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Exhibiting 1851: Reflections and References

Velká výstava 1851: reflexe a reference

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Abstract

This MA thesis delves into the portrayal and analysis of the Great Exhibition of 1851 as depicted in three selected literary works. With the vision of presenting different viewpoints that influence how the event under investigation was seen and received, the article provides a scholarly examination of historical context, and provides theoretical base for analysing the event and its reflections. By looking at different frameworks, the study clarifies different points of view and adds to a more complex understanding of the event and its wider relevance. The first source under examination is Henry Mayhew's novel, *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family*, a humorous (and satirical) portrayal of a provincial family's perspective on the events of 1851 London as they visit the Great Exhibition. This work investigates the utilization of satire within the novel, drawing parallels with the contemporaneous magazine *Punch; or, The London Charivari*, which is analysed, too, with its depictions of the event, and its omnipresent mocking quality. The second novel under examination is Howard Spring's *The Houses in Between*, which also portrays a visit to the Crystal Palace, in this case however, the from a child's viewpoint. Beyond depicting the fair itself, the novel offers insights into Victorian society and its prevailing values, but also the social strata of the time. Further analysis extends to J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, which captures India's 1857 Sepoy mutiny, marking the onset of the Indian Rebellion. Through this lens, the novel reflects upon Indo-British relations, the colonialism intertwined with the Great Exhibition, and the gradual decline of the British Empire. This thesis thus offers a nuanced exploration of historical events and the backdrop of British expansion. Each of the novels presents the Great Exhibition within a distinct context, shedding light on various facets associated with the fair.

Abstrakt

Tato magisterská práce se zabývá obrazem Velké výstavy z roku 1851. Zachycení události a způsob, jak je zobrazována, je zkoumáno prostřednictvím vybraných literárních dílech. Práce se zaměřuje na prezentaci různých perspektiv, které ovlivňují vnímání, přijetí a interpretaci události, a poskytuje tak odborný průzkum historického kontextu. Pro podložení tohoto kontextu slouží teoretický podklad na začátku práce, který umožňuje snazší a komplexnější pochopení historických spojitostí. Prvním zkoumaným zdrojem je román Henryho Mayhewa, *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family*, který humoristicky (a satiricky) zachycuje setkání středostavovské rodiny s událostmi roku 1851 v Londýně, kdy navštíví Velkou výstavu. Tato práce zkoumá použití satiry v románu, která často vychází ze sociálního původu uvedené rodiny, a vytváří paralely s týdeníkem *Punch; or, The London Charivari*, konkrétně s humornými kresbami a karikaturami reagující na situaci Londýna a společnosti v roce 1851. Druhým zkoumaným románem je *The Houses in Between* od Howarda Springa, který rovněž zobrazuje návštěvu Křišťálového paláce, v tomto případě však z pohledu dítěte, a poskytuje tak perspektivu neovlivněnou společenskými tématy a předsudky. Kromě zobrazení samotné výstavy nabízí román také pohledy do viktoriánské společnosti a do tehdejších společenských vrstev. Posledním analyzovaným dílem je *The Siege of Krishnapur* od J.G. Farrella, které zachycuje Velké indické povstání z roku 1857, tedy důsledky výstavy, ale též důsledky koloniálního útlaku a desiluse s ním spojené. Touto optikou román reflektuje indicko-britské vztahy, kolonialismus propletený s Velkou výstavou a postupný úpadek Britského impéria. Každé z uvedených děl představuje Velkou výstavu v odlišném kontextu a osvětluje různé aspekty spojené s touto událostí. Tato práce tak nabízí komplexní průzkum historických událostí na pozadí britské expanze.

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Introduction

During the 1820s, a very prominent era within the Industrial Revolution unfolded, marking the peak of transformative industrial growth and economic expansion in Great Britain. With a burgeoning population of 2.3 million inhabitants, London emerged as the largest city in Europe, which was reflecting the nation's industrial prowess. The post-Napoleonic War period ushered in a prolonged era of relative peace across Europe until the beginning of the Crimean War, providing enough space for national expansion. In support of industrial endeavours, smaller-scale national exhibitions showcasing art and industrial innovations commenced towards the latter half of the eighteenth century. Notable among these was the 1849 exhibition held in Paris; its success served as an inspiration for British counterparts within the Royal Society of Arts. This impetus culminated in the inception of international exhibitions, with the Great Exhibition of 1851 standing as a seminal event in modern history. This inaugural world Exhibition established a tradition; the foundational characteristics of subsequent exhibitions were laid bare during the inaugural Great Exhibition in London. These included meticulous division into thematic sections, centralized organization overseen by a Main Commission, supplemented by sub-commissions as necessary, concerted efforts to secure state patronage and support, the bestowal of prestigious awards, and the publication of comprehensive catalogues detailing exhibited items, among others.

As a harbinger of Victorian progress and modernization, the Great Exhibition assumed profound significance beyond its immediate commercial and industrial implications. It served as a symbol of optimism and faith in a brighter future facilitated by the presentation of new products and (back-then) cutting-edge technologies. Moreover, the Exhibition emerged as a fulcrum of national pride, epitomizing Britain's ascendancy in industrialization and heralding an era of unprecedented progress. Europe looked to Great Britain as a paragon of economic and legal development; and, as Mokyr puts it, the Exhibition was serving as a testament to the nation's industrial and economic prowess.¹ Eventually, with the growing power of the nation,

¹ Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economy History of Britain 1700–1850*, (London: New Haven, 2009), 477.

scholarly discourse surrounding the Great Exhibition has underscored its significance as a reflection of free trade ideologies and international cooperation. As articulated by Purbrick, the Exhibition serves as an emblem of the principles underpinning free trade agreements and the collaborative spirit engendered among nations, particularly in the realm of commerce and trade.² In this light, the Great Exhibition of 1851 transcended its role as a mere exposition of industrial achievements; it represented a celebratory ode to British industry and economy, fostering a collective sense of national identity and pride amidst the transformative currents of the Industrial Revolution. The success of the Great Exhibition can be attributed, partially, to the underlying ethos of the Industrial Revolution, which emphasized the imperative of efficiency and wealth gain. This paradigm shift in economic and technological thinking permeated the exhibits showcased at the Exhibition, where innovations were evaluated based on their potential to enhance productivity and generate greater prosperity; as articulated by Hubhouse, the evaluation criteria for the exhibits at the Great Exhibition extended far beyond mere novelty or aesthetic appeal.³ Exhibits were assessed based on their capacity to create employment opportunities and enhance economic efficiency by quantifying the potential labour force they could mobilize and the cost savings they could accumulate annually.

The discourse surrounding The Exhibition must be approached with a nuanced perspective, recognizing the complexities inherent to the Victorian era. While the prevailing narrative often accentuates its positive attributes, it is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the period. Briggs, for instance, delineates four quintessential elements emblematic of Victorianism: the strive for industriousness, the cultivation of a serious demeanour (which is often interpreted as Victorian Puritanism), a sense of respectability, and a reliance on self-help.⁴ His analysis presents a portrayal of Victorians characterized by diligent labour and conscientiousness, with an emphasis on self-sufficiency that resonates with Puritan ideals. Conversely, Toms offers a contrasting view, depicting the era as one marked by complexity rather than chaos or discordance.⁵ In this sense, he sees the Victorian era as much more complex. This perspective challenges the notion of Victorianism as a monolithic, easily

² Louise Purbrick, "The Great Exhibition of 1851," in *New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 8.

³ Hermione Hobhouse, *The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition: Art, Science and Productive Industry: A History of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851* (London and New York: Athlone Press, 2002), 40.

⁴ Asa Briggs, "Victorianism," in *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* (New York: Longman, 1993), 450.

⁵ Robert Tombs, "Victorian England," in *The English & Their History* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 456.

understandable entity, suggesting instead a nuanced understanding that accommodates the diverse array of experiences and ideologies prevalent during the period. Crouzet adds to the non-definable nature of the event: If a Victorian era did exist, it must be defined by cultural criteria based on mental attitudes; and even on this count this long period saw such important changes that it is difficult to find in it a true unity.⁶ The Great Exhibition, much like the Victorian era it represents, defies simplistic characterization as merely celebratory. This paper aims to engage with the complexities inevitably connected to the event, including its reception, influence, and controversies. By recognizing the multidimensional nature of both the Exhibition and the Victorian era itself, this study aims to challenge conventional interpretations and offer a nuanced understanding that reflects the diverse layers of historical reality.

The re-evaluation of the Great Exhibition is grounded in an analysis of its constituent elements, informed by theoretical historical base and contemporary interpretations. This study seeks to elucidate the nuances of the Exhibition's reception, particularly interrogating its perceived tone of national pride within the context of the socio-economic challenges preceding it, notably the "Hungry Forties." By contextualizing the event within broader historical frameworks, this research aims to deconstruct prevalent narratives and explore alternative perspectives. In order to re-think the event, the paper analyses three novels. The first novel under analysis is Henry Mayhew's work *1851: or, The Adventures of Ms. And Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family, who came up to London to Enjoy Themselves and to See the Great Exhibition* (1851), which offers a humorous perspective on the experiences of a provincial family visiting the Great Exhibition in London. Through the lens of this fictional narrative, the novel satirically explores the reactions of ordinary individuals to the grandeur and spectacle of the Exhibition and Victorian London, providing valuable insights into societal attitudes and perceptions of the event, and highlights the shocking perception of the people coming to see the fair from villages, and smaller towns. The second text examined in this analysis is Howard Spring's *The Houses in Between* (1951), which delves into the milieu of the Great Exhibition, although from the viewpoint of a child. In addition to depicting the spectacle of the fair itself, Spring's novel offers a penetrating portrayal of Victorian society and its underlying values, illuminating the cultural and social dynamics at play during this period of rapid industrialization and societal transformation. Lastly, this paper investigates

⁶ Francois Crouzet, *The Victorian Economy* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), a novel set against the backdrop of India's 1857 Sepoy mutiny, which serves as a pivotal moment in Indo-British relations and colonial history. By juxtaposing the events of the Great Exhibition with the colonial context depicted in Farrell's work, this analysis elucidates the complex intersections between imperialism, colonialism, and the broader forces of the era. Through a critical examination of these literary texts, this study seeks to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of the Great Exhibition and its enduring significance within the literary imagination.

1. The Great Exhibition of 1851: a Catalyst of Change

The Great Exhibition, the milestone of the nineteenth century, began in 1851 and was formally launched on May 1st by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. This historic occasion marked a turning point in nineteenth-century history. The strategic timing of the Exhibition bore witness to the ascendancy of Great Britain as the preeminent global powerhouse of the period. This chapter serves as an exploration into the multifaceted contextual dimensions underpinning the Great Exhibition, encompassing its overarching objectives, symbolic connotations, economic and social contexts, and societal receptions. Through a close examination of these integral components, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive elucidation of the Great Exhibition's seminal role in encapsulating the ethos and dynamism of Victorian Britain; or, rather, all the changes and newness that came along, and its varying reception. During the initial excitement surrounding the Great Exhibition, its unparalleled scope generated a feeling of curiosity and expectation among contemporaries, who were stunned by the scope and magnificence of the project. Indeed, as Luckhurst posits out, the Great Exhibition marked a seminal departure from conventional local exhibitions, transcending national boundaries to assume a distinctly international character, thus elevating its stature to unprecedented heights of global prominence.⁷ The event thus was truly first of its kind, and started a whole tradition of world's exhibitions.

The transition from a localized to an international concept of the Exhibition not only expanded the geographical boundaries of Great Britain but also stretched the imaginative horizons of Victorian society. Halada and Hlavačka highlight Prince Albert's recognition of the lofty expectations vested in the Exhibition, as it served as a formidable platform for showcasing Britain's pre-eminence on the world stage.⁸ An exhibition of unmatched excellence became necessary in the context of an era marked by invention, pride in national identity, and intellectual advancement through science. As articulated by Briggs in *The Age of Improvement*, contemporaneous sentiments echoed a palpable anticipation for an event that would epitomize the zenith of human achievement and intellectual prowess:

⁷ K. W. Luckhurst, "The Great Exhibition of 1851," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 99, no. 4845 (April 1951): 421.

⁸ Jaroslav Halada, Milan Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy: Od Londýna 1851 po Hannover 2000* (Praha: Libri, 2000), 16.

The triumphant facts of industrial progress were proclaimed for all the world to see in the Palace of Industry of 1851, The Great Exhibition, which set out to present a true test and a living picture of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived [...] and a new starting point, from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions.⁹

The primary objective of the Exhibition, as delineated in the excerpt above, was to foster international camaraderie and steer all nations towards industrial advancement. However, it is noteworthy that amidst this aspiration for international cooperation, there exists a discernible sense of hegemony implicit in the notion that the Great Exhibition, the apotheosis of British exploration and colonialism, would serve as the guiding beacon for the future aims of all nations. This juxtaposition emphasizes the rather thin line between fostering fraternity and subtly imposing British hegemony by seeking to align the distinctiveness of other nations with British interests and objectives.

The celebratory tenor of the statement above encompasses multifaceted undertones, oscillating between encouragement towards other nations and an implicit sense of superiority. While on the one hand, there is an evident inclination towards fostering unity and cooperation among all nations, on the other hand, there exists a subtle suggestion of British pre-eminence, proclaiming that the newness that the British brought is to be followed. Central to this duality is the notion of celebration as a unifying force, wherein the Great Exhibition emerges as a symbol of collective progress and enlightenment. The unifying essence of the Exhibition was further underlined by Auerbach in his scholarly discourse, wherein he posited that the event served as a nexus uniting the diverse races of participating nations, thereby fostering a sense of common brotherhood and ultimately contributing to the promotion of peace.¹⁰ Continuing the discourse on the theme of brotherhood, Briggs points out the construction of a monumental olive tree at the heart of the Crystal Palace, emblematic of international concord and Great Britain's overt symbolical embrace of other nations.¹¹ Moreover, the Exhibition was depicted as a commemoration of each nation's industrial artistry and an embodiment of a vision for a more refined, modernized future. This thematic emphasis on industry prompts an examination of the Exhibition's primary focus and its implications, a discourse central to the following part.

⁹ Briggs, "The Balance of Interests," in *The Age of Improvement*, 398.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 6, no. 1 (2001): 92.

¹¹ Briggs, "The Balance of Interests," in *The Age of Improvement*, 376.

The Great Exhibition underscored industry as its central theme, emphasizing the primacy of economic and technological advancements over artistic pursuits. This deliberate exclusion of the fine arts from the event reflects the prevailing focus of a nation steeped in industrial prosperity and committed to the principles of free trade, emblematic of Victorian Great Britain. In addition to serving as a showcase for industrial power and celebrating technological innovation, the Great Exhibition harboured underlying agendas that operated beneath the surface of its objectives.

The event also aimed to address the plight of workers labouring in factories through mechanization, offering new methods for producing goods affordably and efficiently, particularly in the realms of clothing and food production. The overarching goal was to disseminate techniques for manufacturing goods at lower costs, with the aspiration of alleviating poverty among the lower classes living in the urban slums. It was widely believed that industry, trade, and financial prosperity constituted the triumvirate enabling London to exert hegemony over the global economy; a belief that was ultimately validated by the city's ascendancy in the economic sphere. According to Halada and Hlavačka, two thirds of the world's capital was managed by the British by the time the Exhibition was opened.¹² Embodying a spirit of grandiose national pride and power, the decision for London to host the exhibition accentuates a deeper inquiry into the primary impetuses behind this monumental event. Before delving into the intricacies of the exhibition itself, it is imperative to elucidate the origins and motivations that propelled its conception.

One of the principal figures involved in the planning and execution of the Exhibition was Henry Cole, renowned for his adept organization of numerous successful art exhibitions prior to his involvement in this grand undertaking. However, the magnitude and significance of the Great Exhibition set it apart from his previous pursuits. Notably, the interplay between French, particularly Parisian, influences and the nature of Victorian Britain permeated various aspects of the Exhibition, reflecting a confluence of cultural exchange and artistic inspiration; Cole is said to be greatly inspired, claims Halada and Hlavačka, by his visit organized by the Society of Arts at the Exhibition of Products of French Industry in Paris in 1849.¹³ The Exhibition preceding the renowned 1851 event stands as a pivotal precursor, its ramifications reverberating throughout subsequent endeavours. Henry Cole, recognized as the catalyst

¹² Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 20.

