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The Influence of Historical Events on Victorian Literature

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Abstract

Victorian literature serves as a rich reflection of the 19th century's transformative historical events, including the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of the British Empire, social reform movements, and challenges to traditional religious beliefs. This article explores how authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Rudyard Kipling, Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold addressed themes of industrialization, colonialism, class conflict, and spiritual doubt. Through their works, Victorian writers critiqued societal norms, highlighted inequalities, and grappled with the shifting moral and intellectual landscape of their time. Their literature remains a vital lens through which to understand the complexities of the era and its enduring relevance today.

Keywords: Victorian literature, Industrial Revolution, colonialism, faith

Introduction

The Victorian era (1837–1901), named after Queen Victoria's reign, marked a significant period in English literature characterized by a diverse range of themes and styles. It was an era of tremendous social, cultural, and political transformation, which deeply influenced literary output. Victorian literature explored complex issues such as industrialization, morality, class dynamics, and the human condition, often reflecting the tension between traditional values and modern challenges. Writers such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy used their works to address pressing societal concerns, making Victorian literature a critical lens through which to understand 19th-century life (Gilmour, 2014).

The Victorian period was shaped by major historical events that left a profound impact on society and literature. The Industrial Revolution brought rapid technological advancements and urbanization, leading to significant socioeconomic changes. This era also witnessed the expansion of the British Empire, which introduced new perspectives on colonization, cultural exchange, and imperialism (Goodlad, 2004). Social reform movements addressing education, workers' rights, and gender equality emerged as responses to growing inequalities and societal challenges (Bryk, 2002). These historical shifts provided a rich backdrop for Victorian authors to engage with themes of industrial progress, social justice, and the complexities of empire.

Victorian literature serves as a mirror to the historical events of its time, reflecting the profound impact of industrialization, class conflict, and moral responsibility. By analyzing key literary works from this era, we can better understand how historical events influenced the themes, characters, and narratives of Victorian authors, shaping their enduring legacy in English literature.



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I. Industrial Revolution and Its Impact on Literature

The Industrial Revolution was a transformative period that reshaped the social, economic, and cultural fabric of 19th-century England. Marked by rapid technological advancements, such as the advent of the steam engine and mechanized production, it revolutionized industries like textiles, mining, and transportation. Urbanization became a defining feature as people migrated to cities in search of work, leading to the growth of industrial centers like Manchester and Birmingham. However, this period also brought significant challenges, including overcrowded cities, poor working conditions, and stark socioeconomic inequalities. The Industrial Revolution introduced unprecedented productivity, but its societal impact was deeply polarizing, creating wealth for some while perpetuating hardship for others (Gilmour, 2014).

Literary Reflection

The profound changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution did not go unnoticed by Victorian authors. Literature of the time became a powerful medium to critique and reflect on the social realities of industrialization.

1. Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*

In *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a scathing critique of industrial capitalism and its dehumanizing effects on workers. Set in the fictional industrial town of Coketown, the novel portrays the grim realities of factory life, highlighting the alienation and exploitation faced by the working class. Through characters like Stephen Blackpool, an honest but oppressed factory worker, and Thomas Gradgrind, a utilitarian schoolmaster obsessed with facts, Dickens critiques the mechanistic mindset of industrial society. He exposes the moral and emotional void created by unchecked capitalism, advocating for compassion and human values in a rapidly industrializing world (Goodlad, 2004).

2. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

Gaskell's *North and South* delves into the tensions between industrialists and workers, offering a nuanced perspective on industrial conflict. The novel centers on Margaret Hale, a young woman from southern England who moves to the industrial town of Milton. Through her interactions with John Thornton, a mill owner, and the striking workers, Gaskell explores the complexities of class divisions and the possibility of reconciliation. Unlike Dickens' stark critique, Gaskell presents industrialization as a double-edged sword, acknowledging both its challenges and potential for mutual understanding and progress (Bryk, 2002).

Themes

Victorian literature that grappled with the Industrial Revolution often revolved around three key themes:

1. Alienation:

The rise of industrialization led to a sense of disconnection among individuals, as workers were reduced to mere cogs in the machinery of mass production. Characters like Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* embody the emotional and social isolation experienced by the working class.

2. Mechanization:

The mechanized nature of factory life is depicted as a force that strips individuals of their humanity. Dickens' portrayal of Coketown in *Hard Times* vividly illustrates the oppressive and monotonous rhythm of industrial society.

3. Struggles of the Working Class:

Victorian authors frequently highlighted the plight of the working class, focusing on issues such as low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of agency. *North and South* offers a balanced view of these struggles while exploring the potential for understanding between different social strata.



