

UNIT 15

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTORIAN AGE

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are:

- To discuss in detail, the major historical events of the Victorian age,
- To acquaint you with the historical background for the study of the Victorian age of literature and
- To discuss in detail, the various literary characteristics of the Victorian age.

15.1 THE VICTORIAN AGE: AN INTRODUCTION

As the name suggests, the literature produced in English language during the reign of queen Victoria (1837-1901) is known as Victorian literature. It was remarkable in numerous ways. The literature written and produced during this age was a true and accurate reflection of contemporary Victorian society. The “Victorian Compromise”, “Victorian Values” and morality found ample reflection in the works of Victorian writers. Also, the literature written and produced during this age was in many ways a breakaway from the literature produced in earlier ages. The romantic age, in the poetical writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron, was predominantly an age of poetry, especially with its focus on nature and rural life. But Victorian literature, highly influenced by the ongoing contemporary socio-political and industrial activities, was more of a reflection of contemporary urban Victorian society. The literature of the age was also marked by new literary developments. It became an age of prose and novel, an age of realistic appeal to readers. In all, it was an age of political and social struggle which found expression in the literature of the age. The following sections will acquaint the readers with the historical, social and political background of Victorian society and its reflection in the literature of the age.

15.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

The Victorian age was an age of significant historical changes. The reign of Queen Victoria proved to be so fruitful for the English nation that almost every aspect of common life was influenced by the

historical events that happened during this era. The historical and social changes of the period were unprecedented in the sense that the common life was completely caught in the storm of transformation. The changes that took place during these years altered the fabric of human life in numerous ways. This section will acquaint the readers with the key historical events of the period and their effects on the lives of Victorian people.

15.2.1. The Industrial Revolution

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were years of great and significant changes in the history of mankind. A series of great events took place that quickly altered the fabric of human society. The late eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the French Revolution (1789-1799) that dramatically and quickly transformed the political structure of France, and the early nineteenth century saw the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) that spread many of the revolutionary principles in an equally rapid and stunning fashion to other parts of Europe. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, another revolution—an industrial one—was blooming to transform the economic and social structure of Europe, although in a less dramatic and rapid fashion.

The First Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) is one of the most significant events in the history of humankind. It has been said that the Industrial Revolution was the most profound revolution in human history because of its sweeping impact on people's daily lives. The great event was at the heart of every significant change that took place in Great Britain in that period. While the Industrial Revolution first began in Britain in the 18th century and took place throughout the centuries that followed, its impact can still be seen in our lives today. The ease and the rapidity with which people are living today is a miracle of the Industrial Revolution that happened in the eighteenth century. Even the present time is no less influenced by it since the mechanized world in which people are living today is a wonder of the First Industrial Revolution. Although the Industrial Revolution began in the mid-eighteenth century, its most profound effects could be seen in the Victorian England of the nineteenth century. The English life totally came under the current of transformation and change since the industrial revolution had permeated every single aspect of English life.

The period of the Industrial Revolution witnessed a quantum leap in industrial production. New sources of energy and power, especially coal and steam, replaced wind and water to create labor-saving machines that dramatically decreased the use of human and animal labor and, at the same time, increased the level of productivity. There occurred a transition from hand production methods to machines, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes, the increasing use of steam power and water power, the development of machine tools and the rise of the mechanized factory system. In turn, the human labor was organized in new ways to maximize the benefits and profits from the new machines. Factories began to develop and eventually replaced small shops and home workrooms. The workers who were working at their homes were forced

to migrate towards places where factories were established, and worked there for a living.

Another very important aspect of the industrial revolution was the rise of the new middle-class. Earlier, there was only one class in English society: the upper class. As the industrial revolution gained momentum in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, there emerged a new class of people altogether. It gave rise to a group of wealthy, educated and important men. The great event affected a considerable growth in the average income of English people. Because of the newly created job opportunities, people began to earn more and more money and there emerged a new social class: the middle-class. The phenomenal rise in the number of middle-class households is undoubtedly a characteristic feature of Victorian England. It was truly a Victorian phenomenon.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, for more than ten thousand years, farming or agriculture was the main occupation of the majority of people. But in the wake of the industrial revolution, Europe experienced a shift from a traditional, labor-intensive economy based on farming and handicrafts to a more capital-intensive economy based on manufacturing by machines, specialized labor, and industrial factories. It influenced the lives of millions of people since Europe was moving towards a capitalist economy. Agriculture or farming was modernized as there appeared new tools and practices of farming. The agricultural yield increased due to these advanced changes and it became a source of additional income for people. The agricultural production was now not merely for 'use' but for 'profit' also.

Science seemed to be on the bucket list of the Industrial Revolution. Victorian England had already taken an open stance toward science. Science developed by leaps and bounds in this period. Medical science was growing quickly, and the Industrial Revolution was the chief engine behind various advancements that took place in medical science. It allowed medical instruments (such as scalpels, microscope lenses, test tubes, and other equipment) to be produced more quickly. Using machine manufacturing, refinements to these instruments could more efficiently roll out to the physicians that needed them. As communication between physicians in different areas improved, the details behind new cures and treatments for various diseases could be dispersed quickly, resulting in better care.