¹³ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 20.

behind this ambitious venture, then presented his visionary concept to Prince Albert, then serving as chairman of the Royal Commission. Prince Albert's important role extended to securing the necessary consent for the Exhibition, a milestone achieved in 1849, marking the formal commencement of preparations for the upcoming event.

It is imperative to delineate the parameters of desirability attributed to the exhibition, transcending mere mechanical prowess; both Prince Albert and Henry Cole believed, claims Briggs, that it is essential to underscore the crucial role of a fusion between design aesthetics and utilitarian functionality, alongside the advancement of machinery and the cultivation of the high arts, which serve to refine societal tastes.¹⁴ The essence of the Exhibition was inherently industrial, prioritizing the showcasing of advancements in manufacturing and production. However, the incorporation of aesthetically pleasing design elements became an indispensable attribute. This does to some extent represent the humanistic aim to strive to be as all-round as possible (in terms of character); in terms of mechanics and technology, than, to be as instrumental as possible. The association with Prince Albert, who emerged as the prominent figurehead of the event, bestowed upon it a heightened sense of prestige and legitimacy, further elevating its significance. Given the multi-layered nature of the Exhibition, its depiction found resonance in various forms of artistic expression, including literature, poetry, paintings, and songs. Recognizing the Exhibition as a catalyst for cultural and artistic expression highlights its profound impact beyond industrial realms.

Key deliberations during the inaugural meetings held at Buckingham Palace encompassed essential logistical aspects such as financing. Funding was predominantly sourced through private subscriptions, totalling approximately 5,000 contributors, ranging from esteemed figures like the Queen and Prince Albert to individuals from various societal strata, including laborers and notable industrialists like Samuel M. Peto, a prominent railway contractor. Peto's substantial contribution of £50,000, as documented by Halada and Hlavačka, exemplifies the significant financial backing garnered to support the Exhibition's efforts.¹⁵ It would thus be accurate to assert that the event's funding predominantly originated from private financial sources. Additionally, pivotal discussions during these meetings revolved around determining the location and design of the venue for the Exhibition. This juncture marked the introduction of Joseph Paxton into the proceedings, a figure characterized by Auerbach as the

¹⁴ Asa Briggs, "Products," in *Iron Bridge to Crystal Palace: Impact and Images of the Industrial Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 166.

¹⁵ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 19.

quintessential Victorian self-made man.¹⁶ Paxton was summoned by H. Cole to undertake the task of drafting the design for the central Exhibition building; a task for which he exhibited enthusiasm, having previously undertaken similar projects.

The selection of the venue for the seminal cultural event of the Great Exhibition holds significant import, as it not only accommodated the event but also symbolized accessibility across social classes. Following deliberations that entertained options like Regent's Park or Primrose Hill, H. Cole asserted Hyde Park as the ideal locale. This decision was underpinned by considerations of accessibility, ensuring that individuals from all social echelons could readily partake in the Exhibition's offerings. J. Paxton subsequently devised a plan for a remarkable iron and glass structure, which upon completion, elicited descriptions akin to a "fairy vision," as reported by Auerbach.¹⁷ This description serves as an evocative portrayal for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, it captures the essence of the transparent, gleaming glass structure, juxtaposed against the towering trees intentionally preserved within its confines to evoke a sense of nature amidst industrial prowess. Additionally, the sheer size and grandeur of the Crystal Palace render it a symbol in its own right, embodying the aspirations and achievements of the era. Notably, the expeditious construction process, facilitated by railway transport and innovative machinery, underscores the era's technological advancements and industrial capabilities.

Paradoxically, the initial architectural design faced ridicule; Halada and Hlavačka highlight, for instance, the *Punch* magazine's brought satirical portrayal, likening the structure to a greenhouse.¹⁸ And perhaps this was a double entendre, as J. Paxton was famous for his drafts of greenhouses. The designation of J. Paxton's proposal as the "Crystal Palace," albeit initially conceived as a sarcastic portrayal by a magazine, ultimately took on profound significance. This seemingly ironic twist carries weight, especially in light of Paxton's established expertise in greenhouse architecture prior to the Exhibition. The magazine's sardonic reference may have served as a double entendre, underscoring Paxton's background while playfully mocking the grandeur of the proposed structure. Ironically, this epithet persisted, ultimately becoming indelibly linked with the event.

¹⁶ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 97.

¹⁷ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 91.

¹⁸ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 21.

The intricacies of the Crystal palace extend even to its dimensions, as noted by Halada and Hlavačka; the remarkable fact that the building spans precisely 564 meters corresponds precisely to 1851 feet in length, directly mirroring the year of the Exhibition itself.¹⁹ The architectural brilliance of the Crystal Palace not only captivated observers with its aesthetic grandeur but also demonstrated practical innovation, aligning with the earlier articulated ideals of Cole and Prince Albert regarding the fusion of design and functionality. It also does, to a certain extent, carry a symbolic value in its smallest details. For instance, the hollow design of the supporting columns facilitated efficient rain drainage, exemplifying the marriage of form and utility; art and usability. Furthermore, the deliberate use of colours—blue, red, and yellow—on these columns and railings sought to emulate the elemental palette of nature, underscoring the intrinsic connection between human progress and the natural world, which became a thematic motif pervasive throughout the era. This symbiosis with nature extended to the illumination of the space, which relied solely on natural light, eschewing artificial sources. Despite its eventual dismantling (before it tragically burned down in 1939, leaving it in ruins) from Hyde Park, and placed to the Sydenham Hill in south London, J. Paxton’s architectural masterpiece earned him aristocratic recognition for his ground-breaking and, at the time, contentious achievement.

Continuing with the discourse (of controversy) surrounding the Great Exhibition, an additional layer of interpretation emerges concerning its religious connotations. While the prevailing historical narrative underscores the event as a commemoration of technological advancement, societal progress, and global unity, an alternative perspective interjects the divine as the ultimate source of all progress. This theological perspective, adopted by a segment of observers, accentuates the notion of divine providence as the catalyst for human innovation and development. Despite the prevalent humanist and Enlightenment ideals of the era, many individuals continued to embrace a perspective attributing all success to divine providence.

This theological stance persisted alongside the growing currents of humanistic thought and Enlightenment principles, underscoring the enduring influence of religious interpretations amidst the intellectual currents of the time. Geoffrey Cantor highlights the presence of this theological perspective, noting that Prince Albert himself endorsed the motto of the Exhibition by invoking the first verse of Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that therein

¹⁹ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 22.

is; the compass of the world and they that dwell therein.”²⁰ Similarly, the official opening ceremony bore a distinctively religious tone, imbued with elements of enlightenment. Halada and Hlavačka indicate that John Bird Sumner’s, the Archbishop of Canterbury, prayer during the opening of the Exhibition set the religious tone right away.²¹ The Archbishop’s invocation for the success of the Exhibition, coupled with expressions of gratitude toward human effort, focus, and rationality, emphasizes the religious underpinnings inherent in Prince Albert’s approach. This perspective found resonance among numerous Protestant commentators, aligning with Prince Albert’s religious sensibilities.

Certain commentators, even Cantor, interpreted the Exhibition as a “harbinger of Apocalypse,” a simile laden with emotive connotations.²² Such perspective resonates with broader historical patterns wherein humanity often harbours apprehension toward general novelty. Religious discourse frequently draws upon biblical narratives to contextualize contemporary events, a tendency evident in interpretations of the Exhibition. However, the Great Exhibition, by its very nature, served as a celebration of the future and the myriad possibilities it held, diverging from traditionalist apprehensions. In this sense, it was certainly a challenge of faith. This is nicely presented by Auerbach, a historian who perceived the event as a rather secular one, who points out that 1851 Britain’s possibilities, both at home and abroad, seemed limitless.²³ This notion also represent a challenge; the faith proclaimed anything earthly to be limited. This inclination toward celebrating the uncharted territories of the future rather than adhering strictly to a biblical interpretation of Britain’s societal journey underscores a shift in cultural attitudes. The Great Exhibition, in its essence, symbolized a departure from traditional religious paradigms towards a perspective focusing on the future, embracing the potential of innovation and progress.

Evangelicals, conversely, levied criticism against the transient nature of the Exhibition, asserting that its fleeting spectacle paled in comparison to the eternal verities of Christianity. Cantor justifies their viewpoint, highlighting their insistence that humanity’s focus should centre on the enduring values of Christianity rather than on temporal diversions, joys, or experiences.²⁴ Moreover, they cautioned against the lively tide of materialism, which inevitably became a part, or rather an outcome, of the Victorian era’s progress. The clergy and

²⁰ Geoffrey Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” *Isis* 103, no. 3 (2012): 455.

²¹ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 25.

²² Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” 441.

²³ Auerbach, “The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory,” 96.

²⁴ Cantor, “Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,” 443.

their adherents, during this (moral) disagreement, launched extensive critiques of the progressive zeitgeist, lamenting society's increasing reverence for temporal manifestations of progress and science over traditional religious institutions. This event marked a period when divergent interpretations emerged, revealing the Exhibition's dual nature. While some factions celebrated its advancements, others mourned the perceived decline of religious reverence in favour of secular, "shallow" pursuits.

These tensions showcased the clash between the forces of scientific and industrial progress and the entrenched authority of the church, with each faction vying for societal influence. Acknowledging the religious undercurrent of the event and the broader era of progress is imperative. Indeed, the general public, perhaps swayed by Prince Albert's aim to link the opening of the event and Psalm 24, viewed the Exhibition as a manifestation of divine will, expressing gratitude to God for its realization. However, religious interpretations were not the sole source of controversy; racial issues also came to the fore.

During this era of increased mobility and cultural exchange, encounters with individuals from diverse backgrounds posed challenges for the British and Europeans at large. It marked the first time many encountered Indians, Chinese, Americans, or Turks adorned in traditional attire, stirring feelings of novelty and unfamiliarity that were often filtered through a Eurocentric lens, facilitating swift judgment and categorization. Auerbach highlights that the influx of foreigners during the Exhibition exposed a latent strain of nationalism among the British populace, which regrettably led towards racial prejudices.²⁵ The period of free trade and increased travel opportunities naturally brought about cultural shocks for the British populace. This phenomenon epitomizes the nation's progression while also revealing occasional excesses; the Great Exhibition, by challenging British perceptions of race, inadvertently exposed a supercilious attitude among its participants.

However, despite all these challenges, cultural encounters also yielded moments of enjoyment. For instance, the refreshment section of the Exhibition offered exotic foods and beverages, predominantly from the Middle East, providing the British public with a new cultural experience and fostering an interest in exotic cultures. This opportunity for cultural exploration marked the advent of a new era of commercial enjoyment. Overall, the Exhibition

²⁵ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 104.

presented the British with a spectrum of cultural and racial influences, some of which were embraced more readily than others.

The press played a great role in shaping public perception of the Exhibition, as previously evidenced by the case of *Punch* magazine and its link of the Crystal Palace to a greenhouse. Media coverage varied, with both positive and negative perspectives being articulated. Notably, journalists were granted complimentary access to the Exhibition, underscoring the organizers' commercial inclinations and their desire to maximize publicity; this does already point out the commercial strategy of the Victorians. Even prominent media outlets such as *The Times* weighed in on the event, with a conservative stance akin to that of English clergymen. According to Auerbach, *The Times* displayed particular scepticism towards the concept of class fusion associated with the Exhibition.²⁶ The Exhibition was criticized by some for its perceived social openness, with expectations of sharper class distinctions. Conversely, *The Illustrated London News*, characterized as a more liberal press outlet, closely monitored the evolution of the Exhibition with a tone of support and reverence. Similarly, as documented in Auerbach's work, the *Guardian* magazine lauded the event, stating, "The Exhibition demonstrated the resolution, ingenuity, and skill which made us one of the world's great empires."²⁷ This observation suggests a divergence in interpretations of the Exhibition within the press, with perspectives varying depending on the ideological leanings of the media outlet, ranging from liberal to conservative; this range does highlight the political picture of the time, too, as the political sphere was open.

Regardless of whether the coverage was positive or negative, the publicity surrounding the Exhibition succeeded in drawing crowds to London, a phenomenon that proved remarkably successful. Tombs reports an average daily attendance of 43,000 visitors, indicative of the event's widespread appeal and influence.²⁸ The magnitude of the gathering at the Great Exhibition was unparalleled, representing a significant milestone in indoor event attendance. Halada and Hlavačka document the total number of visitors at an astonishing 6,039,196, underscoring the immense scale and impact of the event.²⁹ The remarkable turnout at the Great Exhibition marked an unprecedented milestone in indoor event attendance. This statistic highlights the monumental scale and profound impact of the event, illustrating its significance

²⁶ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 104.

²⁷ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 96.

²⁸ Tombs, "Victorian England," in *The English & Their*, 467.

²⁹ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 19.

in the cultural and social landscape of the era. Shears fittingly observes that while the acquisition of 35 hectares of land in Kensington and the subsequent construction of numerous cultural institutions such as museums, halls, colleges, and libraries by Prince Albert undoubtedly established a tangible monument, it was his foresight in preserving the remaining profits that truly demonstrated his visionary stewardship.³⁰ The Royal Exhibition Commission continues to manage the annual interest generated from the unanticipated earnings of the 1851 Exhibition. According to Halada and Hlavačka, the profit amassed reached £900,000 by the twentieth century, with its accrued interest now supporting British scholarships, art initiatives, and scientific research aims.³¹ In hindsight, it is plausible to assert the commercial nature of the event. As tangible legacies, three prominent institutions in London, namely the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, and the Natural History Museum, stand as enduring testaments to the Great Exhibition's financial legacy, forming integral components of the former Albertopolis complex.

This chapter has elucidated several facets and perspectives associated with the Great Exhibition, commencing with its primary ideal objective of fostering unity, celebration, and peace among all nations. Revered as one of the most emblematic occurrences of the nineteenth century, the Exhibition epitomized the Victorian ethos of national self-fashioning and advancement. Indeed, the event stood as a monumental and captivating spectacle; the ethereal ambiance of the Crystal Palace intertwined with its symbiotic (and somehow symbolic) relationship with nature, alongside the concurrent expressions of faith in both divine providence and human progress. As Shears observed, the nostalgia and wonderment surrounding the Exhibition stem from the irreplaceable absence of its physical remnants.³² Indeed, each portrayal of the Exhibition evokes a sense of romance, reflecting the genuine pride of the British populace in admiring the event's resounding success. However, amidst this admiration lay certain contentious elements, including underlying racial prejudices, the logistical challenges of accommodating the influx of visitors into London, Prince Albert's management of the event's profits, and the ecclesiastical unease sparked by the temporary nature of the Exhibition. The multifaceted nature of the Exhibition lent itself to diverse interpretations, as individuals projected their own perceptions onto the event. Consequently, the Great Exhibition emerges as a symbol of British achievement, although one connected

³⁰ Jonathon Shears, "Afterlives," in *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 219.

³¹ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové výstavy*, 29.

³² Shears, "Afterlives," in *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A Sourcebook*, 196.

with (slight) controversy, yet undeniably marking a historic milestone in the nation's narrative.

1.2 Hungry Forties: Great Britain in Transition (Towards the Better)

Often the wage received was not enough to buy bread for the family, and so a resort to the purchase of coarser stuff was necessitated to obtain more bulk to meet the wants and stay the cravings of hard-working, hungry men and growing children, such as barley meal, toppings, grey peas, potatoes, and swede turnips. A poor old labourer said to me one Monday, 'I had fine fare yesterday. I had roast, baked, and boiled.' 'Indeed,' said I, 'you were in luck. What did you have? Explain.' 'Well,' said he, 'I and my family had swede turnips, and nothing but swede turnips; but we thought we would have as much variety as we could, so we had roasted turnips, and baked turnips, and boiled turnips.'³³

In navigating the historical significance of the Great Exhibition of 1851, it becomes important to situate it within the broader economic (and consequently social) contexts of the mid-nineteenth century Great Britain. The timing of the Exhibition, inaugurated in 1851 on the cusp of a new decade and following a tumultuous period often characterized by economic hardship and social unrest, provides it with a profound symbolic resonance. Termed the “Hungry Forties,” the preceding era was marked by pervasive challenges, including but not limited to economic stagnation, agrarian distress, and labour strife. Against this backdrop, the Great Exhibition emerges as a turning moment, signalling not only a break from the adversities of the past but also heralding a nascent phase of transition and progress; the ultimate goals promoted by the Exhibition, too. This chapter seeks to emphasize the interplay between the Great Exhibition, as a symbol of end of the hardship and movement towards the better, more advanced future.

