

Review Article

Towards the Exploration of the Victorian Literature: The Historical Overview

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Abstract: The Victorian Period is a remarkable period in the history of literature as a lot of transformations took place in this era. The Victorian Period spanned from 1837 to 1901 and it is a remarkable era that left an indelible mark on the fabric of society, art, and literature. This paper delves into the rich precepts of the Victorian era, exploring its distinctive characteristics, social dynamics, and artistic expressions. This study commences with an overview of the historical and socio-political context of the Victorian Period, highlighting the reign of Queen Victoria and the significant events that shaped the era. It also examines how these influences set the stage for the unique values, beliefs, and attitudes that permeated the Victorian society. A central focus of this study is the exploration of the Victorian social hierarchy, with its rigid class structure and strict moral codes. This era was also marked by a flourishing artistic and literary scene that produced a wealth of literary masterpieces. In exploring the works of prominent Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters, it equally explores the thematic underpinnings of their novels, such as social inequality, love, morality, and the changing dynamics of the Victorian society. Additionally, we will discuss the rise of serialized fiction and the influence of Victorian literature on contemporary storytelling. Lastly, this paper sheds light on the legacy of the Victorian Period, exploring its enduring impact on subsequent generations. It also discusses how Victorian ideals and sensibilities continue to shape modern society, art, and literature, as well as their resonance in contemporary discussions on gender, class, and societal norms.

Keywords: Victorian era, naturalism, morality, industrial revolution.

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian period is synonymous with the 19th century literature and it can be traced back to the ascension of Queen Victoria to the British throne on June 20, 1837. Therefore, Victorian era derived its name from the reign of Queen Victoria. She was just 18 years old at the time and became the queen following the death of her uncle, King William IV. Her reign lasted for over 63 years, making it one of the longest in British history. As the Victorian Period is named after Queen Victoria, it is characterized by the significant social, political, and cultural changes that occurred during her reign. It is important to note that the Victorian era did not begin abruptly on the day of Queen Victoria's coronation but gradually evolved over time. However, her reign marked a distinct period of time with its own unique characteristics.

In the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, the Industrial Revolution was already well underway, bringing about rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancements in Britain. This period witnessed significant transformations in various aspects of society, including the economy, politics, class structures, and cultural norms. The Victorian Period was influenced by the prevailing social, political, and intellectual climate of the time. It was characterized by a complex interplay between tradition and progress.

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Some Prominent Victorian Authors

1. Charles Dickens (1812-1870): His novels include: *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Oliver Twist*.
2. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855). Charlotte's novel *Jane Eyre* is considered a literary masterpiece, exploring themes of love, independence, and the struggles of women in Victorian society.
3. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). His works include: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Jude the Obscure*.
4. George Eliot (Real name is Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880): Her novels include *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner*.
5. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900): Although known for his wit and plays, Oscar Wilde also contributed to Victorian literature. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* challenged the norms of morality and aesthetics, exploring the pursuit of pleasure and the consequences of hedonism.
6. Emily Brontë (1818-1848): Emily Brontë, sister of Charlotte Brontë, wrote the iconic novel *Wuthering Heights*, a haunting tale of love, obsession, and revenge set against the backdrop of the Yorkshire moors.
7. Robert Browning (1812-1889): Renowned for his dramatic monologues. His works include *My Last Duchess* and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*," revealed his mastery of language and psychological depth.

Characteristics of Victorian Era

Realism

M. H. Abrams disclosed that realism emerged in the Victorian era. It is a movement in literature that reflects the changing social, cultural, and intellectual landscape of the time (269). Ruskin (1853) asserts that the realist writers sought to present an accurate and objective depiction of the realities of life, often focusing on the middle and working classes. Charles Dickens is considered one of the pioneers of realism in the Victorian literature. His novels, *The Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*, depicted the realities of Victorian society, including social inequalities, poverty, and the struggles of ordinary people. Through realism, Victorian writers depict or portray the everyday lives of ordinary people. Writers moved away from the idealized and romanticized depictions of previous eras and focused on the mundane, the ordinary, and the struggles of everyday existence. They explored themes such as work, family, social interactions, and the challenges faced by individuals within the social structure. This element of realism helped Victorian writers pay meticulous attention to detail in their descriptions. They sought to capture the specificities of time, place, and social context, providing rich and detailed portrayals of settings, characters, and situations.

