

VICTORIANS AND THE SCIENCE FICTION

Ms. Akanksha Johar*
Dr. Neetu Sharma**

ABSTRACT

The Victorian Age was an age of astonishing variety and complexity in all political, social and literary fields. The literature of this time embodies the complete spirit of Victorian England. As W.H. Hudson says, as could not conceivably have been produced at any other time in the world's history. The two more currents that form Victorian England civilization are in the political and social spheres. The progress in the fields of intellectual, science and democracy has been astounding. As W.H. Hudson says the growth of science kept pace with the progress of democracy, and in more than fifty years with which we are here as concerned men have added more to our positive knowledge of ourselves and the universe than our forefathers had done in all the preceding eighteen centuries of our era. The Victorian Age majorly covers the period from 1837 to 1901. Queen Elizabeth succeeded the throne in 1837 the throne of England and died in 1901. After her death, the Victorian Age came to its collapse and was soon replaced by the Modern Age slowly but decisively. Many critics usually regard the year 1887 as the Victorian Jubilee because after this the former poets had nothing new to survive or to add to the literary output and fresh poets and prose writers have arisen. Victorian poets found themselves among new men, strange face and other minds in the later Victorian period.

Keywords: *Victorian Age, Science Fiction, Science vs Religion, Monster Characters.*

Introduction

Victorian Age: An Age of Science or Religion?

The Victorian Age was the Age of Science and the growth of trade and industry which had in turn challenged all the notions of culture, dignity and morality. Several doubts and confusions had arisen to make a chaos in the intellectual circles. Arnold, Ruskin, Carlyle and even a few economists sounded notes of warning, saying the England's culture and morality were in danger of degradation. On contrary there were the utilitarian who were happy because the prosperity was increasing and the empire was expanding. Controversies were rife with regard to the rise of the middle class of business and industry. It was both hailed and condemned at the same time. Carlyle was of the view that the industrialization has made people mechanical, devoid of moral and aesthetic sense. The growth of industries and trade led to urbanization. People were turning into city dwellers, forgetting the culture of cottages, of which English has been proud since long. The loss of that culture had shocked the poets and thinkers. The industrialization made the poor poorer and the rich became richer. The workers in particular were impoverished; their moral degradation had scandalized the sense of the finer spirits. Thus, industrialization had caused lot of confusion among the people. The religious controversies were equally confusing. Catholicism, Protestantism, evangelism, High church, Low Church and broad Church had divided the society into several sections. The war for supremacy between Church and the Government caused confusion and dismays. The Oxford University's insurances to subscribe to the 39th article of matriculation turned the tide of public emotion to a new direction.

Ceaseless Conflict between Science and Religion

Two opposite but equally powerful forces in the Victorian Age were – Science and Religion. There was a ceaseless conflict between the two just like a conflict between head and heart. Religion has always been supported and sustained by faith while Science was born and bred in the mind by

* Research Scholar, Department of English, Maharishi Arvind University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

** Research Guide, Department of English, Maharishi Arvind University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

logic and reason. As Elbert Einstein, has said: Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. (Essay: Science and Religion, 1954). This quote is used to express both, Einstein's religiosity, and his belief in the compatibility and at times the interdependence of science and religion. Christianity was sustained by the tenant priests in the Bible. Christianity believed in the existence of the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God who supervised the entire universe. The world was believed to have been created at the command of God. In course of time Religion came to believe in all kinds of miracles, superstitions, intuitions, rituals and traditions which could not be explained, proved or tested by science or reason. Science challenged the utility of church and priesthood, it questioned the very existence of God and authority of the Bible. The evolutionary scientists like Darwin (*The Origin of the Species*) and Wallace, utilitarian philosophers like Herbert Spencer, John Stuart mill and many others had joined hands against all religious institutions. The very foundation of Christianity was shaken. People were bewildered and in dilemma to decide what to believe and what not to. The situation can be summarized as follows in the words of W. H. Hudson: A vast upheaval in thought was the consequence of this rapid progress and population of knowledge. New theories came in conflict with the old faiths and therefore the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation. The liberal poets and thinkers, notably Tennyson and Mathew Arnold, sought to bring about a sort of compromise between these two powerful forces governing the Victorian social life. They advised the churchmen to be less rigid and more liberal, and they appealed to the scientists to be more generous and humanistic. Both the forces as they believed need to keep a balance and promote each other. This is very relevant to what Einstein has also stated with regard to Science and Religion in his essay *Science and Religion* 1954. So, Tennyson said (In Memoriam, Prologue):

We have but faith, we cannot know;
For knowledge is of the things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam of darkness: let it grow.
Let knowledge grow from more to more,
but more of reverence in us dwell;
The mind and soul according well;
may make one music as before.

The maze therefore becomes the ultimate test of endurance, for it tests both the physical and mental prowess of a person. The Victorians, though not physically traversing a labyrinth in their everyday lives, went through the same tortuous paths in every aspect of their existence, whether trying to make profits, searching for a socially acceptable identity, trying to find a suitable moral watermark, counting the hours in the shadow of the gallows, living in the shabby, faded but respectable past in colonial mansions or merely trying to stay alive and eke out an existence in the dingy by lanes of the slums.

