

# THE VICTORIAN AGE

## 1832–1900



*The Opening of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, May 1, 1851 (detail) by Henry C. Selou.*

## THE VICTORIAN AGE A SHORT INTRODUCTION

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901) coincided with the period of England's greatest expansion. By the end of the century the British Empire included nearly one quarter of the land surface of the globe and more than one quarter of its population. Never had the country been so prosperous, never had the English been so convinced that everything was going better in England than in any other country in the world.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, London, was a hymn to the Industrial Society and an engineering triumph. Hundreds of designers and manufacturers got together to make the exhibition. In a huge building, the Crystal Palace, made almost entirely from glass, manufactured goods of all kinds from all over the world were on display, but it was above all a showcase for British products. Over six million people visited the Exhibition during the six months it was open.

The growing urbanization of England, as a consequence of the industrial and technological revolution, brought railways, manufacturing developments and wealth to the country, which became the first industrial and financial nation in the world. This also resulted in the division of Britain into 'two nations' – the rich and the poor, which led to class conflicts, social unrest, and a deep-felt need for social reform. The aristocracy still lived a life of ease on vast estates, while increasing numbers of factory workers lived in the slums of large cities. The small parish poorhouses were no longer able to cope with the huge numbers of poor and unemployed and to prevent idleness, the 1834 Poor Law provided help for them in workhouses – far from home and in appalling conditions.

The workers had to fight a long and bitter struggle to obtain a decent standard of living. They organized themselves in trade-unions and cooperative societies. It was also under the pressure of public opinion that the 'Emancipation Bill' was passed, which granted to the Roman Catholics the same political and civic rights as to the other citizens. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Reform Acts (1867 and 1884) allowed part of the working classes and agricultural labourers to vote, since they no longer had to own a house or land in order to

do so, the payment of rent being enough. At the end of the century 28% of the adult population could vote. The secret ballot was also introduced in 1872.

The earlier Industrial Revolution had enriched factory owners and industrialists, who mostly managed their own firms. But later in the period, people grew rich simply by investing money, without necessarily having any direct connection with manufacturing industry. They had comfortable houses a long way from the industrial areas, their children attended expensive schools and they spent their money on expensive consumer goods. Between 1850 and 1880 London expanded rapidly. The middle classes began to move out into the suburbs, and commute every day to work. This was made possible by the development of the railway.

Middle-class respectability was often accompanied by narrow-mindedness, prudishness and sentimentality. The middle-class employers, who had made their wealth in the early Industrial Revolution, had little time for education and culture for themselves, but they admired and conformed to all that contributed to respectability: education for their sons and in the family high moral principles like diligence, sobriety, fidelity in marriage. This philistinism was strongly criticized by writers and philosophers because the Victorian Age was also a period of deep questioning and controversy in such fields as religion, progress, justice and materialism.

Thus the Victorians often had double attitudes: pride in the new wealth, but exploitation of the poor; philanthropy and tolerance, but repression of social unrest; complacency and hypocrisy, but a passion for debates and a questioning of values.

Partially adapted from *Literature in English* Françoise Grellet

## PROJECTS

Find out more about:

1. Florence Nightingale
2. Thomas Arnold
3. John Stuart Mill

## PRE-READING TASKS

1. Who makes fashion?
2. Which dress for which mood?

## WOMAN IN BLACK

From the moment Prince Albert died, aged 42, on 14 December 1861, Victoria wallowed in her grief, while British manufacturing began mass production of every conceivable kind of commemorative item from tea sets to pot lids, handkerchiefs to bookmarks. At the same time grander projects were undertaken, including plaques and stained-glass windows as well as statues of the man himself, of which there were eventually twenty-five in several British towns. The Queen rebuked her half-sister Feodora, who had tried to cheer her up following her mother's death a few months before Albert's by reminding her of all she had to be thankful for: 'I do not wish to feel better.' Curating her grief was what she liked best to do.

Over almost half a century Victoria made mourning into an art form. And the country imitated her example. Only some fabrics were acceptable for families in mourning: from the most expensive French black silk, merino wools and crape, to special baby-mourning fabrics and cheap sackcloth for servants. Poor seamstresses often worked fourteen-hour days to fulfil orders for households in mourning. There were strict rules on what jewellery was acceptable too, with jet ornaments *de rigueur*, although onyx and black enamel were also acceptable. During half-mourning, diamonds, amethysts and pearls were allowed and courtiers could wear mauve, grey or lilac in addition to black. The requirement for jet dramatically transformed the fortunes of the fishing village Whitby, which, at its peak in the 1870, employed more than 1,000 locals as jet finders, carvers and polishers.

