

# *The Victorian Age (1832-1901)*

Temper, Values and  
Literary Expression



## *Main history events*

- 1832: the First Reform Bill
- 1833: Abolition of Slavery
- 1837: Victoria becomes queen
- 1838: Chartist Movement (till 1848)
- 1847: 10 Hours Factory Act
- 1851: The Great Exhibition
- 1859: Darwin's *Origin of Species*

- **1861-65:** American Civil War
- **1867:** Second Reform Bill (town labourers)
- **1875:** Trade Union Act (under Disraeli)
- **1876:** Queen Victoria made Empress of India
- **1884:** Third Reform Bill (rural and mining areas)
- **1899-1902:** the Boer War in South Africa
- **1901:** Death of Queen Victoria

## *The Victorian Temper//Compromise*

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way ...”

*(A Tale of Two Cities, 1859)*

## *Economic growth and Empire*

- Great expansion of London – 6,5 million people by 1900
- London as the world's banker
- Industrialization at its climax
- Import-export market at its apex (free trade)
- England was the world's foremost imperial power – “the White Man's burden”
- Flourishing of missionary societies in India, Asia and Africa



- 1830: opening of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway (first steam-powered railway) – train



- Enthusiasm about progress (e.g. Macaulay's essays) vs critique of the same (Arnold's melancholy poetry)
- Double reaction to industrialisation: satisfaction/worry; glorification/disenchantment; gain/loss; meliorism/agnosticism
- E.B.Browning's "The Cry of the Children" (1843) – literature of social protest (vs terrible conditions in factories and coal-mines)

- The “Condition of England” novels (1840s-1850s): Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli.
- Charles Dickens’s and John Ruskin’s lamentations vs progress and technology
- Strenuous social enterprise vs Romantic solipsism and introspection (often misinterpreted by later generations, e. g. *Orlando* – “Giant cauliflowers towered deck above deck till they rivalled ... the elm trees themselves”)
- 1851: The Crystal Palace – exhibition of modern industry and science



# *Moral values and attitudes*

**Queen Victoria**

**“The matriarch of  
Europe”**

earnestness,  
moral responsibility,  
domestic propriety  
(as mother, wife and  
then widow)



## ■ An age of transition:

- *“We are living in an age of transition”*  
(J. S. Mill, 1831)
- *“The Old has passed away, but alas,  
the New appears not in its stead”* (T.  
Carlyle, 1831)
- *“Wandering between two worlds, one  
dead, / The other powerless to be  
born”* (M. Arnold, 1855)

- Obsession with moral purposes, duty, pragmatism vs Romantic introspection
  - “*Victorian*” wrongly employed as synonym of prudish and old-fashioned
- Many Victorians vs hackneyed Victorian sacred cows (especially in the 1890s):
  - Walter Pater and the aesthetic movement
  - *Fin-de-siècle* attitude
  - Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (1903)
  - Beginning of modernist movement (Yeats, Hardy, Conrad, Shaw)

*The Woman  
Question*



- No right to vote till 1918 (30: minimum age); 1928: franchise to all adult women
- 1857: The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act – establishment of a civil divorce court
- Divorce allowed only to women victims of violence, incest, bigamy or other acts of cruelty – yet very expensive practice
- 1870-1908: Women's Property Acts
- Limited educational and professional opportunities



- ⇒ Debates and protests, yet essentially a middle-class phenomenon
- Tennyson, *The Princess*, 1847: utopia of an only-for-females university
- 1848: first women's college in London
- By start 20th century: 12 universities open to women
- Most lower-class women still working under appalling conditions in factories, mines (till the 1870s) and fields

- Unemployment – prostitution (“the fallen woman”)
- Middle-class unmarried women – governess (within and without the family)
- The “governess novel” – *Jane Eyre* (1847)
- Theory of the “separate spheres” (of the “hearth/heart” for women)
- Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62)

