

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

TCLC

9

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism



Volume 9

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Excerpts from Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1960,  
from the First Published Critical Appraisals  
to Current Evaluations**

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# PREFACE

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Literature is that which both lifts us out of everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive lives of such characters as Anna Karenin, Lambert Strether, or Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism can also give us insight into the human condition, as well as into the specific moral and intellectual atmosphere of an era, for the criteria by which a work of art is judged reflects contemporary philosophical and social attitudes. Literary criticism takes many forms: the traditional essay, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Criticism can also be of several kinds: normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, generic. Collectively, the range of critical response helps us to understand a work of art, an author, an era.

## The Scope of the Book

The usefulness of Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, which excerpts criticism on current writing, suggested an equivalent need among literature students and teachers interested in authors of the period 1900 to 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, and playwrights of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Moreover, since contemporary critics continue to analyze the work of this period—both in its own right and in relation to today's tastes and standards—a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student.

Thus, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* presents significant passages from published criticism on authors who died between 1900 and 1960. Because of the difference in time span under consideration (*CLC* considers authors who were still living after 1960), there is no duplication between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully designed to present a list of authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities. The length of an author's section is intended to be representative of the amount of critical attention he or she has received from critics writing in English, or foreign criticism in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work. Additionally, as space permits, especially insightful essays of a more limited scope are included. Thus *TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of that period and to the most significant commentators on these authors.

Each *TCLC* author section represents the scope of critical response to that author's work: some early criticism is presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism is selected to represent any rise or fall in an author's reputation, and current retrospective analyses provide students with a modern view. Since a *TCLC* author section is intended to be a definitive overview, the editors include between 30 and 35 authors in each 600-page volume (compared to approximately 75 authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) in order to devote more attention to each author. An author may appear more than once because of the great quantity of critical material available, or because of a resurgence of criticism generated by events such as an author's centennial or anniversary celebration, the republication of an author's works, or publication of a newly translated work or volume of letters.

## The Organization of the Book

An author section consists of the following elements: author heading, biocritical introduction, principal works, excerpts of criticism (each followed by a citation), and an annotated bibliography of additional reading.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biocritical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the biocritical introduction are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- The *biocritical introduction* contains biographical and other background information about an author that will elucidate his or her creative output. Parenthetical material following several of the biocritical introductions includes references to biographical and critical reference series published by the Gale Research Company. These include *Dictionary of Literary Biography* and past volumes of *TCLC*.
- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies genres. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author section to provide a perspective on any changes in critical evaluation over the years. In the text of each author entry, titles by the author are printed in boldface type. This allows the reader to ascertain without difficulty the works discussed. For purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. For an anonymous essay later attributed to a critic, the critic's name appears in brackets in the heading and in the citation.

Beginning with Volume 9, important critical essays will be prefaced by *explanatory notes* as an additional aid to students using *TCLC*. The explanatory notes will provide several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic; the reputation of a work of criticism; the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, etc.); and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author's work. In many cases, these notes will cross-reference the work of critics who agree or disagree with each other.

- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader accompanies each piece of criticism. An asterisk (\*) at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.
- The *annotated bibliography* appearing at the end of each author section suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights. An asterisk (\*) at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.

Each volume of *TCLC* includes a cumulative index to critics. Under each critic's name is listed the author(s) on which the critic has written and the volume and page where the criticism may be found. *TCLC* also includes a cumulative index to authors with the volume numbers in which the author appears in boldface after his or her name. A cumulative nationality index is another useful feature in *TCLC*. Author names are arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities and followed by the volume number(s) in which they appear.

### Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpts included in this volume, the permission managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in locating copyright holders, and the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, University of Detroit Library, University of Michigan Library, and Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us. We are also grateful to Michael F. Wiedl III for his assistance with copyright research and to Norma J. Merry for her editorial assistance.

### Suggestions Are Welcome

Several features have been added to *TCLC* since its original publication in response to various suggestions:

- Since Volume 2—An *Appendix* which lists the sources from which material in the volume is reprinted.
- Since Volume 3—An *Annotated Bibliography* for additional reading.
- Since Volume 4—*Portraits* of the authors.
- Since Volume 6—A *Nationality Index* for easy access to authors by nationality.
- Since Volume 9—*Explanatory notes* to excerpted criticism which provide important information regarding critics and their work.

If readers wish to suggest authors they would like to have covered in future volumes, or if they have other suggestions, they are cordially invited to write the editor.

## AUTHORS TO APPEAR IN FUTURE VOLUMES

- Ady, Endre 1877-1919  
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## Authors to Appear in Future Volumes

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Readers are cordially invited to suggest additional authors to the editors.

