

PROSE: Fiction

FACTORS OF POPULARITY - From a literary point of view the Victorian Age was above all the 'age of fiction', simply because of the immense popularity the genre gained in the period.

The flourishing of fiction in the Victorian Age was due to:

- the numerous outstanding writers turning to novel writing;
- new publishing and distributing techniques: the publication in installments, the invention of new printing techniques with mobile fonts and finally better means of transport made it cheaper and easier to produce and distribute reading material;
- and finally the fact that prose fiction became the most suitable and appropriate means to question and confute the values of the time.

Despite their great differences, Victorian novelists are usually divided into "Early Victorians" and "Later Victorians".

EARLY VICTORIAN FICTION

SERIAL INSTALLMENTS – Among the factors that helped shape the Early Victorian Novel, one was the publication in serial installments. Before 1820 novels were usually published in three volumes at a high price and could therefore only be bought by wealthy people or borrowed from circulating libraries. After 1820, the experiment was tried of printing books in installments, at the very low price of one shilling each, often as an appendix to a newspaper.

Since the first number was generally published before the subsequent ones were written so that the writer could have a clear idea of the reactions of his readers, the serial nature of the novels had such a huge impact on their structure itself that:

- ♦ the publication went on as long as the public was not tired or the author's imagination lasted; this accounts for the sometimes excessive length of the successful novels;
- ♦ long pauses for comments and disquisitions were replaced by the advancement of events and an element of suspense to keep the reader's interest and curiosity alive.
- ♦ if a certain character pleased the readers, it was carried on, otherwise it was dropped and replaced with another;
- ♦ realism was pursued to represent a fictional world which the reader accepted as credible and truthful. This accounts for the triumph of the **realistic novel**.

- ♦ with **REALISM** art had to represent reality faithfully, without idealizing it as Romanticism had done
- ♦ with **NATURALISM** art has the same "realistic" conception but also a scientific approach to literature

MASS LITERATURE - Just as journalism and the circulating libraries had done in the 17th century with the middle classes, the serial nature of early Victorian novels greatly increased the number of readers among the lower classes and allowed the further expansion of literature consuming.

On the other hand, the quantity of fiction produced to meet the demand created the "popular" appeal of some works and anticipated the literary product later defined as "mass literature".

While authors like Dickens only made some concessions to the predominant taste for sentimentality and sensationalism, less skilled novelists often developed their plots through the repetition of melodramatic clichés so popular in the Gothic tradition, thus increasing the existing gap between 'good' and 'bad' fiction.

SOCIAL COMMITMENT - Early Victorian novelists considered art as a means to denounce the evils of the society of their time and were **socially committed**: the plights of the lower classes, such as poverty, the exploitation of children and workers, and the inadequate educational system (Dickens) or the hypocrisy of the higher ones (Thackeray). On the other hand, they shared the **general optimism** of their middle-class reading public, and did not question the fundamental idea that the system was right or that progress was inevitable and evils a temporary setback; paradoxically, they actually contributed in general to keeping the *status quo* where good was finally rewarded and evil punished and by advocating a somewhat Utopian improvement of society.

TECHNIQUE - Both characters and events in early Victorian novels were interpreted and judged by an omniscient narrator, often obtrusive, who expressed the dominant moral views of the time. The story generally ended in a happy way or at least with good triumphing over evil. This sense of a shared world between novelists and their public in the early Victorian Age accounts for the success of the genre and the appearance of a number of outstanding novelists.

C. Dickens is the novelist who best represents the Victorian Age both in his life and in his works (1812-70), which made him popular and very rich.

He was aware of the spiritual and material corruption of present-day reality under the impact of industrialism; the result was an increasingly critical attitude and an open denunciation of abuses in education, in the law and in institutions in highly emotional stories.

On the other hand, he never questioned the basic values of his time, as he shared the contemporary view that the secret of happiness was to be found in hard work, romantic love and family life.

Dickens's task was never to induce the most wronged and suffering to rebel, or even encourage discontent: his novels were addressed to the upper classes, to make them aware of and alleviate the undeniable sufferings of the poor, especially children, which they ignored. In this he was particularly effective, since the result was that through his popularity, the more educated, the wealthier classes throughout England acquired a knowledge of their poorer neighbours of which many were previously almost ignorant.

This reassuring view, combined with concessions to the predominant taste for sentimentality and sensationalism largely accounts for the immense success that he enjoyed in his lifetime.

Still today, although his novels are open to criticism from a formal point of view, his comic and linguistic gifts as a story-teller are undeniable and his ability to create memorable characters and caricatures are greatly admired.

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63), instead, concentrated on satirising the upper-middle class and depicted their lust for money and social status, selfishness and corruption.

