

Module-1 : The Victorian Scene

Unit-1 □ Victorian England: Society, History and Politics

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1.1.0. Introduction

The seven decades of the nineteenth century in England, from 1832 to 1901, is the Victorian Period and it is the period when the monarch Queen Victoria ruled over England (from 1837). The Victorian Period was marked by growing wealth and power, radical development in science and technology led to sweeping socio-economic changes. Victorian literature too reflects the contemporary society—the celebration of the progress and the social ills arising from rapid industrialisation. In

this unit thus, you will be acquainted with the various aspects of the Victorian age – its society, history and politics – before you are introduced to individual writers and their works in later modules; this will help you contextualise their works.

1.1.1. Victorian England: Historical Significance

Any period, needless to say, has its own nuances, events, revolutions, discoveries, transformations, creations and typical thinkers, which gives each period its uniqueness and difference from the other epochs. Even a cursory glance on the Timeline of the

Victorian period will make a reader realize that the era was rife with important socio-political-religious-economic events that gives it a historical significance. We will be discussing about the historical significance of the Victorian Period.



Queen Victoria

It can be surmised from the Introduction that the most tumultuous event that brought a transformation in the Victorian Era is the **Industrial Revolution**. According to Suroopa Mukherjee: ‘If there was a single social phenomenon that fascinated the Victorians, it was the Industrial Revolution. As a social movement it was essentially economic. It drew away men away from the land by opening out new and exciting career options.’ The Victorian Period

saw the gradual shift from feudal, agrarian economy to a democratic, commercial and urban economy based on manufacture, international trade and business. The era witnessed the peak of Industrial Revolution. As a consequence of the industrialisation, Great Britain became the hotbed of commerce, with plethora of workshops and factories. After 1870, it became the world’s banker. The industrialisation lead to the invention of fast railways and ships, established a more improved postal system, made the telephonic communication easily possible; thereby making it possible for the country to reach globally. The workshops and factories employed many labourers, thus leading to social climbing, the peasants becoming industrial workers. Apparently it brought happiness and wealth, but simultaneously it lead to constant fear of inability to keep pace with the progressive change and competitiveness to cling to the

hard-earned status. Dichotomy between the will to keep pace with the rapid changes and the desire to cling to moral standards, gave way to the Victorian dilemma. While ostensibly the era shone with national success, underneath it cried with labour exploitation. The replacement of manpower— that was a prerequisite in cultivation— by machines, resulted in dismissal of many workers and hence unemployment loomed large in the Victorian England. Due to the rapid industrialization and possibility of lucrative jobs, there was an odyssey of people into the island which led to overpopulation very soon. When the Queen came to the throne the population of London was about two million inhabitants, and during her death in 1901, the population was about six million. The industrialization and the intensification of the need of working classes gave rise to the significant political movement Chartism (It has been discussed in details in the sub-unit Political Movements).

As far as the international relationships are concerned, the Victorian Era witnessed many upheavals. **Imperialism** was at its most glorious state during this time. The Queen who was the only monarch reigning for the longest time witnessed the expansion of the empire. There were the First Opium War (1839-1842) and Second Opium War (1858-1860) against China. With the annexation of the island of Hong Kong to Great Britain perpetually, via the Treaty of Nanking, the First Opium War ended. The Second Opium War furthered the enlargement and commercial power of England. Apart from legalising opium trade and coolie trade, this war also opened entire China to the British merchants. The Crimean War (1853-56) was a mean by the United Kingdom and France to stop Russia to flourish at the cost of the Ottoman Empire. The Sepoy Mutiny or the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857, reassured the power of the Empire with their victory over colonised India Although the Mutiny ended the rule of East India Company in India, the British administration was strengthened. The First Boer War (1880-1881) fought between Great Britain and the South African Republic, joined both the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State to the British Empire. The Second Boer War (1899-1902) saw the use of the modern technologies and war artillery and in a way anticipated the World War I.

The passage of the **Reform Bills**, in 1832, 1867 and 1884 extended the democratic rights. The right to vote and decide the government, that was restricted only to the privileged classes, began to extend to the working classes. The

dissatisfaction of the working classes for the exploitation and the discontent of the middle classes for the discrimination they faced, culminated in the demand for Parliamentary Reform. From the few handful of boroughs, which had only seven members from which two were sent to the Parliament; the franchise reached to the industrial north, which was the habitation of innumerable workers with Reform Act 1832. Any man owning £10 could now vote, increasing more than two million voters. The detrimental policy of monopolising the Parliament only by the wealthy was mitigated to some extent. The Reform Act of 1867, albeit enforcing no novel law furthered the franchise and many more urban men could vote. The Third Reform of 1884 did away with the disenfranchisement of the unprivileged rural Victorian males. Thus these three Reform Acts are milestones in history, ushering England to a democracy.