# Annie (Wood) Besant

1847-1933

English essayist, lecturer, historian, and editor.

Though she wrote over four hundred books and pamphlets, Besant is best remembered not as an author but as one of the preeminent social critics, activists, and religious zealots of her age. Her commitment to such controversial causes as birth control and home rule for India earned her wide recognition during her lifetime. At various times in her long career Besant embraced, among other beliefs, theism, atheism, the free thought movement, Fabian socialism, and eventually Theosophy. To each cause she devoted her considerable talents and energies, both as an orator and as a writer.

Besant grew up in impecunious circumstances following her father's death, but was able to receive a liberal, progressive education when Ellen Marryat, a sister of novelist Frederick Marryat, offered to tutor her. From her childhood Besant was devoutly religious. She spent hours in prayer, fasting, and meditation. Her religious feelings were at their height when, at twenty, she met and married orthodox clergyman Frank Besant. Much later her friend and fellow Theosophist William T. Stead would write: "She could not be the bride of heaven, and therefore became the bride of Mr. Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute." The two were unsuited to each other, and after six years they separated. Having rejected both her marriage and her childhood faith, Besant began her lifelong search for a formal system of belief she could accept. She first became involved with the free thought movement after attending a lecture by the movement's leader, Charles Bradlaugh. It was as a free thinker that Besant began her own career as a public speaker. In 1876 Besant and Bradlaugh were involved in a celebrated obscenity trial for publishing and distributing birth control information. Later, after embracing socialism, Besant led a strike of exploited match-factory workers in London which resulted in major labor reforms. Bernard Shaw was unwittingly responsible for her conversion from socialism to Theosophy by giving her a review copy of Helena P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*. After she adopted Theosophy, Besant forsook her earlier causes, even repudiating her stand on birth control. However, it was as a Theosophist that she achieved some of her most noteworthy reforms. In India, where she eventually settled, she helped to improve and desegregate educational facilities and was instrumental in establishing the Central Hindu College, the first institute of higher education in India to teach Indian subjects and admit Indian students. Though Besant did not live to see India achieve home rule, her efforts toward this goal were a major factor in its final realization.

Critical commentary on Besant's writing has naturally centered on her controversial topics, and not on her technique as a writer. Her biographer, Theodore Besterman, wrote that her early pamphlets on religion and atheism "were straightforward and methodical but uninspired presentations." Critics of her later works concur with this view. "Her writing was apt to be dull and unremarkable, except when she was really indignant," Margaret Cole has noted. It was as an orator—"the greatest woman orator of England," according to Shaw—that Besant excelled. Those who attended her lectures praised



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her ringing voice, intense self-confidence, and masterful control of her subject. Her writing is best when her hastily composed essays capture the power of her spoken words.

Despite her relative obscurity today, Besant remains a significant personality in modern British history. In her private quest for a spiritual truth, she contributed much to the struggles of the poor and the working classes in England and abroad. She has left her mark on British labor laws, on the face of modern education in India, and on the shape of modern Theosophical thought.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth* (essay) 1873
- Essays by Mrs. Besant* (essays and speeches) 1875
- On the Nature and Existence of God* (essay) 1875
- The Gospel of Atheism* (essay) 1877
- The Law of Population: Its Consequences and Its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals* (essay) 1877
- My Path to Atheism* (essays) 1877
- Marriage: As It Was, As It Is, and As It Should Be* (essay) 1879
- History of the Great French Revolution* (history) 1883
- Why I Am a Socialist* (essay) 1886
- Why I Do Not Believe in God* (essay) 1887

- Why I Became a Theosophist* (essay) 1889  
*Annie Besant* (autobiography) 1893  
*Death—And After?* (essay) 1893  
*Eastern Castes and Western Classes* (essays) 1895  
*In the Outer Court* (lectures) 1895  
*Karma* (essays) 1895  
*The Ancient Wisdom: An Outline of Theosophical Teachings* (essays) 1897  
*Sanatana Dharma* (textbook) 1904  
*Theosophy and the Law of Population* (essay) 1904  
*Theosophy and the New Psychology* (lectures) 1904  
*London Lectures of 1907* (lectures) 1907  
*The Wisdom of the Upanishads* (lectures) 1907  
*Wake Up, India* (lectures) 1913  
*India: A Nation* (essay) 1915  
*Home Rule and the Empire* (lecture) 1917  
*Mrs. Besant's Farewell Message* (essay) 1917  
*Memories of Past Lives* (sketches) 1918  
*Theosophy and World Problems* (lecture) 1922  
*World Problems of Today* (lectures) 1925  
*India, Bond or Free* (essays) 1926  
*The New Civilization* (essays and lectures) 1927

