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Lecture 4: Victorianism: Cultural and Social Transformations

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What is “Victorianism”?

Definition

Victorianism, as a concept, refers to a set of social, moral, cultural, and intellectual values associated with Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), and by extension similar attitudes in other English-speaking societies of the later nineteenth century. It encapsulates moral and social ideals, emphasizing virtues such as duty, self discipline, strong work ethic, philanthropy and charity, and sexual restraint. It also implies respectability, modesty, and rigid social order.



How did Victorianism Shape Family Life?

Victorian Family Life

- Victorianism idealised the family as a moral and emotional refuge. Family life was romanticised as loving, child-centred, and harmonious, but strict rules about modesty, and obedience also made it a site of tension, discipline, and gender hierarchy. Victorian ideology promoted “**separate spheres**,” expecting men to work and participate in public life while women managed the home and raised children. Middle-class women were cast as moral guardians and “angels in the house,” responsible for creating a pure, orderly, and nurturing domestic environment.





**How did Victorianism shape
Victorian culture?**

Cultural Transformations during the Victorian Age

The Victorian age (1837–1901) witnessed profound cultural transformations driven by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of a self-confident middle class, redefining social values around respectability, morality, and family life. **Evangelicalism** and **utilitarianism** fostered reforms emphasizing personal responsibility, charity, child protection, and Sabbath observance, while tensions arose between scientific advances—like **Darwinism**—challenging religious orthodoxy and traditional gender norms under the "separate spheres" ideology.

Literature, art, and education flourished amid these shifts, with novelists capturing societal anxieties.

Victorian Art and Literature

Victorian literature emphasized realism, moral purpose, and detailed portrayals of daily life, with novels by **Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and the Brontës** exposing class divides, industrialization's harshness, and gender constraints while upholding virtues like perseverance and justice.

Art shifted from Romantic sublime to realistic depictions of contemporary life, with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—favoring vivid naturalism, medieval revival, and moral symbolism over academic conventions.



Victorian Architecture

- Victorian architecture lasted from 1837 to 1901, during Queen Victoria's rule, and mixed old styles like Gothic Revival, Italianate, and Queen Anne in fancy, uneven designs. Houses had steep roofs, towers, bay windows that stick out, colorful bricks, porches with carved wood trim, and bright paint colors, all made easier by factories producing iron, glass, and parts quickly. Inside, rooms had high ceilings, dark wood, heavy curtains, fancy fireplaces, and patterned walls to show off wealth and family values, turning away from plain old Greek-style buildings





Victorian Leisure Activities

- Victorian leisure activities grew popular as people had more free time from shorter work hours and holidays, with railways enabling day trips to seaside resorts like Blackpool for paddling and Punch shows. Sports such as cricket, football, cycling, rowing, and horseracing drew big crowds, while music halls offered singing, comedy, and magic, and circuses amazed with clowns, acrobats, and animals. At home, families played parlor games, charades, read books or comics, listened to brass bands in parks, or visited zoos and theaters for pantomimes.