The Victorian Era witnessed the peak of scientific progress, and one of the revolutionary, historic discoveries was the **theory of Evolution**, through the process of ‘natural selection’ of species, proving that humans owe their origin to evolution from lower mammals and not creation by a God, as the Bible professed. This far-reaching, havoc-creating thesis was propagated by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* and augmented the science-religion conflict; resulting in doubts, disillusionments, skepticism, vacuum in the Victorian minds. Herbert Spencer’s principle of ‘survival of the fittest’ raised questions about the criterion of being ‘fit’, lead to competition and often the tendency to break free from the restraints of religion in order to survive, was perceptible. The **education system** too expanded its horizon, science and its branches were incorporated in the curriculum in the newer institutes although Oxford and Cambridge Universities continues teaching only the classics. Technical and night schools were established for the mechanics and artisans. Literature saw prospects of development, there was the emergence of many new periodicals like *The Edinburg Review*, *The Blackwood’s Magazine* and the *Cornhill Magazine* where many litterateurs first published their works in serial form before publishing in the form of novels and these included George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy.

Another cultural landmark in the Victorian England is **the Great Exhibition of 1851** which took place in the Crystal Palace of Hyde Park. It was a way to promote

export-import globally and was a cultural meet of many people of distinctions (You may see an image of this provided alongside for a better understanding).



The Great Exhibition of 1851, in the Crystal Palace at Hyde Park, London

Source from : google images (pinterst.com)

Thus, nationally and internationally, culturally and technologically, politically and economically; Victorian Period in England bears historical importance.

Activity for Learners

It would be interesting to make a list or chart of the significant historical events which happened during the long rule of Queen Victoria. You may take the guidance of your counselors or the time line provided at the back of the SLM to do this.

1.1.2. Victorian Society

The Victorian Society, with its all-round and revolutionary progress in various fields, looking ostensibly ‘so various, so beautiful, so new’, and lying ‘like a land of dreams’, with rapid industrialisation, was underneath suffering from social ills, unemployment, political agitations, dissatisfaction with implemented laws, disparity between classes and conflicts. Science undoubtedly underwent extensive progress in all its fields, revolutionary discoveries were established, giving way to religious doubts in the Victorian minds. Yet expansion of the franchise, reform acts concerning the factories, sanitation acts and certain legislative measures for women’s progress, made the era glorious. The scientific temperament, the religious outlooks, the imposition and withdrawal of legislative measures and the status of women when they were considered as the weaker sex, cumulatively construct the society. We will deal with each four factors separately.

1.1.2a) Science

‘In the course of the nineteenth century, the scientific disciplines which until recently have remained the main areas of inquiry were established: palaeontology, geology, zoology, biology, physiology, as well as physics and chemistry.’

(Peter Mudford: ‘Science, Literature and Society in the Late Victorian Period’)

In all the domains of science, the age saw unprecedented progress. Sir Charles Lyell’s pioneering discoveries in the field of **geology** aroused new findings regarding the strata of earth. In *Principles of Geology*, his studies found words and he opined that the earth’s age is actually limitless. Expanding uniformitarianism to develop gradualism, he asserted that the earth is actually made up of physical and chemical changes in the earth’s layers over a long geological time, thus confirming James Hutton’s conviction ‘no vestige in beginning, no prospect in end’. This affirmation of Lyell refuted the Biblical connotation of the Creation of cosmos, and was a blow to the minds of the Victorians still firmly clinging to religion and its precepts. Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking research in **anthropology** and the resultant invention of man’s origin forwarded in his epoch-making book *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was a thundering blow to the beliefs in the Divine Creation of mankind. His assertion that ‘our ancestor was a hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habitation’ interrogated the long-cherished faith of the Biblical Origin of mankind. T.H. Huxley took the responsibility of propagating and

publicizing the Darwinian tenets to the audience, leading to further disillusionment as the scientific creation of man was further confirmed. The Victorian Period also observed the revolutionary expeditions in the realm of **physical science**, and Humphry Davy's name is worth mentioning here, who began to split the substances in their chemical components; the elements like sodium, potassium, magnesium, strontium, calcium, boron, barium and silicon were named. Robert Chambers' pioneering work in the field of **natural history** and **zoology**, a quasi-science, named *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) was an extremely popular book in the Victorian society, widely appreciated initially but gradually sowed the seeds of skepticism in the Victorian minds. The Bible perceived that man was the crowning glory of the Creation, Chambers pointed out that in the zoological terms, Man was but another genus in the animal kingdom. The nomenclatures like transmutation, nebular hypothesis, spontaneous generation, intelligent design have been formulated by Chambers. Michael Faraday's contribution to the other two major areas of science, namely **chemistry** and **electromagnetism**, too enhanced the scientific temperament of the Victorian period. He popularised the terminologies 'anode', 'cathode' and 'electrode', invented carbon and chlorine and another apparatus which is known as Bunsen burner today. His scripting in his notebook, 'I have at last succeeded in illuminating a magnetic curve or line of force and in magnetizing a ray of light' perhaps implies the light he ignited in the path of science, leading to the worldly success of the Victorians. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, appeared another Scottish mathematician and physicist Kelvin William Thomson whose postulations in **physics**, especially in the Second Law of Thermodynamics undoubtedly added a gem to the English crown of scientific achievement. Kelvin contended that the main subject in the interpretation of the **Second Law of Thermodynamics** was the explanation of irreversible processes. He noted that if entropy always increased, the universe would eventually reach a state of uniform temperature and maximum entropy from which it would not be possible to extract any work. He called this the Heat Death of the Universe. He concluded: 'Within a finite period of time past, the earth must have been, and within a finite period of time to come the earth must again be, unfit for the habitation of man as at present constituted, unless operations have been, or are to be performed, which are impossible under the laws to which the known operations going on at present in the material world are subject.' This unprecedented development in science and its breakthrough while on the one hand added prestige to the name of the United Kingdom, on the other hand, it raised questions in the mind of the Victorians: what to believe in and

what to dismiss; and even in the universities: whether to continue teaching the classics or incorporate science in their curriculum.