The Victorian era, a difficult one to characterize as a single, cohesive unit, spans the reign of Queen Victoria, and several years after her death. The beginning of the era deviates significantly from its end; therefore, a careful analysis of the temporal continuum is required in order to completely understand its complex nature. The lead-up to the 1850s in Great Britain was characterized by a tumultuous economic situation influenced by both internal and external factors. Great Britain went through an economic boom during the beginning of the Victorian era, which was characterized by a large inflow of capital. As Crouzet points out, Britain’s naval presence manifested in the expression “Britannia ruled the waves,” which served as a symbol of this prosperity.³⁴ Britain’s nineteenth-century economic situation might be sometimes compared to the United States’ twentieth-century worldwide trade power dominance, which was marked by both abundance and contrasts. In addition to leading the way in economic advancement, Bairoch highlights Britain’s not dominant, but “super-

³³Cobden Unwin, *The Hungry Forties: Life Under the Bread Tax: Descriptive Letters and Other Testimonies from Contemporary Witnesses* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1904), 23.

³⁴ Crouzet, *The Victorian Economy*, 9.

dominant” economy, which not only was the most advanced one, but also had the ability to influence all economies of the international trade network.³⁵ This portrayal emphasizes the economic superiority that Great Britain held at the time. Britain's economy had cycles of expansion and collapse during the 19th century, fuelled by things like industrialization and international trade. Industrial progress created wealth, but it also brought forth social and economic problems.

The 1840s marked a period of significant financial strain, triggered by a confluence of domestic and global challenges. Internally, economic downturns and adverse climatic conditions, including severe droughts, precipitated a decline in earnings and prices, exacerbating fiscal instability. Concurrently, Fitz-Gibbon points out a reduction in capital flow from Britain to its colonies, particularly Australia, further exacerbated the crisis, leading to a series of bank failures and insolvencies overseas.³⁶ This period of economic turmoil underscores the intricate interplay between Britain’s domestic economy, its colonial ventures, and global economic networks. The financial crises of the 1840s laid bare the vulnerabilities inherent in Britain’s economic system, revealing the undeniable interconnectedness of its economic fortunes with those of its colonies.

The prevailing economic adversities were compounded by the onset of the potato blight, which initially struck England and Scotland in 1845 before devastating Ireland the following year. The calamitous impact of the potato blight rippled through economic structures, precipitating widespread food shortages and economic instability. The successive occurrence of the potato famine, also in 1846 further exacerbated these challenges, casting a profound shadow over both economic prosperity and demographic stability. Termed alternately as the “Great Famine” or the “Great Hunger,” the crisis emphasized the intricate nexus between environmental factors, agricultural practices, and socio-economic vulnerabilities within the Victorian landscape. Ireland was primarily an agricultural economy during this time, heavily reliant on the cultivation of potatoes as a staple crop. This had ripple effects on the broader British economy, as Ireland was an integral part of the Great Britain’s economic system. As Brantlinger highlights, over one million Irish people starved to death.³⁷ The loss of Irish agricultural production affected trade, employment, and food prices throughout Great Britain.

³⁵ Paul Bairoch, *Commerce Extérieur* (Paris: The Hague, 1976), 168.

³⁶ Bryan Fitz-Gibbon, *A History of Last-Resort Lending and Other Support for Troubled Financial Institutions in Australia*. (Australia: Reserve of Australia, 2001), 13.

³⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, “The Famine.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2004): 196.

What is interesting about the situation is, as Eagleton stresses, more could have been done to prevent the famine, leading to mass mortality:

There was no question of calculated genocide; and food and imports, contrary to nationalist mythology, far outstripped exports in the Famine years. But neither was the Famine an act of God. Peel's government moved quickly and effectively; the apparatus of public works and the soup kitchens was extended with commendable efficiency, [...] taken as a whole, however, the landowners were precious little use, when their actions were not positively damaging.³⁸

The response of the government to the crisis in question has attracted significant scholarly critique. Particularly contentious is the government's handling of the grain harvest of 1846, which continued to be exported despite the looming threat of famine. Eagleton, among others, asserts that the government's failure to intervene decisively, even after the dire circumstances became apparent in 1847, represents a glaring lapse in governance.³⁹ This lack of action is characterized by Eagleton as a culpable negligence, constituting a morally reprehensible aspect of the government's conduct during the crisis.

The contentious discourse surrounding the responsibility for the famine manifests in divergent interpretations, oscillating between political culpability and environmental determinism. While the inevitability or preventability of the famine itself remains subject to debate, scholars contend that the ensuing ramifications were susceptible to mitigation through effective governance. Brantlinger elucidates the Irish perspective, framing the famine as a form of genocide perpetuated by the predominantly English administration, thereby attributing culpability to political entities.⁴⁰ The combination of the famine's population effects, and economic hardship led to a complex discussion over England's approach to the Irish situation.

The intricate interactions between imperial policies and humanitarian imperatives that influenced the nature of British-Irish relations during this time of crisis and change are shown by this political conversation. In addition, Robert Peel's campaign to remove the Corn Laws in 1846 caused significant political turmoil within the Conservative Party, which added to the

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, (London: Verso, 1995),24.

³⁹ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, 25.

⁴⁰ Brantlinger, "The Famine." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 194.

period's instability and worsened the economic hardship that was already there. The crisis was, besides other factors, famously demonstrated by the Sulphur Crisis that occurred in 1840 between the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and Great Britain. This geopolitical chaos highlighted the long-simmering tensions between countries and caused disturbances in trade, which had a tangible effect on sectors dependent on sulphur, such as fertilizers, mineral processing, and oil refining. As a result, the conflict's effects rippled through multiple industries, worsening the complex economic problems facing the United Kingdom at this particular time.

The potato famine, additionally, triggered a massive wave of emigration from Ireland, as millions of people fled the country in search of food, employment, and better living conditions. Many Irish immigrants settled in other parts of the United Kingdom, particularly in cities like London, Liverpool, and Glasgow. This influx of immigrants had social, economic, and demographic consequences for Great Britain, contributing to urbanization, cultural diversity, and labour supply. Brantlinger highlights a substantial demographic shift during the years 1847 to 1855, noting a migration influx of approximately two and a half million Irish individuals.⁴¹ The demographic shift triggered a profound process of urbanization within the British nation. By the first half of the nineteenth century, England, Scotland, and Wales had undergone significant urbanization, contrasting with the situation in Ireland. Steinbach observes that among the four nations, England exhibited the highest degree of urbanization, a trend that intensified notably from the year 1851 onward.⁴² By the year 1851, a significant demographic transformation had occurred, with approximately 54% of the populace residing in urban centres, thereby engendering the emergence of a novel urban-centric societal framework.⁴³ The migratory influx engendered not only substantial urbanization but also a prevailing sense of disorientation and distress within the populace. Consequently, there arose a pervasive disillusionment with the efficacy of governmental intervention, further accentuating existing societal anxieties regarding human nature. Furthermore, this sentiment pervaded the political landscape, fostering a heightened sense of disenchantment and scepticism towards established authorities across various domains, including religious institutions grappling with significant challenges during the nineteenth

⁴¹ Brantlinger, "The Famine." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 196.

⁴² Susie L. Steinbach, "A 'Green and Pleasant Land' of Cities and Slums" in *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in the 19th Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017), 32.

⁴³ Steinbach, "A 'Green and Pleasant Land' of Cities and Slums" in *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in the 19th Century Britain*, 13.

century, traditional reverence for the monarchy, and notably, confidence in political leadership and systems.

Political dynamics played a significant role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of Great Britain, with particular emphasis on liberal governance and laissez-faire policies. While there exists a prevailing narrative highlighting the ascendancy of liberal ideology in the precede to the mid-nineteenth century, Cowen posits a nuanced perspective, contending that the purported advocacy for liberty and laissez-faire principles was often superficial, amounting to mere ritual or obligatory rhetoric.⁴⁴ The ascendancy of liberal ideology, characterized by its advocacy for a robust economy and the accumulation of wealth as paramount values, underscored the Victorian political ethos. Central to this ideology was the pursuit of free trade and the dismantling of protectionist measures, exemplified by the repeal of the Corn Laws. The repeal of the Corn Laws facilitated open trade with the United States and continental Europe, fostering a climate conducive to economic expansion and prosperity. ...highlights that after the repeal, meaning after the imported grain was no longer on 28% tariff, allowed import of wheat to increase from 58% to 78%, food output expanded by 2%, pastoral agricultural production by 3%, cotton and textile output by less than 1%, and highlights that the repeal helped labour and capital at the expense of land.⁴⁵ The importation of inexpensive foreign grain resulting from the repeal of the Corn Laws had far-reaching implications for the British economy. Yes still, it was not the only facet that saved the political situation, as ... points out, the repeal was considered a major political victory, but its economic consequences were quite exaggerated by those who objected to it.⁴⁶ By liberating the agricultural labour force previously tied to the countryside, the influx of cheap grain incentivized rural-to-urban migration as individuals sought employment opportunities in the growing industrial centres. It is crucial to emphasize that the force behind the migration in the 1840s transformed Irish and British conceptions of the monarchy and sparked long-lasting changes in social structures. At the same time that the Irish people were fleeing to other countries, British cities grew at a rate never seen before, which was a turning point in the era's (socio)economic structure.

⁴⁴ David L. Cowen, "LIBERTY, LAISSEZ-FAIRE AND LICENSURE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 43, no. 1 (1969), 34.

⁴⁵ Douglas A. Irwin, "The Economic Consequences of Sir Robert Peel: A Quantitative assessment of the Repeal of the Corn Laws." *The Economic Journal* 131, issue 640, 3332.

⁴⁶ Irwin, "The Economic Consequences of Sir Robert Peel: A Quantitative assessment of the Repeal of the Corn Laws." *The Economic Journal*, 3333.

The migration with the vision of labour opportunities to urban areas fuelled the growth of cities and the establishment of industrial hubs, which did eventually empower Britain as an industrial powerhouse. Concomitant with the arrival of labour into urban areas was the proliferation of factory-based employment, where workers were remunerated in monetary wages. The simultaneous decrease in food prices and wages facilitated the expansion of industrial production, as factory owners could afford to hire additional labour at relatively low wage rates. This symbiotic relationship between declining food prices, labour availability, and industrial expansion precipitated the growth of industrial centres and the consolidation of Britain's position as a global economic leader during the next ten years. A number of elements came together to mark the end of the Hungry forties, notably the steady recovery of agricultural output and coordinated relief operations led by the British government. In the context of increasing urbanization, it is necessary to go beyond the superficial depiction of urban growth, which exposes a deep contradiction between idealized urban ideals and the hard realities of urban life—a contradiction that Steinbach fittingly explains; indeed, urban centres became breeding grounds for a host of social maladies, including the rampant spread of infectious diseases such as cholera. Moreover, the prevalence of public intoxication, instances of violence, harassment, and petty crime accentuated the disquieting juxtaposition between urban promise and urban peril.⁴⁷ Thus, while the urban landscape symbolized progress and opportunity, its underbelly belied the complexities and challenges inherent in the rapidly evolving social struggle of Victorian Britain. Despite the romanticized allure of urban environments, characterized by bustling thoroughfares and industries, the lived experience often diverged sharply from such idyllic depictions.

In the period under review, there was a significant shift in the model of society from one that was primarily hierarchical to one that was focused on class divisions. Hewitt claims that this change sparked a true social revolution that radically changed how class stratification functions in society.⁴⁸ The heterogeneous nature of the middle class becomes apparent when examining urban commercial zones, characterized by vibrant boulevards serving as focal points for both business activities and leisure pursuits. Within these locales, it is possible to discern three distinct sub-categories of the middle class. Firstly, the upper-middle class, predominantly comprised of self-employed individuals and successful businessmen, occupied

⁴⁷ Steinbach, "A 'Green and Pleasant Land' of Cities and Slums" in *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in the 19th Century*, 16.

⁴⁸ Martin Hewitt, "Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 397.

a prominent position. Secondly, the middle-middle class, consisting of employed people, including fields of teaching, accounting, or medicine, formed another significant segment. Trainor asserts that these two strata enjoyed a relatively comfortable socioeconomic standing compared to the lower middle class, which exhibited considerable overlap with the working class inhabiting urban slum.⁴⁹ The perception of the lower-middle class as constituents of the urban middle class was prevalent, primarily due to their access to relatively remunerative employment opportunities. These workers played a supportive role to their affluent counterparts, the archetypal Victorian self-employed businessmen, thereby contributing to the economic advancement of Great Britain. According to Browne's biographical account of Queen Victoria, the attainment of higher education by working-class individuals facilitated their participation in reformist tendencies through Trade Unions.⁵⁰ Consequently, this heightened societal tension and clashes turned out to be very prominent within Victorian society.

The United Kingdom's economic situation improved after the Hungry forties ended for the reasons already mentioned. Briggs draws attention to a significant turning point that occurred in 1850 when the coal industry produced more than two million tons of coal, or almost half of the world's total production.⁵¹ The proliferation of cotton factories, numbering approximately 1,800 establishments, mirrored the excitement of industrial activities during this period. Concurrently, ship-building factories, iron industries, and railway companies experienced robust growth, indicative of the industrial nature. The railway sector exemplified the transformative impact of technological advancements, with the London Stock Exchange witnessing heightened activity in railway share transactions. The ascendancy of railways serves as a huge emblem of the era, facilitating the rapid and widespread transportation of goods, ideas, individuals, and innovations. However, the factory production engendered adverse consequences for small British farms, as observed by Browne, precipitating a decline in agricultural labour demand and a subsequent plummet in wages.⁵² This dualistic nature highlights the multifaceted dynamics of the era, wherein progress and prosperity coexisted with social dislocation and economic disparities. A darker undercurrent, characterised by the exploitation of colonial subjects as commodities for labour, pervaded the economic, but also social environment of the era amid the narrative of development and prosperity.

⁴⁹ Richard Trainor, "Urban Elites in Victorian Britain," in *Urban History Yearbook 12* (1985): 4.

⁵⁰ E. Gordon Browne, *Queen Victoria* (London: Duke Classics, 1915), 22.

⁵¹ Briggs, "The Balance of Interests," in *The Age of Improvement*, 395.

⁵² Browne, *Queen Victoria*, 74.

The transatlantic trade in human lives paralleled the exchange of goods, commodifying individuals from distant lands and subjecting them to the indignities of servitude and oppression. However, the effects of industrialization extended beyond the confines of colonial exploitation, profoundly impacting the lives of working-class individuals within the British Isles. Men, women, and even children found themselves ensnared in the unforgiving machinery of industrial production, their health and well-being compromised between the relentless pursuit of profit and productivity. Moreover, the advent of mechanized manufacturing precipitated a decline in traditional artisanal skills, eroding the cultural fabric of communities and diminishing access to high-quality sustenance. As elucidated by Tombs, a sense of freedom pervaded the consciousness of the English populace, who perceived themselves as the custodians of a cherished tradition of liberty and autonomy.⁵³ Paradoxically, the growing sense of freedom and confidence among the British populace during the mid-nineteenth century was juxtaposed against the subjugation and exploitation of colonized peoples. The complexity between ideas of national identity, imperial power, and personal autonomy during the Victorian era was highlighted by this dialectic. This nationalist fervour marked by an unwavering confidence in British exceptionalism was not without inconsistencies, but overall, there was a strong sense of nationalistic pride.

The Ten-Hour Factory Act of 1847 was another feature of the time and the idea that (working) conditions were becoming better for the common people. legislative restricted the number of hours that women and children could work in textile mills, allowing them to work no more than ten hours every day. In response to the hazardous and health-worsening working conditions that factory workers faced, the government took such action. There was resistance to the Ten Hours Act as well as support for its approval; limiting working hours, according to supporters, would safeguard employees' health and wellbeing—especially that of women and children—and enhance family life. On the grounds of economics, opponents of the Act, including several members of Parliament and owners of factories, feared that it would hurt profits and diminish productivity. Tombs does point out that there was no evidence that the rate of profit would reduce after the Act was being implemented, and highlights that the capital improvements further generated gains, as the industrial production attracted more investments.⁵⁴ The Ten Hours Factory Act garnered a diverse range of responses, highlighting the complex societal perceptions around labour laws in Victorian times. Some groups

⁵³ Tombs, "Victorian England," in *The English & Their History*, 469.

