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**The Victorian Novel (1837–1901)**

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# The Victorian Novel (1837–1901)

## 1. Introduction & Executive Summary

The Victorian novel (1837–1901) represents the undisputed golden age of British narrative fiction. During the sixty-four-year reign of Queen Victoria, the novel evolved from a widely disparaged commercial medium into the preeminent engine of British cultural life, overtaking poetry and drama as the chief instrument for artistic expression, social inquiry, and ideological debate.

As Great Britain transformed from a predominantly agrarian society into the world's leading industrial and imperial power, the novel served as both a mirror and a catalyst. Novelists did not merely reflect their changing world; they actively diagnosed its crises—urban poverty, class polarization, secularization, gender inequality, and imperial expansion. Through expansive narrative structures, memorable characterizations, and sophisticated modes of social realism, the Victorian novel established a profound dialogue between art and society that continues to influence world literature today.

*"The novel is the one bright book of life. Books lie, or try to, but the novel as a class can't lie. It tells the truth about life in all its complexity, messiness, and moral struggle."*

— D.H. Lawrence, *Reflecting on the Victorian Realist Tradition*

## 2. Material Conditions of Production and Consumption

To understand the Victorian novel's thematic structure and formal pacing, one must analyze the material, industrial, and economic mechanisms that governed its publication and distribution. Victorian literature was fundamentally shaped by print capitalism, technological breakthroughs in presswork, and commercial lending institutions.

## 2.1 Modes of Serialization

The vast majority of canonical Victorian novels were not originally consumed as single bound volumes. Instead, they reached readers in serialized installments, fundamentally altering how plots were constructed and experienced.

- **The Twenty-Part Monthly Issue:** The standard model for Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. A novel appeared across 20 monthly parts (published as 19 parts, with the final part being a double issue). Each issue contained exactly 32 pages of text, two steel-etching illustrations (by artists like Phiz or George Cruikshank), and a substantial advertising supplement (e.g., the 'Dickens Advertiser'). Plicing was affordable at one shilling per part.
- **Periodical Serialization:** Novels were frequently serialized in popular literary periodicals before book publication. Weekly journals like Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* demanded concise, rapid pacing and frequent cliffhangers. Monthly magazines like *The Cornhill Magazine* (edited by Thackeray) or *Macmillan's Magazine* catered to a more educated, upper-middle-class audience, allowing for longer descriptive passages and subtle character development.
- **Structural and Narrative Consequences:** Because authors wrote while installments were actively being published, they maintained a live feedback loop with their audience. Serialized writing demanded intricate subplots, memorable secondary characters, and recurring motifs so readers could retain narrative threads across a full year or more. Crucially, authors could modify character fates or plot trajectories in response to public sales or critical commentary.

## 2.2 Circulating Libraries and the 'Three-Decker'

When published in complete book form, novels were typically issued as three-volume sets, universally known as 'three-deckers.' Priced at half a guinea per volume (31 shillings and 6 pence total), a new novel cost roughly half a working man's monthly wage, rendering direct ownership impossible for the vast majority of Britons.

- **Mudie's Select Library and Market Monopoly:** Because purchasing three-deckers was prohibitively expensive, commercial lending libraries dominated

the literary market. The most powerful of these was Mudie's Select Library, founded by Charles Edward Mudie in 1842. For an annual subscription of one guinea (£1 1s), members could borrow one volume at a time.

- **Institutional Censorship and Moral Gatekeeping:** Because Mudie's purchased thousands of copies of a novel upon release, Charles Mudie held immense leverage over publishers and authors. He operated as a strict moral gatekeeper, rejecting any novel containing explicit depictions of sexuality, religious skepticism, or social subversion that might offend middle-class family readers gathering around the domestic hearth.
- **The Collapse of the System (1894):** By 1894, changing economic conditions, the rise of cheap public libraries, and subscriber exhaustion with artificially inflated three-volume structures led circulating libraries to ban three-deckers. Novels shifted almost overnight to single-volume editions priced at 6 shillings, paving the way for the late-Victorian and Modernist formal transformations.

### 3. Core Thematic Ideologies and Social Debates

Victorian novels were intensely engaged with the pressing social, political, and philosophical controversies of their day. Authors viewed narrative fiction as a vital public venue for diagnosing society's ailments.