In *Vanity Fair* (1848), his masterpiece, he recreates the upper class of early 19th-century society with memorable and round characters; the protagonist, Becky Sharp, a social climber, succeeds in marrying into the aristocracy but then loses her position out of excessive greed. Like Fielding, he employed a very obtrusive omniscient narrator who comments, digresses and directs the readers' reactions to the events narrated to such an extent as to become a remarkable voice although not a character, in the story.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65) was able to convey a lively and multifaceted picture of the society of her time. On the one hand she shared Jane Austen's ability to portray everyday life with sympathy and humour but combined it with Dickens's social conscience: like in *Cranford* (1853), where she created memorable sketches of provincial life. On the other hand in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* she portrayed the dreadful reality of the workers in the new industrial towns and examines the problems created by the clash between capital and labour.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë, although roughly contemporary with Dickens, Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell, are quite different novelists. The themes of their novels reveal a Romantic sensibility almost completely divorced from the society in which they lived.

Wuthering Heights (1847) by **Emily Brontë** (1818-1848), turns around Heathcliff, a typical Byronic hero, with strong passions, an unknown past and destined to be unhappy. The love that unites him to Catherine is of a destructive nature. The novel was considered morbid and immoral when it first appeared, as it seemed to imply that conventions should yield to the forces of passion. This was obviously against the moral outlook of the age and explains why the novel did not have an immediate success.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-54) was more restrained in her portrayal of passion, but her heroines do not behave according to Victorian conventions either. The protagonist of her best known novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), has an independence of spirit which is not typical of the times and somehow anticipates the spirit of woman's emancipation.

What is essentially Victorian, however, is the fact that the two sisters chose fiction to convey themes and feelings which up to now had been largely expressed only through the medium of poetry.

In this respect the works of the Brontës are forerunners of modern psychological fiction.

LATE VICTORIAN FICTION - In the second part of the Victorian Age the sense of a shared view of reality between novelists and readers began to break down. While novelists of the first part of the Victorian Age saw themselves as social reformers but also as public entertainers, some novelists of the second part of the period turned more to an analysis of the artistic dimension of fiction.

They did so partly under the influence of continental writers, such as Flaubert, Tolstoj and Dostoevski, who had attempted to give the novel a deeper moral but also an aesthetic dimension. This resulted in two main literary attitudes.

1. **The first one was the 'aesthetic movement'**, a general anti-Victorian trend which culminated towards the end of the century by changing the nature itself of the novel: it rejected the Victorian moral view of literature with the idea that art should only be judged by aesthetic criteria and it had to be 'Art for Art's sake'.

AESTHETICISM AND DECADENCE

AESTHETICISM

The movement originated in France with Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) and developed in universities and intellectual circles in the last decades of the 19th century. Gautier gave voice to the dissatisfaction of the artists who were tired of the materialism and the restrictive moral code of bourgeoisie.

He developed the idea of the **Art for Art's sake**, that is that art should pursue beauty rather than teaching moral values.

As a result, the French intellectuals withdrew from political and social scene; the typical bohemien embodied the protest against the respectability of middle classes leading an unconventional existence of excesses and cultivating art and beauty.

Walter Pater (1839-1894), the Aesthetic theorist in England, had a subversive message for the young generations: he rejected religious faith and said that art was the only certainty and eternal power.

Life should be lived as a "work of art", that is filling each moment with intense experiences of pleasure; this implied that life should not necessarily be "moral" but spent in the search for beauty.

A dandy is different from a bohemian: these two figures were both born in the 19 century and were both eccentric and queer in their despise for society; but whereas a bohemian is a rebel and an outcast, sympathising with proletariat, a dandy is an individualist and an aristocrat whose elegance is a symbol of his intellectual superiority.

These theories had a great impact on English writers and intellectuals, especially Oscar Wilde.

The works of the decadent of aesthetic writers had in common:

- absence of didactic aim;
- hedonistic attitude, sometimes perversity;
- disenchantment with contemporary society and attention to the self;
- use of the language of the senses

DECADENTISM - Aestheticism slowly degenerated into Decadentism between 1880 and 1890, and was called Symbolism in France after 1890. Decadentism developed the search for beauty to such extent that it degenerated into the absurd and distasteful. The Decadents cut themselves off the masses and they even avoided the contact with reality through the "paradis artificial", that is drugs, by which they replace the imperfect reality with the perfect illusion.

In their extreme artistic exploration, they were often charmed by perversion, vice and corruption and for this they were called "maudits".

The manifesto of French Decadentism and Symbolism were Charles Baudelaire's "Les Fleurs du mal", which showed the charm of evil and decay.

Apart from the French poets Mallarmè, Verlaine and others, European Decadents were mainly prose writers, such as:

- the Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio with his "Il Piacere" and its main character Andrea Spirelli;
- the English Oscar Wilde with his only novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray"

2. **A second group of writers was more socially committed and denounced the evils of industrialism but they lost the general optimism of early Victorians.**

George Eliot (1819-80), the greatest among the second generation of Victorian novelists was a woman novelist, Mary Anne Evans, who chose to write under a male pseudonym. Her novels show the first signs of cracks in the common set of values shared by writer and reader.

