

The Victorian Compromise

The Victorian Age was a complex and contradictory era: it was the age of progress, stability, great social reforms but it was also characterized by poverty, injustice and social unrest. The Victorians promoted a code of values that reflect the world as they wanted it to be, not as it really was, based on personal duty, hard work, respectability and charity. The Victorians were great moralizers. As a rule the values they promoted reflected the world as they would have liked to be. In an age which believed in progress, it seemed natural to believe that material progress would emerge from hard work and to insist on the sense of duty rather than personal inclination. Diligence, good time-keeping and good behaviour: these values were of equal application to all strata of society. The idea of respectability distinguished the middle form by the upper or middle classes. Respectability was a mixture of both morality and hypocrisy, severity and conformity to social standards. It implied the possession of good manners, the ownership of comfortable house with servants and a carriage, regular attendance at church, and charity activity. Philanthropy was a broadly-based Victorian phenomenon with a range and diversity of interest: it addressed itself to every kind of poverty, to 'stray children, fallen women and drunken men' and absorbed the energies of thousands of Victorians. In life, and then in death, charitable work was listed alongside a Victorian's varied accomplishments and qualities. The family was a patriarchal unit where the position of the husband was dominant. It was a role imposed upon him by the divine providence. The husband represented the authority and the key role of woman regarded the education of children and the housework. The subservience of women was clearly underlined by the enormous difficulties they faced if they cast aside the roles expected of them. The concept of 'fallen woman' was a fate imposed upon thousands of women by a society with intense concern for female chastity. Sexuality was generally repressed in its public and private forms, and prudery in its most extreme manifestations led to denunciation of nudity in art, and the rejection of words with sexual connotation from everyday vocabulary. In the late 19th century patriotism was influenced by ideas of racial superiority. It was thus an obligation imposed by the Almighty on the British to bestow their superior way of life on native throughout the world. This attitude came to be known "Jingoism". Since the Victorians, under the strict reign of Queen Victoria, had

to compromise many essential features of individuality and modes of expression, the term 'Victorian Compromise' came to be coined and applied to this particular age. As expected, this characteristic of the Victorian era also came to be reflected in the literature of that age.