

Victorianism and the victorian novel



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

VICTORIANISM AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL Nineteenth century English literature is remarkable both for high artistic achievement and for variety. The greatest literary movement of its earlier period was that of romanticism. It was born in the atmosphere of the violent economic and political turmoil that marked the last decades of the 18th and the first decades of the 19th century. A discussion of Victorianism involves a consideration of a diversity of views about a glorious epoch in English cultural history, and an analysis of the contradictory feelings that it stirred in those concerned with its achievements and decline.

Those who lived in the age of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) were witnessed of an unprecedented material and scientific progress. But for some of them Victorianism was associated with cultural decline and anarchy of spirit. To our contemporaries, Victorianism signifies a far greater complexity, resulting from the interaction of a number of polarities that make up the cultural history of the age. An attempt to define and interpret Victorianism is doubtless difficult. An immense amount of information, often contradictory and even debatable, discourages one's attempt to give a final interpretation of the epoch.

In the Victorian age England became highly industrialized and a modern economy was developed. The force of steam power was used for railways, printing presses and a merchant fleet which had no equal in the world. England invested in all continents and was the world's banker. The situation was regarded as anarchy of spirit, atheism, spiritual wasteland, as it comes out from Thomas Carlyle's description of the age: The truth is men have lost

their belief in the Invisible, and believe and hope ad work only for the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: this is not a Religious age.

Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual is important to us. The infinite, absolute character of virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the Beautiful and Good, but a calculation of the Profitable[1]. The intellectual history of the time consists largely of a series of reactions against it represented by: the Oxford Movement, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Mathew Arnold, John Ruskin and Alfred Tennyson. Thomas Carlyle insisted on the importance of duty.

John Stuart Mill, who had been educated according to the strict principles of utilitarianism, experienced a moral crisis and finally understood the importance of feeling. From Wordsworth he took over the principle of inner culture and from Goethe a respect for a personality integrated in social life. John Henry Newman found the sense of existence in self-denying work and moral submission. Through their most brilliant representatives, the Victorians were also their most severe critics. The idea of progress had considerable currency during the developments in the nineteenth century.

It may also be regarded as an outgrowth of the economic development. The notion of perfectibility prevailed in an age when people were organizing a system of education on a broad, democratic basis, establishing the rights of free speech and trade unionism, extending the franchise, reshaping their legal code. It was the age when the middle classes and a great part of the common people had access to culture. Moral duty remained an imperative

with the most people, no matter whether it was supported by self-interest or Christian principles.

Victorianism denotes not only an epoch but also a cultural phenomenon whose significance transcends the limits of the age. It might be defined by the complementary action of opposite tendencies: individualism and self-denial, material pursuits and idealization of existence, the influence of science and the force of religion. The Victorian age established the predominance of the novel as the best suited literary form to express the feelings, problems and conflicts of the epoch. The novel became what poetry and drama had been in previous ages.

Consequently, the demand of the reading public for novels was becoming larger than ever before. The Victorian novel was the meeting-place of the beginners, when one was aware of a mixture of preceding literary forms and devices rather than of a well-constituted genre, and the novel as an art form, as it emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. The term Victorian novel is at best an academic flag of convenience. Firstly, there is no problem of dates. Queen's Victoria's death in 1901 comes too long after her coronation in 1837 for the term Victorian to have much precise significance, either for history or for literature.

The novel itself had little of the formal definition it has today. It was seen simply as a narrative form opposed to romance, a work of fiction dealing with the affairs of everyday life. As late as 1884 Henry James could complain that, as a form, it had no air of having a theory, a conviction and a consciousness of itself behind it[2]. The difference between the novel and the romance is

clearly illustrated by Clara Reeve as early as 1783, in a fragment which is often quoted by critics nowadays: The Novel is a picture of real life and manners and of times in which it was written.

The Romance in lofty and elevated language describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it is to present every scene, in so easy and natural a manner and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses of the persons in the story, as if they were our own[3]. Generally speaking, the novel is only one of many possible prose narrative forms.

