

Victorian Literature and the changing social structure

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Abstract

That the literature of a particular era is intimately and even originally connected with its social background is too patent a truism to need reiteration. A history of English literature, according to Compton-Rickett. “Needs to be limned on a background of its social activities, in order to be clearly seen and nicely appraised.” It is particularly true of the Victorian age. Almost all the writers of the age show in their creative a keen awareness of their social critics. Compton-Rickett observes: “The closer approximation of literature to social life is very marked in the Victorian era. Kingsley writes passionate social tracts in the guise of a story; cheap bread inspires the muse of Ebenezer Eliot; Elizabeth Barrett voices The Cry of the Children and Thomas Hood immortalizes the weary sempstress and the despairing unfortunate, Carlye, after excursions into German literature and European history plunges into the political problems of the day. Ruskin, starting as critic of the art of painting, turns in the new century to the more complex art of life, and no man of letters has tackled industrial problems with greater insight and more brilliant suggestiveness.”.

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Introduction

The Victorian era was an age of rapid flux and baffling complexity. Moody and Lovett aver: “Never before, not even in the troubled seventeenth century had there been such rapid and sweeping changes in the social fabric of England: and never before had literature been so closely in league or so openly at war, with the forces of social life.” It is hazardous to sum up an age in a formula; and it is particularly hazardous to sum up in this fashion the Victorian age. Two features make such a thing particularly difficult:

(i) The very rapid and sweeping changes which the age witnessed

and

(ii) The complexity of social forces in the age at any given moment.

The words of A.C. Ward are very apt here “One of the irritating characteristics of the Victorian age is its refusal to be covered by any of the commendatory or derogatory labels from time to time attached to it. It was an Age of Faith and an Age of doubt; An age of Morality and of Hypocrisy, of Prosperity and Poverty, of Idealism and Materialism, of Progress and Decline, of Splendour and Squalor. It was a solemn age yet it produces more humorous writers than any other single period: it was advanced in intellect yet immature in emotion. And though as an historical period it lasted

for more than sixty years, disintegrating forces were pecking at its foundations forty years or more in advance of Queen Victoria's death in 1901." The literature of the age reflects this complexity and is also influenced by it.

The two most important features of the Victorian Age were

- (i) The development of science; and
- (ii) The progress of democracy

We now propose to discuss at some length these features in all their important ramifications and, of course, their impact on contemporary literature. Now, for the development of experimental science.

The rapid development of physical in Victorian age transformed the material environment of the people and both directly as well as indirectly made itself felt in the literature of the age. The age witnessed a great outpouring of scientific literature. Such epoch making works as Darwin's Origin of the Species came out in this age. But more important than such direct influence was the indirect and almost ubiquitous than such direct influence which rapid development of physical science exerted on Victorian literature. "The advancement of science", says Compton_Rickett, "has transformed man's outlook upon life and has affected every channel of intellectual activity." In what respects did this transformation come about? First, it encouraged a materialist outlook. The "other-worldliness" gave place to "this-worldliness." Commercialisation of all human activity soon followed accompanied by a marked shift in the values of life. Materialism and commercialism inevitably lead men to restlessness as much as hectic activity. The "busy hum of men" was alien to all spiritual repose. Well could have another Wordsworth lamented:

The world is too much with us; late and soon No doubt, Victorian scientists started "seeing" much in Nature, but not in wordsworthian sense. To them Nature was non-human as a spider or a weed which is so nonchalantly cut up and read lectures upon.

Secondly, the development of science was instrumental in nurturing among the literary writers, the peculiar scientific temper. Some of them even had recourse to "scientific" methods in their literary works. Tennyson, for instance, followed as a poet the scientific method of description which puts a premium on the accuracy of detail. His nature poetry is, according to Compton-Rickett, "like the work of an inspired scientist." In the historical literature of the age also the scientific temper seems to be at work. Carlyle, who was bitterly opposed to science in other ways, Buckle and many others, adopted as historians the scientific method of discovering and orientating accurate facts and relating them to the psyche of an age. The method of induction and rigorous research was essentially scientific. In the real of fiction too, the invisible hand of science was definitely at work. About this aspect Compton-Rickett maintains: "In fiction, the scientific spirit is not less discernible: the problems of heredity and environment preoccupying the attention of the novelists. The social problem [sic] of the earlier Victorians, of Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, Kingsley and Reade, give place to points in biology, psychology, pathology. The influence of Herbert Spencer and of Comte meets us in the pages of George Eliot: while the analytical methods of science are even more subtly followed in the fiction of George Eliot, the early writings of Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and the intimate Wessex studies of Thomas Hardy."

