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## **Lecture Four: The Victorian Era**

### **1.1. Introduction**

The Victorian Age, named after Queen Victoria, was a period of significant transformation in Britain. It marked a transition from a feudal and agricultural society to an industrial democracy. Spanning from 1837 to 1901, the era saw extensive social and technological changes that impacted various aspects of daily life.

During the Victorian Age, England experienced widespread advancements and shifts in politics, law, economics, and society. The Industrial Revolution, which had gained momentum in the preceding decades, continued to reshape the nation, leading to rapid industrialization and urbanization. The growth of industries and the rise of factories brought about significant changes in employment, living conditions, and social classes.

Education also underwent transformation during this period, with the establishment of a more structured and accessible educational system. Competitive sports became popular, and Victorian ideals regarding family life and the role of women took shape, influencing societal norms and values.

The Victorian Age was characterized by a mix of progress and challenges. While advancements in technology and infrastructure brought prosperity to some, others faced difficult working and living conditions, particularly in urban areas. Social and political reforms were also introduced to address some of these issues, aiming to improve the well-being of the working class and expand political participation. On the whole, the Victorian Age represents a period of significant change and transition in Britain, leaving a lasting impact on politics, society, and culture.

### **1.2. Queen Victoria's Reign**

Queen Victoria, who reigned during the Victorian Age, had a significant influence on the politics and ideals of the era. While she had the guidance of advisers like William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne, and later prime ministers such as Benjamin Disraeli, Victoria herself played a role in shaping the values and ideals of the time.

Victoria's conservative and puritanical beliefs resonated with a large portion of the British public. She held strict Christian values and emphasized discipline, which was reflected in her personal conduct and public image. Many paintings depict her with a stern expression, portraying her seriousness and dedication to her role as queen.

In addition to her impact within Britain, Victoria also had a significant influence on Europe. She was referred to as the "Grandmother of Europe" because many of her children and grandchildren married into other European royal families. Her descendants included Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Czar Nicholas II of Russia, among others, linking her lineage to various European powers.

Overall, Queen Victoria's ideals and influence, along with the guidance of her advisers and prime ministers, helped shape the values and direction of the Victorian Age in England. Her puritanical beliefs, dedication to discipline, and connections to European royalty left a lasting impact on both domestic and international affairs.

### **1.3. The Victorian British Empire**

During the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain experienced a period of significant overseas expansion and imperialistic endeavors. The following are some notable events from that era:

1. **The Opium War (1839-1842):** The conflict arose from a trade dispute between Britain and China. To address the trade deficit, Britain began smuggling opium into China, leading to addiction and an imbalance in trade. The Chinese sought to stop the opium trade, but the British responded with military force, resulting in their victory.
2. **The Crimean War (1853-1856):** England and France joined forces in a war against Russia in the Crimea region. The causes of the war were complex, but it involved a struggle for influence in the Middle East and protection of trade routes to Asia. The

Alliance emerged victorious as Russia faced logistical challenges and its railroads became broken.

3. **The Boer War (1899-1902):** Fought in South Africa, the conflict pitted British colonists against Dutch colonists known as Boers. It is considered the first "total" war due to the prolonged and extensive fighting on both sides. Ultimately, the British emerged as the winners, establishing control over the entire South Africa.

These events exemplify Britain's efforts to expand its political and economic influence across different regions. The acquisition of territories, such as India, Burma, Malaysia, and parts of China and the Middle East, further solidified British dominance. Additionally, during this era, Britain's strong navy played a significant role in ensuring its success in various conflicts.

During Queen Victoria's reign, the British Empire expanded to cover vast territories and exerted significant economic and political influence worldwide. Here are some key points regarding the expansion and achievements of the British Empire during this time:

**Transfer of India:** Queen Victoria played a pivotal role in transferring control of India from the East India Company to the British government in 1858. She was then declared "Empress of India" in 1876, symbolizing British authority over the Indian subcontinent.

