

Victorian Literature

Defining Victorian literature in any satisfactory and comprehensive manner has proven troublesome for critics ever since the nineteenth century came to a close. The movement roughly comprises the years from 1830 to 1900, though there is ample disagreement regarding even this simple point. The name given to the period is borrowed from the royal matriarch of England, Queen Victoria, who sat on throne from 1837 to 1901. One has difficulty determining with any accuracy where the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century leaves off and the Victorian Period begins because these traditions have so many aspects in common. Likewise, identifying the point where Victorianism gives way completely to Modernism is no easy task. Literary periods are never the discrete, self-contained realms which the anthologies so suggest. Rather, a literary period more closely resembles a rope that is frayed at both ends. Many threads make up the rope and work together to form the whole artistic and cultural milieu. The Victorian writers exhibited some well-established habits from previous eras, while at the same time pushing arts and letters in new and interesting directions. Indeed, some of the later Victorian novelists and poets are nearly indistinguishable from the Modernists who followed shortly thereafter. In spite of the uncertainty of terminology, there are some concrete statements that one can make regarding the nature of Victorian literature, and the intellectual world which nurtured that literature.

If there is one transcending aspect to Victorian England life and society, that aspect is change – or, more accurately, upheaval. Everything that the previous centuries had held as sacred and indisputable truth came under assault during the middle and latter parts of the nineteenth century. Nearly every institution of society was shaken by rapid and unpredictable change. Improvements to steam engine technology led to increased factory production. More manufacturing required more coal to be mined from the ground. The economies of Europe expanded and accelerated, as the foundations of a completely global economy were laid. Huge amounts of wealth were created, and the spirit of the times discouraged the regulation of business practices. Today, this is called *laissez-faire* economics. This generation of wealth was to the sole benefit of the newly risen “middle class,” an urbane, entrepreneurial segment of society which saw itself as the natural successor to the noble’s former position of influence. At the same time, scientific advancements were undermining the position of the Church in daily life. Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution and natural selection brought humanity down to the level of the animal, and seemingly reduced the meaning of life to a bloody struggle for survival. Rather than a benign Creator, the world was dominated and steered by strength alone. In the general population, the ever-present gap between the haves and have-nots widened significantly during the Victorian period. The poorest of their poor found their lot in life to be worse than it had ever been, as the new market economy favored industry over agriculture. Large numbers of dispossessed farmers and peasants migrated from the countryside to the cities, seeking work in the factories. The effects of that demographic shift can still be observed. Conditions in the overwhelmed, sprawling cities degenerated as the infrastructure simply could not handle the influx of new workers. Slums and shantytowns became the norm, and depredation was a fact of life for the majority of the working class.

For some, the fundamental changes taking place in the world meant progress, and were a source of hope and optimism. For the majority of writers and thinkers, however, the inequality present in Victorian society was a kind of illness that would sooner or later come to a tipping point. Many intellectuals saw it as their duty to speak out against the injustices of this new and frightening world. Essayists like Thomas Carlyle railed against the systematic abuse he saw happening all around him. He saw machinery and the Industrial Revolution as

engines of destruction, stripping people of their very humanity. The level of social consciousness and immediate relevancy one finds in much of Victorian writing was something not witnessed before in English letters. Rather than turning inside or escaping into fantasy, essayists and novelists chose to directly address the pressing social problems of the day. These problems ranged from atrocious labor conditions and rampant poverty to the issue of women's place in the world – what contemporaries referred to as “The Woman Question.” Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's long-form poem “The Cry of the Children” represents an attack on mining practices in England, specifically the employment of young children to work deep in the mines. Barrett-Browning had been outraged by a report she read detailing the practice and felt compelled to make her voice heard on the issue. She was certainly not alone in this feeling. Novelist Charles Dickens made a cottage industry out of addressing social ills in a light-hearted, optimistic tone. Each of his many novels called attention to real-world problems that others might just as soon have swept under the rug. Dickens is also noteworthy for his “rock star” status, attaining popularity that would not have been possible in the previous generation. He wrote with a voice that was very accessible to the ordinary reader of the time, and yet couched within his fiction were essential questions that society would sooner or later be forced to confront. One cannot say exactly how much influence Dickens and others had on their society, but the fact that they tried to change their world is what is important. Writers of the preceding era did not speak to a popular audience nearly as much as the Victorians, or at least not as self-consciously. The Romantic Movement was marked by introversion and abstraction; they were much less interested in commenting on, much less altering the course of world events. Furthermore, the Romantics did not see leadership as a primary objective for art. Victorians, on the other hand, tacitly agreed that encouraging society toward a higher good was a righteous, noble occupation for any artist.

