Chapter Two

Victorian and Anti-Victorian Voices

Yannis Kanarakis

1. Introduction

In this chapter we will explore the radical changes that took place during Queen Victoria’s reign by focusing on certain key ideas or larger clusters of thoughts and the reactions that they generated. As we shall see, the Victorian era was a period marked by unprecedented changes, and Victorian thinkers and writers had a mixed reaction towards these shifts. Some of them welcomed change as a sign of progress, while others considered it an indication of decline and nostalgically contemplated past glories. Here are the major key concepts which this chapter investigates as they are organized in units:

A. Industrialism and Individualism
B. Domesticity and the Woman Question
C. Religion and Evolutionary Theory
D. The Rise and Fall of the British Empire
E. Culture and Aesthetics
F. Victorian Futures

Each unit delves into a major Victorian idea or theme by exploring not only the way it developed throughout Victoria’s reign, but also the oppositional voices that were directed against it.

This BBC sponsored site introduces you to all major changes that took place during the Victorian Age. Access here

Learning objectives:

✓ Familiarization with the historical, socio-political, and cultural context of Victorian literary practice.

✓ Ability to recognize the aesthetic and historical principles underlying each phase of the Victorian period.

✓ Exposure to key Victorian texts, authors, ideas and dominant conflicting voices of the Victorian period.
2. The Historical Context

The Victorian period lasted roughly from 1830 to 1900. It was named after Queen Victoria who sat on the throne at the age of eighteen in 1837 and reigned until her death in 1901. Her reign lasted sixty-three years, longer than that of any other monarch of the British throne, and included many shifts, breakthroughs, and revolutions. As a matter of fact, we might argue that the most prevailing characteristic of the Victorian Age were the radical changes that people at the time experienced. These changes are usually grouped into three historical stages, each of which has its own unique characteristics and prevalent ideas.

2.1 The Early Victorian Period (1830-1858): A Time of Upheavals

The most defining changes that took place during the early Victorian period were triggered by two major revolutions: the Industrial Revolution, which had begun around 1780 but reached its peak during Victoria’s reign, and the French Revolution (1789-1815), the revolt of French citizens against monarchy, which also broke out at the end of the eighteenth century and deeply affected the political thought of the time throughout the western world since it was a forceful manifestation of the power that inheres in the will of the people.

First, nearly all facets of everyday life were shaken by the scientific and technological developments that the industrial revolution had brought about. Steam engine technology accelerated industrial production and helped shape a new class of people who were urbane and entrepreneurial, and whose interests demanded less state intervention in business affairs. Accelerated production also resulted in demographic shifts, since the driving force of economy was no longer related with farming, but with working and living in industrial centers. This practically meant that large numbers of people had to leave the countryside and move to an urban setting whose infrastructure could not support such a sudden and unexpected influx of working hands.

Moreover, in these new industrial centers, new forms of print culture started to develop through the proliferation of newspapers, magazines, journals, novels, and circulating libraries which, along with the educational reforms of the period, led to a gradual increase of literacy rates. The growth of the print culture, furthermore, satisfied the Victorians’ need to be informed about the radical changes that took place at the
time. Such inquisitive spirit was further fueled by technological and scientific advances (science became a national hobby, as we shall see), and the facilitation of travel and communication as well. The spread of railway lines in the 1830s changed the map of the country, as it shortened distances and brought nearer cutaway towns or places which were until then hard to reach. The advances in science and technology also helped commerce flourish, a fact which rendered Britain a powerful empire that controlled the world markets.

These economic, demographic, technological, and scientific shifts had their political, ideological, religious, and cultural repercussions as well. Stimulated by the French Revolution, which inspired peoples throughout Europe to claim their rights against the status quo (or the ancient regime, as it was called), Victorians reacted against the injustices brought about by industrialization. As a result, the times called for a new way of thinking which, however, conflicted with the status quo (the old way of thinking) and so upheavals were generated. A typical example of the way new social givens resulted in new political formations was the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor that the Industrial Revolution had brought about. This widening became a source of political and ideological agitation and soon ignited a persistent call for a sweeping reform of the system of political representation. Consequently, after a series of demonstrations, strikes and fights with the authorities, the First Reform Bill, through which the newly formed industrial centers were represented in parliament, was passed in 1832.

The Victorians interpreted these radical changes in conflicting ways: for many, the changes signaled progress and advance, heralding hope and optimism; yet for others, they were considered to be a type of disease, a spiritual malaise that had to be immediately treated and cured. The Victorian thinkers who were systematically engaged with the benefits or the shortcomings of progress were called sages and were actually responsible for the flowering of prose during this period.

Despite their ideological or stylistic differences, all these sages agreed that this was a time of historical rupture, and expressed their deep awareness concerning these shifts as well as their unease about their outcome. William Hazlitt (1778-1830) spoke in 1825 about “The Spirit of the Age”; Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) talked in 1829 about the “Signs of the Times” (and in 1831 attempted to define the era’s “Characteristics”); John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) also wrote about “The Spirit of the Age” in 1831; and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) published about *England and the English* (1833). This was “an age of transition,” as J. S. Mill put it in “The Spirit of the Age,” in which “mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not acquired new ones.” Or, as Bulwer-Lytton noted:

We live in an age of transition—an age of disquietude and doubt—of the removal of timeworn landmarks, and the breaking up of the hereditary elements of society—old opinions, feelings—ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadows of change. The commencement of one of these epochs—periodical in the history of mankind—is hailed by the sanguine as the coming of a new Millennium—a great iconoclastic reformation, by which all false gods shall be overthrown. To me such epochs appear but as the dark passages in the appointed progress of mankind—the times of greatest unhappiness to our species—passages into which we have no reason to rejoice at our entrance, save from the hope of being sooner landed on the opposite side.

2. 2 The Mid-Victorian Period (1848-1870): Prosperity and Optimism

This period is also known as the “Age of Equipoise,” because the sense of crisis and disruption of the 1830s and 1840s gave its place to optimism and industrial supremacy. Progress became the byword of the day since the mid-century was a period of unprecedented general prosperity. This was the time when Britain discovered many new markets across the seas and

---

**The Great Exhibition:**

It was one of the first international fairs, organized by Prince Albert and Henry Cole. It lasted for five months and was housed in an enormous structure made of glass and metal located in Hyde Park. One could find on display there 13,000 exhibits from Britain and its colonies: technological devices, raw materials, exotic art, and jewelry, among others. The Great Exhibition attracted many visitors and heralded an era of technological advance and consumerism. It celebrated the inauguration of industrial Britain.
became an international Empire. Consequently, it was also the time when Victorian confidence and optimism reached its peak. Such optimism was solidified through the Great Exhibition which opened in Hyde Park, London, in 1851, and signaled Britain’s scientific and technological sovereignty in the world. The prosperity of the times was manifest through the fact that now money and financial problems became prominent topics in the novels of the period. Most writers, moreover, turned to historical fiction or the recording of the domestic stability of middle class people. The attention of criticism, in a similar manner, shifted from Thomas Carlyle and his expression of anxiety about the poor to Matthew Arnold’s concern about the culture of the middle classes.

Furthermore, the fact that many people from different backgrounds and religious practices gathered together into cities, meant that many dissenting voices demanded that their rights were equally heard and represented, and this gradually undermined the supremacy of the Anglican Church. The status of the Church was additionally eroded by evolutionary theory and geology. This practically meant that religious discourses were gradually replaced by more rational ones, like the narrative of evolution or Utilitarianism, as we shall see. All these changes eventually brought about a deep uncertainty about morals, institutions or values, becoming the price, one might argue, Victorians had to pay for progress. Dilemmas, such as tradition or progress, science or religion, culture or anarchy, proliferated, engendering even more debates, and intensifying the feeling of uncertainty, despite the overall prosperity.

2.3 The Late Victorian Period (1870-1901): Decline and Pessimism

Throughout the last two decades of the century, all major Victorian writers passed away: George Eliot died in 1880, Thomas Carlyle in 1881, Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1882, Anthony Trollope in 1882, Mathew Arnold in 1888, Wilkie Collins in 1889, Robert Browning in 1889, and Christina Rossetti and Walter Pater in 1894. This, along with some other radical changes that took place at the time, made people feel that it really was the fin de siècle, that is, the end of the century, or the end of a golden era and the coming of something new, which they could not yet define and which aroused fear. Traditional Victorian propriety and earlier optimism about progress were now openly questioned as outdated, while the ideals of domesticity, family, and earnestness were challenged. This brought about a feeling of uneasiness and anxiety that was enhanced by the aftermath of the Darwinian revolution and the radical rationalization it had spread. Darwinism and its offshoots gave new prominence and prestige to science, which ultimately triumphed over theology. Sexuality, for example, came to be treated as a medical or scientific subject; the status of imperialism was scientifically validated; and the arts and cultural movements were aligned with technological or scientific advances. The feeling that nothing was fixed or could be taken for granted was prevalent.

In the last decades of the century also, technological advances changed profoundly the way literature was produced, distributed, or read, affecting the relation between the author and the reader. The Education Act of 1870, and the subsequent educational reforms, drastically expanded the reading public by making elementary education compulsory. Furthermore, printing and the press became much cheaper and accessible to an increasingly literate public that wanted to be constantly informed about this surprising new world. These changes established journalism as one of the most dominant powers in the shaping of public opinion. Moreover, the expansion of the reading public entailed the incorporation of new reading groups in the market that sought new forms of expression. Thus, the growth of the reading market led to the emergence and development of new genres like children’s literature, travel literature, pop science, and the short story.

More than any other genre, the short story was a sign of the times. The traditional and emblematic three-decker novel (the three-volume novel) declined in popularity in the last two decades of the century, as people no longer read novels through circulating libraries, but bought them. Books had to be cheap and short because the pace of life had also changed and leisure time for the middle classes decreased. There were authors, like Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1858-1930), who were solidly based on this new form and made the most of the financial opportunities that the short story afforded them, developing an awareness of the needs of the market that previous writers did not have. Likewise, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) exploited many different forms of writing that addressed different kinds of readers and always linked...
the implied author of his works with his public image as a celebrity, whereas Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) addressed the specific needs of the market by publishing his most sensational works during Christmas in order to increase sales.

In a strange way, old narratives and viewpoints still lingered, despite the fact that their relevance was lost and they urgently had to be replaced with newer ones. The defining characteristic of the end of the Victorian era was precisely the paradoxical coexistence of conflicting voices: a growing conservativism was accompanied by the rise of feminism, socialism, and the surfacing of dissident sexualities; nationalist or imperialist confidence coexisted along with its questioning; the vision of progress brought fears about regressing to an uncivilized state; collectivism was juxtaposed to disinterested individualism, tradition to innovation, commodification to crafted art, popular and mass art to elite and obscure forms of art. Such coexistence of opposing views and concepts was, of course, highly indicative of a radical dissolution of social consensus and coherence, and anticipated the diversity and plurality of the Modernist Period.

3. Industrialism and Individualism

3.1 The Condition of England

In *Signs of the Times* (1829), Thomas Carlyle argues that the defining characteristic of his era is mechanization, an unprecedented social phenomenon that affected all aspects of life: from industrial production to philosophy, and from cultural production to human relations:
Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand: all is by rule and calculated contrivance, some cunning abbreviating process is in readiness.

The driving force of such mechanization is what Elisabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) years later will call the “plague of gold” and the profound alienation that it brought about. As she admits in “The Cry of the Human” (1842):

Our thoughts grow blank, our words grow strange,
We cheer the pale gold-diggers,
Each soul is worth so much on Change,
And marked, like sheep, with figures. (41-44)

Both Browning and Carlyle are alluding here to the sweeping force of the Industrial Revolution which started in the 1780s but gained momentum during the early nineteenth century. Britain was one of the first countries to be radically transformed by this Revolution due to the fact that its economy could support the large-scale investments that such a transformation called for. Secondly, after the Glorious Revolution, the anti-absolutist climate that was established favored the reduction of State intervention and the expansion of commerce, a fact which led to the birth of a commercial middle class. There were also certain scientific developments such as James Hargreaves’ (1720-1778) spinning jenny (1770) or Samuel Crompton’s spinning mule (1779) that mechanized weaving production, and James Watt (1736-1819) and Matthew Boulton’s (1728-1809) steam engine (1796), which not only satisfied the need for increased power supplies, but also revolutionized modes of production and resulted in increased mass production. Mills no longer depended on waterwheels for power, and steam engines became the driving force of coal mines, paving the way for the railroad, which drastically accelerated the speed of production in the 1830s and 1840s.

Such technological advances deeply affected people’s lives and changed the face of Britain profoundly. This was an era of transition when places like Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester (which was

---

**The Glorious Revolution:**

The Glorious Revolution, also known as the Bloodless Revolution, took place in 1688 and led to the deposition of Catholic James II and the ascension to the throne of his daughter Mary II and her husband William of Orange, who supported the Protestants.
called “the workshop of the world”) turned from small towns into grey industrial cities. The residents were forced to leave behind the rural pace of the farms they used to work on and were subjected to the inhuman working conditions of gas-lit factories that turned night into day in order to maximize profit. As a result, the English class structure also changed fundamentally. Workers started to develop class consciousness, while the middle classes increasingly rose to prominence through the new professions that the industrial revolution engendered. The “captains of industry,” as Carlyle calls the new class of industrialists, antagonized aristocracy since, unlike upper-class men, they were self-made men who did not rely on their family’s money or property.

