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## **UNIT 1 THE VICTORIAN AGE**

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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

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What do we mean by the Victorian era? The Victorian Era is usually a reference to the period of the reign of Queen Victoria between 1837 and 1901. But when we talk about the Victorian era / Victorian age, we mean approximately the period between 1820 and 1914 i.e., a decade and a half prior to Queen Victoria's ascent to the British throne and similarly almost a decade and a half after her death. To place Victorian writings (which had great names in all forms of writing—prose, poetry and novel) in the history of English literature, it is necessary to recognize Victorian literature as sandwiched between the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic literature and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Modern literature. Let us first explore the characteristics of the Victorian age before we delineate the special features of Victorian poetry through comparison and contrast with Romantic and Modern poetry.

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### **1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

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This Unit introduces you to the Victorian Age and Victorian Literature. At the end of your study of this Unit, you will be able to discuss:

- \* the characteristics of the Victorian Age
- \* the differences between Victorian poetry and its predecessor, Romantic poetry

- \* the differences between Victorian and Modern poetry and
- \* Victorian poetry with special reference to Lord Tennyson

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## 1.2 THE VICTORIAN AGE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

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Queen Victoria was the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Empress of India. She ruled for half a century and the period of her rule (1837-1901) is known as the Victorian Age.



QUEEN VICTORIA (source [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))

Queen Victoria has remained one of the iconic queens of Great Britain. From her childhood, she was brought up on a strict code of discipline which later gave the Victorian Age a strict code of morality. She was multilingual and knew French, Italian, Latin and German and also some key words and phrases of Hindustani, as that was the time when India was ruled by England.

The Victorian era was a time of rapid technological advancement and industrialization. Electricity started to become more common, photography became a popular medium, and rail systems spread across Britain. In 1842, Victoria became the first monarch to ride a train. Her reign for nearly 65 years is the second longest in British history, the first being that of Queen Elizabeth II, the present reigning monarch of England(1953-till date) i.e.67 years.

### Activity:

Why do you think Queen Victoria is referred to as one of the iconic queens of Great Britain?

During Queen Victoria's reign, the British empire expanded and reached the zenith of power and prestige. Nearly one fourth of the world owed allegiance to the British Queen. During her reign, Britain witnessed the Industrial Revolution which brought a strong division between the working class and the wealthy. The wealthy grew wealthier and the poor poorer. Charles Dickens's novels like *Oliver Twist* illustrate this huge fissure in society.

Queen Victoria introduced new reforms in arts, science and politics, reforms that are still in effect today, chief among them being the ideal of Constitutional Monarchy, political reforms, industrial revolution and social changes. She gave attention to education and as Queen, she followed the policy of being close to the people to understand their lives and see what positive changes could be brought about. Victorian values were influenced to quite an extent by Queen Victoria herself. Victorian society put a premium on morals, duty, proper behaviour and women's modesty. Gender rules were made and men and women were expected to adhere to them. Men were to be the providers and women were to be homemakers who raised the family. All these get reflected in Victorian writings.

### **Activity**

What were the reforms introduced by Queen Victoria?

#### **1.2.1 The Victorian Novel:**

Charles Dickens is the most famous Victorian novelist whose novels like *David Copperfield*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* offered commentary on social problems and in particular, the plight of the poor and the oppressed working class. William Makepiece Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* depicts as well as satirizes middle-class society. The Bronte sisters (Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and Anne Bronte), and George Eliot are among the most celebrated women novelists. Thomas Hardy's novels, like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* examine the social constraints on the lives of those living in Victorian England and criticise those beliefs, especially those relating to marriage, education and religion, that limited people's lives and caused unhappiness.

**Activity:** Read any novel of Charles Dickens and list out the social problems discussed in the novel.

#### **1.2.2 Victorian Prose**

Prose writings of this period are lengthy treatises and deal with many of the Victorian problems. They are in the nature of intellectual debates on issues of religion, philosophy, arts and politics. Just as the 18<sup>th</sup> century was known as the age of Prose and Reason, the Victorian age is seen as the age of Prose revival. In between the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Victorian Age (the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), was the Romantic age (the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

**18<sup>th</sup> Century(Age of Prose and Reason) →Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century(Romantic period) →late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (the Victorian age).**

These movements came into existence through revolt against the literary practice of the previous era and through revival of the medieval legends and stories.