It shares with other narratives, like the epic and the romance, two basic characteristics: a story and a story-teller. The epic tells a traditional story and is an amalgam of myth, history, and fiction. Its heroes are gods and goddesses and extraordinary men and women. The romance also tells stories of larger-than-life characters. It emphasizes adventure and often involves a quest for an ideal or the pursuit of an enemy. The events seem to project in symbolic form the primal desires, hopes, and terrors of the human mind and are, therefore, analogous to the materials of dream, myth, and ritual.

Although this is true of some novels as well, what distinguishes the novel from the romance is its realistic treatment of life and manners. Its heroes are men and women like ourselves, and its chief interest, as Northrop Frye said,

is “ human character as it manifests itself in society. ” Nineteenth-century novelists like Thackeray and Dickens often told their stories through an omniscient narrator, who is aware of all the events and the motivations of all the characters of the novel.

Through this technique the writer can reveal the thoughts of any character without explaining how this information is obtained. Henry James, who began writing in the last third of the nineteenth century, used the technique of point-of-view narration so completely that the minds of his characters became the real basis of interest of the novel. In such works, our knowledge of events and characters is itself limited by the limitations of this character or central consciousness. Since Henry James’ time, many writers have experimented with shifting the focus of the novel further inward to examine human consciousness.

Writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner used a method of narration known as stream of consciousness, which attempts to reproduce the flow of consciousness. Perceptions, thoughts, judgments, feelings, associations, and memories are presented just as they occur, without being shaped into grammatical sentences or logical sequences. In stream-of-consciousness narration, all narrators are to some degree unreliable, which reflects the twentieth century’s preoccupation with the relativity and the subjective nature of experience, of knowledge, and of truth.

The writers of the Victorian epoch do not constitute a movement based on common theoretical principles, yet the features mentioned above, characterizing the novel as a major literary form, are relevant in most fiction

works of the Victorian age. The novel became a debate on social, political and philosophical topics. There is, however, a difference between the first generation of Victorian novelists and the second one. The first generation was represented by W. M. Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Elisabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, The Bronte sisters and George Elliot.

Those writers remained close to the readers, as we have already mentioned, the spokesmen of the epoch, writing about those topics which the public wished to find in their works. The second generation was represented by Samuel Butler, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. They turned against Victorian authority and orthodoxy and no longer had confidence in the Victorian assumptions. The novel became the supreme literary genre in the nineteenth century and has continued to be so ever since that time. Prose fiction was written, read and reviewed as part of a continuous spectrum of literature dealing with the humanities and science.

Criticism of the novel genre goes back to the early eighteenth century and was widely discussed during the Victorian period. The subject of English literature was included in the syllabus of the University of London when it was founded in 1851[4]. The consonance between writer and reader as a feature of the Victorian fiction also resulted from the fact that novelists wrote about matters the public was really concerned with. The principles of selection, the standards and values were commonly shared. The plot patterns were made up of incidents and situations which were indications of significant moments in the character's state.

The character's behavior, his gestures were taken for signs of his spiritual and moral configuration. But that was not always the case with the nineteenth-century fiction heroes. Respectability, conformity and decency could easily compose a hypocritical mask to hide vice and wickedness. That is why many Victorian novels analyze hypocrisy and the way in which it could assume the appearance and reputation of virtue. Changes in social status determined the hero's values, his appearance and manners, so that the Victorian novelists were also concerned with the phenomenon of snobbery.

The growing complexity and obscurity of the text in some experimental novels of the epoch operate rather as a mode of separation between writer and reader. For example, the first major Victorian novel, Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, appeared conveniently in 1837, in time for the future Queen to be reading it on the night before her coronation, but for decade after this the novels of Dickens stood largely alone among a sea of minor works. The first readers of Dickens did not think of themselves as living in the Victorian period.

