

THE VICTORIAN AGE

When we speak of Victorian age commonly we refer to the period of English history including the long reign of Queen Victoria, that is, from 1837 to 1901. The Victorian Age is very interesting, especially for the many contradictions that characterize it. So I will try to illustrate the Victorian Age and I hope that this presentation will be useful for your study.

The Victorian Age was a complex and contradictory era, as I said, because on one hand it was the age of progress, stability, and great social reforms, on the other it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest. Queen 1832 and the First Reform Act.

BUT WHO IS VICTORIA?

Victoria was the daughter of Edward, the Duke of Kent and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg.

She was born in Kensington Palace in London on May 24th, 1819. Edward died when Victoria was eight months. In 1837 Queen Victoria took the throne after the death of her uncle William IV. Due to her secluded childhood, she displayed a personality marked by strong prejudices and a willful stubbornness. Barely eighteen, she refused any further influence from her domineering mother and ruled in her own stead. Popular respect for the Crown was at a low point at her coronation, but the modest and straightforward young Queen won the hearts of her subjects. She wished to be informed of political matters, although she had no direct input in political decisions.

On Feb 10th, 1840, only three years after taking the throne, Victoria took her first vow and married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Their relationship was one of great love and admiration. Together they bore nine children - four sons and five daughters: Victoria, Bertie, Alice, Alfred, Helena, Louise, Arthur, Leopold, and Beatrice.

Prince Albert was the dominant male influence in Victoria's life. She was thoroughly devoted to him, and completely submitted to his will. Victoria did nothing without her husband's approval. Albert assisted in her royal duties. He introduced a strict decorum in court and made a point of straitlaced behaviour. Albert also gave a more conservative tinge to Victoria's politics. If Victoria, at age 23, was to insistently interject her opinions and make her views felt in the cabinet, it was only because of Albert's teachings of hard work. The general public, however, was not enamored with the German prince; he was excluded from holding any official political position, was never granted a title of peerage and was named Prince Consort only after seventeen years of marriage.

On Dec. 14th 1861 Albert died from typhoid fever at Windsor Castle. Victoria remained in self-imposed seclusion for ten years. This genuine, but obsessive mourning kept her occupied for the rest of her life and played an important role in the evolution of what would become the Victorian mentality. Victoria's long reign witnessed an evolution in English politics and the expansion of the British Empire, as well as political and social reforms on the mother country.

The national pride connected with the name of Victoria - the term Victorian England, for example, stemmed from the Queen's ethics and personal tastes, which generally reflected those of the middle class.

I am now going to speak more specifically about this period of history, starting from the concept of empire and analyzing the economic situation and the role of England in Europe and worldwide.

The Empire

Great Britain during Victoria's reign was not just a powerful island nation. It was the center of a global empire that fostered British contact with a wide variety of other cultures, though the exchange was usually an uneven one. By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one-quarter of the earth's land surface was part of the British Empire, and more than 400 million people were governed from Great Britain, however nominally. An incomplete list of British colonies and quasi-colonies in 1901 would include Australia, British Guiana (now Guyana),

Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, Gambia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Hong Kong, British India (now Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, the Malay States (Malaysia), Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Somaliland (Somalia), South Africa, the Sudan, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Trinidad and Tobago. Queen Victoria's far-flung empire was a truly heterogeneous entity, governed with heterogeneous practices. It included **Crown Colonies** like Jamaica, ruled from Britain, and **protectorates** like Uganda, which had relinquished only partial sovereignty to Britain. **Ireland was a sort of internal colony** whose demands for home rule were alternately entertained and discounted. India had started the century under the control of the East India Company, but was directly ruled from Britain after the 1857 Indian Mutiny (the first Indian war of independence), and Victoria was crowned Empress of India in 1877. Colonies like Canada and Australia with substantial European populations had become virtually self-governing by the end of the century and were increasingly considered near-equal partners in the imperial project. By contrast, colonies and protectorates with large indigenous populations like Sierra Leone, or with large transplanted populations of ex-slaves and non-European laborers like Trinidad, would not gain autonomy until the twentieth century.

Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation

This was a popular combination of factors for the rise of the British Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries. The Protestant aspect of Christianity was seen by many within the British Empire as part of the larger battle with the more 'Catholic' nations of Continental Europe. Ever since the Reformation, religion represented not merely a spiritual difference between the Catholic and Protestant churches but was part of a far larger cultural and political competition between deadly rivals. Portugal, Spain and France were the Catholic nations who developed successful commercial empires before the English (and Dutch) were able to do so. Religion gave an excuse for this commercial rivalry to turn into military and political competition. The very success of the Protestant nations in challenging the Catholic hegemony in the New World and the East Indies seemed to confirm that God might be on the Protestants' side after all - although this did ignore the fact that the English and Dutch co-religionists were just as frequently found at the throats of one another.

It was certainly helpful that the Protestant work ethic meant that Christian and commercial ideals could be reconciled fairly easily and in fact was thought to manifest itself in the improvement and development of British civilisation in general. In pre-industrial Britain, the combination of these three factors would lead to the creation of the settler colonies in North America. Devout Christians would look for economic freedom from feudal relationships in this New World. However, mercantalism and then the industrial revolution meant that this commercial aspect could take on a more sinister role as monopoly power, slavery or exploitative working conditions became a temptation hard for investors or capitalists to resist. It was reassuring to many such capitalists that they could hide behind the idea that by investing in enterprises and schemes around the world that they were serving a modernising and civilising goal and so their consciences could be clear in such a noble enterprise.

The civilisation aspiration could be damaging in its own right. It assumed that **British civilisation was innately superior** to those it was subjugating. Indeed, the very subjugation process confirmed the superiority of British Civilisation! It then assumed that the new rulers were obliged to improve the subjugated peoples that it had taken under its wing with large doses of Christianity and commerce. Of course, this appealed to the positive aspirations that many Imperialists held for the future of a benign Empire. It offered a justification for Imperialism. However, it could also justify some of the more extreme Social Darwinist ideas of racial superiority and it allowed for treating the subject peoples as innately inferior.

In short, **Christianity, commerce and civilisation was a neat way to justify the uniqueness of the British Empire and yet give it a justification for continuing into the future.** It could also be deeply patronising and justified cultural imperialism and racial stereotyping and yet there was a surprisingly large strain of truth behind this reason for the British strain of imperialism.

Technological and Industrial Superiority

The British had no monopoly on technological innovation. Gunpowder, the printing press, navigational equipment were all developed and improved on the continent or further afield yet. Europe from the fifteenth century onwards was becoming a dynamic place where new ideas were swirling around with unnatural haste. Britain was benefitting from this much wider European Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment and yet it was also in a position to take these ideas, and many others, much further as it would become the first nation to harness **the power of steam** which in turn would unleash an Industrial Revolution and an avalanche of high quality, mass-produced goods that would flood the markets around the world. They, in turn, would provide a **technology gap** that non-European nations would find difficult to compete with. Precision-made muskets, rifles, machine guns, train locomotives, steam ships would provide the relatively small and outstretched British armed forces with unparalleled advantages. They could take on vastly larger (and possibly braver) enemies and yet beat them off, subdue and suppress them. British weaponry was very effective and its communication systems allowed it to shepherd its meagre resources to devastating effect and even its medical resources would improve enough to allow its soldiers and sailors to penetrate deeper and more inaccessible areas. Britain was not the only nation to enjoy a technological advantage over non-European nations, but its combination of industrial might and maritime power meant that it had a peculiar advantage and one that would not be challenged until the development of guerilla warfare and tactics in the twentieth century.

VICTORIANS are moralisers (middle class who has the political and economical power) they believe in a world based in the ideas of DUTY, HARD WORK, RESPECTABILITY and CHARITY.

- **Hard Work** is connected with the idea of **REWARD** and is purpose of middle class who want to obtain power and become rich.
- **Respectability** depends on what we have and what we do (ex. Comfortable house, servants, a carriage, attendance at church, a charitable activity etc.)
- **Philanthropy** (take care of welfare of poor people, children, fallen woman, etc.) and Family who is patriarchal, so the husband has the authority. The role of women concerns only the education of children and the managing of the house.
- **Patriotism** (civic pride and national fervour).

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Important period of social and politics Reform: in 1832 the "**First Reform Act**" guaranteed that all male members of working-classes can vote (with the "First Reform Act" only members of middle class can vote), the "Factory Act" in 1833 prevented children from being employed more than forty-eight hours a week, the "**Mines Act**" in 1862 prohibited the working of women and children in mines, the "**Elementary Education Act**" in 1870 recognised the need for general primary schooling, the "Public Health Act" guaranteed the clearing of slums and improved public health.

