

THE 19th CENTURY BACKGROUND

The Social and Political Scene: In the 18th century, the pivotal city of Western civilization had been Paris, by the second half of the 19th century, this center of influence had shifted to London. The rapid growth of London is one of the many indications of the most important development of the age: the shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trading and manufacturing. During the long reign of Queen Victoria, English raised for a high point of development as a world power. It was the period of dynamic change, of ferment of ideas, recurrent social unrest, of great inventiveness and expansion as well as industrialization, scientific development, technology and trade. Despite the industrial and political pre-eminence of England during the period, the most perceptive Victorians suffered from an anxious sense of something lost, a sense of being displaced people in a world made alien by technological changes. Thus, this progress had been gained only by abandoning the traditional rhythms of life and traditional patterns of human relationships which had sustained mankind for centuries. People in that changed world had mixed feelings of satisfaction and anxiety. As a result of all of a sudden change, the English became rich, after this wealth, they began to get rid of their traditions gradually.

The Early Period (1832-1848): It was the time of troubles. In 1832 the passing of a Reform Bill had seemed to satisfy many of the demands of the middle classes, who were gradually taking over control of England's economy. The Reform Bill represented the beginning of a new age. Yet this legislative attempt was not satisfactory and could not solve all the economic and social problems. There was a widespread unemployment and the workers especially women and children were working under terrible conditions either in factories or in mines. The owners of mines and factories regarded themselves as innocent of blame for such conditions; for they were wedded to an economic theory of laissez-faire which assumes that unregulated working conditions would ultimately benefit everyone.

This time of troubles left its mark on some early Victorian literature. It is the novelists of the 1840s and 1850s, however, who saw the most marked response to the industrial and political scene. Vivid records of the conditions are to be found in the fiction of Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli.

The distinguishing quality of Victorian life and literature is its creative energy. But some authors did not admire such creative energy. They felt terrified by it as it might smother them.

The Mid-Victorian Period (1848-1870): It was the period of economic prosperity and religious controversy. It was the time of prosperity though it was occupied political, religious and scientific controversies. On the whole its institutions worked well. The challenging difficulties of the 1840s had been solved or would be solved by English wisdom or energy. The monarchy was proving its worth in a modern setting. The queen and her husband were themselves models of middle-class domesticity and devotion to duty. The aristocracy was discovering that Free trade was enriching rather than impoverishing their estates; agriculture flourished together with trade and industry. Besides, Factory Acts in the Parliament restricted child labor and limited hours of employment, thus the condition of working classes was being gradually improved. The mid-Victorian phase is usually referred as The Age of Improvement.

However, most Victorian poetry and critical prose was less preoccupied with technology, economics and politics than with the conflict between religion and science. Actually there had always been a debate between scientific and religious thinking. But in this period, religion was rejected as being an unreliable means of discovering the truth by the Utilitarian's, the followers of Jeremy Bentham. The Utilitarian's defended scientific reasoning instead of religious thinking. There was a continuous debate between the Utilitarian's and the philosophical conservatives, the followers of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bentham and his followers such as John Stuart Mill's father, James Mill were reformers of distinctive cast of mind, their aim was to test all institutions, government or church or the law in the light of human reason in order to determine whether such institutions were useful, that is to say, whether they contributed to the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers of men. This Utilitarian test was an extremely effective method of correcting inefficiencies in government administration and when the Utilitarian's test was applied to long-established institutions like the Church of England or to religious belief in general, it had disruptive effects. Was religious belief useful for the needs of a reasonable man? To the Utilitarian's the answer is evident: religious belief was merely an outmoded superstition.

Opponents of Utilitarianism, including Coleridge, argued that Bentham's view of human nature was unrealistically narrow, and that people had always needed a faith and that if reason seemed to demonstrate the irrelevance of religion, then reason must be an inadequate mode of arriving at a truth. The anti-Utilitarian's were divided into two groups: Although the first group which included Thomas Carlyle abandoned institutional Christianity, they sought to find some sort of religious belief to substitute. Others who were led by John Henry Newman were conservatives. For them, only a powerful, dogmatic and traditional religious institution could bear the attacks of the irreverent Utilitarian's.

The movement which was started by Newman was called the Oxford movement because it originated at Oxford University or was called Tractarianism because Newman and his conservative followers developed their arguments in defense of a High Church in a series of pamphlets or tracts. They produce a lively controversy and many religious debates at the university which left marked effects on the period.

