

UGBA Sem. – 5  
2019- 20

English (Core) Paper No. - 306  
Title - Essays - I

## Essay on Victorian Novelists

The Victorian Age is essentially the **age of the novel**. During this period novel made a phenomenal progress. It was the golden age of the English Novel. It was used as a popular medium for expressing its rapid progress in **commerce, industry and science**. The novel became a popular literary form among the middle class. As the middle class rose in power and importance and the increase in reading public due to the growth of lending libraries made novel very popular. The popularity of the novel was also because it was the best vehicle to present a picture of life that the middle class reader wanted to read about. Writers of different schools of thought used it to express their general criticism of life. It reflected all the forces which were shaping the complex modern world. "The spread of science made it realistic and analytical; the spread of democracy made it social and humanitarian. The spirit of religious and moral unrest, of inquiry and criticism was uppermost in it. In its variety of matter and treatment, the Victorian novel is the index of the many sided interests and conflicting elements of the Victorian age", says Hudson.

### Features of the Victorian Novel:

The **material and scientific progress** had its influence upon the Victorian life. This was also reflected in its literature. The novel, being a popular medium of expression, tried to find the truth and to show how it might be used to uplift humanity. The early Victorian novel was essentially the reflection of the life lived. Instead of seeking inspiration from the Middle Ages or the world of romance, the early Victorian novelists concentrated on the social, political, economic aspects of Victorian society. **Realism** became a characteristic feature of early Victorian novel. The novelists came to close grips with the problems facing Victorian society and sought to find a solution to the prevailing evils of the age. The reader of this age did not wish to be entertained but wanted to escape. S/He wanted to be close to what s/he was reading about. The Victorian reader found in novel what s/he was looking for and the early Victorian novelists provided him/her a historical perspective of the age with all its varied aspects.

The Victorian novelists were in accord with their people. They gratified the public taste by presenting **enlivening pictures of life**. They identified themselves with their age and were its spokesmen. The early Victorian novelists did not bother much about coherent plots. The structure of the novel in the hands of Dickens, Disraeli and Thackeray is loose and the progress of the story is hampered by episodic intrusions, unconnected descriptions and moral sermons by the novelists. Dickens was the chief novelist among the early Victorian novelists. His novels "contain something for everybody and the parts you do not like you can more or less ignore" says David Cecil. The same formlessness can be found in the novels of Thackeray. David Cecil says, "His hold on structure is very slack...loose end dangle in the air". The early novelists of the Victorian age had a **love for history**. In spite of realistic touches in their fiction, we can find them working in the line of historical fiction left by Sir Walter Scott.

The Victorian age was an age of intense activities in **commerce, industry and finance**. There was a revolution in commercial enterprise due to the great increase of available markets. As a result of this, there was an immense advance in the use of mechanical devices. On the other side of this picture of commercial expansion we see the appalling social conditions of the new industrial cities. The condition of the people living in slums, the exploitation of the labour particularly women and children made life difficult. These **evils of the Industrial Revolution** were vividly painted by such writers as Disraeli, Dickens and Mrs Gaskell.

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The **social novel** was most assiduously cultivated by Benjamin Disraeli. His famous novel "Sybil" is a powerful exposure of abuses connected with the relations of capital and labour. It presents a terrible picture of the lives of the contemporary working class. The social problems of England found a passionate exponent in Mrs Gaskell. Charles Kingsley was an ardent social reformer and one of the most robust humanitarian novelists of the mid Victorian age.

No other culture has produced a succession of **women novelists** equal to that of the novelists of the Victorian period. Women characters acquired a kind of imaginative literature such as they had never before.