The widening of the gap between the rich and the poor eventually engendered social conflict, and became one of the biggest problems of the time. A series of legislations or political changes during the following years aimed at alleviating the condition of the poor:

- In the 1830s, official labor unions started to develop, and policies that would improve prison and working conditions and education began to be practiced.
- The air of change that was blowing throughout Europe after the French revolution was expressed in Britain through the First Reform Act of 1832.
- In 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed. It organized workhouses within which the poor and the needy could live and work under a very harsh regime which was meant to act as disincentive for those who wanted to live there without producing anything. The conditions in these workhouses were severely criticized by many Victorians. Dickens’ Oliver Twist (1837-39) is such a striking example.
- In 1833, the Factory Reform Act was passed which dictated that children under thirteen could only work forty-eight hours a week.
- A series of bad harvests in the 1840s, nevertheless, led to yet more poverty and overpopulation, since starving people from Ireland rushed into industrial centers in order to find a job, and this inflated food prices. This was probably the most wretched period for the poor in the history of England, which is also called the “Hungry Forties.” The overall climate resulted in the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, that is, the reduction of taxation on imported grain, which was meant to protect and increase the incomes of landowners and prevent the import of cheap foreign wheat. This practically meant that the Repeal of the Corn Laws was one of the first laws that took into serious consideration the poor by reducing the profits of the rich landlords.

This time of upheavals, social paradoxes and political instabilities is what the Victorians called the “Condition of England,” a term initially coined by Thomas Carlyle in Chartism (1839). With the phrase “the Condition of England” Carlyle did not allude only to the new reality of the two nations of the rich and the poor, but also to the debates about the role of industrialization that were tearing Britain apart, and the anger produced by such a profound division of society. What Carlyle also wanted to highlight was the fact that the heavy and rapid industrialization of British society did not only herald an era of prosperity for some, but also signaled a time of deep poverty and social agitation, which threatened to overthrow traditional institutions and ideals. In his analysis of British society on the eve of the “Hungry Forties,” Carlyle actually expressed his anxiety about the fact that if the situation of the poor would not improve, this would have catastrophic consequences on English society, leading to something that everybody would regret, i.e., a revolution.
Thomas Carlyle, from *Past and Present*

*In this extract Carlyle, using his characteristic vivid language, defines the “Condition of England.”*

The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is just regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; Waving with yellow harvests; Thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and the willingest our Earth ever had; These men are here; The work they have done, the fruit they have realized is here, abundant, exuberant on every hand of us; And behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth saying, “Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; None of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; This is enchanted fruit!” On the poor workers such fiat falls first, in its rudest shape; But on the rich the master-workers too it falls; Neither can the rich master-idlers, nor any richest or highest man escape, but all are like to be brought low with it, and made “poor” enough in the money sense or a far fataller one.

Benjamin Disraeli, from *Sybil, or, The Two Nations*

*This extract describes the division of England into “two nations,” the rich and the poor.*

**Book II, Chapter 5, The Two Nations**

“It is a community of purpose that constitutes society,” continued the younger stranger; “without that, men may be drawn into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated.”

“And is that their condition in cities?”

“It is their condition everywhere; But in cities that condition is aggravated. A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact. In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; And for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbor as oneself; Modern society acknowledges no neighbor.”

“Well, we live in strange times,” said Ergemont, struck by the observation of his companion, and relieving a perplexed spirit by an ordinary exclamation, which often denotes that the mind is more stirred than it cares to acknowledge, or at the moment is able to express.

“When the infant begins to walk, it also thinks that it lives in strange times,” said his companion. “Your inference?” asked Ergemont.

“That society, still in its infancy, is beginning to feel its way.”

“This is a new reign,” said Ergemont, “Perhaps it is a new era.”

“I think so,” said the younger stranger.

“I hope so,” said the elder one.

“Well, society may be in its infancy,” said Ergemont, slightly smiling, “but, say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation ever existed.”

“Which nation?” asked the younger stranger. “for she reigns over two.”

The stranger paused; Ergemont was silent, but looked inquiringly.

“Yes,” resumed the younger stranger after a moment’s interval. “Two nations; Between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; Who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and
feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; Who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws."

“You speak of _______” said Ergemont, hesitatingly.

“THE RICH AND THE POOR.”

3.2 The Social Problem Novel

The wretchedness of the poor was documented by many philosophers and writers of the time as a new and shocking phenomenon. Perhaps one of the most disturbing recordings of working-class life appears in the study of the German philosopher Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1845). The effects of industrialism on the masses was a debatable topic which was, furthermore, explored and portrayed in the Condition of England novel or Industrial novel, or social problem novel, which came to prominence during that time. In most cases, these novels sought to reconcile or bridge the inequalities that the industrial revolution brought about. Novels that belong in this tradition are, among others, France Trollope’s *The Life and Adventure of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840), Benjamin Disraeli’s *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1846), Elisabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850) and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* (1854).

Most of these novels are either based on first-hand experience or official documents and records, such as parliamentary reports or extracts from the press. For example, Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* heavily relies on the 1842 report of the Children’s Employment Commission and the 1843 report on the payment of wages. Set during the years of political agitation in the 1830s, *Sybil* draws on Parliamentary reports in order to illustrate factory conditions, and draw attention to the gap between the rich and the poor, which were like two different nations. Dickens’ *Hard Times* (1854) is based on the author’s personal investigation of the cotton workers’ strike in Preston, Lancashire. In *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Elisabeth Gaskell presents the bleak reality of industrial neighborhoods, modeled on real Manchester slums. *Mary Barton*, set during the turbulent 1830s, documents Gaskell’s first-hand experiences from industrial Manchester. There is a strong ethnographic undercurrent in the novel that tries to capture the local dialect and the workers’ customs in order to sketch the plight of the people living there. Both Frances Trollope and Elisabeth Gaskell, in their prefaces to *Michael Armstrong* and *Mary Barton* respectively, express their wish to inform the reading public about the embarrassing living and working conditions of the working classes. In Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840), the charitable heroine Mary Brotherton considers it her moral obligation to be informed about the poor, while the author exposes the reader to the child-labour conditions of Manchester and Bradford. In a similar fashion, Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley* (1849) illustrates the complex socio-political and historical factors that led to the workers’ plight.

**Friedrich Engels, from The Condition of the Working Class in England**

*In this extract, Engels describes the individualism of the working people in the slums.*

The crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space.

Most of these writers recorded the bleak reality of industrialism as a means of introducing something new to the middle classes, adopting the role of a reporter, historian or even social scientist. But the political
perspective from which they regarded this bleak aspect of British society was more than evident: Disraeli was a conservative, Gaskell a dissenter, and Dickens a distanced southerner. They had nothing to do, in other words, with the harsh reality that the workers faced. This means that all these writers were not only writing for the middle classes, but they were writing from a middle class standpoint as well, simultaneously promoting a middle class morality in their work. This tendency was in tune with the strong moral tone within which the Condition of England was presented by authors like Marx, Engels, Ruskin, and Carlyle, who all considered it a moral obligation of the individual to be aware of the circumstances in which large communities of people spent their lives. This moral perspective was due to the fact that for these writers the plights of the poor were an offshoot of the nation’s progress, industrialism and individualism, so the middle class individual, who reaped the benefits of such progress was implicitly held morally responsible for the fate of the poor. In this light, all these Victorian writers also addressed the issue of the relation between the individual and the community, and depicted how individuals are always shaped and defined through their relation with the community. This preoccupation with the relation between the individual and community will later develop into what is probably the most defining issue of the Victorian novel.

3.3 Victorian Individualism and Collectivism

The driving force of industrialism was individualistic competitiveness and self-interestedness. Let us not forget here that although this was the first time more than half of the population was living in industrial cities, the sense of community was lost when people had to leave the villages and move into factory towns. Furthermore, the new industrial reality was considered by many as a jungle where people had to struggle hard for survival. This idea was also promoted through the new class of the industrialists, a novel role model, in the sense that they signaled a new type of self-made man who managed to make it on his own without having to rely on his family’s money, fortune, or name. Moreover, there were also certain political events that substantiated the doctrine of individualism. One such case was the Anti-Corn Law League which, based on laissez-faire (free trade) principles, demanded the import of cheap wheat in order to keep wages low and increase the export of cotton. The Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 was actually a triumph of the laissez-faire ideology of self-interestedness, as well. What is more, after the Municipal Reform Act of 1835, Nonconformists (i.e., dissenters from the established church of England) could enter local government. These people manifested a strong individualistic ideology because their creed allowed them to be opposed to religious authorities. As they followed their conscience, they could easily dissent not only from local authorities but from state interference as well, and promote a type of ideology that was in full accordance with laissez-faire economy.

Self-reliance and individualism gradually became one of the most dominant and characteristic middle class Victorian values. This is why when Samuel Smiles, the Scottish government reformer, published his book tellingly entitled Self Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance (1859), it became a huge best-seller. It is precisely the prevalent idea of individualism and the ideology of self-help as a means of
economic success that Charles Dickens ridicules in *Hard Times* (1854) through the character of Bounderby, a supposedly self-made industry owner, who is eventually proved to be a scoundrel.

**Samuel Smiles, from *Self Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance***

Daily experience shows that it is energetic individualism which produces the most powerful effects upon the life and action of others, and really constitutes the best practical education. Schools, academies, and colleges, give but the merest beginnings of culture in comparison with it. Far more influential is the life-education daily given in our homes, in the streets, behind counters, in workshops, at the loom and the plough, in counting-houses and manufactories, and in the busy haunts of men. This is that finishing instruction as members of society, which Schiller designated “the education of the human race,” consisting in action, conduct, self-culture, self-control,—all that tends to discipline a man truly, and fit him for the proper performance of the duties and business of life,—a kind of education not to be learnt from books, or acquired by any amount of mere literary training.

In fact, what actually lurked behind individualism was nothing else but the *laissez-faire* politics that industrialism was solidly based upon. The ideology of *laissez-faire* was also promoted by Utilitarianism, Benthamism, or Philosophical Radicalism, the philosophical and economic movement founded by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) which greatly affected the legal, social, political, and economic thought of the time. Bentham’s system was based on the idea that the leading principle in people’s lives is the desire to avoid pain and seek pleasure; consequently, all laws had to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham’s theory, in other words, was implicitly aligned with the *laissez-faire* individualism of Adam Smith (1723-1790), since it basically opposed any type of state interference so that people would be free to pursue their own interests, and, by doing so, promote general welfare. For Bentham, the role of the state had to be reduced to national defense and the protection of private property and public order.

Along with the development of individualism there grew a strong reaction to it. The strongest and most fervent early critic of Victorian individualism and rationalism was Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). We should note here, however, that Carlyle may have attacked the individualism implicit in *laissez-faire* economy, yet his version of history revolved around the lives of unique individuals. In this way, Carlyle was indirectly favoring a different type of individualism related with the charismatic leader who was in favor of the common good, rather than his [sic] personal interest. In his 1840 series of lectures entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle celebrated the power of human agency, arguing that the concept of individualism was crucial even for those who were partially against it and comprised one of the cornerstones of Victorian ideology.

One of the most influential forms of collectivity that rose to prominence at the time was the political movement of Chartism, which came into sharp contrast with what individualism stood for.

**Chartism and Its Legacy**

Chartism was one of the strongest and most widespread working-class movements that Britain had ever known, despite the fact that it was a very short-lived phenomenon that lasted from 1838 to 1848. Chartism asked for constitutional reform and the democratization of politics. In his pamphlet published in 1839, Carlyle describes it as the symptom of an illness that might radically undermine social stability and order. It was an outgrowth of the political and economic predicaments of the time and the disillusionment that followed the inequalities of the first Reform Bill of 1832. Through this movement, workers protested against their low wages, the unacceptable working conditions, and the widening of the gulf between the rich and the poor. The movement took its name from the “People’s Charter” that William Lovett and Francis Place drew up in 1838, and which included the celebrated
six points: universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, removal of property qualifications for MPs, payment for MPs, secret ballots, and annual elections.

Chartists fully utilized the printing technology of the time in order to spread their political agenda, which was expressed in songs, chants, ballads, and hymns. Thus, there were many chartist papers or magazines, like *The Labourer*, *The Chartist Circular*, or *The Northern Star*, the official chartist organ, which published poems by chartist poets like Thomas Cooper, Gerald Massey, Ernest Jones, or W. J. Linton. After having gathered nearly 1.5 million signatures, in 1839 the chartists submitted a petition to the Parliament, but it was rejected. The rejection was followed by many demonstrations and government counter-actions. These events were actually the historical background against which Disraeli’s *Sybil* and Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* were set. In 1842, a second petition was presented, followed in 1848 by a third one, both of which were also rejected, leading to strikes and riots, which formed the background of Kingsley’s novel *Alton Locke*. The disillusionment and the riots that followed, the fact that the middle classes turned to trade unionism, along with the prosperity of the subsequent years, led to the waning of the chartist power.

By 1848, Chartism had lost its impetus, but its presence could be felt throughout the century as a reaction to the radical changes that industrialization had brought about and the inequalities it had generated. Most of the six points of the People’s Charter were in due course incorporated in the English constitution, while Chartism helped radicalism turn into socialism in the following decades. It definitely paved the way for the improvement of factory conditions and child-labor. It also heralded the rise of class-consciousness which is evident in Dickens’ novels *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

When, years later, a persistent agricultural depression in the 1870s resulted in economic depression, unemployment, and poverty in 1884, there followed general public agitation and a resurfacing of Chartism. This alarmed the authorities and led to the awareness that a new handling of urban poverty was needed which prompted a series of state interventions, new reforms, and debates that signaled the birth of social welfare. A new collective awareness was developed then as a form of dissatisfaction with the dominant trend of individualism. This was also the time when socialism and collectivism became very popular through the foundation of many organizations such as the Socialist League (1883) or the Fabian Society (1884).
CHARTIST
DEMONSTRATION!!