Activity for the Learners

Learners, kindly note that science, especially evolutionary biology, was a blossoming field of research in the Victorian period. Can you name the most important theorists/scientists from your reading of the above section? Also, try to write in your own words what was so new and revolutionary about Charles Darwin's theory of the evolution of mankind. This is important because the theory of evolution shook the traditional assumptions of religion and its impact is evident in the literature of the age.

1.1.2b) Religion

'The Sea of Faith
Was once too at its full, and round the earth's shore,
But now I only hear,
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

'Dover Beach': Matthew Arnold

The early days of the Victorian Age held religion as the firm ground of peace, the Bible was considered as the Gospel truth. In the epoch of rapid change, the easy replacement of the agrarian economy by industrial bounty, the competition and unemployment, the rigorous vocation in the factories, the disparity between classes, the fear of losing the hard-earned social status; the only anchorage was Religion. The Bible and unquestionable belief in Christian religious dogmas equipped and strengthened the Victorians to struggle against the socio-economic odds that continually threatened their inner peace. The morality of the Victorians was apparently governed by the religious standards. Evangelical Christianity was the dominant religious belief. G.M. Young suggests that Evangelical theory 'rests on profound apprehension of the contrary states: of Nature and of Grace, one meriting eternal wrath, the other intended for eternal happiness.' Evangelicalism stressed on the fact that humans are actually depraved after the Fall and in order to be ushered to salvation, they need to establish a personal relationship with God which, they believed, can be done neither through sacramental services nor through virtuous deeds but only through unshakeable faith in God. **The Oxford Movement** which took place in the beginning of the Nineteenth

century, sought the renewal of the Roman Catholic thoughts and practices in the Church of England, as opposed to the marked tendencies of Protestantism. Leaders of the movement were John Henry Newman, a clergyman and subsequently a convert to Roman Catholicism and a cardinal, Richard Hurrell Froude, a clergyman, John Keble, a clergyman and poet and Edward Pusey. Initially science and religion were in harmony William Paley's *Natural Theology*, which was widely read, affirmed that there was a scheming God who designed everything. However, towards 1830s, some Victorians began to express their need of the evidence of a Ruling God's existence. The positivist tradition of Hobbes, Locke and Newton opened up intellectual debates and threw down a direct gauntlet at Christianity. Positivism asserts that knowledge is asserted only through sensory experiences and validated through logic. Thus the theory was an impetus to spark a disbelief in the existence of God. August Comte propagated the theory that society had a history of its own, which moved through three stages—theological, metaphysical and scientific. Christian religion was thus replaced by the broader, religion of humanity. It is the revolutionary work of Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, with the radical discovery that mankind owes its origin to apes and not God as the Bible asserts, that shook the strong base of the Biblical Faith. Thus dichotomy arose between Science and Religion, leading to dichotomy between Faith and doubt, peace and unrest, stability and paradox. Agnosticism was perceptible towards the end of the Nineteenth century, the religious theory which neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of God.

1.1.2c) Laws

The Victorian Period in England witnessed many laws formulated, amended and abolished. The laws were intended to galvanize a social progress—sometimes enhancing the betterment, sometimes bringing more confusion and chaos. The laws pertained to different spheres, and their imposition, revision or repeal collectively and cumulatively led to the socio-politico-economic vicissitudes. Some major domains affected by the legislation are as follows:

➤ Economic Laws:

Innumerable laws had been enforced that ensued to economic changes, resulting in elation or bewilderment. The **Anti-Corn Law League**, enforced in 1846, vouchsafed the Repeal of the Corn Laws which were implemented in 1815, leading to levy in the price of wheat. Abolishing the Corn Laws, the Anti-Corn Law League established Free Trade in the country. The Robert

Peel government, observing that the note issuing policy of the banks as a major cause of price inflation, implemented the **Bank Charter Act** in 1844 and the Act restricted the new banknotes-issuing right and printing notes only to the Central Bank of England. **Repeal of Corn Laws** was enforced in 1846.