The Industrial Revolution profoundly shaped Victorian literature, inspiring authors to use their works as platforms for social commentary. Through compelling narratives and richly drawn characters, they captured the complexities of industrial society, leaving a legacy of literature that continues to resonate in discussions of progress, inequality, and human dignity.

II. Expansion of the British Empire

Historical Background

The Victorian era marked the height of the British Empire, often described as the "empire on which the sun never sets." By the late 19th century, Britain controlled vast territories across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific, making it a dominant global power. This expansion was driven by economic interests, the search for new markets, and the availability of resources in colonized regions. It was also accompanied by ideological justifications, such as the notion of the "civilizing mission," which claimed that Britain was morally obligated to bring Western values, governance, and religion to colonized peoples. However, this imperial endeavor was not without its controversies, as it often involved exploitation, cultural erasure, and violent suppression of resistance (Gilmour, 2014).

Literary Reflection

The expansion of the British Empire deeply influenced Victorian literature, which both celebrated and critiqued the colonial enterprise.

1. Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*

Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* epitomizes the imperialist ethos of the Victorian era. Written in 1899, it portrays colonization as a moral obligation for Western powers, framing it as a burdensome yet noble mission to uplift "uncivilized" peoples. The poem reflects the pervasive attitude of cultural superiority, suggesting that the British Empire was carrying out a benevolent task by spreading its values and institutions. However, it also reveals the complexities and contradictions of imperialism, as the "burden" is depicted as a thankless endeavor fraught with challenges (Bryk, 2002).

2. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

While primarily a domestic novel, *Jane Eyre* contains subtle yet significant references to the colonial context of the time. Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," is a Creole from Jamaica, and her characterization reflects the anxieties and prejudices of Victorian society toward colonized peoples. Bertha's background serves as a critique of colonial practices, illustrating the dehumanizing effects of imperial exploitation and the cultural dislocation experienced by those on the periphery of the empire. The novel also grapples with issues of identity and power, as the imperial legacy shapes the lives of its characters in both overt and subtle ways (Goodlad, 2004).

Themes

Victorian literature dealing with the expansion of the British Empire often explored the following themes:

1. National Pride:

Many works celebrated the achievements of the British Empire, portraying its expansion as a source of national greatness and moral authority. Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* reflects this sense of pride in imperial progress.

2. Cultural Superiority:



Literature often reinforced the idea that British culture was inherently superior and that colonization was a benevolent act of bringing "civilization" to other parts of the world. This perspective is evident in Kipling's imperialist narrative.

3. Critique of Colonial Practices:

Other works, like *Jane Eyre*, subtly critique the darker aspects of imperialism, highlighting the human and cultural costs of colonization. Such narratives question the moral justifications and explore the personal and societal consequences of imperial dominance.

The expansion of the British Empire provided a rich and complex backdrop for Victorian literature. While some works celebrated the empire's achievements, others offered critical perspectives, revealing the tensions and contradictions inherent in the colonial enterprise. Together, these narratives contribute to a nuanced understanding of the Victorian era's imperial legacy.

III. Social Reforms and Class Consciousness

Historical Background

The Victorian era was a time of significant social upheaval and reform. As industrialization transformed the economic and social fabric of society, stark inequalities emerged, prompting widespread calls for change. Movements advocating for poverty alleviation, universal education, and workers' rights gained momentum. Legislative reforms, such as the Factory Acts and the Education Act of 1870, sought to address the exploitation of workers and provide access to basic education. The rise of trade unions and socialist ideologies further challenged traditional class hierarchies and sought to empower the working class. These developments deeply influenced Victorian literature, which became a platform for reflecting on and critiquing the social conditions of the time (Goodlad, 2004).

Literary Reflection

Victorian authors engaged with these social reforms and the growing awareness of class consciousness, using their works to illuminate societal injustices and advocate for change.

1. Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*

In *Alton Locke*, Kingsley portrays the struggles of a working-class poet and tailor who becomes involved in the Chartist movement. The novel vividly depicts the harsh realities of factory life and the dehumanizing conditions faced by workers, while also highlighting the transformative power of education and self-awareness. Kingsley's advocacy for social justice is evident in his sympathetic portrayal of the working class and his call for societal reforms to address economic and social inequalities (Bryk, 2002).

2. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* offers a poignant critique of gender inequality and rural poverty. Tess, a young woman from a poor farming family, becomes a tragic victim of societal and moral hypocrisies. Hardy exposes the rigid class divisions and the lack of agency afforded to women, highlighting the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality. The novel challenges Victorian moral norms and underscores the need for compassion and reform in a rapidly changing society (Gilmour, 2014).