“PEACE and ORDER” is our MOTTO!

TO THE WORKING MEN OF LONDON.

Fellow Men,—The Press having misrepresented and vilified us and our intentions, the Demonstration Committee therefore consider it to be their duty to state that the grievances of us (the Working Classes) are deep and our demands just. We and our families are pining in misery, want, and starvation! We demand a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work! We are the slaves of capital—we demand protection to our labour. We are political serfs—we demand to be free. We therefore invite all well disposed to join in our peaceful procession on

MONDAY NEXT, April 10,
As it is for the good of all that we seek to remove the evils under which we groan.

The following are the places of Meeting of the CHARTISTS, THE TRADES, THE IRISH CONFEDERATE & REPEAL BODIES:

East Division on Stepney Green at 8 o’clock; City and Finsbury Division on Clerkenwell Green at 9 o’clock; West Division in Russell Square at 9 o’clock; and the South Division in Peckham Fields at 9 o’clock, and proceed from thence to Kennington Common.

Signed on behalf of the Committee, JOHN ARNOTT, Sec.

Image 2.4 Poster of a Chartist Demonstration, 1848.
The dilemmas and anxieties concerning the phenomenon of Chartism were recorded in the novels of the time through characters of working class men and women who rejected the bleak individualism of *laissez-faire* by joining collective groups such as trade unions or Chartism. These collectivities were, nevertheless, threatening the established order, since they brought back memories of the horrors of the French Revolution. As Carlyle confessed in “Chartism,” “[t]hese Chartisms, Radicalisms, Reform Bill are our French Revolution; God grant that we, with our better methods, may be able to transact it by arguments alone.” Such threat was dramatized in the literature of the time through the persistent positive illustrations of individual workers and negative depiction of organized evil workers. Despite the fact that all social-problem writers sympathized initially with the newly risen working class, when this class started claiming its rights and questioning the established distribution of wealth, sympathy gave way to fear and horror.

In Dickens’ *Hard Times*, for instance, the workers of industrial Coketown are presented as a single anonymous and uniform body, whereas the character of Stephen Blackpool embodies the worker who maintains his individuality by refusing to join their union. In a similar fashion, Gaskell’s novels stage suspicion and fear in the face of organized workers, whereas *Hard Times*, *Shirley*, and *Sybil* harshly condemn trade unions. In *Mary Barton*, the poor are presented as monsters, whereas in *North and South* they are illustrated in bestial terms. Trade unions and working collectivities are, moreover, regarded as hindrances to economic progress. In *Alton Locke* and *Mary Barton*, chartists are directly and unquestioningly held responsible for outbreaks of political violence and are considered to be its initiators, revealing the social distrust that chartists and the poor evoked for the middle classes. The portrayal of Chartism is even more negative in Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), as becomes evident in the famous scene where the mob attacks Mowbray Castle, overtly evoking memories of the French Revolution. In Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* (1850), Chartism is also presented as a negative influence and a means of losing one’s individual traits by becoming part of an uncontrollably violent mob. All these novels depict how extremist agitators take advantage of the bad working and living conditions of the workers and their ignorance in order to spread destructive mob anarchy and undermine social order.

It is interesting to note here that most of these writers resorted to novelistic and romance conventions in order to overcome the ideological shortcomings or impediments of their plots. All these industrial novels have strong intrusive narrators that directly address the reader in order to consolidate their didactic tone and direct the reader’s response to such complicated social phenomena. The emphasis on didacticism can be considered an early precursor of the attempt to educate and shape the opinion of the middle class, something which became a central issue in the mid-Victorian period, as we will see.

Apart from the didacticism of the omniscient narrators, writers employed other literary conventions in order to provide solutions to political problems. The gap between the two nations, the rich and the poor, in these novels is not resolved by overthrowing the status quo but rather through an unexpected inheritance, the revelation of blood kinship, or marriage. The fact, moreover, that all these authors yearned for a solution to the social problem reflects their desire for social stability and the annihilation of anything that might disrupt it. Thus, what initially sets out to be a social, economic, or ideological problem is soon resolved through an idiom of harmony and reconciliation that actually serves to maintain the status quo. In Disraeli’s *Sybil*, the answer to the Chartist agitation and the threatening rise of a new class is provided through the marriage between Charles Egremont, the industrialist, and Sybil, who, together with her father, the Chartist leader, turn out to be aristocrats. For Disraeli, the gap between the two nations can only be bridged through a new form of aristocracy, embodied in the marriage between the heroine and Egremont, and not through trade unions or chartists. Drawing heavily on Carlyle’s version of heroism, Disraeli promotes in his novel a new form of aristocratic chivalry that would lead the people and establish a historical continuity with the ancient regime. Aristocracy, monarchy, the Church, and workers are harmonized in an overtly non-democratic way, since the new working classes are left totally unrepresented in the final resolution.

In a similar fashion, in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, the initial careful representation of social inequalities of the first part of the book is abruptly substituted by a romance plot and sensationalist fiction conventions. It seems that Gaskell’s sympathy towards social issues reaches an impasse when it clashes with her middle class Christian identity. Resorting to the convention of the marriage plot, Gaskell naively suggests that love can achieve the reconciliation between the two nations or at least soften the tension between them.

*A detailed overview of Chartism. Access here*
3.4 Individualism and Poetry: The Dramatic Monologue

The force of individualistic ideology was not only manifest in the industrial novels of the time, but found expression in other literary forms, such as the dramatic monologue, which was one of the most fashionable poetic modes during the Victorian period. This poetic tradition was invented, practiced, and popularized by Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and various other Victorian poets. It based its effect on theatrical qualities since it involved an imagined speaker and an implied audience. A dramatic monologue focused on a person’s speech which was open to interpretation by the audience without any direct authorial intervention. In most cases, this speech highlighted a form of discrepancy between what the speaker or persona said and what s/he meant or how the audience interpreted it. As such, this medium was a perfect means of illustrating the complexities of human identity through the active participation of the audience or the listener. This medium was very popular at the time because it addressed the conflicts and discrepancies between the personal and the social that were very much in the air. In other words, it implicitly illustrated the shortcomings of individualism by highlighting the active role of the audience in the construction of social reality or meaning. It achieved this by staging individuals who have no knowledge of their blind-spots and whose self-centeredness is the reason why they are self-deluded. The fact that the audience is aware of their delusions, nevertheless, generates dramatic irony. In a similar fashion, Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1832) captures the tension between personal inner vision and the realm of social demand, whereas in “The Lotus-Eaters” (1832) Tennyson lucidly encapsulates the conflict between desire and duty.

In one of Robert Browning’s (1812-1889) most celebrated dramatic monologues, “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” (1845), for example, the nuances of individualism are implicitly invoked through a portrait of a fictional Renaissance bishop on his deathbed ordering his tomb. Browning draws on the theatrical conventions of the dramatic monologue in order to illustrate the clash between the reader’s or the audience’s expectations for compliance with moral and social norms and the bishop’s self-centeredness. From the start, the poem’s unrhymed iambic pentameter, which resembles the rhythm of natural speech, a very colloquial and businesslike tone, foregrounds the bishop’s materialism and sensualism rather than his longing for salvation, faith, or deliverance. The speaker’s self-centeredness is highlighted not only through his indulgences in the poem but also through the fact that he longs to build his luxurious tomb because he wants to outshine his antagonist, Old Gandolf. In full compliance with the critics of laissez-faire antagonism, Browning presents individualism as a synonym of materialism, envious competitiveness, and shallowness as well as the opposite of spirituality, sympathy, or personal fulfillment.
3.5 The Self and the Community in Victorian Fiction

The idea of overcoming the limitations of the self and becoming one with the community, that is, the idea of sympathy through which self-interestedness and greed will be overcome is another crucial Victorian concern and one of the dominant themes in Dickens’s work throughout his career. When he visited Manchester in 1843, Dickens was struck by the volunteers who taught the workers’ children. This very idea of sympathy and love able to transcend “the cash nexus” (i.e., materialism) is staged later that year in his very popular story *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Throughout his works, Dickens consistently employs the medium of sentiment as a means of teaching his readers how sympathy and love can overcome the limitations of individualism. Consider for example Little Nell, the angelic orphan girl in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), whose life is immersed in misery while her guardian grandfather is addicted to gambling. Her tragic deathbed scene affected the Victorians much more than any other piece of writing and urged them towards social action.

Many other Victorian writers were also preoccupied with the relation between the individual and society, turning against the dominant ideology of individualism. One might even argue that the main topic of the Victorian novel is actually the relation between the self and society. George Eliot addresses this issue through the phenomenon of egoism that she is constantly preoccupied with throughout her work. She consistently explores the interdependence of the individual and the community through characters who have to surpass their individual limitations in order to become helpful to the community. In one of her early works, *Adam Bede* (1859), the character of Dinah Morris is the epitome of altruism, and influences everyone around her. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the community is upheld over and above the self; Maggie Tulliver develops from being self-centered to being altruistic and only then can she be united with her brother. In *Romola* (1862-63), through the characters of Tito and Romola, Eliot explores the relation between selfishness and generosity. In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), finally, the narrator illustrates how individual benevolence can affect the community.

In *Middlemarch*, specifically, the power that brings everything together, does not lie with the positivists, Lydgate and Casaubon, who are satirically presented as trying to unify things through biology and anthropology, but through an artist, Will Ladislaw, who is the bearer of imagination, or fancy, as Dickens would have put it. This is precisely why Eliot employs one of the predominant images in the novel, that of the web, to illustrate the idea of interconnectedness. Eliot is preoccupied with extending the sympathies of her readers through imagination, the power of identifying with others, and this is why her moralizing narrator constantly intervenes to make sure the reader is aware of the connections between her narrative and real life, or the reader and the world. The plight of others is, in this way, consistently utilized as a stepping stone for action and an urge against egoism.

The Victorian interest in the relationship between the individual and the collective as a corrective of the extremities of self-interestedness is manifested in the resurgence of the *bildungsroman* (i.e., the novel of development or education). Even though the form is solidly based on autobiographical conventions and the Romantic tradition of individualism, in the *bildungsroman*, this emphasis on the individual is always mediated through the social and the communal. Identity is here shaped by external social forces and is, as a consequence, unstable. In *Great Expectations*, which is yet another moral fable written by Dickens in the form of a bildungsroman, the author is engaged with the impact of social mobility upon the self. The novel indicatively begins with Pip’s attempt to understand who he is by trying to read the inscriptions on his family’s tombstone. The semi-Gothic atmosphere of the novel is related to the dark quest into “the identity of things” (*Great Expectations*, Vol. 1, Ch. 1) amidst a terrifying world of conflicting and misleading signs. The novel includes many scenes of the attempt to to read or write as a means of creating one’s identity, and constantly highlights the role of the past in the construction of oneself. The past is the one thing that the characters in the novel can never escape from. It is actually only when the protagonist accepts and embraces his dark, criminal stepfather that he is able to go up the social ladder and succeed in the competitive world of Victorian England. This is how Dickens chose to illustrate the fact that the individual always needs the others in order to be complete.
3.6 Escaping Industrialism: The Return to the Past and Medievalism

The wretched conditions that the poor had to undergo and the bleak side of industrialization made many Victorian thinkers and writers resort to a glorified type of the past as a means of escaping the ugliness of the present. George Eliot’s novels, for example, are all marked by a nostalgia for a pre-industrial past. In Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), Silas Marner (1861), and Middlemarch (1872) industrialization is totally absent despite the fact that Middlemarch, for example, is set against the backdrop of the first Reform Bill of 1832. In the opening pages of Felix Holt (1867), Eliot nostalgically contemplates a pastoral past when there were no railroads. The need to return to the past is evident in a number Victorian writers and artists; Tennyson and Ruskin are nostalgic of the Middle Ages; Robert Browning, Walter Pater and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood celebrate the art of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance; and Matthew Arnold longs to revisit classical Greece. Such nostalgia was symptomatic of a refusal to directly engage with the present by escaping or sublimating it.

Another reason why many writers turned to a glorified and idealized version of the Middle Ages was because they wanted to criticize certain aspects of the present. Medievalism was first expressed in the eighteenth-century architectural movement of Gothic revival and aimed to highlight a sense of historical continuity. The restoration of the Parliament in a Gothic style after it was burned down in 1834 was indicative of the type of the non-classical past it wanted to evoke. But it was actually Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843), which popularized medievalism by juxtaposing its communal vision to laissez-faire individualism. In this book, which is one of the most influential works of Victorian social criticism, Carlyle tries to explore the reasons why people do not react against the inequalities and injustice of modern life but rather take them for granted. For Carlyle, social bonds have been replaced by the “cash nexus” and reduced to the worship of money and material goods. The aristocracy, Carlyle maintains, has failed to provide people with inspiring role models that would encourage them to get out of such misery. So, he believes that industrialists, these successful self-made men, should take the place of aristocracy and become the “Captains of Industry,” in
order to provide moral guidance to workers and the middle class. Carlyle’s solution draws on a type of medieval chivalry in order to come up with a modern type of hero. His answer to the workers’ plight is actually a return to a form of feudalism that actually promotes existing social hierarchies and economic structures. The promotion of aristocratic political dominance inspired the conservative party, the Tories, and deeply influenced Benjamin Disraeli, as we have seen.