Victorian was first recorded in 1839, but it only gained general currency, largely as a term of disapproval, with the Edwardians. The British experienced the nineteenth century as a period of turbulent transition. The creative tension within mid-Victorian literature came from a cultural schizophrenia. If it was modern, materialist, factual, concerned with things as they were, it was also in many ways Romantic, fascinated with the savage Gothic, melodramatic, idealist[5]. Reading was a curious activity. It was simultaneously a shared experience, and a highly private one.

Whilst Victorians might discuss their reading with family or friends, they joined a reading circle based on the ideal of self-improvement. At its most extreme, the excitement over new works spilled over into a co modification of the original conception which spread far beyond the books covers.

Dickens, Charlotte Bronte and others had their novels dramatized. Willkie Collins with the novel *Woman in White* had had prompted sales, becoming along Dickens and Scott high on people's lists of preferences throughout the century, spanning classes, genders and occupations.

Writing about the power that fiction can have over the reader, Robert Louis Stevenson considers its capacity to make us let go of our conscious selves: In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book; be rapt clean out of ourselves and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images incapable of sleep or continuous thought.

The words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward in our ears like the noise of breakers, and the story ... repeat itself in a thousand colored pictures to the eye. [6] This rhetoric of rapture hardly covers the cerebral challenges laid down by George Meredith's fiction, or the psychological discrimination encouraged by Henry James' prose, nor the degree to which novels may be read as a means of acquiring factual information. But Stevenson's stress on the transformative power of fiction goes to the heart of the Victorian concern with novel reading.

It was practice which could consolidate one's sense of belonging to a particular sector of society, which could reinforce religious or gender norms:

which could, in other words, confirm one's belief in the security, rightness and communality of the life one led. On the other hand, it provided a space for exploring the self, trying out new thoughts, new possibilities, in private. Reading fiction, an activity which combined flexing the imagination with anticipating and reacting to the dynamics of a range of narratives, was a vicarious means of inhabiting other lives, and, potentially changing one's own.

One cannot move far in the Victorian period without encountering the Gothic. It focused social debate. Carlyle's *Past and Present* of 1843 contrasted the aridity of industrial society with the creative humanity of medieval monastic communities: in the 1890s it inspired William Morris' socialist vision. It entered the religious controversy as High Church movements looked back to pre-Reformation times. In the domestic sphere, there were anxieties reacting to the emergence of new political and social trends, the growth of unionism, and the phenomenon of the New Woman.

The figure of the demonic female, a supernatural and powerful creature feeding off the life force of the male, figures prominently in literature of this period in a number of works, plays and poems. Most argue that the literary representations of this creature are a kind of demonization by worried males of those independent women who appeared at the turn of the century, refusing to play the role of Victorian wife and mother. The Bronte sisters were influenced by the Gothic novel.

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), Emily Bronte (1818 – 1848) and Anne Bronte (1820-1849) have created a human universe shaken by outbursts of feelings

and passions, rendering man's dramatic attempt to evade repressions and conventional modes of thinking and behavior. The analysis of a wide range of feelings from excitement, exaltation to terror and titanic passions, associates their fiction with romantic poetry. The intensity of feeling finds its expression in visions and nightmares while fantasy, given free vent, soars to height of blissful dreams.

Into the heroes comes a new sense of the dark side of personality and the Gothic dimension is correlated with psychological investigation. The Gothic elements are not merely part of the setting, but a means of reflecting the life within and the drama arising from the conflict between feeling and reason. The works of the Bronte family, the dramatic effort of the three writers to transcend their condition, have stirred the interest taken by biographers, literary critics and readers alike.

Their loneliness was compensated by a close dependence on one another, springing from the need of love and union. Writing about their destiny, Walter Allen points out that: It haunts the memory of all who encounter it like a powerful romantic novel, but a novel which if written would certainly appear too romantic, charged with too great an intensity, to be convincing; ... the Brontes, then, have become the object of a cult[7]. Being akin to the romantic poets, the Bronte sisters felt the necessity to confess and to write about their personal experience and intimate thoughts.

