ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

04

MACHINES, MORALITY, AND MODERNITY: RUSKIN AND CARLYLE'S CRITIQUES OF INDUSTRIALIZATION IN THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT EXHIBITION (1851)

Priyanshu Shivhare
B.Ed, RIE NCERT Bhopal, MP,
PG in English Literature, IEHE Bhopal, MP, India

Abstract

This essay critically compares John Ruskin's and Thomas Carlyle's responses to industrialization, focusing on their views of the 1851 Great Exhibition. Celebrated as a display of technological progress and imperial power, the Exhibition symbolizes crisis for both thinkers. Ruskin, influenced by Gothic revivalism and moral economy, critiques the dehumanization of labor, commercialization of art, and environmental destruction caused by industrialization. His focus is on the value of craftsmanship and the moral purpose of art. Carlyle, rooted in Calvinist thought, sees industrialization as a sign of religious decline, referring to it as the "Mechanic Age." For Carlyle, spiritual renewal, not economic reform, is the solution to the crisis. Both critics engage with Victorian debates on progress, labor alienation, and unregulated capitalism, offering insights into cultural criticism that remain relevant in addressing the ethical challenges of today's technological age and digital capitalism.

Keywords

John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, Industrialization, Great Exhibition, Victorian criticism, Aesthetics, labor, Capitalism, Mechanization, Cultural anxiety, Moral economy, Spiritual crisis, etc.

Full Article

1. Introduction:

The Great Exhibition of 1851, housed in the Crystal Palace, was a landmark in Britain's industrial and imperial self-image. Celebrated as a triumph of human progress, it showcased over 100,000 objects from across the globe, symbolizing technological advancement and imperial strength. For many Victorians, the Exhibition was proof of national superiority, prosperity, and moral progress. Yet beneath the spectacle, critical voices like John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle viewed it as a symptom of deeper cultural decay. To them, the Exhibition celebrated mechanization over meaning, quantity over quality, and profit over human value. Both thinkers saw industrial modernity not as inevitable progress but as moral and spiritual decline, leading society away from craftsmanship, ethical labor, and human connection.

This essay explores Ruskin and Carlyle's critiques of industrialization, especially their responses to the Great Exhibition. It highlights how their essays, sermons, and treatises expose the ethical and aesthetic costs of unchecked materialism. Their works reject the era's blind faith in economic growth and offer alternative visions rooted in conscience, creativity, and human dignity. Their concerns remain strikingly relevant today, reminding us that technological and economic advancement, without ethical purpose, leads to cultural and spiritual impoverishment.

2. Industrialization and the Great Exhibition: A Contextual Overview:

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

The mid-nineteenth century in Britain was marked by significant change due to industrialization, which reshaped social, economic, and cultural landscapes. Steam power, mechanized manufacturing, and urbanization redefined human labor and spatial experience.

2.1. The Crystal Palace as Symbol: Industrialism Materialized:

The Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton, was an iconic structure made of iron and glass, symbolizing industrial ideals such as transparency, precision, and speed. However, critics like Carlyle and Ruskin saw it as a symbol of cultural loss. Carlyle's works such as *Signs of the Times* and *Past and Present* lamented the era's obsession with machinery, which reduced human life to mechanical processes. Ruskin criticized the Palace's functionality and uniformity, viewing it as a soulless product of industrialism that stripped architecture of beauty and moral purpose.

2.2. The Great Exhibition as Ideological Performance:

The Great Exhibition was not just an economic event but a staged ideological performance that displayed British technological supremacy. It celebrated progress but ignored the human costs of mechanized production, such as child labor and exploitation. Carlyle's critique of Britain's spiritual poverty and moral disorientation beneath its material wealth is evident here. The Exhibition presented an image of progress, masking class conflict and colonial exploitation.

2.3. The Aesthetic-Moral Divide: Artisanship vs. Mechanization:

Ruskin and Carlyle both argued that aesthetics are not neutral; they are deeply connected to moral and spiritual values. Ruskin contrasted hand-crafted Gothic architecture with the industrial design of the Crystal Palace, mourning the loss of human expression. Carlyle, in *Past and Present*, lamented the loss of individuality in labor, comparing medieval work to the mechanized labor of industrial society. Both saw mechanization as disruptive to natural community and divine order.

2.4. Labor, Alienation, and the Myth of Progress:

While the Exhibition celebrated labor-saving machines, critics like Ruskin and Carlyle questioned the nature of work and life in an industrial society. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* proposed a moral economy where labor was not exploitative but ennobling. Carlyle's critique of the "Cash Nexus" highlighted how industrial capitalism commodified human relations, eroding traditional values and the sacred virtue of work.