The Industrial revolution also effected an increase in population. The population of London was about 2 million when Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837; in 1901 when she died, the population of London drastically increased to about 6.5 million. A large number of people relocated from rural regions to large cities to be closer to their new factory workplaces. This population increase had severe consequences since slums began to develop in cities and serious health issues began to crop up in English society.

But besides being an era of economic expansion and rapid growth, the Victorian era was also an era of gross injustice and ill mentality. In the pursuit of wealth, society was becoming more and more insensitive

towards poor working-class people. Children and women (including pregnant women) were exploited to unimaginable limits. They were worked for long hours, without protective gears, in unhygienic conditions, on low wages. They lived in squalid slums thereby increasing the chances of catching serious health diseases. And thus, the great industrial revolution had far-reaching negative consequences which later became the subject matter for the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell and other writers of the Victorian era. The greatly hailed Industrial Revolution, as mentioned, had many dark sides to it, and this is amply reflected in the literature of the age.

15.2.2. Science and Scientific Thought

The English society was primarily a theocentric one, putting the Church or God at the central focus of English life. It was a deeply religious place under strong papal control. The Roman Catholic Church wielded immense power, and deviation from the Catholic faith could mean trial for heresy or a painful death at the hands of authorities. The general English faith was constructed around God. The Church was the principal body of English society governing the belief of the English population. But with time, it slowly began to move away from the theocentric belief due to several reasons. The Enlightenment Age or the Age of Reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had already underscored the human being's ability to 'reason'. There was a growing insistence on reason and logic. Besides, the Great Plague of London that broke out in the seventeenth century and killed thousands of people shattered people's belief in God. A certain percentage of the English population began questioning the existence of God following the Black Death.¹ The English life was moving more and more towards reason and science. To recognize, promote and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity, The Royal Society was also found in 1660. So, in all, there developed space and environment for science to prosper. Science was slowly developing in the Victorian era, and Charles Darwin burst onto the scene with his *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and came up with his famous theory of Evolution. Darwin's book is believed to have challenged the Church's established idea of human birth and existence. There arose serious debates surrounding Darwin's theory and his ideas were taken seriously since he was an eminent scientist.

The Industrial Revolution also played an important role in the development of science since it was an age of machines. The scientific achievements of the Victorian era are remarkable in human history. The period from 1837 to 1901 is regarded as an era of prosperity and knowledge. The spread of education and affluence encouraged innovation, experimentation and scientific ideas. Developments took place in almost all the areas like transportation, communication, trade and so on. Medical science was growing by leaps and bounds in the Victorian era since the pre-Victorian period and the beginning of 1800s was brimming with diseases. Diseases like typhoid, smallpox, tuberculosis

and epidemics began to spread rapidly and violently taking away many lives. Edward Jenner in 1796 introduced the vaccine for smallpox. Anesthesia, a vital contribution to medical science, was also developed in this era.

The Victorian era also witnessed one of the most significant technological inventions of human history in 1837: the telegraph. The invention of the telegraph indeed revolutionized the communication system of the country. The telephone, the most vibrant medium of communication today was discovered by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. With the invention of the telephone, telegraphs became obsolete as the telephone was an easier, cheaper medium of communication than the former. The invention of the telephone was one of the most powerful creations of the Victorian period. Cars and bicycles, internal combustion engine, the electric bulb and railways are some of the other major inventions of the Victoria era.

15.2.3. The Great Exhibition of 1851

Exhibitions of industrial products are not new. They date back to the 1790s in France and then fairly regularly there through the 1820s and 1830s. But these exhibitions were only ‘national’ in the sense that they involved only one country. There were no international exhibitions of any kind until John Scott Russell in 1849 advised Prince Albert that there should be a major exhibition in 1851, and Albert insisted that it must be an ‘international’ one. So, the Great Exhibition of 1851, officially called ‘The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’, was the first international trade show of Britain. The exhibition took place in Hyde Park, London, from 1 May to 15 October 1851. A special building, The Crystal Palace, designed by an English architect named Richard Paxton, was built to house the show. The Exhibition was organized by Henry Cole and by Prince Albert, husband of the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria. Several fundraising events were organized to fund this great event. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was probably the high point of Victorian success and self-esteem. The exhibition was staged to show Britain at the height of its wealth, power and influence, economic expansion and rapid change.

In 1851, Great Britain stood at the very pinnacle of industrial and cultural leadership of the world. The exhibition was staged particularly to reflect the industrial and architectural grandeur of Britain and its economic dominance. It was an ostentatious display of economic prosperity of the vainglorious Britain. The exhibition was visited by about six million people from May to October, and that included some famous visitors also such as William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Louis Carroll and Charlotte Bronte. Charlotte Bronte, the great Victorian era woman novelist, provided her account of the great exhibition. She noted ‘. . . it is a wonderful place – vast, strange, new and impossible to describe. Its grandeur does not consist in one thing, but in the unique assemblage of all things. Whatever human industry has created you find there . . . it seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth – as

if none but supernatural hands could have arranged it thus, with such a blaze and contrast of colours and marvellous power of effect. . .’