Thirdly, the development of science caused a marked spiritual disturbance which often took the shape of skepticism and, sometimes, of patent agonisticism. Mid-Victorian poetry is particularly shot with the tincture of this spiritual disturbance caused by sudden crumbling of the age-old edifice of Christian values. Illustrating this point Compton-Rickett observes: "The questioning note in Clough, the pessimism of James Thomson, the wistful melancholy of Matthew Arnold, the fatalism of Fitzgerald, all testify to the skeptical tendencies evoked by scientific research. It did not kill poetry, but it stifled for a while the lyric impulse and overweighed verse with speculative thought." The last sentence is overweighted verse with speculative thought." The last sentence is over-true, and should with advantage be considered with respect to the poetry of the Victorian age to see the striking difference which the development of science brought about in the general complexion of poetry. Only a handful of writers such as Browning remained undisturbed. Browning could write: God's in His Heaven –All's right with the world.

Objective:

This paper intends to study the Victorian literature and its relevance in modern times

Genesis

The Industrial Revolution ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity. But on the side of debt, it converted the "merry England" into a sooty and squalid England and it also gave rise to a number of social problems which are the inevitable bane of industrialization. With the conversion of the agrarian economy into industrial economy was created, on the one hand, a new class of privileged millowners and big industrialists and, on the other, a huge horde of ill-clothed and ill-fed labourers whose rights were yet to be protected over the years by a long succession of legislative measures. There was a virtual exodus of people from the country to the numerous towns which had started resounding with the grind and buzz of heavy machinery. The policy of laissez faire as expounded first by Adam Smith in the wealth of Nations was seized upon by the Victorian political economists like Mill, Malthus and Ricardo, and applied to the working of the new industrial system. This application was tantamount to the denial of all rights to the labour except perhaps the right to starve. Mayhew in his work London Poor paints a harrowing picture of the miserable life on the working classes of Victorian London. The intransigent political economists for a number of years succeeded in preventing the government from saving the poor from the merciless exploitation of the capitalists. Thus the Industrial Revolution proved much less than an unalloyed blessing.

The so-called political economy and pontifical utterances of its champions did not go unattached. Carlyle and Ruskin did their best to strike at the foundations of this "science" which Ruskin called "nescience." Whereas Carlyle spoke as an inspired prophet, Ruskin combined the inspiration of a prophet with the hard core of dialectical skill that he displayed effectively in *Unto This Last* which he called the greatest work of his life and which, incidentally, influenced Gandhi a great deal by helping him to form many opinions of his own. Most of Ruskin's later works are imbued with the spirit of social reform. Dickens also displays in his novels a soft corner for the miserable poor, their wretched dwelling-places and their poor and squalid lives. His novel *Oliver Twist*, for instance, contains some very realistic pictures of London slums, and *Hard Times* is an unveiled and calculated attack on the contemporary political economy of the school of

Gradgrind who figures among the chief protagonists of the novel. Dickens is nothing if not a social satirist. As Compton-Rickett puts it, “for the motley multitude that pour through the streets, for the hole-and-corner places of the City, for London as an incomprehensible terrifying, fascinating, delightful personality-every brick and stone alive with tragic humor-Dickens remains unrivalled.” Dickens was not only a realist, however, but a satirist, and a very brilliant satirist at that. We cannot entirely agree with Cross who opines: “The attacks of Dickens on science and political economy are hysterical curiosities.” If we remove the elements of fantasy we will get at a very small but a very genuine core of hard common sense.

Basically, the whole progress of English political history is the movement from uncompromising royalism to uncompromising under the impact of various operating factors. Starting with the year 1832, several Reform Bills were enacted which progressively granted voting rights to more and more people, ultimately enduring in universal adult suffrage. As a result the House of Common remained, in Compton-Rickett’s words, “no longer an oligarchy.” It was only then that the expectations raised by the French Revolution (1789) came to be fulfilled. The impact of democracy on the literature of the age is evident. One of its important manifestations is the keen interest which the writers of the age evinced in the hopes and fears of the poor people and in “low life” as a whole. Most Victorians, it is true, believed in a kind of caste system and what Thackeray called snobbery, and sniffed at each other like dogs when two of them met. But almost all writers stood for the demolition of these artificial social barriers and recognition of the inalienable humanity of the underdog. No writer worthy of note seems to be unaware of the process of rapid democratization of the political system. The common man comes and stays as the hero of most works of literature. This process brought in its wake increased educational opportunities for the poor. There was thus a rapid expansion of the reading public who became the new patrons of literature. The writer was thus compelled to cater for these new classes of readers. The democratic spirit of Victorian literature has thus to be studied with reference to the readers also. The unprecedented expansion of journalistic activity is also to be considered likewise. The serialized novels of Thackeray, Dickens and others are a peculiar product of their age.