- Apparent exaltation of woman's goodness and wisdom
- Oppressive domestic ideology
- Reaction at the end of the century: the "New Woman"
- Vs double standards of morality
- Struggle for equal education (e.g. Oxbridge)
- Struggle of equal political rights
- Suffragettes (Head: Emmeline Pankhurst)

## *Religion and other creeds*

- Church of England – fragmentation
- ✓ Evangelical (Low Church) – Christian zeal, strict Puritan ethical code, vs worldliness
- ✓ Broad Church – open to progress in thought, vs divisions between Low and High Church (“liberal protestants”)
- ✓ High Church – the “Oxford Movement” or Tractarianism (Newman): “Catholic” side; call back to the origins of the Church

# ■ Dissenters / Nonconformists

- ✓ Baptists

- ✓ Methodists

- ✓ Congregationalists

- ✓ Other Protestants (e. g.  
Presbyterians)



## ■ Rationalist creeds

- ✓ Utilitarianism (Benthamism; Philosophical Radicalism – Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill)
  - Goal of life: maximise pleasure
  - Criterion: the greatest pleasure to the greatest number
  - “Facts, facts, facts.....” (*Hard Times*, 1854 – Comte and positivism)

- ✓ Darwin, Lyell and the scientific creed
- Higher Criticism of the Bible (D. F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesus*, trans. by Eliot in 1846)
- Man reduced to “nothingness”
  - Tennyson: the stars are “Cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand / his nothingness into man” (*Maud*, 1855)
  - 1859: *Origin of Species* depriving man of his special place in the universe (reaffirmed by *The Descent of Man*, 1871)

## ■ Alternative “faiths”

- Art as religion – the Aesthetes
- Religion of HUmanity – Swinburne
- Unbelief (atheism or nihilism) – Davidson and Thomson
- Religion of Nature and Deism – Hopkins (man able to capture the divine in nature through reason)

- “The multitude of thoughts only breeds increased uncertainty” (John Stuart Mill)
- “There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
... than in half the creeds” (Tennyson)
- “O god – if there is a God – save my  
soul – if I have a soul”

# Literary expression: genres and poetics

- The Victorian novel: “a window looking into reality” .... realities
- Victorian poetry: discordant voices



# The Novel / And romance?

- Social problem novel (Elizabeth Gaskell)
- Novel of manners/satire (William Thackeray)
- Humanitarian novel (Charles Dickens)
- Psychological novel (R. L. Stevenson and Brontë sisters – “Victorian Gothic”)
- Naturalistic novel (Thomas Hardy; George Eliot – character-focused)
- Nonsensical novel (Lewis Carroll)

# Poetry: key aspects

- Objective, socially engaged poetic vision
- Monumental poetry: celebrating progress and English empire (R. Kipling)
- Poetry of anti-myth: disenchantment, disbelief and doubt (A. H. Clough and J. Thomson)
- Both voices in Tennyson

- Decadent poetry vs “*litterature engagée*” (D. G. Rossetti and A. Swinburne)
- Pictorial poetry: visual images to represent emotions and situations
- Musical poetry: sound to convey meaning and mood, “where words would not” (e. g. *Ulysses*: alliteration and assonance)

## ■ Romantic sensibility

- Melancholy and *ennui*
- Country vs city//community vs individual
- Look at the past / memory / yet: more disenchanted (desolate ruins)
- Aesthetics of the fragment and the hybrid poem (e.g. lyric & dramatic)
- Tension being/becoming
- But: no obsession with organic wholeness / focus on the search

# ■ Heterogeneous forms and experimentalism

- R. Browning: the dramatic monologue
- G. M. Hopkins: “sprung rhythm”
- A. Tennyson and A. H. Clough: verse tale / narrative poem / long poem / medley poem / pastiche



# Aestheticism and Decadence

- Last two decades of the 19th century
- Pioneer: Théophile Gautier – “l’art pour l’art”
- British pioneer: Walter Pater
  - Art as religion
  - Art as superior to life
  - Life as a “work of art” (intense experience)
  - Immorality is not a flaw
  - Didacticism is not an aim