⁵⁴ Steve Tombs, *Cold, Calculating Political Economy: Fixed Costs, the Rate of Profit and the Length of the Working Day in the Factory Act Debates, 1832-1847*. (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2014), 32.

bemoaned the Act's alleged intrusion on industrial autonomy and economic rights, while others hailed it as a turning point in the continuous fight for better working conditions and labour rights. The Ten Hours Factory Act drew criticism for its exclusive focus on women and young workers, leaving men's working hours unconstrained. Peacock mentions the so-called relay system as a remedy for this criticism, which divided the workweek into shorter shifts to allow for breaks.⁵⁵ However, the Act's intended benefits were undermined because workers had to stay close to the workplace. However, it indicated (at least) a little improvement in working conditions across all demographic groups. This conflicting viewpoint gave the upcoming exhibition a symbolic meaning, representing a shared desire for a fairer and more compassionate industrial workforce in the future. To put it another way, the Ten Hours Act came to represent a social compact aimed at improving working conditions and advancing social fairness in the rapidly industrializing Victorian Britain.

The conceptualization of the Great Exhibition as a signpost of progress and triumph mirrors the broader narrative of optimism and renewal that characterized the Victorian era. Acting as a ray of optimism in the turbulent years following the hardship of 1840s, the Exhibition may have taken on a symbolic importance beyond its tangible forms. Indeed, the shall be discussed with the notion of the (British) populace seeing the future as one full of promises and possibilities, but also the event as one of starting it. The first sight of the exhibition is symbolic in itself; the construction was seen as a manifestation of progress and a brighter future. The Crystal Palace was absolutely a part of this promise; a symbol of triumph and resilience. In both literal and metaphorical terms, the Crystal Palace stood as a testament to the nation's resilience, its grandeur reflecting the collective spirit of perseverance and ingenuity that defined the period. Portrayed as a majestic sanctuary open to all, the Palace assumed a role beyond mere architectural spectacle; it became a symbol of inclusivity and fraternity, offering a platform for nations to showcase their respective contributions to human progress. The Exhibition aimed to create ties of friendship and solidarity across nations, with the goal of acting as a catalyst for worldwide peace and collaboration. It aimed to build a vision of global solidarity by creating a platform for the interchange of ideas, cultures, and inventions across geopolitical divisions. In this sense, the event was perceived as a transformative moment in British history, signalling a departure from the trials of the past towards a brighter, more prosperous future devoid of the spectre of food scarcity. Moreover,

⁵⁵ A. E. Peacock, "The Successful Prosecution of the Factory Acts, 1833-55." *The Economic History Review* 2, vol. 37, (1984), 204.

the Great Exhibition embodied the promise of modernization and economic stability, offering a glimpse into a world characterized by abundance rather than deprivation.

The narrative of celebration around The Great Exhibition—which is personified by the magnificence of the Crystal Palace and the alleged victories of the British Empire—deserves a more thorough analysis than a pure celebration of its success. Unquestionably, the event marked a momentous occasion in British history, but it also merits critical examination, especially in light of questions about imperialist goals, foreign diplomacy, patriotic propaganda, and hegemonic domination. The upcoming chapter attempts to take a critical stance toward the Exhibition, seeking to strike a balance between recognizing its successes and providing a critical evaluation of its wider consequences.

1.3 Re-thinking The Great Exhibition: Beyond Surface Celebrations

The Great Exhibition of 1851 undoubtedly represents the success of Great Britain's power. Yet, in its grandeur and significance, it also uncovers contentious themes inherent to the era and the Exhibition itself. Consequently, a critical examination of the event is imperative. The Great Exhibition of 1851 marked a significant moment for England, bringing together people from various colonial territories and regions across Europe. It was the first time many Britons encountered individuals from distant parts of the world, such as India, China, America, or Turkey. This exposure to different cultures and customs stirred feelings of curiosity, fascination, and sometimes apprehension among the British population. Auerbach underscores the emergence of a nationalistic sentiment among the British populace in response to the presence of foreigners, which he suggests was tinged with elements of racism.⁵⁶ The sight of people dressed in traditional attires, like the turbaned Turk or the robed Indian, highlighted the diversity of the world beyond Britain's borders; and this did stir up emotions of (rather conservative) Victorian society. These encounters provoked a reflection and evaluation within the context of European cultural norms, challenging existing perceptions and inviting a re-examination of societal values and identities.

The era of free trade and expanded travel opportunities naturally engendered cultural shocks within British society. This phenomenon emphasizes the trajectory of national progression, albeit occasionally marked by excesses. The Great Exhibition was an event often perceived as emblematic of British superiority and condescension; the prevailing sentiment of British superiority vis-à-vis other nations (and/or cultures) underscores a recurring theme within the broader discourse surrounding it. This notion of the British superiority, as previously elucidated, intersects in various forms, including the treatment of immigrant communities such as the Irish. Indeed, the arrival of Irish migrants into urban Victorian slums exacerbated existing societal tensions and magnified the conditions of social deprivation and marginalization. As Swift aptly observes, the plight of the Irish within these urban slums, whether in the squalid confines of Little Ireland in Manchester, the dilapidated London courts and rookeries, the impoverished Glasgow tenements, or the subterranean dwellings of Liverpool, epitomizes a myriad of social ills; these include but are not limited to overcrowding, abysmal sanitation, the proliferation of open sewers and cesspools, inadequate nutrition, substandard clothing, pervasive vagrancy, rampant disease, entrenched alcoholism,

⁵⁶ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 96.

and endemic violence.⁵⁷ Such dire living conditions not only accentuate the depths of economic and social disparity and marginalization within Victorian society but also serve as a sobering indictment of prevailing attitudes towards immigrant communities and the broader discourse on British identity and cultural superiority.

During the Victorian era, British relations with India were characterized by a complicated interplay of political, economic, and cultural dynamics, often fraught with controversy and ethical scrutiny. Central to this relationship was the conspicuous role of the British East India Company, which wielded considerable influence over Indian affairs before being supplanted by direct British Crown rule. This transition marked a significant phase in the intensification of British exploitation of India's vast resources, both in terms of raw materials and agricultural produce, which were systematically extracted for the benefit of British interests. Thakur elucidates how the advent of the Industrial Revolution catalysed a paradigm shift in the British perception of India, transforming it into a reservoir of raw materials essential for sustaining the industrial sector; India was predominantly seen as a supplier of cheap commodities such as cotton, tea, indigo, and coffee, crucial for the thriving clothing and beverage industries in Britain.⁵⁸ However, this economic relationship was heavily skewed in favour of Great Britain, resulting in significant losses for India across multiple fronts. The exploitation of India's resources by British entities, particularly the East India Company and later the British Crown, underscored a colonial dynamic marked by economic imperialism and cultural subjugation.

Economic exploitation itself is a prominent feature of British colonialism in India, with the British East India Company and subsequent colonial administrations implementing policies designed to maximize profit and control over Indian resources. As Thakur claims, the East India Company as a trading concern was more interested in profit than in the welfare of the people of India.⁵⁹ The imposition of exploitative land tenure systems, discriminatory taxation practices, and monopolistic trade regulations served to enrich British investors and merchants at the expense of indigenous Indian communities. This economic domination was supported by a larger agenda of cultural imperialism, which took many forms, such as the denigration of

⁵⁷ Roger Swift, "The Outcast in the British Victorian City: Problems and Perspectives," in *Irish Historical Studies* 25, no. 99, 265.

⁵⁸ Kundan Kumar Thakur, "BRITISH COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF INDIA AND GLOBALIZATION." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 74, 406.

⁵⁹ Thakur, "BRITISH COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF INDIA AND GLOBALIZATION, 407.

Indian social structures and customs (like the family life) and the suppression of native languages and customs, as well as the advancement of English education and legal systems. European ideals of modernity, progress, and civilization were propagated as superior to indigenous Indian culture, leading to the erosion of traditional social hierarchies and the marginalization of native cultural practices. Thakur highlights the decline of traditional artisanal production in India, attributing it to the influx of British-imported yarn into the Indian market; this phenomenon stemmed from the surplus availability of yarn in Britain, a consequence of the mechanized manufacturing processes initiated by the Industrial Revolution.⁶⁰ As British manufacturers flooded the Indian market with competitively priced yarn, indigenous artisans found themselves unable to compete effectively, leading to a gradual erosion of the traditional artisanal sector in India. Steinbach aptly draws a parallel between the rapid expansion of railways and the phenomenon of imperialism in India; this development significantly influenced the dynamics of imperialism in India, as evidenced by the substantial increase in cotton exports to India, which accounted for 23% of total cotton exports. Moreover, the scale of overseas investments, amounting to £225 per year, highlights the economic interests driving imperialist ventures in India during this period.⁶¹ By the 1850s, the railway network had become ubiquitous, facilitating the movement of goods and people across vast distances.

To contextualize the controversy surrounding British-India power relations within the framework of the Great Exhibition, it is important to delve deeper into the nature of the exhibits featured at the event. One significant aspect of the Exhibition was the section dedicated to colonial exhibits, where the focus shifted from machinery (which was initially the main focus of the exhibition) to raw materials. Colonial exhibitors seized the opportunity to showcase their natural wealth, which formed the cornerstone of their economic ties with Britain and fuelled the ongoing cycle of trade. The exhibits in this category, as documented in the *Official Catalogue*, included a diverse array of natural products such as spices, precious woods, furs, shark fins, herbal aromas, tobacco, dried fruits, flax, hemp, as well as gemstones like rubies and emeralds.⁶² This emphasis on raw materials underscored the economic

⁶⁰ Thakur, "BRITISH COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF INDIA AND GLOBALIZATION, 407.

⁶¹ Steinbach, "Timeline," in *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in the 19th Century Britain*, 4.

⁶² G. W. Yapp, Robert Ellis, *The Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851* (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), 2.

dependency of colonial territories on Britain and highlighted the exploitative nature of imperialist ventures.

The symbolic significance of the British-India relationship was vividly embodied in one particular exhibit at the Great Exhibition—the Koh-I-Noor diamond, with its name being translated as Mountain of Light. Originating from India, this precious stone became an iconic representation of the complex colonial dynamics of the era. Despite its Indian heritage, the Koh-I-Noor fell under British possession, emblematic of the status and function of colonial territories within the British Empire; as Tarshis explains: “When the British annexed the Punjab in 1849, the British East India Company, as the de facto civil authority, came to own the Koh-I-Noor diamond.”⁶³ This symbolic act of appropriating the diamond functions as a declaration of the might and power of the country. Renowned for its rarity and inestimable value, the diamond was prominently displayed at the Exhibition, although not without controversy.

Queen Victoria, recognizing the allure of the Koh-I-Noor, permitted its exhibition but expressed dissatisfaction with its presentation. Consequently, as Kinsey describes, the diamond underwent cutting to enhance its clarity and shape.⁶⁴ The original gem could not possibly be shown (although Queen Victoria wore it to the opening ceremony) which does, to a certain degree, point out the distrust towards the visitors, who were, as already mentioned, coming from all sorts of different places, and social backgrounds. As Tarshis points out, it is believed to be discovered about 3000 B.C., and that it was used as a third eye of the Shiva statue, which made it a curse should anyone but a woman or a goddess wear it.⁶⁵ A meticulously crafted glass replica was thus then fashioned and exhibited, drawing in masses of visitors eager to behold the rarest gem on Earth. This process sparked a widespread fascination with glass craftsmanship (including the allure of the glass walls of Crystal Palace, too), underscoring the Exhibition’s role as a catalyst for cultural trends and aesthetic appreciation. However, beyond its aesthetic appeal, the display of the Koh-I-Noor diamond also served as a potent symbol of British imperial power and opulence. Hoffenberg contends that Queen Victoria strategically utilized the Exhibition to showcase the wealth amassed by

⁶³ Dena K. Tarshis, “THE KOH-I-NOOR DIAMOND AND ITS GLASS REPLICA AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE EXHIBITION.” *Journal of Glass Studies*, vol. 42, (2000), 138.

⁶⁴ Danielle C. Kinsey, “Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (April 2009): 413.

⁶⁵ Tarshis, “THE KOH-I-NOOR DIAMOND AND ITS GLASS REPLICA AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE EXHIBITION.” *Journal of Glass Studies*, 137.

her family, leveraging the event as a platform to flaunt their material possessions.⁶⁶ This ostentatious display of wealth not only reflected the British attitude towards their colonial possessions but also accentuated the broader theme of power projection through material acquisitions. The symbolic significance of the Koh-I-Noor diamond extends beyond its mere aesthetic appeal, serving as a manifestation of British imperialism within the broader context of the Great Exhibition.

The Koh-i-Noor diamond's controversial presence in the Exhibition was subject to the press attention. A drawing showing Queen Victoria and Prince Albert seeing the Koh-i-Noor diamond serves as an example of how to compare the divergent reactions to the stone (Fig. 1). Even though the diamond was rather small, it attracted a lot of attention from sincere onlookers. On the other hand, *Punch* magazine used sarcasm in its representation, showing common visitors reacting exaggeratedly to the size of the diamond, as illustrated in a drawing with an enlarged diamond (Fig. 2). Here, the hyperbolised size of the diamond might be interpreted as the manifestation of British pride, or wealth.

While the colonial section of the Exhibition featured an array of captivating exhibits, including artworks depicting exotic locales, taxidermy specimens of indigenous fauna, intricate lacework, and traditional costumes, it was the display of raw materials that garnered particular attention. Exhibitors from the colonies showcased a wealth of natural resources, evoking an ambiance of Oriental allure with their distinctive scents, vibrant hues, and exotic materials. This curated presentation catered precisely to the expectations of the British audience and their counterparts, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between colonial territories and the metropole. Indeed, the colonial exhibits epitomized the aspirations of nations reliant on British trade networks, reinforcing the centrality of Great Britain in facilitating and sustaining global commerce during the Victorian era.

Many nations seized upon the opportunity presented by the Great Exhibition to assert their economic prowess and showcase their cultural identity on an international stage. Russia, for instance, strategically leveraged the event to highlight its abundance of raw materials, thereby seeking to stimulate trade and bolster the economic interests of Russian manufacturing

⁶⁶ Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001), 6.

industries. Similarly, numerous other countries adopted a similar approach, cognizant of the formidable industrial and manufacturing capabilities wielded by powerhouses such as France, Belgium, and, pre-eminently, Great Britain. Greece, on the other hand, opted to articulate its national identity through a different approach, eschewing the display of raw materials in favour of showcasing its rich cultural heritage. Through the exhibition of Greek sculpture and artifacts, Greece sought to underscore its historical significance and cultural legacy, thereby asserting its distinctiveness among the participating nations. In essence, the overarching objective of these nations was twofold: first, to highlight the natural wealth inherent within their respective territories; and second, to assert their cultural identity and historical significance through the curated exhibits. By doing so, these nations endeavoured to attract potential market opportunities, forge international connections, and carve out a niche for themselves within the global trade landscape. The original goal of promoting international brotherhood seemed to fade, giving way to a more self-serving pursuit of economic gain.

Continuing the discussion on contentious aspects, it is noteworthy to examine the role of the press in shaping public perceptions of the Great Exhibition. As previously mentioned with the Koh-i-Noor diamond controversy, publications such as *Punch* magazine contributed to the discourse by likening the Crystal Palace to a greenhouse, thereby casting a critical light on the event. The media coverage of the Exhibition was extensive and multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative commentary. Notably, journalists were granted complimentary access to the Exhibition, underscoring the organizers' emphasis on commercialization and publicity. Even established newspapers like *The Times*, traditionally aligned with conservative sentiments and the English clergy, adopted a critical stance, particularly regarding issues such as class dynamics within the Exhibition, stating that the class fusion was somehow too present.⁶⁷ This might have been a great topic, considering that, as Ciugureanu highlights, 4 millions of the total 6 visiting people were of working-class.⁶⁸ The press interpreted The Great Exhibition in a variety of ways, representing a range of ideological perspectives from liberal to conservative. Positive or unfavourable, the media's portrayal of the event heightened public interest and increased attendance. According to Tombs, the Exhibition was a great success, drawing an average of 43,000 people to London each day, demonstrating its enormous appeal and influence on public participation.⁶⁹ It was amazing that this was the

⁶⁷ Auerbach, "The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory," 104.

⁶⁸ Adina Ciugureanu, *Mediating between the Mass and the Individual: Punch Caricatures of the Great Exhibition of All Nations*, (Constanta: Ovidius University Constanta, 2001), 100.