The great exhibition was organized not only to display Britain’s industrial goods but also the ‘Works of Industry of All Nations’, a global display of art and industrial manufacturing. The chief focus of the Great Exhibition was on the world’s cultural and industrial technology. The goods from different parts of the world were put on display in the exhibition but a majority of them were from Britain and British colonies. On display were objects from Britain’s colonies and some other countries of the world ranging from manufacturing machinery to steam hammers. There were inventions and discoveries, furniture, fine textiles, pottery, laces, clocks, toys, colorful glasses and much more. Some very famous and precious Indian stones were also on display in the Crystal Palace including the prized diamond, the “Koh-i-Noor” or “Kohinoor”, and the “Daria-i-Noor”, one of the rare pale pink diamonds of the world. This great exhibition had such a commercial upshot that it reinforced industrial production and marketing. The new industrial production of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had already changed the face of human life and the Great Exhibition fortified its marketing and selling by proclaiming the industrial success to the world. The great event established and further solidified the foundation of industrial success for Great Britain. It was an event that profoundly escalated British trade in the nineteenth century and was one of the major reasons behind the Victorian era being recognized as an era of industrial success and economic prosperity. The present-day commercial industries still have impressions of the Great Exhibition of 1851. It was indeed a landmark event in the history of Britain and humankind that altered the face of industrial productions and profit businesses in toto.

15.2.4. The Chartist Movement (1838-1848)

The mid-nineteenth century brought significant changes to the British Parliament. The Reform Act was passed in June 1832. It was known as the Great Reform Act. The major reason behind passing the act was many years of people criticizing the electoral system as unfair. For example, there were constituencies with only a handful of voters that elected two MPs to the Parliament. In these rotten boroughs, with few voters and no secret ballot, it was easy for candidates to buy votes. Yet towns like Manchester and other newly developed cities (because of the industrial development) that had grown during the previous 80 years had no MPs to represent them. The Great Reform Act introduced major changes to the electoral system of England and Wales. Under the act, tiny districts were abolished, cities were given representations, and small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, householders who were paying a yearly rental of £10 or more, were given the right to vote. But people who did not possess property worth £10, which used to be a substantial sum in those days, were disenfranchised. So naturally, working-class people were deprived of their right to vote.

The industrial revolution had given rise to the middle class. Because of the increased average income and improved standards of living, middle-class people were able to possess a property worth £10.

But no provisions were made for people belonging to the working class. After the Reform Act of 1832 failed in extending the voting rights to the working-class and enfranchising them, serious agitations emerged against the parliament since the working class believed that the parliament and the middle class betrayed them by disenfranchising them for not possessing any property worth £10. There emerged a massive wave of opposition from the working class. It became a mass movement when a huge number of working-class people gathered in demand for their right to vote. Chartism was this working-class movement which emerged in 1836 and remained most active in the following ten years until 1848.

In the year 1838, a committee of the protestors published the People's Charter, which set out the movement's six main aims. The charted aims would give the working-class people a say in lawmaking as they would be able to vote, their vote would be protected by a secret ballot and they would be able to stand for election to the House of Commons as a result of the removal of property qualifications and the introduction of payment for MPs. The protestors of the Chartism Movement came to be recognized as 'Chartists'. These chartists saw themselves as bringing a democratic change to English society and parliament, and against political corruption. The six main aims of the movement were as follows:

- 1) A vote for every man twenty-one years of age.
- 2) The use of secret ballot to protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
- 3) No property qualification to become an MP.
- 4) Payment for MPs to leave or interrupt their livelihood to attend to the interests of the nation.
- 5) Electoral districts of equal size.
- 6) Annual elections for parliament.

The movement proved to be significant in bringing the working-class people to the forefront of the English nation. It also changed the way parliament, upper-class and middle-class looked at the working-class population. They too now had the right and authority to choose their own representative to the parliament. The nation was slowly and gradually coming onto the right political track. But women were still out of the picture since Chartism was only a male suffrage movement. Despite this, it proved to be a significant political event in the history of Britain since it enfranchised the working-class which was at the heart of Britain's industrial production.

15.3 LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

The Victorian era was a time of profound historical and cultural changes. Every aspect of English society had been deeply affected by them. The population nearly doubled, the British Empire expanded exponentially and the technological and industrial progress helped Britain become the most powerful country in the world. The great events that took place during the period totally revolutionized the English life.

Almost every aspect of English society had slipped into the control of machines thereby reducing the human interaction with production. Literature too was not less influenced by these changes. It is important to note that the literature of the age reflects the contemporary Victorian society in ways more than one. It is ruminative of what Victorian society had become because of the significant historical and cultural changes. In the following sections, we shall be studying the different literary characteristics of the Victorian age.

15.3.1. The Victorian Novel

The literature of the Victorian age was most remarkable for its development of the novel form and taking it to perfection. The novel as a literary form flourished unprecedentedly in the Victorian era. It became the most popular form of literature in the hands of Victorian novelists. It was the pleasantest form of literary entertainment. As many have said, the novel was to the Victorian age what drama was to the Elizabethan age. The novel fills a place in this age which the drama held in the age of Elizabeth. Never before in any age or language has the novel appeared in such mass number and in such perfection. The novel form began to gain popularity only after it was treated by the Victorian hands. The Victorian novelists, in fact, polished the newly developed novel form and made it the most popular form of literary expression. In the following sections, we shall be looking at the origin of the novel as a literary form, its development in the Victorian age, its characteristics and how it influenced future novels.

