

Victorian Age and Literature

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Abstract

The Victorian age was a witness to a lot of alterations that were going to set path for upcoming generations. To become a great nation, the citizens have to endure a lot of challenges and the same happened to the people living in England in Victorian era. England was emerging as one of the most powerful nations of the world and the proof of its progression was the torment its people were undergoing. The religious beliefs were shattered and the emergence of new technological advancements bewildered people. A lot of things changed in a very little time and the result was overall social unrest and financial crisis. The rising popularity of new genres of literature encouraged people to get educated and hence increasing number of libraries.

Keywords: Victorian age, technological advancements, religious beliefs, social turbulences, financial crisis, Victorian literature, emergence of novels and drama.

Introduction

We all know that Victorian age was all about the developments and changes, the social unrest and financial crisis but among all the turbulences a lot of positive changes were taking place, most of which were going to shape the future of society. There are always two sides of a coin and as people were complaining about various problems no one can ignore the evolution of that age. Darwin was criticized like any genius of any age for his theories and discoveries but as they say 'truth shall prevail'. He made people aware of that inevitable truth that we were not the superior creatures of God but evolved results of inferior species. Apart from the developments made in the field of technology literature was evolved during this period as novel took place of poetry and also drama came back into existence. The deviations from Romantic literature were made and the realism glorified the pages and minds of the readers.

Victorian age

The beginning of the Victorian era changed the thinking patterns of people. People who believed the various theories of church all their lives were challenged with new notions of science. Darwin shook the faith of fellow Christians by propounding the 'Theory of Natural Selection' which explained to people that we were evolved from an inferior form and all our illusions regarding the superiority of our creation were shattered. He described the whole science behind it which not only stunned people but also disturbed their whole thinking process. Before Darwin proposed his theories people believed that human beings are the most intelligent creatures on the planet and that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, but the occurrence of new concepts became responsible for a great distrust. Now people not only thought differently about themselves but also about the society, a huge mental turbulence took place and created a wave of confusion and distrust. It was the beginning of Victorian era.

With the developments in the field of science, a lot of new things were happening in the political scenario which directly and indirectly changed the social scene as well. The political fluctuations also affected the social situations. The times of turbulences gave birth to a lot of complications that were new to the peaceful and serene England of Romantic times. The flowing water stream and beautiful nature were replaced by the barrels of rum and ugliness of deteriorating humanity. Victorian era had a lot in its hand to offer to its citizens, sadly not all beautiful things but all that was necessary to give the century a new turn.

Society had never been steady and there were always various traits to define the ages but the period of this transition was a very diverse one. Drastic changes took places in very little time and it became difficult for people to adjust to the viciousness of time. The political advancements were made in the field of colonization, and as The Great Britain was busy expanding the colonies, its own citizens were being neglected and it was just one low wave of the resulting flood. There was a never seen before magnificence of financial crisis which has remained a root to most of the problems of all times. The social ranks were disturbed as the landlordism was abolished and the high class people lost their privileges in the society. The middle class was most disturbed because of a number of reasons; firstly they lost their jobs as a result of technological advancements. The machines were taking place of employees and were performing better in lesser amount of money. One machine could replace hundreds of workers efficiently. Secondly, there was a mutual discomfort and distrust in the society towards the aristocrats. As the higher classes were losing their value in the society they had to suppress people in the lower classes to get the lost grip in the society back which resulted in revolutions and social unrest. The Victorian era was thus a period of dense gloominess which created an atmosphere of overall disappointment.

Effect on literature and popularity of novels

With the changing times changed the literature too. The bright, sunny, cheerful romanticism ended and a new sun rose that did not lighten up the day but threw light on the realities of life. No age is perfect and nobody can imagine a period where everyone has survived happily and thus it was not only Victorian era that dealt with nasty problems. The ages before that had also faced troubles but the magnitude of troubles differed as well as their treatment. The writers of Victorian age were keen to portray life as it was, they refused to follow the set traditions of presenting a grand hero who could take revenge and marry a queen, instead they felt more satisfied to follow the society and present the reality. Another magnificent change that occurred during this time was the change of inclination from poetry to novels and dramas. Earlier poetry was the entertainment of elite class and it was given a high position in literature but as the times changed people turned towards something that was less dreamy and thus emerged the fiction and drama. Drama was initially considered immoral and disreputable and took time to gain popularity but novel gained an instant popularity. Though poetry was not completely out of vogue but the emphasis was now on other forms of literature that were easier to understand even by the lesser educated people. Novels particularly found a large space on bookshelves with increasing number of libraries. People wanted to read stories which could entertain them without expecting them to be exceptionally intelligent. Authors found it their duty to depict the social problems in their works so that people would realize what is happening around them and where they were going wrong.