⁶⁹ Tombs, "Victorian England," in *The English & Their History*, 467.

largest throng to have assembled indoors, and, according to Halada and Hlavačka, that 6,039,196 people had attended overall.⁷⁰

The idea among the upper echelons of society regarding the potential for civil unrest and property damage, given the diverse demographic makeup of attendees. This concern was not unwarranted, considering the sheer volume of visitors, which transformed the event into a mass gathering. Employers played a pivotal role in mobilizing their workforce to attend, while the Exhibition's management strategically implemented discounted entry fees, reducing the barrier to participation from five shillings to a single shilling; there were so-called Shilling days when the entry ticket was discounted. The ridicule, for instance, is present in Richard Askill's *Yorkshire Visitor's Guide to the Great Exhibition*. He outlines guidelines for visitor conduct at the event; these include instructions to maintain personal hygiene, move in a clockwise direction within the Crystal Palace, and refrain from spitting or pushing.⁷¹ What is intricate about this periodical text is the assumption that people from anywhere but London would not know how to have basic human decency. This connects to the urban society, and its values and moods, which ended up feeling superior over the villagers, or even over people from anywhere else outside London. This text presents a complex supposition on the alleged inhumanity of people from places other than London. It captures the sentiments that were prevalent in Victorian urban life at the time, which were defined by a sense of superiority over people living in rural areas or outside of the capital, which leads to a beginning of an urban-centric attitude.

The *Punch* magazine, tailored to an audience predominantly composed of the upper middle-class, adopted a humorous approach characterized by caricature and satire, often directed towards various aspects of the Great Exhibition. Illustrating the theme of racism, one notable publication titled "Memorials of the Great Exhibition – 1881" (Fig. 3) depicted different ethnic groups, including a Turk, a Chinese individual, a Frenchman, a German, and Americans, all being overseen by an English policeman. This portrayal reflects the magazine's scepticism towards the notion of universal brotherhood among nations, highlighting instead the inherent need for control over other nations and a sense of scepticism towards the perceived 'otherness' of different cultures. Another *Punch* illustration of this kind

⁷⁰ Halada & Hlavačka, *Světové Výstavy*, 19.

⁷¹ Ciugureanu, *Mediating between the Mass and the Individual: Puch Caricatures of the Great Exhibition of All Nations*, 101.

of feeling is “The North-America Lodgers in 1851” (Fig. 4), which shows a feral tribe of Native Americans that seem to be overwhelming the British, who look scared and submissive, as though they are just doing housework. This sharp contrast between the supposed ‘cleanliness’ and order of the British and the perceived ‘wildness’ of the ‘other’ highlights the racial prejudices and scepticism that were common among the middle classes of the time. The conspicuous presence of Turks, Asians, and other distinct ethnic groups underscores the international allure of the Exhibition, while simultaneously highlighting the imperialistic ambitions underpinning British colonialism. Central to the visual composition is the imposing structure of the Crystal Palace, depicted prominently to the left of the scene. Its towering glass facade serves as a symbolic representation of the technological prowess and industrial innovation synonymous with Victorian Britain. Moreover, the inclusion of the Crystal Palace within the tableau accentuates its status as the focal point of the Exhibition, embodying the spirit of progress and modernity that characterized the era. Notably, the presence of a troubadour atop a globe situated within the confines of the Palace warrants closer scrutiny. The troubadour, depicted as the sole inhabitant of the globe, assumes a position of authority and command, symbolizing British dominance over the depicted territories. The English woman in the image’s forefront could also represent how a Native American figure is overwhelming the United Kingdom. According to Ciugureanu, Britannia—who is frequently portrayed as a female figure—introduces a dynamic in which the English are now seen as the victims and the power roles are inverted.⁷² *Punch* appears to have developed a unique perspective, a rather critical and mocking one, on English and non-English crowds and individuals as a result of acting as a mediator between the mass and the individual.

The *Illustrated London News*, catering to the upper-class audience who typically held conservative views, maintained a focus on the English identity amidst the diversity of the Great Exhibition. Reflecting the official perspectives of the ruling class, the publication often portrayed scenes with a traditionalist lens. This inclination is evident in the illustration of the Grand Opening of the Exhibition (Fig. 5), which presents a straightforward depiction without underlying satire or context. The imagery prominently features the royal family positioned above others, with the central olive tree symbolizing themes of peace and unity. This chapter

⁷² Ciugureanu, *Mediating between the Mass and the Individual: Puch Caricatures of the Great Exhibition of All Nations*, 113.

critically examined various perspectives on the Great Exhibition, shedding light on instances of moral ambiguity arising from the diverse assembly of nations. The pervasive sense of British superiority, evident throughout numerous illustrations, underscores the prevailing attitudes of the era. To represent the satirical tone, the chapter culminates with a *Punch* magazine sketch (Fig. 6), depicting a British staff member at the Great Exhibition encountering an African visitor atop a giraffe, humorously offering to “Please, sir, shall I hold your horse!” This caricature serves to lampoon the unfamiliarity of other nations with British customs, highlighting the perceived cultural ignorance of the British in turn. Of particular note is the portrayal of the Crystal Palace at the outset, a motif emblematic of the event itself. This portrayal subtly critiques British narrow-mindedness, emphasizing their limited exposure to exotic animals and cultures.

2. 1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to Enjoy Themselves, and to See the Great Exhibition: The Light-hearted Satire

In the examination of literary reflections on the Great Exhibition, one pertinent source of analysis is *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to Enjoy Themselves, and to See the Great Exhibition*. The novel was published in the same year of the event; in 1851. This novel, authored by Henry Mayhew, strikes a balance between light-hearted humour (as already suggested by its humorously long title) and profound insight, offering a multi-layered portrayal of the event. Mayhew, renowned as a co-founder of *Punch* magazine and an esteemed journalist, imbues the narrative with a blend of comedic elements and serious commentary, which only links to his personal connection to the *Punchesque*. The narrative revolves around the Sandboys family, residents of Buttermere village in Cumberland, as they embark on a journey to London to partake in the Great Exhibition. Before delving into the Exhibition itself, the novel meticulously sets the stage by exploring various background aspects reflective of the era's societal ideals, prevailing issues, and emerging novelties. This contextual groundwork serves to enrich the reader's understanding of the broader cultural and historical landscape against which the Exhibition unfolds, thus it shall be analysed in this chapter, too. Through Mayhew's storytelling, the novel navigates between moments of levity and instances of deeper reflection, capturing the complexities of the era and the multifaceted nature of the Great Exhibition's impact on society.

The nervousness of the family connected to the event and to arriving to London is being mocked right from the beginning. The depiction of the Sandboys' trepidation towards the prospect of traveling to the metropolis reflects a broader theme of rural scepticism towards modernity and urbanization; this sentiment is exemplified through their humorous misgivings regarding the novel mode of transportation – the railway. The novel playfully portrays their reluctance to embrace this technological innovation, as evidenced by their cautious approach and comical musings regarding the potential hazards of train travel. Furthermore, the Sandboys' impressions of London serve as a lens through which the narrative highlights the

cultural difference between rural and urban living. The capital's depiction by Mrs. Sandboys as a busy, filthy, and morally dubious place mirrors widespread preconceptions held by rural people regarding the city and its people; "[...] neither him, nor anyone that belonged to him, should ever be exposed to the moral pollution of the metropolis."⁷³ The portrayal of London as a moral quagmire fraught with pitfalls and temptations in the novel reflects broader Victorian anxieties about urbanization and societal decay. During the Victorian era, there was a prevailing belief in the importance of moral rectitude and personal virtue, with individuals striving for self-improvement and moral uprightness. London, with its bustling streets, diverse population, and perceived moral laxity, was often viewed with suspicion and apprehension by rural inhabitants who prized traditional values and virtues; here, moral integrity is at risk.

The theme of the Sandboys family's unpreparedness for their trip to London reflects broader societal concerns about the challenges posed by urbanization and social change in Victorian Britain;

He knew little of the world but through the newspapers that reached him, half-priced, stained with tea, butter, and eggs, from a coffee-shop in London—and nothing of society but through that ideal distortion given us in novels, which makes the whole human family appear as a small colony of penniless angels and wealthy demons.⁷⁴

The perception of London as a city beset by filth, both physical and moral, finds resonance in historical accounts as well. Richards provides insight into the evolving nature of London's streets, particularly in the context of commerce:

Unlike the grand aisles of the Great Exhibition, the streets of mid-Victorian London did not provided an antiseptic ambience for commodities; the open air a commodity was still pre-eminently an inert thing handled by human beings, an everyday item available for purchase, and an object of use.⁷⁵

The narrative surrounding the family's journey to London is imbued with a satirical undertone, revealing an unconventional motivation for their trip. Rather than driven by a

⁷³ Henry Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family, Who Come Up to London to Enjoy Themselves, and to See the Great Exhibition* (London: David Hogue, 1851), 17.

⁷⁴ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 59.

⁷⁵ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 41.

genuine interest in attending the Great Exhibition, their decision is prompted by the scarcity of essential provisions such as tea, food, and clothing in their village of Buttlemore. This shortage is attributed to the mass exodus of villagers to London, leaving the village virtually deserted. Consequently, the family finds themselves compelled to journey to the capital, where their itinerary naturally includes a visit to the Exhibition amidst the broader context of their expedition.

His wife, overpowered by this addition of the loss of dinner to the loss of tea, did not hesitate to suggest him, that perhaps it might be as well, if they consented to do like the rest of the world, and betake themselves for a few days to London. For her own part, she was ready to make any sacrifice, even to face the London dirt.⁷⁶

Through the narrative device of situating the family's attendance at the Exhibition as a consequence of opportune timing, Mayhew satirizes the perceived significance of the event. This approach also serves to underscore a notable contrast between the interests and priorities of rural villagers, exemplified by Mr. Sandboys' pride in pig riding, and those of urban society, which actively supports and participates in the Exhibition. Furthermore, the character of Mrs. Sandboys embodies the archetype of the fastidious Victorian housewife, emblematic of the cleanliness and propriety associated with rural living as opposed to the perceived moral and physical squalor of urban environments: "She did not care about any of his Great Exhibitions, only all she knew was, that she would rather go through any wickedness than live in the dirt that she could see he was forcing her into."⁷⁷ Mrs. Sandboys exhibits a notable lack of enthusiasm for attending the Great Exhibition, thereby reflecting a reluctance to expand her intellectual horizons. This portrayal underscores her adherence to simple yet morally upright values, emblematic of the idealized Victorian ethos.

The family takes the train as their transport to London, which is symbolic in a sense. The railway business even got so extensive that people were buying railway shares at London Stock Exchange. It might be the railway that characterizes the period nicely; goods, ideas, individuals, and inventions started to be transported in higher speed and frequency than they ever did. The journey to London is described as "by no means of an agreeable character."⁷⁸ They are thus sceptical towards the transportation, and rather critical towards it. The family's

⁷⁶ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 25

⁷⁷ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 31.

⁷⁸ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 39.

choice of train transport to London holds symbolic significance reflective of the era's rapid industrialization and urbanization. The still growing railway industry epitomizes the period's transformative nature.

Then, the sight of London's busy metropolis overwhelms the family when they finally see it. The city is overcrowded in part because of its dense population and the flow of people attending the event: "Everyone had gone to the Great Exhibition! and certainly the multitudes assembled in the Park were proof demonstrative of the fact."⁷⁹ Another indication of London's congestion is the family's struggle to secure lodging, forcing them to hastily scour the city for shelter. This predicament mirrors the housing shortages prevalent in nineteenth-century London, which led to the proliferation of slum dwellings.

The narrative within the text extensively deliberates on the impression left by the Crystal Palace, which stood as a central emblem of the Great Exhibition. Despite its undeniable architectural grandeur, the text subtly hints at a sense of underwhelming experienced by some observers. This sentiment is intricately intertwined with the ongoing controversy surrounding the Palace's resemblance to a greenhouse, which has sparked debate among visitors. The juxtaposition of the Palace's remarkable scale and the perceived lacklustre response it elicits highlight the complexity of public perception surrounding this iconic structure. Moreover, the text invites readers to contemplate broader implications of this discrepancy in expectations, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between architectural symbolism and individual interpretation within the context of the Exhibition:

To say the truth, the engravings and the imagination had failed to convey any adequate notion of the structure. The very name of the Crystal Palace had led people to conjure up in their minds a phantasm that could not be realised—a transparent edifice, pellucid as if built of block of ice instead of stone—a prismatic kind of fairy mansion [...] ⁸⁰

The theme of high expectations permeates the narrative, illustrating the anticipation and excitement that preceded visitors' encounters with the Great Exhibition. Envisioning a magnificent and ethereal spectacle, individuals arrived with lofty expectations, anticipating a Palace that resembled a fairy-tale construct—transparent, gleaming, and majestic. However, upon beholding the reality of the Palace and experiencing the Exhibition first-hand, many

⁷⁹ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 145.

⁸⁰ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 134.

found their expectations unmet and their initial impressions coloured by disappointment; “But how different the scene on the earliest dawn of the morrow!”⁸¹ This disjuncture between anticipation and reality is palpable in the fragment above, wherein the stark contrast between visitors’ imagined ideal and their actual experience evokes a sense of dissatisfaction and disapproval. Such sentiments accentuate the complexity of human perception and the intricate play between preconceived notions and lived experiences within the context of the Exhibition.

The claim that no other country could build a structure like it includes a subliminal nationalistic and superiority complex, suggesting that Great Britain is unique. The story subtly challenges the might and accomplishments of foreign powers while praising the British for their inventiveness and resourcefulness by suggesting that the achievement of building the Crystal Palace, beyond the capacity of other countries. This subtext of nineteenth-century British pride is evident throughout the book, even in light of its comic tone. It permeates not simply conversations about the Crystal Palace but also more general attitudes and opinions of the time.

After the family enters the Exhibition, the story takes a more serious turn. The tone that was previously humorous fades significantly, making way for a more courteous depiction of the event. It’s interesting to note that this is the first time in the book when there is any indication of respect for the Exhibition. The fact that Mr. Sandboys showed interest in the machinery area highlights the general opinion of attendees, who considered the British machinery exhibits to be especially appealing and the focal point of the program. This concentration on machinery is a reflection of the general emphasis on technological advancement and industrial prowess.

More than all, he was anxious to see the machinery-room, which everybody spoke of with such enthusiasm. There was the monster pump, with its two mouths, pouring out its river of water, – he wanted to see the stream printing-press, and the carding and spinning-machines, and the power-looms, of which he had heard such marvels.⁸²

⁸¹ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 134.

⁸² Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 149.

This passage gives a clear picture of the British feature of the Exhibition. The animated conversations centred around the British machinery exhibits highlight the general status attached to these displays. It becomes clear that these displays were much anticipated by tourists and occupied a prominent position. The exhibit captions do a good job of capturing the spirit of the occasion, presenting each country's victories as well as its own specialties and innovations; they mirror the event's true colour well, as they suggest what was each nation's triumph. "Young girls were waiting to see the hemispherical lamp-shades, [...] noisy flax-crushing machine, or the splashing centrifugal pump [...] clustered, endeavouring to solve the mystery of its complex operations."⁸³ The visitors are depicted as captivated by the mechanical wonders, eagerly attempting to decipher their workings. However, the use of the term "mystery" suggests that these intricate mechanisms were beyond the comprehension of the average visitor, implying a level of complexity and sophistication that rendered them inscrutable. Moreover, the glorification of the machinery section in connection with God introduces a thematic tension between attributing success to divine providence versus human ingenuity and achievement;

The machine-room alone, with its thousand iron monsters snorting and clattering, was a sight to overwhelm the mind with a positive sense of awe; stories were current of many of the strongest minds having been affected to tears at the spectacle; what with the noise and the motion, there was a sense of reverent humility forced upon the mind, together with a feeling of gratitude to the Almighty, who had vouchsafed to condescend upon us so much of his own power, that filled the bosom with the very pathos of admiration.⁸⁴

Gratitude to the "Almighty" is acknowledged, yet so is the power of human intellect, as the text references the "strongest minds," recognizing the capacity of individuals to achieve remarkable feats through human reason. This juxtaposition of religious faith and human rationality reflects a prominent theme of the nineteenth century, characterized by ongoing debates surrounding the relationship between religion and science. While the grandeur of the display undoubtedly warranted admiration and awe, the portrayal of visitors moved to tears conveys an exaggerated sense of emotion, bordering on melodrama and hyperbole.

