

THE VICTORIAN PERIOD (1832-1901)

Age of Empire, “Progress,” Industry and Commerce

England reaches highest point of development as world power; captured markets all over globe; capital investment in other continents; colonies by 1890 cover ¼ of earth’s surface; England the world foremost imperial power; celebration of superior qualities of English people; many satisfied with progress, but also had an anxious sense of something lost; felt like “displaced people” made alien by technological changes; everything happening too quickly; Thomas Carlyle writes: “The Old has passed away, but alas, the New appears not in its stead; the Time is still in pangs of Travail with the New”; shift from way of life based on ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing; England the first country to become industrialized (steam power, fast railroads, iron ships, looms, printing presses, telegraph, photography; industrialization brought enormous increases in wealth but also social and economic problems; rapid growth of London; growth of commerce).

Age of Moral Purpose and Earnestness

Earnestness, moral responsibility, domestic decorum and respectability; time of “proper” behavior; abandoned introspection of Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Keats in favor of higher moral purpose; Victorians later regarded by figures like Eliot as stuffy prigs; the term “Victorian” is often employed to mean “priggish” and “old-fashioned”—but a very complex period with respect to morals.

Early Victorian Period (1830-1848)

Reform Bill of 1832 extended the right to vote of all males owning property worth ten pounds or more in annual rent—this changed the class structure in England because the voting public thereafter included the lower middle class (though not yet the working class, until 1867); meant break up of monopolies of political power by conservative landowners; redistribution of parliamentary representation; middle class economic interests gained increasing power; 1830-40s considered the “Time of Trouble”; economic crashes spelled unemployment, poverty, and rioting; child labor in horrible conditions; owners followed “laissez faire” mentality (unregulated working conditions would ultimately benefit everyone), so workers suffered; bad crops meant starvation; reform in Corn Laws (allowed free trade of grains into England; wealthy landowners didn’t want the competition, but poor people couldn’t afford bread); Disraeli’s concept of “The Two Nations”—the rich of England and the poor of England.

Mid-Victorian Period (1848-1870)

Writers like Dickens and Ruskin attack shortcomings of Victorian social scene; denounce evils of Victorian industry; criticize laissez-faire economics; gradually conditions improved; Factory Acts restricted child labor and limited hours of employment; 1851, Victoria’s husband Prince Albert opens the Great Exhibition (gigantic greenhouse, the Crystal Palace, exhibits advances in modern industry and science, conspicuous display of the feats of Victorian technology);

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economic progress leads to greater influence throughout the globe, creating the British Empire; 1876, Queen Victoria named the empress of India; motives for empire: sought wealth, markets for manufactured goods, sources for raw materials, world power and influence; many English saw expansion of empire as moral responsibility, “the White Man’s burden” to civilize barbarians; missionary societies flourished, spreading Christianity in India, Asia, and Africa; caused increasing debate about religious belief; Evangelicals became increasingly powerful while the “High Church” emphasized the importance of tradition, ritual and authority (note, T. S. Eliot would later become a High Church Anglican); rationalist challenges to religious belief maintained an influence; Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham’s belief that human beings seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (and thus we should measure morality by that which brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number, caused some crisis at the thought of a universe governed only by utilitarian principles); scientific discoveries seemed to undercut established faith; geology, astronomy and biology questioned traditional religious claims; feeling of human being reduced into “nothingness”; questioned humanity’s “special role” in the world; Darwin’s theories made the Victorians feel “infinitely isolated”; serious conflicts and anxieties.

Late Victorian Period (1870-1901)

Golden glow of mid-Victorianism lingers through the “Jubilee” years of 1887 and 1897; for many Victorians a time of serenity and security; an age of house parties and long weekends in the country; an exhilarating heyday; gaiety of London in the 1880s; rampant consumerism; commodities, technologies changing the texture of modern life; eventually, though, the cost of empire felt in rebellions, massacres, and bungled wars (Boer War at the end of the century; England engaged in bloody struggle to annex republics in the south of Africa controlled by Dutch settlers called Boers); other developments started to threaten the British Empire; Bismarck’s Germany starts to gain technological and military power; economic depressions in 1873-4; William Morris embraces Marxism and the conviction that utopia could be achieved only after the working classes had, by revolution, taken control of government and industry; Samuel Butler satirizes the tyrannical self-righteousness of the Victorian father.

The Nineties

Melancholy, not gaiety, is the spirit of the age; *fin de siècle* (see next section); a weary sophistication; a search for new ways of titillating jaded palates; the Aesthetic movement of “art for art’s sake” assaulted the assumptions about the nature and function of art held by ordinary middle-class readers; mood of degeneration; sense of a “Philistine” public and the “alienation of the artist”; Oscar Wilde’s comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* pokes ironic pun at Victorian morals and earnestness; artists scorning the limits imposed by conventional ideas; picture of the artist rejecting and rejected by ordinary society; the Education Act of 1870 (which finally made basic education compulsory and universal, brings about a large, unsophisticated reading public and the splitting up of audiences into “lowbrows,” “highbrows,” and “middlebrows”); Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 marks the end of an era; rise of various kinds of pessimism and stoicism (the determination to stand for human dignity by enduring bravely, with a stiff upper lip, whatever fate may bring); pessimism exhibited in novels and poems of Thomas Hardy.

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Fin de siècle

Fin de siècle is French for "end of the century," though also implying end of an era. The expression generally refers to the years 1890 to 1914 in Europe. The expression is used to characterize anything that has an ominous mixture of opulence and/or decadence, combined with a shared prospect and/or despair of unavoidable radical change or some approaching "end." Note that it is not necessarily change itself that is implied in the expression *fin de siècle*, but rather its anticipation. For example, for the 19th-century *fin de siècle*, the most radical changes to the cultural and social order occurred more than a decade after the new century had started (most notably as a result of World War I). A more recent example of *fin de siècle* can be found in the Y2K problem: the general turmoil caused by this relatively insignificant technical issue becomes a lot more understandable when acknowledging an underlying *fin de siècle* mechanism.