3. Thomas Carlyle: Morality, Mechanization, and the Gospel of Work:

Thomas Carlyle was one of the sharpest critics of Victorian industrial modernity. He believed that mechanization not only reshaped labor but also drained human life of spiritual depth. For Carlyle, machines represented more than steam engines and factories; they symbolized a mechanized worldview where life became predictable and soulless.

In Signs of the Times, he warned: *"We have machines for everything, except for the making of men."* His writing emphasized that the age's obsession with efficiency was causing spiritual paralysis.

In Past and Present (1843), Carlyle offered a solution: the Gospel of Work. He believed meaningful labor was sacred and essential for self-realization. Abbot Samson, a medieval figure, embodied this ideal, representing the dignity and moral power of honest work.

Carlyle proposed that industrial leaders, whom he called Captains of Industry, should act not just as profit-seekers but as moral guides responsible for workers' well-being. He imagined a new aristocracy—one built on talent, character, and ethical leadership rather than birthright.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

Finally, Carlyle's writing style itself resisted industrial uniformity: his prophetic, passionate, and metaphor-laden prose stood as a literary rebellion against the cold rationality of the machine age.

4. John Ruskin: Art, Ethics, and the Discontents of Industrial Modernity:
John Ruskin, an influential art critic, moralist, and social thinker, was one of the strongest voices against the visual and ethical degradation brought by industrial capitalism. Unlike Carlyle's critique of mechanization, Ruskin framed his arguments around aesthetics, ethics, and the human spirit. For him, true art was never just decorative but always a moral expression. His rejection of the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition symbolized his deeper criticism of a system that sacrificed human creativity for mass production and profit.

4.1. The Gothic Ideal and the Death of the Craftsman:
In *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853), Ruskin argued that Gothic architecture represented the highest moral and artistic achievement of humankind. He admired its imperfections and individualism, which reflected the personal investment and freedom of the worker. "You must either make a tool of the creature or a man of him" — *The Nature of Gothic*. Industrialization, he believed, reduced laborers to machines, stripping their work of dignity and their lives of meaning. Unlike the uniform products of factories, Gothic craftsmanship embodied the laborer's imagination, emotions, and individuality.

4.2. Ethical Economy and the Question of Value:
In *Unto This Last* (1860), Ruskin directly challenged the economic theories of his time. He argued that economics could not be separated from ethics. True wealth, he claimed, was not measured by accumulation but by life-enriching conditions. "There is no wealth but life" — *Unto This Last*. Ruskin exposed the ethical failure of industrial capitalism, introducing the term "illth" to describe the social and moral damage caused by unethical production, resource exploitation, and worker alienation. For him, economic systems must prioritize human well-being, not just profit.

4.3. Moral Aesthetics: Art as Ethical Instruction:
Ruskin believed art had the power to elevate society's moral consciousness. In *Modern Painters* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), he emphasized that beauty must align with truth, justice, and spiritual integrity. "Fine art is that in which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together" — *The Two Paths* (1859). To Ruskin, industrial aesthetics, which celebrated utility and uniformity, were symptomatic of moral decay. True art required human emotion, thought, and ethical commitment—a vision deeply opposed to the industrial age's soulless production systems.

5. Comparative Dimensions: Convergences and Contrasts:
John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle stand as major critics of Victorian industrial modernity, each highlighting the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual damage caused by mechanization and capitalism. Despite their different styles, both shared concerns over the ethical shortcomings of utilitarianism, spiritual emptiness, and the alienation of labor.

5.1 Convergences: Victorian Common Concerns: *Critique of Utilitarianism and Economic Reductionism* -Both Ruskin and Carlyle rejected 19th-century utilitarian thought, which reduced human life to calculations of profit and pleasure. Carlyle criticized this in *Signs of the Times* and *Chartism*, attacking the "Cash Nexus" that replaced human affection with economic exchange. "Love not Pleasure; love God. This is the Everlasting Yea" — *Sartor Resartus*. Similarly, Ruskin in *Unto This Last* condemned the separation of ethics from economics: "The true science of political economy is the science which teaches nations to want and work for

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

the things that lead to life." Both believed labor, leadership, and commerce should serve human dignity, not just profit.

5.2. Diagnosis of a Spiritual Crisis:
Both thinkers believed that mechanization didn't just alter the economy but eroded the soul of society. Carlyle described this era as the "Everlasting No"—a world of spiritual fatigue and skepticism. Ruskin, too, saw industrialization as a moral decline rather than progress.

5.3. Alienation and the Degradation of Labor:
Carlyle and Ruskin were deeply concerned with the worker's loss of connection to meaningful labor. Carlyle, in *Past and Present*, mourned the absence of moral leadership for the working class. Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice*, lamented how mechanized production robbed artisans of creative expression and purpose.

