



E-ISSN: 2706-8927  
P-ISSN: 2706-8919  
[www.allstudyjournal.com](http://www.allstudyjournal.com)  
IJAAS 2023; 5(1): 48-49  
Received: 26-12-2022  
Accepted: 05-01-2023

**Suksham Ahluwalia**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of English,  
Arya College Ludhiana,  
Punjab, India

## Realism in Victorian novel

**Suksham Ahluwalia**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2023.v5.i1a.961>

### Abstract

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is considered by some to be the golden age of English Literature, especially for British novels. It was in the Victorian era that the novel became the leading literary genre in English. In this era the 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.

**Keywords:** Social realism, Victorian values, cultural concerns

### Introductions

The Victorian period of literature roughly coincides with the years that Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain and its Empire (1837-1901). During this era, Britain was transformed from a predominantly rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one. New technologies like railroads and the steam printing press united Britons both physically and intellectually. Although now the period is popularly known as a time of prim, conservative moral values, the Victorians perceived their world as rapidly changing. Religious faith was splintering into evangelical and even atheist beliefs. The working class, women, and people of color were agitating for the right to vote and rule themselves. Reformers fought for safe workplaces, sanitary reforms, and universal education. Victorian literature reflects these values, debates, and cultural concerns.

Prior to the Victorian Era, poetry had been the dominant form of literature. However, changes in class structure saw the novel rise in popularity. As the middle class expanded and more people became literate, the popularity of the novel exploded. These works also became “more accessible as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of newspapers and the periodical press.”<sup>[1]</sup> Most notably, the works of Charles Dickens were frequently serialized in newspapers or journals, his first being *Pickwick Papers* in 1836. As a result of this serialization and a focus on character rather than plot, Dickens’ works are sometimes criticized for having weak plots. The subject matter of realistic Victorian novels also helped increase their popularity. Dickens particularly would portray the lives of working class people, creating characters that the new rising middle class audience could relate to. The realistic Victorian novel focused on characters and themes such as the plight of the poor and social mobility that was being afforded to a new middle class and the rising middle class were eager to consume these novels.

One of the prominent features, that the novelist chose for their themes the specific contemporary problems of the Victorian society caused by the predominance of industrialism and utilitarianism and wrote about them sometimes as satirists, sometimes as humanists, sometimes as moralists. In spite of the fact that they were conscious of the havoc caused by the industrial revolution, the presence of mass poverty and accumulation of riches in a few hands, yet they believed like the common Victorians that these evils would prove to be temporary, that on the whole, England was growing prosperous, which was evident from the enormous increase in material wealth and there was no reason why this progress should not continue indefinitely.

The early Victorian novel, unlike both the novel of the preceding era as well as the following novel of the later phase of the Victorian period, was rather formless. Like the Elizabethan drama, the novel in the early Victorian phase was written more for any entertainment than for any artistic purpose.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Suksham Ahluwalia**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of English,  
Arya College Ludhiana,  
Punjab, India

But in spite, it contained the large purpose of offering a picture and criticism of contemporary life. A significant shift in the English Novel in its movement from the 18th to the 19th century was the change of emphasis from action to character. They gave primacy to the character as opposed to Neo-classical novelists who gave more importance to action.

The second-generation Victorian novelists were “more ‘literary’ and less ‘popular’ than the first generation. They had more academic flavors in their writings, more poetic imagination.”<sup>[2]</sup> They did not have the breadth and variety (with the exception of *Middlemarch*) of the early novelists but they certainly had a greater depth of characterization and greater intensity of presentation. Victorian literature differs from that of the eighteenth century and Romantic period most significantly because it was not aimed at a specialist or elite audience; rather, because the steam printing press made the production of texts much cheaper and because railroads could distribute texts quickly and easily, the Victorian period was a time when new genres appealed to newly mass audiences.

