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Unit 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE VICTORIAN AGE



AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit aims to situate the Victorian novel within its broader cultural and historical context in order facilitate the understanding of the nineteenth-century works of fiction examined in the following chapters.

STRUCTURE:

- 1.1. Britain's Imperial Century
- 1.2. The Industrial Revolution
- 1.3. Democratization and Social Rights
- 1.4. The Age of Doubt
- 1.5. The Victorian Novel
- 1.6. Unit Questions
- 1.7. Works Cited
- 1.8. Further Reading and Resources

1.1. BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL CENTURY

The Victorian Age is conventionally associated with the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), who came to embody the authority, stability, and expanding influence of the British Empire. Yet its origins are often traced slightly earlier, to the pivotal year 1832, which marks the effective beginning of the period. This year witnessed the passing of the first major Reform Act, a decisive step toward the expansion of political representation and the gradual democratization of England. At the same time, 1832 signalled a symbolic transition in literary history: the deaths of Walter Scott, a defining figure of

Romantic fiction, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the central voices of European Romanticism, coincided with the emergence of a new literary sensibility. Significantly, it was also the year in which Alfred Lord Tennyson, later to become one of the most representative poets of the age, published his first volume of poetry, thus heralding the transition from Romanticism to Victorianism.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the consolidation of British imperial power through the systematic expansion of its territories beyond Europe. Colonialism, in this context, refers to the process by which a nation extends its authority over distant lands, establishing colonies or administrative systems to govern indigenous populations. This domination typically involved the extraction and control of local resources, economic systems, and labor forces. The Victorian period is often described as the age of the “high empire,” a phase during which Britain acquired vast territories and brought millions of people under its rule, thereby reshaping global political and economic structures.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain consolidated its position as the world’s foremost imperial power, a dominance secured through extensive colonial expansion and sustained by remarkable advances in science, technology, and industrial production. Between 1815 and 1914, the British Empire expanded by approximately 26 million square kilometres and incorporated nearly 400 million people, establishing control over vast and diverse territories. These included strategically and economically significant regions such as Egypt, India, South Africa, Nigeria, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Cyprus, and Ireland, among others. At its height, the Empire governed nearly one-third of the world’s land surface and population, fostering a global network of political and economic influence.



Barker, Thomas Jones. *The Secret of England's Greatness (Queen Victoria presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor)*. c. 1862–1863, National Portrait Gallery, London. Wikimedia Commons.

A key moment in the imperial administration of India occurred in 1858, when governance was transferred from the British East India Company to direct control by Queen Victoria. In 1877, this imperial authority was further

symbolically consolidated when Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. British rule in India, which lasted until 1947, brought significant infrastructural developments, including the expansion of railways, canals, and road networks, though these projects primarily served imperial economic interests. During this period, the foundations of what would later become the Commonwealth were also laid.

Closely linked to this expansion was the phenomenon of cultural imperialism, whereby the colonizing power imposed its language, values, and cultural norms upon subject populations. This process was frequently justified through narratives that portrayed colonized societies as backward or in need of moral and civilizational guidance, causing anxieties about degeneration and the supposed fragility of “civilized” order. In literary and intellectual discourse, such attitudes were further reinforced through what later critics would term “Orientalism” (Edward Said), a representational framework in which Western writers depicted non-European peoples as exotic, passive, and often infantilized, rather than engaging with the complexity of their cultures.

This unprecedented expansion also shaped the ideological character of the age. Victorian Britain often justified its imperial ambitions through the rhetoric of a “civilizing mission,” grounded in assumptions of moral, racial, and cultural superiority. Such beliefs reinforced a worldview that was simultaneously colonial, nationalistic, and deeply self-centred, positioning Britain not only as a dominant political power but also as a supposed bearer of progress and civilization.

1.2. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The Victorian Age was marked by an unprecedented industrialization covering all areas of economic activity. Prosperity was fuelled by large-scale manufacturing and commerce (coal mining and processing, steelwork and textile mills, railways and steamship). However, this industrial expansion also brought significant social changes, as modern factories concentrated both labour and capital, deeply affecting everyday life.

The First Industrial Revolution, which began in the late eighteenth century, was initially driven by the mechanisation of the textile industry. The introduction of power looms transformed production processes, but also reshaped the labour force, as these machines required relatively unskilled workers to operate them in large mills. As a result, skilled handloom weavers

and spinners who had traditionally worked from home were displaced and lost their livelihoods. This economic shift also altered family structures, since many men migrated from rural villages to industrial towns and cities in search of employment, leaving behind established patterns of domestic and community life.

The Second Industrial Revolution, extending from the mid- to the late nineteenth century, intensified these transformations through further technological innovation and mechanisation. The expansion of steam power enabled mass production on an unprecedented scale, particularly in the textile industry, and contributed to the rapid growth of international trade. As early as 1829, Thomas Carlyle observed the profound changes caused by industrialization in the essay “Signs of the Times”:

Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends. (64)

Britain emerged as the leading exporter of cotton goods worldwide. At the same time, the increasing demand for labour accelerated urbanisation, as growing numbers of workers moved into industrial centres. Factory owners, primarily from the upper classes, often prioritized profit over welfare, subjecting workers to long hours and harsh, unsafe conditions. In the absence of adequate protective legislation, men, women, and children were exposed to serious health risks, with many suffering or dying from diseases associated with the cotton industry. The main cause of death was especially respiratory illnesses, as depicted in the novel *North and South* (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell where Bessy Higgins suffers from “fluff on the lungs”, a lung disease caused by inhaling fine white dust while working in a cotton mill. The factories in Milton, the fictional industrial town, pose serious consequences for the environment and human life as “[h]ere and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black ‘unparliamentary’ smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain”(60).