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How Literature was Affected in the Victorian Age

The Year 1837 was very significant. It was not only the year that Queen Victoria acceded the throne, but also the year that a new literary age was coined. The Victorian Age, more formally known, was a time of great prosperity in Great Britain's literature (Keach 608). The Victorian Age produced a variety of changes. Political and social reform produced a variety of reading among all classes (Stuart 5). The lower-class became more self-conscious, the middle class more powerful and the rich became more vulnerable (6). The novels of Charles Dickens, the poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, the dramatic plays of Oscar Wilde, the scientific discoveries of the Darwins, and the religious revolt of Newman all helped to enhance learning and literacy in the Victorian society. Of all of the Literary eras, the Victorian age gave a new meaning to the word controversy. Writers of that time challenged the ideas of religion, crime, sexuality, chauvinism and over all social controversies (Brown 16).

Queen Victoria influenced the literary age herself. She loved to read and she was educated in the finest schools in Great Britain (Fraiser 278). Queen Victoria encouraged reading among all of her people. She gave out free books to children and she built schools for the lower classes. Also the Queen invited prominent Victorian age writers such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Charles Dickens to read privately to her in Buckingham Palace (Packard 59).

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The Victorian Age was also an era of several unsettling social developments. This forced writers to take positions on immediate issues animating the rest of society (Brown 23). Hence, romantic forms of expression in poetry and prose continued to dominate English literature throughout much of the century. The attention of many writers was directed to the growth of the English democracy, education, materialism, religion, science and the theory of evolution. In "Opposition of Matter" Thomas Carlyle spoke out against materialism. Historian Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote History of England and Critical Historical Essays. Macaulay expressed the complacency of the English middle class over the new prosperity and growing political power (29).

The Oxford Movement caused corruption during the Victorian age. The Tractarians insisted that the Anglican Church was Catholic, not Protestant and they wanted to establish independence from the rising middle class (Richardson 8). The movement began under the leadership of John Keble and Paul Newman. Newman attacked the national apostasy in Tracts for the Times (9). The book caused an outburst in England. Newman was forced to resign his position as head of the movement. With his resignation, the Oxford Movement came to an end. Following the Oxford Movement, many Orthodox Victorians believed that God had created each species and the world was created in seven days (Packard 58). As the nineteenth century proceeded, these traditional customs were put into question by Erasmus Darwin and his grandson, Charles Darwin. Erasmus Darwin found that the world was not created in seven days in Zoomina, where he discovered that the evolutionary theory

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was unscientific. Charles Darwin wrote *Origin of the Species*, causing full scale controversy in Europe(59). Darwin said that species survive and evolved by natural selection, or the survival of the fittest. The public debate over the evolution marked for Victorians a radical change in intellectual and religious life. The literature of the first four decades of the Victorian period could not help but reflect the social and intellectual controversies of the era(Richardson 9). Writers including Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin attacked the problems directly, while Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Alfred Lord Tennyson dramatized the conflicts and challenges in their works. The most popular form for this type of dramatization was the novel. Victorian novels represented almost every aspect of nineteenth century Victorian life(Keach 629). Though poetry and prose were certainly distinguished, it was the novel that ultimately proved to be the Victorians special literary achievement(Keach 682). The Victorian novel's most notable aspect was its diversity. The Victorian period produced a number of novelists whose work today would fit between popular fiction and literature. Novelist Wilkie Collins excited his audience with *The Woman in White*, Elizabeth Gaskell with *Wives and Daughters* and M.E. Braddon with her much underrated *Lady Audley's Secret*(Richardson 35). All three of these authors wrote for large audiences; increasing literary rates and increasing publication sales(36). Motifs of Gothic fiction also found their way into the Victorian novel.(Summers 18) The two authors who illustrated this form of Gothism were Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* was a masterful combination Gothic motifs in which the strange love experiences of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. The book has been considered as on of the finest novels in English history.(20)

