The Victorian Period

1832-1901

World Power

- During the Victorian Period, England was at its highest point of development as a world power.
  - London replaced Paris as the pivotal city of Western Civilization.
- The period is named after Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837-1901.
- The period was a time of scores of developments—e.g., steam power (more fully exploited for fast railways, iron ships, looms, printing presses, farmers’ combines), the telegraph, the intercontinental cable, photography, anesthetics, universal compulsory education
- The most important development of the age was the shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern, urban economy based on trade and manufacturing.
- England expanded its influence all over the world. Cotton and other manufactured products were exported in English ships, a merchant fleet whose size was without parallel in other countries.
  - England gained particular profits from the development of its own colonies, which, by 1890, comprised more than a quarter of all the territory on the surface of the earth. One in four people was a subject of Queen Victoria. By the end of the century, England was the world’s foremost imperial power.
- Because of its status around the world, there was optimism and pride in being English. Writers celebrated that the English people were “the greatest and most highly civilized people that ever the world saw.”
  - However, prosperity came with a price. Other writers exposed not-so-pleasant realities:
    - brutal factory conditions
    - stinking slums
    - “[a] sense of something lost . . . displaced persons in a world made alien by technological changes that had been exploited too quickly for the adaptive powers of the human psyche”

Reform and EARLY VICTORIAN ENGLAND

- Two key issues—trade policy and electoral reform—dominated domestic politics during the Early Victorian Period.
- Manufacturing interests, who refused to tolerate their exclusion from the political process any longer, led working men in agitating for reform. Fearing the kind of revolution it had seen on the continent, Parliament passed a Reform Bill that transformed England’s class structure.
  - The First Reform Bill of 1832 extended the right to vote to all males owning property worth £10 or more in annual rent. This included the lower middle classes but not the working classes.
  - The Second Reform Bill of 1867 further extended the vote and redistributed parliamentary representation, breaking up the monopoly that conservative landholders had so long enjoyed.
  - Corn Laws Repealed (1846) - The Corn Laws placed high tariffs (taxes on imports) on wheat and other grain in order to discourage food imports and help English landlords and farmers keep prices high.
    - Reform came when Parliament, confronting crop failures in England and a massive potato famine in Ireland (1845-1849), sought to improve dire conditions.
    - With the repeal, free trade ensued, and imports could be imported with the payment of only minimal tariff duties.
    - Although free trade did not eradicate the slums of Manchester, it worked well for many years and helped relieve the major crisis of the Victorian economy.
MID-VICTORIAN ENGLAND (1848-70)
Economic Prosperity, The Growth of the Empire, and Religious Controversy

- Utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham and James Mill) - All humans seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The criterion by which we should judge a morally correct action, therefore, is the extent to which it provides the greatest pleasure to the greatest number.
  - Measuring religion by this moral arithmetic, Benthamites concluded that it was an outdated superstition; it did not meet the rationalist test of value.
  - Utilitarianism was influential in providing a philosophical basis for political reform, but aroused considerable opposition on the part of those who felt it failed to recognize people’s spiritual needs.
  - John Stuart Mill, philosopher and son of James Mill, wrote that his upbringing in Utilitarianism had left him no power to feel.

- Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) explores how a process called “natural selection” explains how different forms of life evolved from previous forms.
  - Darwin’s account is quite different from the creation story from the Bible; controversy resulted. Some Victorian thinkers took Darwin’s theory as a direct challenge to biblical truth and traditional religious faith. Others accepted Darwin and religion, striving to reconcile scientific and religious insights.

- Motives for an Empire
  - Britain’s motives in creating its empire were many. The nation sought wealth, markets for manufactured goods, sources for raw materials, and world power and influence.
  - “White Man’s Burden” - Many English people also saw the expansion of the empire as a moral responsibility—what Victorian writer Rudyard Kipling termed the “White Man’s Burden.”
    - Queen Victoria herself stated that the imperial mission was “to protect the poor natives and advance civilization.”
    - Missionary societies flourished, spreading Christianity in India, Asia, and Africa.