Let us briefly look at the broad features of Victorian Prose:

1. Victorian Realism:

Realism was the chief characteristic of Victorian prose, very different from the highly imaginative prose of the Romantic Age.

2. Victorian Compromise:

The word 'Compromise' has many meanings. One of them is "something that combines qualities or elements of different things." Here 'Victorian compromise' relates to the combination of the positive and negative aspects of that period, of optimism and pessimism. The positives arose out of the changes in the standard of living that were brought about by the Industrial revolution and advancements in technology. Together they contributed to Britain's rising stature as a colonial power while the negatives related to poverty, starvation and poor living conditions of the working class. The positives could be seen in the objective and rational approach to issues that were once clouded by blind faith in religion.

3. Victorian Utilitarianism:

This was first propounded by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), but his concept of Utilitarianism came into force only during the Victorian era. Utilitarianism upheld the belief that the value of a thing or an action is determined by its utility. In other words, the principle behind Utilitarianism is to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number and that this is the measure of right and wrong of all that we do or attempt to do.

4. Agnosticism:

With the advent of science and the theory of Evolution by Charles Darwin, the belief in the existence of God became a question mark. To believe or not to believe was the dilemma of this period and gave rise to writings on agnosticism.

The great prose writers of this period include Thomas Carlyle (*Hero and Hero Worship, Sartor Resartus*), John Ruskin (*Unto this Last, Seven Lamps of Architecture*), Lord Macaulay (*History of England*), Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*), R.L. Stevenson (*Essays*), John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty, On the Subjection of Women*) and Walter Pater (*Imaginary Portraits*). Mention has been made here of a few of their popular and celebrated works. The one thing that unites all of them is that they were all involved in the conflicting issues of the day, such as Utilitarian ethics, political reforms, education, growth of democracy, and Science vs Faith. In fact the Victorian age is best

defined as an age of conflict between old and new ideas in respect of science and religion, faith and doubt, morality, rights of women etc.

To sum up, the chief characteristics of the Victorian Period were based on conflict- what is often described as ‘Victorian Conflict’- ensuing between economic progress and prosperity as against poverty and exploitation of the working class, between faith and doubt, between individualism as against collective and shared responsibility and Victorian morals as against moral decay in society.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- a) What are the characteristics of Victorian prose?
- b) Write short notes on the ‘Victorian Conflict’ and the ‘Victorian Compromise’.

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## **1.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ROMANTIC AND VICTORIAN POETRY**

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### **1.3.1 Romantic poetry**

As stated earlier, the Victorian age is sandwiched between the Romantic age of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Modern age of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To understand Victorian poetry, let us begin with a look at the differences in the poetry of these three periods. Let us first see what distinguished Romantic from Victorian poetry.

The Romantic Age(1798-1830) is coterminous with the French revolution that happened between 1789 and 1799. Romantic Literature refers to the writings of the first three decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain . The great poets associated with Romantic literature are William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

How do we define Romanticism? As a literary and intellectual movement, it originated in Europe coinciding with the French Revolution that supported the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The goal of the Revolution was to eliminate class divisions in the society, to do away with French monarchy and aristocracy and establish all people as citizens with access to equal rights. Romantic poetry turned against the elite society of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whose emphasis was to follow conventions, traditions and rules governing poetry. It went counter to the neoclassical poetry which made reason and intellect the basis of all writings. In its place Romantic poetry valued emotions and imagination. Wordsworth and Coleridge defined poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and as “emotions recollected in tranquillity”. The key words, as you can see from these two definitions are emotion, imagination and tranquillity. When you read the poetry of the previous century that is the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis was on reason and logic. Even poetry that was written by poets like Dryden and Pope approximated to prose. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge turned away from the Augustan ideals. They turned to Nature to inspire them. So the emphasis shifted from man and society to man and Nature in its pristine glory. The experience of joy in the presence of Nature provided them the creative and imaginative inspiration.