- Demolition of trade barriers (liberal policy)
- Expansion in Asia, Africa, Central America and Oceania
- Progress of science and technology (Great Exhibition 1851)

Victorians believed in a world which was not real, but was the result of the middle class mentality and

behind the progress, expansion and philanthropic associations was hidden a different world.

- Patriotism flows into the idea of racial superiority based on fundamental physical and intellectual differences,
- Education and childhood were not the same for all children; in fact there were private teachers for rich children, orphanage (with strong discipline), compulsory education (gender separation),
- The marginalization and contempt for "fallen woman" who have not respected chastity, were the result of the same society that promoted charities.
- The progress of industry is based on exploitation of workers who are underpaid, living in

crowded areas, have health problems (disease, Tb, cholera). URBAN HABITAT is influenced by industrial development.

- Poor lived in **SLUMS**, what we call "baraccopoli", characterised by squalor, disease. Middle class was aware of their situation but they left people working-class alone, so crime and disorder were allowed to grow (problem of Law and Order with the establishment of Metropolitan Police in 1829-30). The contradiction is very clear: they didn't care about workers but they created places of entertainment like public houses and music halls.

The nineteenth century saw **a huge growth in the population of Great Britain**. The growth of the cities was due to the effects of the industrial revolution: people were flocking into the towns in search of employment. For some it was also the call of the unknown, adventure and a better way of life. The search for employment also involved the children that were expected to help the family budget. They often worked long hours in dangerous jobs and in difficult situations for a very little wage. For example, there were the climbing boys employed by the chimney sweeps; the little children who could scramble under machinery to retrieve cotton bobbins; boys and girls working down the coal mines, crawling through tunnels too narrow and low to take an adult. Some children worked as errand boys, and they sold matches, flowers and other cheap goods. Consequently people needed to live near to where work but the available housing became scarce and therefore expensive, resulting in extremely overcrowded conditions. Particularly in London where the population grew at a record rate, large houses were turned into flats and tenements and the landlords who owned them, were not concerned about the upkeep or the condition of these dwellings. The roads were crossed by ditches, into which drains and sewers emptied. The ditches contained the only water the people in the street had to drink. These poor living conditions led to death caused by starvation and destitution. Great wealth and extreme poverty lived side by side because the tenements, slums, rookeries were only a stone's throw from the large elegant houses of the rich. Many children were turned out of home and left to fend for themselves at an early age and many more ran away because of ill treatment. Many destitute children lived by stealing and many people thought that education was the answer.

The Victorian Compromise

The "Reform Bill", which in 1832 expanded the right to vote on renewing the electoral system, marked the prevalence of the citizens of those constituencies, increasingly depopulated the countryside (the rotten boroughs) and thus the transfer of power from the country landowners, which also involved changes at the cultural level. **The "Reform Bill" is generally considered the dividing line between the Romantic and Victorian era**, a time of great contradictions, and the balance under the mask of respectability. The progress of British industry in the first half of the nineteenth century was spectacular: the expansion of industrial cities, the growth of the welfare of the bourgeoisie (with his unwavering faith in progress), however, could not hide the overcrowding in the cities, poverty, lack of the most basic hygienic conditions in the slums, exploitation of workers subjected to hours of work, which were impossible (even for women and children). These conditions produced a split in the country, the so-called "two nations": the working class and the preferred shares. To prevent the gap, the British ruling classes carry out what is called the "Victorian compromise." So, on the one hand they ensured a policy of total non-interference by the State Economic and refused to impose any rule to the market; on the other, the awareness of the inhuman conditions imposed on the workforce contributed to the adoption of reforms to improve the conditions of life and work of the proletariat. In British society this awareness took the form of a **vague humanitarianism**, which was often an expression of **easy sentimentality**. The increased prosperity, scientific and medical progress, the spread of literacy were all signs of progress, hence the optimism and the desire on the part of the middle class to extend their values, even the working class. **The whole idea of respectability dominated Victorian society, but respectability could not by itself eliminate social ills such as poverty, cruelty to children, child prostitution or the exploitation of workers. The "sins" were simply hidden under a veil of hypocrisy.**

Now I will introduce the literature of the Victorian era, the greatest authors, the most important works and the recurring themes.