➤ **Religious Laws**

Laws were enforced in the arena of religion as well, leading to conflict sometimes and sometimes, harmony. The **Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts** (the act introduced in 1673) in 1828 allowed the Dissenters to sit in the Parliament and participate in the local government discussions. The **Catholic Emancipation Act** enforced in 1829 allowed the Catholics to sit as MPs for the first time since Elizabethan Settlement, and changed the Anglican Constitution to a Protestant one. **The Ecclesiastical Titles Act** enacted in 1851, was an anti-Roman Catholic measure. In response to the agitation-causing restoration of Catholic Hierarchy by Pope Pius IX, this Act made it a criminal offence for anyone outside the Church of England to use any papal title. **Disenchantment and Disendowment of the Irish Church**, enforced in 1871, emphasized that all ecclesiastical properties of the Church of England would be vested in the commissioners, no Irish Bishop would sit in the House of Lords and the Church of Ireland was to have a General Synod elected triennially by the diocese.

➤ **Political Laws**

The **Reform Bill**, the passage of which officially heralded the beginning of the Victorian Period, was a significant political measure to extend democracy. Proposed by the Whigs and led by the then Prime Minister Charles Grey, the Act affected the electorate in England and Wales. It granted seats in the House of Commons to the large cities that emerged after the Industrial Revolution and withdrew seats from the boroughs. It also included in the franchise, those who did not own landed property. The **Abolition of Property Qualification for the MPs** was another legislative measure enforced in 1858 and it being one of the demands by the Chartists, recommended that there was no need of possessing property in order to be a candidate for election. The **Second Reform Act** of 1867 extended the right of suffrage to the urbane male working class in England and Wales. The **Ballot Act** carried out in 1872, pertaining to the demands of the Chartists introduced secret ballot

in all the elections. The **Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act**, executed in 1875, legalized peaceful picketing by the trade unions. The Third Reform Act of 1884 ensured franchise to most adult males and expanded the voting right from towns and boroughs to the countryside. **Local Government Act** enforced in 1894 divided the country into Urban District Councils and Rural District Councils.

➤ **Civil, Domestic and Development Laws**

The nineteenth century observed modification and operation of several civil laws repeatedly, because dissatisfaction and discontent with the prevalent ones and to serve for the betterment, modification was necessary. There had been the implementation of the **Factory Acts** several times, amending the working hours of the factory labourers, targeting the minimization of exploitation. In 1833 it was passed by the Whig government to regulate and fix certain duration each day of work for men and women. In 1844, the Act was again passed saying that the adult workers should not work more than twelve hours a day, those under thirteen years should not work more than eight hours and no employee should be below eight years of age. In 1848, the Factory Act reduced the working hours to ten hours a day. In 1874, the Factory Act was enforced again to state that there should be no child labourer below ten years and no full-time worker below fourteen years. The **Coal Mines Inspection Act** of 1850 (coal mine owners could sit in the House of Lords), **Coal Mines Regulating Act** of 1872 (guaranteeing safety in coal mines with sufficient fan ventilators and stronger timber support), **Employers and Workmen Act** of 1875 (workmen will have legal footing in case of breach of contract), **Factory and Workshops Act** of 1878 (workshops with more than forty people would be regularly inspected) and **Workmen's Compensation Act** of 1897 (employers should compensate the injury of men in potentially hazardous jobs) were also sanctioned and akin to the Factory Acts. Then there were other civil laws like **Matrimonial Causes Act** passed in 1857 which established divorce causes, although women had limited provisions for divorce except adultery and **Married Women's Property Act** of 1870 that said that women could keep £20 of their earnings and the latter was reestablished in 1882 said that women would continue as separate owners of property post-marriage.. One debatable Act was **Poor Law Amendment Act** of 1834, intended to alleviate the condition of poors, but basically worsened it. The workhouses where the poor people were sent for were miserable and grotesque, called poor law bastilles. The **Irish Land**

Act of 1870 passed under Gladstone's government enforced that it would be illegal to forcefully evict the tenants. It was again passed in 1881, guaranteeing fair rents, fixity of tenure and free state of tenancy for Irish tenants.

➤ **Education and Health Laws**

Laws were passed in the spheres of education and health as well. **Forster's Education Act** of 1870 set up new boarding schools, **University Test Act** of 1871 said that the entry to Oxford and Cambridge would be open to all on the basis of merit and not limited to the members of the Anglican Church. **Mundella's Elementary Education Act** (1881) stated free and compulsory education of children from five to ten years. **Food and Drugs Act** of 1860 prevented adulteration of food and stated that inclusion of additives would be a criminal offence.

These laws, as it is apparent, collectively intended a holistic development of the country and do away with all discontents and disappointments that were detrimental to progress.

Activity for the learners

The learners can make a chronological list of the different laws executed in the Victorian Age. They can explore and write down the positive and/or adverse effects of these laws on the overall structure of society.

