

Lecture 7

The Victorian Age and London of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations (1861)

* The Victorian Age :

- Charles Dickens lived and wrote his novels throughout the Victorian Age. This was a particularly notable time in England's history.
- Queen Victoria reigned the English Parliament from 1837-1901. Mostly, these years were marked by prosperity and optimism. Her reign was a time of expansion of wealth, power, and culture, with enormous contributions to society.
- The Victorian Era formed the modern principles of invention and technology. The concept of developing solutions to problems became extremely popular and scientists were inspired to create new means of benefiting mankind. This idea motivated other aspects of society, including politics, ideology, and economics.
- Through this growth in technology came growth in manufacturing and banking, which spurred the Industrial Revolution. The industrial working class and middle-class expanded due to an increase in manufacturing jobs and low-cost consumer items.
- Although the technological advances of the Victorian Age helped the British people immensely, the factory environment was notably harsh. Factories were unsanitary, unsafe, and utilized child labor. Employees contracted diseases, and often faced death.
- The brutality of the industrial life stimulated conflicting feelings and theories among Victorian thinkers. Socialism spread, and reformist liberalism promoted helping the poor.
- Writers such as Charles Dickens often attempted to expose the dark side of the industrial age.
- This era saw the birth of satire, a genre which writers often utilized to criticize the problems of society through humor; many authors still use this style today.
- In addition to the growth in theories on social reform, education and literature also thrived during the Victorian Age. Education spread, literacy increased, and reading and writing became priorities.
- Literature became a reflection of society, religion, and integrity, and both romanticism and realism greatly influenced writers.
- Many authors widely studied today wrote during the Victorian Age (including George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë , and Oscar Wilde) which proves how influential the era still is to our society.
- The Victorian Era was a long period of prosperity, confidence, and change that greatly affected future societies, as well as our way of thinking.

***An Outline of the Main Characteristics of the Victorian Era in England :**

- 1- The **Industrial Revolution** begins in England, though the Continent will experience it some decades later.
- 2- **Urbanization** intensifies-along with urban poverty and class dissatisfaction.
- 3- "**Nature**" is no longer simply God's gift, as previous generations might have thought.
- 4- Early in the Victorian Era, the merchants and manufacturers of the middle class promote **laissez-faire** (In the **laissez-faire** view, the state has no responsibility to engage in intervention to maintain a desired wealth distribution or to create a welfare state to protect people from poverty, instead relying on charity and the market system) economics, free trade, various social reforms, and individual liberty.
- 5- The **Reform Bill (Reform Act** is a generic term used for legislation concerning electoral matters) of 1832 was an important event to extend the voting to the urban areas and to those who own properties worth than 10 pounds.
- 6- Though middle-class **liberalism** is very powerful throughout the Victorian Period, it does not go uncriticized in any decade. This is the age of the Victorian sage or cultural critic-**Thomas Carlyle, J.S. Mill, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin**, among others, take aim at or modify liberal assumptions about human nature, economics, and social organization.
- 7- **The original Scientific Revolution of Darwin**, Galileo, and Newton finds its completion in the Victorian Era. Science begins to dominate public discourse, and even, according to some writers, partially displaces religion as a coherent world view.
- 8- Along with the dominance of the scientific world view comes anxiety over **the loss of the older, religious outlook**. Many British citizens find it hard to maintain their Christian beliefs. Putting a positive construction upon Darwinian "evolution" sometimes provides them with an alternative vision of progress.
- 9- Though the British Empire has been growing since the days of Queen Elizabeth I, nineteenth-century English citizens, especially during the Victorian Era, become intensely interested in their overseas possessions. **This interest is most likely due in part to anxiety about competition with other countries-Bismark's Germany**
- 10- An English artistic movement of the late 19th century, dedicated to the doctrine of '**art for art's sake**' – that is, art as a self-sufficient entity concerned solely with beauty and not with any moral or social purpose.

Charles Dickens' London

- Dickens spent most of his life in London.
- His descriptions of nineteenth century London allow readers to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of the old city.
- Immersing the reader into time and place sets the perfect stage for Dickens to weave his fiction.
- Victorian London was the largest, most spectacular city in the world.
- While Britain was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, its capital was both reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences.
- In 1800 the population of London was around one million. That number would swell to 4.5 million by 1880.
- While fashionable areas like Regent and Oxford streets were growing in the west, new docks supporting the city's place as the world's trade center were being built in the east.
- Perhaps the biggest impact on the growth of London was the railroad in the 1830s, which displaced thousands and accelerated the city's expansion.
- The price of this massive growth and control of the world's trade was the incredible poverty and filth that started to infiltrate the city.
- In his biography of Dickens, Peter Ackroyd writes,
"If a late twentieth century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick- sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him."
- While there were great financial disparities during the early 19th century, there was no segregation of "haves" and "have-nots" in the city. Homes of upper and middle class people existed in close proximity to the homes of people living in abject poverty.
- Rich and poor alike intermingled in the crowded streets. Businessmen, pickpockets, prostitutes, drunks, and beggars, all shared the same city—only further magnifying the class differences. Pip grows up in this world.