- The Ideological Influences of Victorian literature were
- **Purism**, a religious movement who want reform the Church of England , according to Calvinism principles (hard work, prayer, chastity)
- **Transcendentalism**: all reality is a single unity, the spiritual principle is over soul, man is the emanation of our souls and nature is the best instrument to reach the truth.
- Then we have **Marxist theories**, because during Victorian age mechanization was seen as an answer to the problem of poverty. People believed that machines would have improved the prosperity of the classes and that human race had the duty to study and be happy.
- The most popular genres were:
- **novels** (romantic novel, adventure novel, realistic novel, sensation novel, historical novel, novel of manners and so on)
- **poetry**
- The main topics were :
- **industrial progress,**
- **education**
- **The workers' conditions of life**
- **childhood**
- **materialist philosophy**

Now, to introduce the authors and their works, I am going to offer excerpts from the books, hoping to have more fun listening to their words.

- "You will see from these pages if I'll be the hero or another in my life. In principle, from the beginning, I must remember that I was born (as I was told and I believe) on Friday, at midnight. It was found that the instant that the clock began to strike the hours I began to cry. From nurse to my mother and some of their neighbors, which stood strongly to heart could be several months before our personal knowledge, it was said, in view of the day and time of my birth, first, that I was unlucky; second: I would have enjoyed the privilege of seeing spirits and ghosts, because these gifts inevitably touched, as they believed, in these unfortunate infants of either sex, who had the unfortunate idea of being born into the small hours of a Friday night. " incipit of *Oliver Twist* (1836-39) Charles Dickens (the other famous book of Dickens is of course "*David Copperfield*",
- "Sometimes we do get out of compassion for creatures incapable of feeling either for themselves than for others". Emily Bronte with *Wuthering Heights* (1847)
- "You have cold because you are alone: no contact lights the fire within you. You are sick because of all the best feelings, the noblest, the sweetest stays away. You are stupid because as far as I suffer, do not sign to approach, they move one step to meet him." Charlotte Bronte "*Jane Eyre*"
- "But there is a sense of destiny, fatalism so irresistible and inevitable that the power of a curse, and almost always ends in order to force human beings to wander like ghosts that linger around the place where some important and significant event marked with its color their lives, the more irresistible as black is the color that afflicts." Nathaniel Hawthorne "*The Scarlet Letter*"
- "Call me Ismael. Some years ago - no matter how many exactly - having little or no money in my pocket and nothing in particular that interests me to the ground, I thought to give me to see the navigation and the waters of the world. It is a way I have to chase melancholy and to regulate circulation. Whenever I perceive to pose to her lips grimly, soul every time I go down like a damp, drizzly November, every time I realize that I involuntarily stop before the funeral homes and funeral leave behind all the I meet, and especially whenever the mood becomes so strong in me that I need a strong moral principle to prevent me from down the street and determined to throw his hat on the ground methodically to people, then decide it's time to get in to the sea as soon as possible." Herman Melville "*Moby Dick*" (1851)
- "Good intentions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. Born of pure vanity. The result is absolute nothingness. Sometimes we get one of those sterile and voluptuous emotions that have a certain charm about the weak people. That's it. They are nothing but bad checks. " Oscar Wilde "*The picture of Dorian Gray*"(1891)

In poetry we have of course Emily Dickinson "I had never seen the sun, I could bear the light shade, but has added to my desert an incredible desolation.

As I said before, in Victorian age we have purism with his principles of hard work, prayer and chastity but we can also speak about the victorian sexuality.

We have a rigid division between sexes:

- **men**: active and full of energy: every gentleman in this age has a devoted wife and two prostitutes for his lust.
- **women**: have a passive role in relationships
- In the **family the husband represented the authority** and the role of woman is limited to :
 - **the education of children**
 - **the duties of a wife**
 - **house management**

Indeed, girls' education is repressive against natural instincts and women can't live their sexuality freely.

The other side of the coin, the opposite of purity and forced submission to man, we have the nude in Victorian art. Starting from 1830-35 the nude became the most debated topic in English art. Nudes are presented not only in painting and sculpture but also in popular illustration and photography.

Conclusion: in this period the Middle class represent their values in trade (economy) in colonies conquers, but also in everyday life: Victorians were great creators of moral standards, esthetic criteria, style of cloths, behaviour in public situation, rules ecc. Middle class show off, together with their military power (Imperialism) and economic power (Capitalism), their idea of Beauty, Good, Life, Ethics. The Victorian world is a world ruled by a simplification of life and experience in a purely practical sense: things are right or wrong, good or bad. The middle class is not disturbed by dilemma between altruism and selfishness: they are selfish in the world (in the free market, in the colonies) as well as good fathers, educators, philanthropists at home. Middle class was moralist and puritan at home, hypocritical and licentious with young women of working-class outside.