15.3.1.1. The Origin of the Novel Form and Its Precursors

The novel is one of the most widely read forms of literature today. A great number of novels are published every year and read by millions of people across the globe. It is still one of the most popular literary forms among the literati. But the origin of the novel form dates back to the early eighteenth century when prose as a literary medium rose to prominence in the Augustan Age of English Literature. The literature of the eighteenth century falls under the category of Augustan Age or Classical Age or the Age of Pope. Prose as a new medium of literary expression gained considerable significance and popularity in the writings of these eighteenth-century writers. When we compare this age with previous ages, we find that every preceding age was dominated by poetry and poetical works (verse drama, for that matter). These poetry and poetical works constitute the 'glory of English literature', according to Matthew Arnold. It was the most dominant form of literary expression from Chaucer, through Shakespeare and Milton, to Dryden. But it was in the eighteenth century that prose as a medium of literary expression emerged and rose to prominence. The eighteenth century witnessed the triumph of prose. It was in this period of prose dominance that the first English novel appeared. A novel is a long work of narrative fiction, mainly written in prose form. Daniel Defoe is credited with writing and publishing the first English novel in 1719 when he published *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe also

published another novel, *Moll Flanders* in 1722. Novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith and Tobias Smollett came after Daniel Defoe to take the form to newer heights. Since then, the English novel has not looked back and has continued to rise to newer heights. Its popularity as a literary genre has never diminished. These novelists tried and succeeded in writing novels. The novel after these initial years was slowly becoming a popular literary form.

The writers that came after Daniel Defoe took the form to newer heights with the publication of their novels. Samuel Richardson is considered one of the precursors of the novel form. He has authored epistolary novels such as *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48). Henry Fielding is also considered an important early novelist of English language, who wrote *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749). Laurence Sterne published *Tristram Shandy* in parts between 1759 to 1767; Oliver Goldsmith wrote *The Vicar of the Wakefield* (1766); Tobias Smollett, known for his comic picaresque novels, wrote *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). It is also important to note that Charles Dickens, the greatest novelist of the Victorian age, was greatly influenced by the writings of Tobias Smollett. These early English novelists had a profound influence on the writings of Victorian novelists for they had set the tone for the novel to succeed in the canon of English literature.

15.3.1.2. The Rise of the Victorian Novel

The nineteenth century saw the novel scaling new heights in the realm of literature. It became the most popular literary form of the period. Following the great literary tradition set by the novelists of the eighteenth century, the writers of the Victorian era began writing novels and achieved tremendous success. The novel reached its zenith in the nineteenth century era in the writings of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and many other notable English novelists. Although the seeds of the novel as a literary genre were sown in the early eighteenth century of Augustan Age, it was in the Victorian era that the form gained mass acceptance and substantial popularity. It began to be picked up by the maximum number of readers, including women. The Victorian age became remarkable because of the increased release of novels and novelists during this period.

The Victorian period was remarkable because of the significant historical, cultural, social, political and industrial changes. It was an era of economic expansion and rapid growth. For the first time the middle class had come into existence in Britain and other parts of Europe. This rise of the middle class was one of the factors that helped the novel grow and develop. More and more middle-class people were turning to books for gaining knowledge. The growing needs of the middle-class readership were addressed by novels as novelists began to write more and more novels. The Victorian novel rose to entertain the rising middle class.

There was a growing demand from the readers of the form since a greater number of readers were picking up novels. David Daiches, a historian said, the novel “was in a large measure the product of the middle class, appealing to middle-class ideals and sensibilities, a patterning of imagined events set against a clearly realized social background and taking its view of what was significant in human behavior from agreed public attitudes.” The characters of the Victorian novels are from middle-class and this appealed to the middle-class readers since they could connect to those fictional characters. There were no romantic stories but believable life struggles that garnered the attention of millions of readers. An Education Act was also passed in 1870 which set the framework for schooling of all children between the age of 5 and 12 furthermore increasing the literacy rates among the population. Because of the industrial revolution, many job opportunities were also created. Certain jobs required a certain level of reading ability and the Victorian novel catered to the needs of such people.

Britain was becoming a ‘Constitutional Monarchy’ which brought democracy to the nation. In turn, the democracy opened the doors of education to all which resulted in the considerable spread of literacy among the English population. The newly educated mass began to invest their spare time in reading novels which resulted in the growing demand for novels. Poetry was there since ages but it could not cater to the taste of the growing middle-class readership. The reading of poetry needed great technical knowledge and it proved to be ‘insufficient’ in addressing the reading taste of the newly developed readership. The novel in this sense was capable of providing the English readers with what they wanted. Besides, the growth of cities, a ready domestic market and one in the oversea colonies and an increase in printing and publishing houses in the democratic and industrial Britain facilitated the growth of the novel as a form.

Some historians have also attributed the growth and success of the novel form to the decline of drama in the nineteenth century. The drama was no longer in the picture in the Victorian age. No drama of any significance was written and staged during this era. People desired reading about everyday events which the drama would not have been able to achieve. There was also the desire on the part of writers to create something new in the canon of literature as poetry and drama had been in the picture for long since Chaucer. A kind of literary revolution was required to address the changing literary needs of the English readers which the novel was able to gratify. The drama had become absolutely outdated and had lost its appeal to the readers. Novels on the other hand were relatively more significant in improving the readers’ knowledge. They were multidimensional in the sense that they gave more freedom to the writer than the drama since the traditional dramas were written in accordance with prescribed rules and had limited scope. The novel on the other hand could talk about every possible thing. Reading novels provided the newly developed readership with new knowledge of the contemporary world. Thus, drama’s decline resulted in the growth and prominence of the novel as a literary form.

