

Victorianism versus modernism

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Victorianism is about how the individual could improve the society. They believed that a good individual could make the society better as a whole and therefore improve life. Victorians focused on science and the desire for extremely realistic portrayal of life in both literature and art. Some aspects of Victorian thinking were retained while others were discarded in a new movement called Modernism.

Modernists focus on the individual but have the view that humans are beings without free will and that they do not look for guidance within them, but instead are driven by factors outside of them. According to Modernist thinking, an individual is molded by the external factors that surround him. Therefore the way the society already is will affect the individual and Modernism tries to portray the effects of this. Each style captures something about the individual in the society. As mentioned above, Victorianism and Modernism both focus on the individual and the society.

An example of this from a Victorian perspective is, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, written by Robert Louis Stevenson. This novel zooms in on the view of the morality in people and society, incorporating science as well. Both of these aspects were vital to Victorian thinking. Victorian period began during the reign of Queen Victoria, which lasted between 1837-1901. During this period the sciences went through a major revival. Both of these ideals are demonstrated in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. This novel accurately captures the ideals and behaviors occurring at the time with extreme detail and realism. "A certain sinister block of building thrust forward its gable on the street. It was two stories high; showed no window, nothing but a door... The door, which was equipped

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with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and distained” (2). Victorianism’s desire for the utmost detail on even the most routine things was demonstrated in most novels during the period.

The extreme realism creates a better picture of society and how things are occurring during the lives of the individuals living then. The notion of morality and science were also in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. This is a story of a respected doctor’s attempt to separate the two different aspects of human nature, good and bad. Dr. Jekyll who is depicted as a moral and decent gentleman, who participates in charity work and has the reputation of being a courteous doctor, personifies the good aspect.

His experiment is to try to purify his good-natured self from his “ wild and depraved” side. His experiment goes awry instead Jekyll liberates his primal, deprave and criminal side taking the name of Mr. Hyde. Hyde is a “ troglodyte,” a primitive creature who acts on instinct instead of conscious and moral decisions. His reputation as an animal grows as he commits crime after crime. Hyde takes his immorality to the limit. He is the complete opposite of Jekyll. The scene when Hyde takes the potion to transform him back to Jekyll, “ He put the glass to his lips, and drank at one gulp.

A cry followed; he reeled, staggered, clutched at the table and held on, staring with injected eyes, gasping with open mouth; and as I looked there came, I thought, a change—he seemed to swell—his face became suddenly black and the features seemed to melt and alter—and at the next moment ... pale and shaken, and half fainting, and groping before him with his hands, like a man restored from death—there stood Henry Jekyll! ” (40). (Stevenson)

This scene demonstrates that alchemy and science were heavily pursued during this time. Science was on the rise again during this period and Dr.

Jekyll was testing everything that science could do for the society and through his testing and experimenting Jekyll changes to Hyde who is the bane of society. His scientific experiment helps show society that one bad individual could alter the "good life" of society. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde showed people that being a good person is the best thing to do for society and for the individual. The reason Jekyll is a good example to show the Victorian qualities of science exploration and the effects the individual has on the world is explained by Masao, "In this society of respectables Dr.

Jekyll stands out as "the very pink of the proprieties"(Chap. 1). Although his studies, like those of Faust and Frankenstein before him, tend toward "the mystic and the transcendental" (Ch. 10), he still manages to maintain a considerable scientific reputation. And yet, despite Jekyll's social role-in fact, because of it-it is Jekyll who brings forth Mr. Hyde. " (Masao 470-480) Masao explains why Jekyll underwent his transformation and how science heavily influenced his thinking to try this experiment. Masao also explains that science is possible through the well-mannered people of the time and their questioning of ways to improve society.

The Modernism Period was about the individual and that the individual could not really change society. The Modernist literary period was marked by the reactions and sentiments towards global change and tragedy. The Modernist movement began around 1890 and lasted to 1945. Now during this time the World Wars wreaked havoc on the most culturally, technological, and

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industrialized parts of the world; which caused people to want to create order out chaos, or just to lose hope or alienate themselves which gave rise to Existentialism.