What is also interesting to note here is that the medieval past was employed to serve diverse ideological ends and not only conservative ones. For example Ruskin’s essay “The Nature of Gothic,” in the fifth volume of Modern Painters (1860), is solidly based on Carlyle’s medievalist tradition. However, it further expands the notion of medievalism to include not only the concept of chivalric pre-industrial, non-alienated labor, but also the freedom of expression and imagination which industrial mass production definitely lacked. Such celebration of handicraft will later have a huge impact on William Morris’ socialism and the arts and crafts movement. It will also help shape a whole tradition of utopian fiction in which medievalism will be utilized as a means of illustrating an unattainable utopian kind of communal future. This is evident in novels such as William Morris’ News from Nowhere (1891) or George Gissing’s Workers in the Dawn (1880), Demos (1886) and The Nether World (1889).
4. Domesticity and the Woman Question

Domestic propriety became one of the most characteristic values of the Victorian temper and was espoused by the Queen herself. Women were identified with domestic morality as its guardians and bearers, whereas men were identified with the public sphere. Gradually, though, a number of women were not satisfied with the domestic role they were called to play, as it was too constraining and even suffocating. Their attempt to escape the limitations of the domestic sphere marks the birth of a proto-feminist awareness which comprised a crucial part of the Victorian agenda of political and social reformation.

4.1 Two Separate Spheres: The Cult of Domesticity

Anne Brontë, “Domestic Peace,” 1850

Why should such gloomy silence reign,
And why is all the house so drear,
When neither danger, sickness, pain,
Nor death, nor want have entered here?
We are as many as we were
That other night, when all were gay
And full of hope, and free from care;
Yet, is there something gone away.
The moon without, as pure and calm,
Is shining, as that night she shone;
But now, to us, she brings no balm,
For something from our hearts is gone.
Something whose absence leaves a void—
A cheerless want in every heart;
Each feels the bliss of all destroyed,
And mourns the change—but each apart.
The fire is burning in the grate
As redly as it used to burn;
But still the hearth is desolate,
Till mirth, and love, and peace return.
’T was peace that flowed from heart to heart,
With looks and smiles that spoke of heaven,
And gave us language to impart
The blissful thoughts itself had given.
Domestic peace! best joy of earth,
When shall we all thy value learn?
White angel—to our sorrowing hearth,
Return—oh, graciously return!

The cult of domesticity functioned at first as a protective shield the Victorians raised against the sweeping shifts of the times. Amidst the chaos brought about by radical socioeconomic changes, the idea of ordered and pious domesticity was presented as an antidote to such disorder. Home became the shelter from all these troubles that seemed to be threatening nearly all aspects of daily life, and women were the guardian angels of morality. This feminized version of domesticity was also historically enhanced by the ascension of a young female monarch to the throne in 1837. Queen Victoria was devoted not only to her public role, but her domestic role too as a loyal wife and mother of nine children, and foregrounded the role of women as the bearers of the nation’s morality. In 1839, Sarah Stickney Ellis, the author of multiple books about women’s
roles in society, further popularized the idea of “separate spheres” for men and women and highlighted women’s supportive role in the family. Through her publications, she insisted that women should be confined to the domestic sphere in order to be able to care for their husbands who toiled in the turbulent public sphere. Women were identified with the ideals of home and were considered to be emotional, melancholic, and sensitive.

These domestic traits actually enabled the association of women with art and culture. Interestingly, poetry started to be increasingly associated with femininity. Actually, the first two Victorian poets, long before Lord Alfred Tennyson appeared on the scene, were Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. Hemans was one of the most popular early Victorian poets and a leading figure in the domestication of English poetry. Most of her work dealt with the idea of home, associated either with family or with England. Landon’s poems, on the other hand, are mostly preoccupied with unfulfilled desire and the isolation that female writers experienced. The image of a domesticated woman who is sullen or melancholic due to her alienation from the public sphere became a defining characteristic of Tennyson’s work. It is a theme he returns to in a number of poems, such as “Oenone,” (1829), “The Palace of Art” (1832), and “The Lady of Shalott” (1832), or “Mariana” (1830).

The genre of the novel also contributed decisively to the dissemination of the ideal of domesticity. As a matter of fact, this was the time when, gradually but steadily, the novel replaced poetry in popularity and became the dominant literary form in the nineteenth century. It should be noted that, unlike previous dominant literary forms, that is poetry and drama, the novel was not a collective or public medium, but involved reading in the privacy of one’s home. In this sense, the novel was the cultural form of domesticity par excellence. This is why most novels involved narratives that had to do with concepts of domesticity such as the family or the home. In these novels, the protagonists were usually women, unlike the common literary modes of the past, like the epic, which dealt with the public sphere and focused mostly on men. The prevalence of domestic ideals in the fiction of the time is also obvious in the work of the most popular Victorian writer, Charles Dickens. In nearly all of his stories, Dickens counterbalanced the threatening injustice and violence of the public sphere with the soothing moral warmth of home. The domestic sphere is consistently illustrated in Dickens as the haven against the difficulties of life.

In the social-problem novels of the time, moreover, it is often the female protagonist who is the bearer of a redemptive and reconciliatory force precisely because of her association with the domestic sphere. Here, femininity is identified with the domestic values of love and compassion which are employed in order to
soften the political and economic forces of the public sphere with a kind of moral, emotional, and spiritual authority. In Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil*, for example, the heroine stands for the sacred and the noble, whereas in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South* the female protagonists redeem male power through their loving. It is the consciousness of Margaret Hale that gives coherence to the universe of *North and South* the way a mother brings a family together. The female as a motherly mediating force brings extremes together into a happily-ever-after resolution. Thus, through the marriage plot between Margaret Hale and Henry Thornton, male capitalist individualism is feminized and Christianized in order to give birth to a commercial middle glass that will replace a declining immoral gentry.

**Sarah Stickney Ellis, from The Women of England**

*In this extract Sarah Stickney Ellis discusses the influence that women in Victorian England have.*

It is therefore not only false in reasoning, but wrong in principle, for women to assert, as they not unfrequently do with a degree of puerile satisfaction, that they have no influence.

An influence fraught either with good or evil, they must have; and though the one may be above their ambition, and the other beyond their fears, by neglecting to obtain an influence which shall be beneficial to society, they necessarily assume a bad one: just in the same proportion as their selfishness, indolence, or vacuity of mind, render them in youth an easy prey to every species of unamiable temper, in middle age the melancholy victims of mental disease, and, long before the curtain of death conceals their follies from the world, a burden and a bane to society at large. A superficial observer might with this class many of those exemplary women, who pass to and fro upon the earth with noiseless step, whose names are never heard, and who, even in society, if they attempt to speak, have scarcely the ability to command an attentive audience. Yet amongst this unpretending class are found striking and noble instances of women, who, apparently feeble and insignificant, when called into action by pressing and peculiar circumstances, can accomplish great and glorious purposes, supported and carried forward by that most valuable of all faculties—moral power.

It is not to be presumed that women possess more power than men; but happily for them, such are their early impressions, associations, and general position in the world, that their moral feelings are less liable to be impaired by the pecuniary objects which too often constitute the chief end of man, and which, even under the limitations of better principle, necessarily engage a large portion of his thoughts. There are many humble-minded women, not remarkable for any particular intellectual endowments, who yet possess so clear a sense of the right and wrong of individual actions, as to be of essential service in aiding the judgments of their husbands, brothers, or sons, in those intricate affairs in which it is sometimes difficult to dissecver worldly wisdom from religious duty.

To men belongs the potent (I had almost said the omnipotent) consideration of worldly aggrandisement; and it is constantly misleading their steps, closing their ears against the voice of conscience, and beguiling them with the promise of peace, where peace was never found. Long before the boy has learned to exult in the dignity of the man, his mind has become familiarized to the habit of investing with supreme importance, all considerations relating to the acquisition of wealth. He hears on the sabbath, and on stated occasions, when men meet for that especial purpose, of a God to be worshipped, a Saviour to be trusted in, and a holy law to be observed; but he sees before him, every day and every hour, a strife, which is nothing less than deadly to the highest impulses of the soul, after another god—the mammon of unrighteousness—the moloch3 of this world; and believing rather what men do, than what they preach, he learns too soon to mingle with the living mass, and to unite his labours with theirs. To unite? Alas! there is no union in the great field of action in which he is engaged; but envy and hatred, and opposition, to the close of the day. . . .

How often has man returned to his home with a mind confused by the many voices, which in the mart, the exchange, or the public assembly, have addressed themselves to his inborn selfishness, or his worldly pride; and while his integrity was shaken, and his resolution gave way beneath the pressure of apparent necessity, or the insidious pretences of expediency, he has stood corrected before the clear eye of woman, as it looked directly to the naked truth, and detected the lurking evil of the specious act he was about to commit.
Nay, so potent may have become this secret influence, that he may have borne it about with him like a kind of second conscience, for mental reference, and spiritual counsel in moments of trial; and when the snares of the world were around him, and temptations from within and without have bribed over the witness in his own bosom, he has thought of the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty, has scattered the clouds before his mental vision, and sent him back to that beloved home, a wiser and a better man.

The Cult of Domesticity. Access [here](#).

Here you can find Isabella Beecher’s The Book of Household Management (1861), a paradigmatic domestic advice book. Access [here](#)
Apart from evolutionary theory, which launched a relentless questioning of religious and metaphysical assumptions, there were other historical factors that contributed to a gradual yet steady change in domestic values, which were so fundamental in the middle class moral code. Gender stereotypes, which were so ardently supported in Sarah Stickney Ellis’ *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839) as the cornerstones of domestic ideology, were systematically attacked in the 1840s and 1850s,
Yannis Kanarakis

initiating what has been called the Woman Question. There were many women who found the idea of marriage as the only alternative in their lives suffocating, and thus fought for equal rights with men. Caroline Norton, Harriet Martineau, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, and Bessie Rayner Parkes, among others, played a decisive role in the 1850s parliamentary debates which led to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 which made divorce legal and provided for the protection of divorced, separated, and deserted wives.

What also led to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act was quite unexpectedly the British defeat at the Crimean War that took place from 1853 to 1856. The failure, incompetence, and mismanagement on the part of the authorities outraged the disillusioned public which demanded radical reforms. In sharp contrast, nevertheless, to the inadequacy and ineffectuality of the male high-class authorities, a modern heroine emerged out of this war. Florence Nightingale rose to prominence as the organizer and manager of a very efficient team of nurses that tended the wounded soldiers during the war. “The Lady with the Lamp,” as Nightingale came to be known, was not only the founder of modern nursing but actually foregrounded the role of women as crucial and helpful agents of the public sphere as well. She thus played a crucial role in the professionalization of nursing for women, setting up the first secular school for nurses which unlocked the gates of women’s domestic seclusion.

![Image 2.8 George Frederic Watts, Found Drowned (1867). An image that depicts the fate that awaits women who leave the domestic warmth and seek adventure in the public sphere.](image)

Despite its double standards for men and women, as well as its many shortcomings, the 1857 Act gave relative autonomy to women, paving the way towards the improvement of their status. As a consequence of the Act, many constitutional efforts were made towards women’s equality. During the debates about the Second Reform Bill, J. S. Mill, a Member of the Parliament then, suggested that women should also vote, and in 1869 he published his controversial essay *The Subjection of Women*, in which he argues in favour of equality between men and women. However, another series of Acts brought to the forefront the inequality between men and women and infuriated certain liberal thinkers. These were the Contagious Diseases Acts, successively passed in 1864, 1866, and 1869, which permitted the authorities to perform genital inspection on women who were suspected of venereal disease and who would subsequently be detained in hospitals. Men were, of course, neither inspected nor penalized on grounds that this would harm the morale of the army and put national security at risk. This comprised not only a violation of the rights of women, since it subjected them to public humiliation, but, most importantly, failed to eradicate or at least deal with the problem. In 1886, these Acts were repealed, and a number of other Acts set the stepping stones for women’s independence. The 1870 Education Act, for instance, helped women get new employment opportunities as
teachers, and in 1882 The Married Woman’s Act gave women rights to the property acquired before and after marriage. All these actions led to the first feminist wave.

The shift in the sociopolitical climate is reflected in a number of Victorian heroines who question the restrictive roles society forces on them by developing an oppositional discourse against dominant morals. One of the harshest critiques of the domestic ideal came with William Thackeray’s novel *Vanity Fair* (1847-48). Becky Sharp, the daughter of a penniless artist and the heroine of the novel, climbs up the social and economic ladder by cynically exploiting anybody who stands in her way. Through the heroine’s embodiment of social mobility and the economic principles of the time, the novel illustrates that domestic values are, like everything else, a product of the “cash nexus,” and, as such, part of the social facade and the play of appearances upon which most Victorian morals rested. This facade is also exposed in two novels written in the same year; Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) which, in its claustrophobic domestic imagery, dramatizes the struggle between self-expression and self-repression and exposes the limited rights and sparse educational and career prospects that women had; and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), a story of the conflicts between the uncontrollable forces of passion and middle class respectability. The latter implicitly cauterizes the cult of domesticity through its formal structure. The framed narratives create an atmosphere of uncertainty and subjectivism that casts an uncanny light upon the domestic sphere. Home is no longer presented as a warm and safe refuge, but rather as the locus of thwarted desire, unfulfilled passions, and secret traumas. This is why in both novels the authors borrow from the Gothic tradition in order to illustrate the darker side of the domestic sphere. A few years later, in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), George Eliot’s heroine, Maggie Tulliver, is considered to be a mistake of nature by her family and local community due to her untamable nature and passion for education and love. Maggie’s tragic, but wished for, death by drowning at the end of the book can also be read as a proto-feminist victory, as it signals her refusal to fit into the reproductive model of her time.