Romantic literature was greatly influenced by the French revolution, and its flagship slogan “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” made the poets celebrate the human spirit in individuals. A majority of the protagonists in Wordsworth’s poems come from the lower rungs of society, mainly the rural people and the lonely and the poor. For example, Wordsworth’s poems are about the Solitary Reaper, the Idiot Boy, Lucy Gray, the Leech Gatherer- simple, innocent, rustic, guileless people with a pristine purity very much like that of Nature. These simple characters revealed the human spirit of courage and endurance in the most trying circumstances. The Romantics revered and admired Nature and made Nature central to their poems. Pastoral life, medievalism, Hellenism and supernaturalism were some of the recurring themes in their poetry. In the introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge stated that their aim was to make the natural appear supernatural( we see the Spirit of Nature in Wordsworth’s poems exalted to the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe) and the supernatural appear natural (we see in Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, the supernatural elements being a part of the natural story of the mariner’s eerie experience).

### 1.3.2 Victorian Poetry

When we come to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the great Romantic poets had exhausted their poetic inspiration, we have a slightly different form of poetry. Victorian poetry is the poetry written during the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901). During the Victorian age, numerous poetic ideals were developed, such as the increased use of the sonnet as a poetic form. Some characteristics, or features, of Victorian poetry move it away from the Romantic era poets. We have shown how the Victorian era was characterized by a class-based society, with a growing state and economy, and a rise in Britain's status as the imperial power. The Victorian conflict that has been referred to is central to Victorian poetry. Its characteristics include realism, pessimism and optimism, morality, conflict between Science and Faith, interest in medieval legends etc.

	Romantic Poetry	Victorian Poetry
Time Period	1800- 1830	1837-1901
Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influenced by Nature</li> <li>Supernatural elements</li> <li>Wonderment, Romance, emotional aspects involved</li> <li>expressive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influenced by science, innovations, and technology.</li> <li>Less emotional</li> <li>Down to earth</li> <li>Realistic</li> <li>Human misery was showcased</li> <li>Occasional poetry written to describe a particular event</li> </ul>
Poets	John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth	Alfred Lord Tennyson, Mathew Arnold, Robert Browning
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conventional</li> <li>Expressive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Medieval text</li> <li>Modern Language</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praise of nature</li> <li>• Emotionally charged</li> <li>• Flowery language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be easily understood</li> <li>• Industrialization, greyness of life is brought out</li> <li>• Realistic</li> </ul>
Concentration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centers on the poet: poet's eye</li> <li>• Emphasized the power of imagination and man's relationship to the supernatural.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not just the views and experience of the poet; a second person can be involved</li> <li>• Man as not a part of nature but as the ruler of it</li> </ul>
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literary enlightenment</li> <li>• Liberalization</li> <li>• Artistic</li> <li>• Nature</li> <li>• Conventional women</li> <li>• Aristocracy</li> <li>• Middle-class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrialization</li> <li>• Science and technology</li> <li>• Progress in medicine and communication</li> <li>• Women's larger role in society</li> <li>• Realistic portrayal of life</li> <li>• Economic hardships</li> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Working class struggle with politics and daily life</li> </ul>

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### Check Your progress 2:

1) Explain with illustrations, the differences between Romantic and Victorian poetry.