Ten years after Albert's death, with Victoria still refusing to play an active role in public life, her children worried that their mother's invisibility was seriously jeopardizing the future of the throne and playing into the hands of the republicans. There were even fears for her sanity. Victoria argued that she was working as hard as ever; it was simply that her activities were undertaken in private. Her insatiable appetite for perpetuating Albert's memory seemed

the most important of these. When her wayward son Bertie, Prince of Wales, wrote to his fiancée, Alix, in English rather than German, the native tongue of his sainted father, Victoria was horrified, believing this to be a betrayal of Albert.

Although Victoria continued to see herself as a poor, weak, broken-hearted widow, Albert's death was, in some ways, the making of her – however impossible it was for her to see it that way. The final irony is that had Albert survived, Victoria would have sheltered increasingly behind him, becoming more the mother and grandmother figure that came naturally to her. Her strengths were deep compassion, a genuine ability – gained through experience – to commiserate with others, stoical endurance and an indomitable personality.

Adapted from an article in the *Literary Review* by Anne Sebba



Victoria, a good day

## COMPREHENSION

1. What effects did Victoria's mourning have on manufactory?
2. What on fashion?
3. What can you guess about Victoria's character from the text?
4. How did politicians and her family react to her behaviour?

## ESSAY TOPIC

Public or civic duty must come before personal feelings.

## PROJECT

Find out about Whitby.

## PRE-READING TASKS

1. Why do you think people want to have children?
2. What would you say are the feelings and thoughts of a father when he sees his baby son for the first time?

## DOMBEY AND SON

‘The House will once again, Mrs Dombey,’ said Mr Dombey, ‘be not only in name but in fact Dombey and Son;’ and he added, in a tone of luxurious satisfaction, with his eyes half-closed as if he were reading the name in a device of flowers, and inhaling their fragrance at the same time; ‘Dom-bey and Son!’

The words had such a softening influence, that he appended a term of endearment to Mrs Dombey’s name (though not without some hesitation, as being a man little used to that form of address): and said, ‘Mrs Dombey, my – my dear.’ A transient flush of faint surprise overspread the sickly lady’s face as she raised her eyes towards him.

‘He will be christened Paul, my – Mrs Dombey – of course.’ She feebly echoed, ‘Of course,’ or rather expressed it by the motion of her lips, and closed her eyes again. ‘His father’s name, Mrs Dombey, and his grandfather’s! I wish his grandfather were alive this day!’ And again he said ‘Dombey and Son’, in exactly the same tone as before.

Those three words conveyed the one idea of Mr Dombey’s life. The earth was made for Mr Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and the moon to give them light. Rivers and sea were made to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei – and Son.

He had risen, as his father had before him, in the course of life and death, from Son to Dombey and for nearly twenty years had been the sole representative of the Firm. Of those years he had been married, ten – married as some said, to a lady with no heart to give him; and who was content to bind

her broken spirit to the dutiful and meek endurance of the present. Such idle talk was little likely to reach the ears of Mr Dombey, whom it nearly concerned; and probably no one in the world would have received it with such utter incredulity as he, if it had reached him. Dombey and Son had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts. They left that fancy to boys and girls, and boarding schools and books. Mr Dombey would have reasoned: That a matrimonial alliance with him *must*, in the nature of things, be gratifying and honourable to any woman of common sense. That the hope of giving birth to a new partner in such a House, could not fail to awaken a glorious and stirring ambition in the breast of the least ambitious of her sex. That Mrs Dombey had entered on that social contract of matrimony (almost necessarily part of a genteel and wealthy station, even without reference to the perpetuation of family firms) and with her eyes fully open to the advantages. That Mrs Dombey had always sat at the head of his table, and done the honours of his house in a remarkably lady-like and becoming manner. That Mrs Dombey must have been happy. That she couldn't help it.

From *Dombey And Son* by Charles Dickens (1812---1870)



## COMPREHENSION

1. What is Mr Dombey's attitude to his son?
2. Analyse the relationship between husband and wife. What are, according to Mr Dombey, the function of marriage and the role of the wife?
3. What is Dombey's character?
4. What, would you say, would be Dombey's attitude if the baby had been a girl?