Although different kinds of realism (see below) dominated the novel in the Victorian period, the eighteenth-century tradition of the Gothic lived on, particularly in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). *Jane Eyre* uses many Gothic conventions: a young, pure female heroine; a sinister house filled with mysteries; and a handsome, brooding older man – but within a Victorian frame. *Jane Eyre* must make her own way in the world as a governess, and must also pursue what is right for her despite Victorian gender and class conventions. *Jane Eyre* uses some Gothic tropes, but sensation fiction (so named because its suspenseful plots inspired dangerous “sensations” in readers) more fully embraced the surprise and horror typical of the Gothic. Sensation fiction typically centers on deception and bigamy, in which men or women are lured into fake marriages – and worse. Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859), which tells the story of two women who look strangely alike and are substituted for each other at various points, is perhaps the most famous example. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), in which a supposedly deranged woman tries to kill her husband after he realizes that she has married another man, also shocked Victorian readers. One of the aims of sensation fiction was to surprise and trouble readers by challenging social conventions, but another Victorian genre, melodrama, achieved popularity by upholding popular values. Melodramas divide characters starkly into those who are vicious and those who are virtuous. They evoke emotion in readers and viewers by making virtuous characters the subject of vicious plots. These were some of the most popular theatrical productions of the period.

William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) best exemplifies satirical realism, a mode that emphasizes the worst qualities of each character and suggests that the world, or “*Vanity Fair*,” is a dark and unfair place. The novel follows the adventures of Becky Sharpe, a scheming and amoral heroine who manipulates all those around her (and does very well for herself), in contrast to Amelia Sedley, a trusting and virtuous young woman who struggles to find happiness. Social realism focuses on the foibles, eccentricities, and remarkable characteristics of people, who are frequently caricatured. Often comic (and sometimes tragicomic), it is best exemplified by the work of Charles Dickens. In novels like *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) in which

Dickens uses the plight of the orphan Oliver to critique a heartless orphanage overseen by eccentric bumlbers, Dickens both criticized the social system and created a vibrant world of memorable characters. In his masterpiece *Bleak House* (1852-53) Dickens takes aim at the bureaucratic excesses of the court system as seen in the never-ending court case. To quote Cazamian: “As a creator, Dickens is prodigious. The picture he has painted of the social world is one of the richest in the whole range of English literature. His perception of things and characters is remarkable for its direct keenness and fresh vigor and incomparable liveliness .

Psychological realism emphasizes portraying the rich inner life of characters – their thoughts, feelings, motivations, anxieties, etc. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) for instance, she portrays the progress of several marriages in a small provincial town. Dorothea Brooke, the heroine, is an idealist who marries an elderly scholar, Casaubon, in the hopes of helping him with his work. But she becomes disillusioned and finds herself attracted to his nephew Will Ladislaw. The rapid transformation of Britain into an industrial society prompted some writers to write novels which exposed the difficult plight of the working class. In Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), the millworker hero, Stephen Black pool, faces ostracism after his refusal to join the millworkers' union. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) uses the viewpoint of Margaret Hale, an emigrant from southern England to a northern industrial city, to address the plight of millworkers. As Dickens and Gaskell focused on important domestic issues, other writers turned their attention to Britain's rapidly-expanding empire, which they took as a subject for novels and poetry. Rudyard Kipling celebrated British rule in India with his novel *Kim* (1901), in which the young Kim becomes a British spy in India. Joseph Conrad took a more skeptical stance toward imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the sailor Marlow journeys through the Belgian Congo. Although ostensibly about the Belgian rather than the British Empire, Marlow informs his fellow sailors that his tale applies to Britain as well.

### Conclusion

William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) best exemplifies satirical realism, a mode that emphasizes the worst qualities of each character and suggests that the world, or “*Vanity Fair*,” is a dark and unfair place. The novel follows the adventures of Becky Sharpe, a scheming and amoral heroine who manipulates all those around her (and does very well for herself), in contrast to Amelia Sedley, a trusting and virtuous young woman who struggles to find happiness. Many Victorian writers believed that their writings should illustrate social and political problems of the country and that it should also serve as a code of conduct for readers. Therefore, writers of the Victorian period dealt with topics concerning changes in society and they put emphasis on moral propriety

### References

1. Adams James Eli. *A History of Victorian Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell; c2012.
2. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*. Ed. Carol T. Christ and Catherine Robson. New York: Norton; c2006.
3. Cazamian, Louis François, *History of English Literature* (Aldine paperbacks); c1972.