The nineteenth century was also known for the emergence of newspapers and magazines since prose as a medium was increasingly becoming prominent. It is believed by historians that the emergence of newspapers and magazines contributed to the rise of the novel form in the sense that the newly emerged readership was more interested in the realistic portrayal of contemporary Victorian society. The newspapers and magazines were among the most prominent forms of writing that attracted a large number of readers. It is a well-known fact that the novels in the Victorian era were published serially and not in one big volume as it is published today. Reading the novel in serialized form was easier for the reading population since they did not have to pay more at a time to read a particular work. They could buy a magazine with only a few shillings and read the published part of the novel. So, the success of the novel form is attributed to newspapers and magazines as well since it was in this era of newspaper and magazine that novel as a literary form became more popular.

15.3.1.3. Characteristics of the Victorian Novel

The novel was the most significant literary development of Victorian literature. The form's output had increased thousandfold. Never ever in any language or age did the novel appear in such numbers and with such perfection. The Victorian novel is such a literary development that it astonishes us with its rapidity and excellence. And as mentioned earlier, the novel was in the Victorian era what drama was in Elizabethan. The Victorian novel had totally harbingered the emergence and domination of a new literary form that would rule the literary taste of readers for centuries to come, and it is true that the novel still remains one of the most popular literary forms in the twentieth century. Its popularity has not diminished even after more than two hundred years of sheer literary dominance. In this section, we shall be looking at some of the characteristics of the Victorian novel.

15.3.1.3.1. Realism

Literature has always remained an integral aspect of human existence. We know that the literature produced a hundred and fifty years before the Victorian age was either classical or romantic. Adventurous, classical or romantic kind of literature prevailed in this period. But it was far removed from reality. The literature produced during the Victorian era, especially novels, was characterized by the spirit of realism. It was a departure from the idealism of the Romantic period. The romantic features of enthusiasm, passion, imaginations etc. declined in this period. Realism became the characteristic feature of the Victorian novel. It was a trend-setting phenomenon in the sense that it changed the way people looked at literature. Realism is the representation of men as they are, the expression of the plain, unvarnished truth without regard to ideals or romance.

The Victorian novel was realistic in nature in the sense that it brought the readers closer to real life by talking about plausible events. Most of the novels published during the Victorian era are not far from

reality but closer to it. The readers of such novels find it easy to relate to the events in the narrative. These narratives were about the common man and his struggles, which also happened to be the struggles of the lower-class people in society. These struggles usually included a character of lower-class trying to gain upward mobility in society. The Victorian novel shows a mirror to life in many such ways. It primarily represents life as it is and not as it ought to be. Its emphasis is on the here and now. The Victorian novel pays considerable attention to specific action and verifiable consequences. It evokes common actions, presents surface details and emphasizes the minor catastrophes of the middle-class population. It employs simple and direct language and writes about the issues of human conduct. The action was replaced by characterization since man was at the center of Victorian society. There was considerable attention to detail in the Victorian novels to give a crystal-clear picture of contemporary society. The ideals of the romantic age were incapable of representing the harsh realities of life and thus were replaced by the realist ideals of the Victorian age which underscored the smaller physical detail to represent the life not romantically but as it is. The novels of most of the Victorian novelists are laced with realism. Charles Dickens mastered the art of realistic representation in Victorian literature as most of his novels touches upon the realistic aspects of Victorian life. His novels acquaint the readers with prevalent social issues of contemporary Victorian life and society. His novels truly reflect the grim social realities of life by portraying characters caught in the havoc caused by the industrial revolution. *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), are some of his most famous novels that touch upon the prevalent social issues. William Makepeace Thackeray was also a major Victorian novelist to have written great novels that talk about serious social issues and bring the readers closer to the Victorian reality. Thackeray even says for himself, "I have no brains above my eyes; I describe what I see."

15.3.1.3.2. Morality or Moral Purpose

The middle-class Victorian society was governed by a set moral code. A certain code of conduct was to be followed by everyone. Morality was at the heart of every Victorian citizen. Truthfulness, economizing, duty, personal responsibility, and a strong work ethic were strongly regarded morals of the Victorian era. But contrasting to this was the world of factories and machines. Although the industrial revolution had changed the face of Victorian society in various ways, it also had many dark sides. The exploitation of the poor was one of the biggest problems that the industrial revolution had given rise to since factory owners worked the poor people in their factories for long hours, in poor working conditions and at low wages. This was strongly reflected in the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). But these novelists also insisted upon the adherence to moral values in their novels. Morality was a characteristic feature of the Victorian novel and literature in general since the Victorian novel and literature departed from the purely artistic

standard of art for art's sake. The emphasis was on morality and moral values rather than artistic value in literature. The aim of Victorian novels and novelists was not to achieve artistic perfection in terms of form and language but to instruct the readers and teach them. The literature produced in this era, especially novels, was didactic in nature. Pleasing the readers was not the purpose of Victorian novelists. Their chief purpose was to teach the readers of English society the importance of moral values, and we find that this is well reflected in the writings of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and the Bronte sisters.

