

The Victorian Age (1837-1901)

The Historical context

Victoria became Queen of England in 1837. Since she was very young and inexperienced, Parliament's power increased.

With Victoria's ascent we have the beginning of the "Age of Empire", in which the process of industrialization kept on, but the bad working conditions caused the social unrest.

In 1838 the Chartists (a group of radicals and workers) asked for a radical reform to bring true democracy to the country, but their demand, the "People's Charter", was rejected by Parliament. Only in 1867 workers got the right of vote with the "Reform Bill" and in 1871 their unions were legalized with the "Trade Union Act".

Some agricultural problems had socio-political effects. The famine in Ireland for the failure of the potato crop caused many peo-

pe to die or to emigrate (1845).

The abolition of the Corn Laws, which had caused the price of bread to increase, improved people's conditions both in England and in Ireland (1846). But the political unrest didn't disappear in Ireland: Irish Roman Catholics claimed in a more pressing way for their rights.

The only war in which Britain was involved in this period was the Crimean War (1854-56).

Liberal life was influenced by John Stuart Mill:

the balance between individual freedom and state intervention can be reached only if there are state services and institutions. With a series of Parliamentary Acts men from all creeds could go to universities, primary school system was provided and trade unions were legalised.

In 1876 Queen Victoria became empress of India.

The British Empire continued to prosper but, towards the end of the century, an economic depression arose for the increasing competition of United

States and Germany.

In 1884, and 1888 two Reform Bills extended the right of vote to agricultural workers and miners. Meanwhile county councils enlarged their powers.

In 1886 and 1893 Gladstone tried to improve Irish condition with two proposals of Bills, but they were rejected. Some Irish people began to claim for independence in the "Ginn Jinn", an extreme nationalistic movement.

In 1901 Queen Victoria died. He had restored popularity to the British Crown.

The social context.

Some important passages characterised British social context in this period.

First of all the application of the steam engine to the textile industries and the development of new ways of transport transformed Great Britain in an industrial country. Secondly many people moved to new industrial

overcrowded houses that were badly built. They had no lavatories, sewers or piped water. Some people lived in damp and airless cellars. Typhus and cholera were very common.

Since the number of workers was very high, they were exploited and the bad working conditions in which they worked undermined their health. Children were exploited in textile mills and mines, too.

The exploitation of poor people was also due to the political philosophy of Liberalism that led to free trade and unlimited competition.

Middle-class people were liberal and were represented by the Whigs who were now called "liberals". They became richer and richer during the century. While the beginning of this century was characterised by socio-economical instability, enthusiasm for triumphs in technology and engineering characterised the second half of the century. In particu-

urban optimism dominated the years between 1851 and 1871. In 1851 the Great Exhibition of Industry took place in London.

The values of middle class in the Victorian Age were respectability, good manners, hard work, probity and strong belief in family. But the other side of the picture presented problems such as prostitution, illegitimacy and high crime figures in large cities. Public schools provided an excellent education for middle-class boys and young men who would become the ruling class in industry and politics. Middle-class girls were educated to have a good marriage.

The middle class succeeded thanks to the exploitation of workers. Their situation slowly improved with the Factory Acts (1847 and 1867), the Mines Act (1842), the Education Act (1870).

Some candidates representing the Trade Unions were accepted on the Liberal lists. The Labour Representation Committee was formed in 1900, and it became the Labour Party in 1906.

Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx based their scientific theories on the observation of British economy. They thought the conflict between capital and labour could be resolved with violent revolution.

But workers preferred reforms and they claimed for state intervention.

Women's position changed, too. At the beginning of the century women couldn't have their own money and property. They could earn money only if they became teachers or writers. But by the end of the century women could go to schools to enter various professions.

The cultural context

The Victorian Age is a period of optimism, reflected by the essays on scientific and economic theories. Fiction developed in the forms of short stories or serialised novels.

Charles Lyell explained in his "Principles of Geology" the natural explanation of geological phenomena.

But the scientific masterpiece was "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection" by Charles Darwin. The new theory of evolutionism opposed to God's creation described in the Bible and influenced in many aspects Victorian literature.

The story of English

The Educational Act of 1870 established the English public school and marked the birth of Received Pronunciation (RP), a spoken

standard which was the distinctive sign of middle-class people. RP identified the authorities ruling in the colonies and became a means of social promotion. This is evident in "Pygmalion". But many people didn't like RP because it implies snobbery.

Irish-Gaelic culture disappeared and the language spoken in Ireland was Irish English. We also have the revival of Scottish nationalism.

The story of British Art

Victorian life was celebrated by Augustus Egg's paintings, while William Powell Frith was nearly a photographer. Pre-Raphaelites reacted to the standards given by the Royal Academy. Rossetti, Millais and Hunt put nature, plants and symbols in their paintings. John Ruskin defended the Pre-Raphaelites. William Morris was influenced by these artists.

Architecture was influenced by all the styles which had developed in the past.

The new buildings have elements of Gothic, Renaissance art, etc. The dominant 19th-century style is called neo-Gothic (or "painted style").