## ESSAY TOPICS

1. What, according to you, is the basis of a secure and fulfilling relationship between husband and wife?
2. What is the narrator's attitude to Mr Dombey? How can you see this

## PROJECTS

Find out about:

1. The Custody of Infants Act.
2. The Matrimonial Causes Act.

## PRE-READING TASK

What are great scientific discoveries?

*On THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES*

The shelf life of a science book can often be quite short, with new developments in the field moving the subject on and thus making old theories redundant. If an old science book retains any interest at all, it is usually only from a historical perspective. Even those memorable in the history of science can quickly fade into obscurity. *The Origin of Species* is one of the few exceptions, remaining relevant even after 150 years after it was first published and retaining its place as the foundation text of modern evolutionary biology. Any serious student of the subject should at the very least be aware of its contents, even if they haven't read the book in its entirety. This is not to say that Darwin was right about everything he included in the book. Some of his ideas have been superseded or developed to the point where they are now hardly recognizable, while, on a few occasions, Darwin was just plain wrong. Nonetheless no current work on evolution can take place without reference being made to him in some form.

*The Origin* is also not a typical science book in that it does not contain any tables or statistics and there is only one diagram, illustrating what Darwin describes as 'the Tree of Life'. Darwin's writing style obviously belongs to the Victorian period and it can occasionally be a little long-winded, but it is fundamentally engaging. Rather than simply containing dry lists of facts, as so many science books do, it is often personal and anecdotal. What *The Origin* does is to present an argument, putting the case for natural selection, and then goes on to examine and explain the reasons why this argument is valid.

In the opening sentence of the final chapter, which is a summary and conclusion to the book, Darwin describes it as being 'one long argument'. The argument he is referring to is, in essence, a defence of his theory of descent with variation – what we now call evolution. Although he would include it more frequently in later editions, Darwin used the word 'evolution' very sparingly in the first edition of the book, most probably because, at the time, the word had become associated with radical, even revolutionary ideas. Darwin thought of

himself as a scientist first and, while he cannot possibly have been unaware of the controversial nature of what he was proposing, he was doing so firmly from within the scientific establishment.

The main theme of the argument was that variation within members of the same species actually occurred and the process by which they varied was natural selection. Darwin gave a succinct explanation of what he meant by natural selection in the introduction:

*As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently occurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected.*

Here, in a single, if rather long sentence, is the core of the matter. Not only does variation occur, Darwin is saying, but this is the process by which it occurs. Those individuals of a species of an animal or plant best adapted to their environment are those which will be the most successful and will have more offspring than less well adapted individuals. Over time, successive generations of these successful individuals will come to dominate the population of the species and, if that population is isolated from other populations of the same species, it will begin to diverge from them and may eventually form an entirely new species.

On the face of it, this is a relatively simple idea, but the implications, and what can be inferred from the implications, are enormous. For example, if new species can arise through a natural process rather than being the creation of God, then the logical extension of this idea is that there is no reason to suppose that a Creator exists at all. Darwin did not take his argument down this road, but it is a simple enough path for anybody reading *The Origin* to follow. This is, of course, why the book was so controversial.

From *Origins and Arguments* by Charles Darwin (1809---1882) by Bill Price  
pockets essentials



## COMPREHENSION

1. In what respects is *The Origin of Species* not a typical science book?
2. What is its argument?
3. Why was it so controversial?

## ESSAY TOPICS

1. 'Struggle for Existence' and 'Survival of the Fittest' are all very well in Nature but not in human society. Discuss.
2. Do you think it is defensible to use all scientific knowledge to create new variations of species?

## PROJECT

Find out about 'Creationism'.

## PRE-READING TASKS

1. What do you think might be the reaction of a father to his young son's dying solely due to poverty?
2. Would you defend someone who stole out of hunger?

## BARTON

At all times it is a bewildering thing to the poor weaver to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last, till he ends in building one more magnificent than all, or withdraws his money from the concern, or sells his mill to buy an estate in the country, while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of wealth, is struggling on for bread for their children, through the vicissitudes of lowered wages, short hours, fewer hands employed, &c. And when he knows trade is bad, and could understand (at least partially) that there are not buyers enough in the market to purchase the goods already made, and consequently that there is no demand for more; when he would bear and endure much without complaining, could he also see that his employers were bearing their share; he is, I say, bewildered and (to use his own word) 'aggravated' to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners. Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty because the families that once occupied them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough food, of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?

I know that this is not really the case; I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with childlike improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight.

But there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting or forgiving those whom (they believe) have caused all this woe.