15.3.1.3.3. Serialization of Novels

Although this is not the characteristic of the Victorian novel, it is important to note that the novel in the Victorian era was not published the way it is published today: in one volume. It had become customary for novelists to publish the novel in parts or volumes. It was a convenient method both for the novelist and the readers since the novelist could write a part of the full novel and publish it before finishing the other, and the readers could read that part of the novel with paying only a few shillings rather than paying for the full volume at a time. Most monthly part issues sold for about one shilling, meaning the cost of a novel could be spread out over a year and a half. Throughout the Victorian era novels in serial parts were published in abundance in newspapers and magazines. The newspapers and magazines were popular forms of daily and monthly literature in the nineteenth century and it was because of these two powerful mediums that novel as a literary genre rose to new heights. Charles Dickens, who is considered the greatest Victorian novelist, published most of his novels in the serial form. Serialization made it easy for the novel to be read by the maximum number of readers.

15.3.1.3.4. Social Problem Novels

The Victorian novels can also be categorized as 'Social Problem Novels' because of its social significance. These Social Problem Novels are also known as "industrial", "social" or "condition-of-England" novels. "The condition of England" was a phrase used by Thomas Carlyle in his essay *Chartism* (1839) about the "condition and disposition" of working-class people. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, industrialization was a huge success. It had revolutionized the ways of living in various ways. The period was heading towards economic progress in the shadow of industrialization. Although the industrial revolution had bettered the lives of people by introducing machines and factories, it also had many dark sides to it in the sense that it had caused a great deal of damage to the Victorian society. One of the worst parts of the industrial revolution was child labor. It was a misfortune of the Victorian society that small children were worked in factories for long hours. Most children worked for 16 hours a day with only a forty-minute break in between. The evils of child labor are well reflected in the works of Charles Dickens as it is a well-known fact that Dickens himself had worked in factories when he was a small child since his father had been imprisoned for heavy debt in

Debtor's Prison. His novel *Oliver Twist* is centered around a small child in a workhouse.

Industrialization had also not spared women from its diabolical grip since women were also exploited like small children. They were also worked on low wages. The factory owners were also insensitive towards pregnant women as a report had appeared somewhere which reported: "We have repeatedly seen married females, in the last stage of pregnancy, slaving from morning to night beside these never-ending machines, and when . . . they were obliged to sit down to take a moment's ease, and being seen by the manager, were fined for the offense."

It was an age where people were worked in factories, on low wages and in poor working conditions. The working conditions were so disastrous that the workers often caught some serious health issues since they had to work in the factories without any protective gears which increased the chances of catching diseases. The factories had also adversely affected the environment by pollution. Rivers and other water resources were highly polluted which resulted in the spread of health issues among the population. The literature of the age, especially novels, is remarkable because it reflected such social problems caused by the industrial revolution. The Victorian novelists are fundamental to the canon of Victorian literature because of their excellence in portraying such social or industrial problems caused by the industrial revolution.

15.3.1.3.5. Women Novelists

The Victorian era was an era of new progress and development not only in the economic, industrial, social or political sphere but also in literature. Literature saw the emergence of a new kind of writing in this era which was women's writing. Women's writing existed even in earlier ages also but it was the time when women's writing was not taken seriously. The literary canon was completely under the dominance of male writers. Even publishers were not showing enough interest in the works of female authors because of the preconceived notion that their writing was trivial and silly, and that nobody would purchase books written by female authors. It was precisely because of this that the earlier ages failed in featuring the works of women writers. But the whole picture of women's writing was about to change in the Victorian age. Jane Austen had already set the tone for the Victorian women novelists to try their hands at novel and excel in novel writing. Victorian age witnessed the rise of some of the biggest figures of women's writing. The women novelists that emerged in this age completely broke away from the male novelists of the age and created a separate identity of their own. Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Anne Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell are the most important women novelists of the age. The three Bronte sisters were often known as "stormy sisterhood" since they took the Victorian society by storm through their writing. For the first time in the history of English literature, there emerged a kind of writing that allowed women to express themselves on a global level through literature. The novels of these women novelists were centered on the everyday life of women in the Victorian era. For the first time, the focus of literature had

shifted to domestic life since women were mostly confined between the four walls of their houses. As George Eliot says, the novels written by women novelists were considered "silly" because it was believed that women's writing had no literary importance and value. George Eliot was the male pseudonym used by the woman novelist Mary Ann Evans. She used the pseudonym of George Eliot to write and publish her novels because she thought that her writing would not be taken seriously if she used her real name, and it was because of this that she kept on writing and publishing her novels under the male pseudonym to create the impression that the novels were written by a male novelist. Charlotte Bronte is known for her novel *Jane Eyre*. Elizabeth Gaskell is known for her *North and South* for depicting the contrasting lives of the rich and the poor in England. Emily Bronte is known for her gothic novel *Wuthering Heights* whereas Anne Bronte is known for *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall*. These women novelists made significant contributions to the development of the novel form, and they were the ones who began the great tradition of women's writing in the novel form.