1.1.2d) Position of Women

The English historian George Malcolm Young produces a reflective analysis of the position of Victorian women in his work *Victorian England: The Portrait of an Age*. He asserts: 'The notable Victorian woman is a blend of the great lady and intellectual woman, not yet professional, and we can graduate the proportions until, at the opposite ends of the scale, we encounter the limiting instances of the queen herself and Harriet Martineau.' The complete erasure of womankind from the Reform Bills drives home the marginalization of women. The denial of their rights to vote, a crucial socio-political and more importantly democratic right, is evidence to the marginalization women faced. The only two entities that were meant and expected to define her were 'wifedom' and 'motherhood'. She was expected to inculcate all 'feminine' values in her that would enhance her femaleness and tend her husband and children with unquestionable dutifulness and utmost compassion. The

paradigm in which a Victorian woman was expected to fit herself has been beautifully delineated by **John Ruskin** in *Of Queen's Gardens* where he says: "She (a woman) must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side..." Entirely self-sacrificing, a woman stood for the domesticity and hearth, and that gave her sanctity and purity. Rather than an intellectual partner, she was considered as a body to her husband—to provide him with services; with children, sex and domestic chores. A Victorian woman was defined in two binaries: the 'angel' and the 'fallen woman'. A woman who had given in to seduction, lapsed from the duties that society imposed on her, deviated from the conventional image of femininity was tagged as a fallen woman.

Yet the age saw literature and journalism, two previously male dominated areas, practised by women. The age saw the emergence of women poets like Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and novelists like the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. Women, during the latter years, became conscious of their rights, and the struggle for Women's Suffrage germinated, which will be discussed under the section Political Movements.

Dear Learner...Stop and Think!

The Victorian age was a period of stark contrasts—in socio-economic conditions as well as in the position and construction of woman/womanhood. On the one hand it was an age dominated by a woman-Queen Victoria- on the other an era when women had no social power, economic independence or freedom to work. In fact women had only two roles defined by a very patriarchal society—those of motherhood and marriage. It is interesting for you to note the coinages described to define women—'angel' or 'fallen woman' and reiterated in the literature of the time. It is thus interesting to note the age saw literature and journalism, two previously male dominated areas, practised by women. Women, during the latter years, became conscious of their rights, and the struggle for Women's Suffrage germinated, which will be discussed under the section Political Movements.

1.1.3. Political Movements

We have already seen that there were several causes which demanded perpetual solution and that engendered political movements. The Victorian Period was never an unperturbed one and was pervaded by political movements now and then. Apart from agitations by Trade Unions and protests by the exploited labours, there were political movements of national significance.

- **Anti-Corn Law League**

The **Anti-Corn Law League**, as a campaign protest against the Corn Laws that issued levy on a staple agricultural product like wheat, gained momentum from 1828 to 1832. A Corn Law was first introduced in Britain in 1804, when the landowners, who dominated Parliament, sought to protect their profits by imposing a levy on imported corn. Farmers were afraid that when the Napoleonic war would be over in 1815, the import of foreign corn would make the prices of indigenous crops fall. This fear was proved true and the price of corn fell massively three years later. British landowners applied pressure on members of the House of Commons to take action to protect the profits of the farmers. Parliament responded by passing a law permitting the import of foreign wheat free of duty only when the domestic price reached 80 shillings per quarter (8 bushels). Cobden found this law to be economically harmful and morally wrong. The members of this movement were mainly middle-class manufacturers, merchants, bankers and traders. They wanted the Corn Laws to be repealed so that they could sell more goods both in Britain and overseas. The source of the protectionist system was thought to be the Corn Laws: once they were repealed, the Anti Corn Law League thought that free trade would follow. The campaign headed a nation-wide campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws which ended in success in 1846 when the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel repealed the legislation.

- **Chartism**

Another noteworthy political movement was **Chartism**. It was established and controlled by the working class in 1836 to achieve parliamentary democracy as socio-economic reform. They expressed their resentment against provisions like Factory Act, Reform Act of 1832 and Poor Law that promised so much and failed. The economic cause of Chartism was the widening gulf between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The low wages in lieu of long hours of life risking work, periodic unemployment and prices of

necessities too high to afford agitated the working class. The working class was not included under the umbrella of franchise extended by 1832 Reform Act. 1833 Factory Act was disappointing as it enforced exploitation of labourers by employers while 1834 Poor Law in no way alleviated the condition of poor. The infuriated workers now sought for political help. Chartism was a product of Industrialization and it proclaimed the fundamental belief that economic exploitation and political subservience could be corrected by Parliamentary means. The strength of Chartism intensified between 1838-39, 1842-43 and 1847-48. It appeared under the Whig government and ended under Robert Peel's economic reforms. The Chartist circular provided for the Representation of the people of the great Britain and Ireland in the Common Houses of the Parliament; embracing the principles of the Universal Suffrage, no Property Qualification for the MPs, Annual Parliament, Equal Representation of Electoral Districts, Regular Payment of Members and Vote by Secret Ballot.

- **Women's Suffrage**

Sadly enough, the three Reform Acts that extended franchise to many, excluded the women citizens. The Women's struggle for the right to vote and the need of the women to execute their political rights and establish themselves in the Parliament was not conspicuous until late Victorian Age. The Women's Suffrage Movement in England became a national movement from 1872 with the formation of National Society for Women's Suffrage formed by Lydia Becker. National Unit of Women's Suffrage Society founded in 1897 under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett was more influential and acted vehemently to propagate the women to struggle for their democratic rights. By the time Victorian Period was over, the suffrage was not achieved.

