

Victorian thinkers essay sample



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Victorian Thinkers contains studies of four of the most influential critics of 19th-century British culture. Each was heralded a prophet in his own lifetime, and yet each was also regarded as misguided, and even mad, by his contemporaries. Their interests in art and culture led them to develop views on society and economics. Carlyle was a writer of extraordinary stature, radical in thought and style; Ruskin, who began his career as a critic of painting and architecture, developed his views to produce critiques of economics and social welfare; Arnold was a poet and literary critic, a definer of “culture” who later turned to social issues; and Morris, renowned for his work as artist and designer, championed a revolutionary socialism which would honour the civilizing effects of the arts. A. L. Le Quesne is also the author of “After Kilvert”.

George Landow has also written “The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin” and “Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art and Thought”. Stephan Collini is also the author of “Liberalism and Sociology”, “That Noble Science of Politics” (with Donald Winch and John Burrow) and “Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930”. Peter Stansky is also the author of “Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts”. Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Thackeray are among the Victorian thinkers to earn the title of “sage”(мудрец). To some degree, the Victorian sages were respected and enjoyed by people from all social classes. They were certainly considered intellectuals and trailblazers of alternative viewpoints. They passed their message through public speaking, periodic columns in newspapers, poetry,

and in novel-form. It is a difficult task to describe them as a group because they were each so unique in their style and beliefs. Yet, their focus and aims had much in common.

Thomas Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881) was in many ways the founding father of the Victorian literature of ideas. He was a popular satirical writer, essayist, historian and teacher from Scotland in the Victorian era, born in the village of Ecclefechan, Dumfriesshire. Apart from being blessed with excellent thoughts, he was completely devoted towards his family. His work was extremely attracting to most Victorians who were clashing with changes in science and politics, which actually endangered the traditional social order. Controversies circled around him when he called economics as “ The Dismal Science” and wrote several articles for the Edinburgh Encyclopedia. Carlyle’s collected works (1974) comprises of 30 volumes. One of his most famous works is “ On Heroes And Hero Worship”.

Childhood & Early Life

Carlyle was born on December 4, 1795 in Ecclefechan, Dumfries and Galloway. Initially, he went to Annan Academy, at Annan, but due to continuous nagging and harassment, he left it after three years. Carlyle was deeply influenced by the beliefs of Calvinist. Afterwards he attended University of Edinburgh and later on became a mathematics teacher. He taught initially in Annan and then in Kirkcaldy. In Kirkcaldy, he befriended the mysterious Edward Irving. Carlyle returned back to University of Edinburgh in 1819. By 1821, Carlyle withdrew from his career as a clergy and completely focused to make himself a writer. His first work “ Cruthers and Jonson” was

not well received. While translating teachings of Goethe's " Wilhelm Meister", he commenced disbelief in the form of the realistic novel and therefore, focused on establishing a new form of fiction. Apart from writing German literature, he branched out into wider ranging commentary on modern culture in his influential essays " Signs of the Times and Characteristics".

During his stay at the university, which was until 1821, he went through immense crisis of faith and conversion which provided the material for his later work " Sartor Resartus". It was during the same time that he contracted dreadful stomach ailment which remained with him all his life. All these happenings made his reputation as an awkward, quarrelsome and to an extent disagreeable personality. His writing style was generally nasty and sometimes vicious which only helped wrongly, making his irritating image become stronger. He commenced reading German literature extensively, which influenced his thinking to a great extent. He signed himself as an expert on German literature in a series of essays he wrote for Fraser's Magazine. In 1825, he wrote " Life Of Schiller". After 1828 came some of the most outstanding essays of Carlyle, all of which were penned when he was at his house, in Dumfrieshire, Scotland.

It was also during this time that Carlyle became friends with the popular American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1834, Carlyle shifted to Chelsea, London and was popularly known as the " Sage of Chelsea". He also took membership of a literary circle. It was in London where Carlyle penned " The French Revolution: A History", a historical study concerning oppression of the poor. All the three volumes of the book became successful and led

way for many more to come. Carlyle had numerous affairs before he got married to Jane Welsh in 1826. Even after his marriage, he continued to be attracted towards Kitty Kirkpatrick. Amazingly, more than 9000 letters were exchanged between Carlyle and his wife, which were published showcasing the affection for each other. However, due to continuous fights and quarrels, he slowly alienated from Jane. Carlyle died on 5th February, 1881 in London

Few Famous Works

Sartor Resartus

This was Carlyle's first major work. He commenced writing the same in 1831 in his Craigenputtock home. The book, ironically criticized for its own formal structure, simultaneously pressurized readers to encounter the problem of where 'truth' is to be found. In 1833, "Sartor Resartus" initially got published as a series in Fraser's Magazine until 1834. The content of the book revealed attempts to establish the British public to Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, a German philosopher. "Sartor Resartus" gained little popularity in the beginning, but gradually became quite famous. This work of Carlyle finally got published in the book form in 1836 in Boston. The French Revolution