Horseracing



Cycling



Rowing



Cricket



Music Halls



Circus

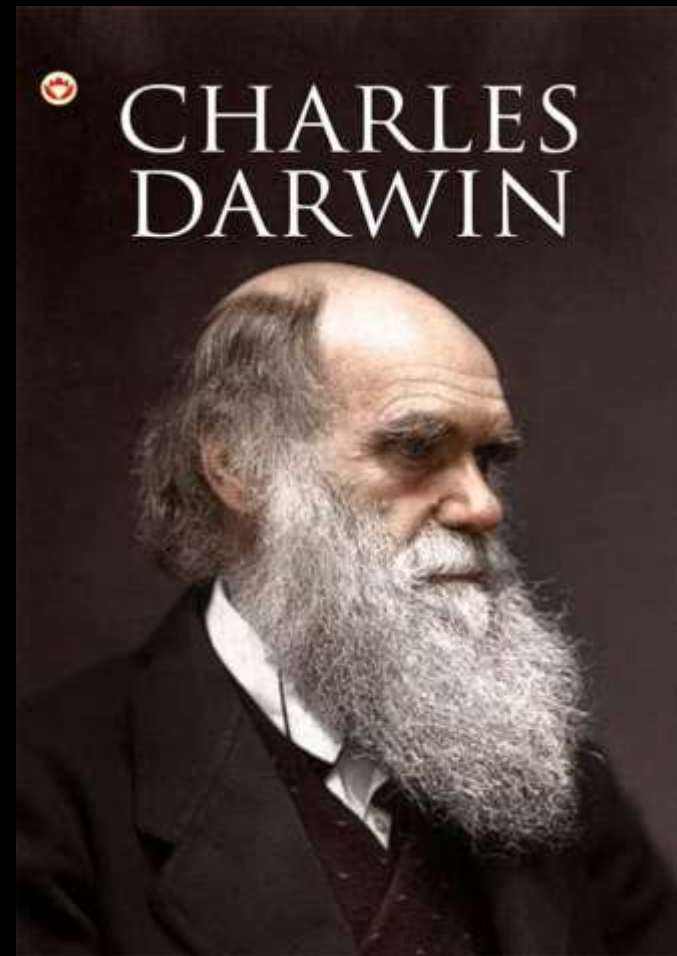


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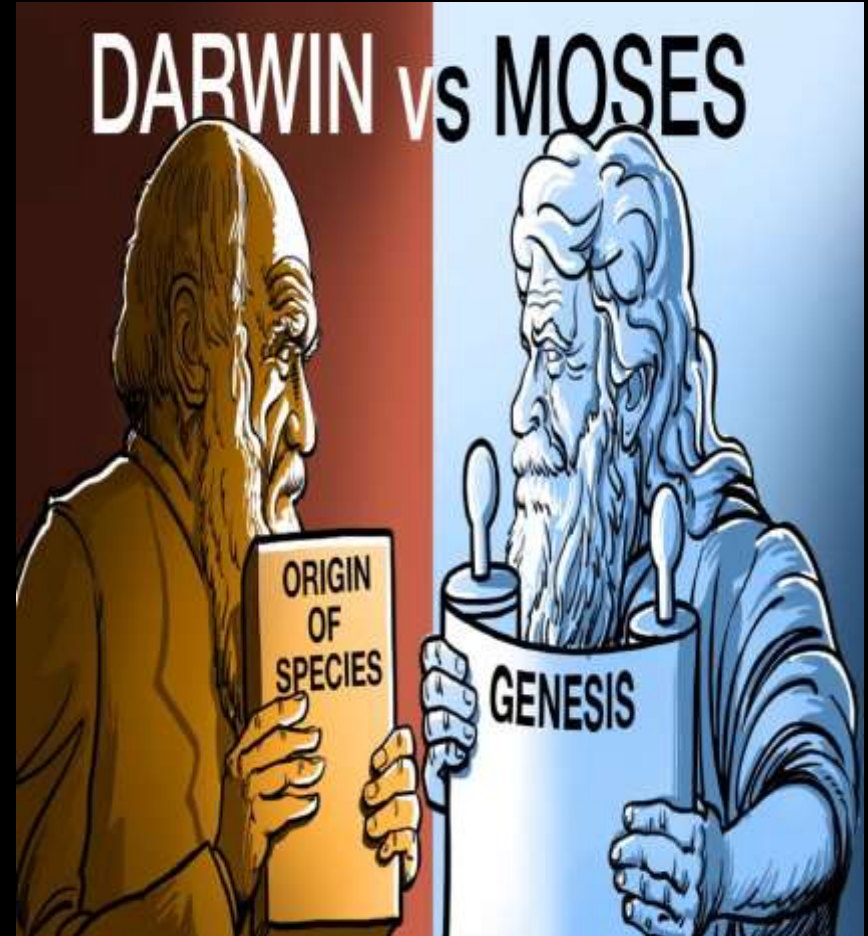


Darwinism and the Conflict between Science and Religion

- Charles Darwin (1809–1882) was a British naturalist who developed the theory of evolution by natural selection, published in *On the Origin of Species* (1859).
- Darwinism is the theory of biological evolution by natural selection developed by Charles Darwin, explaining how species arise and change through inherited variations that improve survival and reproduction in their environment.



