University of Tlemcen

Department of English

Teacher: Rahmouni Amel

ASCC

**Lecture: The Victorian Era**

**Introduction**

The expression “Victorian Age” or “Victorian Era” refers to the period of time when Britain was under the reign of Queen Victoria. King William IV died on June 20, 1837, leaving no legitimate offspring. As a result, his eighteen-year old niece Victoria (granddaughter of George III) became queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Her reign ended in 1901, being one of the longest reigns in the history of England. This age witnessed the most significant changes in almost every aspect of politics, law, economics, and society.

The Victorian age was first and foremost an age of transition. The England that had once been a feudal and agricultural society was transformed into an industrial democracy. Between 1837, when eighteen-year-old Victoria became queen, and 1901, the year of her death, social and technological change affected almost every feature of daily existence. Many aspects of life-from schooling to competitive sports to the floor-plan of middle-class houses to widely held ideals about family life- took the shape that has been familiar for most of the twentieth century.

**Queen Victoria’s Reign**

For her political education, Queen Victoria owed much to her adviser and friend William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne, who had been Prime Minister since 1835. Victoria was said not to be the real reason why the Victorian Age was so successful in England. Most of the real credit should go to her very able prime ministers Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Melbourne, her father figure. They guided her, along with Prince Albert, in the ways of politics. Victoria had a great impact on Europe as well. She had been called the “Grandmother of Europe”. Two of her grandsons were Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Many of her children and grandchildren married into the other royal families of Europe.

Victoria’s ideals were the ones of most of the British public. Her ideals were very puritan. Being a puritan meant that she believed in strict Christianity and discipline. Many paintings show her with “her nosed turned up” in severity. She heavily believed in discipline.

**The Victorian British Empire**

Imperialism may be defined as “the sustained effort to assimilate a country or region to the political, economic or cultural system of another power” (Darwin, 614). During the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain achieved dramatic overseas expansion. In 1876, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli sent to Parliament a bill that gave Queen Victoria the title “Empress of India”. New territories were acquired: Burma and Malaysia to safeguard the borders of India; islands and ports and coaling stations to secure continued English dominance over the seas; pieces of China and the Middle East to protect trade routes or gain economic advantages. During the final decades of the century, England competed with other European nations in the “scramble for Africa” that made most of the continent into colonial territory. Noteworthy, during this period Britain did not lose any war due to its strong navy. Some main events from this era are as follow:

**The Opium War (1839-1842)**: the war had its roots in a trade dispute between Britain and China. The British imported many goods from China in exchange for silver while the Chinese showed no interest in Western products due to their self-sufficient economy. In order to cure the trade deficit, the British blamed China’s closed-door policy and started to smuggle opium to Chinese people, creating huge addiction and succeeding in tipping trade balance. As a reaction, the Chinese wanted to stop opium trade. However, Britain sent its troops to China and started a war that ended with the victory of the British.

**The Crimean War (1853-1856):** From 1854 to 1856, England and France were allies in a war against Russia in the Crimea (modern-day Ukraine), which lies between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azof and was then a part of the disintegrating Turkish Empire. The causes of the Crimean War have never been entirely clear, but it was part of a struggle between England and Russia to maintain influence in the Middle East and thereby protect trade routes into Asia. The Alliance won because the Russians could not supply their troops. The Russian railroads became broken and the Russians could not fix them.

**The Boer War (1899-1902)**: The Boer War (1899-1902) was fought in South Africa between the British colonists and the Dutch colonists (called Boers) living in South Africa. This war is often called the first “total” war because both sides fought endlessly. In the end, the British won and all of South Africa was under British control.

Not stopping this far, the British Empire grew wider and covered wider areas. Victoria was an important proponent in transferring control of India from the East India Company to the British government in 1858. Victoria was declared “Empress of India” in 1876. The British gained control of Egypt (with the Suez Canal) in 1869 and many other areas. The British Empire became the richest country in the world during the reign of Queen Victoria. There were many sayings like, “The sun never sets on the British Empire”, and “The workshop of the world”, that described Britain in the nineteenth century. By the time of the 1897 Diamond Jubilee celebrating the 60th year of Queen Victoria’s rule, her Empire contained one-quarter of the world’s population. Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 was an outpouring of national affection and a celebration of 50 years of domestic progress. The Great Exhibition showed off the nation’s great industrial triumphs. The Diamond Jubilee of 1897, by contrast, marked the high tide of Empire.

**The Woman Issue**

Queen Victoria had married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, in 1840. Over the next 17 years she gave birth to nine children and became increasingly popular as a moral leader and model of family values. A Victorian journal summed up the role of women in mid­-Victorian times in the phrase that “married life is a woman’s profession”. Accordingly, middle class women in households were not expected to have a job. This was one of the things that marked them out as different from the working class. Even if young women had an adequate job they had to resign when they got married. The most conventional image of the perfect Victorian woman is found in the title of a long poem written by Coventry Patmore: *The Angel in the House.* A woman was supposed to help regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action.