Among these was John Barton. His parents had suffered, his mother had died from absolute want of the necessaries of life. He himself was a good, steady workman, and as such, pretty certain of steady employment. But he spent all he got with the confidence (you may call it improvidence) of one who was willing, and believed himself able, to supply all his wants by his own exertions. And when his master suddenly failed, and all the hands in the mill were turned back, one Tuesday morning, with the news that Mr Hunter had stopped, Barton had only a few shillings to rely on; but he had a good heart of being employed at some other mill, and accordingly, before returning home, he spent some hours in going from factory to factory, asking for work. But at every mill was some sign of depression of trade; some were working short hours, some were turning off hands, and for weeks Barton was out of work, living on credit. It was during this time his little son, the apple of his eye, the cynosure of all his strong powers of love, fell ill of the scarlet fever. They dragged him through the crisis, but his life hung on a gossamer thread. Every thing, the doctor said, depended on good nourishment, on generous living, to keep up the little fellow's strength, in the prostration in which the fever had left him. Mocking words! when the commonest food in the house would not furnish one little meal. Barton tried credit; but it was worn out at the little provision shops, which were now suffering in their turn. He thought it would be no sin to steal, and would have stolen; but he could not get the opportunity in the few days the child lingered. Hungry himself, almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness, but with the bodily pain swallowed up in anxiety for his little sinking lad, he stood at one of the shop windows where all edible luxuries are displayed; haunches of venison, Stilton cheeses, moulds of jelly – all appetizing sights to the common passerby. And out of this shop came Mrs Hunter! She crossed to her carriage, followed by the shop man loaded with purchases for a party. The door was quickly slammed to, and she drove away; and Barton returned home with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only boy a corpse!

From *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865)



"Reflections of a Starving Man or Social Contrasts", 1894, by Emilio Longoni

## COMPREHENSION

1. What causes for resentment among weavers are mentioned in paragraph 1?
2. What is the purpose of the narratorial intrusion in paragraphs 2 & 3?
3. What misfortunes are described in paragraph 4?
4. How do the conditions of John Barton's family contrast with the action of his employers, the Hunter family?

## ESSAY TOPICS

1. Have the conditions of working people improved? In what ways?
2. Disraeli, writer and Prime Minister, spoke of the two nations that Queen Victoria ruled over: The Rich and The Poor. Do you believe this applies also to contemporary Luxembourg or is our society more coherent?

## PROJECTS

Find out about:

1. Chartism
2. Spinning Jenny

## PRE-READING TASKS

1. What do you know about children's rights?
2. What would you say is a happy childhood?

MUDLARKS<sup>1</sup>

At one of the stairs in the neighbourhood of the pool<sup>2</sup>, I collected about a dozen of these unfortunate children; there was not one of them over twelve years of age, and many of them were but six. It would be almost impossible to describe the wretched group, so motley<sup>3</sup> was their appearance, so extraordinary their dress, and so stolid and inexpressive their countenances. Some carried baskets, filled with the produce of their morning's work, others old tin kettles with iron handles. Some, for want of these articles, had old hats filled with the bones and coals they had picked up; and others, more needy still, had actually taken the caps from their own heads, and filled them with what they had happened to find. The muddy slush was dripping from their clothes and utensils, and forming a puddle in which they stood. There did not appear to be among the whole group as many filthy cotton rags to their backs as, when stitched together, would have been sufficient to form the material of one shirt. There were the remnants of one or two jackets among them, but so be-grimed and tattered that it would have been difficult to have determined either the original material or make of the garment.

On questioning one, he said his father was a coal-backer<sup>4</sup>; he had been dead eight years; the boy was nine years old. His mother was alive; she went out charing<sup>5</sup> and washing when she could get any such work to do. She had 1s<sup>6</sup> a day when she could get employment, but that was not often; he remembered once to have had a pair of shoes, but it was a long time since. 'It is very cold in winter,' he said, 'to stand in the mud without shoes,' but he did not mind it in summer. He had been three years mud-larking, and supposed he should remain a mudlark all his life. What else could he be? for there was nothing else that he knew *how* to do. Some days he earned 1d, and some

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<sup>1</sup> boy who earns a few pennies by collecting rubbish from the mud of the Thames at low tide