Note for the Learners

It is thus observed that the women were deprived perceptibly of one of the foremost socio-political rights—the right to decide who would form the government. However the Women's Suffrage Right which was implemented many years after the Victorian Period came to an end, had its embryonic stage in the Victorian era. It is to be noted that there had been many women, agencies, platforms, movements and journals which strove for accomplishing this right. Learners, please make a note of the various feminist agencies and

the notable women suffragettes whose activities culminated in the flourishing of Women Suffrage. It must also be mentioned that the 1880s and 1890s saw the emergence of the socio-literary phenomenon called the ‘New Woman’, who challenged existing ideas of dress, work and spheres of movement of women. You can see a few pictures of the New Woman, and how she was caricatured in the contemporary press for her new role and dress in the Periodical press, provided along with this Unit.

1.1.4 Literature and its Concerns: Early and Late Victorian

The Victorian England upheld a rich gallery of literary masterpieces. The literature of the nineteenth century typifies the unrest and paradox, social ills on the one hand, and on the other, the stability and tranquility sought in the creed. Although prose fiction reached the apex of development with its variedness, versatility and abundance, the poetry and non-fictional prose contributed to the wide kaleidoscope as well. The litterateurs of the era can be categorized into two divisions—the Early Victorian ones and the Later Victorian ones.

1.1.4a) Early Victorian Literary Masters

❖ Fiction

The major novelists of the early Victorian period were Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell. The novels of **Charles Dickens** are characterized by his keen observation of social ills, a comic humour, and humorous use of class and dialect difference. His *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836-37) is on a series of adventures by the protagonist Samuel Pickwick and other Pickwickians. The characters are humorously drawn on. *A Christmas Carol* (1843) deftly shows clash between wealth and poverty and the celebration of togetherness and love. The latter novels of Dickens are however imbued with a vein of seriousness. *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) remarkably shows Dickens’ empathy with the poor orphans whose condition was worsened by the Poor Laws. The suffering of the children in the Yorkshire schools is the subsistence of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), the helpless Victorian femininity has been projected in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) through Little Nell. *David Copperfield* (1849-50) is semi-autobiographical—the hero marries beloved Dora and after her death, Agnes. *Bleak House* (1852-53) throws light on the legal system of

contemporary England through the microcosmic Jarndyce and Jarndyce case going on in the Court of Chancery, the plot involves the innovative double narrative technique. A turn from a more individual hero to portrayal of society is in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) showing the situation of pre and post French Revolution London and Paris. *Hard Times* (1854) is a poignant account of the drastic effect of Utilitarianism and the deadening consequences of tutelage on Utilitarian principles. The title of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) is rather an irony, because it ends with despondency and disillusionment on the part of the hero. The final and unfinished novel of Dickens is *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. **William Makepeace Thackeray's** (1811-63) *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), a satire on the mid nineteenth society, revolves around two women—Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852) is a historical fiction, the protagonist being a colonel serving Queen Anne. *The Newcomes* (1853-54), story of the colonel Newcome and his son Clive has travel, history, love, marriage for money, capitalism, Methodist religion embedded within it. *The Virginians* (1857-59), another historical fiction, is a sequel to *Henry Esmond*, because it is the story of Esmond's twin grandsons George and Henry Warrington. Some of the major novels of another Victorian novelist named **Anthony Trollope** (1815-1882) are *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), *The Three Clerks* (1858), *Castle Richmond* (1860), *Orley Farm* (1862), *Rachel Ray* (1863), *Miss Mackenzie* (1865), *The Belton Estate* (1866), *The Claverings* (1867), *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* (1871) and *Lady Anna* (1874). Some of the women novelists who established their merit with their creative feats were **George Eliot** aka Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880), Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell (). George Eliot wrote seven novels: *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861) *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Love as a transmuting force, seduction, Methodist ways, balance between morals and aesthetics, social realism have been etched out in *Adam Bede*. Issues like dichotomy between love and loyalty and social constrictions have been depicted in *The Mill on the Floss*. The issues of religion, industrialization and Victorian community have been dealt in *Silas Marner*. With Florence as the locale, *Romola* charts the fifteenth century chronicle of the city from different perspectives. With a huge gallery of characters, *Middlemarch* manifests many aspects of Victorianism including women's position, double standards, political reform, industrialization and morals. **Charlotte Brontë**, with her four novels *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *The Professor* and *Shirley* met astounding literary success.

Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre* is the icon of insanity and herself being confined within the attic brings out the woman's stance in marital relationship. Jane's "Reader, I married him" is one of the oft-mentioned lines from literature. Written in first person narrative, *The Professor* traces the career of the protagonist William Crimsworth. *Shirley* is a social novel showing the uprisings in the Yorkshire textile industry while *Villette* draws the adventure and love of Lucy Snowe. **Emily Bronte's** *Wuthering Heights* shows the issues of class and gender, and the class barriers that counter the love between a boy and a girl from different classes. Catherine-Heathcliff love story remains an example of one of the passionate romances. Written in the narrative-within-a-narrative style (Lockwood's and Nelly Dean's), it is a Gothic romance. Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) contributed to the genre of fiction with novels and short stories. Her *Mary Barton* is on the difficulties of the lower-class life in Manchester. The status of a woman and the constant judgement of her character with the two yardsticks 'angel' and 'fallen woman' have been portrayed in *Ruth*, *Cranford* and *North and South*, on the other hand, are social novels, depicting the industrial England and its vagaries.