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The Victorian interest in social life led to a flowering on the novel of romance. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Cranford*, producing a charming picture of Victorian Village life and the complex studies of family life in *Wives and Daughters* (Brown 53). *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* by Charlotte Bronte, expressed the daily lives of ordinary young women. Bronte also took an even broader step in her novels. She wrote about women's sexual passions (Summers 14). Never before had a woman wrote a novel of this content. Unquestionably, the three great masters of Victorian novels were Charles Dickens, William Thackeray and George Eliot. Of the three, Dickens was the most popular with the Victorian public and the most difficult to evaluate today. Dickens novels cannot really be judged. He used a difficult more inclusive type of writing. His novels are read more often because readers are fascinated by his picturesque types of social realities: incest, crime, pain, adulation and antagonism toward women. *Bleak House* for example, ends with a happy couple, but as in most comedies, their marriage does not resolve the social and physiological issues raised by their work("Charles Dickens", online). Dickens other noted novels were *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. William Thackeray's greatest novel, *Vanity Fair*, refused both to elevate the heroine onto traditional pedestal and to conflict upon her antagonists complete defeat.(Brown 40) George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) was perhaps the most learned of the Victorian novelists. She wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel about a girl growing into maturity and the problems she faces(Liston 19).

Also during the Victorian age that male writers wrote about the injustices of women. During the age women were treated unfairly as all women of the 1800's (Stuart

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215). Women were considered as outcasts and the law did not look out for their welfare(216). Thomas Hardy wrote about the injustices of women in *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*(Brown 22). John Stuart Mills wrote *On Subjection of Women*, extending his area of individual freedom and self reliance of his opinion of how women were treated(24).

Victorian poetry was also popular during the Victorian Age. Robert Browning,

Matthew Arnold and Lord Tennyson were among the most popular Victorian poets (Harris 129). The major themes of Victorian poetry were loneliness, religious anxiety and social change. Matthew Arnold expressed these themes most powerfully in "Dover Beach." The speaker sees his unbelieving society as a darkening plain, where ignorant armies clash at night (Keach 635). In stanzas from the "Grand Chartreuse," Arnold described his society between two worlds, one dead and the others powerless to be born (Keach 708). Tennyson's "In Memoriam," is a product of seventeen years reflection and meditation engendered by the death of Tennyson's college friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Robert Browning wrote "An Epistle" which is a contribution of the narrator's description of a madman. The man is a prophet, yet he does not understand the true meanings of right and wrong.

As Victorian novelists, Victorian dramatists attempted to present life realistically. The popular dramatist Oscar Wilde, wrote plays that dealt with social problems directly. In his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he attacked Victorian strictness in his play. The plot of the play turns upon the fortunes and misfortunes of two young Englishmen, John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. Each of them lived a double life. They create themselves another personality to provide an escape from social and family

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obligations. The plot becomes hilariously complicated when Algernon decides to pass himself off as Earnest in order to spend time with Cecily, his girlfriend. John on the other hand, announced to Gwendolen, for courtship reasons that his poor brother Earnest, died of a chill in Paris (Keach 711). The plot of the play is brilliantly constructed with its witty and polished dialogue. Even the title of the play has a satirical double meaning: "Ernest" is the name of a fictitious character, but he designated the moral virtue of sincere aspiration which was so important in the earlier Victorian Period. Wilde made the earnestness of Ernest the key to an outrageous social comedy and he poked fun at conventional Victorian seriousness by fitting solemn moral language to frivolous and ridiculous action (712). *The Importance of Earnest* ranks among one of the most brilliant comedies in English history.

The Victorian age was an age of rapid growth and social change (Keach 612). By the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, Great Britain had become the literary capital of the world (Fraiser 23). The Victorian writers wrote about their changes in their society. Late in the nineteenth century, the final blow to the Victorian age did not come until the outbreak of World War One in 1914. For the next four years, novelists, poets and dramatists directed their energies primarily to war. After the war ended, the British Empire was shaken badly by the Labour Party. The ideas and popular forms of the Victorians no longer adequately the radically different society. The Victorian age came to an end around 1916, ending one of the most fascinating times in English history. Literature was greatly affected during the Victorian Age. Victorian literature helped to strengthen modern literature in all aspects.