In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), although her portraits of social life are much indebted to Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell, she gave a complete picture of all social classes in both rural and urban environment, at the same time exploring the psychological and moral complexity of her characters and anticipating the psychological analysis of 20th-century fiction. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), instead, Maggie, the protagonist is unconventional and rebellious, she cannot see why she cannot be as free as her brother to do as she wishes. Her tragic end is an indication that the optimistic view of the first part of the century was over.

George Eliot also defied convention in her personal life by living with a married man against the prevailing moral and religious code and the hypocritical behaviour often associated with it. But she was not a feminist and never preached rebellion against the order of things but offered no solutions, only tragic conclusions, in her fiction.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) showed the same critical spirit and original angle on moral questions. His novels, however, are more limited in scope than George Eliot's. They are all set in an imaginary county called Wessex which corresponds roughly to the heart of Dorset, and are essentially regional novels of its rural life and traditions. The heroes and heroines of his novels, for example *Tess* (1891) or *Jude the Obscure* (1895), are usually tragic figures. Hardy portrays man as an isolated being struggling for survival in a world ruled by fate and chance and an indifferent (if existing) deity. The use of nature for symbolic purposes and the emotional subject matter of his novels place Hardy in the Romantic tradition, while his pessimistic outlook on life sets him apart from the optimistic faith in progress characteristic of the mainstream of early Victorian fiction.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94), instead, reacted against the hypocrisy of bourgeois respectability in Victorian society and he expressed his reaction more in his way of life than in the themes of his novels. His refusal of the optimistic faith of his age is reflected in his exploration of the double nature of man in novels such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, based on a case of divided personality. He also continued the tradition of Scott in his novels about Scottish history such as *The Master of Ballantrae*.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was outside the mainstream. While other Victorian novelists limited their setting to Britain, with occasional excursions to the continent of Europe and the United States, he created a whole fictional world out of the Anglo-Indian experience of Empire. He wrote only one successful novel, *Kim* (1901), but he was a master of the art of the short story in *The Jungle Books* (1894-95), a collection of brilliant stories. Most are realistic, but some, like his famous animal stories, include fantasy elements: they all share vivid language and the variety of characters, both Indian and English, drawn from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds.

Henry James (1843-1916) was probably the novelist who contributed most to the formal development of the novel. Being an American by birth, but spending most of his life in Europe, he describes the impact of old European culture on American character. *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is the story of an intelligent and attractive American heiress whose visit to Europe changes her life and personality: from the innocent, curious girl she was at the beginning, she grows to maturity through the painful experience of an unhappy marriage set in an Italian background.

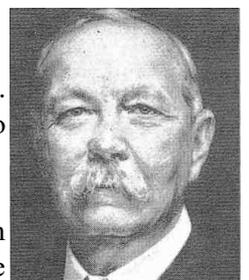
James' major contribution to the development of the novel was to shift the fictional emphasis from action to reflection and from subject matter to form. What interested him in narrative technique was how to represent human consciousness. The earlier Victorians had tried to solve the problem either by first-person narration or by using an omniscient narrator to enter the different characters' minds and explain their behaviour and their motives; James went further by reducing the role of the omniscient narrator and shifting the point of view to the perceptions and thoughts of the characters themselves.

This was to prove a turning point in the development of the novel and pave the way for later experiments. It also had an effect on who read novels. While Dickens's novels were read and enjoyed by everyone from Queen Victoria downwards, only a small minority of highly motivated and educated readers took pleasure in the novels of Henry James, which were centered on inner thoughts and formal matters rather than plots and characters.

MINOR GENRES Outside the mainstream of development, new types of stories emerged from combinations of the ingredients of popular fiction and gave rise to sub-genres which were to become very popular such as the **ghost story** and the **detective story**.

Ghost stories were particularly popular in Victorian times and became part of the culture of the period. They developed from the Gothic tale of terror but used more familiar settings and everyday situations, to make the terror more credible. Dickens was among those who wrote ghost stories.

The detective story also developed from the Gothic tale of terror. However, it did not rely on fearful sensations to create suspense but on a new and real source of terror in the period: crime and criminals. The growth of towns in the Victorian period had created many slums where organised bands of criminals prospered. This underworld is well portrayed in many of Dickens's novels and became a source of inspiration for detective novels. The initiator of the genre in Britain was **Wilkie Collins** (1824-89) with the first detective in *The Woman in White* (1860). The character of the detective was immortalised by **Arthur Conan Doyle** (1859-1930) in his famous stories of Sherlock Holmes.



Arthur Conan Doyle