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**ANNIE BESANT** (essay date 1893)

In a century that boasts so much of what is new, amid nations that ever seek some fresh discovery, it may seem as though a view of life dating from the hoariest antiquity would have but little chance of welcome, would find but scant approval. Theosophy is the oldest of all archaic teachings; its name counts but some fifteen centuries, but the thing covered by the name antedates the most ancient of the nations known to Western man. . . . It was old when, five thousand years ago, Shri Krishna taught it as his kingliest mystery to his beloved disciple Arjuna, on the plain of the Kurus. . . . To-day it is freshly promulgated in order that it may reinvigorate the attenuated belief in the spiritual life that Christendom has preserved, and make that belief once more a living force that may triumph over materialistic luxury and materialistic science. It not only affirms but it demonstrates the reality of the spiritual life, transferring the soul from the realm of faith to the realm of knowledge, and enabling the patient and devoted student to enter on a path the goal of which is, in very truth, the vision of the Divine.

The Esoteric Philosophy—to give it its commonest name—postulates an eternal essence of being, limitless, incognizable, from which arises manifestation, the breathing forth of a universe, thought taking form; in it the root of spirit and of matter, the dual aspect of the one eternal substance, a duality inseparable from manifested existence. This manifested existence is found in the present universe to be evolved through seven distinct stages of being—states of consciousness regarded as spiritual, planes of differentiated forms regarded as material. Each of these seven gradations has its own spiritual forces, its own material forms, entities of which one pole is spirit, the other matter; these poles being present in each, as the positive and negative poles of a magnet. There is no entity that is pure spirit; there is no entity that is pure matter; one or other aspect may predominate, but both must be present. On the highest plane matter has its subtlest, its most sublimated form; on the lowest plane spirit has its most restricted and confined energy; but they are indivisible, their union indissoluble throughout the

whole of the present cycle of evolution. These seven planes can be investigated, lived in, by perfected men, so that their existence becomes a matter of knowledge, and is subject to continual reverification as new students advance to proficiency in the spiritual life; for to the eye of spirit "Nature has no veil in all her kingdoms," and human consciousness is capable of working on each of these planes of being, and of transferring itself without breach of continuity from one plane to another. Those perfected men who have achieved this power are called Adepts, Mahâtâmâs, Masters, and so on. They are men who have quickened the slow processes of natural evolution by strenuous efforts, resolute will, long-continued and loving self-abnegation; they have done swiftly what the race is doing slowly, and, as the Elder Brothers of Humanity, they labor ever still for human progress, holding in trust for the race all they have attained, teaching those who have already progressed sufficiently far to profit by their instructions, ever watching to take advantage of every opportunity by which a human soul may be helped forward to the light. . . .

The possibility of consciousness transcending physical conditions is now so thoroughly established that it is scarcely worth while to offer arguments in proof thereof to educated and thoughtful persons. In the mesmeric trance and in many allied conditions consciousness escapes from the bondage of physical matter and manifests powers and capacities loftier and more piercing than those of normal life. Clairvoyance, clairaudience, are among its most familiar demonstrations, and the evidence is here so abundant as to be within the easy reach of every student. These phenomena belong, for the most part, to the astral world, in its various sub-stages and higher and lower regions. Manifestations of great genius, on the other hand, are the successful attempts of consciousness on the higher mental plane to impress itself on the lower, and some analyses of their own experiences from the pens of such men as Mozart and Tennyson suggest lines of corroborative testimony to the truth of Theosophic teachings on this head. Serious students of Occultism learn methods of training which gradually evolve the power of thus passing from plane to plane at will, and thus accumulate experience which adds to the wealth and variety of the ever-increasing store of evidence to the reality of these superphysical states.

What is done by the student deliberately after he has reached a certain stage of development is done for him in the earlier stages, and normally for all humanity, by the process of reincarnation. Reincarnation is the successive inhabiting of body after body by the spiritual Ego, the higher nature of man. This Ego, the true "I," is eternal, alike ingenerable and indestructible, springing from the divine source, a spark individualized from the flame of the divine life. Dwelling in the man of flesh, its true consciousness masked and unable to manifest itself through the gross covering that envelops it, it gathers the teachings of experience, the lessons of earthly life. Then, passing through the gateway of death to the higher states of consciousness, it gradually shakes off its garments worn in earthly life, and, as pure soul clad in form of ethereal texture, it dwells awhile apart from the turmoil of earth, assimilating the experience it has gathered, and thus formulating the capacities which, on its return to earth, will appear as innate characteristics. Thus each succeeding life is molded by the lives that went before it, and the experienced, often-incarnated Ego brings with him to his new life-lesson all that he has been able to build into his own spiritual nature from the experiences of his past. (p. 665)