Prudishness of the times

As regards sex, the Victorians were extremely prudish. Even a trivial impropriety of dress (not to speak of the modern “topless” and the “mini skirt” which, in the opinion of the house in the annual debate of the Oxford Union held in 1966, “does not go far enough”) would send the Victorian martinets into paroxysms of rage. They were indeed very touchy about sex which they treated with a hush-hush incommodiousness. Even Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot and others who were stark realist in everything else, did not lift the lid off the animality of their characters. They approach the beast of sex very gingerly, and with gloves on. Thackeray, who gives in *Vanity Fair* the interesting career of a smart little meretrix (Becky Sharp), does not show even by suggestion the little animal that is her. All this is done to avoid shocking the susceptibilities of the readers. Victorian parents were quite domineering. Even now-a-days, when a teenager finds her father not very forward in letting her have her own way with her “dates”, she can be heard complaining : oh, I have a Victorian sort of papa!” Mr. Murdstone’s cruelty to David Copperfield is an instance of the authority which a Victorian father exercised.

Even too much of drinking was held culpable in the Victorian era. Gone were the days of coffee-house boozing so rampant in the eighteenth century which produced such lovers of wine as Addison, Steele, and Dr. Johnson. The last named wrote (it seems in earnest): "He who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy." And Walter Scott wrote in 1825: "Sots are excluded from the best company." Dickens eyes drunkards with sinister fascination. In his early novels he indeed deals with intemperance in his usual light-hearted vein, but in later works he treats the subject with grim and didactic purposiveness. Dickens is, in fact, reflecting the marked shift in public opinion and taste.

The NINETEENTH CENTURY was the great age of the English novel. This was partly because this essentially middle-class form of literary art was bound to flourish increasingly as the middle classes rose in power and importance, partly because of the steady increase of the reading public with the growth of lending libraries, the development of publishing in the modern sense, and other phenomena which accompanied this increase, and partly because the novel was vehicle best equipped to present a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and moral values by people who were recognizably like the people encountered by readers, and this was the kind of picture of life the middle-class reader wanted to read about. The novel, like the medieval fabliau, is what Northrop Frye calls a "low mimetic" literary form.

Dickens the doyen of the age

The purely escapist impulse to read about a high aristocratic world of ideal gallantry and beauty is as lacking in the typical Victorian novel-reader as the desire to see the fundamental problems of human experience projected imaginatively and symbolically through the presentation of "great" figures acting out their destiny on the grand scale.

The Victorian novel-reader did want to be entertained, and in a sense he wanted to escape. But he wanted to be entertained with a minimum of literary convention, a minimum "esthetic distance." He wanted to be close to what he was reading about, to have as little suspension of disbelief as possible, to pretend, indeed, that literature was journalism, that fiction was history. Of course, the novelists fooled them- at least the great ones did. The ordinary reader may have had the illusion that what he was happening around him without the modifying effect of literary form and imagination. In fact, meaning that reached far deeper than the superficial pattern of social action suggested to the casual reader; the novels of Dickens, for example, are full of symbolic images and situations suggesting such notions as the desperate isolation of the individual (the grotesque and the eccentric in Dickens's characters become almost the norm, suggesting that life is atomistic and irrational and that patterns of communication can never be real). But it has been left for modern criticism to investigate this aspect of Victorian fiction.

The great majority of borrowers from Mudie's libraries and readers of serialized novels in magazines wanted to read about life as they thought they knew it. The impulse that makes modern television viewers so devoted to plays of ordinary life, dealing with people like themselves with whom they can identify themselves, but liberated by plot from the dullness of life as they actually live it- this impulse helped to create the English novel and to sustain it during its brilliant nineteenth-century career. That this indicate a gap between the demands of art and the expectations of its audience need not surprise us; such a gap is a commonplace in literary of its audience and can be read by later

generations for different and perhaps profounder reasons. But the same can be said of the best Elizabethan drama. The requirements and expectations of a given audience can help to explain the rise and flourishing of a given literary form, but cannot explain its true nature or value, except with reference to ephemeral works produced by hack writers merely to satisfy the contemporary demand.

Dickens towering Victorian

With Charles Dickens (1812-70), journalism and melodrama are gathered into the novel to give it new life and a new and important place in middle-class entertainment. If he learned something from eighteenth-century novelists, especially Smollett, he learned even more from his own circumstances and observation, combing an extraordinary relish for the odd, the colorful, and the dramatic in urban life and in human character with a keen eye for the changes which the Industrial Revolution brought into England in his lifetime, an acute consciousness of his own lower-middle-class origin and the unhappy circumstances of his own childhood (which included his father's imprisonment for debt and his own much resented employment at a blacking factory as a youngster), and sentimentally humanitarian attitude toward human problems. Beginning as little more than a comic journalist, he soon discovered his special gifts as a novelist, gifts which enable him to present to his delighted readers stories set in his own day or the recent past in which the vitality of the characters, the enthusiastic savoring of their physical environment, the movement from comedy to pathos and from compassion to horror, and the sheer high spirits with which he rendered eccentrics, villains, unfortunates, hypocrites, social climbers, nouveaux riches, criminals, innocents, bureaucrats, exhibitionists, self-deceivers, roisterers, and confidence men, human oddities of all kinds each with his own physical and moral individuality and each involved in a rich pattern of interacting lives played out against social background whose sights and sounds and smells were rendered with a vivid particularity- in which all this is presented with an almost reckless profusion.

