

Overview to the Victorian Period

I. Introduction

- A. Officially, Queen Victoria ruled from 1837-1901 (63 years)
- B. Sometimes the period from 1832 to 1901 is used; 1832 marked the passage of the First Reform Bill
 - 1. Industrial towns such as Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds gained representation in Parliament
 - 2. Many middle class property holders gained the right to vote, increasing the size of the electorate by about 50%

II. Technology and Industry

- 1. The term “Victorian” was first used in 1851, at the Crystal Palace exhibition in London
- 2. The age was marked by many advances, including photography, the telegraph, and the railway
 - a) The Manchester and Liverpool Railway was established in 1830
 - b) By 1848, there were 5000 miles of railroads
- 3. This was a time of unprecedented pollution of the air and water,
- 4. Working conditions were extremely difficult
 - a) The work week was typically six days, fourteen to sixteen hours a day
 - b) The Factory Act of 1833 outlawed employment of children under nine and cut the work week to 48 hours for children under twelve
 - c) The Ten Hours Act of 1847 limited the work day for women and children to ten hours

III. Empire

- A. The British Empire expanded to rule 1/4 of the world’s landmass and 1/4 of the world’s population
- B. It was also a time of bloody rebellions and wars:
 - 1. The Crimean War against Russia in 1854-56
 - 2. The “Indian Mutiny” of 1857-59
 - 3. The Boer War in South Africa in 1899-1902

IV. Domestic Relations

- A. An age of contradictions:
 - 1. Sexual repression yet flourishing prostitution
 - 2. The idealization of women, yet married women could not own property before Parliamentary acts of 1870 and 1882
- B. Divorce was illegal except by Act of Parliament before 1857
- C. Divorced women had no legal right to custody of their children

V. Faith, science, and anxieties

- A. A time of faith
 - 1. Formal “High Church” and informal “Low Church” movements flourished within the Church of England
 - 2. There was a growing evangelical movement of Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and other “nonconformist” or “dissenting” sects
- B. A time of doubt
 - 1. Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* only codified the evolutionary theory that had been evolving for a century

- 2. Advances in biology, geology, astronomy, and archaeology, historical analysis of the Bible (“Higher Criticism”) challenged the literal Biblical chronology
- C. Victorians felt that they were part of an age unlike those that had gone before
- D. The railway and telegraph not only standardized time but led to a perception of anxiety and hurry

VI. Literature and the Arts

- A. The essay takes its place alongside poetry and fiction in importance.
- B. Contemporary social concerns appear alongside Greek myths and Arthurian
- C. Many novels’ subtitles emphasize the novel’s modernity in their subtitles
- D. This occurred alongside a revival of interest in medieval literature, architecture, and arts and crafts
- E. The dramatic monologue emerges as a distinct literary form
- F. Novels expand into what Henry James called “loose baggy monsters”
- G. Many of these novels were published in serial form
- H. The *Fin de Siècle* (“end of the age”) and “decadent” or “Aesthetic” movement of the 1890s expressed a world-weariness and despair, often to be remedied by mindless sensation