Not surprisingly, women in the Victorian world held very little power and had to fight hard for the change they wanted in their lives. What one thinks of as feminism today had not yet taken form in the Victorian period. The philosophy of female emancipation, however, became a rallying point for many female Victorian writers and thinkers. Though their philosophies and methods were often quite divergent, the ultimate goal of intellectual women in the nineteenth century was largely the same. Poets and novelists frequently had to be coy when addressing their status in society. Christina Rossetti's “Goblin Market” combines early feminist imagery with many other concepts in a fairy-tale like world of imagination. Her use of religious symbolism is especially fascinating. Though not as highly regarded, Letitia Elizabeth Landon was also an accomplished and popular female poet. Charlotte and Emily Brontë crafted novels that have stood the test of time and taken their place as literary classics. These women were exceptions to the rule. Patriarchy had been firmly entrenched in Western society for so long that women writers faced an uphill climb to gain any level recognition and acceptance. Some authors, like Mary Ann Evans, felt the need to work under a male pseudonym in order to receive recognition. Evans published her first two novels, *Adam Bede* and *Scenes of Clerical Life*, under the false name of George Eliot. Interestingly, even today Evans is more commonly known by her pseudonym than her real name.

In the early years of the Victorian Period, poetry was still the most visible of literary forms. Like everything else, poetry and poetics underwent an evolution during the nineteenth century. Both the purpose of poetry and its basic style and tone changed drastically during the Victorian Period. In the first half of the nineteenth century, poetry was still mired in the escapist, abstract imagery and themes of the earlier generation. While essayists and novelists were confronting social issues head-on, poets for their part remained ambivalent at best. This self-induced coma gradually lifted, and by mid-century most poets had moved away from the

abstractions and metaphysical tropes of the Romantics and fashioned a more down-to-earth, realistic kind of verse. Alfred, Lord Tennyson was the master of simple, earthy lyricism to which everyone could relate. His *In Memoriam* shows off this simplicity and economy of verse, while remaining an effective and moving elegy for his deceased friend Arthur Hallam. The obsession with the natural world and the imagination that so clearly distinguished the Romantic poets was supplanted during the Victorian Period by a clear-headed, almost utilitarian kind of poetics. The subject matter of Victorian poetry was quite often socially-oriented, but this was by no means set in stone. Victorian poets were nothing if not masters of variety and inventiveness. Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, for example, covered a wide array of subjects, from lucid dreams to the nature of art and even the meaning of existence. Throughout his various aesthetic experiments, Browning never failed to inject humanity into his subject matter. "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," one of Browning's most famous poems, demonstrates the intensity and psychological realism he was able to portray in the space of a few hundred lines.