### 4.3 Women’s Representation in Poetry by Men

Women knew that in order to improve their position they would have to change the way they were culturally perceived and socially represented. Thus, they revolted against the stereotypical and patronizing way in which female figures were represented by male poets. As poetry written at the time was a very popular and influential genre, male authors had established a tradition of idealizing women as melancholic domestic figures who functioned as poetic inspiration, as discussed above. Apart from Tennyson’s numerous female figures, another striking example is D. G. Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” (1850). In this poem, a male lover gazes up the heaven as his departed beloved lady looks at him longing for their reunion. Through language that brings together religious and sexual imagery, the damozel is presented as virginal yet maintaining certain implicit sexual overtones. She is turned, in other words, into an idealized reverie in the mind of a man and appears as he would have liked her to be: a woman eternally longing for him and ultimately becoming his inspiration.

* A very helpful interactive site on "The Blessed Damozel". Access [here](#)
A second dominant characteristic in the way male poets presented female characters involved their ventriloquizing and objectification. In Tennyson’s “Marianna” (1830), for example, the voice of the female character is conditioned and mediated by the male speaker who will not let her speak for herself, while in “The Lady of Shallot” (1832), we never hear the Lady’s voice throughout the entire poem. In Victorian poetry, women are often treated as the objects of male imagination and not as independent subjects. This becomes particularly clear in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (1842), where the Duke/speaker controls what the readers know about his young wife. He also commodifies her literally by turning her into a painting in his possession. In the poem, the last image of the statue of Neptune taming sea horses is indicative of the fate of his poor wife whose female nature had to be disciplined by male authority because it was considered threatening. In a similar vein, in D. G. Rossetti’s “Jenny” (1860), the male speaker takes pity on a prostitute he has hired, Jenny, and lets her fall asleep on his knee. Jenny becomes an object of contemplation for the speaker who reads her as if she were a book. She inspires speculation and pity since she is presented as incapable of realizing the full implications of her social plight.
4.4 Women’s Representation in Literature by Women

Drawing on the changes in the social and political climate, women writers started portraying female figures that turned against patriarchal tradition and deviated from the domestic model. In the 1850s, “spinsters” became dominant figures in novels, reflecting the fact that a third of the women at the time were not married. This was not only a shift towards realistic writing, since it recorded a historical fact, but also an attempt to bring women out of the male shadow and present them under their own light. “Spinster” figures in Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853), or in Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) and *Ruth* (1853), signaled women’s distancing from the domestic ideal, as well as their gradual incorporation into the public sphere. Indicative of this trend that wanted to undermine the tradition of representing women as inactive and domestic is Gaskell’s central heroine in *North and South* (1855), Margaret Hale. Through this dynamic female character, Gaskell eradicates the division between the two separate spheres, the domestic and the public, by bringing together social and family themes. Leaving the traditional South behind, Margaret and her family move to the industrial North, where she is introduced not only to the plights of the industrial workers, but also to a young self-made industrialist, John Thorton. In a seminal moment in the book, Margaret chooses to mediate between John Thorton and the angry mob of workers during a strike. This act signals the emergence of women in the public sphere, and indirectly introduces the issue of women’s rights into the social reform agenda of the industrial novel.

The tradition of female idealization and objectification, along with the cult of separate spheres, are also harshly criticized in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a best-selling poem of the time, composed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning’s wife. Written in blank verse, this autobiographical poem traces the development of a female poet through her struggle to harmonize her aspirations with love, something which, as the third person narrator ironically admits, is definitely not the case with male authors. Barrett Browning questions the Victorian stereotype of separate spheres as Aurora can become domestic only when she has conquered the public. Browning also attacks the constant idealization of women in male poetry. This is why Aurora refuses to get married and chooses to pursue the difficult career of a poetess. But the poem gives voice to female victims as well. In many instances in the poem, prostitution is attacked and sympathy is drawn for the poor fallen women who are sexually exploited. These radical ideas are enhanced through the very innovative form of this work, as *Aurora Leigh* is a poetic novel that crosses the boundaries of genres. The poem ends with the vision of a New Jerusalem, a new world where women would have equal rights and chances with men.
The second most influential mid-Victorian female poet after Barrett Browning was Christina Rossetti. As the youngest child in a family of poets, artists and philosophers, she was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in which her brother was a founding member. As a woman, she had little place in a “brotherhood,” and this was probably why she was involved throughout her life with the establishment of sisterhoods. Rossetti was actively involved with feminist groups and even volunteered to offer her services to a refuge for fallen women. It comes as no surprise then that much of Rossetti’s work was a critique of marriage and traditional Victorian domestic values.

In one of her most well-known poems, “Goblin Market” (1859), Rossetti appropriates the Pre-Raphaelite portraits of women with accentuated femininity in order to deal with the theme of female sexuality. Through the fairy tale narrative of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, the poem illustrates the dangers that await a woman once she leaves the haven of her domestic sphere. The fact that Rossetti frames her story within a fairy tale narrative helps her sublimate the connotations of female sexuality and the issue of the fallen woman. Rather than judge or condemn Laura, who is seduced by the goblins, the narrative promotes understanding and social acceptance, as she is eventually saved by her sister. Rossetti’s version of the fallen woman is in sharp contrast with D. G. Rossetti’s portrayal of a fallen woman in “Jenny” (written in the 1850s but published in the 1870s), where female sexuality necessarily leads to marginalization. In “Goblin Market,” the problems of female commodification and objectification are overcome through female solidarity.
The emancipation of this female figure is not only evident in the way her hair symbolically flows free, but also in the way she directly addresses the viewer without any hesitation.

4.5 The New Woman and the Decline of Domesticity

Sydney Grundy, from *The New Woman*

From Act 1

**Sylvester:** Yes, I am Mrs. Sylvester’s husband. I belong to my wife, but my wife doesn’t belong to me. She is the property of the public. Directly I saw her photograph in a shop-window I realized the situation. People tell me I’ve a wife to be proud of; but they’re wrong. Mrs. Sylvester is not my wife; I am her husband.

**Colonel:** [taking up a book] This is what comes of educating women. We have created a Frankenstein. “Man, the Betrayer—A Study of the Sexes—by Enid Bethune.”

**Sylvester:** Oh, I know her. She comes to our house.

**Colonel:** And has a man betrayed her?

**Sylvester:** Never. Not likely to.

**Colonel:** That’s what’s the matter, perhaps?

**Sylvester:** Her theory is, that boys ought to be girls, and young men should be maids. [Colonel throws down the book.] That’s how she’d equalize the sexes.

**Colonel:** Pshaw! [Takes up another book.] “Ye Foolish Virgins!—A Remonstrance—by Victoria Vivash.”

**Sylvester:** Another soul! She’s also for equality. Her theory is, that girls should be boys, and maids should be young men. Goes in for latchkeys and that sort of thing.

**Colonel:** [throws down the book] Bah! [Takes up a third.] “Naked and Unashamed—A Few Plain Facts and Figures—by Mary Bevan, M.D.” Who on earth’s she?

**Sylvester:** One of the plain figures. She comes to our house, too.
Colonel: [reads] “The Physiology of the Sexes”! Oh, this eternal babble of the sexes! [Throws book down.] Why can’t a woman be content to be a woman? What does she want to make a beastly man of herself for?

Sylvester: But my wife isn’t a woman.

Colonel: None of them are, my boy. A woman, who is a woman, doesn’t want to be anything else. These people are a sex of their own, Sylvester. They have invented a new gender. . . .

[Enter Enid and Victoria, in hot argument. . . .]

Enid: I can’t agree with you! Say what you will, I can’t agree with you!

Victoria: That doesn’t alter the fact. A woman has just as much right to a latchkey as a man.

Enid: Rudeness is not argument!

Victoria: Why make distinctions?

Enid: I make no distinctions. I admit that a woman has just as much right to come home with the milk as a man but I say, a man has no right to come home with the milk; and I say more—no woman who respects herself has any desire to come home with the milk!

Victoria: Bother the milk! It isn’t a question of milk. It’s a question of making artificial distinctions between the sexes.

Enid: I say that there ought to be no distinction! Why should a man be allowed to commit sins—

Victoria: And woman not be given an opportunity?

Enid: Then do you want to commit sins?

Victoria: I want to be allowed to do as men do.

Enid: Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself; there!

Victoria: I only say, I ought to be allowed.

Enid: And I say that a man, reeking with infamy, ought not to be allowed to marry a pure girl—

Victoria: Certainly not! She ought to reek with infamy as well.

Enid: Victoria! [Knock without.]

Victoria: What is the difference between man and woman?

Enid: There is no difference! . . .

Lady Wargrave: Excuse my ignorance, but I have been away from England for so many years. Can this be the New Woman I have read about?

Colonel: Everything’s New nowadays! We have a New Art—

Enid: A New Journalism—

Victoria: A New Political Economy—

Doctor: A New Morality—

Colonel: A New Sex!

Lady Wargrave: [smiling] Ah!

Doctor: Do you object to modernity?

Lady Wargrave: I’ve only one objection to new things; they are so old.

Victoria: Not the New Woman!

Lady Wargrave: No; she is generally middle-aged. . . .
The term “New Woman” was coined in 1894 to denote a self-reliant, outspoken, educated, and unconventional type of woman that was very popular in certain narratives of the time. These narratives signaled a new rising collective consciousness of femininity. Drawing on the earlier tradition of the Fallen Woman and the campaigns of the proto-feminists, feminist voices gained new momentum in the 1880s and 1890s, as a result of certain historical factors. First, the fact that in the 1870s women were allowed to attend university education boosted their hopes and aspirations of reaching, like men, higher social ranks and opened new vistas for women, who started re-envisioning a life based on equality. This is precisely what the extract from Sydney Grundy’s play ridicules when claiming that education has created female monsters. Last but certainly not least, the staging of Ibsen’s plays created heated debates about the social position of women and popularized the roles of unconventional women who rebelled against inequality and injustice.

As we have already seen, the figure of the independent and rebellious woman was the focus of many earlier novels or poems. What changed in the last decades of the century was the perspective from which such independence was regarded. In other words, these unconventional heroines were no longer considered to be failures, or social peculiarities that the narratives were anxious to regulate through marriage, but they were rather presented in a positive light. This implied that the institution of marriage was not socially idealized any longer, as we can infer from the increasing presence of unmarried women in late Victorian narratives and the distrust in the marriage plot, the epitome of mid-century domesticity. In Anthony Trollope’s novels, for example, and especially in *The Way We Live Now* (1875), we witness the dissolution of traditional norms through the rise of a new kind of self-interest that corrodes domestic ideals. Echoing Carlyle’s critique, Trollope presents a world in which all traditional values are replaced by money, and marriage is only considered as a means of financial success. George Meredith’s novel *The Egoist* (1879) records the burdens of domestic tyranny, while the cornerstone of Victorian domesticity, family life, is harshly questioned in Samuel Butler’s novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903). All fundamentals of Victorian morality are presented here as empty institutions that have nothing to offer anymore.
The dissolution of the marriage plot cast an emancipatory light on women characters. Thus, in Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), the protagonist refuses to marry her beloved and prefers to live with him outside wedlock. Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians* (1886), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Awkward Age* (1899), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) all record emancipated independent women with vibrant sexualities and illustrate the disruptive force of desire within family life. Thomas Hardy has also created multiple paradigmatic New Women. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), Hardy shocked his contemporaries with the sexual boldness of the heroine, whereas in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) he offers a critique of matrimony through Sue Bridehead’s highly unconventional views on marriage. Both Tess and Sue encapsulate the spirit of the New Woman in a very concise way.

As female sexuality was no longer connected exclusively with the institution of marriage, it acquired a new essence, and women were able to enjoy new forms of freedom. One of the basic arguments of first-wave feminists was precisely that female sexuality can be freely expressed only if it is dissociated from marriage and motherhood. The claim for sexual liberation was the reason why the New Woman cause was affiliated with the aestheticist and decadent sexual agenda; they both promoted new sexual types and emancipation from middle class Victorian stereotypes. In their sexual cause, the New Woman novels brought together and harmonized two earlier trends of the Victorian tradition: the social problem novel that focused on public discourse and the novel of domestic realism that concentrated on private discourse.
5. Religion and Evolutionary Theory

5.1 Crisis of Faith

Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach”

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. (21-8)

Religion occupied a central position in Victorian life whether it was ardently supported or passionately rejected. Traces of religious language or thought can be observed in all dominant cultural, historical, and political discourses, and nearly all Victorian thinkers and writers dealt with it one way or another. In the 1830s, long before the publication of Darwin’s work, Victorians experienced a prominent crisis of faith motivated by a thick web of factors that persistently attacked religious faith. These factors basically involved the distrust that people felt over the disputes and antagonisms between English churches or sects, as well as the radical secularization of people’s worldview that the rise of science, technology and consumption brought about. This intense Victorian preoccupation with the loss of a unifying, coherent and meaningful narrative is characteristically presented in Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (1867). There used to be once, Arnold argues, a “sea of Faith” that provided soothing comfort to people and a sense of meaning to their lives, but now the world is bare of its metaphysical magic and beauty. The force behind all this was none other than the then dominant scientific narrative of evolutionary theory which presented the world as comprising only matter: “vast edges drear / And naked shingles.”

