

A Study of the Victorian Novels from Dickens to Reade: An Assessment

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Abstract: *The Victorian era was the great age of the English novel— realistic, thickly plotted, crowded with characters, and long. This was an age of increasing information and knowledge, which gave rise to an optimistic belief in progress and an age marked by a great technological and industrial progress and development. However, on the one hand English society was marked by these positive developments and also philanthropy, but on the other hand there were social injustices as the exploitation of women and children in factories and societies. It was the ideal form to describe contemporary social life and to entertain the middle class society. However, the novels of Charles Dickens, full to overflowing with drama, humor, and endless variety of vivid characters and plot complications, nonetheless spare nothing in their portrayal of what urban life was like for all classes. William Makepeace Thackeray is best known for *Vanity Fair* (1848), which wickedly satirizes hypocrisy and greed. The paper aims to show the ways in which Victorian novelists represent the exigencies of their particular contexts within the framework of their creative writings and how the respective authors reproduce aspects of nineteenth century Victorian society.*

Key Words: *Victorian Novel, Hypocrisy, Philanthropy, Exploitation, Nineteenth Century.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Literary critic Edmund Wilson has called Dickens “the greatest dramatic writer that the English had had since Shakespeare who created the greatest and most variant world.” Dickens’s colossal esteem as a writer was acknowledged by his fellow Victorians Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and by such modern writers as George Bernard Shaw and George Orwell. With the exception of Shakespeare, no writer in English literature has enjoyed a comparable degree of popular and critical acclaim. Dickens is simply England’s greatest novelist and deserves to be ranked with the top literary artists of all time.

Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) appeared of a family of the lower middle-class which considered itself as genteel, yet tended to decline in the scale of consequence. Though born on the South coast, he was so young when brought by his parents to the outskirts of London that it is to the Kentish back-ground of *Great Expectations* we must look for his earliest memories. In 1827 he was articled to a solicitor, meanwhile mastering shorthand and attending sessions of courts. He became parliamentary reporter for a small newspaper and then for *The Morning Chronicle*. In 1836, he married Catherine Hogarth, who gave birth to ten children. Although secure in his literary and financial success, Dickens remained restless and dissatisfied.

Critical discretion of Dickens’s career generally divides his novels into two groups: the early novels, from his debut with *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) to *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and his later novels, beginning with *Bleak House* (1852-53). Admirers of all that is commonly meant by the term Dickensian; the novelist’s irrepressible vitality and inexhaustible supply of eccentrics, comic situations, sentiment, and humour locate Dickens’s greatness in this first period. Modern critics, beginning with George Bernard Shaw, generally tend to emphasize the complexity, psychological delicacy, and profound social exploration of the later novels as the primary source of Dickens’s brilliance. Regardless of reader preference, Dickens’s whole canon shows amazing technical and artistic development. He began his career as a novelist almost by accident, when he was hired to write narrative connectives for a series of illustrations of Cockney sporting scenes that became *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) but he quickly took control of the project, shifting his story to the primary interest, and *Pickwick* became one of the 19th century’s phenomenal best-sellers.

Improvised and with little preplanning or attendance to a larger theme, Dickens’s early novels, such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839) *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844) show him working toward a more complex structure of characters who cause the drama rather than having it imposed on them, and much more extended and onerous portraits of society supported by the most demanding narrative method of all, that of mystery and suspense. Dickens’s later novels: *Bleak House* (1852-1853), *Hard Times* (1854) *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), and the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) are all cut to the pattern of

intrigue and detection that joins a vast network of relationships and social and psychological themes in a unified whole.

Unlike most modern novelists, Dickens is a traditional storyteller who employs such theatrical techniques as secrets, surprises, and coincidences to heighten suspense and uncover universal patterns beneath the surface of things. His fictional motto, expressed in his preface to *Bleak House*, is to show the “romantic side of familiar things”. His novels are built on conflict, with dramatic action replacing authorial analysis and commentary. “My notion always is,” Dickens observed, “that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it, and not mine.” In the arranged collision of characters, Dickens reaches his desired illumination of increasingly more complex psychological and social themes. Through the combination of realism and symbolism, evident particularly in his later novels, Dickens anticipates the central dynamic of the modern novel, linking his work with later novelists such as Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner.

Dickens’s life is a variegated story of the power of the imagination to produce a seemingly inexhaustible supply of memorable characters - Pickwick, Sam and Tony Weller, Fagin, Bumble, Quilp, Scrooge, Pecksniff, Sairey Gamp, Micawber, Lady Dedlock, Mr. F’s Aunt, Miss Havisham, to name just a few - in an imaginary yet recognizable universe animated by the novelist’s great powers of visualization. Dickens remains the novelist unparalleled, capable of probing at the deepest level the light and dark elements of his mind and world. Edgar Johnson in *Preface to Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* remarks: “Dickens is significant for more than the sheer intensity with which he reflects experience. His is a penetrating vision of modern life. The unifying thread of his entire career was a critical analysis of nineteenth-century society unsurpassed by any novelist in grasp and scope.”