❖ Non Fiction

The Victorian essayists, with their profound thinking and brilliant intellect, have expressed many concerns related to their contemporary age. In the medium of prose, fiction was undoubtedly matchless in its projection of the Victorian Spirit; but non-fictional ones nevertheless equaled their fiction counterparts in keen observations and propounding theories. Some of the Victorian non-fiction writers are John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Charles Darwin and Matthew Arnold.

- **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) founded the Utilitarian society to study the Benthamite idea that all policies should be judged by the standard of what promoted 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. In the book *Utilitarianism* (1863), Mill advocates a single ethical principle to be the source of all ethical principles: 'The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest-Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. In the book *On Liberty* (1848), Mill affirms the need of the Individual to be free from the dominance of the society in order to establish Utilitarianism, because Individualism is the key of Well-being. In *Principles of Political Economy* (1863), Mill discusses the

requisites of labour and capital for production. *The Subjection of Women* (1869) is a feminist work, promulgating the equality between the sexes, asserting logically that since men and women are anatomically or intellectually equal, society and state should also promote their equality.

- **Thomas Carlyle** (1795-1891) is best known for his work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) where in the form of six lectures, he says that the greatness of a man makes him a hero, manifesting six perspectives of a hero: as Divinity, as Prophet, as Poet, as Priest, as Man of Letters and as King. His *Chartism* (1840) presents the picture of England of his times and the vagaries caused by different social and political turmoil. His 'Condition of England Question' discusses the extent of success of Chartism to uplift the ailing condition of the working classes. As a historian, he wonderfully chronicles the Reign of Terror in *The French Revolution: A History* (1837). In *Past and Present* (1843), he invokes to the historical events of England and mentions the contemporary issues, thus depicting the differences. In *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* he collects and elucidates the writings of Cromwell.
- **John Ruskin's** (1819-1900) first major work is *Modern Painters* (five volumes, 1843-1860) was written as a defence of the work of J.M.W Turner and was a masterpiece on art, stating that in the art of landscape the contemporary painters were superior to the old masters. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) discusses the seven ideas or lamps of good architecture, and is a key text to Gothic Revival. *The Stones of Venice* (three volumes, 1851-53) is on the architecture of Venice's Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance times. *Unto this Last* (1860), first published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, is on economy. *Sesame and Lilies* shows the eternal difference in nature between men and women whereas *Of Queen's Garden* is Ruskin's discourse on repressive Victorian feminine values.
- **Matthew Arnold** (1822-1888) in his *The Study of Poetry* opined that in the face of conflict between science and religion, in poetry only the Victorians will find 'a surer and surer stay'. In *Culture and Anarchy*, he dwelt on the schism between Hellenism and Hebraism, dismissed the aristocrats as Barbarians and ridiculed the middle class as Philistines.
- **Charles Darwin's** *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proposed the evolutionary theory of mankind, that we evolved from apes; thus refuting the Biblical Divine Creation.

- Two minor non-fiction writers were Macaulay and Newman. **Thomas Babington Macaulay** (1800-1859) has his writings mainly on his visualization of India. His *Minutes on Education* is a cornerstone on the education in colonial India, and his ‘downward filtration theory’ where he said that formal education is for chosen few who will percolate it through the masses, was applied vehemently.
- **John Henry Newman** (1801- 90) contributed to the genre with texts like *The Ariens of the Fourth Century* (1832), *Tracts for the Times* (1833-41), *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) and *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865).

1.1.4b) Late Victorian Literary Masters

- **Thomas Hardy** (1840-1928), the ameliorist, masterfully brings out the sublime human tragedy in his novels. The universal note ‘happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain’ lies as an undercurrent in almost all his novels’; mankind is in a constant battle against a inscrutable, malevolent, malign Destiny. The indifferent, relentless, rueful force as he prefers to call ‘Immanent Will’ permeates the plots of his novels in the form of chances and coincidences. Nature is not passive, but an active participator in the lives of his characters; in his Wessex novels Nature is manifested sometimes as a cruel Force—red in tooth and claw—against whom his characters continuously combat as in *Tess of d’Urbervilles*, sometimes a serene comforter like the compassionate dog of Gabriel Oak in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (The novel you will be reading in this course, discussed in Module-3, Unit-2), sometimes bleak and solitary as the Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*. His novels show his compassionate handling of the female characters. Opposed to the idealisation of marriage as the goal of woman’s sexuality, there is our New Woman Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. In a society where virtue and virginity were synonymous, there Tess’s apparent ‘fallenness’ when seduced by Alec, “‘Justice’ was done” at the end with Tess’s execution is Hardy-esque irony. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *Desperate Remedies*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *The Woodlanders* and *Two on a Tower* brilliantly project Hardy’s literary feats. The collection of short stories, *Life’s Little Ironies* and *A Group of Noble Dames* also equal the novels in brilliance.
- **Samuel Butler** (1835-1902) established his name as a Victorian novelist mainly for two novels—the Utopian satire *Erewhon* (1872) and semi-autobiographical *The Way of All Flesh* published posthumously in 1903.

