

Self-prepared Study Material

The Victorian Period and Literature

The Victorian literature reflects the zeitgeist of the age- its credos, its ethos, its dogmas and its upheavals. It deals with the pressing socio-economic and religious issues and intellectual concerns of the time. The Victorian literature is intertwined with/ immersed in the age. So, let's first understand the age first.

The Victorian age is an age of contradictions. It 'was the best of times, it was the worst of times' as Dickens put it. In this age England became the first industrial nation in the Europe with one quarter of the globe as its colony. There was peace and prosperity. However, the condition of the poor was bleak and miserable. There was a growing class division.

The Victorian age was also the age of growing democracy. There were several democratic reforms (1832, 1867, 1884) by which franchise was gradually extended to the middleclass and then to the tax paying working class.

The Victorian age was an age of ideological conflicts- conflict between science and faith, between rationality and mysticism, between technological progress and religious orthodoxy.

As a result of this ideological conflict there happened to be what is called the Victorian unrest. The Victorians straddled between two worlds- one dead, another yet to be born. Most of the Victorians went for a compromise.

Victorianism emerged as a socio-cultural and, moral ideology. There was over emphasis on morality, earnestness, social respectability etc. However, much of this moralism was a shield to hide the inner hypocrisy.

Another important factor was a growing nationalism and a sense of racial superiority that made it obvious marks in the literature of the period.

Let us understand the relationship between the Victorian period and its literature by the following charts-

Philosophy and Values of the Victorians/ Characteristics of Victorian Literature					
Values	Major Ideas	Literary Form/ Structure	Literary Content/ Themes	Literary Genres/ Styles	Key Authors
Earnestness	Expansion of Empire	Narrative over Lyric	Isolation/ Alienation	Dramatic Monologue	Lord Tennyson
Respectability	Glorification of War	Meter and Rhythm over Imagery	Lack of communication	Novel Elegy magazines	The Brontes Oscar Wilde
Evangelism	Industrialism	Objective; reflective	Pessimism and despair	Drama: Comedy of Manners	Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning
Evolution and Progress	Economic Prosperity	Melancholy or meditative, even in love poems	Loss of faith	Rigid standards of personal behavior	Charles Dickens
Hypocrisy?	Reform	Moral issues, didactic	Didactic	High moral tone	Thomas Carlyle
Protestant work ethic		Contemporary subjects			Charles Darwin
Restraint		Longer over			Matthew Arnold

		shorter forms			
Utilitarianism		More common expressions			Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti
Strong emphasis on duty					
		Medieval subjects and forms			Rudyard Kipling

Romantic/Victorian Contrasts

	Romantic Era	Victorian Era
Idealism	Visionary/Utopian	Sober/Utilitarian
View of Nature	Kind/Harmonious	Harsh/Cruel
Focus	Inward/Individual Common man Imagination Introspection	Outward/Nation Middle class Reality Work
Philosophy	Transcendentalism	Utilitarianism

More Victoriana

Key Metaphor	Struggle or strife
Key Theme	Theory of evolution leads to crisis of faith Intellectual and spiritual doubt – antidote is work
Growing social consciousness	Reform movements – child labour, safety, hours Women – demand emancipation, enfranchisement, evolution
Victorian Trinity	Religion, science, morality
Nationalism	Britain – first great modern industrial nation
Poets	Feel alienated, betrayed - estranged from life and love - so isolate themselves no groups or friends

