

THE VICTORIAN AGE

Historical Perspective of the Victorian Period

Introduction: The Victorian Era is an age of British history spanning the 64-year reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). It is one of the longest reigns in the history of England. In the year 1837, Queen Victoria succeeded William the IV on the throne of Great Britain and Ireland. The period is marked by many important social and historical changes that altered the nation in many ways. The population got nearly doubled and the British Empire expanded. The period saw the British Empire grow to become the first global industrial power, producing much of the world's coal, iron, steel and textiles. By this time the role of the monarch was to reign, rather than rule.

Historical Perspective of the Victorian Period: The period is known for economic progress, poverty and exploitation. The gap between the rich and the poor grew wide and with drive for material and commercial success there appeared a kind of a moral decay in the society. The Victorian era saw a wild growth of industries and factories. One very important factor of the age was its stress on morality. A feminine code of conduct was imposed on them which described every aspect of their being from the proper apparels to how to converse, everything had rules. The role of the women was mostly that of being angels of the house and restricted to domestic confines. They were financially dependent on their husbands and fathers and it led to a commercialization of the institution of marriage.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VICTORIANISM

Characteristics of the Victorianism: - The discoveries of science have particular effects upon the literature of the Victorian Age. It is simple to mark the following four general characteristics:

- 1. Realism:** Literature of this age comes closer to daily life which reflects its practical problems and interests. It becomes a powerful instrument for human progress.
- 2. Moral Purpose:** The Victorian literature seems to assert its moral purpose. Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, Ruskin-all were the teachers of England with the faith in their moral message to instruct the world.
- 3. Doubts or Contradictory faiths and philosophies:** It is often considered as an age of doubt and contradictory faiths and philosophies. The influence of science is felt here. Browning the optimist and Hardy the pessimist are regarded as most popular writers of the age. There is realistic literature with Pre-Raphaelite poetry that believes in "art for art's sake".
- 4. Idealism:** Though, the age is characterized as practical and materialistic, most of the writers suggest a purely ideal life. It is an idealistic age where the great ideals like truth, justice, love, brotherhood are emphasized by poets, essayists and novelists of the age.

Growth of Victorian Age: After the romantic revival, the literature of the Victorian age entered in a new period. The literature of this period expresses the fusion of romanticism to realism. The Victorian age is rich in literature. It produced two great poets like Tennyson and Browning; dramatists like Shaw and Galsworthy; novelists like Charles Dickens and Hardy; and essayists like Carlyle and Stevenson. The age is remarkable for the excellence of its literature.

Victorian Prose: Victorian age produced two great essayists like Carlyle and Stevenson. Carlyle's major works include *The French Revolution in 3 vol. (1837)*, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1841)*. His prose style differs from other prose writers. He writes about people and events of the past. He has his own philosophy. He accounts great men as Hero. whereas Stevenson writes famous essays in this period *A Night among the Pines, Walking Tours, An Apology for Idlers, A Plea for Gas lamps, El Dorado Familiar Studies of Men and Books and Crabbed Age and Youth*.

Stevenson's essays are an attempt in the direction of Human welfare. He wishes to remove all that creates obstacle in human progress and happiness. For example in his famous essay *An Apology for Idlers*-he points out the importance of direct education based on self-observation and self-learning. He puts stress on the quality of being happy for personal sake as well as social sake.

Victorian Poetry: It produced three great poets- Tennyson, Browning and Arnold. Tennyson is the most representative poet of the age. He represents Victorian conflict and compromise. He is a great lyric poet. His lyricism is deep rooted and dominates all of his poems. It makes his poetry sweet and smooth. His lyric can be divided into many parts like personal, dramatic, patriotic and musical lyrics or songs. Among Tennyson's personal lyric "In Memorium" is very important. It is a collection of lyrics composed on the death of his bosom friend Arthur Hallam. Tennyson's dramatic lyrics are in the form of dramatic monologues. Tennyson is admired as a pictorial artist. His description of the nature is highly sensuous. Robert Browning is known for his dramatic monologues and philosophy of hope. Browning is the greatest writer of dramatic monologues. All of his monologues deal with different aspects of love. Matthew Arnold is regarded as the greatest elegiac poet of Victorian age. He contributes a number of elegies but the following five are of great merit:

- (i) *Thyrsis*
- (ii) *Rugby Chapel*
- (iii) *The Scholar Gipsy*
- (iv) *A Southern Night*
- (v) *West Minister Abbey*

Victorian Drama: It produced two great dramatists like Shaw and Galsworthy. Shaw is doubtlessly the greatest of all dramatists of this period. He contributed anti romantic plays of ideas like *Candida* and *Apple Cart*. *Saint Joan* won Nobel Prize for him. Galsworthy is also a great dramatist. He is a problem play writer. He has a deep sympathy for the weaker section of society. In his dramas, he presents their problems to attract the attention of all the people

of the society. It appeals more to head than to heart. The basic purpose of his plays is not to entertain but to make people conscious of others people's sufferings caused by imperfection of law and society. His famous plays are: *The Silver Box*, *Strife and Justice*.