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) was a significant novelist and essayist of Victorian England. He was a voluminous writer and one of the masters of English realism. He is, generally, remembered for some of his significant novels which include: *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), *The History of Pendennis* (1840-50) and *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852). But some of his smaller works are also luscious which include: *The Yellowish Papers* (1837-38), the comic memoirs of a footman; *Catherine* (1839-40), the first full-length work of popular Newgate fiction and *A Shabby Genteel Story* (1840), his popular one. His first real novel was *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon* (1844). At this period he also published three travel books: *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), *The Irish Sketch Book* (1848), and *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846).

Thackeray’s growing reputations in the 1840s was consolidated by his writings the highly successful *The Book of Snobs* (1846-49), which anatomized the class-consciousness of the early Victorian age. This concern, and the discontent with contemporary fictional stereotypes evident in his masterly parodies, *Punch’s Priza Novelists* (1847), In 1848, after a long and often disappointing search for a profession and a voice, Thackeray could gloat to his mother that he had suddenly “become a sort of great man... all but at the top of the tree: indeed there if truth were known and having a great fight up there with Dickens.” The reason for this long-awaited feeling of satisfaction was the success of his serialized novel, *Vanity Fair*. It traces the interweaving destinies of two contrasted heroines during the period of Waterloo and its aftermath. In *Vanity Fair* the genius of Thackeray reaches in high-water mark. In theme it is concerned chiefly with the fortunes of Becky Sharp, an adventuress and an orphan daughter of a penniless artist. The novel *Vanity Fair* (A Novel Without a Hero) marked Thackeray’s book as a radical departure from other novels. It offered readers of the time a portrait of English life and society stripped of the idealization they had come to expect from the novel. The characters who are the likely candidates for romantic treatment, Amelia Sedley and George Osborne, are paired with realistic opposites, Becky Sharp and William Dobbin, and exposed as inadequate.

Vanity Fair was followed by *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50), portraying the development of one of ‘the gentleman of our age’ from childhood to maturity. *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852) is the most carefully planned of his novels. It is a historical novel, set during the reign of Queen Anne. *The New-Comes* (1853-55) is a panoramic novel of English social life during the first half of the 19th Century. *The Virginians* (1857-59), another historical novel, continues the Esmond family saga in 18th century England and America. Thackeray’s last works are the short novel *Lovel the Widower* (1860), and *The Adventures of Philip* (1861-62). A rehash of many of themes and situations from *Pendennis* and *The New-Comes*, *The Adventures of Philip* lends support to the view that by the end of his life Thackeray had little fresh to say.

However, Thackeray’s reputation rests on *Vanity Fair*, *Henry Esmond*, and less securely today, on *Pendennis* and *The New-comes*. It may be observed that his sense of the novel as ‘a sort of confidential talk between writer and reader’ (Preface, *Pendennis*), has not always been congenial to modern taste, but recently the critics have rediscovered the keen satirical eye and comic irreverence of his early stories and travel books, which have the robust energy of the 18th century writers he admired. Thackeray remains a central figure in the history of Victorian realism, and his sceptical, ironic but compassionate vision of human conduct in a society dominated by the power of money and class gives his best work the authority of major art.

Among the great Victorian novelists, Thackeray today is probably the last read. His voluminous social panoramas have not found favour measured against the controlled focus promulgated by Flaubert and Henry James.

Thus the showman of the fair closes the performance, having taken his characters from adolescence to maturity, from the Regency to the Victorian period, and having instructed his readers in the absorbing fascination of ordinary life. Thackeray's genius rests in his ability to create a new standard for the novel in which truth in all its complexity is predominant over make-believe. Regarding his global reputation Charlotte Bronte wrote in a letter to W.S. Williams in 1847: "I approve of Mr. Thackeray. This may sound presumptuous perhaps, but I mean that I have long recognized in his writings genuine talent, such as I admired, such as I wondered at and delighted in. No author seems to distinguish so exquisitely as he does dross from ore, the real from the counterfeit." Despite his shortcomings, Thackeray is one of the world's great literary artists, whose basic theme is the expansion of human sympathy, and tolerance unsupported by falsehood and simplification.

Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) was born in Marylebone, London in 1824. He wrote intricately plotted novels of sensational intrigue which helped establish the conventions of modern detective fiction. In 1851 Collins met Charles Dickens and became one of his closest friends. Most of his early stories and novels appeared in Dickens's magazines 'Household Words' and 'All the Year Round', and through participation in Dickens's elaborate amateur theatricals he was encouraged to try his hand at Drama. But there are differences, whereas Dickens supposed his characters and then invented a plot to set them in motion, Collins invented his plot and then fitted characters into it. Far more than Dickens, Collins depended upon the technique of the popular sensational theatre; how closely is shown by the case with which he inured variant of his novels to the stage. His tales comprise almost irreversibly two stuffs: an intricate plot and a love-story. He often narrates his story through the mouths of different characters, sacrificing continuity for the sake of startling effects. Collins's first published novel, *Antonina* (1850), is a floridly written historical novel based on the Roman Empire. In the novels *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), and *The Dead Secret* (1857), Collins placed sensational incident in a realistic contemporary middle-class setting and developed the technique of gradually unfolding a mystery introduced at the beginning of the story. His three best books are *The Woman in White* (1860), the story of a crime based upon the resemblance of two women of whom one turns out to be the illegitimate sister of other; *Armada* (1866), where an ingenious plot is unfolded in an atmosphere of sinister eeriness; and *The Moonstone* (1868), on the theme of a jewel stolen from an Indian idol and retrieved by Brahmin conspirators. His masterpiece *Man and Wife* (1870), a novel on the problem of the marriage laws, and by this he concentrates on social issues. Collins was a master of climax and suspense, but the men and women in his tales are scarcely characterized at all, being but pawns upon his chessboard of intrigue. He was in some ways an ancestor of modern writers of detective fiction. As late as 1881, he published the seminal detective story "Who Killed Zebedee?" and the anti-religious (often called anti-catholic) novel *The Black Robe*. However, Wilkie Collins was one of the most influential writers of his era, and his impact still being felt today in every kind of popular fiction.

Charles Reade (1814-1884) belongs to that brilliant group of English writers and artists which included Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Tom Taylor, George Eliot, Sir Walter Besant, and Goldwin Smith. According to critics, he ranks next to Dickens in originality and power. Before turning to fiction he had been a successful dramatist, and his novels, with their crudity and violence and large dependence upon dialogue and dramatic presentation, have an affinity to the stage. His books are little read today, yet he gave to the English stage the comedy "Masks and Faces", which is now as much a classic as Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer" or Sheridan's "The School for Scandal". His power as a novelist was marvellous. *Peg Woffington* (1853), the first of them, was made over from his comedy 'Masks and Faces'. Like Dickens he used the novel to expose abuses and advocate reforms. *It's Never Too Late to Mend* (1856) has to do with the management of prisons and the mistreatment of criminals. His novel *Hard Cash* (1863) is about the poor treatment of patients in private insane asylums. In *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870) Reade attacked the trade-unions. His other books are not to the same degree novels with a purpose. Several, of which the powerful but too vehement *Griffith Gaunt or, Jealousy* (1866) is the best, are studies in character. It is noted that, Reade accumulated and classified in huge ledgers and notebooks immense amounts of material for his studies of the human situation, drawing it from personal observation, newspapers, reports of commissions of inquiry, and other sources. Generally, his imagination was stifled rather than vitalized by all this information. He followed the same method in the composition of *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861) putting into that great and still widely read historical novel which relates the story revolving about the travels of a young scribe and illuminator, Gerard Eliassoen, through several European countries.

As a talented violinist, he was also partner with a Soho violin making company for a while. *The Ladies' Battle* (1851) was his first comedic effort to play at the Olympic Theatre. Others plays were to follow, but his collaboration with Tom Taylor on 'Masks and Faces' (1852) was met with critical acclaim. Owing much to Maria Edgeworth, *Christie Johnstone* (1853) shows Reade's exceptional talent for engaging the dialect, with a firm and empathic grasp of the culture and people of Scotland. When he died on April 11, 1884, he left his vast collection of notes and research open to the public, so that other writers could study his methods. Reade's writing is sometimes compared to that of his French contemporary, Zola, and to those of his English contemporary, Charles Dickens, because of his realism.

2. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, their novels were about the common man, which also happened to be the struggles of the lower class. These struggles usually included a lower class citizen trying to gain upward mobility. Thus, a subgenre called Social Realism was born. One of the most popular novels of this time is in the Social Realism genre. In Charles Dickens *Great Expectations*, the novel goes through a boy named Pip's life, as he unexpectedly comes into money and is asked to become a gentleman. The novel follows Pip's struggles, and focuses on telling the whole truth about the character, both his good and bad actions and the reasons behind them. He was meant to be a very tangible person, one that the average person of this time could relate to. Pip was written to be very "real", with all his flaws and positive attributes. Realism had turned to Naturalism towards the end of the nineteenth century. With Naturalism, writers defined their character using their heredity and history and the qualities that people found distasteful in Realism, which was the fixation with character and the thoroughly dull plots, was intensified by Naturalism. The impact was uniquely because of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution that inspired other writers to branch out into something that differs from Realism. Whereas Realism seeks only to describe subjects as they really are, naturalism also endeavors to govern "scientifically" the underlying forces, like the heredity and history, manipulating all of the actions of the subjects.

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