<sup>2</sup> area of the Thames, near the docks

<sup>3</sup> various, clown-like

<sup>4</sup> one who carried sacks of coal

<sup>5</sup> cleaning for other people

<sup>6</sup> 1s : one shilling 1d : one penny

days 4d; he never earned 8d in one day, that would have been a 'jolly lot of money'. He never found a saw or a hammer, he 'only wished' he could, they would be glad to get hold of them at the dolly's<sup>7</sup>. He had been one month at school before he went mud-larking. Some time ago he had gone to the ragged-school<sup>8</sup>; but he no longer went there, for he forgot it. He could neither read nor write, and did not think he could learn if he tried 'ever so much'. He didn't know what religion his father and mother were, nor did know what religion meant. God was God, he said. He had heard he was good, but didn't know what good he was to him. He thought he was a Christian, but he didn't know what a Christian was. He had heard of Jesus Christ once, when he went to a Catholic chapel, but he never heard tell of who or what he was, and didn't 'particular care' about knowing.

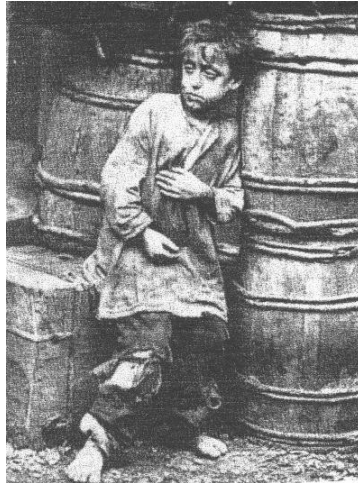
His father and mother were born in Aberdeen, but he didn't know where Aberdeen was. London was England, and England, he said, was in London, but couldn't tell in what part. He could not tell where he would go to when he died, and didn't believe anyone could say *that*. Prayers, he told me, where what people said to themselves at night. He never said any, and didn't know any; his mother sometimes used to speak to him about them, but he could never learn any. His mother didn't go to church or to chapel, because she had not clothes. All the money he got he gave to his mother, and she bought bread with it, and when they had no money they lived the best way they could.

From *London Labour and the London Poor* by Henry Mayhew (1812---1887)

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<sup>7</sup> shop where such goods were exchanged for money

<sup>8</sup> charity school for poor children



### COMPREHENSION

1. How are the children described?
2. What do you get to know about the Mudlark's family?
3. What do you get to know about education?
4. What can the child mean when he says: 'When they had no money they lived the best they could?'
5. What would you say is the writer's tone and style? Why?

### ESSAY TOPICS

1. Comment on the child's view of life.
2. Poverty is bad but ignorance is worse.

### PROJECT

Find out about English currency at the time!

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES:

1. What children's classics do you know?
2. What do they have in common?

## HUMPTY DUMPTY



However, the egg only got larger and larger, and more and more human: when she had come within a few yards of it, she saw that it had eyes and a nose and mouth; and, when she had come close to it, she saw clearly that it was HUMPTY DUMPTY himself. "It can't be anybody else!" she said to herself. "I'm as certain of it, as if his name were written all over his face!"

It might have been written a hundred times, easily, on that enormous face. Humpty Dumpty was sitting, with his legs crossed like a Turk, on the top of a high wall – such a narrow one that Alice quite

wondered how he could keep his balance – and, as his eyes were steadily fixed in the opposite direction, and he didn't take the least notice of her, she thought he must be a stuffed figure, after all.

"And how exactly like an egg he is!" she said aloud, standing with her hands ready to catch him, for she was every moment expecting him to fall.

"It's very provoking," Humpty Dumpty said after a long silence, looking away from Alice as he spoke, "to be called an egg – *very!*"

"I said you *looked* like an egg, Sir," Alice gently explained. "And some eggs are very pretty, you know," she added, hoping to turn her remark into some form of compliment.

"Some people," said Humpty Dumpty, looking away from her as usual, "have no more sense than a baby!"

Alice didn't know what to say to this: it wasn't at all like conversation, she thought, as he never said anything to her; in fact his last remark was evidently addressed to a tree – so she stood and softly repeated to herself: -

*"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall:  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the King's horses and all the King's men  
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty in his place again.*

"That last line is much too long for the poetry," she added, almost out loud, forgetting Humpty Dumpty would hear her.

"Don't stand chattering to yourself like that," Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, "but tell me your name and your business."

"My *name* is Alice, but –"

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"*Must* a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: *my* name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."

“Why do you sit out here all alone?” said Alice, not wishing to begin an argument.

“Why, because nobody is with me!” cried Humpty Dumpty. “Did you think I didn’t know the answer to *that*? Ask another.”

