

Victorian England 1832-1901



Great Exhibition Hall 1851
represents 19th century progress!



This view of 19th century London shows the darker side of progress, the Industrial Revolution at its height.

Queen Victoria took the crown at 18.



Queen Victoria as a young girl and as queen. Her reign lasted over 63 years, the longest of any British monarch. Like Elizabeth I, she gave her name to this period of British history and literature.



Marriage

Victoria met Prince Albert, a cousin who was a minor German Prince, when she was 16. Four years later at age 20 and already queen, she fell in love with him and married. Some believe he married her only to gain social status; however, their marriage was a happy one. They parented 9 children. He died in 1861 and from that time on she dressed only in black. For the next 40 years until her death, she ordered that a fresh suite of clothing be laid out for him daily.



She started the tradition of a bride wearing white at her wedding.

Queen Victoria at 20 and as a widow.



The Queen on the morning of her coronation. After Albert's death she wore widow's black and a widow's bonnet in public, never a crown.

Queen Victoria



She was a popular queen, the first to take residence in Buckingham Palace. She spoke English, French, German, Italian, and Hindustani.

She became queen when the monarchy was unpopular with the people, but she won them over with her modesty, practicality, personality, and style.

England during her reign:

- ❖ Industrial Revolution was at its height, a period of social, economic and technological change. Population doubled creating a demand for housing, food and clothing. Irish potato famine created a flood of new immigrants.

England during her reign:

- ❖ “The sun never sets on the British Empire.”
England was an imperial nation gaining control of countries around the world.
During Victoria’s reign, 25% of the world’s population, was part of the British Empire.
- Imperialism: policy of extending a nation’s authority by acquiring territory or by dominating their politics and economy.
- Hegemony: dominating over groups with or without the threat of force.



British Empire during Victoria's reign, controlled one quarter of the world's population, about 458 million people. It covered 14.2 million square miles, about a quarter of Earth's total land area. This is the reason why the English language was at one time **the language** of business, law, and government.

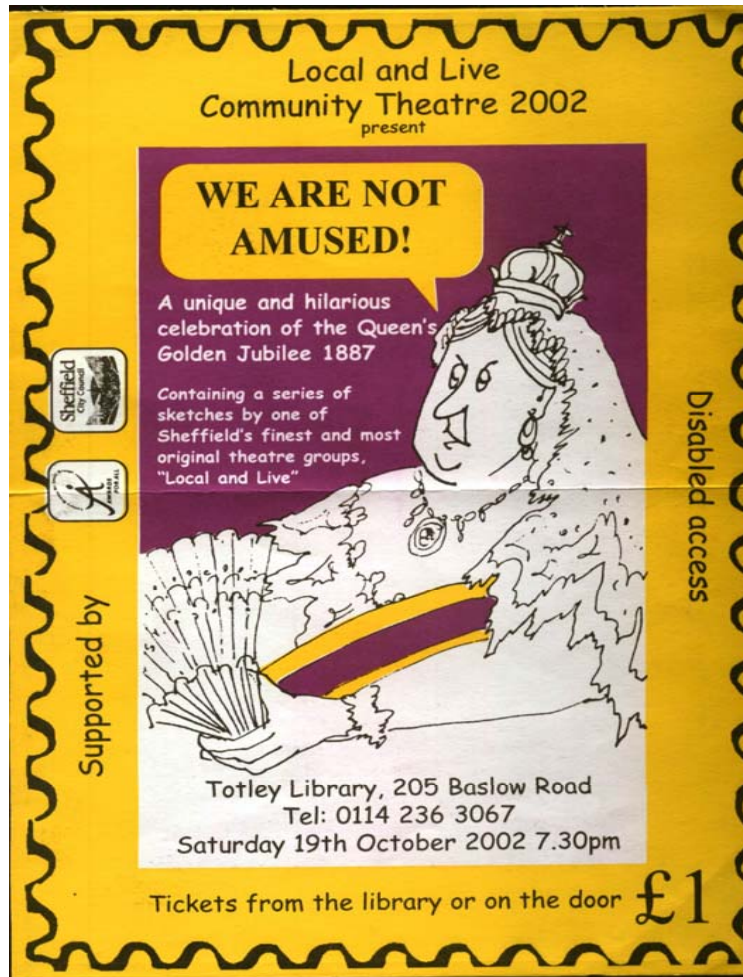
England during her reign:

- ❖ Social conventions for **WOMEN** remain similar to those of the Bennet sisters. Women were to marry and provide homes. A working class woman, if married, could be a servant and if unmarried, a teacher or governess. Many women did not marry simply because there were not enough men. This led to the creation of the phrase “redundant women.”
- ❖ Legal changes were to their advantage. Although they still could not vote, **WOMEN** had the right to retain their own property after marriage, to sue for divorce, and to fight for the custody of their children in a separation.

Victorian literature expresses a world of ideas in a culture comfortable enough with itself to ponder and debate these.