5.4. Contrasts: Diverging Philosophies and Rhetorical Strategies:
Despite common concerns, their solutions diverged. Carlyle's approach was theological and prophetic, favoring moral heroes and spiritual revival. Ruskin's was ethical and artistic, arguing for beauty, justice, and ethical reform in both art and society.

5.5. Attitude toward Authority and Leadership:
Carlyle imagined a world led by "Captains of Industry"—heroic leaders guiding society. He distrusted democracy and sought spiritual authority. Ruskin, more egalitarian, advocated for worker education and ethical cooperation, later founding the Guild of St. George to promote these values.

5.6. Stylistic and Rhetorical Modes:
Carlyle's writing was symbolic and urgent, designed to awaken readers through powerful images and moral binaries. Ruskin's style was more measured, combining moral critique with artistic observation and a call for thoughtful reform.

5.7 Legacy and Contemporary Relevance:
Both thinkers remain influential in modern discussions on technology, work, and capitalism. Ruskin's legacy lives on in the Arts and Crafts Movement, environmental thought, and critiques of consumerism. Carlyle's warnings about spiritual emptiness continue to resonate, although his flirtation with authoritarian ideas remains controversial. Together, Ruskin and Carlyle offer complementary visions in the Victorian struggle to humanize modernity—challenging us to rethink progress, work, and life itself.

Divergences: Philosophical and Rhetorical Styles:

Aspect	Carlyle	Ruskin
Style	Prophetic, declamatory, masculine	Poetic, moralizing, melancholic
Influences	Calvinism, Romanticism, medievalism	Romanticism, aestheticism, Christian socialism
Solution	Return to hierarchy, moral leadership	Restoration of beauty, ethics, and craft
Role of the Worker	Spiritual obedience, guided labor	Free, imaginative, self-expressive labor

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

5.8. Gender, Morality, and Authority: Subtextual Readings:
Although neither Ruskin nor Carlyle directly theorized gender in contemporary feminist language, their attacks on industrialism are nonetheless informed by strongly gendered notions of morality, authority, and social order. These gendered subtexts structure their visions of crisis and redemption in the modern world.

6. Carlyle's Patriarchal Order and Masculinist Morality:
Carlyle's social vision revolves around martial virtue, paternal authority, and heroic manhood. He believed society should be led by morally upright, spiritually strong "Captains of Industry," who act as patriarchal guides for the disoriented masses. In *Past and Present*, he praises feudal loyalty and manly strength as cures for the moral decay caused by industrial capitalism. "Obedience is our universal duty and destiny" — *Past and Present*. Carlyle's model leaves little room for equality, instead promoting a hierarchy where masculine traits—strength, discipline, and productivity—represent order, while chaos and moral weakness are feminized threats. His rejection of "softness" and his emphasis on willpower reflect anxieties about a society softened by industrial ease. In his rhetoric, the strong male leader emerges as the necessary savior of a passive, feminized world.

7. Ruskin's Gendered Aesthetics: Restoration of the Feminine:
Ruskin's ideas, though shaped by Victorian gender norms, offered a softer counter to industrial capitalism's harshness. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), he framed gender roles as complementary: men shaped the external world, while women nurtured its moral and spiritual core. While still rooted in patriarchy, Ruskin celebrated feminine virtues—care, gentleness, and aesthetic sensitivity—as vital to healing the social damage caused by mechanization. His critique of industrialism mourned the loss of tenderness and beauty under the masculine drive for speed, profit, and control. Through his support for domestic craftsmanship and maternal labor, Ruskin imagined a world rebalanced by feminine values, even as it remained structured by traditional gender boundaries.

8. Moral Authority and Gendered Redemption:
In spite of these variations, both philosophers demand moral regeneration based on implicitly gendered ideals: Carlyle as heroic paternalism, Ruskin as maternal solicitude and aesthetic sensibility. Neither completely avoids the gender ideals of their epoch, but both provide systems where morality must direct production, and power must derive from inner excellence, not mere mechanical effectiveness.

9. Legacy and Relevance in Contemporary Discourse:
Far from being dinosaurs of the past, Carlyle and Ruskin's criticisms of industrial modernity are startlingly prescient in the post-industrial and digital era. Their observations regarding labor, value, and society's soul still reverberate in arguments concerning technology, ethics, and culture.

10. Post-Exhibition Reflection and Influence:
Both philosophers had a profound influence on a staggering array of intellectual, political, and aesthetic developments around the world.

