



# Pessimism in the Victorian Era and Literature

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**Abstract:** This article illustrates the pessimism in Victorian Era and Literature. With the enthronement of the Queen Victoria as the monarch of great Britain and Ireland in the year 1837, there began a new Era or phase of the English society which saw a dramatic shift in nearly every sphere of life especially in that of science & technology, literature and religion. Pessimism can be described as a tendency to think negatively. Victorian Era is perhaps a most versatile period in the history of English literature. Many writers of this period including Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold explored the themes of social injustice and harsh realities of the Victorian society.

**Keywords:** Industrial Revolution, Science vs Religion, Pessimism in working class people's lives.

**Victorian Age and Literature:** The Victorian Age was the age of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 until her death in 1901. It was the age of industrial revolution and scientific development. People started questioning the false principles and dogmas of the Church and Bible. Society got divided into three categories; theists, atheists and agnostics, where agnostics were not sure whether God exist or not.

The most important genre of the Victorian Era was novel. Charles Dickens is the most important novelist of this age. His first novel, "The Pickwick Paper" (1836), written when he was just twenty-five, was an overnight success. 'A Tale of Two Cities' is a historical novel by Dickens, set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. The tone of the novel is sarcastic, sympathetic, horrified and sentimental. The novel opens with –

*"It was the best of times, 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; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going to heaven, we were all going direct the other world"*

This phrase points out a major conflict between family and love, good and evil, light and darkness, wisdom and folly. Charles Dickens shows a pessimistic view about the society at that time where on the one hand rich are enjoying luxurious lives but on the other hand, the poor are struggling under the yoke of economic decline. The novel conveys a message of injustice against poor and the hope for better future. Both London and Paris face corruption, hunger, poverty, crime and violence.

The poor were severely suffering under the rich. Every attempt to improve their condition led to fall in prison. Public wanted a revolution. The three ideals; liberty, equality and fraternity become the motto of French Revolution. Some people believe that it is a chance to take revenge from the rich. Victorian society was divided into three classes; upper class, middle class, lower class. Upper class had the control on remain classes. Middle class people were financially rich and the lower class or the working class was the machine at that time.

Matthew Arnold is well known for his poetry as well as his criticism of the society at that time. He is one of the major writers of Victorian Era. His most celebrated poem, “Dover Beach” is a dramatic monologue, in which he writes

*“...for the world which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new, hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;”*

In these lines the poet addressed his beloved and requests her to be faithful in her love. He says that this world is very beautiful but it is only an illusion. There is no hope, no joy, no love, no light in this world for distressed people. This poem expresses a crisis of faith. Arnold tried to show some negative aspects of Victorian society.

One of the most critical developments in the field of research was Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin published a book – “On the Origin of Species” which shook the whole world. Darwin argues directly against the idea that everything was created by God perfectly. After the publication of this book people started questioning religion.

Alfred Tennyson, Victorian England’s most famous poet, had also pessimistic views about society. He held the poet laureateship for over forty years. He was not completely pessimist but there are melancholy and pessimistic moods in his works. His poem – “Ulysses” gives us details about the unhappiness, thirst for knowledge and desire to see the unseen. His “In Memoriam” is a poem for the poet’s beloved Cambridge friend Henry Hallam who died suddenly in 1833, aged 22. It connects the despair Tennyson felt over the death of his friend.

Victorian age was a complex and contradictory Era. In the later decades of the Victorian period, Thomas Hardy was the most important novelist. Many of his novels concern tragic characters struggling against the passions and social circumstances. “Tess of the d’Urbervilles” is a novel by Thomas Hardy. This novel is considered as a great pessimistic novel. The whole life of Tess is full of struggles and tortures. The poverty of the d’Urbervilles family, the unfortunate death of the price, Tess’s seduction, death of a child sorrow, her hardships of the winter labour and Tess’s unfortunate encounter with Alec, all these pathetic scenes follow one after the another. Hardy describes the condition of women in Victorian society. Women were not considered equal to men. It was expected from every woman to be simple, modest, pure and soft spoken. Since it was a patriarchal society, the life and decisions of women were depended upon the mercy of her father or husband. She became a property of her husband and a machine of giving birth to children. In this novel, one can see the concept of industrial revolution. New industries and towns were set up. Children had to go through the harsh struggles of the Victorian life. They were considered to be the property of their parents. The Victorians had to compromise many essential features of individuality and modes of expression.

However, there was an exception, Robert Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning always wrote poems which carried a moral and hopeful tone despite all the challenges of Victorian world. For an instance, Robert Browning writes – “*God’s in his heaven - All’s right with the world.*”

**Conclusion:** Victorian age was a revolutionary time and a phase of transition for the society to a greater extent. Women and children were the most tortured and underprivileged ones. Women did not have the right to vote. Therefore, both the society and the literature of the Victorian Age embody the reality of this phase which was full of uncountable upheavals and triumphs.

### References:

- (1) Charles Dickens: “*A Tale of Two Cities*” (1859)
- (2) Matthew Arnold: “*Dover Beach*” (1867)
- (3) Charles Darwin: “*On the Origin of Species*” (1859)
- (4) Alfred Lord Tennyson: “*Ulysses*” (1842)
- (5) Alfred Lord Tennyson: “*In Memoriam*” (1850)
- (6) Thomas Hardy: “*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*” (1891)
- (7) Robert Browning: “*Pippa Passes*” (1841)

