

The Romantics

The Industrial Revolution

1760-1840

The Industrial Revolution

The 17th century had been the age of monopolies and protectionism helped by the State intervention. During the 18th century the new ideas of freedom for the individual gave rise to the liberalism, a new economic philosophy spread: free trade and unrestrained economic activity called *laissez-faire*.

The Industrial Revolution took place in England and then it spread in other parts of the world. It was a big change from an agrarian economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture.

Fundamental to this process were some technical innovations:

- The use of new materials like iron and steel;
- New energy sources: coal, petroleum, electricity and the steam engine.

- The invention of new machines that increased production and reduced expenditure of human energy (workers were gradually replaced by machines).
- The transportation and communication system strongly developed.
- The factory system was born (division of labour and specialization of functions).

The Industrial Revolution was not only a process of growth, but even a moment in which the working and living conditions got worse and worse. New technologies and machines meant a drastic increase of unemployment and many people had to leave their native places and were reduced to starving (suffered from hunger).

Women were paid less than men and children were paid even less than women. They were employed in mines because they had to work through very small tunnels.

The workers left their hometowns and had to live in big cities, but in overcrowded sides called slums, without the most elementary sanitation and where the death rate was high.

To fight against these conditions in 1824 Trade Unions were founded, in 1830 the word Socialism entered in political language and then the first reform was proposed by Robert Owen and finally improved working and living conditions for his workers and their families.

The interest of society focused on child-labour and the conditions for the prisoners and the poor ones. Children's rights were finally recognized as human beings and this new idea was reflected in the central role held by children in Romantic poetry.

Women condition changed too, but not just improved. Many of them worked with men in factories but they were subject to discrimination: paid less for worse jobs.

Women in higher classes had less freedom because of the rigid code of social behaviour imposed by the bourgeoisie but at the end of the 18th century women demanded emancipation and equal rights with men; in this field was a pioneer Mary Woolstonecraft.

In 1830 William IV came to the throne after George III and after two years a Reform Bill was passed and it was very important to keep the balance in a complicated society. The right to vote was extended to much of the male middle class (only), while half the middle class and almost all the working class and women had no franchise.

Other reforms:

- 1833 the Factory Acts forbade the employment of children under the age of nine;
- 1833 abolition of slavery and slave trade in the British colonies;
- 1834 a new system of national education was introduced.