Here is a very helpful overview of religion in Victorian Britain. Access here
5.2 Evolutionary Theory and Charles Darwin

Image 2.14 Satiric illustration of Evolutionary Theory from Punch, May 1861.
Charles Darwin, from *On the Origin of the Species*

In this extract, Darwin defines the term “struggle for existence” which became one of the most influential and misappropriated aspects of his theory.

Hence, also, we can see that when a plant or animal is placed in a new country amongst new competitors, though the climate may be exactly the same as in its former home, yet the conditions of its life will generally be changed in an essential manner. If we wished to increase its average numbers in its new home, we should have to modify it in a different way to what we should have done in its native country; for we should have to give it some advantage over a different set of competitors or enemies.

It is good thus to try in our imagination to give any form some advantage over another. Probably in no single instance should we know what to do, so as to succeed. It will convince us of our ignorance on the mutual relations of all organic beings; a conviction as necessary, as it seems to be difficult to acquire. All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.

Although Darwin’s groundbreaking book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* was published in 1859, the concept of evolution had been widely discussed decades before that. As early as 1833, Charles Lyell’s *The Principles of Geology* recorded geological findings that radically questioned biblical assumptions and the idea that the world was divine creation. Evolution, though, came to be tightly associated with Darwin, as he provided a very coherent and convincing theory which could account for the emergence of certain species in a way that could be easily understood by nearly everybody. This easy-to-follow narrative made also possible the popularization of the argumentation against religion.

The controversy about the descent of man is well captured in numerous literary texts from all genres. Robert Browning’s poem “Caliban Upon Setebos; or Natural Theology in the Island” (1864), for instance, questions and undermines the idea that man was made in god’s image. The poem is a monologue that draws on Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1610-11), in which Prospero, a noble magician, is shipwrecked on an island inhabited by a bestial native, Caliban. While this animal-like creature is unable to grasp the magnitude of higher metaphysical forces, it is able to perceive instinctively how evolution works. At some point in his monologue, Caliban alludes to Darwin’s idea of natural selection, the mechanism that propels evolution and allows certain species to survive. In Caliban’s words, only those species which adapt by “running,” “diving,” or “fleeing” will endure:

There is the sport: discover or die!
All need not die, for of the things o’ the isle
Some flee afar, some dive, some run up trees;
Those at His mercy,—why, they please Him most
When […] when […] well, never try the same way twice!

(218-222)

Through the figure of Caliban, Browning does not only reflect the implications of Darwin’s argumentation, but also addresses contemporary questions about man’s origin, the existence of god, and man’s ability to understand all this. Throughout the poem, Browning presents many different interpretations and versions, yet no conclusion is eventually reached. Such open-endedness reflects the anxiety Victorians
Yannis Kanarakis

The remarkable aspect of Darwinian theory was that it could be appropriated by both progressive and conservative discourses for different purposes. It could either stand for opposition to religious orthodoxy, as in the case of Browning, or represent a set of ideas that promoted continuity rather than a radical break from the status quo. It could, moreover, be viewed in terms of optimism or pessimism. Thus, concepts like “natural selection” or “the struggle for survival” were optimistically considered by many Victorian thinkers to be in tune with the *laissez-faire* economy that actively contributed to the nation’s progress. The association between biology and economy or sociology was initiated basically by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), a prominent Victorian philosopher, biologist and sociologist, who coined the term “survival of the fittest” to describe the competitiveness and ruthless struggle for success that characterize modern societies. Spencer’s idea that societies, very much like organisms, evolve from simpler to more complex forms deeply affected the discipline of anthropology. All these ideas, however, which comprised the backbone of this attempt to make ethics out of science, called social Darwinism, were definitely a misinterpretation of Darwinian theory, which clearly argued that there was no governing principle, end or *telos* in the evolutionary process.

It was precisely on these grounds that evolutionary theory was interpreted by other thinkers at the time as scientific proof of moving backwards rather than forwards. The randomness with which the universe operates, they argued, as well as the fact that humans are insignificant creatures in a cruel universe that does not care about them are not signs of progress. Thomas Hardy’s (1840-1928) work illustrates this pessimism, and represents the darker and crueler side of evolutionary theory. When Charles Knight slips, falls, and is suspended from a cliff in one of Hardy’s earlier works, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), he sees a fossil and speculates minutes before his end on the fact that evolutionary time makes no sense in the face of death. In *Jude the Obscure* (1894), Hardy’s last novel, the universe is indifferent to the dreams and aspirations of its characters, and constantly crushes them in a cruel way. Only the characters who are able to adjust to a changing world, in which there is no divine providence, manage to survive in the end.

---

**Friedrich Nietzsche, from *The Twilight of the Idols***

*In this extract, the German philosopher discusses the inability of the English to get rid of Christian morality.*

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. This is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females à la Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there.

We others hold otherwise. When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one’s feet. This morality is by no means self-evident: this point has to be exhibited again and again, despite the English flatheads. Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one’s head.

**It is important to note here that either as a form of providence or as lack of it, evolutionary theory was directly or indirectly associated with a new form of morality. This was because it did not only undermine faith but also replaced it as an organizing narrative that could provide order amidst the chaos and anxiety that the loss of faith had left behind. As a consequence, some writers strove to harmonize science and religion on moral grounds: Charles Kingsley, a clergyman, combined theology and evolutionary theory in his writings; Philip Henry Gosse brought together zoology with Evangelicalism; finally, Gerald Manley Hopkins’ poetry regarded science as a manifestation of God’s design. Although the Victorians appeared eager to do away with religion as an outdated system that could no longer account for the new spirit of the times, in many cases, they actually reshaped Christian ideas in a more secular form. This was precisely the argument that Nietzsche**
presented against George Eliot and the Britons in general for failing to fully get rid of the burden of Christian morality. Nietzsche is probably right, as all basic Victorian values, such as self-sacrifice, honesty, humility, respectability, earnestness, and virginity, were nothing but secularized, traditional religious values. Even the device of the omniscient narrator, a defining characteristic of most major Victorian novels, can be seen as a secularized version of divine providence; in a god-like fashion, omniscient narrators distributed justice by punishing crime and rewarding virtue.

Image 2.15 A satirical illustration which presents Darwin as a descendant of the ape (1871).

Here you can find all of Darwin’s work and manuscripts. Access here
Thomas Hardy, from _A Pair of Blue Eyes_

_This is a characteristic example of Hardy’s pessimistic view of evolutionary theory._

Haggard cliffs, of every ugly altitude, are as common as sea-fowl along the line of coast between Exmoor and Land's End; but this outflanked and encompassed specimen was the ugliest of them all. Their summits are not safe places for scientific experiment on the principles of air-currents, as Knight had now found, to his dismay.

He still clutched the face of the escarpment—not with the frenzied hold of despair, but with a dogged determination to make the most of his every jot of endurance, and so give the longest possible scope to Elfride’s intentions, whatever they might be.

He reclined hand in hand with the world in its infancy. Not a blade, not an insect, which spoke of the present, was between him and the past. The inveterate antagonism of these black precipices to all strugglers for life is in no way more forcibly suggested than by the paucity of tufts of grass, lichens, or confervae on their outermost ledges.

Knight pondered on the meaning of Elfride’s hasty disappearance, but could not avoid an instinctive conclusion that there existed but a doubtful hope for him. As far as he could judge, his sole chance of deliverance lay in the possibility of a rope or pole being brought; and this possibility was remote indeed. The soil upon these high downs was left so untended that they were unenclosed for miles, except by a casual bank or dry wall, and were rarely visited but for the purpose of collecting or counting the flock which found a scanty means of subsistence thereon.

At first, when death appeared improbable, because it had never visited him before, Knight could think of no future, nor of anything connected with his past. He could only look sternly at Nature’s treacherous attempt to put an end to him, and strive to thwart her.

From the fact that the cliff formed the inner face of the segment of a huge cylinder, having the sky for a top and the sea for a bottom, which enclosed the cove to the extent of more than a semicircle, he could see the vertical face curving round on each side of him. He looked far down the facade, and realized more thoroughly how it threatened him. Grimness was in every feature, and to its very bowels the inimical shape was desolation.

By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight’s eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called Trilobites. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

The creature represented but a low type of animal existence, for never in their vernal years had the plains indicated by those numberless slaty layers been traversed by an intelligence worthy of the name. Zoophytes, mollusca, shell-fish, were the highest developments of those ancient dates. The immense lapses of time each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man. They were grand times, but they were mean times too, and mean were their relics. He was to be with the small in his death.

Knight was a geologist; and such is the supremacy of habit over occasion, as a pioneer of the thoughts of men, that at this dreadful juncture his mind found time to take in, by a momentary sweep, the varied scenes that had had their daily face between this creature's epoch and his own. There is no place like a cleft landscape for bringing home such imaginings as these.

Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously. Fierce men, clothed in the hides of beasts, and carrying, for defence and attack, huge clubs and pointed spears, rose from the rock, like the phantoms before the doomed Macbeth. They lived in hollows, woods, and mud huts—perhaps in caves of the neighbouring rocks. Behind them stood an earlier band. No man was there. Huge elephantine forms, the mastodon, the hippopotamus, the tapir, antelopes of monstrous size, the megatherium, and the myledon—all, for the moment, in juxtaposition. Further back, and overlapped
by these, were perched huge-billed birds and swinish creatures as large as horses. Still more shadowy were the sinister crocodilian outlines—alligators and other uncouth shapes, culminating in the colossal lizard, the iguanodon. Folded behind were dragon forms and clouds of flying reptiles: still underneath were fishy beings of lower development; and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. These images passed before Knight’s inner eye in less than half a minute, and he was again considering the actual present. Was he to die? The mental picture of Elfride in the world, without himself to cherish her, smote his heart like a whip. He had hoped for deliverance, but what could a girl do? He dared not move an inch. Was Death really stretching out his hand? The previous sensation, that it was improbable he would die, was fainter now.

However, Knight still clung to the cliff.

To those musing weather-beaten West-country folk who pass the greater part of their days and nights out of doors, Nature seems to have moods in other than a poetical sense: predilections for certain deeds at certain times, without any apparent law to govern or season to account for them. She is read as a person with a curious temper; as one who does not scatter kindnesses and cruelties alternately, impartially, and in order, but heartless severities or overwhelming generosities in lawless caprice. Man’s case is always that of the prodigal’s favourite or the miser’s pensioner. In her unfriendly moments there seems a feline fun in her tricks, begotten by a foretaste of her pleasure in swallowing the victim.

Such a way of thinking had been absurd to Knight, but he began to adopt it now. He was first spitted on to a rock. New tortures followed. The rain increased, and persecuted him with an exceptional persistency which he was moved to believe owed its cause to the fact that he was in such a wretched state already. An entirely new order of things could be observed in this introduction of rain upon the scene. It rained upwards instead of down. The strong ascending air carried the rain-drops with it in its race up the escarpment, coming to him with such velocity that they stuck into his flesh like cold needles. Each drop was virtually a shaft, and it pierced him to his skin. The water-shafts seemed to lift him on their points: no downward rain ever had such a torturing effect. In a brief space he was drenched, except in two places. These were on the top of his shoulders and on the crown of his hat.
5.3 Science and Art: Realism

Darwinism greatly contributed to the popularity of scientific discourse as reflected in the rise of realism. Realism drew on the scientific model because it was a means of understanding the world in a way that had nothing to do with the outdated illusions of the artistic, the metaphysical, or the Romantic worldview. The new era was after all about truth and “facts,” as mentioned above. So realism actually involved the representation of life as the average reader saw and experienced it.

It was basically through George Eliot that realism became very popular in Britain. Eliot’s brand of realism was different from the French realism of Balzac or Flaubert, which became prominent in the 1850s.
Although Eliot was in tune with the French realists in focusing on the everyday, unlike them, she subjected her realism to a moral end in order to encourage her readers’ sympathy. Realism, thus, signaled the representation and explanation of the world through middle-class values in order to give meaning and validity to these values. In other words, as it became evident in Eliot’s case, it was an optimistic moral code imposed upon the world not based on religion but rather on positivism and science.

By the 1870s, however, realism became less optimistic when it was transformed into Naturalism. Naturalism was a brand of realism that claimed to be closer in detail to reality than realism itself, and it was affected by Darwinian theory. Naturalism portrayed human beings as a form of organic matter solely determined by heredity and the environment, and presented the idea of free will as a cosmic joke. Such determinism is evident in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), where it is impossible for the main characters to escape the limitations that the environment has set on them, or the faults and misery of their parents and families.

5.4 Degeneration: From Progression to Regression

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a growing awareness that Victoria’s reign, which had brought so much glory to the nation, was approaching its decline. As a result, the *fin-de-siècle*
became inevitably associated with decay and even degeneration. Many of the rising social phenomena and artistic trends of the period were interpreted by Max Nordau, the Zionist physician and social critic, as signs of a degenerating world. In his book, *Degeneration*, published in 1892 and translated into English in 1895, Nordau holds that modernity is a sort of pathological disease, the symptoms of which are expressed in symbolist or pre-Modernist literature. Nordau based his theory on Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* and the idea that species are not static or fixed. If species can evolve and progress, then they might as well regress into weaker and less developed forms. This pessimistic biological model was employed by Nordau to account for social ills as well, such as poverty, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and criminality.