## **1.4 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VICTORIAN AND MODERN POETRY**

a) Modern poetry, ie. poetry written in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was in alignment with the Modernist slogan "Make it New". This meant writing anew, going against all conventional forms of writing. Victorian poetry that preceded it was closely linked to the social thoughts and ideals that dominated the Victorian age. The main differences between the two are "tradition vs progression, nationalism vs revisionism and science vs faith".<sup>2</sup>

b) Literature of the Victorian age endorsed adherence to Victorian morals. In contrast, instead of traditional adherence to morals as emphasized by Queen Victoria, modern writers attempted a progressive outlook on life, unencumbered by traditional morals. In place of society and its imposition of set ideals, the modern movement laid emphasis on individualism.

c) There came about a distinct change in the attitude towards Nature. We have seen the difference between the Romantic approach to nature and that of the Victorian. The

Romantics had personified Nature and sought to find one to one correspondence between Nature and man. To the Romantics, the external aspects of Nature, its beauty and splendour corresponded to man's physical senses, in particular the eye and the ear. The inner glow of Nature, its harmony and tranquillity could be felt in the heart and feelings of man while the spirit in Nature and the spirit in man were both overarched by the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe. The Victorians were more concerned with man and society and related man to Nature as captured in the innocence of rural areas, far from the madding crowd of cities and towns. The Modern poet was more interested in science and preferred to express his / her thoughts through reason and logic. Thus we perceive a change in the social and cultural mores between the two eras.

- d) The two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changed the outlook of the modern man who grew sceptical about existing unquestioning faith in God or the Essence of Creation. This led to a new philosophy called Existentialism as against Essentialism of the past. It was no longer an acceptable axiom that all creation originates from a universal essence which is more fundamental and immutable. In short, according to essentialism, our existence comes out of Essence and our goal should be to reach back to that Essence. Instead the Moderns looked at existence as the only fact that we recognize and it is for the individual to shape his essence. Many modern writers questioned all that had been said in the name of Faith and in the context of an Almighty God.
- e) The Victorian Age saw the rise of Great Britain as an imperial force. This also bred a sense of pride in the nation's achievement. Nationalism was a binding force bringing the British together. But in the Modernist period, the feelings of nationalism faded away. Many Modernist writers questioned government and authority in general. Modernists in Great Britain believed that the government was imperialist and responsible for wrong doing across the world.

To sum up, the characteristics of Victorian poetry are realism, pessimism, conflict between science and technology, nationalism, Victorian insistence on adherence to traditional morals, interest in medieval myths and folklore, humour, and use of the Dramatic Monologue.

The main feature of modern poetry is freedom. Modern and Post-modern poets exercise the freedom to write in any structure they choose - rhymed verse, blank verse, free verse, and they have the freedom to experiment with new hybrid structures. As for content, there is greater interest in individualism, science and reason, new approach to understanding the meaning of existence and a quizzical stance towards nationalism and authoritarianism.

### **Check Your progress 3**

1. Discuss how Victorian poetry differs from Modern Poetry.



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## 1.5 VICTORIAN POETRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TENNYSON

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Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) is regarded as the finest Victorian poet, a true representative of the Victorian Age. From his younger days, with his wide literary education, he wrote poems following the style of his predecessors, notably Shakespeare and Spenser (early 17<sup>th</sup> century), John Milton (late 17<sup>th</sup> century i.e., 1608-1674), Alexander Pope (18<sup>th</sup> century) and Walter Scott and Lord Byron (early 19<sup>th</sup> century). When he was at Cambridge, he formed a close friendship with fellow student Arthur Hallam. Six years later Hallam died and Tennyson wrote 'In Memoriam' mourning his death. This was the period when Tennyson's two brothers developed mental illness, yet surprisingly a few of Tennyson's masterpieces belong to this time - 'Two Voices', 'Ulysses' and 'Morte d' Arthur'.