With the creation of Modernism, came Magical Realism, Existentialism, and a break against the traditional styles of the past. One Modernist writer who accomplished all of the criteria for Modernism is Franz Kafka. Kafka, who was a very troubled man during his lifetime, clearly showed the affect his life had influenced him in his writing. Kafka was severely depressed at times and would express his feelings in certain stories of his such as In the Penal Colony and TheMetamorphosis. Kafka would make his characters suffer his torment in a fantasy, magical realism way.

He would invent new places and put nohappinessor positive emotion in them. He would make his work reflect his depressive state of mind. Many writers would explore traumatic or negative situations because during this time period that's all there was. War heavily influenced the Modernist movement. Another story of Kafka, Metamorphosis shows how constantly living in a depressive state or war torn area can affect the people in those areas. In Kafka's Metamorphosis, he introduces the main character Gregor Samsa as, " a commercial traveler" (89).

Samsa is also described to be a hard worker who works his shift to pay back the debt his parents incurred. Before Gregor is transfigured, he is the primary breadwinner for hisfamilywho just accepts his duty and will do his best to fulfill it. After his transfiguration, he again doesn't even question why, how it happened, or how he can fix his predicament he has awoken to. He goes on trying to make life the best it can be. The opening line of <https://assignbuster.com/victorianism-versus-modernism/>

Metamorphosis, " As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (89) (Kafka). Now as he realizes his alteration, he is totally unaffected by it. He continues thinking about how he will be able to make money for his family, even though there is no possible way he can help his family now. Kafka shows his sense of alienation and despair in reality through the lack of emotion in Gregor. It shows in the text that Kafka is deeply affected by his depression. Modernism is marked by the separation of morality or positive social criticism that was present in Victorian writing.

However Modernism breaks from Victorian by showing that the individual is more important to think about because Kafka shows what happens when the individual disregards it when thinking how to provide for the society. Kafka's illustration of the society recognizing how it can not help or change the society is shown also in the interpretation of Nina Straus, who writes that, " Kafka sought to escape by way of ambiguous writings and from which Gregor escapes through his transformation into an insect is Kafka's image of an unequivocal, completely virile and powerful body.

In contrast, we must imagine Kafka's own body, a body with which he felt " nothing could be achieved" (29), and that body's imagistic parallel in the " pitifully thin ... legs" of the insect Gregor, waving " helplessly" around a " bulk" that is " divided into stiff arched segments" (67). ..." My body is too long for its weakness, it has no fat whatsoever for creating a beneficial warmth, for maintaining an inner fire, no fat from which the mind could someday nourish itself beyond its daily need without damaging the whole.

How shall the weak heart ... manage to push the blood through the entire length of these legs? " The description shows how weak Kafka was during his life. He would rather try to improve himself than try to improve the flawed society that was being ravished by war, loss, despair and alienation. Victorianism and Modernism both focused on the individual and the society however they had very differing ideas about which was better to focus on. Victorians believed that helping the society was more important than focusing solely on the individual.

A healthy and good person was extremely beneficial to the society and the way of life at the time. However introspection was not really praised but studying science was. Science was the way to improve society therefore Victorians were behind it completely. They wanted the best society possible even if that meant sacrificing some introspection and self-enlightenment, which Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde demonstrates perfectly. Modernism, however, had given up on society. There was nothing the individual could do to improve his way of life. Their was set and nothing could change it.

Modernists were particularly depressed with this thinking but it was heavily influenced by the World Wars. Kafka affected by this depression coped by creating Magical Realism as an escape from reality even though Metamorphosis still shows the flaws in society. Both of these styles have differing views on society and how society can make life better. Victorians were the first to believe that a healthy society meant good individuals but Modernists show that society will be flawed and there is nothing the individual can do to change this fact.

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