SUMMARY UNIT 2. VICTORIAN LITERATURE.

♦ The popular image impressed on succeeding ones is always interesting, and popular usage of the word 'Victorian' is particularly instructive: its connotations are respectability, church-going, prudishness, the close-knit patriarchal family circle, the businessman of unimpeachable probity. This how the Victorian middle-classes imposed themselves on the world and on posterity, and they would be pleased and proud that this image -or this false front, some might say- has endured. The moral and religious roots of Victorianism reach well back into the 18th century, to the Wesleys and the revival of evangelicalism.

♦ The relationship of reader and writer is characteristic of all the great prose of the Victorian period; these voices talk about here and now, about England and English life, and they count on their readers to believe that there really is an English nation, with particular problems to confront, decisions to make, and with a definable destiny to pursue. The audience to which the authors addressed themselves were members of the middle-class, this was the class which had made England `the workshop of Europe'. The class was so little homogeneous in point of economic establishment that it commonly was referred to in the plural -the middle classes, among which are to be distinguished a lower-middle, a middle-middle, and an upper-middle class, each marked by its own mode of life, social ambitions, and cultural standards.

♦ The new religion of the new capitalists was `laissez-faire', often called Political Economy, or Benthanism: the new economic doctrines of an unrestricted market economy and total freedom for the industrialist seemed to the early Victorians to be dogma as undeniable as any preached from the pulpit, iron laws proven beyond denial. The new economic dispensation brought its characteristic problems, yet the necessity of confronting them had the effect of enhancing Victorian England's consciousness of a peculiar destiny and mission, of confirming the epoch's sense of being different from all periods that had gone before it. Nothing so much shaped the identity of the Victorian Age as its consciousness of being modern.

♦ The basic argument is that the years following the Reform Act of 1832 were the years of the political and cultural triumph of the middle-classes. `The Great Reform' has often been presented as a stage in a non-violent 'bourgeois' revolution which effectively transferred the political apparatuses of the State to middle class control. It is similarly argued that other aspects of the culture of the ruling classes was altered; that a 'bourgeois' morality became normative. The Law, the Church, the schools and universities, all helped to instil commonly-held notions.

♦ Fiction had become the dominant form in literature, and the problem of recording even its main types becomes difficult. Some novelists tried a number of different forms, as if they were attempting to adjust themselves to all the changes of public taste. Seen in this way, literature begins to assume more importance in its own right: it ceases to be seen as a reflection. There is a sense here that literature, and indeed literary culture as a whole, was playing an active role. As part of the periodical press, the novel was very much a part of this process. Fiction, then, can be seen not as the passive `reflector' of an already given society. Instead fictional literature can be seen as active within society, as being aimed at particular readerships within it, of presenting, to that specifically chosen audience, certain types of information and attitude, and helping to form or change attitudes and behaviour. Diaries were another common personal form of literary production. Letters, diaries and autobiographies, provide an immediate point of access to the ideological formation of the individual in a literate society. Such forms of writing represent the starting point, the common grounding, of the whole society's literacy. Private writing such as letters, diaries and memoirs are not merely personal, then, but social documents, showing the extent to which even the most basic form of literary production played an active role in the production of cultural behaviour thorough ideological debate.
Literature, therefore, can give us access to two types of information about a given society. Firstly and most obviously, facts about a society’s technology, social hierarchy, laws, and institutions (the reflexive model); secondly and perhaps more importantly, ‘facts’ about values and attitudes. **Evidence concerning the latter is particularly valuable when basic institutions such as the family, or the economy, are changing, and values are in conflict.**