gains admiration and respect because of their character – strength, courage, morality, talent, ability, etc. Strachey discusses how Nightingale chose not the life of luxury but the hard life of a nurse and used all her ability and talents in doing something worthwhile for the society. However, Strachey does not turn a blind eye to Nightingale’s drawbacks. He revealed the flaws and defects of Florence Nightingale. Nightingale who may seem to be a “perfect lady” to a casual observer does not escape the keen eyes of Strachey who perceived the “serenity of high deliberation in the scope of the capricious brow, the sign of power in the dominating curve of the thin nose, and the traces of a harsh and dangerous temper – something peevish, something mocking and yet something precise in the small delicate mouth.” Thus, the social position and authority of Nightingale is entwined with the weakness of her character in terms of being too egoistic and obsessed with work, and Strachey has called attention to both her strengths and weaknesses.

**Florence Nightingale’s Psychology:**

Strachey in his effort to bring out the character of his subject embarks on a psychological study of his subject. He stresses the trivial matters in the life of Nightingale, which would throw some
light on their inner anxieties and contradictions. Strachey discusses the insignificant details of Nightingale’s life, including her childhood, and shows how even as a child she was different from the rest. As she grew up, she was dissatisfied with the conditions of the hospital and their inadequate facilities. Thus, she took the admirable responsibility in her own hands to reform the system. Her personal and professional relations with political authorities and others show her enthusiasm and dedication towards her work which later only took on a demonic status. She became so stubborn and obsessed about work that she wore herself out. She also used to stress out her colleagues, admirers and other like Sidney Herbert with work. Nightingale became impatient and almost eccentric whenever she felt that she had failed in her work. Thus, Strachey by reflecting on the day-to-day life-style and behaviour of Nightingale establishes the fact that the virtue of Nightingale was also her limitation. Her fall was in her rise. He also thereby establishes a multiple identity for Nightingale who was on the one hand admirable for her work but it was also her love for work that made her a “demon”.

Representation of Women:

Many feminists see Strachey as a champion of strong women. “Florence Nightingale” is an example of Strachey’s treatment of women. He is one of those people with “modern” ideas who upheld sexual avant-gardism. Florence Nightingale is projected by Strachey as one of those women who had defied patriarchy, as someone who had been able to triumph personal and professional insecurities. Nightingale’s “rebellious nature” is emphasised. Strachey shows how Nightingale consciously avoided marriage. Strachey also shows how Nightingale managed to handle men, even at high social positions. Talking about Nightingale’s friendship with Sidney Herbert, Strachey writes:

“The man who acts, decides and achieves; the woman who encourages, applauds—and from a distance—inspires: the combination is common enough; but Miss Nightingale was neither an Aspasia nor an Egeria. In her case, it is almost true to say that
the roles were reversed; the qualities of pliancy and sympathy fell to
the man, those of command and initiative to the woman.”

However, others believe that although Strachey was an avant-
garde writer on women, in her presentation of women he attacked
rather than applauded the assumption of power by women. His
biographies on women are believed to tell us less about the subject
than about his sexual politics. This can also stand out as a valid
argument as he stresses the drawbacks of Florence Nightingale in
his effort to celebrate her strength at the same time. It reveals
Strachey’s gender insecurities. Strachey’s interpretation of
Nightingale hints that all women must destroy in order to create and
Nightingale destroyed herself and even others for the sake of her
work. Strachey says that her love and desire for work could “scarcely
be distinguished from mania.”

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: In what ways does Strachey discuss the
strengths and weaknesses of Florence Nightingale?

Q 9: What ideas do you derive of the representation of women in
Strachey’s biography on Florence Nightingale?

8.4.2 Strachey’s Prose Style

Lytton Strachey’s prose style was very different from the
typical Victorian style of writing. His style departed from the writing
styles of Victorian biographers who conceived it their duty to admit
nothing about the follies of the subject, which would keep the readers
from admiring him. Strachey was aware of the demands of the time,
its urge to seek the truth and therefore embarked on a writing style
which treated the subject as a human being with the usual share of
vice and follies rather than putting them on the pedestal and treating
them as idols.

