The Victorian Novel

by Martin Blocksidge



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Scope of Topic
An introduction to four Victorian novels.

BOOKS TO READ
Great Expectations by Charles Dickens
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte
The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot
Jude the Obscure by Thomas Hardy

NOTES

Victorian England saw the emergence of mass literacy, and thus came to attach enormous importance to the written word, especially in the days before radio, television and the video machine could take alternative forms of entertainment into the home. All sorts of conditions of men and women read books or periodicals, and we consequently have a huge harvest of writing from Victorian times, both fictional and non-fictional. Novelists reached a very wide audience, often publishing their works in serial form in magazines or journals first, and issuing them as books later. Books were costly and substantial objects in the nineteenth century as the modern paperback did not exist.

By far the most enjoyable way to appreciate the textures of Victorian life is to read Victorian novels. The nineteenth century was an age extremely rich in fiction, and this pamphlet will introduce you to four important and satisfying novels by four of the age's greatest novelists. They will show you something of the range, as well as of the greatness of Victorian fiction.

Charles Dickens

Although the Victorians have been accused of being smug and self-satisfied, one of the most dominant features of Victorian literature is unease and self-criticism. If the age believed in progress and improvement (and it did), it was by no means insensitive to the problems which it found on its doorstep. Perhaps the author who embodies the flavour of Victorian England most obviously is Charles Dickens (1812-1870). Dickens is not only one of Victorian England's most implacable critics, but he has probably done more than any other author actually to create for us many of our mental images of the period. Much of what we think of as Victorian England is Dickens's England. He had, for example, a significant role in the creation of the modern mythology of Christmas, most obviously in his short novel *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Just about all Dickens's novels contain hugely comic elements, but more than any other Victorian author, Dickens had an eye for corruption, exploitation and degradation. He was particularly sensitive to the malign power of wealth, and also to the unsympathetic way in which adults treated children. (Indeed, a concentration upon the intensities of childhood experience is a common theme in all the novels I shall be talking about in this pamphlet.)

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Great Expectations (1860-1) presents a narrative in which the central figure grows from boy to man and in the process is pitted against many of the hostile influences of Victorian England. *Great Expectations* is a first-person narrative, exploring the central character's feelings from the inside. *Great Expectations* offers one of Dickens's most original, unexpected and exciting plots. It centres around a mysterious arrangement whereby Pip, the central character, is plucked from an unpromising life as a blacksmith's apprentice in a country village, and sent to London to live the life of a gentleman as the result of money provided for him by an anonymous benefactor. The identity of this benefactor is revealed only at a relatively late stage of the story, with unexpected effects for Pip.

The novel is divided into three parts. In the first one we are made powerfully aware of Pip's deprivations: he is an orphan, an unwanted extra mouth to be fed by his neurotically domineering elder sister and her simple-minded blacksmith husband, Joe. Alongside a powerful portrait of a young boy's guilt and repression, Dickens enjoys himself by creating a host of grotesque, comically self-important village figures. These are thrown into frightening relief by the image of the decayed manor house just outside the village, and its mysterious, almost surreal inhabitant, Miss Havisham.

The first part of the novel is full of powerful images: of the marsh country at night, of escaped convicts lurking there, of the nightmare nature of Miss Havisham's house. The second part of the novel transports us instantly to a London full of dirt and grease and narrow alleyways; a London which Dickens will never quite allow to become merely picturesque. Again, there are memorable characters: Mr Jaggers, Pip's guardian, and his enigmatic assistant, Wemmick; his friend Herbert Pocket and his chaotic family, and the hauntingly attractive but tantalising Estella. The third part of the novel charts Pip's attempts to come to terms finally with the cultural opposites of village poverty and urban prosperity.

Although a wealthy man, Dickens was perpetually suspicious of wealth itself. Pip's prosperity as a 'gentleman' in London cannot last. Pip is corrupted by both wealth and status and the novel ends up questioning the whole notion of what being a gentleman in Victorian England actually meant. All the greatest novels of Dickens's maturity offer a sustained scepticism about the capitalist and industrialised society into which Victorian England had developed.

Charlotte Bronte

The position of women in Victorian society became eventually a major political issue, and it was against the deprivations of Victorian womanhood that the suffragettes were fighting in the early years of the twentieth century. Many prominent Victorian novelists were women, and some of the problems which women faced are inevitably reflected in their work. Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) was particularly drawn, by experience as well as by imagination, to the plight of the unmarried and financially deprived women whose lives she dramatises in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853).

