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| “All was Not as it Seemed” |
| *The Guardian*  14 Jun 1994 Brian Keaney  All was not as it seemed - many nineteenth-century writers describe an age of hypocrisy and poverty which is far removed from the current notion of "Victorian" values.  The Victorian age (from 1837 to 1901) marked the height of the British Empire. Britain was powerful and respected all over the world, and its navy protected worldwide trade routes. Goods were imported from every corner of the empire to furnish the lifestyles of the well-off and the trading classes, and to provide raw materials for "the workshop of the world". British products - and culture - were then exported all over the world again.  The process of industrialization began in the 18th century and was well underway when Victoria came to the throne in 1837. Society was transformed. However, progress meant riches for some but poverty for others. The elegant clothes of middle-class and upper-class women were made in unhealthy and dangerous conditions by low-paid workers.  The values the Victorians adopted had either to justify or come to terms with this inequality or to provide arguments for changing it. Poems of protest such as Thomas Hood's “The Song of the Shirt” were popular: "Oh! men with sisters dear, Oh! men with mothers and wives, It is not linen you're wearing out, But human creatures' lives." In her novel *Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell asked hard questions about who really created wealth: "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 the wealth, is struggling on for bread." Far from comfortable, pictures of Victorian life often dwell on the comfort of the middle-class drawing rooms: servants quietly coming and going, bringing food and drink, taking coats and hats and announcing visitors. The lives of the vast majority of people were very different to this.  Friedrich Engels (1820-95), the philosopher and son of a factory owner (and, with Karl Marx, author of the Communist manifesto), painted a grim picture of working-class life in Manchester: "The cottages are old, dirty and of the smallest sort, the streets uneven, fallen into ruts, and in parts without drains and pavement masses of refuse, offal and sickening filth lie among standing pools in all directions the atmosphere is poisoned by the effluvia from these, laden and darkened by the smoke of a dozen tall chimneys. A horde of ragged women and children swarm about here, as filthy as the swine that thrive upon the garbage heaps." (The Condition of the Working Class in England, 1845) But social criticism came from many quarters. Before he became Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) was a 'Romantic Tory' and a critic of industrialism. He was also a popular novelist. In Sybil, or The Two Nations (1845), he wrote about two nations which exist within the same country but which rarely meet or come into close contact. The two nations are the rich and the poor.  During the Victorian age values were argued over, as they are now. Queen Victoria was on the throne for 64 years, longer than any other British monarch. In many ways her own firmly held views about morality set the tone for the age. All her life she absolutely hated scandal and what was then known as "fast living", such as swearing, gambling, drinking and smoking.  The idea of "respectability" was born. It is most closely linked with the rising middle classes. Pre-marital sex was considered shameful. At the same time middle-class men were expected to delay marriage until their career had reached the point at which they could afford to keep a wife and family.  Divorce, although legalized in the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, brought disgrace with it. (When Edward, Prince of Wales, was involved in a divorce case in 1870 he was hissed on the racecourse at Epsom.) It was rare and generally available only to the wealthy.  Values and practices, as in other periods, did not always mean the same thing. There was a certain tendency throughout the middle classes to do one thing and to preach and give the appearance of another.  The "self-made man" The Victorian era was also the period of belief in the "self-made man". The book Self-Help, written by Samuel Smiles in 1859, was a bestseller. According to Smiles, "The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual and, exhibited in the lives of the many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength." The family was considered to be the backbone of society and the royal family was held up as the ideal. There was a tendency, however, for some middle-class families to become smaller. Ideas about family size were influenced by the work of Thomas Malthus, whose Essay on the Principle of Population had first been published in 1798. Simply put, Malthus suggested that the growth of population will always be greater than the growth of subsistence (what people live on).  He argued that population is held in check by "natural" factors, including war and ill health. He later modified these views, and wrote that population could be controlled by regulating greed and sexual activity. But large families came to be seen as a cause of impoverishment rather than a symptom of it, and were a reason for blaming the poor for their own lot.  Some philosophers, economists and politicians began to ask whether it was a good idea to give charity to poor people. To do so, they argued, was to interfere with the 'natural' processes of population control. They maintained that economic forces, if allowed to operate unhindered, would in the long run produce the most efficient results and therefore the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.  In 1834 the Poor Law was passed which meant that any able-bodied pauper would have to enter a workhouse if he or she wished to receive any relief or benefit. In Charles Dickens' novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837-8), the philosophy behind the "workhouses" is ridiculed, as well as the corruption that took place in them: "The parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved that Oliver should be 'farmed' or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against 'the poor laws' rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience she knew what was good for children and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them: thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still and proving herself a very great experimental philo- sopher." Dickens was darkly suspicious of the role of philosophers in preparing the ground for the Poor Laws, which left, in the form of the workhouse, a legacy of fear and resentment for generations. His suspicion of philosophy was developed further in his portrayal of the mill-owner, Mr Gradgrind, in Hard Times (1854), one of many novels of the 1850s on industrial themes. The Victorian era is well known for the growth of the novel. As a form it was very popular and everyone, from labourers flocking to the new public libraries to royalty, turned to novels. Poetry too was popular. Unlike the harsh realities depicted in some novels, Victorian poetry often described a dream world, similar to the fantasy that is so popular today (as seen in the spread of science fiction).  The Lady of Shalott, written by the young poet Alfred Tennyson in 1832, draws on the world of medieval knights and chivalry:  Willows whiten, aspens quiver, Little breezes dusk and shiver Thro' the wave that runs for ever By the island in the river Flowing down to Camelot. Four gray walls, and four gray towers, Overlook a space of flowers, And the silent isle imbowers The Lady of Shalott.  Tennyson's poetry is essentially backward-looking, set in the medieval world of chivalry when life seemed simpler and values were so much more certain.  Although for many people today Victorian Britain represents a kind of golden age, the habit of looking at an imagined past with nostalgic longing had begun before the reign of Victoria. |

**Response:**

What was life like for the working class of Victorian England versus the middle/upper classes? Write a 5-8 sentence summary of the most important information in this article, commenting especially on housing/living conditions, work conditions, and lifestyle.