“Don’t you think you’d be safer down on the ground?” Alice went on, not with any idea

of making another riddle, but simply in her good-natured anxiety for the queer creature. “That wall is so *very* narrow!”

“What tremendously easy riddles you ask!” Humpty Dumpty growled out. “Of course I don’t think so! Why if ever I *did* fall off – which there is no chance of – but *if* I did –” Here he pursed up his lips, and looked so solemn and grand that Alice could hardly help laughing.

“*If I did fall,*” he went on, “*the King has promised me* – ah, you may turn pale, if you like! You didn’t think I was going to say that, did you? *The King has promised me* – *with his own very mouth* – to – to –”

“To send all his horses and all his men,” Alice interrupted, rather unwisely.

“Now I declare that’s too bad!” Humpty Dumpty cried, breaking into a sudden passion. “You’ve been listening at doors – and behind trees – and down chimneys – or you couldn’t have known it!”

“I haven’t indeed!” Alice said very gently. “It’s in a book.”

“Ah, well! They may write such things in a *book*,” Humpty Dumpty said in a calmer tone. That’s what you call a History of England, that is. Now, take a good look at me! I’m one that has spoken to a King, *I* am: mayhap you’ll never see such another: and to show you I’m not proud, you may shake hands with me!” And he grinned almost from ear to ear, as he leant forwards (and as nearly as possible fell off the wall in doing so) and offered Alice his hand. She watched him a little anxiously as she took it. “If he smiled much more the ends of his mouth might meet behind,” she thought: “And then I don’t know *what* would happen to his head! I’m afraid it would come off!”

“Yes, all his horses and all his men,” Humpty Dumpty went on. “They’d pick me up again in a minute, they would! However, this conversation is going on a little too fast: let’s go back to the last remark but one.”

“I’m afraid I can’t quite remember it,” Alice said, very politely.

“In that case we start afresh,” said Humpty Dumpty, “and it’s my turn to choose a subject –” (“He talks about it just as if it was a game!” thought Alice.) “So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?”

Alice made a short calculation, and said “Seven years and six months.”

“Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it!”

“I thought you meant ‘How old *are* you?’” Alice explained.

“If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty. Alice didn’t want to begin another argument, so she said nothing.

“Seven years and six months!” Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. “An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you’d asked *my* advice, I’d have said ‘Leave off at seven? – but it’s too late now.’”

“I never ask advice about growing,” Alice said indignantly.

“Too proud?” the other enquired.

Alice felt even more indignant at his suggestion. “I mean one can’t help growing older.”

“*One* can’t, perhaps,” said Humpty Dumpty; “but *two* can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven.”

“What a beautiful belt you’ve got on!” Alice suddenly remarked. (They had had

quite enough of the subject of age, she thought: and, if they really were to take

turns in choosing subjects, it was *her* turn now.) “At least,” she corrected herself on second thoughts, “a beautiful cravat, I should have said – no, a belt, I mean – I beg your pardon!” she added in dismay, for Humpty Dumpty looked thoroughly offended, and she began to wish she hadn’t chosen that subject. “If only I knew,” she thought to herself, “which was neck and which was waist!”

Evidently Humpty Dumpty was very angry, though he said nothing for a moment or two. When he did speak again, it was in a deep growl.

“It is a – *most* – *provoking* – thing,” he said at last, “when a person doesn’t know a cravat from a belt!”

“I know it’s very ignorant of me,” Alice said, in so humble a tone that Humpty Dumpty relented.

“It’s a cravat, child, and a beautiful one, as you say. It’s a present from the White King and Queen. There now!”

“Is it really?” said Alice, quite pleased to find that she *had* chosen a good subject after all.

“They gave it to me,” Humpty Dumpty continued thoughtfully as he crossed one knee over the other and clasped his hands round it, “they gave it me – for an unbirthday present.”

“I beg your pardon?” Alice said with a puzzled air.

“I’m not offended,” said Humpty Dumpty.

“I mean, what *is* an unbirthday present?”

“A present given when it isn’t your birthday of course.”

Alice considered a little. “I like birthday presents best,” she said at last.

“You don’t know what you are talking about!” cried Humpty Dumpty. “How many days are there in a year?”

“Three hundred and sixty-five,” said Alice.

“And how many birthdays have you?”

“One.”

“And if you take one from three hundred and sixty-five what remains?”

“Three hundred and sixty-four, of course.”

Humpty Dumpty looked doubtful. “I’d rather see that done on paper,” he said.