Re-arranged and transfigured, the events of their lives composed a specific universe. Generally speaking the literary work reflects the writer's dream rather than his life; it is a mask behind which the real personality of the

author hides[8]. The dominant tendency in the Victorian novel is Realism in the sense of a marked necessity of reflecting truth – social, economic or individual – in art and of a rigorous documentation undertaken by the writer, following the example of the man of science.

The novel gained a more elevated status, ceasing to be a mere entertainment and becoming a debate on the urgent matters of the day. Although novel writing and novel criticism did not have serious theoretical principles to go by, this strong aspiration towards truth, this realism of a special kind which attracted the creative efforts of the most gifted writers of the epoch and its propensity to stimulate debate as well as meditation on the important matters of the epoch, definitely conferred the novel a high prestige and a new artistic quality. The Victorian novel is generally based on the chronological presentation of the hero's life from childhood to maturity or old age, within an episodic or a well-knit plot. There are two methods of character description: first the character is shadowy and he gradually emerges as a living personality through his reactions to a chronological series of events; then, the writer gives a descriptive portrait of the hero. In the simple adventure story, the writer either puts the character into the story in such a way that a character emerges.

J. Warren Beach points out three major tendencies of the Victorian novel: 1. Moral edification. It was assumed that the role of the novelist was to depict reality but also to teach lessons of virtue, to improve morals and manners by his allegiance to a strict code of ethical values. In most Victorian novels the balance is the end restored through poetic justice or happy-end. 2.

Discussion of the characters with the reader. The method is especially relevant in W. M. Thackeray's novels.

He comments, as if in a private conversation with the reader, on the nature and actions of the hero betraying some secrets at moments of sentimental reminiscences or nostalgia over bygone times. 3. An insistence on the ways in which actions illustrate human nature in general. It was assumed that the character's moral and intellectual state was reflected in his behavior and visible action. [9] Summing up the polarities of the age, J. H. Buckley shows that although concerned with immediate gain, the Victorians were nostalgic and celebrated the past and its culture.

The Victorians were conventional and believed in authority, yet they encouraged the doing-as-one-likes principle and free trade. Their art was didactic, yet it was romantic, escapist[10]. This age which bears the name of Queen Victoria, undoubtedly linked to the culture of a century, has been subject to diverse evaluations, often contradictory, as has been shown. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was a point of reference for the traditionalist and a critical target for the modernists in their desire to define their status.

According to Virginia Woolf, modernism became manifest about the year 1910, when a definite change in the demands of the reading public was caused by changes in conduct, politics and human relations. Once modernism was affirmed, Victorianism became associated with out-dated modes of thinking. It seemed that the literary conventions of the Victorian Age have ceased to establish a communication between writer and reader.

As to the character, he has remained an entity in the novel, whether testing the principles and standards shared by the community or reflecting existence according to his own sensitiveness.

A growing preoccupation with time from a philosophical as well as from a technical point of view characterizes the modern novelists. It often happens that in modern novel the character is not described in the midst of action but afterwards, when he re-experiences life through memory and meditation. Plot has somehow come to mean the complete pattern or design of the work and not only the summary of the principal events of the book. Time affects every aspect of fiction – the theme, the form and the medium or the language.

The character's sense of duration and of the meaning of experience has come to be assessed in terms of personal time or psychological time which is sometimes projected against the points of conceptual time. As A. A. Mendilow shows: In the final analysis all the techniques and devices of fiction reduce themselves to the treatment accorded to the different time-values and time-series and to the way one is played off against the other.

These values are of varying artistic importance but in combination they condition the whole conception of the most protean of all arts. [11] The plot does not render the sequence of events in their logical or chronological succession but follows the direction of memory which travels freely in time and space. This has led to a poetic vision and structure in the modern novel, as Anthony Burgess shows: As for plot, more and more novelists are

revolting against what they regard as contrivance, the manipulation of coincidences to produce a neat conclusion.