In his Eminent Victorians Strachey treated several idolised
figures celebrated during the reign of Victoria. Among them was
Florence Nightingale who created the career of trained nursing for women. The Victorians popularly celebrated Nightingale as the “Lady with the Lamp”. Her startling achievements in nursing the wounded soldiers during the Crimean War were justly admired, winning for her the tag of the Angel of the Crimea. However, Strachey looked “upon Nightingale with clear eyes, following her career with an amused smile at the popular misconceptions.” Strachey laid stress on having a psychological insight into his subject. In the case of Florence Nightingale, also Strachey has tried to read Nightingale’s inner thoughts and feelings. Although he was also careful to record the achievements of Nightingale, his main intention was to bring out Nightingale’s character and temperament. Strachey declares in his preface to Eminent Victorians that the biographer should have a clear and definite point of view. He believed that biographers should employ, “selection”, “proportion” and “emphasis” of materials, which would enable them to achieve a certain perspective on the subject. In the case of Florence Nightingale’s biography, Strachey, instead of stressing so heavily on her achievements, chose to select the details of some of the apparently trivial matters in Nightingale’s life that would bring before the reader her personality. Necessarily, he employed a style, which was based on selection, rather than completeness; which was satirical rather than laudatory and his biography revealed Nightingale as an arrogant, over-ambitious and egoistic lady who could only be humbled with time. His interest was in personality rather than accomplishment. According to Strachey, a biographer must be critical and evaluative and be ready to confront the true character of the subject considering both the virtues and vices of the subject. Strachey also points out in his Preface that the biographer should enjoy freedom of mind and spirit and thereby should be detached from the subject that alone would enable him to provide a fair and just account of the subject, free from any kind of prejudice. Keeping this in mind Strachey has used a style that suits his purpose of giving a comprehensive analysis of the character of his subject.
8.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Eminent Victorians published in May 1918, as the English art historian and author Quentin Bell observed, is Bloomsbury’s most characteristic wartime offering. Strachey drew the attention of the public even during the turmoil of the war to minute matters. Eminent Victorians, as Bell argues, was a success mainly because it helped the people to discover that the idols they considered “household Gods” were humans after all. Eminent Victorians was a reaction to the writing styles of people such as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill who gave excessive respect and reverence to heroic personages. People were, however, divided in their opinions regarding the novel approach of Strachey towards Biography writing. Some thought of him to be a ‘deliverer’ who had at last managed to administer a final blow to the Victorian Age and released the people from the burden of Victorian legacy of hero-worship. It was a relief for the war-weary public who were tired of the age of ideals and therefore they appreciated Strachey’s pioneering work. Mourois writes: “[Strachey’s book] came to them as deliverance, all the more relished as its irony was veiled with an appearance of candour, and the mischievous grouped into an exquisite form.”

On the other hand, Strachey’s writings also made him infamous and as Cyril Connolly says, Strachey earned the name, ‘great anarch’ and “was instantly regarded as a wicked, irreverent, and satirical rogue who dared to make fun in a cold, witty and heartless manner of heroism in general and of the Victorian kinds of it in particular.” Critics like F.A Simpson criticised Strachey on grounds that he was morally flawed. He was considered ‘vulgar’ and as Noel Annan remarked, “historians never mentioned Strachey’s name without a curse.” But, Strachey is defended because of the fact that he was not critical simply for the sake of being critical but was so where it was due and can “see the mean, the ridiculous side even, of those characters with
whom he is most in sympathy of.” As Michael Holroyd puts it, Strachey liberated 20th century biography from respectability. In the case of the biography on Florence Nightingale, Strachey offers a critique of Nightingale’s ambition and he calls Nightingale to be demon-driven. However, he also admires Nightingale and he shows towards the end of the biography that Nightingale was given the Order of Merit only because she actually deserved it. Perhaps, this is the tendency to both celebrate and criticise great personalities like Nightingale that makes Eminent Victorians a biography in the modern sense. Eminent Victorians had been translated into Polish, Romanian, Spanish, Italian and Japanese even while Strachey was alive.

8.6 LET US SUM UP

After reading the unit, you must have understood how to discuss critically the contribution Lytton Strachey made to the world of biographical writings through his collection like Eminent Victorians. You may have also realised that the text of Strachey has to be historically contextualised. The Victorian age held a strange kind of fascination for Strachey. He said, “To the cold and youthful observer there is a strange fascination about the Age of Victoria. It has the odd attractiveness of something which is at once very near and very far off; it is like one of those queer fishes that one sees behind glass at an aquarium, before whose grotesque proportions and sombre menacing agilities one hardly knows where to laugh or to shudder; when once it has caught one’s eye, one cannot tear oneself away.” It was Strachey’s endeavour to fight against the vices of the age that has always been hidden in the mask of virtue with the help of his wit. Strachey’s interest in personality and “psychological problems” also exposes his modernity. Perhaps, this is what you find so interesting while reading the “Life of Florence Nightingale”. The biography of the “Lady with the Lamp”, rather than being a glorified account, turns out to be a systematic analysis and critique of Nightingale’s life and character. The critical and alleviatory style in which Strachey has written the biography, simply adds more impetus to the art of writing a modern biography with all its characteristics. You will do well by
reading the other character portrayals by Lytton Strachey namely—Cardinal Manning, Dr. Arnold, and General Gordon for getting a better idea of the genre called biography, as reshaped by Strachey.