Two key human qualities of Victorianism get highlighted in the actions and attitudes of the people, both reinforcing the concept of a dual approach to everything. The first is the concept of happiness resulting from utilitarian ideals. This turned out to be a myth with which people fooled themselves into believing that money and more money, profits and more profits, could fill the vacuum left by spiritual or moral uncertainties. So, while they really craved mental peace and warmth of human companionship they spent most of their lives running after financial gain, trampling into the dust and suffocating to death their real desires. The truth of this, which most adults pretended not to know about, is brought out very touchingly by the child Paul in *Dombey and Son*, when he questions the power of money, wondering why it could not save his mother. Mammon, worshipped by the industrially progressive nation, is thus put into its rightful place by a child who has, the courage of his innocence to speak the truth and not get buoyed down by duplicity.

The other obvious duality is seen in the external and in the internal, the public and the private existence of the people. For the Victorians, appearances had to be maintained at any cost, even if it meant that the inner self became a desert. To *Dombey* for instance, the loss of his heir, the survival of a 'daughter' are tragedies no doubt, but in the face of his personal grief, what bothers him most of all is what the world thinks of him and what it says about him. This thought haunts him like a bogey, so much so, that in order to keep up a suitable appearance in society he never gives in to his personal grief. Family in the true sense of the word becomes less important to him than social expectations.

In all the features of Victorianism that are touched upon by Dickens in his novels, these two characteristics form the keynote. If one looks at the maze or labyrinth one is likely to find very similar attributes in it. Taking the first instance, in the case of a maze too there is a prize – or the gain – towards which one is moving. The overwhelming desire to win the prize may result in drastic steps taken, including a ruthless elimination of any rivals. Thus, basic human qualities get pushed into the background in order to make way for success. The prize therefore gains an inappropriate degree of importance becoming worth much more than what it really is. If on the other hand one stops to help a fellow human in trouble, chances are that the prize may be lost but perhaps a friend gained. Ultimately which would give the greater satisfaction? This was a question many Victorians perhaps asked themselves at some point in life but were afraid to answer.

In the second question of duality, the obvious simplicity of the pattern of a maze and the very different situation faced when one is actually inside it comes to mind. Very often ideas and actions, which seemed straightforward, turned out to be complex and practically impossible to unravel. Who would think getting justice when one is innocent of any wrong would be such a Herculean task for instance? Or for that matter a child getting a suitable education could be so full of pitfalls? But these were very obvious cases in everyday Victorian life. Also, the Victorians could never allow anyone to see their sufferings and tribulations, pretending to be fine, keeping up social pretenses whereas in actuality they were hollow inside. This constant pretense after a while became their reality, fooling them into believing that that was their truth. A traveler in a maze could either be convinced of his insurmountable prowess and steam ahead straight into the jaws of death, or succumb to despair believing in his weaknesses and incapacities. Either way, by not accepting the truth about oneself, or perhaps not even knowing which was the truth, they call disaster upon themselves. However, those who are willing to judge for themselves without social pressure and are not willing to accept as gospel truth what society tells them may ultimately not only succeed, but more importantly turn out to be more content, for example Louisa in *Hard Times*.

Dickens's use of images of the labyrinth or maze can therefore be justified as being extremely suitable for highlighting certain key aspects of Victorianism. Through the various ideologies, both secular or scientific and religious, through questions of progress and conservatism, through liberalism and puritanism and all the various contradictory features of the age, run these two primary notions. They can be said to form the essence of Victorianism. While all critics zero in on one or some of the characteristics of the age, depending on their focus of interest, behind all the diversity and vastness lies a basic integral duality, which forms the essence of the age.

As has already been pointed out, Dickens does not always use the physical manifestations of a maze. Rather, he incorporates certain characteristics features associated with a maze symbolically into his descriptions of ordinary, everyday existence. This makes it more effective, for ultimately Dickens is not talking about concrete dimensions either of a maze or a place, society or generation but about its soul. It is the keynote which moves through the age that he is highlighting and for this purpose the use of image of a labyrinth and especially what it denotes comes in handy. Ultimately, the Victorian age both in its entirety and in its minuscular parts becomes synonymous with mazes large and small. Both are imbued with similar qualities and looking into the soul of one is to feel the pulse of the other.

As most of Dickens's novels deal with journeys of one kind or another, the journey through a maze can also be read on a technical level as the journey of a reader through the words in a text, the prize being the comprehension and enrichment at the end. Thus, typical of a maze with its innumerable paths and possibilities, the image of a labyrinth can also open up numerous interpretations and can be put to use in any number of ways.

If we consider that, Dickens has merely held up a mirror to the various concrete problems of his age and highlighted the evils rampant in society then he is doing no more than what any writer in any age is expected to do. The Victorian age cannot however be classified merely according to Darwin's theory. John Stuart Mill's ideas, Bentham's principles and so on. This would only open up diverse and even contradictory opinions of the age as indeed has already happened, giving the age a mythical status, making it larger than life, just because there is too much in it to explain simply and singly, the same way that a myth is open to multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

Alfred Russel Wallace, lists the achievements of nineteenth-century science and technology and finds them much more numerous and impressive than those 'of all preceding ages.' Most Victorian writers of science fiction wouldn't dispute. Wallace's basic observations, but their stories often contradict

his conclusion that these achievements are necessarily tending towards utopia or the longer-term perfection of civilization. On the contrary, from Frankenstein on, as Carl Freedman (2000) contends, science fiction often expresses versions of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called 'the dialectic of enlightenment' – that is, the utilization of reason and science for irrational, destructive, dystopian purposes. A genre of storytelling that typically takes the form of secular prophecy, science fictions seems often to be retelling versions of the Tower of Babel and the Fall of Babylon, Armageddon and Judgement Day. It doesn't question the validity and power of scientific discoveries, but it deeply distrusts how the facility will affect the form of things to return.

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