The conception of man as a spiritual being, sprung from one divine source, passing through a common evolution, trained by the one method of reincarnation, traveling towards the single goal of spiritual perfection—all this tends to lay deep and sure the basis for the Universal Brotherhood of man. We cannot despise, for mere outward differences of rank and wealth and culture, the brother souls that started with us on the long pilgrimage, that have lived with us, worked with us, suffered with us, through countless æons. We have all been poor and rich so many times, so often lofty and so often low in social rank, so often learned and ignorant, so often wise and foolish—how should we despise each other in any one brief stage of our long pilgrimage? Brotherhood becomes so patent as a fact in nature that it inevitably works itself into our lives as a living truth, and further study of minuter truths only makes more definite and more complete our recognition of this sublime and potent verity.

In a brief article such as this nothing more can be done than give barest outlines of great teachings—poor presentment of richest store. But those who study shall find satisfaction; those who patiently seek the light shall behold it; and that great Science of the Soul, which is the trunk whence the religions of the elder world have sprung, shall serve once more as stem wherefrom shall branch out the more glorious religions of the centuries that lie before humanity. (pp. 665-66)

Annie Besant, "What Theosophy Is," in *The Outlook*, October 14, 1893, pp. 665-66.

REV. ANSON P. ATTERBURY (essay date 1893)

[Under the heading "What Theosophy Is," Mrs. Annie Besant has presented] a short but comprehensive statement concerning "the Esoteric Philosophy." As ordinarily described, this so-called system of religion is the dreariest waste imaginable; under Mrs. Besant's light yet potent touch, fountains gush forth from the desert, flowers bloom, a beautiful transformation is effected—in about two thousand words. It takes genius to accomplish such results.

Certain statements made in the article referred to are somewhat startling to one who attempts to verify them. Thus, Mrs. Besant says, concerning Theosophy, that "the thing covered by the name antedates the most ancient of the nations known to Western man." Undoubtedly some idea of "religion"—undefined and perhaps undefinable—is as old as the human race. But to claim that the doctrines which Theosophy includes are thus hoary with antiquity is indeed interesting to a student of modern and Western science. . . . To have information direct from astral spheres that materialistic evolution has been taught from the year 4000 B.C.—or further back—down to our own time, is indeed an item of news "interesting if true."

"The thing covered by the name" includes other doctrines, concerning which it is certainly surprising to hear such claims for antiquity. If only some records could be brought from the mountain fastnesses of Thibet, and published from the Mahatmas and for the enlightenment of the lower Western races, giving definite proof that somebody, at least a thousand years ago, believed anything at all approaching to the conglomeration of ideas "covered by the name" Theosophy, the claim as to the antiquity of this system would be worth investigation. Undoubtedly, some thoughts concerning religion, imbedded in the Vedic writings of the far past, are included in the Theosophic presentations of the present. But to say that "the thing covered by the name antedates" other religious beliefs, and so may

rightly claim the reverence due to antiquity, is mere childishness of assertion, without either proof or expectation of acceptance.

Mrs. Besant confidently affirms concerning Theosophy that it "demonstrates the reality of the spiritual life." We should be glad to have it demonstrated—even by a Theosophist. But the kind of spiritual life that it "demonstrates" is something hardly satisfactory. The chilly astral life that it asserts, the final absorption into Nirvana—a vague something, which is nothing, assumed without proof . . . is hardly a satisfactory answer to the innate longings of the human soul. And the authority of an elusive Mahatma, whom "eye hath not seen and ear hath not heard," is insufficient evidence of such "things unseen."

A system of philosophy like Theosophy, which makes spirit and matter but the "dual aspect of the one eternal substance," and then makes that "one eternal substance" the only approach to any idea of God that the religion contains, is both foolish and Godless. It is philosophic nonsense thus to identify matter and spirit; in spite of modern materialist assertion, mankind instinctively rejects the idea. To claim that a stone is only a soul in an early stage of development is indeed an astral sublimation of thought.

The so-called proof of the whole system of Theosophy rests upon the existence and testimony of Mahatmas, men "who have quickened the slow processes of natural evolution by strenuous efforts, resolute will, long-continued and loving self-abnegation." But cold criticism must refuse to accept the existence of such creatures, or at least to believe in their taking such part on earth, until better evidence is adduced than has thus far been presented. . . . The exposure of [Mme. Blavatsky's] fraudulent spiritualistic phenomena, made by the agents of the London Society for Psychical Research, vainly denied by the Theosophical Society, is sufficient to answer all claims of Theosophy which are based upon occult phenomena. If these Mahatmas exist, as is claimed by Theosophists, they must do something better than thus far they have done before they will be cordially received by an incredulous Western world. If they exist, and "labor still for human progress," why have they been so long in telling us, and so very shadowy in their appearance, and so charlatan-like in their manifestations? We cannot help remarking to them that it would be well to seek some introduction other than through Mme. Blavatsky, if they desire successfully to "labor still for human progress"—at least so far as concerns communication with the Western world.