But I think that, if we take away the plot, character dialogue, even characters, we shall be left with something that is common to the more traditional and the most avant-garde novelist – a concern with interpreting, through the imagination, the flux of ordinary life, an attempt to understand, though not with the cold deliberation of the scientist, the nature of the external world and the mind that surveys it. [12] The narrative voices are often ironical, ambiguous, withholding information. The novel becomes open-ended and the task of interpretation rests wholly with the reader.

A reaction against the sophistication and difficulty of the linguistic and semantic structure of the modernist novel appears with the postmodernists. However some of their books present a further step in the breaking up of the rational order of life in that the world depicted by them is often random, vague and unintelligible. Some of them turn to the models offered by the traditional novel which they invest with new meanings through parody, defining the important postmodern concept of the presence of the past[13].

The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which traditional realistic fiction was based no longer prevails. Hence the world is viewed in terms of a series of constructs, artifices, provisional structures. Any work of imagination is likely to exhibit tendencies, romantic and realistic, emphasizing one or the other. In their desire to render local color, to tackle unusual subjects and to break down classical genres, the romanticists anticipated the realists.

Harry Levin shows that the realists took over a considerable residue of romance and that such intermixtures are evident in the romantic realism of Dickens and the fantastic realism of Dostoevsky[14]. Some Victorian novelists felt the appeal of previous literary trends and moods. In their works the harshness of reality is softened by a romantic vision and poetic language. This proves the allegiance of the Victorian novelists to sentimentalism, Gothicism and romanticism.

Myth is displaced but its essence remains: the creation of worlds at the limit of human desire and the eternal return to or reiteration of the essential patterns of life. The novel has affinities with romance, allegory and fairy-tale. The support of affirmative values testifies to the writers' confidence in progress and high moral values. The exploration of the deep levels of consciousness is expressed in cases when dream and reality get imperceptibly confused. The rendering of mania, lunacy and obsessions is achieved through devices and imagery taken over from Gothic literature. W. M.

Thackeray subverts ideals and illusions, offering a philosophic meditation on human existence to which his plots and characters are subordinated. George Eliot holds the balance between the romantic realists and those writers, who reject, deny or reverse the Victorian illusions: Samuel Butler with his satire and deconstructive tendencies and Thomas Hardy with his tragic, anthropologic view of life. In the polarity between tradition and modernity, Victorianism stood for tradition. It was then invested with certain features, an operation necessary for the clarification of modernist innovations.

Modernism appeared and developed its principles within Victorianism, so that the latter was a different cultural reality and a condition for modernism to appear and develop. No separation should be made between tradition and modernism if merely for the fact that the former is absolutely necessary for defining the later. Chesterton's statement amounts to the same thing when estimating tradition both as previous influences to be felt in Victorian culture: for real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as from a root. 15] ————— [1] Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of the times, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1869), p. 479; [2] Henry James, *The art of the novel*, *Longman's magazine* (1884); [3] See A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), p. 40; [4] D. J. Palmer *The rise of English studies* (1965); Franklin E. Court *Institutionalizing English literature: The culture and politics of literary study, 1750-1900*, (1992); [5] D. D.

Stone *The romantic impulse in Victorian fiction* (1980); [6] Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Gossip on Romance*, (1882), *Works*, XII: 186 [7] Walter Allen, *The English Novel*, Penguin Books, 1967, p. 185; [8] Rene Wellek, *Austin Warren, Teoria literaturii*, Bucuresti, E. P. L. U. , 1967, P. 109-115; [9] J. W. Beach *The twentieth century novel in Neville H. Newhouse, Joseph Conrad* , London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1966), p. 23 [10] Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951, p. ; [11] A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the novell*, New York: Humanities Press, 1972, p. 40; [12] Anthony Burgess, *The novel now*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, p. 17; [13] Linda Hutcheon, *A poetics of Postmodernism*, New York, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 4; [14] Harry Levin, *Realism in perspective*

in *Approaches to the novel*, edited by Robert Scholes, San Francisco: Chandler publishing Company, 1966, p. 103; [15] G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 10;