Realist literature of the Victorian period often served as a vehicle for social critique. Writers used their works to shed light on social issues and inequalities, exposing the harsh realities of industrialization, poverty, and class struggles. Through realistic portrayals, they aimed to engage readers and provoke reflection on the social injustices and problems of the time. The Victorian period writers embraced an objective and observational approach to storytelling. They sought to present a balanced and unbiased view of society, often adopting a detached narrative voice. This objective observation allowed for a more nuanced exploration of characters, social dynamics, and the complexities of human behavior.

Victorian realist literature delved into *psychological Realism* that is, the inner lives of characters, exploring their thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Writers aimed to provide psychological depth and complexity to their characters, presenting them as fully realized individuals with their own hopes, fears, and desires. This psychological realism added a layer of authenticity and relatability to the characters, allowing readers to engage on a deeper level.

Verisimilitude is a concept that stood out in the realist literature of the Victorian period. It aimed for truth or reality. Writers of this period used their observations and experiences to create believable narratives, often drawing from their own encounters with the social, political, and cultural aspects of Victorian society. This pursuit of verisimilitude enhanced the credibility of their works and made them resonate with readers.

Overall, realism in the Victorian period, challenged sought to present a more truthful and accurate representation of life, addressing the realities and complexities of society. The realist literature of this era continues to be celebrated for its ability to capture the essence of Victorian society, providing valuable insights into the time period and reflecting the concerns and aspirations of its people.

Another aspect to mention in the Victorian period is Social Commentary. This era was marked by a significant focus on social commentary in literature. Arnold (1869) suggests in his essay, "Culture and Anarchy" that writers of the era used their works as a means to critique and comment on various aspects of Victorian society, including social inequality, gender roles, education, industrialization, and morality. Obviously, the duty of writers had never been taken for granted. In the Neo-classical period, writers used literature to expose social injustices prevalent in their society. They shed light on the harsh realities faced by the working class, exploring themes of poverty, exploitation, and the negative effects of industrialization. By presenting these issues in their works, writers aimed to create awareness and inspire social reform. They also criticize class structures because the Victorian era was characterized by a rigid class structure with significant disparities between the upper class, middle class, and working class. Writers critically examined these class divisions and

the impact they had on individuals' lives. They depicted the struggles of social mobility, the limitations imposed by class, and the inherent inequalities within the system. Another social issue that the Victorian period writers tackled was *gender roles* and *feminism*. This period in literature challenged traditional gender roles and addressed the limitations placed on women in society. Writers like Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell portrayed strong, independent female characters who defied societal expectations. They questioned the limited roles assigned to women and advocated for gender equality. Victorian writers were keen observers of the moral climate of their time. They critiqued the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent in society, often exposing the moral decay behind the façade of respectability. Charles Dickens, in particular, highlighted the disparity between public appearances and private actions, drawing attention to issues such as child labour, crime, and corruption. They used satire and irony, wit, humor, and sharp social commentary to expose the follies and vices of Victorian society. In particular, Oscar Wilde employed the tool to mock the superficiality and artificiality of the upper class.

Victorian writers emphasized the importance of education as an indispensable tool for social reformation. They highlighted the deficiencies in the education system and advocated for accessible education for all. In his *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy explored the barriers to education and the social consequences of limited opportunities. The social commentary in Victorian literature provided a platform for writers to express their concerns about the societal problems of their time. Their works sparked discussions, influenced public opinion, and played a significant role in the social reforms and changes that occurred during the era.

As novel became prominent in this era, character development was of great emphasis. John Stuart Mill for instance, was of the view that the fictional characters well developed, effect of the novel as a tool for social reformation is achieved. In his notable work *Utilitarianism* (1861), he explores the ethical theory of utilitarianism and its implications for individual and societal behavior. In this work, he delves into the principles of morality and examines how character traits and actions should be evaluated based on their overall utility or consequences.