In the short space of her article Mrs. Besant has compressed assertion sufficient to require a volume should even partial response be attempted for all. It is, however, most interesting to see how fair a presentation may be made of matters inconceivably foolish—if only there be sufficient assumption, assertion, and assurance. But the superficial credulity of many may be trusted.

Rev. Anson P. Atterbury, "Correspondence: 'What Theosophy Is,'" in *The Outlook*, October 28, 1893, p. 778.

THE SPECTATOR (essay date 1894)

Like many other people who feel that they have suffered from the misconceptions and misrepresentations of the world, Mrs. Besant has written an *apologia pro vitâ suâ* in the form of an autobiography [*Annie Besant: An Autobiography*]. Not that she professes any intention of offering an explanation or defence

for the opinions which brought about her hostile attitude towards society—or, perhaps, we should rather say which attracted the hostility of society towards herself—for the only reason that she gives for telling the story of her life is the hope that the tale may prove profitable to others whose lives are darkened by the same troubles and doubts which she has experienced in her own. Whether or not her book is likely to have this effect, is a question which need not be considered. But there is one result which may attend her labours, and not an undesirable one. Her history may induce society to be less hasty and more charitable in passing judgment upon those who rebel against the opinion of the majority. That Mrs. Besant has herself chiefly to thank for the unenviable notoriety which she achieved is true enough; but that does not acquit the world of having treated her with scant justice, or of lending a credulous ear to charges which could not be fairly made against her. The autobiography before us has every appearance of being a truthful and perfectly honest production. . . . [This] self-drawn portrait is by no means without interest. It is that of a woman of considerable ability and but little knowledge, of an independent mind and very dependent affections, an alternate prey to religious fervour and religious doubt, unselfish in the matter of material advantage and painfully self-centred, possessed of most of the Christian virtues, but absolutely devoid of Christian humility. There are many forms of egoism; few more insidious than that which besets Mrs. Besant. She herself seems only to have half-recognised its existence. "Looking back to-day over my life," she writes, "I see that its keynote—through all the blunders, and blind mistakes, and clumsy follies—has been a longing to sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self." And, she adds, the sacrifice was to her the "supremely attractive thing;" to make it required no painful surrender of her own wishes, rather it was a "joyous springing forward along the easiest path." For which reason she is ready to disclaim all credit for self-denial and self-sacrifice. But there her reasoning stops short. She does not pursue it to the logical conclusion that there was self-indulgence in yielding to the longing for sacrifice, and, apparently, she fails to realise how extremely selfish some of her sacrifices were. It is possible to be self-seeking in the matter of spiritual as well as material advantage, and to do injury to other people's spiritual interests by attaching an altogether inordinate importance to one's own. Mrs. Besant's sense of the importance of her own convictions was deplorably exaggerated.

It might very well be that this longing for sacrifice was the keynote of her earlier life. But, to be brutally candid, it was a longing to sacrifice what other people cared for, in order to obtain what Mrs. Besant cared for. The supreme luxury, in her eyes, was a conspicuous martyrdom. . . . To do her justice, she seems to have felt no doubts on the subject herself, entertaining a perfectly genuine enthusiasm for her own heroism. There is something rather piteous, as well as ludicrous, in the blindness that shut her eyes to the real state of affairs. Endowed with a fatal facility of speech, she set herself to teach long before she had learnt, with the result that her own ignorance grew the more confirmed. Even in the light of such knowledge as she has now attained, she views her past labours with perfect self-complacency, and quotes long passages from her essays on atheism—the name which she gives to the crude form of utilitarianism which served her for the time as a religious creed—with unconcealed satisfaction. . . .