15.3.1.3.6. Science Fiction Novels

Science had already made its mark in the Victorian era. There was a shift towards scientific thought and inquiry. The society began to question the long prevalent aspects of society. The spirit of doubt and questioning cropped up in the minds of people. As we have seen before, it was also an age of a variety of scientific developments. The year 1859 was remarkable because of Charles Darwin's landmark scientific literary work *On the Origin of Species* which profoundly affected the minds of people regarding religion, human birth and existence and the role of religion in human life. Besides, the age was also remarkable for the various developments in medical science. Literature was also not much far away from scientific representation in the Victorian era as the late Victorian period saw the emergence of a totally different kind of literary writing: science fiction. Herbert George Wells (H. G. Wells) began writing in the late Victorian period and excelled the art of writing science fiction. He had mastered the art of science fiction to such an extent that he was once referred to as 'the Shakespeare of Science Fiction.' He is the founder of the science fiction genre. His novels are called 'Science Fiction' because most of his novels have the elements of science and scientific experiments. These elements of science and scientific experiments are not secondary but dominant features of his novels. The protagonists of Wells' novels engage in some kind of scientific experiment which transforms him into an abnormal creature. *The Invisible Man* (1897) is about one such protagonist name Griffin who drinks a potion he made for himself through scientific experiments that made him invisible. *The Time Machine* (1895) was also a famous science fiction novel by H. G. Wells that popularized the concept of time travel. The plot of the novel revolves around the concept of time travel by using a vehicle or device to travel purposely and selectively forward or backwards in time. The protagonist of the novel is a scientist who invented a time travel device and to test the device he takes a ride of it and comes to realize that

he has stopped in 802,701 A.D. in time. The events that follow this show the protagonist and his struggles with the people living in that time. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) are two of his other science fiction novels that became very popular on its publication. H. G. Wells' science fiction novels are works of classics as they are popular even today and read by millions of people.

15.3.2. The Victorian Poetry

It is true that the Victorian age was emphatically an age of prose and novel but poetry was not less significant in this period. The period has also produced some of the greatest poets of English literature besides great novelists. Though the age is known for its rich tradition of novels and novelists, it is also known for its poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barret Browning. The Victorian poetry departs from the poetic tradition set by the romantics. The romantic poets were more inclined to nature and country life and whereas the Victorian poets have shown faith in human life and society. Like the Victorian novel, the poetry of the age also finds its interest in contemporary Victorian society. There is a strong inclination towards Victorian people and their lives.

15.3.2.1. Realism

The Victorian Poetry doesn't differ much from the Victorian novel in terms of its overall theme and subject matter. The Victorian age was an age of significant changes brought mainly by the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution had many dark sides to it since it introduced pathetic conditions of working and living to the society. The Victorian novel as discussed above had reflected these pathetic consequences of the industrial revolution. But Victorian poetry also came forward to discuss the contemporary Victorian human society and life. The poetry of this age departed from the idealistic standards of romantic age and shifted its focus to the realistic representation. The poems written by Tennyson were rich in its social and realistic representation.

15.3.2.2. Focus on Urban Life

The romantic poetry was known for its depiction of the rural and country life. It was more inclined towards nature and its representation. The romantic poets turned to nature and rural life primarily to find solace from the harsh realities of the industrial revolution. The poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron feature some aspects of nature. But the Victorian poetry drifted away from this and reflected the newly developed city life. The industrial revolution had given rise to new cities. These cities were immensely populated. The huge population gave rise to new slums. The living conditions deteriorated, and the Victorian poetry reflected this deterioration. The Victorian poets mastered the art of depicting city life in their poetry.

15.3.2.3. Pessimism

Pessimism is the defining feature of Victorian poetry. The standards of living had deteriorated because of the industrial revolution. The increase in slums was giving rise to new diseases. There was poverty, unemployment, corruption, disease, deaths etc. The poetry of the age discussed the pathetic lives of these people and thus had a note of pessimism. Tennyson and many other poets mourn the death of traditional English life. Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* is one such pessimistic poem that mourns the arrival of the modern way of life.

15.3.2.4. Questioning the God

The Victorian society began to question God on many prevalent aspects. The spirit of doubt and questioning developed among the Victorians, and the poetry of this age succeeds in representing this new spirit. Tennyson, the Browning couple, Matthew Arnold and many other poets wrote poems concerning the Victorian spirit of doubt and questioning. Their poems reflected the newly developed tendency of people questioning the God, religion and Church, and the corruption of the priests.

15.3.2.5. Social Reform

It is a well-known fact that the industrial revolution began in the age when Wordsworth and Coleridge were at the top of their business. The society was changing rapidly since cities were growing in number and the industrial revolution had started showing its impacts, both positive and negative. In order to move away from the deteriorating society, Wordsworth, Coleridge and other romantic poets found solace in rural and country life. They began appreciating nature and not the growing city life. But it was in the Victorian era that poetry began to represent urban life. Rather than turning their heads against poor urban life, the Victorian poets began to confront it and talk about it in their poetry. They took the task of social reform through poetry. Thus, the poetry of the age was becoming more and more social in its appeal to the readers.