⁸³ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 161.

⁸⁴ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 137.

The recurring theme of British pride and superiority, evident in the portrayal of the Crystal Palace as a feat only achievable by the British, is mirrored in the depictions of other nations. British characters exude a sense of pride, arrogance, and condescension, implying a hierarchical view of other nations as inferior. This attitude is particularly pronounced in the context of machinery, where the British are depicted as excelling while other nations are relegated to a position of mere admiration and envy of British achievements. Such portrayals reinforce the notion of British exceptionalism and dominance in the eyes of the characters and, by extension, the readers.

The foreigners appeared to be in no way prepared for so overpowering an example of England's immeasurable pre-eminence [...] and it was curious to see the Frenchmen and Germans grouped round the several machines in operation, with their noses almost touching the wheels, as they vainly endeavoured to make themselves acquainted with their bewildering details.⁸⁵

The story is replete with references to competition, most notably when Frenchmen and Germans are seen enviously studying the machinery up close. This artwork highlights Great Britain's perceived dominance in industrial innovation by implying that France and Germany wanted the technological achievements pioneered by the country. The term "immeasurable pre-eminence" emphasizes Britain's supremacy even more by suggesting that other countries' accomplishments are insignificant in contrast to Britain's. The concept of a competitive global landscape, with Britain positioned as the unchallenged leader, is reinforced by this picture as nations compete for technical superiority.

One prominent example of satire in the book appears in the titles given to the many illustrations that are used to support the story. It is necessary to highlight the picture "London Crammed and Manchester Deserted" (Fig. 7), which explicitly alludes to the deserted villages and the residents' struggles with a lack of different necessities. This title depicts the striking contrast between the busy metropolis and the abandoned rural countryside, offering a melancholy statement on the fallout from the large-scale migration to London for the Exhibition. Furthermore, the drawing "The Opening of the Bee-Hive" (Fig. 8) captures the passionate emotion surrounding the occasion. Here, the metaphor of a beehive alludes to the

⁸⁵ Mayhew, *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys*, 137.

busy activity that bees experience in a hive, signifying the overwhelming number of visitors and the tangible enthusiasm that permeates the Exhibition. Additionally, the title makes reference to the expected behaviour of society because the word “bee-hive” hints to the word “behave,” emphasizing the expected manners and behaviour that are considered suitable for guests. This detailed analysis of the titles mirrors topics covered in Richard Askill’s *Yorkshire Visitor’s Guide to the Great Exhibition*, whereby norms for visitor conduct are established. These rules place a strong emphasis on maintaining good personal hygiene, moving through the Crystal Palace in an orderly manner, and abstaining from unsightly actions like pushing and spitting. These analogies emphasize how individual behaviour and more general cultural conventions interact, underscoring the novel’s sophisticated critique of societal norms and expectations surrounding the Great Exhibition.

Henry Mayhew’s novel *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family* offers a humorous yet insightful portrayal of the Great Exhibition. Through the journey of the Sandboys family to London, Mayhew explores societal attitudes towards modernity, urbanization, and the Exhibition itself. The narrative humorously depicts rural scepticism towards technological innovations like the railway and satirizes the perceived significance of the Exhibition. Mayhew also delves into the public’s high expectations and subsequent disillusionment upon encountering the Crystal Palace. Additionally, themes of British pride and superiority are subtly interwoven throughout the novel. Through its blend of humour and profundity, Mayhew’s novel provides a complex commentary on Victorian society and the cultural impact of the Great Exhibition.

3. *The Houses in Between: The Innocent Eye*

They dug trenches in Hyde Park. This was one of the things that were dug up. There was a lot of it—a lot of broken china. A lot of china was broken, you know, while the exhibition was on. You could get tea there, and people were careless. When it was over and the place was cleaned up, all the broken china was buried on the spot. And that's what they turned up when they were digging the trenches on the site of the Palace of Peace. Don't you think that extraordinary?⁸⁶

The analysis now turns to Howard Spring's *The Houses in Between*, a novel that provides a rich exploration of Victorian England through the medium of a family saga, firstly published in 1951. Within this literary work, numerous facets of the era are vividly captured, offering insight into its social dynamics. Of particular interest is the narrative perspective chosen by Spring; the portrayal of the Great Exhibition unfolds through the eyes of Sarah Ashton, a young daughter of the affluent Ashton family. The employment of this narrative strategy imbues the portrayal of the grand event with a distinctive perspective, presenting it through the innocent gaze of a young girl. Through the eyes of the narrator, readers are afforded a glimpse into the Great Exhibition that is coloured by the naivety and curiosity of youth. However, interspersed within this youthful perspective are moments of retrospective reflection, as the protagonist intermittently revisits and contemplates her past experiences. This narrative structure imbues the saga with a mosaic-like quality, wherein memories are connected with present-tense narrations of past events. As a result, the novel unfolds as a tapestry of recollections, with glimpses of critical stance only when Sarah narrates as an adult. The narrative thus becomes a play of the mind of the child (not being able to critically see any of the elements of the event) and the adult who is now able to reflect on it. Central to the depiction is the social standing of the Ashton family. At the outset, it becomes evident that they occupy a position of privilege within the stratified social hierarchy of Victorian England; Robert Ashton's success as an architect affords the family a comfortable suburban living,

⁸⁶ Howard Spring, *The Houses in Between* (London: The Reprint Society, 1954), 3.

indicative of their upper-class status. This can be recognised in the scene where the family's footman, Tetley, hands Robert "a folded copy of *The Times*, and, if it were winter, wrap a bearskin rug around his knees."⁸⁷ It is interesting to note in this regard that the middle classes tended to read *Punch* magazine and other periodicals, whereas *The Times* served mostly the upper classes. The middle class's affinity for *Punch* highlights the latter's cultural relevance and appeal to this group of people; *The Times*, on the other hand, was popular with the higher classes, ensuring its place as the preferred daily for the well-off families. By this interpretation, the Ashton family's affiliation with *The Times* validates their social status within Victorian society by placing them in the company of the respectable and prosperous upper class.

Two elements of the novel are prominent from the utmost beginning; the naivety and innocence of Sarah's thoughts, and the family's status of wealth. Actually, it seems like the naiveté is even highlighted by being set in exactly this family. The Ashton family affluence is shown from the beginning, where there is a scene of Sarah getting ready for the day when they will all see the Exhibition:

It was such a glorious day. After the early showers, the May sun was shining. I knew that the rain would have left wetness all over the surfaces of the Crystal Palace and that the sun would make them sparkle. And it was my birthday, and I would be walking into the Exhibition with Papa on one side of me and Mama on the other. And the Queen would be there. I began to hop again.⁸⁸

In this context, the Great Exhibition is depicted with a heightened sense of idealism, a perspective amplified by the innocence and naivety of the child narrator. Notably, the imagery of raindrops glistening on the glass surface of the Crystal Palace is particularly striking. It conjures an almost ethereal atmosphere, akin to pearls adorning the structure. It additionally does introduce the construction of being able to accommodate the weather change; the raindrops would be equally beautiful as the sun rays, which adds to the romanticised idea of the event and its location. This evocation is highly idealised, and it is essential to acknowledge that the portrayal of the event is infused with romanticized elements. As

⁸⁷ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 9.

⁸⁸ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 5.

articulated by Auerbach, the sight of the Crystal Palace resembled a “fairy vision.”⁸⁹ Sarah’s inexplicable excitement surrounding the Great Exhibition can be contextualized within the broader societal narrative of progress and optimism prevalent during the Victorian era; this fervent anticipation may have been caused by the Exhibition’s portrayal as a sign of a bright future, a sentiment amplified by contemporary discourse extolling its transformative potential. Such exuberance likely stemmed from the collective desire to leave behind the hardships of the preceding decades, the “Hungry Forties.” Thus, the Great Exhibition emerged as a symbol of hope and renewal.

This is underscoring the romanticized perception of the Exhibition as a transcendent and magical experience, especially because the British spectators felt huge sense of pride and amazement;

We were off, and I felt all tight and breathless inside. I could not speak. I could only look about me, and because I had for so long heard so much about this wonderful day I was amazed that everything did not look different from what it did. I had heard Papa telling Mama about ‘All the nations of the earth’ having been invited and about the Prince’s wish that the Great Exhibition would bring peace on earth, goodwill to men. And in church last Sunday the preacher, too, had talked about these same things: the coming together of nations, and peace, and love.⁹⁰

Vivid sensory imagery and self-reflection indicate the narrator’s internal condition, which is one of exhilaration. Phrases like “I could not speak” and “I could only look about me” are repeated frequently, underscoring the protagonist’s helplessness in the face of such grandeur, and emphasizing how overwhelming the event was to her. The romanticized depiction of the Great Exhibition in this excerpt is rooted in the child narrator’s limited comprehension of the event’s overarching objectives. The narrative illuminates the child’s naivety and awe, underscored by their inability to fully grasp the significance of the Exhibition’s goals, as articulated by the Prince’s aspirations for peace among nations, and goodwill brought to all people. This is being highlighted at all times in the novel; the ideal state of the event’s aim, and the goodwill that the event will bring, highlighting the British superiority, acting almost like a saviour entity.

⁸⁹ Auerbach, “The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory,” 91.

⁹⁰ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 6.

The final paragraph alludes to a sense of British superiority, wherein the nation's achievements are equated with divine powers; Prince Albert and the preacher promote the same ideas, and if the preacher is a medium who articulates God's word, then in this paragraph they are on the same level; Prince's word is thus adequate to God's here. The child is, naturally, not able to distinguish between these authorities. This notion is highlighted by the reference to the preacher's sermon on the Great Exhibition, which emphasizes the event's association with lofty ideals of peace and unity. However, it is pertinent to contextualize this portrayal within the broader historical landscape. Historically, the church's stance on the Exhibition was somewhat ambivalent, with some factions expressing reservations about its promotion of worldly pleasures over spiritual pursuits. There existed a theological tension between the temporal nature of the event, and the pursuits of science, symbolized by the Exhibition, and the eternal truths of faith espoused by the church. Consequently, the excerpt reflects a romanticized idealization of societal unity, wherein the church is depicted as embracing the event's success without critical scrutiny. In essence, the excerpt presents a sanitized and idealized portrayal of the Great Exhibition, emphasizing themes of unity and celebration while downplaying any potential discord or dissent.

Subsequently, as the family advances toward the Exhibition, the narrator reminisces on her previous, somewhat nebulous expectations:

Oh, I hardly know what I expected, silly child I was: but as we sedately rolled through the shining air of that May day I should not have been surprised to see hordes of black and yellow men mingling with the white ones we knew so well, embracing and hugging and kissing, and maybe lighting their voices here and there in Christmas carols.⁹¹

The intriguing aspect of this passage lies in the narrator's apparent lack of consideration for the moral implications of the scenario described. Despite an initial moment of self-awareness denoted by the phrase "silly child I was," which hints at a recognition of their youthful naivety, the subsequent focus of the passage on racial diversity is striking. The portrayal of individuals from diverse backgrounds engaging in joyful interactions and celebrations together suggests a spirit of inclusivity present at the Exhibition. However, the narrator's surprise at the scene, particularly their astonishment at the perceived loudness and exuberance

⁹¹ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 6.

of the crowd, emphasizes their limited exposure to social diversity; this is emphasized by Sarah's reference to their familiarity only with the British class, highlighting a narrow worldview that contrasts with the scene of communal harmony presented in the passage.

This upper-class position of the family gets much more prominent with Robert, the father of the family commenting on the behaviour of the crowds:

“The crowds are very well behaved,” Papa said. “There was some fear of disturbances.” Certainly the crowds were well behaved. They gazed at us suspiciously as we drove by. But I was disappointed to see not a black or brown or yellow face among them.”⁹²

This excerpt from the novel accentuates the apprehension felt by the British regarding the potential behaviour of visitors from diverse cultures and nations, as indicated by the phrase “There was some fear of disturbances.” This sentiment resonates (just like some elements from the previous analysed novel) with the concerns expressed in Richard Askill's *Yorkshire Visitor's Guide to the Great Exhibition*, which portrays an expectation of lower-class individuals and foreigners as expected to behave poorly, even improperly. Additionally, there is a notable physical separation depicted, with the Ashton family arriving comfortably while the crowds are kept at a distance, perhaps suggesting a hierarchical view of society where the crowds are perceived as inferior. This symbolic positioning merits attention. Moreover, the passage hints at Sarah's unconscious curiosity about individuals with different skin colours, revealing her innocence as a narrator who has yet to grasp the social norms surrounding such matters.

What stands out in the narration of Sarah is the description of Crystal Palace. The spectacle seems very whimsical to her, and she connects the view of it to the natural setting around, and the weather:

We drove through a lane of men and women, and on either hand, as far as I could see, there were thousands upon thousands. Over them all now I could see the Crystal Palace rising up, flashing back the sunshine, and looking so light and airy that it would not

⁹² Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 6.

have been surprising of all the flags straining and flickering and undulating on its roof had lifted it up and flown away with it into the sky.⁹³

Sarah's depiction of the Palace employs descriptive adjectives that evoke a sense of natural beauty, such as "light and airy." This romanticized portrayal is enriched by the child's imagination, as she envisions the flags representing various nations fluttering into the sky, adding a layer of fairy-tale ambiance to the scene. Similarly, as with the previous analysed novel, the descriptions of the Palace seem to be very celebratory, and the British very justifiably feeling very proud of it.

The narrator reminisces again, now in regards of the Palace:

I never lost that feeling about the palace, not that day nor on any of the other days when I entered it later. It seemed to my childish fancy a vast celestial vehicle, a crystal sky-ship, that had come to rest lightly on the earth, and might at any moment take off again and bear us upon some unimaginable voyage.⁹⁴

The construction is pictured like an exhibit itself. The expression "never lost that feeling" alludes to a significant and enduring effect. As it presents the Palace as otherworldly and transcendent, the comparison to a "celestial vehicle" inspires amazement and wonder. Its designation as a "crystal sky-ship" accentuates this picture even more by suggesting motion and the possibility of exploration. The idea that it "might at any moment take off again" heightens the Palace's magical quality by implying a feeling of possibility or even magic.

The usage of space-related, somewhat scientific terminology, such as "celestial vehicle" and "crystal sky-ship," in describing the Crystal Palace may reflect the Victorian era's growing fascination with scientific progress. As the intellectual discourse of the period increasingly focused on scientific inquiry and technological advancement, it is plausible that the young girl's perception of the Exhibition would be influenced by these prevailing themes; in this case, it would rather mirror what the child heard the people are talking about, as her herself is not yet able to comprehend it. Thus, such description acts as a reflection of the topics of the Victorian era within society. This is further present with her description of the

⁹³ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 6.

⁹⁴ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 6.

Palace, as she likens it to a ship: “And all this was inside the great glass ship.”⁹⁵ This highlights the discourse of the era connected to ship-making factories, which was a huge part of Great Britain’s business. Additionally, the absence of any reference to religious or spiritual connotations in her description suggests a secular interpretation of the Exhibition’s significance, reflecting the broader cultural shift towards rationalism and empiricism characteristic of Victorian society. In this way, the Crystal Palace becomes a symbol of human ingenuity and progress, embodying the spirit of innovation and optimism that defined the Victorian age.

The portrayal of the Crystal Palace (in literature) often takes on a reverent and awe-inspiring tone, which is reflecting the prevailing sentiment of nostalgia and amazement associated with the Great Exhibition. Despite various critiques of the event itself, the Palace emerges as a symbol of wonder and grandeur. As Shears astutely observes, the absence of any physical remains of the Exhibition contributes to its power to amaze.⁹⁶ Unlike physical monuments or memorials, which may evoke more varied responses, the Palace exists primarily in the realm of memory (similarly in Sarah’s case), which creates a kind of mythical quality. This ethereal quality lends itself to romanticized descriptions, such as that provided by the narrator in the excerpt. The comparison of the Palace to a “celestial vehicle” and a “crystal sky-ship” conjures images of otherworldly beauty and possibility.

