



REALISM AND THE VICTORIAN ERA: THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BRITISH NOVEL

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Abstract

Realism, which emerged in France in the mid-19th century as a reaction to Romanticism, sought to depict life as it truly was. In England, this movement overlapped with the Victorian era, a period marked by industrial progress, empire expansion, and the flourishing of the novel as the dominant literary form. Writers like Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and Alfred Tennyson shaped this “Golden Age of the British Novel,” combining social critique, realism, and elements of Romantic tradition. The era also saw the rise of children’s literature, reflecting broader cultural and educational changes.

Keywords: Realism, Victorian era, romanticism, novel.

Introduction

Realism is a literary movement that started in France in the 1850s as a reaction against Romanticism and which tried to show "life as it was" in literature all over Europe. Although the concept is also questioned by some critics, it is a useful term to understand the general spirit of the second half of the 19th century: a reaction to Romanticism, a stress on reason and positivism, and a faith in the power of the artist to show reality.

In England, this movement coincided approximately with the "**Victorian era**", a period ruled by Queen Victoria (1837-1901) which meant the height of the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution. The United Kingdom expanded its borders into America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania and became the first economic and political world power. Many critics prefer to talk about the "Victorian Age", since many of the best English novelists of the period are not "realistic" in the same sense as their French or Russian counterparts. But whether more or less realistic, **NOVELS** are certainly the most important literary form of the period, excellent

novels read by an expanding educated middle class that had developed with economic prosperity Jesus (Angel Gonzalez Lopez. 2009, December 10).

The Victorian era is widely considered the ‘Golden Age of the British Novel.’ While the novel form had been in use previously, it was during this time that it became a mainstay of literary fiction. The novel’s ubiquity today can be traced back to its popularity in Victorian England.

Both printing technology and literacy improved under Queen Victoria, creating the perfect atmosphere for an increased interest in long-form fiction. Novels were often printed serially – in sections over a series of months – before being collected into complete editions. The serial format helped grow excitement and anticipation for readers, leading to improved popularity. Charles Dickens is particularly remembered for the buzz his serialized novels would generate.

Other famous novelists of the period include William Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Today, the greatest Victorian novelists are remembered for their overall artistry and their social observations and critiques.



Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Charles Dickens was the greatest novelist of his age, and continues to be one of the most widely read authors today. He wrote a tremendous number of works. He created a new type of novel – a social novel. The great contrast between rich and poor Dickens considered abnormal in a civilized society. Dickens put all his hopes in the good qualities of human nature. To the end of his life he hoped to find means to better the world he lived in. But while painting hard reality, Dickens changed his

attitude as years went by, as to the causes of poverty and exploitation (M. Bakoeva, & E. Muratova, & M. Ochilova. 2010).

Dickens wrote vividly about London life and the struggles of the poor, but in a good-humoured fashion (with grotesque characters) which was acceptable to readers of all classes. His early works such as the *Pickwick Papers* (1836) are masterpieces of comedy. Later his works became darker, without losing his genius for caricature: *Oliver Twist* (1837), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1861). *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is the popular story of Mr. Scrooge visited by the four Christmas ghosts (George H. Ford. 1975).



Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

Whether or not Alfred Tennyson was the greatest of the Victorian poets, as affirmed by many critics today, there is no doubt that in his own lifetime he was the most popular of poets.⁴

Tennyson's work spans genres, with influences from both Romanticism and Realism, leading some contemporaries to criticize him for being overly sentimental. His early poetry's powerful medieval imagery served as a major influence for the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of mid-century artists dedicated to reviving the Italian Renaissance and adopting intense detail and color.

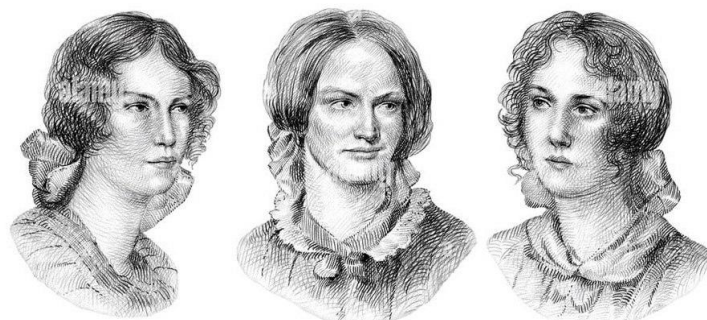
Much of Tennyson's work was based on mythological themes from ancient Greece and Rome. This can be seen in his famous poem 'In Memoriam A.H.H.' – a long-form work written as an elegy to his close friend Arthur Hallam.²



Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Jane Austen shared the chronological time with the Romantics, but she shares some of the features of Realism. She has a unique talent and cannot really be assigned to any group. Her novels (*Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* (1816)) remain as popular and critically acclaimed as ever. Her primary interest is people, not ideas, and her achievement lies in the meticulously exact presentation of human situations and in the delineation of characters that are really living creatures. Her novels deal with the life of rural land-owners, seen from a woman's point of view, have little action but are full of humour and true dialogue.¹

The Brontë Sisters



Emily
Wuthering Heights

Charlotte
Jane Eyre

Anne
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

The Brontë sisters

Victorian novelists, particularly Emily Brontë (1818-1848), who wrote *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the epitome of the Romantic novel, wild passion set against the Yorkshire moors. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) wrote *Jane Eyre* (1847), a love story of great realism.



Writing for Children

A new genre arose during the Victorian era – children’s literature. Although children had always been an audience for certain stories and tales, until the 1800’s authors had not written commercially with the goal of entertaining child readers. Both Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm collected and preserved traditional tales at the beginning of the century. And as literacy began to improve and social programs fought to protect childhood and ban child labor, children became increasingly popular as a commercial focus, leading to a boom in children’s literature.

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