Victorian Novel: It produced two great novelists like Charles Dickens and Hardy. The spirit of revolt is much more intense in the fiction than the poetry of this period. The most prominent novelists of the period are Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. Dickens is the great novelist. He makes the minute study of the whole mankind. He presents lively picture of human society. Dickens, "*David Copperfield*" is a representative novel in the sense that it throws light on the prevailing conditions of Victorian society. It is a social document that brings to light miserable condition of boarding-houses, women education, child labor and social injustice. Dickens is a social thinker working in the line of a social reformer. Hardy's best novel is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Thomas Hardy published this novel in 1891 with subtitle-a pure woman. Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a young girl, who is raped by Alec D'Urbervilles. She gets pregnant, but the baby dies. It raises a question how such a woman may be called a pure woman. But Hardy proves it. She later falls in love with Angel Clare, but he deserts her. Alec assures her that Angel would not come back. Her family starves and she becomes a mistress to Alec. But Angel comes back and Tess murders Alec and spends a few moments of love with Angel before she is arrested to be hanged.

Pre-Raphaelite poetry Or Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood: The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood is also known as the Ore-Raphaelites. It was a group of English painters, poets and critics, founded in 1848 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who reacted against the artificiality of the art of the period. They wanted to return to the purity and simplicity of the Italian art of the 13th and 14th century (before Raphael). There were seven members in this "brotherhood". The Pre-Raphaelite defined themselves as a reform-movement. They were influenced by the ideas of the art critic John Ruskin, who considered art as a way to react to the ugliness of modern, urban life. The main characteristics were: fidelity to nature, sensuality, use of non-industrial materials, re-evaluation of medieval religion and legends. The main representatives were: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. William Morris created the Arts and Crafts Movement, which designed and manufactured a great variety of objects for interiors (stained glass, wallpapers, tapestries, rugs etc...). They used handicraft and simple decoration in reaction to industrial machinery. The Pre-Raphaelite movement influenced the Aesthetic Movement. It originated in France, following the ideas of The Ophelia Gautier; it was a reaction against the materialism and the strict moral code of the bourgeoisie. Aesthetes were not interested in political and social matters but isolated themselves in a world of beauty and art. Their motto was "art for art's sake", which means that art doesn't have any moral aim but it's an end in itself. The followers of Aesthetics led an unconventional life, full of sensations and excess (they wanted to be different from the working masses and they also rejected the Victorian moral values). The main representative in Britain was Oscar Wilde.

Naughty Nineties: The last decade of the nineteenth century is characterized by "naughtiness". "Victorianism" is a complex collection of several values, and the revolt of the nineties against Victorianism is also quite complex. This revolt has three points. First, it

repeats the old revolutionary formula of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in a new setting. Secondly, it worships power than beauty. And thirdly, it challenges the older values of art and life. In the literature of the nineties two distinct tendencies are exposed: the pessimistic tendency and Continental tendency. In the poetry of the nineties, we consider Robert Bridges and Hardy as representatives poets. The most prominent novelist of the period is Thomas Hardy. The last years of 19th century witnessed a dramatic revival. The most vigorous drama of the age was concerned with social and domestic problems and was considerably influenced by Ibsen. Oscar Wilde's plays have the tone of social criticism. Shaw is doubtlessly, the greatest of all the dramatists of this period.

Victorian Compromise in Tennyson

Victorian compromise is a combination of the positive and negative aspects of the contemporary issues of Victorian era. The Victorian era is well-known for its enrichment of knowledge in science, expansion of empire and growth of economy, conflict between the science and religion, conflict between aristocracy and democracy etc.

All Victorian writers, in some way or other, give expression to this conflicts and consequents. Some of the Victorians clung to the old faith and condemned the 'new-fangled opinions', others went over to the side of science, and still some others tried to draw some sort of compromise between the two conflicting forces. Tennyson can be classed with the third group, the one which stood for what is often called "The Victorian Compromise".

The problems of the day are wonderfully depicted in the writing of the poets of this era. Poets like Arnold of nineteenth century started to hold a very pessimistic view about the Victorian crisis; he seems to express only a negative attitude toward his contemporary age. But we see a quite dissimilar attitude in Alfred Lord Tennyson. Unlike Arnold, he expressed a compromising attitude to his age and its intricate problems.

We find in his Ulysses, The Lotos Eaters, The Charge of the Light Brigade, holds such a sort of view which is supposed to find a middle ground. He is neither too melancholic like Arnold nor too optimistic like Robert Browning. He tries to portray in his poems a real and clear picture of the problems of contemporary age in an implicit way. In fact the poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" which is based upon the Crimean war describes the marvelous courage of the British soldiers and pays homage to them.

In his political opinions Tennyson shared the views of an average Victorian who believed in the golden mean, a compromise between democracy and aristocracy. He believed in slow progress and shunned revolution.

In the field of sex, The Victorians permitted indulgence in sex but restricted its sphere to happy married life. Tennyson reflects this spirit of the age in his love poems by pointing out that true love can be found only in married life. In Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallot" we are introduced to 'two young lovers' walking together in the moonlight, but we are at once reassured by the statement that these two lovers were 'lately wed'

In the Victorian age, there was a huge conflict occurred especially because of Darwin's theory between science and religion. Darwin suggested that humans are actually originated from the apes. This struck the Orthodox, and moved the faith of people in religion what was contemporarily coming forward by the writings of then thinker. But Tennyson himself was too greatly affected by the development of science to remain an orthodox Christian yet still was not so much affected as to turn an unqualified agnostic.

Because of the quality to look for a middle ground, Tennyson is considered as a compromising craftsman who does neither yield to the crisis of his age nor possess a carefree attitude towards the problems, rather keeps compromising and finding a solution.