Law Graham observed that Serial Publication was a distinct and influential feature of the Victorian period in literature. He cited Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* as an instance. Serialization, he believes, refers to the practice of releasing novels, stories, and other literary works in serialized form, with regular installments published in newspapers or magazines. To Gissing (1903), serial publication had significant implications for both writers and readers during this era. This era saw increased *readership* because serial publication expanded the readership of literary works in the Victorian era. By publishing installments in newspapers or magazines, authors were able to reach a broader audience. This format made literature more accessible to readers of different social backgrounds and economic means, contributing to the democratization of literature. Each installment ends by keeping the reader in suspense thereby leaving furious, eagerly awaiting the next chapter of the story.

The serial format makes room for *flexibility* and *adaptability*. It allowed authors to adapt their works based on reader feedback and market demands. Authors could make adjustments to the plot, pacing, or character development as the story unfolded. This flexibility contributed to the dynamic nature of storytelling during the Victorian era and allowed authors to respond to readers' interests and preferences. Serial publication involves collaboration between authors, editors, and publishers. Authors often worked closely with editors to ensure a cohesive and engaging narrative. Publishers provided guidance and feedback to authors, influencing the direction of the story. This collaborative process between various stakeholders shaped the final product and ensured its appeal to the target audience. It also provided a platform for social commentary and public debate. Many Victorian authors used their works to address social issues and ignite discussions among readers. The serialized nature of publication allowed for ongoing conversations and debates around the themes and ideas presented, contributing to the cultural and intellectual discourse of the time. Some of the most renowned works of Victorian literature were initially published in serialized form. Authors such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Wilkie Collins released their novels in installments, captivating readers over an extended period. The serialized format allowed for the gradual development of complex plots, extensive character arcs, and the exploration of various themes.

According to Wikipedia, as a great feature of the Victorian period, Serial publication, offered tremendous financial benefits to both the authors and the publishers. Writers received payment for each installment, which provided them with a steady income while they were working on the complete work. They worked assiduously to ensure they meet up with the reading aspirations of the audience. The publishers on their own, benefited from increased sales and readership as readers purchased subsequent issues as not to miss out any part of the ongoing story. Serial publication thus, was a distinctive feature of the Victorian period, providing a unique reading experience and shaping the literary landscape of the era. Each volume can be read within a short period of time unlike the when it is a full length novel that would take long to be read, this method thus, expanded readership, built anticipation, facilitated social commentary, and fostered a collaborative process between authors, editors, and publishers. The popularity and success of serial publication during the Victorian era left a lasting impact on the publishing industry and influenced storytelling practices.

There was heightened emphasis on emotions, sentimentalism, and the exploration of intense human experiences. Fannie Safier, Katie Vignery, Linda Abbott *et al*, observed that the writers of the period in a bid to effectively communicate their thoughts, sought to evoke strong emotional responses from their readers, often delving into themes of love, loss, longing, and personal struggles. Authors like Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy delved into the depths of human emotions, presenting characters who experienced profound love, despair, grief, and passion. The exploration of these intense emotions allowed readers to engage on an emotional level and empathize with the characters' experiences. Sentimentality played a significant role in Victorian literature, with writers often employing sentimental themes and techniques. Sentimental novels, especially those by Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, focused on the power of emotions and the moral lessons they imparted. The novels evoked empathy with the aim to elicit an emotional response from readers.

Romantic love and longing were common themes in Victorian literature. Authors portrayed the intensity of love and the longing for emotional fulfillment, often depicting the complexities and obstacles that stood in the way of true love. This exploration of romantic relationships and unrequited love resonated with readers, tapping into their own desires and aspirations. Victorian literature often delved into themes of suffering, tragedy, and personal struggles. Novels like *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy depicted characters who faced immense hardships and confronted the darker aspects of human existence. These works explored the depths of human suffering and the resilience of the human spirit, evoking a range of intense emotions in readers. Victorian literature also employed pathos and sympathy to elicit an emotional response from readers. The authors skillfully crafted characters and situations that evoked pity, compassion, and a desire to alleviate suffering. Through these emotional connections, writers sought to engage readers' empathy and highlight social issues and injustices. This period was marked by a sense of nostalgia and a fascination with the past. Writers tapped into this sentiment, evoking a sense of longing for simpler times or lost innocence. The exploration of nostalgia and melancholy in works like Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetry created a wistful and reflective mood, evoking powerful emotions in readers.

