

The Victorian Novel

The Victorian novel reflects social changes, such as the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for democracy and the growth of towns. It became obvious during the 1840s that the first industrial civilization in the history of the world had reached a state of acute, generalized crisis that was recorded and analyzed in all the institutions of the new urban culture. It is not surprising therefore that the novel widely-read although not considered "great" art, should have found a new vitality and thanks to an important generation of writers, began to have a real impact on legislators, opinion-formers and those who could vote to change the world. This happened through the **novelistic mixing of documentary and romance, sensationalism and prophecy**. The novel allied itself to parliamentary reports on industry, agriculture, health, prison conditions and criminality.

The most characteristic theme in Victorian fiction is **class**. Although it would be oversimplified to describe the Victorian novel as a photograph of social reality, the problem of relationship between one class and another, the desire to rise and the fear of falling down the social ladder, and the problems that arose from exploitation of labour and corruption or inadequacy in the social services are all familiar and central themes in the early Victorian novel, up to the Great Exhibition of 1851. The problem was generally centred on the relationship between an individual and a group of society as a whole, and this relationship obviously had both a bad side and a good one. Than the main character's journey is usually between these two poles. It is, in any case, a fact that between 1830 and 1855, the period under consideration, **social history** became a vital part of the novel functioning both as witness and commentary.

The reason for this are not only to be found in the juxtaposition of classes and the contrast between the rich and the poor. The **spread of publishing**, of both literature and information, which began in the first years of the century and increased with the increase of literary and of the **reading public** is also responsible. This reading public was predominantly middle class and, in particular, **lower middle class**. The most popular subject for working writers in the first half of the century was, not surprisingly, **family life**, especially middle class family life. Dickens, Thackeray, The Brontë sisters and Gaskell all came from the middle class. This explains two other important and characteristic elements in Victorian fiction.

On the one hand there is the **realism** derived from the 18th-century narratives of Richardson, De Foe and Fielding, a realism that kept its precarious equilibrium between two equal and juxtaposed dimensions, **pathos and the grotesque**, which, on the other hand account for the **exaggeration** of the tones, characters and emotions which is most typically Victorian.

The villains in Victorian fiction are over villainous caricatures of evil, as we can see so often in the work of Dickens. On the other hand, the virtuous are often too virtuous and innocent and therefore the persecuted and defenseless victim designed to provide the sense of pathos which is so typical of Victorian fiction.

Children are often used to achieve this effect. Victorian upper-middle-classes felt protected by the industrial system that had created both their wealth and the new urban poverty. The rookeries and workhouses, the landscape of hunger and desperate object poverty in the cities, made the rich feel both guilty and afraid , guilty and therefore philanthropist, afraid and therefore cruelly repressive. As regards the lower middle classes these were always in danger of falling into the bottomless fit of the urban hell in the East End, the pathetic victims of circumstances and evil men alike supplied the petty bourgeois with a mirror-image of his fears.

The logic of Utilitarianism offered a sound excuse(?) but was also the ideological as well practical cage. If on the one hand all this accounts for the pathetic side of Victorian art, on the other, it also explains much about the complementary side of the coin, the grotesque. If pathos was analogous to humanitarianism and philanthropy as another manifestation, a symptom of the sense of guilt and fears of the middle classes the grotesque described the underworld according to peculiar, humorous strategies of discourse as the world of sin, vice and damnation, as the hell of the Victorian urban cosmos, the place of the sinful and therefore damned (i. e. poor). In doing so the novel gave the middle classes both an "alibi" and a way of exorcising all the ghosts of the middle classes' bad conscience.

Whenever the villains are the rich, caricature works as a filter giving the reader the possibility not to recognize his own image through the distorting mirror of the novel so that the image presented can raise both shudders of horror, disgust, and laughter. Caricature pathetic and the grotesque also worked as a projection screen for the lower middle class, the clerks and the small businessman who lived in daily fear of poverty. In fact, this class aspired to a life-style modeled on the upper classes and yet lived in constant fears of the East End, debtor's prison and ruin. Novels of poverty were an expression of this fear and also provided a way of feeling above the world in the novel since both the pathetic and the grotesque imply(?) the readers' superiority over the human subjects of the fiction.

Women in Victorian society, children, animals and pampers were inferior and defenseless, and therefore pathetic.

Pathos provides not only a feeling of superiority but at the same time also a partial identification with the pathetic subject. The abnormal and the grotesque, on the other hand, through laughter, implies the reader's refusal to identify himself with the grotesque subject and acts as a shield against bad luck and social hostility. All these fictional features best shown in Dickens, are yet to be found in a more or less accentuated way in almost all the writers of the period. The novel mirrors the sense of fear and guilt of the middle classes but in this sense it is also the mirror of the contradictory Victorian bourgeois identity and it expresses the kind of conscience willing to create a new society. The novel is also an expression of the moral puritan obligation felt by the middle classes as the need, the necessity to solve the social problems raised by industrialization.

The Victorian novel is generally set in the city, the expression of **industrial civilization**, The city is anonymous, a place where identities are lost. In the Victorian novel a myriad of characters and caricatures gives shape to the anonymous masses, making them know and recognizable. It is as though the Victorian writers wanted to make them into one large family. The novel itself was a familiar object, printed in installments, each chapter was anxiously awaited, becoming the centre of discussion and speculation as to what would happen next.

This became a kind of language readers had in common just as television serials have become today. The vividly imagined characters of Dickens and his fellow writers were almost considered real, and people would talk about poor little David, that rascal Steerforth and Micawber as though they were neighbours. This helps us see how literature had become an object of **mass consumption**, and therefore, of **industrial production**, an integral part of a system that it criticized from within without ever costing doubt upon it as a system.

Everything we have said applies perfectly to Dickens and the "Victorian mood" generally. The situation, however, was more complex. Thackeray combined the pathetic with caricature and satire. Emily Brontë's work is isolated and closer to the mood of the Romantics, nor is George Eliot's realism to be forgotten. All these writers express Victorianism, as does Anthony Trollope (1815-1888) Trollope provides an almost photographic record of a certain classes. He describes provincial ecclesiastical life. Trollope's method is to reproduce things as they are without melodrama, caricature or pathos.