Like Pip, Jane Eyre suffers from being an orphan and therefore a dependant. Like Pip, her guardian is unsympathetic, but there resemblances end. There is no way in which Jane's femaleness renders her the weaker vessel. Although Charlotte Bronte was always aware of the economic and emotional deprivations felt by the single woman, Jane Eyre is strongly and positively in charge of her own life. In a book which offers a great deal by way of human suffering, it is difficult not to be impressed with Jane's resilience. She is sent by her guardian to school at Lowood. Charlotte Bronte paints a grim picture of a kind of school which seems to crop up with great frequency in Victorian novels and in which the human resources of the pupils are stretched to the uttermost. The degree of suffering and deprivation which Charlotte

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Bronte presents might seem almost too much to take, were it not for the fact that much of what she says is based on direct experience of a school which she attended herself and in which two of her sisters perished through ill-treatment.

But Jane Eyre undergoes a variety of further adventures. For all the fact that the novel presents the story of a respectable middle-class spinster, its central character experiences a number of extraordinary things in a life full of movement and quest: the whole gothic world of Mr Rochester's house and the strange story of his wife; the reverend St. John Rivers and his plans for taking Jane to India as a missionary; the dramatic and charged landscapes in which so many of the events take place; and the ill-defined feelings that there are supernatural powers lurking. You may well think that this all sounds like fantasy, yet so much which happens in Charlotte Bronte's novels is closely related to her own experience. Nor is her fiction merely written for a female audience: the power and vigour of her emotional world are instantly accessible to anyone, and *Jane Eyre* is certainly not short of incident.

George Eliot

It is worth noting that, in order to counter unfair prejudice, Charlotte and Emily Bronte published their novels under male pseudonyms. So too, did George Eliot (1819-1880), whose real name was Mary Anne Evans. Her reason for adopting a pseudonym was to conceal her identity from her family.

George Eliot, although a Londoner for most of her adult life, returned in her fiction to the Warwickshire in which she grew up. Indeed *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), although taking place in and around the fictional town of St Ogg's, contains a good deal of autobiographical material. George Eliot had enjoyed a very close childhood relationship with her brother Isaac who subsequently turned against her when she went to London and lived with an already married man.

The central characters of the novel are a brother and sister, Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and the admiration which Maggie feels for Tom is clearly derived from George Eliot's feelings towards her own brother. The first two sections of the novel present a wonderfully indulgent and sympathetic view of childhood: its joys, difficulties and crises which seem so important at the time, yet from an adult point of view are really so trivial. Maggie is emotional, headstrong, yet refined and intelligent, Tom, 'the young sultan', is full of masculine assertiveness, prone to flaunt his feelings of superiority, He has forthright practical views, the complete opposite of his romantic and intense sister.

The novel combines a number of concerns. It is a witty presentation of small-town life in the mid-century. Mrs. Tullliver's family, the Dodsons, provide the novelist with a wonderful opportunity to show us the petty bourgeois respectability of prosperous provincial citizens, and whilst the opposition between Maggie and the deadly force of conformity is one of the main themes of the novel, George Eliot is not short of humour in her treatment of the matter.

As the novel's title suggests, the book is about other things too. The Mill itself is the family home and business of the Tullivers. The feckless yet essentially innocent Mr Tulliver is forced to sell it or face bankruptcy, and much of the second half of the novel presents Tom's quest to regain the Mill for the family. It is by this stage that the separation between brother and sister has become almost complete. Maggie is thrown more and more back into her own world. The guilt she is made to feel by her family over small misdemeanours hardens into a genuine desire for self-sacrifice which blights her emotional life, especially her relationships with other men, and hastens the novel's tragic ending.

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Although celebrated in her life, and often regarded after her death as a 'thinker', George Eliot's novels, and *The Mill on the Floss* in particular, are full of witty, ironic description allied to a genuine sympathy with the human lot. George Eliot's characters often suffer, but they are created with a fullness and intimacy which makes the reader feel very close to them.

Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1895. It thus dates from the last years of Queen Victoria's reign, and was the last major novel which Hardy (1840-1928) wrote, though he spent the rest of his literary career producing a large body of poetry. If you were to read this novel after the three which have already been discussed, you would almost certainly notice some important differences.