At some point in the Victorian era, the novel replaced the poem as the most fashionable vehicle for the transmission of literature. This fundamental shift in popular taste has remained to the present day. Serial publications in magazines and journals became more and more popular, and soon these pieces were being bound and sold in their complete forms. Dickens made full use of the serial format, and his novels betray the episodic arrangement of their original publication method. He was the first great popular novelist in England, and was the forerunner of the artist-celebrity figure which in the twentieth century would become the norm. The influence of Dickens was so severe that every novelist who came after him had to work under his aesthetic shadow. Part of his appeal certainly owed to the fact that his literary style, while always entertaining, put the ills of society under the microscope for everyone to see. His *Hard Times* was a condemning portrait of society's obsession with logic and scientific advancement at the expense of the imagination. Until the Victorian Period, the novel had been frowned upon as a lesser form of writing, incapable of the sublime reaches of lyric poetry. Critics saw that the novel appealed to a popular, often female readership, and therefore dismissed it as artless and dull. The later Victorian novelists, however, proved that the form could attain heights of artistic achievement previously reserved only for poetry. Thomas Hardy, for example, pushed the novel to its limits, significantly expanding the possibilities of the form. Although he thought of himself more as a poet, his first best talent lay in constructing detailed, fatalistic plot-structures that still captivate readers. Novels like *Jude the Obscure* share many qualities with Greek tragedy, of which Hardy was quite fond, but they also contain psychologically sophisticated, realistic characterizations. His gift for characterization would influence an entire generation of writers.

Thomas Hardy must be regarded as a key forerunner of the Modernist Movement in literature. His novels and poetry all display tendencies that would reach their apex in the early twentieth century. Hardy often created desolate, hopeless worlds where life had very little meaning. He also actively questioned the relevance of modern institutions, in particular organized religion. Sentiments like these would find accomplished spokespersons in poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Another skilled poet who is often considered a precursor to Modernism is Gerard Manley Hopkins. Though he never published in his lifetime, his work was greatly received after his death. His unusual use of language set him apart from virtually every other poet of his day. Hopkins was very much concerned with religion and the nature of Creation. However, he still preserved a healthy quantity of skepticism. It is this existential doubt that, like Hardy, made Hopkins a favorite among the Modernist writers who would later discover his work.

For many, the word “Victorian” conjures up images of over-dressed ladies and snooty gentlemen gathered in parlors and reading rooms. The idea of “manners” essentially sums up the social climate of middle-class England in the nineteenth century. Rules of personal conduct were in fact so inflexible that the Victorians garnered a reputation for saying one thing while doing another – an attack that the next generation of writers would take up with vigor. In the world at large, change was happening faster than many people could comprehend. A surging global economy was orchestrated by the might of the British Empire. The nobility, formerly at the top of the pyramid in society, found their status reduced as agriculture lost its preeminence in the now industrial economy. Mechanization and steam power led to ruthless efficiency, while more often than not the poor suffered under the weight of the capitalist middle class. Being impoverished in Victorian England was unpleasant to say the least, but there were efforts underway to improve the lot of the poor. The Reform Bills of the nineteenth century extended voting rights to men who were previously disenfranchised – but not, of course, to women. That would require years more of struggle. For all of the social inequalities which still persisted, the Victorians successfully undermined some of humanity’s most time-honored institutions. Some writers greeted these changes with fear, and wanted desperately for society to check its relentless pace. Others embraced the new world that was coming into being, thrilled at the progress of science and society. Together, these voices comprise an important and sometimes overlooked era in English literary history.

Major Writers of the Victorian Period

- Arnold, Matthew (1822-1888)
- Brontë, Charlotte (1816-1855)
- Brontë, Emily (1818-1848)
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861)
- Browning, Robert (1812-1889)
- Carroll, Lewis (1832-1898)
- Carlyle, Thomas (1795-1881)
- Dickens, Charles (1812-1870)
- Doyle, Arthur Conan (1859-1930)
- Eliot, George (1819-1880)
- Hardy, Thomas (1840-1928)
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley (1844-1889)
- Housman, A. E. (1859-1936)
- Kipling, Rudyard (1865-1936)
- Landon, Letitia Elizabeth (1802-1838)
- Rossetti, Christina (1830-1894)
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel (1828-1882)
- Stevenson, Robert Louis (1850-1894)
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles (1837-1909)
- Tennyson, Alfred (Lord) (1809-1892)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace (1811-1863)
- Wells, H.G. (1866-1946)
- Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900)
- Yeats, William Butler (1865-1939)

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