In *In Memoriam*, Tennyson laments the loss of his close friend and the tragic loss makes him confront the Victorian conflict between religion and science. The modern theory of Evolution which explained evolution in terms of natural selection went against traditional faith in God and Immortality. The new theory stated that the evolutionary process took place with change in biological organisms over time in heritable physical and behavioural traits. Tennyson's poems reflected this conflict though he left it to the reader to form his own judgement. This period also saw some of his characteristic poems - "The Two Voices", "Ulysses," "St. Simeon Stylites," and, probably, the first draft of "Morte d' Arthur." 'Ulysses' is a good example of Tennyson's dilemma as to the function of art. The Romantics before him had made art as a subjective self expression of their feelings and emotions. In other words art was used distinctly for art's sake i.e., that art needs no justification, it need serve no political, didactic or other end. Ulysses depicted in the poem desires to abdicate his responsibility as the King of Ithaca in favour of his son, Telemachus and go on a journey in search of new knowledge, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The question is whether his quest for personal knowledge should be at the cost of his responsibility towards his people. The Victorian age with its attempts at reforms viewed art as the possible means to bring about a reformation of society. Tennyson earned his laurels as a National poet with his three poems - *Ode on the Death of Duke of Wellington*, *Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava* and *Maud*.

The poem prescribed in your course is "Morte d' Arthur", one of the poems included in his *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's poem on King Arthur was based on Book 21 of Thomas Malory's 15<sup>th</sup> century epic *Le Morte d' Arthur*. Malory was an English writer and he wrote this classic English-language chronicle of the Arthurian legend. 'In Memoriam' is a vast poem of 131 sections of varying length, with a prologue and epilogue. Inspired by the grief Tennyson felt at the untimely death of his friend Hallam, the poem touches on many intellectual issues of the period as the author searches for the meaning of life and death and tries to come to terms with his sense of loss.<sup>3</sup> Tennyson was conscious of the schism between Romantic emphasis on emotion, its worship of Nature and beauty, and subjectivity and the Victorian ideals of objectivity, and a constant dialogue with the intellectual and critical thoughts of the time. In "Morte d' Arthur" Tennyson sets the narrative of Arthur's last battle within the frame of modern life.

One of the most important and obvious characteristics of Victorian poetry was the use of **sensory elements**. A majority of Victorian poets including Tennyson, used **imagery** and the **senses** to convey the scenes of struggles between Religion and Science, to make it possible for readers to comprehend the Victorian conflict. Alfred Tennyson lives up to this expected characteristic in most of his works.

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## 1.6 SUMMING UP

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In this Unit, we have learnt about: Queen Victoria's reign in Great Britain; characteristics of the Victorian Age; features of Victorian prose and Victorian novel; comparison between Romantic and Victorian Poetry; and the distinction between Victorian and Modern Poetry. We have also gained some insights into Tennyson's poems.

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## 1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Write a short essay on the characteristics of Victorian poetry.
- 2) Explain how the 'Victorian Conflict' is evidenced in the poems of Tennyson.

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## 1.8 GLOSSARY

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Iconic: very famous and well known, and believed to represent a particular idea

Zenith: the highest point or state; culmination; peak

Alliance: Loyalty or the obligation of loyalty to a nation, sovereign or a cause

Fissure: split, crack, cleft

Constitutional Monarchy: a system of government in which a country is ruled by a king and queen whose power is limited by a Constitution.

Premium: In great demand or of high value

Utilitarianism: Based on the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, it advocates the belief that the value of a thing or an action is determined by its utility.

Agnosticism: the tenet that neither the existence nor the nature of God is known or knowable.

Pristine: pure, unspoiled, untouched

Flagship: a single item from a related group, considered as the most important

Pastoral: belonging to the countryside, rural

Hellenism: the principles and ideals associated with the ancient Greek civilization

Medievalism: strong fondness or admiration for the culture, mores, etc, of the

Middle Ages.

Supernaturalism: the condition or quality of existing outside the known experience of man or caused by forces beyond those of nature

Individualism: Belief in the primary importance of the individual and in the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence.

Personification: the attribution of human characteristics to things, abstract ideas, etc, as for literary or artistic effect.

Existentialism: a modern philosophical movement stressing the importance of personal

experience and responsibility and the demands that they make on the individual, who is seen as a free agent in a deterministic and seemingly meaningless universe

Essentialism: a philosophical theory giving priority to the inward nature, true substance, or constitution of something over its existence.

Organism: a living thing that has (or can develop) the ability to act or function independently

Heritable: that can be inherited

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## 1.9 REFERENCES

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## 1.10 READING LIST

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