Like George Eliot, Hardy took as setting for most of his novels the part of the country in which he had grown up. This was Dorset, which he called Wessex in his novels, and to which he returned to live for much of his later life. Hardy is justly celebrated, in a series of novels ranging from *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), as a chronicler of rural life. However, there is nothing sentimental in his view of the English peasantry at the end of the nineteenth century. The old order in rural England was changing, and it left much suffering in its wake. Hardy's view of human nature and the likely outcome of human endeavour is almost uremittingly tragic.

Jude the Obscure has some similarities with the other novels I have been discussing. Like Pip in *Great Expectations*, Jude starts life with nothing: he is poor and orphaned. Like Jane Eyre he is forced to make his way in and through the world as his character prompts him. Unlike Jane Eyre, though, he is not repaid for his efforts or his integrity: there is no God in this novel specially caring for the 'poor orphan child'. *Jude the Obscure* is not primarily about the countryside in a way that most of Hardy's earlier ones were. For the most part we follow Jude through a variety of urban locations. This, Hardy's last major novel, seems almost to proclaim the death of rural England. One of the earliest visual images in the book is of derelict cottages in Jude's own village, ready to be pulled down.

Perhaps the best known feature of the novel is the idealistic desire of the young Jude to become an undergraduate at Christminster (a thinly disguised portrait of Oxford), whose towers and spires he sees from afar as a child. The novel thus opens up a number of issues about the social exclusiveness of the university and the difficulty that a young man of humble origins has in educating himself and rising to higher things. Especially as Jude is particularly susceptible to female charm, Hardy was perhaps the first English novelist to write in a sustained way about physical love. In his works, characters are frequently tormented by physical passion; in *Jude* physical love becomes very important indeed. Not only are Jude's lofty educational aims subverted by it, but Jude's life is dominated by the presence of two dominant, attractive, but very different women. He first meets Arabella Donne when he is passing the pig farm where she works. His cousin Sue Bridehead works first in an ecclesiastical supplier's shop and later trains as a teacher. Thus the difference between them is clear. Arabella is all animal energy and sexual magnetism. Sue is spirit rather than body. Arabella enjoys using her female charms. Sue rebels against the conventions under which intelligent women had to live.

Hence *Jude the Obscure* begins to seem recognisably the most 'modern' of our four novels. It raises important issues of a social, political and religious kind, in a way which offended some contemporary readers. Indeed a copy of the book was ostentatiously burned by the Bishop of Wakefield as testimony to *Jude the Obscure*'s essential depravity. Not only was the novel

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asking serious questions about such things as the position of the Universities and the Church, it also presented Jude and Sue living adulterously. Its concern to present the physicality of love points it very much in the direction of the twentieth century, as does the implication that men and women live in a Godless world in which there is little certainty of help from any kind of benign power.

You will see that there are obvious differences between these novels, particularly in the style and outlook of their individual authors. Equally, you will see how Victorian novelists often felt themselves drawn to comparable themes and characters, such as the relationship between the individual and wider social convention or the desire of characters originally deprived to 'make good' in some way. These issues are obviously ones which preoccupied Victorian society in general, but in these novels you will find them foregrounded in a particularly powerful and compelling way.

FURTHER READING

Dickens's other first person narrative is *David Copperfield*. Dickens deals with the nature of Victorian society in a larger scale in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, and confronts the question of how the industrial revolution has affected the individual in *Hard Times*. His earlier novels tend to be more lighthearted, and it is well worth reading *Pickwick Papers* or *Martin Chuzzlewit* to understand why Dickens was so popular in his lifetime.

If you want to find out more about Dickens the man, the most recent biography is by Peter Ackroyd; there is also one by Edgar Johnson called *Charles Dickens: his Tragedy and Triumph*.

Charlotte Bronte's output is smaller. Her other great novel is *Villette*, but *Shirley* is worth reading too. Equally, if you are an enthusiast it is worth reading her sister Emily's novel *Wuthering Heights*. The best biography of Charlotte Bronte is by Winifred Gerin, who has also written separate studies of Emily, Ann and Branwell Bronte.

George Eliot's other two relatively short novels of provincial life are *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, but her masterpiece is undoubtedly *Middlemarch*. To see her working in a very different sphere indeed, it is worth trying the later *Daniel Deronda*. The best biography of George Eliot is by Gordon S. Haight.

Hardy's sequence of Wessex novels is a substantial one. Perhaps *The Return of the Native*, *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are the most characteristic, though *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is possibly his finest study of a single character. There are two biographies, one by Robert Gittings (in two volumes entitled *Young Thomas Hardy* and *The Older Hardy*), the other one by Michael Millgate.

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