Comfortable:

- ❖ 100 years of peace 1815 (Napoleon, Waterloo) to 1914 (WWI)
- ❖ Industrial Revolution expanded the middle class
- ❖ By 1860's all men except agricultural workers had the right to vote
- ❖ 1860-1900 literacy rate went from 40% to 90% (marriage certificates)
- ❖ Obsessed with being genteel, decorous amounted to prudery



❖ Obsessed with being genteel, decorous amounted to prudery

A young women of personality and charm, Queen Victoria was influenced by the prudery of the time. Some say the queen often used the expression “We are not amused” whenever a conversation “took a ribald turn”.

Language in particular reflected the uptight prudishness of the era. Since it would be improper to refer to body parts, a family at the dinner table would be embarrassed to ask for a thigh or a breast from a plate of chicken, so they used the euphemistic dark and white meat.

Victorian Poets

Wordsworth said the “A poet is a man speaking to other men.” Poetry was an individual experience and spoke of that experience.

Robert Shelley, a Victorian, expanded the role of the poet when he said “Poets are the acknowledged legislators of the world.” Poetry confirmed what the Victorians valued or pointed out problems in their society. Their poetry often related to society’s problems or misdirections.

Victorian Social Consciousness

These poets questioned the cost of exploiting the earth and human beings to achieve comfort for the few. They protested or made fun of the codes of decorum or manners as well as authority.

We will read about Robert Browning's "murderously acquisitive Duke" in "My Last Duchess."





The attitudes of the poets toward their world will change as we read. The beginning of the era is similar to the Romantics. The world was orderly and nature's beauty was a reflection of God's plan and goodness. Alfred Lord Tennyson represents this beginning. His poetry "assures readers. . .that everything was part of a benevolent plan in which eventually all losses will be made right." He saw God in his world. He also looks to the past to the lives of several mythical characters to find ideals of human behavior.



The Victorian created the concept of smog, called “the storm cloud of the 19th century.” John Ruskin describes “. . .the sky is covered with greasy cloud; now raincloud, but a dry black veil, which not ring or sunshine can pierce; partly diffused in feeble mist, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance, or wreathing, or color of its own. . . . It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke. . . . But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead man’s souls.”



Thomas Hardy's "Darkling Thrush"

Matthew Arnold "Dover Beach" "...the sea of faith had ebbed."

By the middle of the 19th century, other writers seemed less certain about a spiritual or divine presence in the world. Matthew Arnold writes that "the sea of faith had ebbed. There was no certainty or if there was, what was certain was that existence was not governed by a benevolent intelligence that cared for its creatures."

Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" is the grimmest of these questioning poems. It was written on January 31st 1899 and marked the close or death of the 19th century.

Victorian Social Consciousness

Victorian authors continued to reflect their social concerns in their writing. In his novels, Charles Dickens attacked the hollowness, glitter, superficiality as well as the poverty and cruel conditions of those like Tiny Tim and the orphan Oliver Twist.

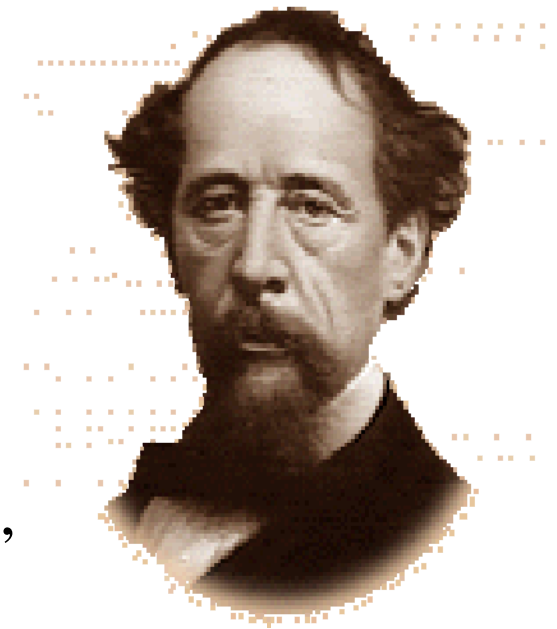


“Many of Dickens's most memorable scenes showed decent people neglected, abused, and exploited.”



Dickens's last novel, Our Mutual Friend, features a family called the Veneerings. "They are 'bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London.'"

Veneer is a thin surface layer, as of finely grained wood, glued to a base of inferior material. Cherry, ebony walnut veneers are used in making furniture often instead of solid wood; therefore the craftsman conceals, something common or inferior, with a deceptively attractive outward show. So what sort of people do you suppose the Veneerings were?



Victorian Drama



Oscar Wilde was the Victorian playwright who, like Dickens, poked fun at those who were socially pushy or insincere. He makes delicious fun of the idle, often phony upper class in his play, The Importance of Being Earnest.

This play is called a comedy of manners. If you enjoy watching Boston Legal, you are watching a contemporary comedy of manners.

All in all, Victorian literature is about change and a culture's reaction to change.

The telegraph, telephone, photography (Victoria was the first royal to have her portrait “taken” rather than “painted”) the advent of the automobile and electric lighting changed not only the way people lived, but their view of the world in which they lived.

Names of the period you would recognize include Charles Darwin and Florence Nightingale. Darwin unsettled the world by offering another view of creation while Nightingale, who founded the first modern nursing school, gave women a role model.

How comfortable with change are you? Your reaction to this question is no different from a Victorian woman of your age.

Bibliography

Text quotes taken from:

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Images from:

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