Nordau’s theory also established a correlation between individual and racial or cultural progress. Children were identified with primitive tribes, since they were both perceived as immature, innocent and naive, whereas adulthood was correlated with stages of advanced civilization. This association highlighted the proximity of young ages and certain tribes to the animal realm, and consequently undermined the domestic security and safety that Victorians cherished. If animals gradually turned into more developed living forms, then under certain circumstances humans could revert to an animal state, too. This meant that a developed culture could just as easily regress into more primitive stages, as an adult could regress into childlike behavior. Nordau’s theory thus highlighted the fact that the indispensable (and inescapable sometimes) other side of progress and evolution was regression. The anxiety of degenerating into earlier brutal forms of life is very clearly dramatized in Stevenson’s story *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which Dr. Jekyll, the intellectual, prestigious, and cultivated doctor, reverts to Mr. Hyde, his primitive and animalistic “other” governed by primitive instincts and desires. The same fear of devolution is addressed in a number of *fin-de-siècle* texts, such as Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, H. Rider Haggard’s *She*, H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

In general, most literature of the *fin-de-siècle* alludes to dark irrational forces lurking beneath the surface and threatening to destabilize the established order of things. These disruptive forces may take several forms: in Hardy’s work, they are manifested as uncontrollable sexual urges, in Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as repressed psychological elements, in James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) as the nightmares of child libido. In ways reminiscent of the Gothic, such narratives addressed the darker side of progress and highlighted the importance of the past. Although progress was a move away from tradition, such Gothic narratives brought back the past in the form of what Freud a few years later would call “the return of the repressed.”
6. The Rise and Fall of the British Empire

6.1 The Rise of the British Empire

As already stated, the industrial boom, supported by an overwhelming shipping force, led to an unprecedented expansion of Britain’s markets during the mid-nineteenth century. Meanwhile, with the acceleration of British colonization, English language and culture spread throughout the world. In 1849, the dominion over India, “the chief jewel in the imperial crown,” was completed, while the discovery of gold in Australia in 1851 led to large-scale immigration. Throughout the last decades of the century, Britain annexed vast areas in Africa, the Far East, and the Pacific. The Britons had been familiar with risky expeditions through the Romantic fascination with adventurous travels and the “exotic” other. However, the concept of a powerful and leading worldwide empire became prominent only with “the Indian Mutiny” of 1857-58, when the revolt of certain Indian troops in Northern India led to the killings of a number of Britons and Britain’s subsequent fierce reaction. This marked a radical shift in the discourse that accompanied Britain’s imperial expedition, which no longer proclaimed to be solely a peaceful process of carrying the torch of civilization, but also, if needed, a forceful struggle that would suppress “savagery.”

The right to forceful rule was further supported by a proliferation of scientific discourses, some of which were based on racial and imperialist versions of “the survival of the fittest” doctrine which provided the necessary ideological justification for racial or national supremacy. This was the time when the Britons realized the magnitude of their empire and its raw force, and felt more than ever before an urgent need to implement new conceptions of Englishness, i.e., what it meant to be English in the modern world. The more Britain expanded as an empire and was exposed to a wide array of foreign “others,” the more this concept of
Englishness was solidified and strengthened against the primitiveness of the peoples it came in contact with. We should not forget that Britain at the time was the most technologically, scientifically and industrially advanced nation in the world. Moreover, the constant political reforms and the extension of franchise made Britons feel that their country was a very modern democracy. The overall climate of success and expansion is reflected in the literature of the time, where the empire is no longer a peripheral presence, but occupies a central position.

The imperial prestige of Britain, moreover, helped heal the wounds that the Crimean war had left behind. This failure had seriously damaged and questioned not only English heroism but manhood as well. The new hero that emerged out of the war, after all, was a woman. Britain’s imperial expansion reinforced the call for a new hero and a modern English man, giving birth to what Charles Kingsley would call “muscular Christianity.” This novel form of manhood was infused with the traditional middle class values of respectability, honor, and earnestness which were then additionally seasoned with the cosmopolitan air of international success and victory. The new stereotype that brought together imperialism, Christianity, and Englishness is manifest in Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910). Both books consist of short stories and a poem that precedes each story. Through fantasy narratives, these stories present the history of England and its imperial adventures. *Puck of Pook’s Hill* culminates in a patriotic song that is meant to teach children the superiority of England as well as its values and morals, while *Rewards and Fairies* ends with a Christian poem, which is meant to remind readers of the fact that domestic ideology is a crucial part of Englishness.

---

### 6.2 Imperial Decline

In 1877, Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, which signaled the peak of British imperialist confidence, since Queen Victoria ruled one quarter of the world’s population. The Britons soon became aware of the nation’s unprecedented power and prestige. During the last two decades of the century, the empire became a central preoccupation that affected nearly every facet of people’s lives. As imperialism was gaining momentum, nevertheless, it also began to be radically questioned by those who doubted that the empire would be able to sustain its supremacy and impose its order upon the natives, or those who were concerned about the fate and state of indigenous people under the British reign. This concern is reflected in Wilkie Collins’s novel *The Moonstone* which projects some sort of national guilt and a feeling that there is a price that has to be paid for conquered “exotic” places. Moreover, as the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee approached in the summer of 1897, there was widespread concern about the frailty of the monarch and, consequently, the empire. These concerns were amplified by a growing competition between Britain and the emerging new powers, such as the USA, Germany, or Prussia. George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), for instance, reflects this international competitive climate, as it is set in various cities throughout the world and acknowledges implicitly different centers of power. The imperial uneasiness and decline of confidence was officially recorded in the Berlin Conference in 1884 which divided Africa among European powers. The time had come when imperialist prestige was beginning to collapse.

The literature of the time both addressed and attempted to resolve all these anxieties. The resurgence, for example, of romance and its growing popularity in the 1880s could be attributed to such imperialist fears. Apart from being a reaction to realist crudeness, romance grew in popularity in the 1880s because it was a narrative that was implicitly aligned with the imperialist agenda. It involved exotic, faraway settings that were presented through narratives of conquest in tune with the nation’s imperial expeditions around the world, increasing thus the nation’s self-assurance. As such, romance counterbalanced the discourse of decline by offering an implicit imperialist cause through an escapist discourse. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883) heralded the resurgence of the romance, and so did Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885),
She (1887), and Allan Quatermain (1887). In a similar manner, Kipling’s stories provided a vision of a coherent, stable, and invincible national subject which would inspire new imperialist narratives. Thus, the upheavals and concerns that were so widespread during this time are totally absent from his work. Kipling invented a new form of military aristocracy able to counter foreign threats and disperse fears of imperial decline.

On the other hand, there were a number of works that clearly and directly recorded the darker side of imperialist rule through what we call imperial Gothic. Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) explicitly embodies the anxiety about foreign threat. Interestingly, the figure of Count Dracula successfully brings together many potential threats: the foreigner, the Catholic, the aristocrat, the sexual pervert, the dandy, and the fear of syphilis coming from abroad. All these threats embody the dangers of turning one’s back against middle class domestic morality; they actually highlight the conservative need to turn towards these values as a means of maintaining order. Joseph Conrad’s work, conversely, chronicles the decline of empires as liberating through an early Modernist idiom. Conrad’s narrative expresses disillusionment with the imperialist discourse, partly through his steering away from realist devices. Imperialism is exposed as a form of ruthless exploitation, associated with the savagery and “the horror” that lies deep down in the white man’s psyche. This is why Kurtz, in Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness (1899), regresses into a primitive and chaotic state after having faced the darkness that lies within him. This dark aspect of the truth is revealed to him only when he acts as an agent of imperialist barbarism.

7. Culture and Aesthetics

The concept of culture became one of the central topics of debate in the mid and late Victorian period, as it was widely believed that through culture the wild impetus of the middle and working classes would be mitigated. Gradually, however, culture became a refuge to ideas or attitudes that were threatened by the supposedly vulgarizing tastes of the bourgeoisie. In this sense, the notion of culture maintained a double role as either a means of cultivating the middle and working classes (for Matthew Arnold), or as an arrogant means of marking a distance from them (for Oscar Wilde, the Aesthetes, and the Decadents).

7.1 Culture and Anarchy

The fascination that the middle and working classes had with commercial forms of entertainment was followed by a growing concern with the degrading impact of mass culture on them. As a result, throughout the 1860s and 1870s, the Victorian sages were preoccupied with the education of the masses. The matter gained new urgency due to a historical event on the 22nd of June 1866, when a number of marchers were denied access to Hyde Park and a thousand yards of park railings were destroyed by outraged rioters. This incident urged Thomas Carlyle to write an essay entitled “Shooting Niagara: And After?” (1867), in which he expresses his concern about the “swarmocracy,” as he called it, of the angry reformers. In turn, Matthew Arnold responded to this debate in a series of essays entitled Culture and Anarchy (1867-68). Modern individual liberty, Arnold claims here, lacks any form of restraint or sense of public duty or discipline and only culture can prevent the reign of anarchy. Arnold upholds the idea of culture against the materialism and vulgarity of the philistines (those hostile against culture) and believes that acculturation will be achieved through “general perfection,” the combination, that is, of intellectual playfulness and moral discipline, beauty and practicality (or, what he symbolically calls, Hellenism and Hebraism). He defines culture as a force that will make individuals aware of the fact that their progress is a common, not an individual, pursuit. For Arnold, Britain suffered from the fact that its three different classes, what he calles the barbarians (the land-owning aristocracy), the philistines (the middle classes), and the populace (the poor and the unemployed) could not transcend their conflicting self-interests and embrace mutuality. Arnold’s notion of culture, in other words,
was nothing else but the Victorian preoccupation with the relation between the individual and the common
good, as discussed above.

Only a year before the passing of the second Reform Bill (although set during the upheaval of the first
Reform Bill), George Eliot’s novel *Felix Holt, The Radical* instructs the working poor through the concept of
culture. Reminiscent of Arnold, culture here is upheld as a means through which anarchy can be prevented
and democracy safeguarded. The protagonist, Felix, realizes that his individuality makes sense only when
considered as an extension of the common good, and that class differences will be surmounted via a type of
social experience that is shared by everybody.

The debates about the role of culture and education gradually affected literary tastes and styles in the
following decades. By 1870, Tennyson stopped being considered the nation’s favorite poet and was replaced
by Robert Browning. Tennyson, accessible and widely read, was considered a mainstream poet writing for the
masses, while Browning, more obscure and hard to follow, was closely affiliated with a more elitist form of
culture which the privileged classes promoted. Consequently, the notion of culture encompassed a new sense
of elitism, shaping the literature that followed, and steadily paving the way for Modernist elitism.

It is also important to note that what actually lurked beneath the discourse of culture was anxiety
about the extension of franchise that the second Reform Bill would bring about by allowing the vote to all
working men who had a permanent residence. Such extension, the cultured and affluent classes feared, would
endanger their own rights and leave them at the mercy of the uneducated and unrefined majority. Through
education and culture, that is, these classes wanted to make sure that long held traditions, institutions, and
values would not be overthrown by the sweeping force of the rising middle classes.
7.2 Aestheticism: The Cult of Beauty

Image 2.20 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Rosa Triplex (1874).

What is striking here is both the sensuality of these figures and their androgynous characteristics.

Walter Pater, from The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry

The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters I expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years man had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed? All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with
which it has moulded the changing lineaments and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.

One of the most influential artistic and cultural movements of the time, that had its roots in the early and mid-Victorian period, was Aestheticism, also known as the “Art for Art’s Sake” movement. Aestheticism was a movement that celebrated the supremacy of beauty and art over morality and science. For the aesthetes, as its followers were called, morality was considered to be a bourgeois convention and a distraction from the exploration of formal perfection and beauty. Aestheticism was initially a French literary phenomenon, introduced in Britain by Algernon Swinburne in 1866 through his Poems and Ballads. In these poems, Swinburne presents explicit sexual imagery in a sensual idiom and refuses to be limited by any moral constraints. What was deeply shocking for his contemporaries was the fact that Swinburne’s collection of poetry celebrated a kind of pleasure that had nothing to do with domestic Victorian ideals and norms.

Swinburne’s ideas were followed by Walter Pater. In The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (1873), which was probably the most influential book in the late Victorian and early Modernist period, Pater argues that art should not have a practical relevance to life or to morality but rather be devoted to the search for beauty and perfection. He argues, moreover, that the transitory character of life can be transcended or preserved through perfect moments of sensory intensity that one can find solely in art. This is his point exactly in the extract about Mona Lisa quoted above. Pater is not so much interested in describing the famous painting or giving his reader historical details about it, but rather in recording the fleeting impressions, thoughts, and feelings that the painting generates in him.

In their attempt to escape censorship, the aesthetes favored form over content, that is, beauty over moral teaching. In this sense, they promoted the superiority of form. By paying more attention to technical detail or aesthetic finesse, the aesthetes sometimes created very sophisticated, complex, and hard to follow narratives, in which meaning became ambiguous or simply elusive. Such elusiveness of meaning was contrasted with the dominant ideology of the time which laid emphasis on practicality, materialism, and utilitarianism. This is precisely why Oscar Wilde argues in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, a highly concise manifesto of aestheticism, that all art is useless. For Wilde and the aesthetes, art had to be cherished for its beauty only, not its usefulness. The aestheticist opposition to the dominant ideology of the time is also evident in its escapist, its tendency, i.e., to deny any practical or moral relevance, or any engagement with life or history.
By distancing themselves from the realm of action or practicality and by indulging into eccentricity and pleasure, the aesthetes were accused of being effeminate. Most aesthetic literature and art was, after all, one of the first homosexual subcultures, as it communicated in a coded way a same-sex form of love. Consider, for instance, the paintings of Simeon Solomon, one of the most emblematic aesthetic painters, and the homosexual subtext they contain. In this light, the aesthetes’ argument in favor of artistic autonomy could also be an encrypted cry for sexual freedom. It is not accidental that the most characteristic figures of aestheticist art and philosophy are either androgynous or celebrate an asexual kind of beauty that alludes to same-sex love, and is distanced from bourgeois sexual models and norms. In combining both male and female characteristics, such human forms are the embodiments of the idea of a united or unified soul. These figures need not rely on the other sex for their pleasure or propagation and invite the viewer to put aside moral judgments in order to appreciate their beauty.