Erewhon which is actually an anagram/palindrome of ‘nowhere’, is a satire on Victorian society, Darwinian machines and contains many clues of dystopia. Revolving around the Pontifex family and chiefly around the protagonist Ernest, the story of *The Way of All Flesh* has loss in Evangelical Christianity and the Bible, sexual assault on women, bigamy and alcoholism and therefore it is in a way defying the Victorianism. Butler’s minor novels are *Life and Habit*, *Evolution: Old and New*, *Erewhon Revisited*, *Unconscious Memory* and *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino*. **George Meredith** (1828-1909) in his novels *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (tragic story of Richmond Roy, a music teacher), *Beauchamp’s Career* (satire on Conservative establishment), *The House on the Beach* (a young woman’s engagement to an older man), *The Egoist* (another novel depicting male domination on woman’s sexuality) and *Diana of the Crossways* (the protagonist Diana resembles the paradigm of a New Woman) enriched the late Victorian world of fiction.

- **George Gissing** (1857-1903) is known for his works like *The Nether World* (the lives of poor people of the London slums and their miseries), *New Grub Street* (the literary world and career of a litterateur) and *The Odd Women* (the shifting role of women in times of social change and the Woman Question).

Note for the learners

The learners have formed an idea of the major literary masters of the Victorian Period. They can take the help of the suggested readings (listed later) and make a note of the styles, narrative techniques and philosophies in the works of the Victorian writers.

1.1.4c) Conservatism/ Prudery and Circulating Libraries

The circulating libraries reached the height of popularity during the Victorian period. During the nineteenth century, circulating libraries were traced in communities all over England. While they initially appeared in London, Edinburgh and resort destinations, in the Victorian Age circulating libraries with smaller collections were established everywhere. Additionally, clienteles in remote areas could pay the larger circulating libraries to deliver books to their homes. Women from upper classes, who could afford these libraries, widely used them as the place of pastimes. However the libraries were prudish and conservative and did not issue all novels. The novels

that went against the Victorian standards and morals were not given. Thus, indirectly they exerted control over novelists, who would not wish to risk their novels being banned from readers and hence chose moderation in discussing issues like—sexuality, pregnancy, illicit love—in their works. The three volume novels were popularized during this period. These circulating libraries not only encouraged readership, but also made reading fashionable. Muddie’s Select Library (1842-1937) and W.H. Smith and Son were two of the biggest circulating libraries.

1.1.5. Summing Up

- The Victorian England was an epoch which witnessed many changes from social, political, religious, cultural and literary perspectives. It officially started with the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832, although the monarch who nominates the age accessed the throne in 1837.
- The period ushered England to democracy, enforcing and extending franchise almost all over England, except the men of lower classes and all the women, with the consecutive Reform Acts.
- With the rapid industrialization and progress in science, England became the glorious seat of commerce and business, with wealth and power in her hands.
- Religion and science which were so long in concordance came into conflict with revolutionary discoveries that challenged the Biblical precepts.
- Woman in this age was only to fulfill to goals—be a good wife and mother. Virginity and virtues were synonymous, and a woman breaching the social construction of femininity was given the diminutive nomenclature ‘fallen woman’.
- The fiction reached the peak of success, and widely practiced by male and female novelists; yet non-fictional proses and poetry too prevailed in the panorama of Victorian literature.

1.1.6. Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. Analyse the historical significance of the Victorian period
2. How did the enforcement and abolition of various legislative reforms cumulatively lead to the constant change in the Victorian England?

3. Write an essay on the Non-Fictional Prose that enriched Victorian Literature.
4. How did the Early Victorian novelists use their works as the reflection of the contemporary society?
5. Reflect on the Scientific Temperament of the Victorian Age.

● **Middle Length Questions-12 Marks**

1. What was the effect of industrialisation on Victorian social set up?
2. Write a note on the position of women in Victorian England.
3. Write a note on the Religion and its complexities in the Victorian Period.
4. Write a short note on Chartism

● **Objective Type Questions-6 Marks**

1. Why was the Anti-Corn Law League such a necessity?
2. What is the significance of the binaries 'angel' and 'fallen woman'?
3. What is the basic philosophy of Utilitarianism?

1.1.7. Suggested Reading

1. Alexander Michael. *A History of English Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007
2. Bagchi, Jashodhara (Ed): *Literature, Society and Ideology in the Victorian Era*
3. Baugh, A.C. *Literary History of England*, Volume IV. Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967.
4. Carter, Ronald and John McRae (Ed). *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2001.
5. Hughes, Linda K. *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
6. Mukherjee, Suroopa (Ed). *Victorian Poets*. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011.
7. Young, G.M. *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age*. London: Oxford University Press, 1936.
8. www.victorianweb.org/history/legisl/html
9. www.britannica.com
10. www.jstor.org