

## The Victorian Period

The Victorian Period is named for the Queen of England during the time period from 1837-1901. This period of time had a lot of things happening. The Industrial Revolution brought a lot of change to the landscape, making factories and cities and introducing new machines that helped people move around more. At the same time, people were able to find new ways of gaining wealth so that people in the lower classes were able to earn enough money to compete with the upper classes (Altick 10). These changes in society were explored in books written in the time. Charles Dickens wrote *Hard Times* to show how the people in the lower and middle classes felt trapped inside of worn out definitions, and Oscar Wilde who showed how the upper classes also felt trapped in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Charles Dickens concentrated on his story showing the lives of the little people of the city. As his characters move through their world, they encounter members of the upper class, all of whom seem to be pretty silly. They continue to insist that the old social orders are still in place and that they should be given respect and prestige based on their birthright alone even when they are, like Mrs. Sparsit, completely broke. This is shown to be almost opposite from the little man like Bounderby who has worked hard with the support of his family to grow from poverty to wealth. Through this character, Dickens reinforces the idea that anyone willing to work hard and exercise their minds might be able to break out of any social or economic condition they find themselves in, particularly in the quickly changing environment of the industrializing nation, but that attaining wealth after poverty doesn't necessarily mean that these "self-made" individuals are immune from the hypocrisy and social blindness of the old elite classes.

Although Bounderby has attained wealth, he seems to expect others to be able to copy his achievement without giving them any help in doing so. He doesn't recognize that a good part of his own success is owed to his family who made sure that he was at least fed and educated so that he would have a chance and he has almost no sympathy for the condition of his own factory hands in attempting to provide them with similar opportunities (Dickens 4). In writing this story, Dickens seems to make the argument that the reason why the poor are so poor is because the wealthy, whether they are newly wealthy or just the latest generation in a long line of wealth, are not interested in helping the poor break out of the condition that they're in because they would rather have the poor under their own control.

Oscar Wilde approaches the question of the changing society from the upper classes looking down. While the poor people were looking up at the social elite and wishing they could have some of that luxury, Wilde suggests that the wealthy were somewhat envious of the freedom of movement enjoyed by the anonymous poor. Any behavior that wasn't strictly included within the accepted "codes of conduct", which were very limiting and easily broken, could get an individual such as Jack Worthing kicked out of his social set and lose his relatively easy lifestyle. However, this sort of lifestyle was considered very boring by this character as it entailed maintaining a large country home and being responsible for his young "niece" Cecily (Gillespie 20). She was called his niece because she was related to the man who adopted Jack after he had been found as a baby in a tote bag at the railroad station. While this beginning to his life should have made it difficult for Jack to attain any position in society, his acceptance by his own guardian made it possible for him to be accepted. Rather than risk this shaky

acceptance, Jack invented an alter-ego in the form of an imaginary younger brother named Earnest that was constantly getting into trouble and forcing him to run off to the city to take care of things. In reality, Jack was just going to the city to relax and play. The other main character in the story is Algernon, Jack's friend in the city, who has also invented an alter ego, an elderly friend named Bunbury, who needed Algernon's company occasionally as a means of relieving his boredom. His reasons for doing this is also to escape the constraints placed on him as a member of the elite class. As the play moves forward, both men fall in love with the main women in the story and eventually find out that, through a strange twist of plot, no one has told any lies. The superficial way in which they go about living their lives, though, highlights the points Dickens was trying to make that portrayed the upper class as being completely out of touch with reality and the true values in life.

Through these stories, both Dickens and Wilde illustrate how the wealthy classes have lost all touch with the realities of life at the lower levels. Dickens shows how even people who were once poor lose their sense of balance when they gain wealth. Their own greed and self-importance force them to continue oppressing those below them as a means of feeling important while those who were already wealthy continue to insist on conforming to empty social ideals. Wilde illustrates how the wealthy held some envy toward the lower classes because the great freedoms they enjoyed in being completely anonymous and free of the social constraints expected (Gillespie 22). But even while they completely miss the point of the desperate condition of many of the poor, these wealthy individuals also seem to completely miss the point of a "real" life as in experiencing sincere emotions and engaging in sincere activities. In urging his audience

to be “earnest”, Wilde is attempting to bring society back into a more substantive context.

### Works Cited

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