#### 3.1 The 'Condition-of-England' Question & Industrial Realism

Coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1839, the 'Condition-of-England' question referred to the terrifying social fractures produced by industrialization, urban slum growth, trade union conflict, and the rise of Chartism. Novelists sought to bridge the gap between Disraeli's 'Two Nations'—the rich and the poor—who lived in total ignorance of each other's existence.

- **Oliver Twist & Nicholas Nickleby (Charles Dickens):** Exposed the horrific conditions of Yorkshire schools and London workhouses under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.
- **Mary Barton & North and South (Elizabeth Gaskell):** Explored class conflict, Chartist agitation, and the human cost of industrial strikes in Northern manufacturing towns like Manchester.

- **Hard Times (Charles Dickens):** A blistering satire of Utilitarian political economy and industrial rationalism, contrasting the mechanical rigidity of Coketown with the human empathy of the circus.

### 3.2 Gender, Domesticity, and the 'Woman Question'

The Victorian period was marked by intense debate over the legal, social, and economic position of women. Mid-century ideology enforced the concept of 'Separate Spheres'—the public sphere of business and politics designated for men, and the private domestic sphere for women.

- **The Angel in the House vs. Legal Reality:** Victorian culture idealised the woman as the 'Angel in the House' (a term taken from Coventry Patmore's poem)—a selfless, morally pure guardian of domestic virtue. However, legal reality under doctrine of Coverture denied married women legal identity, property ownership, and custody rights over their children until the Married Women's Property Acts (1870, 1882).
- **Governess Novels and Female Autonomy:** Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) subverted domestic conventions by insisting on a woman's passionate need for moral, intellectual, and financial independence. The 'governess novel' highlighted the precarious plight of educated, middle-class women with no viable career paths.
- **The Fallen Woman and Double Standards:** Victorian fiction frequently grappled with the double standard surrounding sexual morality, contrasting the 'pure' woman with the ostracized 'fallen woman' (e.g., Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Gaskell's *Ruth*, and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*).

### 3.3 Faith, Evolutionary Science, and Secularization

The 19th century witnessed a profound crisis of religious faith triggered by geological discoveries (Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*), historical-critical biblical scholarship from Germany, and above all, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Novelists struggled with the collapse of traditional Christian certainty. George Eliot, who translated David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* into English, replaced orthodox dogma with a secular religion of human sympathy. In the late century, Thomas Hardy's tragic Wessex novels introduced a bleak, Darwinian universe

governed by blind chance, indifferent nature, and deterministic forces ('The Immanent Will').

### **3.4 Imperial Expansion, Race, and Colonial Anxiety**

The British Empire was the economic backbone of Victorian Britain, and colonial presence saturates the period's narrative fiction. Empire functioned as a space for quick wealth acquisition, social redemption, or exile.

- **Jane Eyre (Charlotte Brontë):** Colonial wealth derived from Jamaican sugar plantations funds Rochester's estate and introduces Bertha Mason (the 'madwoman in the attic') as a symbol of colonial exploitation and racial angst.
- **Great Expectations (Charles Dickens):** Magwitch's fortunes made in the Australian penal colony finance Pip's gentlemanly aspirations in London, exposing the criminal underpinnings of high society.
- **Late-Century Imperial Degeneration:** Late Victorian Gothic fiction expressed deep anxiety over 'reverse colonization'—fears that foreign, primitive, or degenerated colonial forces would invade and dismantle the metropolitan heart of London (e.g., Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, H. Rider Haggard's *She*).

## **4. Chronological Trajectory and Evolutionary Phases**

Spanning over six decades, Victorian narrative fiction underwent distinct stylistic and structural evolutions, conventionally divided into three major chronological phases:

### **4.1 Early Victorian Phase (1837–1850): Social Reform & Melodrama**

Characterized by high energy, social outrage, episodic plotting, and vivid characterization. Authors responded directly to urban growth and Chartist unrest. Melodramatic structures and comic subplots were blended with fierce moral critique. Key figures: Early Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell.

### **4.2 Mid-Victorian Phase (1850s–1870s): High Realism & Panoramic Canvases**

The pinnacle of classical realist narrative. Marked by political stability, middle-class self-confidence, and intellectual sophistication. Multi-plot panoramic

canvases examined the complex webs connecting different social strata. Authors exercised authoritative third-person omniscient narration and profound psychological interiority. Key figures: Mature Charles Dickens (Bleak House, Little Dorrit), George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins.