As the narrative progresses to the opening ceremony attended by the Ashton family, a traditional display of patriotism and religious observance unfolds. The familiar strains of “God Save the Queen” permeate the air, accompanied by the solemn invocations of the preacher over the Exhibition’s success and goodwill. However, amidst these ceremonial proceedings, Sarah’s attention is drawn to the conspicuous absence of the multicultural diversity she had anticipated. Despite the rhetoric espoused by figures of authority such as Prince Albert, the preacher, and her own father regarding the gathering of nations, Sarah’s observations reveal a dissonance between the lofty ideals articulated and the tangible reality before her:

But the more they talked about the nations of the earth the more disappointed I was not to see all the exciting foreigners I has expected. There was one who came and bowed to

⁹⁵ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 7.

⁹⁶ Shears, “Afterlives,” in *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A Sourcebook*, 219.

the Queen, and Papa said was a Chinese Mandarin making obeisance. [...] How small a representative he seemed of the black and red, the brown and yellow and gold splendour I has expected from 'all the nations of the earth.'"⁹⁷

This paragraph encapsulates Sarah's growing disillusionment with the grandiose promises of the Great Exhibition. The gap between her expectations which are based on the rhetoric of inclusivity and diversity, and the reality of the event becomes increasingly evident. The encounter with the Chinese Mandarin, portrayed as a lone figure amidst the predominantly white British crowd, serves as a symbol of the discrepancy between Sarah's imaginings and the actual diversity of the attendees. Sarah's preference for observing men of diverse origins, particularly those with different skin colours, over the exhibits themselves is a notable aspect of her experience at the Great Exhibition. Her inclination to view individuals from the Orient as spectacles underscores her fascination with the "other," reflecting a curiosity about cultures and peoples distinct from her own. However, this fascination is nuanced, revealing not only a sense of intrigue but also an expectation of a fantastic vision of the exotic.

This complexity is further elucidated through her father's approach, which emphasizes both engagement with and, to some extent, a cautious distance from individuals of other cultures:

It took us a long time to find the carriage, and I drowsed and nodded as we drove home. I was half-aware of Papa approving of everything. 'A splendid occasion.' 'The world has never seen anything like it.' 'The Prince is justified if ever man was.' 'There were no black men, no brown men, no red men,' I chanted drowsily. 'My dear child,' said Papa, 'surely you weren't expecting to see anything of the sort?' 'I expected to see all the end of the earth in peace and goodwill.' 'Well,' said Papa, 'so far as I'm concerned, the fewer foreigners we see over here the better I shall be pleased. The best guarantee of peace on earth is British trade. And that's what the Great Exhibition will promote.'⁹⁸

Sarah's disappointment upon leaving the Exhibition stands in stark contrast to her father's satisfaction. Their perspectives are diametrically opposed: while Robert Ashton finds contentment in the Exhibition, it is not for its idealistic goal of fostering unity among nations and promoting goodwill. While Sarah yearns to encounter foreigners and exotic individuals, Richard is content with their absence, indicating a lack of concern for the notion of

⁹⁷ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 8.

⁹⁸ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 8.

international brotherhood and maintaining a nationalistic distance. Instead, Robert prioritizes trade, emphasizing its significance above all else. This divergence in their viewpoints highlights broader themes of nationalism, but most importantly it represents the economic interest which cannot be dismissed from the event.

The viewpoint of the upper-class British gentleman is personified by Robert Ashton, who praises Britain for its accomplishments in commerce while ignoring the negative effects of these efforts, such as colonialism. His disregard for the effects of trade and colonial expansion highlights a pragmatic and possibly even superior position, while also reflecting the innate self-interest of British culture. This mindset is representative of larger Victorian-era themes of economic prosperity, social stratification, and British nationalism.

The family's excursion to the Exhibition serves as a juxtaposition between the adult perspective and the childish viewpoint. While Sarah, as a child, is captivated by the exotic allure of the Orient, the spectacle of the Palace, and yearns for a greater diversity of experiences, her naivety resonates with the idealistic aspirations originally associated with the event—to inspire unity and advancement. As she is then an adult and is able to reflect back on her memories, she acknowledges that the exhibits and the tours were not the main fair to her, it was the spectacle of the grandiose Palace.

Well, my nannie, who was named, believe it or not, Mercy Kite, often took me on educational tours round the exhibition, but I never liked this much. What I liked was to see the thing from the outside, with glass all glittering in the summer weather and the rows of flags at the top blowing out straight in the wind under the white clouds. However, having tea inside was always pleasant, and for some childish reason which I can't explain, the cups with the blue rings fascinated me. I thought them exquisite.⁹⁹

The stark contrast between Sarah's youthful optimism and her father's pragmatic outlook offers insight into broader societal attitudes of the time. Sarah's innocence and fascination with the exotic reflect a romanticized view of the Great Exhibition as a platform for cultural exchange and international camaraderie. In contrast, her father's indifference towards foreigners and emphasis on trade underscores the prevailing British colonial mindset, which prioritized economic interests over notions of cultural understanding and cooperation.

⁹⁹ Spring, *The Houses in Between*, 3.

This juxtaposition serves as a microcosm of Victorian society, where idealism often clashed with pragmatism, particularly in matters of imperialism and global trade. Sarah's longing for diversity and inclusivity represents a yearning for a more harmonious world, while her father's focus on trade symbolizes the utilitarian approach favoured by the British ruling class. This dynamic highlights the complexities of Victorian-era attitudes towards globalization, encapsulating both the optimism and self-interest inherent in Britain's imperial ambitions.

4. *The Siege of Krishnapur: The British Point of View*

The final chapter commences with an analysis of the historical novel *The Siege of Krishnapur*, which intricately unfolds against the backdrop of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, also recognized as the Sepoy Mutiny. The novel was firstly published in 1973. The narrative focalizes on Krishnapur, a fictitious township emblematic of India under British occupation, drawing inspiration from the real-life events transpiring in Lucknow. Within its pages, the novel deals with the themes ranging from colonial hegemony and imperialism to the collision of divergent cultures. However, rather than adopting a didactic tone, the author skilfully interweaves his critique within layers of entertainment. This literary work emerges as a sophisticated deconstruction, a whimsical farce, and an inverted comedy of manners, seamlessly transitioning from moments of gravitas to instances of biting satire. Termed by the British as the “Indian Mutiny” and alternatively hailed in India as the “First War of Independence,” Farrell’s narrative assumes a level of familiarity with the historical uprising, sparing extensive exposition on its historical context. Instead, *The Siege of Krishnapur* emerges as a contemporary interpretation of the erstwhile popular genre of the “mutiny novel”, a genre through which nineteenth century Britons sought to grapple with their colonial setbacks by transposing them into the realm of fiction. Through this lens, Farrell’s work stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of historical fiction in elucidating complex social and political phenomena and interrogating the intricacies of imperialist power dynamics.

This novel is notable for its narrative perspective, predominantly conveyed through the point of view of the British characters, with rare exceptions. Farrell’s deliberate choice to adopt this singular viewpoint serves to accentuate the inherent power dynamics of

colonialism. In relegating the Indian populace to the margins of the narrative, their voices are conspicuously absent, symbolizing their subjugation and disenfranchisement within the colonial hierarchy. Conversely, the British characters (and their points of view) are afforded ample space for expression, portraying them as oblivious, domineering, and self-aggrandizing masters of their colonial domain. Within the confines of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the portrayal of Indian individuals remains indistinct and enigmatic, relegated to the role of vague “others.” This characterization mirrors the prevailing colonial attitudes of the British protagonists, who perceive the indigenous population through a lens of cultural superiority and exoticism. Consequently, Farrell’s narrative illuminates the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in colonial relationships, wherein the colonized are rendered voiceless and marginalized, existing solely as foils to the dominant colonial narrative.

In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, a pervasive theme emerges wherein British characters exhibit a prevailing sense of intellectual and cultural superiority, and consequently perceiving Indian society as inherently inferior or antiquated when juxtaposed with their own. This attitude permeates their interactions with Indian individuals, characterized by an interplay of fascination and disdain. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in the relationship between Fleury, a young British officer, and his unnamed Indian servant; the names of the bearers shall be discussed shortly. Here, the servant serves as a symbol of colonial subjugation, facing not only suspicion but also systemic discrimination rooted in the entrenched racial hierarchies of British colonial society. The servants are not really being viewed as real people by the British. Their identity is dismissed:

Fleury groped his way to the chair and sat down. For a few moments Rayne lapsed into silence and the only sound was his rather heavy breathing. When the bearer returned with a glass of Champagne for Fleury, Rayne said loudly: ‘We call this lad „Ram.“ That’s not his real name. His real name is Akbar or Mohammed or something like that. We call him Ram because he looks like one. And this is Monkey,’ he added as another bearer came in carrying a plate of biscuits. Monkey did not raise his eyes. He had very long arms, it was true, and a rather simian appearance.¹⁰⁰

The act of renaming the servants to suit their physical appearances not only strips them of their individual identities but also reduces them to crude caricatures based on racial

¹⁰⁰ James Gordon Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 62.

stereotypes; Rayne points out that the bearer's name might have been Akbar or Mohammed, which are typically associated with Islamic regions. In this aspect, the names reflect the Muslim population in India, but also different Middle Eastern countries. This only does reflect Rayne's ignorance towards the other, almost ridiculing it. The name Akbar becomes especially symbolic, as it was a historical figure known as the greatest emperor of the Mughal dynasty in India. Additionally, the nonchalant manner in which Rayne dismisses the bearer's real name, preferring instead to assign him a name based on his own perceptions, reinforces the power dynamics inherent in British colonial rule, where the agency and dignity of Indian individuals are routinely disregarded.

The names Akbar and Mohammed carry connotations deeply rooted in Orientalist and exoticist perspectives, often symbolizing perceptions of religious and cultural inferiority vis-a-vis Western norms. Within colonial contexts, these names were emblematic of the perceived backwardness of non-Western societies, particularly when juxtaposed against the presumed superiority of British civilization. The scene depicted in the novel exemplifies this dynamic, wherein the British characters, represented by Rayne, assert their cultural dominance by imposing Westernized names upon Indian servants, thus diminishing their individual identities. Moreover, the act of likening one of the servants to an animal, in this case, a monkey, and subsequently labelling him as "Monkey," reflects a profound lack of respect and dehumanization. By reducing individuals to crude stereotypes and stripping them of their cultural heritage, the British characters reinforce colonial power dynamics and perpetuate a sense of cultural hegemony. The servants become mere caricatures, denied agency and autonomy, as their identities are subsumed under the oppressive weight of colonial attitudes.

The novel adeptly critiques colonialism without resorting to overt didacticism or polemics, presenting a nuanced examination of the imperialist mindset through various narrative elements. Central to this critique is the juxtaposition of materialism and spirituality, a recurring theme woven intricately throughout the text. The Great Exhibition of 1851 emerges as a symbolic representation of the materialist ethos, showcasing the base of technological progress and industrial advancement. This advancement, as shown in the novel, is valued even more when connected to the world of spirituality;

I had the privilege like yourself of attending the Great Exhibition which opened in our home-land six years ago almost to this very day. To wander about in that vast building

of glass, so immense that the elms it enclosed like Christmas trees, was to walk in a wonderland of beauty and of Man's ingenuity [...] But of all the many marvels it contained, there was one in the American section which made a particular impression on me because it seemed to combine so happily both the spiritual and the practical. I am referring to the Gloating Church for Seamen from Philadelphia. 'A splendid example,' agreed the Collector. 'A very happy marriage of the fact and spirit, of deed and ghost.'¹⁰¹

The greatness of the event is being recognised, and its nature of combining the elements of beauty and spirituality, too. The British recognise that there was a sense of higher purpose to some of its facets. However, as the narrative unfolds, the tide of opinion concerning the Exhibition (and thus expansionist imperialism) subtly shifts. This transformation is exemplified through the character of the Collector (here, it is interesting to acknowledge that the character gets named based on his hierarchy within the British group there, his name is otherwise Hugh Hamilton) initially portrayed as a fervent supporter of the Exhibition, and a great patriot. Yet, as the events unfold, Collector undergoes a profound change of perspective, ultimately arriving at the realization that the Exhibition, despite its grandeur and innovation, ultimately lacks a transcendent or higher purpose; the violence in Krishnapur becomes his disillusionment:

As it happened, the Collector would not have minded agreeing with the Padre about the Exhibition. He has come to entertain serious doubts about himself. He, too, suffered from an occasional enlightening vision which came to him from the dim past and which he must have suppressed at the time [...] The extraordinary array of chains and fetters, manacles and shackles exhibited by Birmingham for export to America's slave state for instance [...] Why had he not thought more about such exhibits? Well, he had never pretended that science and industry were good in themselves, of course [...] they still had to be used correctly. All the same, he should have thought a great deal more about what lay behind the exhibits.¹⁰²

Here, a character who initially embraced the ethos of progress and industrialization epitomized by the Great Exhibition, but who now grapples with profound doubts and moral qualms regarding his previous convictions.

¹⁰¹ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 56.

¹⁰² Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 331.

The mention of the Padre's scepticism about the Exhibition reflects a broader questioning of the prevailing societal attitudes towards progress and modernity. This is because Padre, the preacher who joins in order to provide spiritual guidance, calls the Exhibition 'The World's Vanity Fair.'¹⁰³ The Collector's growing disenchantment with his own convictions is palpable as he grapples with the moral quandaries stemming from the technological marvels showcased at the Exhibition. This internal conflict is mirrored by the Padre's perspective, which likens the Exhibition to Vanity Fair, drawing a direct parallel to John Bunyan's allegorical work *The Pilgrim's Progress* and its portrayal of the continual decline of spiritual enlightenment amidst worldly distractions. In taking this critical stance, the Padre diverges from the Exhibition's professed objectives, signalling a deeper examination of its ethical implications. The Collector's introspective journey unveils a nascent awareness of the darker undercurrents of industrialization, symbolized by the unsettling array of chains and fetters intended for export to America's slave states. This excerpt underlines the significance of retrospection in discerning the hidden agendas concealed beneath the surface allure of the Exhibition. Only through hindsight does the Collector come to grasp the intertwined issues of slave trade, exploitation, and moral depravity associated with the event, underscoring the complexity of its historical legacy.

An intriguing facet of the narrative that directly intersects with the Great Exhibition is the possession of numerous artifacts by the character Fleury. These items, acquired through trade and procurement, encompass a diverse range, including artworks, textiles, as well as cultural and technological artifacts. Fleury's ownership of these objects not only reflects the British fascination with exoticism but also underlines a sense of ownership and acquisition prevalent during the era. To Fleury, these artifacts symbolize notions of progress, rationalism, and the promise of the future. However, as the story unfolds and the siege intensifies, these once-prized possessions take on a new role. In a desperate turn of events, they are repurposed as cannon shot to be fired at the besieging Indian soldiers, known as sepoy, but they are also placed in mud and dried, as they are later used as protective shields from the sepoy's attacks. This transformation of cherished artifacts into instruments of war occurs as the British face dwindling ammunition supplies, compelling them to utilize whatever resources are at their disposal, including broken pieces of furniture. This poignant development underscores the stark contrast between the initial symbolism of these objects and their eventual use in the

¹⁰³ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 330.

brutal realities of conflict: “When the supply of heavy furniture, and of the more ponderous artistic object, has been exhausted, there began the rape of ‘the possessions’.”¹⁰⁴

Following this point in time, the items with high sentimental value—especially those owned by Fleury, who is in possession of a large number of artifacts from the Exhibition—start to be used:

So in the end he took to pointing at the last and most precious of ‘the possessions’ [...] tiger-skins, bookcases full of elevating and instructional volumes, embroidered samplers, teasetts of bone china, humidors and candlesticks, mounted elephants’ feet.”¹⁰⁵

This symbolic act underlines the intersection of progress and tradition, where tradition is sacrificed in favour of modernity. In this context, cherished objects of sentimental value are repurposed as instruments of violence or protection, highlighting the stark contrast between the cultural significance of these artifacts and their utilitarian function in wartime. The act of using these objects as weapons or shields reflects the primal nature of violence, transcending the boundaries of sentimentality and cultural heritage. Moreover, as the British residents of Krishnapur engage in acts of violence alongside the sepoys, their indifference towards the destruction of these artifacts emphasize the erosion of traditional values in the face of conflict and societal upheaval.

This scene holds symbolic significance, portraying the utilization of valuable artifacts—sole remnants of the Great Exhibition—as instruments of violence. Such imagery can be interpreted as emblematic of the gradual erosion of British influence and the decline of the British Empire. As these artifacts, once revered symbols of progress and cultural superiority, are repurposed for destructive ends, they serve as potent metaphors for the unravelling of colonial aspirations and the waning dominance of imperial power. Through this lens, the scene encapsulates the broader narrative of societal upheaval and the disillusionment with colonial ideology during this tumultuous period of history.