In 1937, Carlyle wrote "The French Revolution: A History". This work was divided into three volumes. However, accidentally, the first manuscript of the first volume got burned by philosopher John Stuart Mill's maid. Instead of re-writing the first volume, Carlyle continued to write second and third volume. This work highly contained a passionate intensity which was previously unknown in the historical writings. Carlyle's work to develop motivation and urges influenced many events in France. Heroes and Hero Worship

Carlyle intently believed that heroic leadership is crucial. This belief of his founded form in the book “ On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History”. In this book, he compared several different kinds of heroes such as Odin, Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon, William Shakespeare, Dante, Samuel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robert Burns, John Knox, Martin Luther and the Prophet Muhammad. Later Work

Carlyle’s later writings usually included short essays, generally based on the hardening of his own political positions. Carlyle also carried out some notorious racist essays like “ Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” suggesting that slavery must never be completely eradicated or else compensated with some work. He continued to emphasize that slavery forced work out of people who would otherwise have been lazy and futile. The same views and his support for the repressive measures of Governor Edward Eyre in Jamaica resulted in making distance with Carlyle’s old generous partners. Eyre was blamed of brutal lynchings during his efforts to suppress a rebellion and Carlyle in his defense established a committee. After the demise of Jane, Carlyle almost became absent from social activities. He also wrote “ Reminiscences of Jane Welsh Carlyle”. Carlyle was appointed as a rector of the University of Edinburgh. In 1875, he came out with the essay “ The Early Kings of Norway: Also an Essay on the Portraits of John Knox”.

John Ruskin

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was respected art critic who is also interested on political economic and social issues. Childhood & Education

John Ruskin was born in London on 8 February 1819. His father was a wine

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importer who owned a company that later became known as Allied Domecq. The only child of his father, John Ruskin began his education at home and then enrolled in to King's College in London. Later he took admission in Christ Church, Oxford University to further his studies, where he won the Newdigate Prize for his poetry. Though he was never an outstanding performer, the University granted him a voluntary fourth class degree. In his later life, Ruskin continued writing contemptuous reviews and articles that often made him face legal consequences.

In one of such cases, he was sued by James McNeill Whistler in 1878. Though he was ordered to pay only a small amount as compensation, Ruskin's reputation was badly affected after the incident. During the Aesthetic movement and Impressionism Ruskin estranged from the modern art world and began writing on other issues and continuing his support humanitarian movements, such as Home Arts and Industries Association. In his later life, Ruskin lived in Brantwood, a house on the shores of Coniston, where the Ruskin Museum was established in 1901 after his death on 20 January 1900. Ruskin died at Brantwood of influenza on 20 Jan 1900.

He identified art with morality and claimed that contemporary art was not capable of creating art. He developed the idea that art contributes to spiritual development of the man and his well-being.

On his frequent trips in Europe, he took an artists's and poet's delight both in landscape and works of art, especially medieval and Renaissance. His first great work, *Modern Painters* (5 volumes, 1843-60), began as a passionate defence of Turner's pictures, but became a study of the principles of Art. In

The Seven Lamps Of Architecture (1849) and The Stones Of Venice (1851) he similarly treated the fundamentals of architecture. These principles enabled him, incidentally, to appreciate and defend the Pre-Raphaelites, then the target of violence and abuse. To Ruskin the relationship between art, morality and social justice was of paramount importance and he increasingly became preoccupied with social reform. His concern inspired, among others, William Morris and Arnold Toynbee, whilst in the practical field he founded the Working Men's college (1854) and backed with money the experiments of Octavia Hill in the management of house property.

He advocated social reforms which later were adopted by all political parties old age pensions, universal free education, better housing. Gothic was for Ruskin the expression of an integrated and spiritual civilisation; classicism represented paganism and corruption; the use of cast iron, and the increasing importance of function in architecture and engineering seemed to him a lamentable trend. He was Slade Professor of art at Oxford (1870-79) and (1883-84). His later works, eg. Sesame and Lillies(1865), The Crown Of Wild Olive (1866) and Fors Clavigera (1871 -74), contain the programme of social reform in which he was so interested. Ruskin married (1848) Euphemia (Effie) Gray (the child of whom he had written The King Of the Golden River) but in 1854 the marriage was annulled and Effie later married Millais. Ruskin did not marry again, although on occasions he fell in love with girls much younger than himself and his last disappointment over Rose la Touche contributed to his mental breakdown which caused him to spend his last years in seclusion at Brantwood on Lake Coniston, where he wrote Praeterita, an unfinished account of his early life. Much of his wealth he

devoted to the ' Guild of St. George', which he founded, and other schemes of social welfare.