

**William Hughes, *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies***

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Regardless of their level of engagement with Victorian studies, scholars and students of the Victorian era will find this fourth volume of the *Key Concepts in Literature* series a useful addition to their academic toolbox. This latest instalment, entitled *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies*, offers an in-depth contextualisation of 19th-century British writings. The majority of the volume is structured as a glossary proposing meticulous definitions for terms of specific relevance to the study of the Victorian era. The terms are sorted alphabetically, and constitute a collection of ‘must-know’ concepts, events, movements or practices which are useful, if not essential, to a comprehensive understanding of the history and culture of the Victorian period. The choice of terms is justified by their Victorian specificity of meaning: either because the terms are currently no longer in current use or, in other cases, because their meaning(s) have evolved and the implied cultural values which upheld these meanings have become less visible. The glossary is followed by five sections respectively dedicated to the chronology of Queen Victoria’s reign, her Prime Ministers, the significant parliamentary legislation during that period, British coinage, and the weights and measures systems. *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies* is therefore useful to provide in-context definitions of terms and concepts which might be encountered in 19th century primary-source documents. In Hughes’ words, it is designed “to support scholars of nineteenth century domestic and imperial history as well as readers of Victorian fiction, poetry and drama.” (Hughes 7) Both scholars and Victorian era enthusiasts with an interest in further developing their knowledge of the long 19th century will therefore find this book enlightening.

In his introduction, Hughes addresses the issue of objectivity in our apprehension of the past. He focuses particularly on the meanings of words and the gap between signifier and signified, as well as the evolution of the signified in the face of an unchanged signifier. The picture of the Victorian era we imagine today was indeed conjured up by the Victorians themselves, and we perceive it today through the lens of their language. Attempting to understand the Victorians’ world first requires a thorough understanding of the words they used to depict it. Hughes’s

reflection on the definition of words is a reminder that studying the past calls for critical distance not just from our objects of study but also from the language used to represent them. Drawing on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, and the willingness to break through "the monoliths of interpretation" (Hughes 5), Hughes further stresses the necessity of questioning our understanding of language, and avoiding the anachronistic interpretations that derive from applying contemporary meanings to words which have existed for centuries:

Victorian studies, as an academic discipline, requires if not participation in the thought of that period then at least a guarded and critical empathy – and a willingness to pursue context far beyond a merely superficial contemplation. Such an engagement is not possible without a sustained attention to details, and a consideration of what the "facts" or artefacts under consideration actually meant to the *Victorian* perceiver as well as to an interpreter or commentator who is grounded in the consciousness of the twenty-first century. (Hughes 5)

By making explicit the connotations these terms held at the time, this book is instrumental in bridging the gap between words and their various, ever-changing definitions. It invites us to cross over to the Victorians' side, so as to acquire a better understanding of the period they lived in, by looking at it through their eyes.

As a secondary benefit, Hughes' selection of terms also reveals the preoccupations of the period, by underlining the main events and intellectual movements that occurred throughout the century. His work is remarkable in that it also represents a beneficial contribution to cultural history. The specific value of *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies* lies not only in the individual definition proposed for each word, but in the selection and juxtaposition of these terms, and what they say collectively about Victorian culture. Outside of its primary function as a dictionary, William Hughes's work is an enterprise of linguistic museology, and the concepts he explores stand as artefacts of the past.

Scholars will find the cross-referencing of terms useful—within the definition of a term, the words in bold characters correspond to terms which can also be found in the glossary elsewhere and are conceptually related to the topic at hand. This will allow the meticulous reader to gain knowledge about a network of related concepts and understand each of them in context, rather than learn about them in isolation. The cross-referencing provides an efficient panoramic view of the Victorian era, as, for instance, political movements may be linked to colours, and colours may be linked to Victorian values. This process enables one to learn not only about the strict definitions of the terms, but also to understand what they would have connoted to the Victorians, who would have understood each of these words in the wider context of their time period. For instance, the "art nouveau" entry leads to the following connected entries: fin-de-siècle, yellow, decadence, greenery-yallery, Aestheticism, Arts and

Crafts movement, Glasgow School. These various keywords allow a much more comprehensive understanding of the movement. This makes the learning process very enjoyable and much more dynamic, as it is easy to let yourself be carried along and jump from topic to topic fluidly.

The final pages will be very useful to provide context for all the entries of the glossary. Beginning with a chronology of the reign of Queen Victoria, the terms defined throughout the book may be looked at in light of their general yearly political and historical context. The same logic applies to the sections pertaining to the list of Prime Ministers in office and the significant parliamentary legislation which occurred during the same period. Finally, the British coinage section, as well as the weights and measures section provide very useful and clearly presented equivalences, allowing for easy comparison with current values.

In conclusion, *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies* is sure to equip both scholars and general readers with the contextual elements they will need in their travels back to the 19th century, and increase their fluency in the Victorian language.