**The Victorian Age**

**Victorian era**, in British history, the period between approximately 1820 and 1914, corresponding roughly but not exactly to the period of Queen Victoria’s reign (1837–1901) and characterized by a class-based society, a growing number of people able to vote, a growing state and economy, and Britain’s status as the most powerful empire in the world.

During the Victorian period, Britain was a powerful nation with a rich culture. It had a stable government, a growing state, and an expanding franchise. It also controlled a large empire, and it was wealthy, in part because of its degree of industrialization and its imperial holdings and in spite of the fact that three-fourths or more of its population was working-class. Late in the period, Britain began to decline as a global political and economic power relative to other major powers, particularly the United States, but this decline was not acutely noticeable until after World War II.

**The Victorian British Empire**

The Victorian British Empire dominated the globe, though its forms of rule and influence were uneven and diverse. The traffic of people and goods between Britain and its colonies was constant, complex, and multidirectional. Britain shaped the empire, the empire shaped Britain, and colonies shaped one another. British jobs abroad included civil and military service, missionary work, and infrastructure development. People from various imperial locations traveled to, studied in, and settled in Britain. Money, too, flowed both ways—the empire was a source of profit, and emigrants sent money home to Britain—as did goods such as jute, calico cotton cloth, and tea.

Dramatic expansion of the empire meant that such goods came to Britain from all over the world. Between 1820 and 1870 the empire grew, shifted its orientation eastward, and increased the number of nonwhite people over whom it exerted control. Much of this expansion involved violence, including the Indian Mutiny (1857–59), the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) in Jamaica, the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60) in China, and the Taranaki War (1860–61) in New Zealand. India became central to imperial status and wealth. **Victorian British economy**

Britain’s status as a world political power was bolstered by a strong economy, which grew rapidly between 1820 and 1873. This half-century of growth was followed by an economic depression and from 1896 until 1914 by a modest recovery. With the earliest phases of industrialization over by about 1840, the British economy expanded. Britain became the richest country in the world, but many people worked long hours in harsh conditions. Yet, overall, standards of living were rising. While the 1840s were a bad time for workers and the poor—they were dubbed “the hungry forties”—overall the trend was toward a less precarious life. Most families not only had a home and enough to eat but also had something leftover for alcohol, tobacco, and even vacations to the countryside or the seaside. Of course, some decades were times of plenty, others of want. Relative prosperity meant that Britain was a nation not only of shopkeepers but of shoppers (with the rise of the department store from mid-century transforming the shopping experience). Increased wealth, including higher real wages from the 1870s, meant that even working-class people could purchase discretionary items. Mass production meant that clothes, souvenirs, newspapers, and more were affordable to almost everyone.

**The Victorian stereotype and double standard**

Today “Victorian” connotes a prudish refusal to admit the existence of sex, hypocritically combined with constant discussions of sex, thinly veiled as a series of warnings. There is some truth to both sides of this stereotype. Some few educated Victorians did write a lot about sex, including pornography, medical treatises, and psychological studies. Most others never talked about sex; respectable middle-class women in particular were proud of how little they knew about their own bodies and childbirth. In addition, Victorians lived with a sexual double standard that few ever questioned before the end of the period. According to that double standard, men wanted and needed sex, and women were free of sexual desire and submitted to sex only to please their husbands. These standards did not mesh with the reality of a society that featured prostitution, venereal disease and women with sexual desires, but they were important nonetheless.

**Gender and class in Victorian society**

Victorian society was organized hierarchically. While race, religion, region, and occupation were all meaningful aspects of identity and status, the main organizing principles of Victorian society were gender and class. As is suggested by the sexual double standard, gender was considered to be biologically based and to be determinative of almost every aspect of an individual’s potential and character. Victorian gender ideology was premised on the “doctrine of separate spheres.” This stated that men and women were different and meant for different things. Men were physically strong, while women were weak. For men sex was central, and for women reproduction was central. Men were independent, while women were dependent. Men belonged in the public sphere, while women belonged in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women were meant to run households and raise families. Women were also thought to be naturally more religious and morally finer than men (who were distracted by sexual passions by which women supposedly were untroubled). While most working-class families could not live out the doctrine of separate spheres, because they could not survive on a single male wage, the ideology was influential across all classes.

Class was economic and cultural and encompassed income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behaviour, politics, and leisure activities. The working class, about 70 to 80 percent of the population, got its income from wages, with family incomes usually under £100 per annum. Many middle-class observers thought that working-class people imitated middle-class people as much as they could, but they were mistaken; working-class cultures (which varied by locality and other factors) were strong, specific, and premised on their own values. The middle class, which got its income (of £100 to £1,000 per annum) from salaries and profit, grew rapidly during the 19th century, from 15 to over 25 percent of the population. During the 19th century, members of the middle class were the moral leaders of society (they also achieved some political power). The very small and very wealthy upper class got its income (of £1,000 per annum or often much more) from property, rent, and interest. The upper class had titles, wealth, land, or all three; owned most of the land in Britain; and controlled local, national, and imperial politics.