- Darwinism challenged Victorian religion by contradicting the Bible's literal creation story in Genesis, suggesting humans evolved from apes via natural selection rather than divine design, shaking faith in God's direct role. It challenged also the idea of fixed species.



**What were the Social
Reforms that were Introduced
during the Victorian Age?**

Factory Acts

- Factory Acts were laws passed in Victorian Britain (1837–1901) to improve working conditions in the factory system. They protected particularly child and female workers from harsh factory conditions during industrialization.

Factory Acts

Legislation	Main points
1802 Health and Morals of Apprentices Act	Children were limited to 12 hours of factory work a day. Children were to be given religious instruction.
1819 Factory Act	No child under 9 could be employed in a cotton factory. Children between the ages of 9 and 16 were not allowed to work more than a 12-hour day.
1833 Factory Act	Children between 9 and 14 were restricted to 8 hours work a day with 2 hours of compulsory education. Those under 18 could work only 12 hours a day. Four inspectors were appointed.
1844 Factory Act	Dangerous machinery was to be fenced. Children under the age of 13 could not work more than $6\frac{1}{2}$ hours a day.
1853 Factory Act	The working day for adults was limited to 6am–6pm or 7am–7pm with a $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour break. This made a working day of $10\frac{1}{2}$ hours.
1874 Factory Act	The working day for adults was limited to 10 hours and a half day on Saturday.
1878 Factory and Workshops Act	Factories and workshops were placed under general government inspection.

Education Acts

- Victorian Education Acts expanded schooling for poor children amid industrialization. **The 1833 Act** funded voluntary schools run by churches, while **the 1870 Forster Act** created local school boards to build public elementary schools for ages 5–12 (with small fees), **the 1880 Act** made attendance compulsory up to age 10, and the **1891 Act** made it free, boosting literacy rates from under 50% to near 97% by 1900 and curbing child labor.

Public Health Acts

- Victorian Public Health Acts tackled urban filth and diseases like cholera from rapid city growth. The 1848 Act set up a Board of Health and let towns form local boards for sewers and clean water if petitioned. The key 1875 Act made it mandatory for councils to appoint medical officers, build drains, supply safe water, control overcrowding, and remove hazards like bad food or nuisances, cutting death rates sharply



Women's Rights

- Victorian women faced severe legal limits: married ones lost property and earnings to husbands, had no custody rights over children, and couldn't vote, divorce easily, or work freely outside low-wage jobs like servants or mills. The "separate spheres" ideal confined them to home duties, motherhood, and moral purity, with sex only for procreation and education discouraged as "unfeminine." Reformers won gains like **the 1870 Married Women's Property Act** (keeping earnings), **1886 custody rights**, and **suffrage campaigns** by suffragists like Millicent Fawcett, though full vote came post-1901.



Philanthropic and Religious Groups

Victorian philanthropic and religious groups supplemented state aid amid poverty:

Salvation Army (1865): Provided soup kitchens, shelters, and moral rehabilitation for the homeless and addicts through evangelical missions.

YMCA (1844): Offered housing, Bible classes, and character-building activities for young working men to combat urban vice.

Ragged Schools: Delivered free basic education and clothing to poor street children, emphasizing Christian values and literacy.

Temperance Societies: Campaigned against alcohol abuse with pledges, lectures, and sober recreation to reform families and workers.



Thank You !

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