

30 ott 2020 - The Victorian Age

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It was the best of time, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair – Charles Dickens, *The Tale of Two Cities*

It was an age of contradiction and opposites: age of progress, but also of problems in justice.

The Victorian Age usually is meant from 1837 - 1901, during the reign of Queen Victoria. Actually the Victorian Age started in 1832, with the *Great Reform Bill*, a law, which is usually taken as the watershed between the romantic age and the victorian age. This Reform Bill shifted political power from the hands of the landowners to the hands of manufacturer. It implied cultural changes as well.

Social area

The new ruling classes were as ruthless as those that had governed Britain during the first phase of industrial revolution, but they began to be gradually aware of the inhuman levels of exploitation of the workers: they were more careful on the workers:

- at a political level this awareness gave rise to a serious of reforms that in the end improved the conditions of life and work of the proletarians, avoiding at the same time that social revolution that, according to Marx's analysis, should have taken place in Britain first;
- among the common affluent people this awareness took the form of humanitarianism, philanthropy and sentimentalism;
- the Victorian novelist, mostly belonging to the middle classes, shared the same values and models of life of their reading public, and approached with this attitude to the main problems of their times; they felt a sense of guilt, and they find a solution in philanthropy, and they acted according to philanthropy granted from a position of social and economic privilege; at the same time they thought that their only responsibility was to expose their problems
- there were some good points:
 1. more general **prosperity** that was spreading in Britain;
 2. medical, mechanical and scientific **progress**;
 3. improvement of **literacy**
 4. the reform of a **middle class parliament**, conceded to the working classes, created a

widespread belief that social peace was possible and that progress was limitless

- these good points account for the optimism which characterized the whole period, and for the self-confidence and self-complacency of the middle classes which were also able to impose their values on the working class; the most important value was *respectability*

- the negative points are:

1. **poverty**
2. **prostitution**
3. **exploitation of labour**
4. **cruelty to children**

- these evils were removed from the conscience of people by being concealed under the veil of hypocrisy;
- it was a characteristic tendency of the victorian society to deceive itself in relation to its responsibilities and faults; some political writers exposed this attitude, attacking the fundamental insensitivity of their times

VICTORIAN AGE

age of contradiction

- progress // problems in justice

Reign of Queen Victoria
(1837-1901)

starts with **Great Reform Bill** → landowner's power
TO

manufacturer's power

improved conditions of
life and work

avoiding a social
revolution

humanitarianism and
philanthropy

aware of the inhuman levels of
exploitation of the workers

Novelists felt their only responsibility
in exposing society problems