The Victorian Age
Cultural context
(1837-1901)
Cultural context

• The prevailing moral values of the period were those of the Middle Class, the social class which was predominant at the end of the century.
• These values were all dealt with in the Novel.
• Reading novels became the main form of entertainment of the Middle Class.
• It was not only a private but often a group activity: novels were read aloud by one member of the family while all the others, servants included, listened.
Cultural context

• The demand for new novels had increased a lot and a great quantity of books were published;
• Many writers started to write novels which were also serialised (published in instalments) in the magazines of the period.
• Rich families often had their own libraries and those who could not afford to buy books borrowed them from the circulating libraries.
Circulating libraries.

- The high price of books in the 19th century England led to the growth of circulating libraries which, for a modest subscription price, supplied to readers a continuous flow of popular novels.
- They became an important cultural institution in Britain in the 1780s doing much to enable the rising middle class to have access to a broad range of reading materials, especially novels, but also poems, plays, histories, biographies, philosophy and travels.
The Novel in the first part of XIX century

• During the first part of the Victorian age both novelists and readers shared a common view of life.
• They both accepted the values, conventions and structure of Victorian society.
• Novelists saw and denounced the evils typical of their society, such as poverty, exploitation of children and workers, the inadequate educational system, but they considered them a temporary setback.
• They, in fact, never questioned the idea that the system was fundamentally right and considered progress inevitable. At best, they thought that such (social) problems could be solved through a more generous attitude of the upper classes, who had to help those who were less lucky.
The Realistic Novel

• This first part of the century was characterized by the development of the **Realistic novel** which **represented life as it really was**.

• The aim of the novelist was **to create a fictional world** which the readers **considered real and credible** and to which they reacted emotionally and rationally.

**MAIN FEATURES**

• **Characters** acted according to the **rules of Victorian society** and were **judged by an omniscient narrator** that **expressed the dominant moral values** and views of the time, making a clear distinction between “right” and “wrong”.

• The **stories** were mainly set in **cities**, that represented **industrial civilisation** and were a **symbol of anonymous life and alienation**.

• **Plots** were **long** with **several subplots**.

• **Deeper analysis of the characters’ inner world**

• **The story** generally **ended happily** or at least with **good triumphing over evil**.
The Novel in the second part of XIX century

• During the second part of the Victorian Age the common set of values shared by novelists and readers started to break down.
• Writers started to reject the Victorian moral view; their point of view was not only different from but often against that of the prevailing moral code.

Naturalism - last three decades of the century

Main features

• Naturalist writers aimed:
  • to write wholly realistic novels;
  • to apply a detached and scientific objectivity in describing characters, events, and social and natural settings;
  • to be as impersonal as possible, but their narrators often betrayed a sympathetic tone of voice;
  • Deterministic view of life based on the belief that human beings are controlled by the social and economic environment;
  • Novels expose the worst evils, injustices and wrongs in society
  • Novelists express the pessimistic vision of an age overwhelmed by industrial progress and science;
  • The positive endings are more and more often replaced by tragic ones
Progress in the scientific fields

- This period saw a great progress in many branches of science.
- By the end of the century some of the discoveries made were applied to industry and improved the industrial process.
- This scientific progress also implied a new attitude towards faith and religion.
- Some religious certainties were deeply shaken by the new scientific theories, such as those formulated by Charles Lyell in 1830 in his “Principles of Geology” or by Charles Darwin in 1859 in his book “On the origin of the species by Means of natural selection”.
Consequences of new scientific theories

• **Lyell** clearly demonstrated that the age of the earth was much older than that suggested in the Bible and that there were natural explanations for all the geological phenomena;

• **Darwin** showed that creatures evolved into new species as part of their struggle for existence.

• The extreme consequence of these theories was that human beings and the universe they lived in had not been created by God, but their origins were natural.
Consequences of new scientific theories

- In this way the foundations of Victorian Protestantism were undermined and many intellectuals developed a sceptical attitude.
- However, the Middle Classes refused to see their certainties and beliefs shaken and destroyed by the new scientific theories so ....
- they went on believing that they were God’s creatures and considering social success as a proof of God’s benevolence towards those who were morally correct.
- Their Calvinist faith justified their privileged position and allowed them to consider the poor as delinquents.