

Who Best Expresses The Character Of An Age, Historian, Poet Or Novelist?

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

A wise lady¹ once remarked that 'General notions are generally wrong'. The notion that a straight answer can be given to the question in our title is almost certainly wrong, and nothing could be more unjustifiably dogmatic than such a straight answer, if it were given. As there is no answer to this question, except one so equivocal as to be meaningless, it is considered desirable to break it up into three other questions, namely 'what is meant by "the character of an age"?' 'is it possible to express it in writing?' and 'if so, who has been most successful in doing it?'

First then, let us try to extract some meaning from that nebulous expression 'the character of an age'. Henry James once said:

What is character but the determination of incident?
What is incident but the illustration of character?

This gives us a clue: by examining the main incidents of a period we may arrive at an estimation of its character. If we consider such a period as the first half of the nineteenth century (in England) the prominent incidents which present themselves are those connected with the Napoleonic Wars and the Industrial Revolution – such events as the Battles of Waterloo and Trafalgar, the Bedchamber Plot, the Chartist Riots, the Eglinton tournament, and the Reform Act. The list could be extended indefinitely and the incidents chronicled would be bewilderingly diverse. Yet with a keen eye we might discern common factors which would help to build up an idea of the 'character of the age'. It would certainly be possible to assert that it was a period in which great alterations were taking place in every aspect of the national life. England was changing from the 'green and pleasant land' of William Blake to the 'counties overhung with smoke' described by William Morris. People were moving from the clean, windy life of the countryside to the gloomy squalor of factory towns. Output and methods of production were revolutionized. The population was growing; the age of aristocratic privilege was slowly making way for the age of democracy.

Again we could make a long list, even of the broad features of the age. The conclusion we must reach is that character (described by the dictionary as 'the distinctive mark') is quite indescribable – in a hundred words or a hundred thousands. Every act performed in an age affects its character; it is a brain-teasing, baffling conception, only to be vaguely apprehended – impossible to neatly define or glibly describe. It is, like Anthony's crocodile:

'... shaped, Sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth; it is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs; it lives by that which nourisheth it; and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates'.²

So, on our first question we come to the lame conclusion that the character of an age is a conception compounded of a multitude of facts and impressions, a conception both elusive and indefinable.

To the second question, 'is it possible to express it in writing', we can return a more confident answer: It is quite impossible to express the *whole* character of an age in a piece of writing,

¹ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. [But was it not George Eliot?]

² Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra.

but it may be possible to throw an oblique light on some aspect of it. So we return a very qualified affirmative to this question.

We are brought now to the really absorbing part of our enquiry – which writers were most successful in expressing the spirit of their age? One name springs to the lips unhindered – he whom Ben Jonson called

Soul of the Age!
The Applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!

William Shakespeare only incidentally expresses the spirit of the Elizabethan Age. His genius is wider – it covers all ages and all mankind. But we do find portions of his work which express to perfection our idea of the character of England in Elizabeth's reign. We think of Marlowe, Jonson and the Mermaid tavern when we read:

I laugh'd him out of patience; and that night
I laugh'd him into patience: and next morn,
Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed.

The conception we have of the Elizabethans as lofty, idealistic lovers is borne out by these lines from one of the sonnets:

. . . love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shak'n.³

But we shall experience great difficulty in trying to arrive at fixed conclusions about the age of Elizabeth from a perusal of Shakespeare's works. Sometimes he is lofty in his attitude to love; sometimes passionate; sometimes cruel; sometimes cynical. Like all men, his moods alter, and the diligent investigator retires baffled, with a vague idea that mankind has not altered very much since the sixteenth century.

Since Shakespeare's genius proves too vast for our purpose let us turn to some lesser luminaries who have caught some aspect of their age in a short sentence. There is Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who often revealed the character of eighteenth century high society with brilliance, as in this example from *The Critic*: If it is abuse – why one is always sure to hear of it from one damned good-natured friend or other!

Now Geoffrey Chaucer, who put the essence of chivalry into brief words when he described A verray parfit gentil knight.

Then there was Thomas Babington Macaulay, who threw light on an age not his own when he wrote: The Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators.

We should be wrong to assume, because of such examples as the foregoing, that the character of an age is only memorably expressed by a few inspired words. In poetry and drama this is very often the case, but the novelist, having a broader medium, is able to gain his effect by more diffuse means. No one expressed the character of mid-nineteenth century London better than Charles Dickens, but no short quotation will serve to illustrate this. His method was to build up an impression in the mind of his reader by skilful description, inspired characterization and pungent dialogue. While some writers light the face of the age with a quick bright ray, Dickens and his like kindle a steady glow.

³ Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.

There have been mentioned, apart from Shakespeare, four writers who may be considered to have 'expressed the character of an age'. They are four out of an innumerable company, of which the only common characteristic is genius. They number a playwright, a poet, a historian and a novelist.

So our three questions are answered, and we have seen no reason to alter our opinion of the possibility of satisfying the demands made by the original title. All we can say is that a man of genius, when writing about a period of history – whether his own or a previous one – is always likely to be able to express its character in a noteworthy manner, and that no one medium is, in general, more appropriate to this end than another.