Orthodox society had probably never heard of her or her teaching, had she not wilfully provoked prosecution, by publishing a certain pamphlet, with whose ideas, by the way, she did not

agree. One thing at least stands to the credit of her honesty; while she exaggerates the importance of her crusade, she does not exaggerate the scanty equipment with which she undertook it. She did not care for politics, she says, because the necessary compromises of political life were intolerable to her. In other words, the recognition of two sides to every question, the task of collecting information on both sides, and the anxious consideration of all available evidence before passing judgment, were things which she abhorred. How youthfully ignorant was her enthusiasm may be seen on almost every page of her book. Her religious convictions were formed and abandoned with equal haste; and it was with the utmost fervour and the least possible understanding that she professed herself successively a Christian, a Theist, an Atheist, a Socialist, and a Theosophist. (p. 309)

And this is the woman to whom the world wanted to affix the label of "Dangerous,"—one who has never outgrown the romantic ideals and unreasoning enthusiasm of a clever school-girl. Clever, she undoubtedly was, and one cannot help thinking that she might have made an honourable name for herself in more than one walk in life had she brought herself to undergo the necessary training and discipline. Even the book before us shows signs of a very considerable literary capacity. The portrait that she draws of Mr. Bradlaugh is full of interest, though presenting rather a one-sided view of that remarkable man; and there are occasional passages which rise to a high point of eloquence. (p. 310)

"Mrs. Besant's *Autobiography*," in *The Spectator* (©1894 by *The Spectator*), Vol. 72, No. 3427, March 3, 1894, pp. 309-10.

#### W. E. GLADSTONE (essay date 1894)

[*Annie Besant: An Autobiography*] presents to us an object of considerable interest. It inspires sympathy with the writer, not only as a person highly gifted, but as a seeker after truth, although it is to be regretted that at a particular point of the narrative the discussion borders on the loathsome. Indeed, it becomes hard to conceive by what mental process Mrs. Besant can have convinced herself, that it was part of her mission as a woman to open such a subject as that of the Ninth Chapter, in the face of the world, and in a book meant for popular perusal. Instruction will be derived from the work at large; but probably not exactly the instruction intended by the authoress. Her readers will find that they are expected to feel a lively interest in her personality: and, in order that this interest may not be disappointed, they will find her presented to their view in no less than three portraits, at different portions of the volume. They will also find, that the book is a spiritual itinerary, and that it shows with how much at least of intellectual ease, and what unquestioning assumptions of being right, vast spaces of mental travelling may be performed. The stages are, indeed, glaringly in contrast with one another; yet their violent contraries do not seem at any period to suggest to the writer so much as a doubt whether the mind, which so continually changes in attitude and colour, can after all be very trustworthy in each and all its movements. This uncomfortable suggestion is never permitted to intrude; and the absolute self-complacency of the authoress bears her on through tracts of air buoyant and copious enough to carry the Dircæan swan. Mrs. Besant passes from her earliest to her latest stage of thought as lightly, as the swallow skims the surface of the lawn, and with just as little effort to ascertain what lies beneath it. An ordinary mind would suppose that modesty was the one lesson which she

could not have failed to learn from her extraordinary permutations; but the chemist, who shall analyse by percentages the contents of these pages, will not, I apprehend, be in a condition to report that of such an element he can find even the infinitesimal quantity usually and conveniently denominated a 'trace.' Her several schemes of belief, or non-belief, appear to have been entertained one after another, with the same undoubting confidence, until the junctures successively arrives for their not regretful, but rather contemptuous, rejection. They are nowhere based upon reasoning, but they rest upon one and the same authority—the authority of Mrs. Besant. In the general absence of argument to explain the causes of her movements, she apparently thinks it sufficient to supply us with her three portraits, as carrying with them sufficient attestation. If we ask upon which of her religions, or substitutes for religion, we are to place reliance, the reply would undoubtedly be, upon the last. Yes; but who is to assure us that it will be the last? It remains open to us to hope, for her own sake, that she may yet describe the complete circle, and end somewhere near the point where she began. (pp. 317-18)

W. E. Gladstone, "True and False Conceptions of the Atonement," in *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 211, September, 1894, pp. 317-31.\*

**BEPIN CHANDRA PAL (essay date 1913)**

Mrs. Besant has been, for more than a quarter of a century, one of the most prominent figures in our public life. And to-day, there is, perhaps, not another person, in any Indian province, to whom the heart of awakened India goes with greater reverence and deeper affection than it does to this strange woman from beyond the seas.

A magnetic personality, a finished orator, a capable organiser, endowed with large powers of imagination and sympathy, and with a very rare combination of the subtle wisdom of the diplomat with the fervour of the prophet, Mrs. Besant's influence over a very large section of our English-educated countrymen has been hardly less than that of any other leader of thought in India of the present generation.

