

The Victorian Novel

The Victorian Age is marked roughly by the reign of Queen Victoria of England from 1837-1901.

The Victorian reading public firmly established the novel as the dominant literary form of the era. The novel is the most distinctive and lasting literary achievement of Victorian literature.

Earlier in the century Sir Walter Scott had created a large novel-reading public and had made the novel respectable. He had also strengthened the tradition of the 3-volume novel.

The publication of novels in monthly installments enabled even the poor to purchase them

The novelists of the Victorian era:

- accepted middle class values
- treated the problem of the individual's adjustment to his society
- emphasized well-rounded middle-class characters
- portrayed the hero as a rational man of virtue
- believed that human nature is fundamentally good and lapses are errors of judgment corrected by maturation

The Victorian novel appealed to readers because of its:

- realism
- impulse to describe the everyday world the reader could recognize
- introduction of characters who were blends of virtue and vice
- attempts to display the natural growth of personality
- expressions of emotion: love, humor, suspense, melodrama, pathos (deathbed scenes)
- moral earnestness and wholesomeness, including crusades against social evils and self-censorship to acknowledge the standard morality of the times.

The Victorian novel featured several developments in narrative technique:

- full description and exposition
- authorial essays
- multiplotting featuring several central characters

Furthermore, the practice of issuing novels in serial installments led novelists to become adept at subclimaxes.

Major Victorian Novelists

CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870)

Dickens was the most successful of the English Victorian novelists, a master of sentiment and a militant reformer.

We admire Dickens for his:

- fertility of character creation
- depiction of childhood and youth
- comic creations

Major Works:

- ***A Christmas Carol*** (1843), most popular Christmas story in the English speaking world
- ***David Copperfield*** (1849-50), essentially autobiographical and Dickens' own favorite novel
- ***Bleak House*** (1852-3), the first Dickens novel with a carefully-knit plot

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY (1811-63)

Thackeray's chief subject is the contrast between human pretensions and human weakness. He excelled at portraying his own upper middle class social stratum.

His major work is ***Vanity Fair*** (1847).

THOMAS HARDY (1840-1920)

The characteristic Victorian novelist such as Dickens or Thackeray was concerned with the behavior and problems of people in a given social milieu which he described in detail.

Thomas Hardy preferred to go directly for the elemental in human behavior with a minimum of contemporary social detail. He felt that man was an alien in an impersonal universe and at the mercy of sheer chance.

Though readers assume he is a pessimist he called himself a meliorist, yearning hopefully for a better world.

Major Works:

- ***Tess of the d'Urbervilles*** (1891)
- ***Jude the Obscure*** (1895)

The revolt in ***Jude the Obscure*** against indissoluble Victorian marriage (of Jude to Arabella and Sue Bridehead to Phillotson) aroused such a storm of protest over its religious pessimism and sex themes that Hardy turned thereafter exclusively to poetry.