The drama had also been prevalent in Elizabethan era but the novel particularly found its place in literature of this age. Since it was a convenient way to write and had a larger connectivity which increased its popularity day by day. Authors like Dickens and Hardy hold a prominent position in Victorian age novelists in England. Where Hardy created an imaginary town of his own and pulled the bitter realities through it, Dickens on the other hand used his childhood experiences, but both of them followed the footsteps of George Eliot who is known to bring realism to England. While Eliot wrote serious novels targeting the social flaws, Hardy had a romantic approach towards writing and even if his novels made him more famous he always considered himself a poet. Apart from the above mentioned authors the name that actually represented the society of that age was Charles Dickens. More than a social philosopher or teacher he was an emotional critic. Dickens was not only a writer but a victim of Victorian age. He had to leave his education in childhood to work in a shoe polish factory as his father went to prison. He altered his experiences of humiliation and abandonment in early life in his *David Copperfield*. Though uneducated, he edited a journal for over twenty years and wrote around fifteen novels and numerous novellas, short stories, fiction and non-fiction articles. His novels include *Nicholas Nickelby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *A Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Emergence of Drama as a popular form of literature

As the novel became immensely popular and the century touched new horizons, people's notion of morality changed and they accepted drama as a form of literature. Drama had always been popular but it rose to an altogether different stature in Victorian era, only with some important changes. Aristotle implemented the theory of Catharsis in drama as he said that purgation or purification of soul was only possible when treated with extreme change in emotion. According to him catharsis helped in cleansing the soul of repressed emotions like pity or fear. "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude;...through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."(C.350 BCE, book 6.2). In previous ages drama was given immense importance for a number of reasons; firstly it was used as an aid to educate people about their religion and deities and that is how Mystery and Miracle plays as well as Ramleela evolved in England and India respectively. Secondly and subsequently it became a source of entertainment with the use of actors, dresses, sets, etc which not only preached religion now but also provided laughter and cries. Thirdly and lastly it was used to stir up emotions in people. The last reason was prominent for making drama popular. Playwrights of different ages used drama as a tool to address their own interests. Shakespeare wrote about kings and queens, revenges and villains because he wanted to show his loyalty towards them and it was a demand of the period. One of the many reasons of Shakespeare's popularity was that he presented heroes in his plays and no matter what time and age we always feel encouraged and inspired by dauntless, brave men who fight for their country, rights and women. The Victorian drama was not about the previous tragedies but the social realities and as the novelists Victorian playwrights knew their duties as well. The Victorian age did not have the dauntless, fierce heroes but common people who were suffering because of the poor functioning of the society and hence the playwrights of this age portrayed what they saw around them. The Victorian playwrights addressed the issues they were widely familiar with and thus the social turmoil and sufferings found place in the Victorian drama.

Conclusion

Time has always had an impact on literature and as in the previous ages it flourished on the banks of river or in the kingdoms of dauntless kings, it was now time for it to be a witness to the downtrodden and poor. The

concealed hideousness of people was now in open, things which were thought to be devilish and acts that were satanic were now part of everyday lives. People were struggling to keep up their position in society, to maintain their finances and most importantly their freedom. There were rebels, traitors and spies and all were functioning under the cover of nationalism. The Victorian age was gloomy, dark and depressive but it was the most realistic of all times. The Sun was setting so that it would rise again with a new horizon. Nobody can overlook the positive changes brought forth by the age. Not only in the field of technological advancements but also in literature, time took various turns and emerged novel as the more popular form than poetry and the drama that was considered immoral became another popular genre. The result was that people now had stories to read which they could relate to. The novels and dramas of the time were easier to understand and proved to be more than just a source of entertainment. Realist writers like Dickens, Hardy and Shaw became the moral teachers and showed society the mirror that they needed most.

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