In the earlier years of her consecrated service to India, she very materially helped to wean away the sympathies of [a] good many English-educated Indians, especially in the South, from the so-called free-thought and secularism of the middle-nineteenth-century European culture, and very largely rehabilitated for them the faith and philosophy of their fathers. In her latest activities she has been a most powerful influence to wean away [a] good many people from separatist ideals of isolated sovereign national independence, and draw them to the higher ideal of federated and co-operative inter-nationalism. . . . (pp. 1-4)

[No] one else could have stemmed the tide of this so-called free-thought and secularism, so far as this large class of people were concerned, so successfully as Mrs. Besant has undoubtedly done. Hide-bound Hindu orthodoxy may not have been seriously affected by her apologetics and exegetics, which did not always follow the lines of the ancient exegetical literature of our race. Her readings of Hindu philosophy and her interpretations of Hindu rituals, may have seemed to some as a medley of modern scepticism and ancient supernaturalism. But notwithstanding all this, one cannot reasonably refuse to acknowledge the immense debt that the present generation of English-educated Hindus owe to her. One may question the validity of her spiritual claims. One may not accept her science

as true or her philosophy as sound. There may be,—indeed, there are—the widest possible difference of opinion in the country about these matters. But no one, I think, can refuse to admit the very patent fact that large numbers of our educated countrymen, especially in Madras, would not have been what they are to-day . . . without her teachings and the inspiration of her magnetic personality.

To many people, who have carefully observed Mrs. Besant's career, as it is gradually evolved through successive stages or phases of traditional faith and rational doubt, of gross materialism and subtle theosophy,—her character and personality seem to be a puzzling mystery. And this mystery has been, very largely, I think, the one supreme secret of her success in life. (pp. 5-9)

Bepin Chandra Pal, "Mrs. Annie Besant: A Character Sketch" (originally published in *The Hindu Review*, 1913), in his *Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study*, Ganesh & Co., Publishers, 1917, pp. 1-12.

**BEPIN CHANDRA PAL (essay date 1917)**

[It may not] be very easy to discover Mrs. Besant's real philosophy of life. She has professed and preached so many different and even contradictory doctrines, that it is no easy thing to find out either the least common multiple or the greatest common measure of her strange and rich intellectual repertory. Yet there must be some sort of a secret unity or affinity even in these strange collections or they could never have found a place in an individual intellectual life and evolution. Mrs. Besant's changes have been somewhat violent, and one cannot indeed feel sure even now that she has reached the last of these. Nor do they prove any serious mental or moral disqualification. The men or women who change not from youth to age, except in the body, may be considered very steady and respectable, but whether they actually live or simply vegetate may also be very pertinently questioned. And whatever else Mrs. Besant has or has not done, there can, I think, be absolutely no question about the fact that she has lived her life and not simply vegetated. She has changed many a time. But changes have no meaning unless they are worked upon something that persists, unchanged, through all these changes. . . . That something is at once the least common multiple and the greatest common measure of our changing lives. It is that something which constitutes the most vital element in our real philosophy of life. To understand the value of Mrs. Besant's spiritual life one must seek and discover this permanent and persistent factor of her inner life and character.

Born a Christian, married to a priest of the established Church in England her first intellectual allegiance was naturally given to the creeds and dogmas of popular Protestant Christianity. Nor was she a half-hearted Christian, either. Mrs. Besant's forceful nature never can engage itself half-heartedly in any pursuit, whether intellectual or moral, social or religious. She believed in every Christian doctrine, faithfully followed the religious exercises of the Church, and threw herself with unstinted enthusiasm into the parochial works of her husband's congregation. But all of a sudden, a domestic calamity, the death of her only child, a daughter to whom she was much devoted, scattered her house of sands. . . . [John Stuart] Mill's problem faced her. Why is there death, disease, sorrow, degradation, vice, sin,—all these multitudinous evils in this world? How are these reconciled with the beneficence of the responsible Ruler of the Universe? The only answer that Mill found

for this question was that God is either not-good, or He is not-powerful enough to keep down evil. . . . Mrs. Besant thus found out by bitter personal experience,—or more correctly speaking, she thought that she had discovered,—that there was no God like the God whom she had all her life believed in and prayed to. (pp. 33-9)

[Mrs. Besant's unbelief was] more than mere agnosticism, it developed into positive atheism. This intellectual assertiveness has been a prominent feature of her character. It was equally present in her early Christianity, as in her subsequent atheism and secularism. It was a prominent feature in her subsequent Theosophy also. What did not exist to her, could not exist in the universe. What was true to her, must be true universally and for all. In theory, Theosophy has little room, really, for any kind of absolutism. A system or doctrine that proclaims the truth of *all* religions, which believes, like Hinduism, in evolution and *adhikariveda*—in the religious and the spiritual life, cannot be absolutist in any sense of the term. In practice, however, like many other universalist doctrines, Theosophy is clearly, absolutist. It is, therefore, that we so frequently found at one time, an irritating impatience of other ideas and ideals, other doctrines and disciplines, in Mrs. Besant. In India her condemnation of almost all our modern religious movements . . . had at one time been both exceedingly narrow and exceedingly bitter. This narrowness was inconsistent with the true spirit of Theosophy. This bitterness is unknown in those who have attained high spiritual life, at least in India, and among the Hindus. But I do not blame Mrs. Besant for it. These things are constitutional in her. All extraordinarily ardent natures are narrow: and absolute devotion to a particular school or system or sect naturally, breeds bitter antagonism against opposite or rival schools, systems or sects. It is only when these ardent and devoted souls attain superior spiritual elevation, or are called to some large practical work, needing combined and organised efforts of many minds of diverse castes and culture that these limitations drop off their mind and character like the dry leaves of autumn. (pp. 41-5)