The application of scientific attitude of mind, towards a study of *the Bible* was another kind of investigation which was known as "Higher Criticism". It treated *Bible* as a mere text of history instead of treating it as a sacredly infallible document. The new discoveries of geology and astronomy altered the view of man. Geology by extending a knowledge of stellar distances to dizzying expanses reduced the stature of man in space.

In the mid-Victorian period a further reduction into "nothingness" was affected by biology. Darwin's great treatise, *The Origin of Species* was interpreted by non-scientific public in a variety of ways. Some chose to assume that evolution was synonymous with progress, but most readers recognized that Darwin's theory of natural selection conflicted not only with the concept of creation derived from *the Bible* but also with long-established assumptions of the values attached to man's special role in the world.

The Late Period (1870-1901): This period was the decay of Victorian values. For many Victorians this final phase of the century was a time of serenity and security, the age of house

parties and long weekends in the country. Life in London, too, was for many an exhilarating heyday. Yet, there were anomalies in the seemingly smooth-working institutions of mid-Victorian England; and after 1870, flaws became evident. Outside of England, there were some developments that challenged Victorian stability and security. The sudden emergence of Germany after the defeat of France in 1871 confronted England with powerful threats to her naval and military position and also to her exclusive pre-eminence in trade and industry. The recovery of the United States after the Civil War likewise provided new and serious competition. Severe economic depressions occurred that the rate of emigration rose to an alarming degree. Another threat to the domestic balance of power was the growth of labour as a political and economic force. In 1867, a second Reform Bill had been passed, which extended the right to vote to sections of the working classes. Thus the Labor Party represented a wide variety of shades of socialism. The revolutionary theories of Marx and Engels which were expounded in their *Communist Manifesto* in 1847 and again Karl Marx's *Das Capital* in 1867 brought new dimensions. According to Marxist theory, the true Utopia could be achieved only after the working classes had taken the control of government and industry by revolution.

Victorian Values: Earnestness, Respectability and the Evangelicals: There was a wide spread spirit of melancholy and seriousness in the period. For this reason, the term "earnest" has been so often applied to the typical Victorian writers. Yet, the period, in fact, did not exclude high spirit and humor.

The connections between literature in the Romantic and Victorian ages are close. Victorian poets such as Robert Browning and Charles Swinburne derive from Shelley, and Alfred Lord Tennyson is a follower of Keats, and Matthew Arnold is a follower of Wordsworth. Yet, a Victorian writer might avoid the wild excesses, the lack of controlled form of much Romantic writing and even Lord Byron himself foresaw that such a reformation was necessary. The energy of Romantic Literature, to some extent, still exists in the Victorian Literature, but it is channeled into a stricter concern for disciplined forms. In other words, it lacked the energy of Romantic Poetry. As the Victorian writers put some rules, their writings could not be so energetic as Romantic Poetry is. Because of strict control, Victorian Poetry is limited.

Both the Evangelical Movement and the code of "respectability" came into existence to correct the evils of industrialism and materialism especially from the moral point of view. It was a desire for moral and economic betterment for self-improvement. The word "respectable" was applied to anyone who was honest in behavior and clean in habits. The code of "respectability" created the interest in the analysis of the problems of conscience and moral choice. In other words, there was an emphasis on the inner life of man.

Evangelical is a very important term in the Victorian Age. The term refers to part of a branch of the Church of England called the Low Church. Their view of life and religion was identical with that of the Non-conformists, a group whose membership included a generous proportion of successful businessmen; the Evangelicals were a formidable force. They simply advocated a strict Puritan code of morality to live a plain life and righteously censorious of worldliness in others. The Evangelicals became a powerful and active minority in the early part of the 19th century. The term 'Evangelical' has been loosely applied to cover any kind of enthusiastic concern for reform. At this point it can be supposed that Jeremy Bentham and his

followers could be classified as Evangelical but in spirit; in spirit, because the Utilitarian's were responsible for many of the major reforms of government and administration in the Victorian Age. In a way, the Utilitarian's were infected by a religious spirit which they were outwardly rejected.

The spirit of Evangelicalism was different from that of the conservatives. The revival of conservatism was not romantically manifested not in politics but in Oxford Movement in religion. The code of Puritanism and respectability limited classes in England. There was a class anxious to have a fixed set of manners by which people live and measure themselves and the families of others. Hence a sense of conformity developed external conformity. That is to say, the concept of respectability was based on manners and behaviors. The status of liberty in Victorian England was actually one of the outstanding achievements of the age. The Victorian achievement in religious as well as political freedom is also impressive. Atheist orators as well as extremely religious one enjoyed the privilege of addressing large audiences.