Alice couldn’t help smiling as she took out her memorandum book, and worked the sum for him:

$$\begin{array}{r} 365 \\ 1 \\ \hline 364 \end{array}$$

Humpty Dumpty took the book and looked at it carefully. “That seems to be done right – ”he began.

“You’re holding it upside down!” Alice interrupted.

“To be sure I was!” Humpty Dumpty said gaily as she turned it round for him. “I thought it looked a little queer. As I was saying, that *seems* to be done right – though I haven’t time to look it over thoroughly just now – and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents – ”

“Certainly,” said Alice.

“And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’, ” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them – particularly verbs: they're the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however / can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what / say!"

from *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is Humpty Dumpty? Describe and characterize him!
2. How is Alice characterized?
3. Find two funny passages and try to explain how Carroll creates humour.

### ESSAY TOPIC

Carroll writes as much for an adult as for a juvenile audience. Discuss with close reference to the text.

## PRE-READING

1. What would you say are typical aspects of life in a city today?
2. Imagine walking through a city with your eyes closed. What can you hear and smell?

## VICTORIAN LONDON

The London in which the Victorians lived is largely beyond our imagination.

The London of the early to mid-Victorians is the London of the streets – and with good reason, because many of the poorer Londoners earned what passed for their livings on them, and many of the better-off ones found the streets a necessary part of their daily lives in a way that is not, perhaps the case today. For the many prostitutes and criminals, the street was where their money was made. But the streets were also a place of work: for the humble crossing-sweeper, for example, who tried to ensure, in return for a tip, that when persons of quality crossed the road they did so without having to pick their way through dust, mud and horse dung.

Many people ate on the streets as they went about their daily business, not least because so many artisans' lodgings had few or no facilities for cooking. Stalls selling whelks<sup>1</sup>, oysters and pies proliferated, and many shops had windows open to the street so that workers could buy their dinner as they walked past. Pea soup was a staple of the poorer diner, but there was a knack to knowing when exactly to eat it. It was thin on the first day of the week, but the dregs were topped up daily with new ingredients, so that by Wednesday the soup had thickened to the point where one could stand a spoon in it. It was reckoned that a boy who ate a bowl of it, with some bread, would be able to last 24 hours without eating anything else – an important consideration when money was short.

Dickens's London was also experiencing constant structural, or infrastructural, upheaval. This was the time when the Underground and the sewers were built. As a result, many of the roads, in the 1860s in particular, were

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<sup>1</sup> edible mollusc (French : bulot)

in a permanent state of excavation. Roads themselves multiplied, linking the ancient medieval city from east to west and north to south. More bridges were built across the Thames; the city spread into suburbs as the population increased.

One aspect that is, happily, no longer with us is the smell. The Thames, into which the primitive sewers of the City and Westminster all flowed until Joseph Bazalgette built the Embankment, became so putrid<sup>2</sup> in the hot summer of 1858 that Parliament had to suspend its business. The government had for years resisted spending public money on such a scheme, but the moment its own members became nauseous, it acted. Aside from sewage there was the omnipresent horse dung in the streets, and the unwashed element of the population, which was considerable. London acted as a magnet for poor people across the country, many attracted by the belief that the city offered opportunities, only to find themselves struggling with poverty like so many hundreds of thousands of others. With no welfare state to support them, and the workhouse hardly distinguishable from a prison, they resorted to selling matches or even just 'spills', twists of paper used to light a cigar or cigarette. Boys blacked boots, girls sold flowers, if they were lucky (the less fortunate were coerced into prostitution). And, to add to the mix, by the 1850s it was estimated that a thousand horses a week died in the capital and had to be disposed of. Some of them ended up in the poor's sausages, further testing constitutions already threatened by cholera from the filthy water.

Whatever the broad mass of people did, they too were usually on the streets, because they walked everywhere. There was, for much of the period, no cheap public transport; even the Underground, or one of Shillibeer's horse-drawn omnibuses, was beyond the pocket of many of the poor. Some people walked miles every day. Boys, often barefoot (shoe-leather being an expensive commodity), would run for miles after buses to help carry the luggage of passengers who alighted<sup>3</sup>. They often had to fight for the privilege against porters who were already waiting at the bus stops.