*Bepin Chandra Pal, in his Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study, Ganesh & Co., Publishers, 1917, 725 p.*

#### GEOFFREY WEST (essay date 1928)

In 1891 W. T. Stead declared Mrs. Annie Besant to be one of the three most remarkable women of his time. The other two were Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Butler, both, like Mrs. Besant, of the "apostolic type," "propagandists militant." They, to a very great extent, belong to a now faded past, and their prominence has dwindled in memory; Mrs. Besant, however, is with us still, and if her star has in some degree sunk lower in the West, that has been by her own choice and that it might rise the more splendidly shining in the East. All that she was then seems to-day but the preface to what she was to become, and to agree that she was remarkable then is necessarily to agree that she is to-day doubly remarkable.

She is, though, far more than a mere phenomenon. Her work, even her work of forty and fifty years ago, is significant for us to-day where that of Mrs. Booth and Mrs. Butler is forgotten. Her sufferings, her labours, and her victories were the birth-pangs wherein an attitude essentially familiar was shaped and produced, an attitude at least more tolerant and understanding, expressed in a wider sympathy and a concern with the spirit rather than the letter of belief, more human if some-

times less humane, taking a broader and possibly profounder if more bewildered view. It is no longer the fashion to denigrate things Victorian, but to study the life of Mrs. Besant is to realize how many of the swaddling cruelties which public opinion in the sixties and seventies lent all its weight to enforce, would be possible no longer—or only under the most unusual circumstances. In the change thus marked she has played her part, and a great part, and whatever our final attitude to her, this debt must be acknowledged. She battled for free thought in days when hell was an ever-threatening reality, and even intelligent clergymen—leaders of religious thought—declared it the Church's duty, not hers, to ascertain the truth; she strove against the subjection of women, for their education and equality. . . . She gave in the seventies the first popular impulse to the modern birth-control movement by her public defence of its principles in the face of every insult and ascription of obscene motive; she upheld upon platform and in print the rights of smaller nationalities at a time when the intoxication of empire still rose unrestrained. She was a socialist before Socialism became respectable, an advocate and organizer of Trade Unions when even the workers accepted them unwillingly, a propagandist against royalty, capital punishment, the existing land system, and for woman suffrage and equal justice. Upon all these issues she was, if never alone, a pioneer, and time has justified her; there is not one which is not to-day either so fully accepted that it is taken for granted or would not be discussed with a vastly wider tolerance than even she, probably, dreamed of. She fought, it is clear to us to-day, on the side of the angels, and it might seem ironic—were it not that we instinctively take it for granted—that like all agents of heaven she was attacked most bitterly by the godly.

There was indeed, it appears, scarcely a public controversy from the seventies to the nineties, touching intellectual, social, or political freedoms, with which she did not identify herself upon the unpopular side; typify her era she certainly does not, but she may be said to have summed it up in very large degree simply by the extent to which she ran counter to its most cherished beliefs and prejudices, fought against the storm of its reactionary forces. (pp. 9-13)

But her significance is more than this, and it is rather in this additional respect that her later progress into Theosophy becomes relevant. For though throughout her life she has been deeply involved in politics, the essential fact concerning her is that she has been from first to last a religious adventurer, a spiritual pilgrim. (p. 13)

Mrs. Besant appears to many to have shared with Booth and Stead—to mention two contemporary figures—an overwhelming instinct and desire for religion together with inadequate equipment for its apprehension, lacking those sensitive refinements of the spiritual nature which alone give hope of victory. The religious heart is, unfortunately, no warrant of the religious soul. Mrs. Besant, no doubt, regards Theosophy as her final triumph; by that alone, Theosophists will say, her name must be carried to posterity. . . . (pp. 162-63)

[Mrs. Besant] has been since Madame Blavatsky's death the living centre of the [Theosophical] Society, which has under her Presidency gone forward from strength to strength, to prosperity and influence; but only time can show whether without her it can preserve its position. For herself, whatever its fate, it appears undeniable that in Theosophy Mrs. Besant has increasingly rejected her earlier ideals, denied what, at her most masculine, her most modern, her most significant, she stood for. (p. 167)