Yet, under such circumstances one may wonder why John Stuart Mill considered liberty a problem. Mill was inspired by his experience that individuality was threatened not merely by political tyrannies or firmly established religion but also by the less tangible pressures such as middle-class conventions.

The Intellectual Background and Literature

There are five key words which reflect Victorian intellectual background: Industry, democracy, (social) class, art and culture. "Art is man's nature" is a statement that helps us understand the 19th century concept of culture. Their attempt was to reconcile the change of continuity and order. The emphasis was on education, on the things man adds to nature. For Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, culture is an unconscious and inevitable growth because the principles that really hold society together are unconscious. In other words, the word 'culture' means the whole way of life in a society.

Since the dominating middle-class viewed art as useless; and therefore, as a mere luxury product, the concept of culture came to include aesthetic judgments as well as moral and social judgments. The literary minds especially the novelists turned to public affairs as well as the prose writers such as Mill and Carlyle. They wrote for a demand for action either personal or social. In short, their aim was to make reform, to rehabilitate all institutions and attitude which reflects, in a sense, the concept of progress. Therefore, the Victorians tended to be overburdened with opinions and ideas about revolution, evolution, determinism, nature and other large public themes. The novelist was, in a sense, freer than the poet.

The weight of Puritan code on the literature of early and mid-Victorian England was considerable. The temper of Victorian Literature can be described as an eager or earnest response to the expanding horizons of the 19th- century life. The writers were in dilemma about their divided duty toward their public and their art especially to provide firm guidance in problems of science and religion, the destiny of nations and daily life. This was the writer's task which sometimes appealed to them and sometimes appalled them. The existence of such a dilemma may help to explain another characteristic of Victorian literature: its variety both in style and in subject matter. We encounter some frequently recurring subjects in Victorian literature including a preoccupation with humanity's relationship to God, and also an acute

1000
700
200

500
350
100
1500

28.02.2017

awareness of time, a strong sense of past and present as well as of future. Among the poets one topic that links their writings together is love and it is prominent in Victorian poetry. Victorian poets explored other aspects of love relationships such as the timeless equilibrium of lovers pictured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or the poignant experience of isolation by Arnold, or the hostility of partners of a shattered marriage in Meredith's "Modern Love".

Before the 19th-century, the relationship between poet and poem was simple; the poet was the maker and the poem was the product. If poems were discussed in terms of emotion, this always meant the reader's emotion, not the poet's. After the Romantic Movement a new conception appeared, that of a poem as the expression of the poet's emotion: a poem is now seen as retaining an umbilical link with its creator. This gave a new twist to the old doctrine of inspiration. The poet who feels uninspired no longer sees himself as out of touch with an external force, but as in proper touch with his own feelings. This doctrine continues right through the 19th century and is still with us. It leads Yeats to say that "out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, out of the quarrels with ourselves we make poetry." So the expression of emotions was distinguished from the arousing of emotion in others. The first is art and the latter is craft (rhetoric).

The Victorian poetry or at any rate Victorian lyric poetry is a continuation of the Romantic tradition. Wordsworth's description of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" can also be used as a definition of lyric poetry in the Victorian period.

As for the novel, most of the Victorian novelists were primarily concerned with man in society. Occasionally such a search may take on quasi-religious dimensions, as in the later novels of Thomas Hardy and especially George Eliot's novels, with their persistent concern, with the role of free will and fate in the lives of their characters. On the whole, it can be said that the Victorian novelists were less occupied with people's relation to God than with their relation to other people.

In the Victorian period, there was an emphasis on the inner life of man. Such an attitude was observed especially in the novels of George Eliot, who devoted her novels to careful analysis of problems of conscience and moral choice. She believed that man created his own fate by his individual choice especially by his moral choices. This insistence of self-analysis aroused the question whether a man who had respectable manners was really respectable or not. This theme can be seen in most of the late Victorian novels. In other words, an individual's obvious behavior could not be trusted to reflect his true personality. This belief also placed importance on the analysis in the inner-self which proved that visible externals could deceive people; therefore, they were not believable any longer.

The development of the novel was toward more inward and more philosophic analysis of the implication of a situation, a more careful and poetic rendering of experience. There is certainly a difference between the novelists of the first half of the Victorian age and those of the second.