**Expansion in Egypt and other areas:** The British Empire gained control over Egypt, including the strategically important Suez Canal, in 1869. British influence extended to various other regions, solidifying its global reach.

**Economic prosperity:** During Queen Victoria's reign, the British Empire became the wealthiest nation in the world. The Industrial Revolution and the empire's vast resources and trade networks contributed to Britain's economic success.

**Global dominance:** The British Empire was often described with sayings like "The sun never sets on the British Empire" and "The workshop of the world." These phrases highlighted the empire's vast territorial holdings and its position as a global economic powerhouse.

**Jubilees and celebrations:** Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 marked 50 years of her rule and was celebrated as a testament to domestic progress. The Great Exhibition showcased Britain's industrial achievements. The Diamond Jubilee in 1897 marked the high point of the empire's power and influence, with Queen Victoria's reign spanning one-quarter of the world's population.

These milestones and celebrations reflect the height of British imperial power during the Victorian era, solidifying Britain's position as a global superpower and shaping the course of history.

#### **1.4. The Woman Issue**

During Queen Victoria's reign, societal expectations for women were rooted in traditional gender roles and conservative values. Here are key points regarding the role of women in Victorian society:

**Domesticity and marriage:** Married life was considered a woman's primary occupation, and middle-class women were not expected to have jobs outside the home. The ideal Victorian woman was epitomized in Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Angel in the House," which emphasized women's role in upholding Christian virtues and nurturing their families.

**Limited rights and legal status:** Women, regardless of social class, had limited rights and faced legal and societal restrictions. Upon marriage, a woman's possessions became her husband's property, and he had legal control over the children. Domestic violence against women was not criminalized during this period.

**Education:** Educational opportunities for women improved during the late Victorian period, particularly with the compulsory education laws for children under ten. However, the curriculum for girls often focused on practical skills for managing household duties.

**Women's rights activism:** Despite societal constraints, some middle-class women campaigned for women's rights and social reform. Figures like Annie Besant and Josephine Butler fought for women's rights, birth control, and socialism. Their efforts contributed to advancements in women's education and legal rights.

**Suffrage movement:** The struggle for women's suffrage gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Married Women's Property Acts of 1882 and 1892 allowed women to retain their income and property after marriage. However, women were still denied the right to vote in general elections until the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which granted limited voting rights to women over 30. Full voting rights for women over 21 were achieved in 1928.

The Victorian era witnessed the gradual progress of women's rights and the emergence of women's activism, setting the stage for further advancements in gender equality in the 20th century.

### **1.5. Compulsory Education for Children under Ten 1880**

The Elementary Education Act of 1880 was introduced by A.J. Mundella, a social reformer and member of the Liberal Party. This policy mandated compulsory school attendance for children between the ages of five and ten. The passing of this act had a significant impact on the lives of young children, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, as it effectively superseded the Factory Acts that previously allowed them to work long hours in mills and factories.

Despite this progressive legislation, disparities in education opportunities persisted among different social classes. The availability and quality of education varied depending on one's social standing.

For working-class children, access to education was often limited due to the need for them to contribute to their family's income through labor. Many children were engaged in factory work or other forms of employment, which deprived them of formal schooling.

In contrast, middle-class families increasingly recognized the importance of education for their children. They viewed it as a means of upward social mobility and securing a better future. Middle-class children were more likely to attend private schools that offered a more comprehensive education compared to their working-class counterparts.

The upper class had the privilege of providing education through private tutors or governesses who taught children at home. Boys from aristocratic families often attended prestigious boarding schools, while girls received a more limited education that focused on accomplishments and societal expectations.

Although the Elementary Education Act of 1880 marked a significant milestone in expanding access to education, inequalities in educational opportunities persisted among different social classes during the Victorian era. The act aimed to address the needs of working-class children by reducing their time spent in labor, but it did not entirely bridge the gap in educational access and quality between social classes.