Yet, there were lighter sides to life, such as the parks that spread out with the growth of London and the great fairs, such as the one at Greenwich, or Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield. During winter men especially loved skating on ponds in the park, though when the ice cracked on the lake in Regent's Park in

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<sup>2</sup> rotten, foul

<sup>3</sup> got off

January 1867 forty of them were pulled dead from the freezing waters. For better-off women shopping was an expanding form of recreation, while men had their clubs, which ones they joined depending on their station in life. There were places where no respectable woman would be seen; and no man could possibly be considered respectable unless he was wearing a hat. The well-to-do had their silk toppers, but the very poor would make their hats out of paper. Hats were important not least because men kept things in them – quite often, their lunch or dinner. Some of Dickens's characters extract important goods – comestible or not – from their hats at key moments.

London was a teeming, bustling place. Some led hand-to-mouth existences and very often the facts of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century urban life were very smelly indeed.

Adapted from an article by Judith Flanders in *The Literary Review*

#### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What were great changes taking place in the London described?
2. What jobs are mentioned in the text?
3. In what way is Victorian London 'largely beyond our imagination'?

#### ESSAY TOPICS

"When a man is tired of London he is tired of life" Explain this quote by Samuel Johnson, considering city life in general.

## PRE-READING TASKS

1. What are inventions of the last thirty years?
2. How did or do people react to them generally speaking?
3. How do you explain people's reactions?

## TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

This extract describes the use of steam engines in agriculture and shows the often inhuman working conditions. The workers have become slaves of the machines and the 'engineers' have lost all contact to the wider significance of the work, being only interested in their 'engines'.

Close under the eaves of the stack, and as yet barely visible, was the red tyrant that the women had come to serve – a timber-framed construction, with straps and wheels appertaining – the threshing machine which, whilst it was going, kept up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves.

A little way off there was another indistinct figure; this one black, with a sustained hiss that spoke of strength very much in reserve. The long chimney running up beside an ash-tree, and the warmth which radiated from the spot, explained without the necessity of much daylight that there was the engine which was to act as the *primum mobile* of this little world. By the engine stood a dark motionless being, a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness, in a sort of trance, with a heap of coals by his side: it was the engine-man. (...)

What he looked, he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun. He travelled with his engine from farm to farm, from county to county, for as yet, the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex. He spoke in a strange northern accent; his thoughts being turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron charge, hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all: holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives. (...) The long strap which ran from the driving-wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him.

While they uncovered the sheaves he stood apathetic beside his portable repository of force, round whose hot blackness the morning air quivered. He had nothing to do with preparatory labour. His fire was waiting incandescent, his steam was at high pressure, in a few seconds he could make the long strap move at an invisible velocity. Beyond its extent the environment might be corn, straw, or chaos; it was all the same to him. If any of the autochthonous idlers asked him what he called himself he replied shortly, 'an engineer'. (...)

They were soon in full progress, after a preparatory hitch or two, which rejoiced the hearts of those who hated machinery. The work sped on till breakfast-time, when the thresher was stopped for half an hour; and on starting again after the meal the whole supplementary strength of the farm was thrown into the labour of constructing the straw-rick, which began to grow beside the stack of corn. A hasty lunch was eaten as they stood, without leaving their positions, and then another couple of hours brought them near to dinner-time. The inexorable wheels continuing to spin, and the penetrating hum of the thresher to thrill to the very marrow all who were near the revolving wire-cage.

The old men on the rising straw-rick talked of the past days when they had been accustomed to thresh with flails on the oaken barn-floor; when everything, even to winnowing, was effected by hand-labour, which to their thinking, though slow, produced better results. Those, too, on the corn-rick talked a little; but the perspiring ones at the machine, including Tess, could not lighten their duties by the exchange of many words. (...) for as the drum never stopped, the man who fed it could not stop, and she, who had to supply the man with untied sheaves, could not stop either, (...)

For some probably economic reason it was usually a woman who was chosen for this particular duty, and Groby gave as his motive in selecting Tess that she was one of those who best combined strength with quickness in untying, and both with staying power, and this may have been true. The hum of the thresher, which prevented speech, increased to a raving whenever the supply of corn fell short of the regular quantity. (...)

Dinner-time came, and the whirling ceased; where-upon Tess left her post, her knees trembling so wretchedly with the shaking of the machine that she could scarcely walk.

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Considering the whole text, explain why the threshing machine is called the “red tyrant” by Hardy.
2. How is the engine man characterized?
3. What are the old men’s reactions to this new way of work?
4. Where do Hardy’s sympathies seem to lie? Refer to the text for your answer.

## ESSAY TOPIC

1. Discuss “the despotic demands of machinery” in our times.