- **Ruskin's Impact:**
  William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement took Ruskin's enshrinement of craftsmanship, moral beauty, and anti-industrial aesthetics straight off. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi, who viewed it as a deeply spiritual book. It prompted him to adopt non-industrial economics, self-sufficient village-based production, and honest work.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

Green and Slow Movements adopt Ruskin's perception of harmony with nature, honor towards beauty, and condemnation of industrial speed.

- **Carlyle's Influence:**
Carlyle's focus on spiritual work and heroic leadership influenced Victorian social thought, British imperial ideology, and even early corporate paternalism. His more dubious legacy involves influence on authoritarian ideologies, as in the misappropriation of his ideas by subsequent nationalist thinkers. However, his criticism of mechanization and bureaucratic soullessness remains relevant in criticisms of corporate capitalism, alienated labor, and technocracy.

10.1 Anticipations of Contemporary Crises:
Their criticisms are not just in the past. In the 21st century, most of the fundamental fears they spoke against have come back with added urgency:

- **Automation and Alienation of Labor:**
As Carlyle and Ruskin feared mechanized labor, contemporary societies are confronted with job loss from AI and robots. The destruction of meaningful work resonates with their concern about spiritual disconnection.

- **Techno-optimism versus Humanistic Ethics:**
Carlyle's distrust of mechanical determinism and Ruskin's advocacy of beauty and soul are echoed today in criticisms of Silicon Valley's transhumanist and data-reductionist ethic.

- **Quantification of Value:**
Amidst the metric-driven world, algorithms, and profit margins, Ruskin's insistence that *"There is no wealth but life"* seems like a radical manifesto.

- **Surveillance Capitalism and Digital Monotony:**
Carlyle's "mechanical age" now bears the face of data extraction, algorithmic control, and platform labor, where human agency is framed by systems as invisible—and impersonal—as the factory was in the 1850s.

10.2 Enduring Moral Vision:
What is still compelling about both thinkers is not merely their critique, but their appeal to moral imagination. They challenge us to ask ourselves again: *What kind of work dignifies the human soul? What is the place of art, beauty, and spiritual nurture in public life? Can technological advancement support and sustain life, or does it risk rendering it obsolete?* In these questions, Ruskin and Carlyle are not reactionaries, but visionaries—providing resources for a humanistic critique of modernity that remains incomplete.

11. Conclusion: Remaking Modernity:
John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle did not just oppose industrialism; they provided profound alternatives that were rooted in moral vision, aesthetic value, and dignified labor. For them, the Great Exhibition was a world bewitched by machinery but blind to the loss of soul, community, and purpose. While Carlyle lamented the moral hollowness of the age and demanded spiritual leadership, Ruskin lamented the loss of beauty and the soul of the craftsman in a mass production world. Both perceived industrialism as not being progress, but a crisis of meaning. Their criticisms ring especially strongly today—in an age dominated by AI, automation, and hyper-efficiency.
They lead us to question:
What is progress without intention?

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

What is wealth if it robs us of awe?
What happens to humanity in an age of machines?
In posing these questions, Ruskin and Carlyle become not only commentators of their age, but living companions to ours.

References

- Auerbach, Jeffrey A. *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*. Yale University Press, 1999. Google Books, books.google.com/books/about/The_Great_Exhibition_of_1851.html?id=19wY8iof5ywC.
- Brake, Laurel. *Print in Transition, 1850–1910: Studies in Media and Book History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.
- Carlyle, Thomas. "Signs of the Times." *Edinburgh Review, vol. 49, 1829, pp. 439–459.Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/1140/1140-h/1140-h.htm.
- ---. *Past and Present*. Chapman and Hall, 1843. *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/26159/26159-h/26159-h.htm.
- MacKenzie, John M. *The Victorian Vision: Inventing New Britain*. V&A Publications, 2001.
- Plotz, John. *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics*. University of California Press, 2000. Google Books, books.google.com/books/ about/The_Crowd.html? id=S9Pee_BeipcC.
- Ruskin, John. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Smith, Elder, and Co., 1849.
- ---. *The Stones of Venice*. 3 vols., Smith, Elder, and Co., 1851–1853. *The Morgan Library & Museum*, www.themorgan.org/printed-books/312373.
- ---. *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*. Smith,Elder, 1862. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, search.library.wisc.edu/catalog /991003 8276902121/cite.

Article Received: 09/04/2025
Article Accepted: 22/04/2025
Published Online: 25/06/2025

To Cite the Article: Shivhare, Priyanshu. "Machie, Morality and Modernity: Ruskin and Carlyle's Critiques of Industrialization in the Shadow of the Great Exhibition (1851)" *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.- VI, Issue- 1, June, 2025, 30-36. www.literarycognizance.com