### **1.6. Religion and Science in the Victorian era**

The Victorian era was a highly religious period, even more so than the preceding 18th century. Christian principles and beliefs were considered vital for societal cohesion, with an established religion providing moral guidance and a sense of responsibility. Despite the dominance of faith, science also played a significant role in Victorian England, leading to concerns that it might undermine religious beliefs. While only a small number of influential individuals had their faith shaken by scientific discoveries, the Victorians actively embraced and valued advancements in scientific fields. Notably, British biologist Charles Darwin's publication of his groundbreaking theory of evolution, "On the Origin of Species," in 1859 garnered international attention. However, opinions on evolution and natural selection remained deeply divided throughout Darwin's lifetime. Additionally, the Victorians displayed a keen interest in emerging disciplines such as psychology and the study of energy in physics.

### **1.7. Growth of Economy and New Social Classes**

During the first half of the 19th century, Britain experienced significant progress in terms of material well-being. An article in *The Economist* in 1850 noted that the country had seen a remarkable advancement in all aspects of material prosperity. The widespread use of machinery had greatly reduced the need for arduous physical labor, particularly outside of the agricultural sector. This economic transformation

contributed to Britain being referred to as the "workshop of the world." Industrial production surged from £230 million in 1820 to £820 million by 1888, indicating the country's robust economic position.

However, despite the positive economic indicators, Victorian Britain had a stark contrast between the wealthy and the poor. A researcher once remarked that it was a favorable environment for the rich, but the situation was dire for the poor. The society was mainly divided into three distinct social classes:

1. **The Upper Class:** This class consisted of the aristocracy, landed gentry, and wealthy industrialists. They held significant wealth, power, and influence in society, often enjoying lavish lifestyles and occupying the top rungs of the social hierarchy.
2. **The Middle Class:** The middle class comprised professionals, merchants, traders, and skilled workers. This group benefited from the industrial advancements and often had a comfortable standard of living. They were the backbone of the expanding middle class and played a crucial role in driving economic growth.
3. **The Working Class:** The working class formed the largest segment of Victorian society. They were predominantly manual laborers, factory workers, and agricultural workers. Their living conditions were often harsh, with long hours, low wages, and inadequate housing. Many struggled to make ends meet and faced challenging circumstances.

While the period saw significant economic progress and industrialization, the social disparities and hardships endured by the working class were stark reminders of the inequalities that prevailed in Victorian Britain.

The Victorian era witnessed a significant cultural blossoming, particularly in the realm of literature and the arts. In the early 19th century, reading was not a widespread activity due to high levels of illiteracy and the expense of printed materials. Books, in particular, were considered luxury items, and owning a well-stocked library was a symbol of wealth and prestige in private homes.

However, advancements were made in education and literacy rates began to improve, particularly among the growing middle class. This middle class became the focus of many Victorian novels, as these works were written for and portrayed the experiences of this social group. Victorian novelists often used satire to critique the increasing influence of money and the rise of the "nouveau riche" in society. Characters like Mr. Osborne in William Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" (1848) and Podsnap in Charles Dickens's "Our Mutual Friend" (1865) exemplify the portrayal of arrogant and wealthy middle-class individuals.

Between the affluent middle classes and the working class, there existed a sizable lower middle class, which found representation in the novels of authors like Charles Dickens and H.G. Wells. These novels depicted the struggles and challenges faced by the lower middle class more prominently than any other social group, shedding light on the societal disparities of the time.

Beyond literature, Queen Victoria's influence extended to various places around the world being named after her. Lake Victoria in Africa, known as the source of the Nile River, was named in her honor, as were Victoria Falls, named by the Scottish explorer Dr. Livingstone. Additionally, the state of Victoria in Australia was named after Queen Victoria.

In general, the Victorian era saw a flourishing of culture and literature, with an emerging middle class driving social change and novelists capturing the complexities of society through their works. Queen Victoria's impact extended beyond Britain's borders, with her name becoming associated with landmarks and places across the globe.

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