8.7 FURTHER READING


8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q No 1:** Lytton Strachey in this book avoided presenting an idealised view of a person… …this went against the traditional biography in which the biographer refrained from speaking ill of the subject… …instead he introduced a more realistic and human portrait of the character by exposing his/her vices and follies.

**Ans to Q No 2:** In the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey says that the biographer should have a clear and definite point of view… …a biographer should be critical and evaluative… …a biographer must be ready to judge the complex behaviour of human beings… …most importantly, a biographer is an individual whose freedom should get reflected in his work… …detachment from the subject should be maintained with great caution.
Ans to Q No 3: “Lives of the Saints” or Hagiographies… …16th century biographies like Cardinal Norton’s Life of Richard III (1513), Roper’s Life of More (1535) and Cavendish’s Life of Wolsey (1554-7)……. 17th century biographies like Francis Bacon’s Life of Henry VIII (1621) Walton’s Lives (1640-78) and Aubrey’s Minutes of Lives (1669-1693)…. …Samuel Johnson’s 18th century Lives of the Poets that stood between the falsehood of fiction and the useless truth of history……19th century, biographical writings like Lockhart’s Life of Scott (1837, 1838), Gilchrist’s Life of Blake (1863) showing a potential influence on the structure of fiction….. …finally, the modern idea of ‘critical’ biography as established by Lytton Strachey in his Eminent Victorians (1918).

Ans to Q No 4: There are five parts… …unlike in other accounts, Strachey in this biography proceeds to make an indepth and psychological study of Florence Nightingale and expose certain habits of her character.

Ans to Q No 5: Florence Nightingale had a nurturing and caring attitude… …she would even imagine heaven as a place full of suffering people whom she would be serving there…. …she became a wonderful nurse because of the perfect timing between the need for a nurse and her ability as a nurse… …her outspokenness and the ability to inspire others.

Ans to Q No 6: She was a lady who demanded attention of many other people… …she sacrificed her own family life for her profession… …she had a dominating and egoist nature even at her old age…. …she was a stubborn character and emphasised too much self-righteousness.

Ans to Q No 7: He gave rise to a modern kind of biography… …reshaped biographical literature with elements of criticism… …liberated 20th century biography from respectability… …destroyed illusions…. …taught how ‘memory’ and character can be genuinely reconstructed…. …Strachey presented an iconoclastic manner of writing.

Ans to Q No 8: Strachey in his biography has laid more stress on the character of Nightingale than on her achievements…. …he found that
Nightingale gains admiration and respect because of her strength, courage, morality, talent, ability, etc… …but Strachey has also revealed the flaws and defects in her character… …sometimes she was too egoistic and obsessed with work.

Ans to Q No 9: Many feminists uphold Strachey as a champion of sexual avant-gardism… … Florence Nightingale is portrayed as a woman who defied patriarchy… …but Strachey is also criticised by many as they believe that while representing the women he attacked rather than applauded the assumption of power by women.

Ans to Q No 10: He believed that biographers should employ, “selection”… … he ‘selected’ the details of some of the apparently trivial matters in Nightingale’s life that would bring before the reader her personality… … according to Strachey, a biographer must be critical and evaluative and be ready to confront the true character of the subject considering both the virtues and vices of the subject… … hence selection is necessary.

8.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss Lytton Strachey as a biographer? What are the peculiarities of his style as a biographer?

Q 2: How does Strachey draw out the character of Florence Nightingale in his Eminent Victorians?

Q 3: Discuss with reference to the life of Florence Nightingale, the contribution of Lytton Strachey in the field of biographical writings.

Q 4: Do you think that Strachey’s analysis of the life of Florence Nightingale is a balanced one? Give examples from the text in support of your answer.

Q 5: What seems to be the major themes discussed by Lytton Strachey in his “Life of Florence Nightingale?”

Q 6: “It is the tendency to both celebrate and criticise great personalities like Nightingale that makes Eminent Victorians a biography in the modern sense.” Elaborate.

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Life Writings (Block – 2)
Florence Nightingale was a nurse who saved many lives in the 19th century. She was named after the city of Florence in Italy, where her parents went after they got married in 1818. Her family was rich and they had two homes in Britain as well as servants. British tales. Florence was an unusual young woman for her time because she didn’t want to go to parties and get married. She wanted to be a nurse and help people. Her family didn’t want her to become a nurse because hospitals back then were dirty, horrible places.