15.3.2.6. Dramatic Monologue

Dramatic monologue is a narrative device in which a person or character speaks for a longer period of time. Robert Browning is often considered the master of this form of writing. His dramatic monologues are so perfect that he presents the whole thought process of his fictional characters before the audience or the readers. The technique of dramatic monologue allowed Browning to explore the minds of his characters and reveal it before his audience in a subtle manner. His monologues are special also because of his treatment of contemporary social and religious problems of the day, particularly domestic abuse and religious hypocrisy. His dramatic monologues were so perfect that it influenced the writings of many later day poets like W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

15.3.3. The Victorian Prose

Prose as a literary medium emerged in the eighteenth century. The age of Pope or Enlightenment age became the age of prose because of the significant advancements that facilitated the growth of prose. But prose in the Victorian age had a separate identity when compared to earlier prose writings. The prose in the romantic age and eighteenth century saw the rise of the personal essay. The prose writers provided their personal accounts of different things. But Victorian prose differed from earlier prose writing in the sense that it shifted from personal essays to social criticism. The prose writers unlike the earlier one began to write about the prevalent social scenarios. They focused their writing on social issues of the day also providing their personal commentaries on that. In a way, they took the task of social reform through prose because prose as a literary medium was read by a greater number of people in the Victorian age as compared to the verse form of poetry. The prose of the age included didactic essays and social commentaries on politics, society and environment. There were historical tracts as well since an increasing number of writers were attempting historical writing. The prose of the age also included a lot of polemical writings on various social issues including the plight of the working class. Thomas Carlyle is one of the most prominent prose writers of the age chiefly known for his *Life of Schiller* (1825), *Sartor Resartus* (1836), and *French Revolution* (1837). His work *Past and Present* (1843) was inspired by the critical social and industrial conditions of the day. John Ruskin was also a significant prose writer of the age. He is known for his prose works like *Modern Painters* (1843), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) and *The Two Paths* (1859). In most of his writing career, he was occupied with architecture and painting and not with literary arts. His works mentioned above are about the architecture of those times. He was later found to have shifted to social writing also. *Unto this Last* (1860) is one of his most popular works and it is often said that Mahatma Gandhi was highly inspired by this work. The age was also remarkable because of the writings of Thomas Babington Macaulay who was far more popular than Carlyle and Ruskin in his own lifetime. It is said for him that “even his purely literary essays have been widely read by persons who as a rule never think of reading criticism.” Macaulay was a legal advisor to Supreme Council in India. He is famous for his work *Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835*, which laid a very strong foundation for the establishment of formal English education in India. He is best known for his work *History of England from the Accession of James II* (1848). Besides Carlyle, Ruskin and Macaulay, there were numerous other prose writers in the Victorian era. The Victorian prose was not limited in reach since it was read by a large number of people. These writings were published in newspapers and magazines and thus it was easy for the writers to reach the maximum number of readers since newspapers and magazines were popular means of reading in those days.

• CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-1

Answer the following questions:

1. The period from _____ is known as the Victorian age.

2. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was housed in a special building called _____.
3. The Crystal Palace was designed by an English architect named _____.
4. Which of the following was not one of the aims of the Chartist Movement?
 - a) No property qualifications to be an MP.
 - b) Electoral districts of equal size.
 - c) The use of secret ballot to protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
 - d) Voting rights to women.
5. The Victorian literature was most remarkable for its development of the _____ form.

a) poetry	b) prose
c) novel	d) drama
6. Which of the following novelists cannot be considered as one of the precursors of the English novel?

a) Laurence Sterne	b) Samuel Richardson
c) Thomas Hardy	d) Henry Fielding
7. *Tristram Shandy* was written by _____.

a) Thomas Hardy	b) Laurence Sterne
c) Henry Fielding	d) Daniel Defoe
8. Robert Browning is well-known for his _____.

a) Psychological Realism	b) Focus of urban life
c) Dramatic Monologue	d) Idealism

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-2

Answer the following questions:

1. Discuss in brief the major literary characteristics of the Victorian age.

2. Write a note on the characteristics of Victorian novel.

3. What are the salient features of Victorian poetry?

15.4 LET US SUM UP

The Victorian era had a dream run not only in the social, industrial or political sphere but also in literature. The Great Industrial Revolution was one of the most significant events that took place during the era and totally altered the fabric of human society. This industrial revolution had given rise to the Great Exhibition of 1851 which displayed the newly gained industrial strength of Britain. The age was also remarkable for its spirit of science and scientific developments. There was the Chartist Movement of 1838 also which enfranchised the working class. But besides these significant changes, literature played a significant role in educating the masses and keeping them informed about the events. The rise of the novel form was the most prominent feature of the literature of this period. The great novelists of the age mastered the art form and laid the foundation for the novel form to develop further in the hands of later day novelists. The novel as a literary form was so dynamic in the Victorian era that it could talk about any possible subject matter. Social reform was necessarily required and the novelists of the age used novel as a tool to bring about the reform. Most of the novels in this age were centered around social reform since the great industrial revolution had caused great damage to society as a whole. The poetry and prose of the age were also not behind in making their marks in the canon of Victorian literature since the poets and other writers of the age made profound contributions to the literature of the age. It was so remarkable that literature excelled in a machine age. The Victorian age thus became the age not only of industrial dominance but also of literary.

15.5 KEY WORDS

- Literature: written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit.
- Monologue: a long speech by one actor in a play or film, or as part of a theatrical or broadcast programme.
- Profound: (of a state, quality, or emotion) very great or intense.
- Canon: a general law, rule, principle, or criterion by which something is judged.

15.6 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. A Compendious History of English Literature by R.D. Trivedi
2. English Literature by W. J. Long
3. A History of English Literature by Edward Albert

ANSWERS:

1) 1837-1901 2) The Crystal Palace 3) Richard Paxton 4) d) Voting rights to women 5) c) novel 6) c) Thomas Hardy 7) b) Laurence Sterne 8) c) Dramatic Monologue