Dickens began with a great sense of life and little sense of form capturing the individual oddity, the extravagant moment, with remarkable skill, and then marking time, as it were, until he could introduce another such oddity and another such moment. Sketches by 'Boz' (1836) are lively journalism merely, but with the *Pickwick Papers* (issued in monthly parts in 1836 and 1837) we can see him feeling his way from humorous journalism to something more. The full title is significant: *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club containing a Faithful Record of the Perambulations, Perils, Travels Adventures and Sporting Transactions of the corresponding Members.*

This reminds us not only that the *Pickwick Papers* were originally planned as a series of sketches to accompany a set of sporting prints, but also of the picaresque tradition in which Dickens began his career as a novelist. *Pickwick* began as burlesque, but soon moved into a more substantial kind of picaresque comedy, where the interest lies not only in particular absurd incidents but also, and more significantly, in the way in which given characters react to new kinds of environment. Each of the characters soon develops his own moral, physical, and emotional qualities, and the interest is kept up by showing how these qualities reveal themselves in new and unexpected situations. the simplicity,

benevolence, and harmless egotism of Mr. Pickwick are placed in ever more testing circumstances, and the benign character who sets out in order to observe the world which he thinks he understands it faced again and again by situation which affront all his assumptions, threaten his status as benevolent observer, and lead him in the end, after the most violent experience of the indifference and intractability of the world of other people, to retirement and closed circle of his friends, followers, and dependents, on whom he can confidently turn his benevolent observation. But the interest does not lie merely in our watching the behavior of Mr. Pickwick and his friends as they react to different environments: the characters themselves are drawn with lively humor, and the individual traits of Alfred Jingle or Sam Weller are pleasing and amusing in their own right. Further, in taking his characters through various parts of England, Dickens is able to give us a sense of the early nineteenth-century social scene, a feeling of English town and country just before the Industrial Revolution changed its face so startlingly, in the last phase of the great coaching days before the railways put an end forever to that phase of English life. Everybody in the book travels, and traveling means coaches and horses and- perhaps most of all- inns and innwards. Inns are focal points, where characters meet, ways cross, and different kinds of conviviality can be illustrated. Moreover throughout Pickwick there runs a steady vein of incidental satire- of electioneering methods, in the famous Eatanswill election, or political journalism, in the two Eatanswill editors; of lawyers and the law; of social convention, and innumerable other phases of English life, caricatured with rich comic effect through such characters as Mrs. Leo hunter, Mr. Nupkins, Dodson and Fog, and so many more. Burlesque, caricature, satire, comedy, the presentation of the English scene, the panoramic view of life- these different aspects of the book are never fully drawn together; they do not always rise out of each other but exist side by side, so that Pickwick remains episodic, a beside book to be taken up and put down at any point, a picaresque novel which stops simply because the author can think of no more to say.

Conclusion

So, Victorian literature is just literature written during the reign of Queen Victoria in Great Britain. My favorite British comedian, Eddie Izzard, refers to Queen Victoria as 'one of England's more frumpy queens.' You can take a look at her picture and decide for yourself. So, Queen Victoria reigned from 1837-1901. Currently her reign is the longest of any British monarch - 63 years and 7 months - but it looks like our girl, Queen Elizabeth II, is well-poised to steal that record.

A huge growth in population. During Victoria's reign, the population of England more than doubled, from 14 million to 32 million.

There were also some significant improvements in technology. The Victorian era slightly overlaps with Britain's Industrial Revolution, which saw big changes to the way that people lived, worked, and traveled. These improvements in technology offered a lot of opportunities for the people in England but also represented a major upheaval in regards to how people lived their lives and interacted with the world. Those of us who were alive before the Internet should be

able to relate. I mean, the Internet has made a lot of things easier, but it's also brought a lot of issues about personal privacy, how we communicate and the potential for terrible things, like identity theft.

Another characteristic of the Victorian era are changing world views. In addition to the major developments in technology, there were emerging scientific beliefs, like Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and those things were changing how people in England thought about themselves and how they interacted with the world around them. Most notably, a lot of people were distancing themselves from the church.

And finally, there were poor conditions for the working class. The Industrial Revolution led to the distance between the haves and have-nots growing at a really high rate, and a lot of people (especially artists, like writers) felt obligated to speak out against what they believed to be societal injustices, which if you've followed any of the 'We are the 99%' movement, it might sound familiar to things that are happening right now.

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