The British characters in the story are thus shown battling their own beliefs and civilisational demons. Not only are the battles external, they are internal, too. This is mostly prominent with the character of Fleury, who questions his position in India, and the moral

¹⁰⁴ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 270.

¹⁰⁵ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 271.

question of British imperialism. Fleury's character arc in *The Siege of Krishnapur* reflects the internal conflict inherent in colonial subjects amidst imperial conquest. Initially subscribing to British colonial superiority, Fleury's encounters with Indian rebels challenge his perceptions of native passivity and inferiority. This dissonance prompts a critical reassessment of colonial ideology, leading to a gradual disillusionment with British imperialism. Fleury's evolving empathy towards Indian individuals and feelings of guilt underscore the moral complexities of colonial governance. His narrative trajectory exemplifies the transformative potential of individual agency in contesting hegemonic narratives of domination. Firstly, he perceives the Indian culture as useless and primitive:

Take the Indian Court in the Crystal Palace, it was full of useless objects. There were spears, a life-sized elephant with a double hawdah, swords, umbrellas, jewels, and rich cloths. [...] In fact, the whole Exhibition was composed merely of collections of this and that, utterly without significance.¹⁰⁶

There is a strong sense of disillusionment over the Exhibition. It is described as not orderly at all, and that it lacked significance. The objects like swords, jewels and spears evoke a perception of exoticism and primitivism associated with Indian culture in the colonial imagination. The language used, particularly the phrase "merely collections of this and that," conveys a sense of disdain and condescension towards Indian material culture, reducing it to a mere spectacle for the amusement of Western audiences. This might be supported by Luckhurst, who describes the spectacle of the exhibits to have a "bazaar-like effect."¹⁰⁷ The disorder observed in the Exhibition can be interpreted as emblematic of the British colonial elite's disillusionment, challenging their predisposition towards orderliness. This chaos signifies a clash between the meticulously structured worldview of British colonial governance and the heterogeneous complexities encountered in colonial contexts.

As Fleury's disillusionment deepens, he undergoes a cognitive shift, recognizing the fallacy of inherent superiority among nations. This epiphany crystallizes when he acknowledges the fundamental egalitarianism of human existence, wherein each individual's intrinsic worth is neither elevated nor diminished by nationality; everyone

¹⁰⁶ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 93.

¹⁰⁷ Luckhurst, "The Great Exhibition of 1851," 440.

becomes equally unimportant to him:

‘Objects are useless by themselves. How pathetic they are compared with noble feelings! What a poor and limited world they reveal beside the world of the eternal soul. ‘ Fleury paused, guiltily aware that he was indulging ‘feelings’ once more. [...] I suddenly realized that it makes no difference that I was born in England and that you were born in India . . . Your ancestors have been taking an interest in just the same sort of irrelevant rubbish as mine have. Do you see what I mean?’¹⁰⁸

This rare instance of vulnerable introspection among the British colonial elite signifies a profound departure from the prevailing narrative of imperial supremacy promulgated during the nineteenth century. It underlines the notion that genuine reckonings with the complexities of colonial violence and domination are uniquely accessible to those directly implicated in colonial subjugation. Fleury’s intimate engagement with the violence perpetrated within the colonial milieu precipitates a critical re-evaluation of his ethical framework, leading to the recognition of the intrinsic parity between British and Indian individuals.

It is essential to elucidate that the interpretation of the novel primarily operates within a symbolic framework and should not be regarded as a direct substitute for historical accounts. Historical fiction, such as *The Siege of Krishnapur*, serves as a supplementary narrative to historical documentation, offering a nuanced perspective that enriches our understanding of the past. Therefore, a critical approach is often employed in the analysis of such literature, acknowledging the multiplicity of interpretations that may arise from the text. This recognition underlines the complexity inherent in historical representation and the necessity of engaging with various perspectives to attain a comprehensive understanding of historical events.

¹⁰⁸ Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 92.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to examine how the Great Exhibition of 1851 is portrayed in literature. The theoretical section establishes a framework by exploring the historical, social, and cultural contexts of the Victorian era, which inevitably influenced the exhibition itself; the event's backdrop mirrored the characteristics of the Victorian age. Victorian Britain was marked by a blend of progress, growth, and innovation alongside elements of national pride, inconsistency, and hypocrisy. The societal changes of the time were evident across various aspects of life, notably in the surge of British industrial production and the subsequent expansion of trade, accompanied by shifts in labour class dynamics. Urbanization became pronounced, particularly in London, owing to the abundance of job opportunities, entertainment, and intellectual exchange in cities. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and significant urban growth in the nineteenth century, mechanization thrived, supplanting small-scale workshops with large industrial factories. Consequently, Great Britain ascended as a global empire with colonies worldwide, amassing considerable wealth that fuelled ongoing trade cycles. This prosperity facilitated the development of improved urban infrastructure and cultural endeavours; the World Exhibition emerged as a testament to Britain's affluence, ultimately revealing itself as a commercial venture. Despite notable advancements, the Victorian era was marred by injustices. The industrial boom fostered confusion and alienation among social classes. Religious shifts, characteristic of the

nineteenth century, saw people turning away from traditional faith towards human rationality and capability. Disparities in living conditions exacerbated class divisions, with affluent classes prospering while the impoverished struggled, widening the socioeconomic gap. Poverty persisted in slums and rural areas untouched by progress, plagued by limited employment opportunities. The Victorian era was a time of contrasts, defying simple characterization as wholly positive or negative. This thesis underlines the theme of British arrogance prevalent in the nineteenth century.

The practical part of the thesis, analysing literary depictions of the World Exhibition, portrays the British as looking down upon other nations present at the exhibition. with a focus on Henry Mayhew's novel *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family*. Mayhew's work presents a multifaceted portrayal of the event, blending humor with insightful commentary. The narrative follows the Sandboys family from rural Cumberland to London for the Exhibition, offering a lens through which to explore societal attitudes toward modernity and urbanization. The novel begins with humorous depictions of the family's nervousness about traveling to London, reflecting broader rural scepticism toward urban life and technological innovations like the railway. Upon arrival in the bustling metropolis, the family encounters congested streets and struggles to find lodging, highlighting the challenges of urbanization in Victorian Britain. Inside the Exhibition, the narrative shifts to a more serious tone, exploring visitors' reactions to the Crystal Palace and British machinery exhibits. Mayhew satirizes British pride and superiority, portraying other nations as envious of British achievements. The novel also critiques societal norms and expectations surrounding the Exhibition, examining themes of high expectations and subsequent disillusionment. *The Houses in Between* by Howard Spring provides a nuanced exploration of Victorian England through the innocent eyes of Sarah Ashton. The novel intricately weaves together Sarah's youthful perspective with moments of retrospective contemplation, offering a multifaceted portrayal of societal dynamics during the era. Particularly noteworthy is the juxtaposition between Sarah's idealistic anticipation of the Great Exhibition and the stark reality she encounters. While Sarah eagerly anticipates a diverse and harmonious gathering of nations, her experiences at the Exhibition reveal a picture marked by limited diversity and her father's pragmatic outlook. This dissonance reflects broader Victorian attitudes towards globalization, encapsulating both the idealism of unity and the pragmatism of economic interests. Through Sarah's journey, the novel delves into the complexities of Victorian society, where aspirations for progress often collided with the realities of colonialism and class divisions. *The Siege of*

Krishnapur by J.G. Farrell offers a sophisticated critique of British colonialism during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, presenting an examination of the imperialist mindset through various narrative elements. The novel interweaves historical events with fictional storytelling, exploring themes of colonial hegemony, cultural clashes, and the erosion of traditional values in the face of conflict. Through the lens of characters like Fleury and the Collector, the narrative exposes the internal struggles and moral complexities inherent in colonial governance, ultimately challenging prevailing notions of British superiority. The novel's portrayal of power dynamics is particularly notable, as it predominantly presents the British perspective while relegating Indian voices to the margins. This deliberate narrative choice underscores the inherent asymmetry of colonial relationships, where the colonized are rendered voiceless and marginalized, existing solely as foils to the dominant colonial narrative. Moreover, the characterization of Indian individuals as enigmatic "others" reflects prevailing colonial attitudes of cultural superiority and exoticism. A central theme that emerges is the collision of progress and tradition, symbolized by the artifacts from the Great Exhibition repurposed as instruments of war. This transformation highlights the complexities of colonialism, where cherished symbols of progress are subverted by the brutal realities of conflict, signalling the erosion of British influence and the decline of imperial power.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 stands as a significant milestone in the nineteenth century representing a pinnacle of progressivism in various facets. Originating from British aspirations to foster international harmony and stimulate commerce through open trade, the Exhibition aimed to showcase the advancements of the era. However, its unveiling also brought forth a host of contentious issues, including the perpetuation of stereotypes against other nations, the insularity of British perspectives, and the complex dynamics of colonialism, particularly evident in the selection of exhibits from India. While acknowledging the grandeur and significance of the event, it is imperative to adopt a critical stance that transcends its romanticized portrayal. The Great Exhibition's idealized vision must be scrutinized in light of its inherent biases and limitations. This necessitates a nuanced examination that acknowledges both its achievements and shortcomings, avoiding the temptation to singularly glorify its legacy.

In conclusion, while the Great Exhibition merits admiration for its contributions to progress and international cooperation, a critical approach is essential to discern its broader implications. By interrogating its narratives and engaging with diverse perspectives, the event itself offers a comprehensive understanding of its historical significance and enduring legacy.

Resumé

Tato práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat, jak je Velká výstava z roku 1851 zobrazována v literárních dílech. Teoretická část představuje rámec historických, sociálních a kulturních souvislostí viktoriánské éry, které nevyhnutelně ovlivnily samotnou výstavu; pozadí události odráželo charakteristiky viktoriánské doby a naopak. Viktoriánská Británie se vyznačovala směsí pokroku, růstu a inovace spolu s prvky silné národní hrdosti a pokrytectví. Společenské změny byly zřejmé v různých aspektech života, zejména v nárůstu britské průmyslové výroby a následné expanzi obchodu, doprovázené posuny v dynamice zejména dělnické třídy. Urbanizace se projevila hlavně v Londýně díky množství pracovních příležitostí, zábavy a intelektuálního pokroku ve městech. S příchodem průmyslové revoluce a významným růstem měst v devatenáctém století se rozmohla mechanizace, která nahradila malé lokální dílny velkými průmyslovými továrnami. V důsledku toho Velká Británie vystoupila jako globální impérium s koloniemi po celém světě a shromáždila značné bohatství. Tato prosperita usnadnila rozvoj městské infrastruktury a kulturních iniciativ; Světová výstava slouží jako svědectví o prosperitě Británie, ačkoliv se v závěru ukázala být silně komerční. Navzdory všudypřítomného pokroku byla viktoriánská éra nekonzistentní. Průmyslový vzestup podpořil násilí na rušných městských ulicích, též krádeže a vzestup šíření nemocí. Náboženské posuny, charakteristické pro devatenácté století, vedly k tomu, že se lidé odvraceli od tradiční víry k

lidské racionalitě a schopnostem. Rozdíly v životních podmínkách prohloubily vnímání sociálních vrstev, přičemž zámožné třídy prosperovaly, zatímco chudí bojovali o své zdraví či stravu, čímž se prohlubovala socioekonomická propast; chudoba přetrvávala ve slumech a venkovských oblastech nedotčených pokrokem, sužovaných omezenými pracovními příležitostmi. Viktoriánská éra byla dobou kontrastů a nelze ji charakterizovat jako čistě pozitivní epochu.

Praktická část této práce, analyzující literární vyobrazení Světové výstavy, zobrazuje Brity jako pohlížející na ostatní národy přítomné na výstavě. Prvním analyzovaným dílem je román Henryho Mayhewa *1851: or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Cursty Sandboys and Family*. Mayhewovo dílo představuje mnohostranné zobrazení události, mísící humor s bystrými komentáři na sociální původ rodiny. Příběh sleduje rodinu Sandboys z venkova při jejich výpravě do Londýna na výstavu a nabízí optiku, kterou lze prozkoumat společenské postoje k modernitě a urbanizaci. Román začíná vtipnými líčeními nervozity rodiny z cestování do Londýna, což odráží širší venkovskou skepsi vůči městskému životu a technologickým inovacím. Po příjezdu do rušné metropole se rodina setká s ucpanými ulicemi a snaží se najít ubytování, což upozorňuje na problematiku urbanizace ve viktoriánské Británii. Mayhew hyperbolickými popisy satirizuje britskou hrdost a nadřazenost a vykresluje jiné národy jako závidící britským úspěchům. Román také kritizuje společenské normy a očekávání kolem výstavy, zkoumá témata vysokých očekávání a následné deziluze. *The Houses in Between* od Howarda Springa poskytuje průzkum viktoriánské Anglie nevinným očima Sarah Ashtonové. Román propojuje její mladistvý pohled s momenty retrospektivního rozjímání a nabízí tak mnohostranné zobrazení společenské dynamiky spojené s výstavou, kam se její rodina vydává. Zvláště pozoruhodné je srovnání mezi jejím idealistickým očekáváním od Velké výstavy a tvrdou realitou, se kterou se setkává. Zatímco Sarah dychtivě očekává rozmanité a harmonické setkání národů, její zkušenosti na výstavě odhalují obraz poznamenaný omezenou rozmanitostí a pragmatickým pohledem jejího otce, který by na výstavě nejráději žádné jiné národy a národnosti neviděl. Tato disonance odráží širší viktoriánské postoje ke globalizaci, zapouzdřující jak idealismus jednoty, tak pragmatismus ekonomických zájmů. *The Siege of Krishnapur* od J.G. Farrella nabízí sofistickou kritiku britského kolonialismu během indického povstání v roce 1857 a představuje zkoumání imperialistického myšlení prostřednictvím různých narativních prvků. V románu se prolínají historické události s fiktivním vyprávěním. Román zkoumá témata koloniální hegemonie, kulturních střetů a eroze tradičních hodnot zapříčiněnou bezprostřední blízkostí konfliktu.

Skrze optiku postav, jako je Fleury a Collector, vyprávění odhaluje vnitřní boje a morální složitosti, které jsou vlastní koloniální správě, a nakonec zpochybňuje převládající představy o britské nadřazenosti. Obzvláště pozoruhodné je v tomto románu zobrazení dynamiky moci, protože představuje převážně britskou perspektivu a zároveň odsouvá indické hlasy na okraj. Tato promyšlená narativní volba podtrhuje inherentní asymetrii koloniálních vztahů, kde jsou kolonizovaní marginalizováni. Navíc charakterizace indických jedinců jako záhadných „jiných“ odráží převládající koloniální postoje kulturní nadřazenosti a exotiky. Ústředním tématem, které se objevuje, je střet pokroku a tradice, symbolizovaný artefakty z Velké výstavy přeměněnými na válečné nástroje. Tato transformace podtrhuje složitost kolonialismu, kde jsou uctívané symboly pokroku rozvráceny brutální realitou konfliktu, což signalizuje erozi britského vlivu a úpadek imperiální moci.

Velká výstava z roku 1851 představuje významný milník devatenáctého století, který představuje vrchol progresivismu v nejrůznějších aspektech. Výstava, která vychází z britských aspirací na podporu mezinárodní harmonie a stimulace obchodu prostřednictvím otevřeného obchodu, měla za cíl předvést pokroky éry. Akce samotná však přinesla řadu sporných problémů, včetně udržování stereotypů vůči jiným národům, ostrovtipu britských perspektiv a komplexní dynamiky kolonialismu, zvláště patrné ve výběru exponátů z Indie a podobně. Ačkoliv je na místě uznat a uctívat vznešenost a význam události, je nezbytné zaujmout kritický postoj, který přesahuje její romantizované zobrazení; idealizovaná vize Velké výstavy musí být prozkoumána ve světle jejích přirozených předsudků a omezení. Závěrem lze tvrdit, že i když si Velká výstava zaslouží obdiv za své příspěvky k pokroku a mezinárodní spolupráci, je nezbytný kritický přístup, aby bylo možné rozeznat její širší důsledky. Pouze zkoumáním různých náhledů na akci samotnou a jaké měla přesahy lze dosáhnout komplexního pochopení, a porozumět tak jejímu historickému významu a trvalého odkazu.

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