![Image 2.21 Simeon Solomon, The Sleepers and the One who Watcheth (1870). Homosexuality is implicitly addressed here by one of the most outstanding painters of the aestheticist tradition.](image)

**Oscar Wilde, Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray**

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful
things. The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty. There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass. The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials of his art. From the point of view of Form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of Feeling the actor’s craft is the type. All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so also at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself. We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it inordinately. All art is quite useless.

7.3 Decadence

The movement of Decadence that followed aestheticism is so tightly linked with it that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between them. The Decadents, just like the aesthetes, believed in the cult of beauty, artistic autonomy, and the unconventional. Yet, the Decadents took the aestheticist fascination with the ephemeral
and turned it into an obsession with the beauty of the fleeting moment. They sought to experience the aestheticist moments of intensity through drugs, sexual extremities, or abuse. This was why Decadent art was marked by a celebration of hallucination, immorality, pain, or mental and physical illness. Moreover, the Decadents’ pursuit of peculiar sensual stimuli led them to a fascination with artificiality as a means of having new sensations and pleasures that lay beyond moral or natural conventions. In its turn, this fueled a fascination with shock as a means of transcending and disrupting daily routine and, of course, scandalizing the bourgeoisie. In literature, this was achieved by undermining the reader’s expectations for coherence, linearity, and meaningfulness through a complex and over-refined style. Consider, for example, Swinburne’s “Nephelidia” (1880), a poem with almost no content or meaning, resting exclusively on acoustics and a highly sophisticated and complex form:

From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a notable nimbus of nebulous noonshine, Pallid and pink as the palm of the flag-flower that flickers with fear of the flies as they float, Are they looks of our lovers that lustrously lean from a marvel of mystic miraculous moonshine, These that we feel in the blood of our blushes that thicken and threaten with throbs through the throat? (ll. 1-8)

What is interesting to note here is that at a first glance the poem appears to be coherent. Taking a closer look at it, nevertheless, one discovers that this sense of coherence does not rely on meaning at all, since the poem is very ambiguous, but rather on its musicality, which involves the use of alliteration, complex meter and rhyming patterns. By showing an alternative organization of words based on their sounds, Swinburne manages to challenge his readers’ conception of how meaning is produced.

Decadent art was also shocking due to its risqué (or improper) character which emphasized sexual dissidence as a means of attacking and undermining middle class normality. This is clearly evident through The Yellow Book, an iconic Decadent periodical that published the most provocative and controversial work of the time. The editor of The Yellow Book was Aubrey Beardsley, a very contentious illustrator. His groundbreaking illustrations foreshadowed formalism and art-nouveau, laying the foundations for modern graphics and design as well. Apart from the risqué topics and figures that they depicted, Beardsley’s illustrations could often stand as autonomous works, refusing to be subordinated to the narratives they were meant to accompany and exemplify. Furthermore, his work was influenced by Japanese art in its denial to depict a three-dimensional reality, revealing thus his fascination with surface and the rejection of depth. Moreover, by illustrating mythical figures or characters from traditional and established literature within a sexual context, Beardsley mingled “high” and “low” art in a very postmodern, we might argue, way. Consider, for example, Beardsley’s illustration of Wilde’s play Salome (1891, 1894); the heroine here is presented as a threatening castrating femme fatale engaged in an erotic play with John’s head. As Biblical allusions are reduced to a minimum, what predominates is the decoration of a depthless surface, while the relation between the illustration and the original Biblical story is eliminated.

The Aesthetic and Decadent movements were abruptly terminated with Wilde’s conviction for sodomy at the close of the century. Wilde was sued by his boyfriend’s father for corrupting his son, Lord Alfred Douglas. Being at the peak of his success, Wilde fool-heartedly counter-sued the father for libel, but lost the case and was sentenced to two years of hard labor. This verdict was at the same time an implicit conviction of sexual anarchy and dissidence, and an attempt to legalize normality or, what were considered to be, healthier and more productive sexual models.
Image 2.23 Aubrey Beardsley, The Climax (1893).

Here is a study of Marriage and Sexuality in the U.S. and U.K. from 1815-1914. Access here

The Yellow Nineties Online. Access here

British and European Aesthetes, Decadents and Symbolists. Access here

Oscar Wilde Overview. Access here
8. Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the 20th and 21st Century

Since the 1960s there has been a vogue for recreating the nineteenth century in contemporary fiction. This trend, which became especially popular in the last 25 years, has been termed by critics as “Neo-Victorianism” or “Victoriana.” When it comes to the definition of this trend, it is important to note that the Neo-Victorian novel is not just a version of historical fiction, for it is not the historical setting that makes a novel Neo-Victorian. Critics claim that Neo-Victorian fiction rather involves a close engagement with the nineteenth century through which the relationship between contemporary and Victorian culture is closely investigated and comparisons between the two ages are invited.

What is it, though, that has instigated the emergence of Neo-Victorian literature but not Neo-Romantic, Neo-Renaissance, or Neo-Augustan revivals? Researchers point out that there has been a fascination with the Victorian period because of its proximity to our age. Although the nineteenth century appears to be distant, dissimilar, and unfamiliar to us in some respects, it is close, similar, and familiar in others. Much like the Victorians, today we are preoccupied with such topics as gender and sexuality, imperialism, civil rights and minorities, the invasion of technology, and the role of tradition in a radically shifting world. In the words of the French historian and critic Michel Foucault, we are still Victorian, as he claims in the first chapter of *The History of Sexuality* (3). Our proximity to the Victorians invites comparisons which can illuminate both the past and the present, affording us a view of the future as well. By revisiting the not so distant past, authors address issues from radically different points of view or in entirely new settings, creating thus an amalgamation of Victorian and contemporary aesthetics. In doing so, they are given the chance to cast new light on the past and use it as a filter through which the present can also be reviewed.

The fact that the trend is believed to have originated in the 1960s is not accidental but rather indicative of its association with the movement of postmodernism. In its attempt to recreate the past, the Neo-Victorian novel has actually adopted all major characteristics of postmodern literature: the incorporation of a variety of discourses, pastiche, intertextuality, parody, or sophisticated conceptions of history. For example, Margaret Forster’s Neo-Victorian novel *Lady’s Maid* (1990) is a rewriting of the affair between two famous Victorian poets, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as perceived through the eyes of Barrett’s maid. Forster employs the postmodern device of pastiche, a form of imitation that mixes different styles, in order to reimagine not only a famous love affair but also the nineteenth-century convention of narrating a story from a

---

**Pastiche:**

One of the most striking characteristics of postmodernism is that it incorporates a wide variety of styles, discourses, narratives, or schools not for the sake of parodying them but rather for the sake of celebrating diversity. [For more on postmodern literature, see Chapter 4.]

---

**Intertextuality:**

The term, which was given prominence by the Bulgarian philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, denotes the complex and thick web of interrelationships that exist between texts either in a direct manner through allusion, citation, and pastiche or through parody. As such, it signifies the interdependence and interconnectedness that exists between literary works, and foregrounds the idea that there are no original texts, but only copies of copies.

---

**Metafiction:**

The term refers to stories which self-reflexively draw attention to themselves or to their elements. Sometimes this gets the form of direct commentary on the act of reading or writing. This way the reader is encouraged to think about the process of storytelling as an artificial process and not as reality itself. Even though this is a Modernist or Postmodernist practice, it can be traced back to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1756).
maid’s perspective. By blending fiction with historical facts in a very postmodern way, Forster comes up with a complex narrative that raises the question of class and its relation to truth. In a similar fashion, in *Arthur and George* (2006), the awarded contemporary writer Julian Barnes reconstructs an incident in Conan Doyle’s personal life, in which the famous author tries to help a half-Indian solicitor be acquitted of a crime he did not commit. Employing the figure of the creator of one of the most emblematic pursuers of truth, Sherlock Holmes, Barnes explores the relation between race and truth through a pastiche of narratives that undermines the very act of knowing, representing, or even of establishing a coherent identity.

What is also important to consider here is the issue of intertextuality which is quite revealing of the politics of Neo-Victorian fiction. The Victorian era is not merely employed as a historical setting, but rather as an intertext meant to be rewritten. Let us consider Will Self’s 2002 novel *Dorian, An Imitation*. The book transposes Wilde’s climate of decadence and degeneration of the *fin de siècle* into the early 1980s artistic club London scene, where sex and drugs reign. Dorian’s corruption is here suggested through the fact that the protagonist suffers from AIDS and infects his victims rather than kill them or corrupt them as Dorian does in Wilde’s text. Instead of Dorian’s picture, we end up with *Cathode Narcissus*, a video installation in which Dorian’s naked body can be seen aging and bearing all AIDS symptoms, while Dorian enjoys a virus-free image and life. Wilde’s implicit allusions to gay culture are here given an explicit twist and acquire a central role. Self’s rewriting forces the reader to reconsider in retrospect Wilde’s story and develop a new understanding not only of the original text but also of the pre-AIDS age as well. The modernization of Wilde’s text is achieved through the intricate interconnections that are established between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1980s and that involve postmodern readings and understandings of history.

In a similar fashion, J. G. Farrell seizes the opportunity in *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) to exploit the issue of the empire afresh and reconstruct the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Based on this historical event, which actually solidified British imperialism, Farrell creates an anti-colonial narrative that is harshly critical of the British rule in India. The story focuses on the way a group of Englishmen react when they are trapped by the siege. Their entrapment, set against the backdrop of the Great Exhibition, ironically brings to the surface the delusions, pride, and arrogance upon which British superiority was based and which the Exhibition fueled. The assumed progress of British culture and science, for instance, is challenged when British doctors are unable to deal with an epidemic of cholera that breaks out among the besieged. The besieged Englishmen are gradually forced to question their position in India, while their role as agents of culture and civilization is ridiculed. Victorian imperialism in Farrell’s Neo-Victorian novel is presented through a contemporary lens. At the same time, history is exposed as a study in cultural and historical relativism rather than a discipline of truth. This process of reinterpretation and revision, which necessitates the rediscovery of the past, is in essence postmodern.

Apart from the novel, Neo-Victorianism involves films, TV series, comics, fashion, and music. In other words, it is an extensive and inclusive cultural phenomenon that has its own sub-categories and subdivisions. A very important such subdivision is steampunk, a fusion of science fiction, cyberpunk, fantasy, and historical fiction by way of Neo-Victorianism, in which the future is anachronistically set during the Victorian times when technological inventions are powered only by steam. Most prominent novels in this tradition include *The Anubis Gates* by Tim Powers (1983), *Homunculus* by James Blaylock (1986), *Internal Devices* by K. W. Jeter (1987), *The Difference Engine* by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (1990), *Extraordinary Engines* by Nick Gevers (2008), and comic book series such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, or animation films such as *Steamboy* (2004).

The Victorian era was a period when Britain underwent radical changes and became an industrial and colonial superpower.

During the Victorian period, religion and the Church were overthrown by science, a fact which led to an unprecedented secularization and rationalization of everyday life.

During the Victorian Era, the working class and women gradually gained more rights.

This was also the time when older cultural forms were replaced by newer ones and the novel became the dominant genre.
Works Cited

___, Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27739
___, *Aurora Leigh*. http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora.html
___, *Run to Earth*. http://manybooks.net/titles/braddonmetext058rrth10.html
___, *Shirley*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30486
___, *Villette*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9182
___, *The Woman in White*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/583
___, *Heart of Darkness*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/219
___, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22764
___, *A Tale of Two Cities*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/98
___, *Barnaby Rudge*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/917
___, *Bleak House*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1023
___, *Dombey and Son*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/821
___, *David Copperfield*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/766
___, *Great Expectations*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1400
___, *Hard Times*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/786
___, *Little Dorrit*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/963
___, *Oliver Twist*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/730
___, *Sybil or the Two Nations*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3760
___, *Daniel Deronda*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7469
___, *Romola*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24020
Victorian and Anti-Victorian Voices

____. The Mill on the Floss. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6688
____. Life of Charlotte Bronte. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1827
____. North and South. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4276
____. Ruth. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4275
Gautier, Theophille. Mademoiselle de Maupin. https://archive.org/stream/mademoiselledema00gaute/mademoiselledema00gaute_djvu.txt
____. The Odd Women. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4313
____. She. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3155
Hardy, Thomas. A Pair of Blue Eyes. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/224
____. Far from the Maddening Crowd. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/107
____. Jude the Obscure. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/153
____. Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy. https://archive.org/details/selectedpoemsoft00harduoft
____. The Return of the Native. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/122
____. Tess of the d’Urbervilles. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/110
Ibsen, Henrik. Ibsen’s Prose Dramas. https://archive.org/details/ibsensprosedram00ibsegoog
James, Henry. The Bostonians. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/19717
____. The Portrait of a Lady. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2833
____. The Princess Casamassima. https://archive.org/details/princesscasamas00jamegoog
____. The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/209
____. The Wings of a Dove. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/209
____. The Works of Rudyard Kipling. https://archive.org/details/worksophrudyardki00kip
Morris, William. *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3261
Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42
——. *The Treasure Island*. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/120

Bibliography