#### **4.3 Late Victorian Phase (1880s–1901): Naturalism, Decadence & The Fin-de-Siècle**

Characterized by the breakdown of Victorian moral consensus, loss of imperial confidence, and existential skepticism. Influenced by French Naturalism (Émile Zola) and Aestheticism. Themes included psychological breakdown, scientific hubris, urban degeneration, and gender revolt. Key figures: Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, George Gissing, Sarah Grand.

### **5. Major Subgenres of the Victorian Novel**

The elasticity of the novel form allowed for the emergence of specialized subgenres catering to diverse reader interests and ideological anxieties:

- **Industrial / Social-Problem Novel:** Focused on working-class struggle, industrial strikes, and urban squalor in Northern factory towns. Examples: Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Disraeli's *Sybil*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*.
- **The Victorian Bildungsroman:** The novel of formation or coming-of-age, tracing a young protagonist's psychological, moral, and social journey from childhood to maturity within a structured social hierarchy. Examples: Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*.
- **Sensation Fiction:** Emerged in the 1860s as a sensationally popular precursor to the modern psychological thriller. Combined gothic terror with domestic realism, exposing crime, bigamy, secret identities, insanity, and forgery beneath respectable middle-class surfaces. Examples: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*.
- **Late-Victorian Gothic & Imperial Romance:** Reemerged in the 1880s and 1890s, transferring gothic terror from rural castles to the fog-choked streets of imperial London. Explored themes of psychological duality, scientific overreach, imperial paranoia, and degeneration. Examples: Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stoker's *Dracula*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

- **New Woman Fiction:** Emerging in the 1890s, these novels featured rebellious, educated female protagonists who rejected traditional marriage, demanded sexual equity, and sought intellectual and professional autonomy. Examples: Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*.

## 7. Formal and Narrative Innovations

The Victorian novel was not merely a passive container for social themes; it was an arena of rigorous formal and structural experimentation that revolutionized narrative technique.

### 7.1 The Authoritative Omniscient Narrator

The classic Mid-Victorian novel perfected the intrusive, omniscient third-person narrator. Acting as a social commentator, moral philosopher, and intimate companion to the reader, this voice bridged the gap between characters and audience. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the narrator presents himself as the 'Manager of the Performance,' standing above the puppet stage of human vanity. In George Eliot's novels, the narrator functions as an empathetic philosopher, guiding reader sympathy toward overlooked, ordinary lives.

### 7.2 Psychological Realism & The 'Web' of Relations

George Eliot revolutionized fiction by shifting narrative focus from external plot mechanisms to internal moral choices and psychological causation. In *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Eliot articulated her famous metaphor of human society as a delicate, interconnected 'web' where every individual action reverberates throughout the community. Her deep psychological interiority laid the groundwork for Modernist stream-of-consciousness.

#### ***Key Innovation in Middlemarch:***

*"I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must derive its focus on certain drama that has taken shape within my memory."*

### 7.3 Spatial Realism: City as Labyrinth and Regional Topography

Victorian novelists elevated setting into an active antagonist or character. Charles Dickens mapped the fog-bound, labyrinthine streets of industrial London, transforming real topography into symbolic landscapes of bureaucratic corruption (the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*) and financial toxicity (the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*).

Conversely, Thomas Hardy created 'Wessex'—a meticulously semi-fictionalized region in Southwest England. Hardy used Wessex to document the tragic erosion of ancient rural traditions and agrarian lifeways under the relentless march of industrial steam power and modern capital.

## 8. Literary Legacy, Critical Reception, and Neo-Victorianism

The reception of the Victorian novel has undergone dramatic shifts across the 20th and 21st centuries:

- **Early 20th-Century Modernist Backlash:** In the early 20th century, Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and James Joyce aggressively repudiated Victorian fiction, criticizing its didactic moralizing, sprawling 'loose baggy monsters' (as Henry James termed them), and over-reliance on external material detail.
- **Mid-Century Critical Rehabilitation:** By mid-century, critics like F.R. Leavis (*The Great Tradition*), Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*), and Ian Watt rehabilitated the Victorian novel, recognizing its profound moral seriousness, formal complexity, and unmatched diagnostic power regarding industrial modernity.
- **Feminist and Postcolonial Re-readings:** Feminist theorists (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*) and Postcolonial critics (Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*) re-examined Victorian fiction, exposing how colonial power dynamics and patriarchy structured classic realist plots.

- **Postmodern Neo-Victorianism:** In contemporary fiction, 'Neo-Victorianism' has flourished as writers revisit, rewrite, and interrogate the Victorian era from post-modern perspectives, giving voice to marginalized figures. Examples include John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, and Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*.