Themes

Victorian literature addressing social reforms and class consciousness frequently explores these key themes:

1. Social Mobility:



Many works examine the barriers to upward mobility and the challenges faced by individuals attempting to improve their social standing. *Alton Locke* explores these struggles through the lens of a working-class protagonist.

2. **Morality:**

Victorian authors often grappled with the moral dilemmas posed by societal reforms, critiquing the hypocrisy and rigidity of conventional morality. Tess's plight in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* serves as a powerful indictment of the era's moral double standards.

3. **Critiques of Societal Norms:**

Through their narratives, authors challenged the status quo, advocating for a more just and equitable society. Both Kingsley and Hardy used their works to critique class structures and call attention to the injustices of their time.

The rise of social reform movements profoundly influenced Victorian literature, inspiring authors to engage with the pressing social issues of their day. Through their works, they captured the struggles and aspirations of the era, offering a critique of societal norms and a vision for a more compassionate and equitable world.

IV. Religious Doubt and the Changing Role of Faith

Historical Background

The Victorian era was marked by profound challenges to traditional religious beliefs, driven by scientific discoveries and intellectual advancements. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) introduced the theory of evolution, which directly contradicted the biblical account of creation. This and other scientific developments sparked widespread debates about the compatibility of faith and reason. The rise of secularism, coupled with advances in geology, astronomy, and biology, further eroded the unchallenged authority of the Church. These shifts led many Victorians to grapple with spiritual uncertainty, prompting a reevaluation of faith and its role in society (Bernstein, 2006).

Literary Reflection

Victorian literature often reflected the era's spiritual turmoil, with authors and poets exploring themes of doubt, loss, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world.

1. **Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam***

Tennyson's elegiac poem *In Memoriam* encapsulates the struggles of faith in an age of scientific progress. Written in response to the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam, the poem delves into themes of grief, loss, and spiritual doubt. Tennyson wrestles with questions about divine justice, the afterlife, and humanity's place in a seemingly indifferent universe. While the poem ultimately affirms a cautious hope in God's plan, it vividly captures the tension between faith and reason that characterized the Victorian age (Goodlad, 2004).

2. **Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach***

Arnold's *Dover Beach* is a poignant meditation on the erosion of faith in a world increasingly dominated by skepticism. The poem contrasts the eternal beauty of nature with the fleeting and uncertain nature of human belief. Arnold laments the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith," symbolizing the retreat of religious certainty. His yearning for love and human connection as a substitute for lost spiritual assurance reflects a broader Victorian struggle to find new moral frameworks in the absence of traditional faith (Peltason, 1999).



Themes

Victorian literature addressing religious doubt and the changing role of faith often explores the following themes:

1. Loss of Faith:

Works like *Dover Beach* reflect the growing skepticism and disillusionment with religious institutions and doctrines in the face of scientific and philosophical advancements.

2. Existential Questioning:

The uncertainty about humanity's purpose and place in the universe, as seen in *In Memoriam*, underscores the existential challenges posed by the waning influence of religion.

3. The Search for New Moral Frameworks:

Victorian authors sought to reconcile the loss of traditional faith with the need for ethical and spiritual guidance, often advocating for humanism and emotional connection as alternatives to religious orthodoxy.

The Victorian era's religious doubt and the reevaluation of faith are vividly reflected in its literature. Poets like Tennyson and Arnold captured the intellectual and emotional struggles of their time, offering insights into the human condition amid profound cultural and scientific shifts. Their works continue to resonate, highlighting the timeless nature of these existential questions.

Conclusion

The literature of the Victorian era stands as a profound reflection of the dynamic social, cultural, and intellectual transformations of the time. From the Industrial Revolution to the expansion of the British Empire, from social reform movements to the challenges posed by religious doubt, Victorian authors used their works to critique, explore, and engage with the rapidly changing world around them.

Through the works of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, we see the human cost of industrialization and the struggles of the working class. In narratives addressing the British Empire, such as those by Rudyard Kipling and Charlotte Brontë, literature grapples with themes of colonialism, cultural superiority, and the complexities of identity. The social reformist zeal of writers like Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hardy highlights the inequalities of the era and the need for compassion and change. Meanwhile, the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold poignantly captures the spiritual uncertainty and existential questioning that emerged in the face of scientific progress.

Victorian literature not only provides a mirror to its historical context but also offers timeless insights into the human experience. By engaging with themes of alienation, morality, identity, and faith, these works continue to resonate, reminding us of the enduring relevance of literature in understanding and addressing societal and personal challenges. The era's authors, through their nuanced narratives, challenge readers to reflect on the past while considering its implications for the present and future. Victorian literature remains a cornerstone of English literary heritage, rich in lessons about resilience, empathy, and the quest for meaning in an ever-changing world.

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