LATE-VICTORIAN ENGLAND (1870-1901) - Decay of Victorian Values

- This period marked the apex of British Imperialism, and the costs of the empire (rebellions, massacres, bungled wars—Indian Mutiny in 1857, Jamaica Rebellion in 1865, massacre of General Gordon in 1885, The Boer War) showed.
- “Irish Question” - Home rule for Ireland becomes a topic of heated debate.
- Germany threatens England’s naval and military position, and the recovery of the United States after its Civil War provided new and serious competition in industry and agriculture.
- Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* (1847) challenged the middle-class economic and political system.
- Walter Pater - Answers to problems cannot be solved, so we should enjoy the fleeting moments of beauty.
The Novel

- The novel was the dominant form in Victorian Literature.
  - Novels were initially, for the most part, published in serial form (told in contiguous—typically chronological—installments in sequential issues of a single periodical publication), and were later published in three-volume editions, or “three-deckers.”
- Victorian novelists most frequently depict a set of social relationships in the middle-class society developing around them.
  - Most focus on a protagonist whose effort to define his or her place in society is the main concern of the plot.
  - The novel constructs a tension between surrounding social conditions and the aspiration of the hero or heroine, whether it be for love, social position, or a life adequate to his or her imagination. This tension makes the novel the natural form to use in portraying women’s struggles for self-realization in the context of the constraints imposed upon them.
- Female writers were, for the first time, not figures on the margins, but major authors.
  - Jane Austen (Romantic Period), Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot all helped define the genre.
- For Victorians, the novel was both a principal form of entertainment and a spur to social reform.
- Joseph Conrad defined the novel in a way that could speak for the Victorians: “What is a novel if not a conviction of our fellow-men’s existence strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history?”
- Famous Victorian novels and novelists
  - Jane Eyre, Villette (Charlotte Brontë)
  - Wuthering Heights (Emily Brontë)
  - Bleak House, Great Expectations (Charles Dickens)
  - Middlemarch (George Eliot)
  - Mary Barton (Elizabeth Gaskell)
  - Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure (Thomas Hardy)
  - Vanity Fair (William Makepeace Thackeray)
  - The Picture of Dorian Gray (Oscar Wilde)

Victorian Literature

“The Woman Question”

- 1918 - English women over the age of 30 who owned property or were married to a property holder gained the vote.
- Married Women’s Property Acts (1870-1908) - Until the passage of these Acts, married women could not own or handle their own property.
- Arguments for women’s rights were based on the libertarian principles that had formed the basis of extended rights for men.
- 1848 - The first women’s college opens in London.
  - By the end of Queen Victoria’s reign, women could take degrees at twelve universities or university colleges and could study, although not earn a degree, at Oxford and Cambridge.
- The Industrial Revolution brought hundreds of thousands of lower-class women into factory jobs.
  - Bad working conditions and underemployment drove thousands of women into prostitution.
- The only occupation at which an unmarried, middle-class woman could earn a living and maintain some claim to gentility was that of a governess, but a governess could expect no security of employment, only minimal wages, and an ambiguous status—somewhere between a servant and family member—that isolated her within the household.
  - The governess novel, of which the most famous examples are Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair, became a popular genre through which to explore women’s roles in society.
Literary Movements

- **Realism** focuses on ordinary people facing the day-to-day problems of life, an emphasis that reflects the trend toward democracy and the growing middle-class audience for literature.
  - Realism grew out of Romanticism as rapid technological and social changes occurred.

- **Naturalism** is a movement that involved cramming works with gritty details—the sour smells of poverty, the harsh sounds of factory life—often with the aim of promoting social reform.
  - Naturalism directly contradicts the Romantic idea that nature mirrors human feelings and instead portrays nature as harsh and indifferent to human suffering.

Poetry

- As the novel emerged as the dominant form of literature, poets sought new ways of telling stories in verse.
- Some poets like Matthew Arnold and Alfred, Lord Tennyson held that poets should use the heroic materials of the past. Others like Elizabeth Barrett Browning felt that poets should represent “their age, not Charlemagne’s.”
- Victorian poets experimented with character and perspective.
- Although Victorian poets developed out of and show the strong influence of the Romantics, they were not able to sustain the confidence that the Romantics had in the power of the imagination.
- The dramatic monologue became a popular form of poetry.
- Also popular was the use of visual detail and sound (beautiful cadences, alliteration, vowel sounds, roughness).