Marriage was seen as woman’s natural and expected role: it satisfied her instinctual needs, preserved the species, provided appropriate duties, and protected her from the shocks and dangers of the rude, competitive world. In the late Victorian period teaching had become one of the professions for middle class women, especially, when education for children under ten years old had been made compulsory in 1870. Most working class women did not have a choice whether or not they went to work. Their families simply needed the additional money to survive. What both working class and middle class women had in common was the fact that they had hardly any rights. When for example a young woman married all her possessions became her husband’s property. It was not a crime when a husband hit his wife, and the children were legally the husband’s. A few middle class women dared to campaign for women’s rights, including Annie Besant (d. 1933) and Josephine Butler (d. 1900), who also both fought for birth control and socialism.

One of the most successful campaigns carried out by women was for better education. When school education had been made compulsory for children under 10 all children had to do reading, writing, arithmetic, but some subjects were just for girls. A school syllabus for girls in Bristol in 1899 listed lessons such as ‘how to light a fire’, ‘removing tea stains’, and ‘porridge making’. By 1900 women had won many improvements in their education and also in their legal rights. After 1882 (The Married Women´s Property Act of 1882 and 1892), they were allowed to keep their own income and property after they married, but they were still denied the vote in general elections and barred from holding political office. Political changes did not take place until after the First World War when the 1918 Act allowed women over 30 to vote. Women over 21 had to wait until 1939.

**Compulsory Education for children under ten 1880**

The elementary education act of 1880 was a policy that made school attendance mandatory from ages five to ten. Introductory by social reformer and member of liberal party A.J. Mundella, the education bill quietly overrode the factory acts, dramatically reducing the amount of time young children were allowed to spend in mill and factory work. However; education opportunities differed from one class to another.

**Religion and Science in the Victorian era**

The Victorian era was fundamentally a religious age; even more religious than the preceding 18th century. Christian principles and beliefs were seen as the real tool that bounds a society together. The Historian A. Froude asserted that “an established religion is the sanction of moral obligation; it gives authority to the commandments, creates a fear of doing wrong, and a sense of responsibility for doing it”. Alongside faith, science was another main characteristic of Victorian England to the extent that lead many to fear that it would somehow shake religious faith. R.K Webb explained that the number of people whose religious faith was shaken by scientific discoveries was “probably fairly small” but consisted of “people whose opinions counted for much”.

Victorians made and appreciated developments in science. Charles Darwin, the British biologist and naturalist published his famous theory on the origin of species on 24 November, 1859. It presented his theory of evolution by natural selection and adaptation of the species. The book became an international best-seller, but opinion on the argument for evolution and natural selection remained fiercely divided throughout Darwin’s life. Victorians were also fascinated by the emerging discipline of psychology and by the physics of energy.

**Growth of economy and new social classes**

In the first 50 years of the 19th century Britain had ‘witnessed a leap forward in all the elements of material well­being,’ the author of an article in *The Economist* wrote in 1850. “The extended application of machinery [is] almost putting an end to very severe bodily toil except in agriculture.” Britain’s economic position in that period seemed to support the optimism and confidence of the time and to justify the reference to Britain as ‘the workshop of the world’. From 1820 to 1888 the industrial production rose from £ 230 million to £820 million.

In spite of these figures, it could be safely said that Victorian Britain was “a fine place for the rich, but the Lord help the poor,’ a researcher once noted. Industrial Britain mainly contained three different social classes:

**The upper class**: the aristocracy and gentry, continued to dominate political and social life. In 1873 the top group of the upper class, i.e. less than 7, 000 people out of a population of 31 million, owned 4/5 of the land in the UK. This class had the biggest political influence and did not have to spend much time to earn an income as they were rich by heritage. They lived part of the year in “country estates” with up to 40 servants or in “town houses” depending on the seasons and weather.

**Middle class**: The keeping of domestic servants marked the division from working class. At the top of this class (in London) were bankers and city merchants. The lower middle class was formed by shopkeepers and small businessmen, then white­-collar workers, such as teachers and clerks. Income in the middle classes was based on non­-manual jobs in business or the professions (law, medicine, education, religion, art and entertainment, literature and science).

**Working class:** 75% of the population. They earned their income from manual work. The working class was formed of labourers, farm hands, factory workers, railway-men, domestic servants and others. Almost all workers were liable to unemployment at some time. They lived in dreadful workhouses and in constant fear of accidents.

**Victorian Cultural Blossoming**

During the first half of the nineteenth century, reading was hardly a popular pursuit. Much of the population was unschooled, and, more importantly, printed matter was too expensive for the common man. Books were also expensive and were considered luxuries, which is why it was a sign of wealth and prestige for a private home to include a library, the shelves well stocked with leather-bound volumes.

The British made many advances in the academic field. The increasing middle-class people were the class portrayed in the novels and to whom the novels were written. Thus Victorian novelists were inclined to treat the predominance of money with angry satire. We have the arrogant "nouveau rich" merchant such as William Thackeray's Mr Osborne in *Vanity Fair* (1848) and Charles Dickens´s Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Between the rich middle classes and the workers, a very large lower middle class existed; its members populate the novels of Dickens and H.G. Wells more than the members of any other class.

Many places around the world are named after Queen Victoria. Lake Victoria, in Africa and the lake where the Nile River starts, was named for Victoria, along with Victoria Falls named by the Scottish explorer Dr. Livingstone. Victoria, a state in Australia, is also named for the queen.