Abrams M. H. observed that sentimentality and intense emotions were key features of the Victorian period, allowing writers to engage readers on an emotional level and explore the complexities of human experience. The evocation of strong emotions, sentimental themes, and the exploration of intense psychological states made Victorian literature highly immersive, capturing the hearts and imaginations of readers of the time and leaving a lasting impact on the literary canon.

As the Victorian era is believed to be an era of total transformation, Gothic and Supernatural Elements are discernable features of the era. The Victorian writers incorporated supernatural elements in literature. This is why Pater (1873) states that this era had a fascination with the supernaturalism, mystery, and occult. Certain types of fiction that sprouted in the Victorian era to justify the deep belief in supernatural by the Victorians include:

1. **Gothic Fiction:** Though evidence abound that gothic fiction existed before the Victorian era as Abrams disclosed that Horace Walpole had in 1764, published *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*, the genre became prominent in the Victorian period. Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Sheridan Le Fanu were prominent in writing influential Gothic novels that explored supernatural themes. These works often included elements such as haunted houses, mysterious figures, vampires, ghosts, and supernatural occurrences, creating an atmosphere of fear and suspense.
2. **Spiritualism:** To Pater (1873), the Victorian period witnessed a surge in interest in spiritualism and the paranormal. According to him, spiritualist movements gained popularity, and people participated in séances, attempting to communicate with the spirit world. This interest in spiritualism and the belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits influenced the literature of the time. Like in the Elizabethan era, when Shakespeare in most of his plays, incorporated wantons as part of the characters, Victorian writers resuscitated the idea of incorporating supernatural elements into their literature.
3. **The Occult and Mysticism:** According to Wikipedia, The 19th century is routinely thought about as the era of secularisation, a period when the disciplines and institutions of modern science were founded and cultural authority shifted from traditional authority of religion to explanation through the scientific exposition of natural laws. The Victorian era saw a renewed interest in occult practices, mysticism, and esoteric knowledge. Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood, influenced by works of philosophers like Emanuel Swedenborg and Algernon Blackwood, incorporated occult themes and supernatural entities into their writings. Their works explored the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, often delving into the hidden realms of magic and mysticism.
4. **Fairy Tales and Folklore:** in the Victorian era, authors like the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen gained popularity during this time, with their stories blending elements of the supernatural, magic, and folklore.

Spiritual and Moral Allegory

Christians Rossetti, according to Wikipedia, wrote during the time of Mid-Victorian England and her extreme religious belief tremendously influenced her literature. Brontë's only novel, published in 1847 mirrors vividly the Victorian society. The novel blends realism, romance and the Gothic. Wikipedia notes that some reviewers thought it immoral and abhorrent; others praised its originality and 'rugged power'. The house at the Heights is situated in bleak moorland, and

the wild setting is a powerful presence as the story unfolds. The Victorian era saw the use of supernatural elements as vehicles for spiritual and moral allegory. Authors like Charles Dickens and George MacDonald employed supernatural motifs to convey moral lessons or explore spiritual themes. Supernatural interventions or encounters with otherworldly beings were used to prompt character growth, moral transformation, or highlight ethical dilemmas. The inclusion of supernatural elements in Victorian literature allowed authors to explore the boundaries of reality, delve into the mysterious and unknown, and engage readers' imaginations. It also reflected the Victorian fascination with the supernatural, spiritualism, and the mystical, providing an outlet for escapism and exploring deeper philosophical and moral questions within the context of the supernatural realm.

Another wonderful feature of the Victorian Literature is the settings of their works were rich and detailed. Victorian authors had a penchant for providing vivid and elaborate descriptions of the physical environments in which their stories unfolded. These settings served various purposes, from establishing atmosphere and mood to reflecting social and cultural contexts. Victorian authors paid meticulous attention to detail when describing the settings of their narratives. They employed elaborate descriptions of landscapes, interiors, and cityscapes to transport readers into the world of the story. Whether it was a lush countryside, a bustling urban street, or a grand mansion, the aim was to create a vivid and immersive experience for the readers through symbolism. The elaborate settings in Victorian literature often carried symbolic meaning and reflected the social and cultural contexts of the time. For example, the stark contrast between the opulence of the upper-class settings and the squalor of impoverished areas highlighted the stark divide between social classes. Settings were used to convey messages about wealth, status, morality, and societal values.

Historical novels were popular during this era. Victorian authors took great care in portraying historical periods accurately. The writers spent time in researching and recreating the settings of different time periods. This attention to historical detail helped to create an authentic backdrop and enhance the readers' understanding of the era being depicted. They also established atmosphere and mood by describing the physical surroundings in great detail. Authors were able to evoke specific emotions and immerse readers in the intended ambiance.

Dark and gloomy settings created an atmosphere of suspense and mystery, while idyllic landscapes evoked a sense of tranquility and harmony. Their detailed settings mirrored the inner worlds and psychological states of the characters. The environment was used as a metaphorical extension of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. For instance, a decaying mansion might symbolize a character's mental or moral deterioration, while a beautifully manicured garden could represent their inner peace or hidden desires.

Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge* vividly illustrates that the Victorian period witnessed a shift from rural to industrial landscapes. Victorian authors captured this transition by describing both the beauty of nature and the encroachment of industrialization. They depicted the sublime beauty of the countryside while also exploring the impact of rapid urbanization and industrial progress on society and the environment. Rich and detailed settings appealed to the readers' senses, immersing them in the world of the narrative. The authors incorporated visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile descriptions to create a multi-sensory experience. This sensory immersion heightened the readers' engagement and made the settings come alive in their imaginations. The Victorian period's emphasis on rich and detailed settings added depth, texture, and authenticity to the literature of the time. The enduring legacy of the Victorian literature continues to captivate readers and provide valuable insights into the social and cultural fabric of the era.

Overall, these literary characteristics contributed to the unique flavor of Victorian literature, reflecting the complexities, aspirations, and concerns of the Victorian society. They continue to captivate readers and offer valuable insights into Victorian era and its cultural milieu. It also has a lasting impact on subsequent generations of writers.

The Victorian Period was characterized by a set of precepts, or principles that shaped the values and behavior of individuals within the Victorian society. Young (1988) believes that these precepts encompassed various aspects of life, including morality, social conduct, and cultural norms.

Precepts of the Victorian Literature

1. **Morality and Virtue:** Abrams M. H is of the view that Victorian society placed a strong emphasis on morality and virtue. It upheld traditional values such as honesty, integrity, and self-discipline. In the Victorian era, morality was often influenced by religious beliefs, with Christianity playing a significant role in guiding moral conduct.
2. **Respectability and Decorum:** In the Victorian era, decorum was a respected virtue. Individuals were expected to adhere to social norms and conventions, demonstrating proper behavior in public and private settings. Modesty, politeness, and self-control were deemed essential virtues.
3. **Social Hierarchy:** Class distinction played out in this era as the Victorian era was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy. The upper class enjoyed privileges and status, the middle class aspiring for upward mobility, and the working class facing significant socioeconomic challenges.

4. **Gender Roles and Separate Spheres:** This feature played out in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The Victorian society had distinct gender roles, emphasizing separate spheres for men and women. Men were expected to be the breadwinners, engaging in work and public affairs, while women were primarily responsible for domestic duties, childrearing, and maintaining a nurturing home environment.
5. **Work Ethic:** The Victorians valued hard work and diligence. The Protestant work ethic, influenced by religious beliefs, emphasized the idea that hard work and perseverance led to personal success and moral virtue.
6. **Imperialism and Nationalism:** The Victorian era coincided with the height of the British Empire, and imperialism and nationalism were significant precepts of the time. In the Victorian era, there was a sense of pride and belief in the superiority of British culture, accompanied by a desire to expand and exert influence on a global scale.
7. **Philanthropy and Social Reform:** The Victorians were concerned with social issues and philanthropy. Many individuals and groups sought to address social problems, improve public health, alleviate poverty, and promote education and social reforms. These efforts reflected a sense of duty and a desire for societal progress.

It is important to note that while these precepts were influential, they were not universally embraced or followed by all members of Victorian society. There were variations in adherence to these principles depending on individual circumstances, geographical location, and personal beliefs. Nonetheless, these precepts provide insight into the values and ideals that shaped the Victorian mindset. The Victorian Period was a time of immense societal, cultural, and artistic change.

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