### Contribution of Victorian Novelists

#### Charles Dickens:

Charles Dickens is a pre-eminent novelist of the Victorian Age. He is one of the greatest novelists that England has produced. He is a novelist of lower and middle class London life. The taverns, law courts, thieves, school rooms, work houses, prisons and ordinary homes of the day are depicted with realism in his novels. Pickwick Papers contains some sixty different situations and 350 characters. Oliver Twist is a study in crime and villainy and the punishment given to the wrong doers. Nicholas Nickleby exposes the weaknesses of Yorkshire schools and the horrible teaching and teachers who were in charge of young boys. David Copperfield is his best work. It is autobiographical as it "was often dipped in his own blood" says Hugh Walker. The novel is remembered for some memorable characters like Micawber, Uriah Heep, Ms Trotwood, Agnes, Murdstone. The novel is a criticism of the system of teaching run by masters like Creakle. Bleak House is a satire on the abuses of the old court. Hard Times is a satirical exposure of the evils of industrialism and the misery that follows due to industrialization. In this novel, Mr Gradgrind describes his system of education thus:

"Now what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life Plant nothing else and root out everything else."

A Tale of Two Cities is a historical novel representing the two cities of London and Paris during the French Revolution. The novel has one of the most famous opening lines in English literary history, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." The characters of this novel are masterly portrayed. Great Expectations deals with the adventures of a young boy Pip and is one of the gripping novels of Dickens.

The novels of Dickens belong to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian era. He was a novelist with a purpose. In nearly all his books he set out to attack some specific abuse in the existing system. He was at heart a moralist and an idealist. He was the greatest social reformer who used his pen to remove the evils of the Victorian society. He is considered to be one of the greatest social reformers of his age. The lost, neglected child is a central feature in many of his novels. The figure of the child is used to reveal Dickens' views on society.

#### William Thackeray:

William Thackeray was one of Dickens' greatest competitors during his own time. He is known for his novel Vanity Fair. It is a frank, satirical and sometimes world-weary portrait of the top level of society. The characters of Emilia and Dobbin have their weaknesses and strengths. The novel is a masterpiece of tone, constantly challenging a reader's assumptions about characters and situations. He said that Vanity Fair is "a novel without a hero". His other novels are Barry Lyndon, The History of Pendennis, The History of Henry Esmond.

Thackeray is known for his realism. He is first of all a realist who paints life as he sees it. As he says himself, "I have no brains above my eyes, I describe what I see." His realism can be seen in his art of characterization. His characters are not very high or excellent. They are average men and women. But they show a greater understanding of personal belonging to the higher social circle. He takes the reader into

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world of upper class where snobbery, hypocrisy, false glitter had their fullest paly. He shows society which bases its judgment of people on money and outward show and which ignores the true values of love, generosity and loyalty.

Thackeray exposed the follies of human beings and so he is regarded as a cynic. He wanted to reveal truth. He uses irony to reveal it. He was a satirist and a moralist. His novels are a protest against the popular novel of his day. He has been praised for his style in his novels. His style is very near to the ideal of a novelist. His style is graphic and eloquent.

### **Anthony Trollope:**

Anthony Trollope was a popular novelist in his own day. His pictures of clerical life which began with The Warden and continued in Barchester Tower have gained appreciation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His other novels are The Three Clerks, Framely Parsonage, Doctor Thorne, The Small House at Allington. Trollope has been admired for his political novels, particularly by historians. He wrote from first-hand knowledge because he had stood unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate.

Trollope is the novelist of the middle and upper middle classes. He presents an accurate, detailed picture of their quiet lives in a matter of fact way. He was more interested in characters than in plot. His characters are drawn from life. They are well-rounded and individualized. They are life-like and he knows how to tell a story.

Trollope's style is simple and lucid. His excellence lies in his ability to present the mid-Victorian upper class life. He skillfully makes use of pathos and there is mild satire in many of his novels. He is a careful craftsman whose works have remained popular.

### **Women Novelists**

The Victorian Age is considered as a significant age for women novelists. Through her novels Jane Austen had showed the new way of expression to women in the previous age. Under her influence a remarkable group of women wrote noteworthy social novels.

### **Elizabeth Gaskell:**

Elizabeth Gaskell was a social novelist. She lived for many years in Manchester and knew at first hand the evils of the industrialized cities. Her first novel was a sociological study based on her experience of the conditions of the laboring classes in the new cities. Her novels A Tale of Manchester Life and Mary Barton give a realistic view of the hardships caused by the Industrial Revolution as seen from the worker's point of view. Her well-known novel "North and South" was also set in Manchester. It shows the distinction between rural, traditional Southern England and the industrial, class conscious North. Her later novels Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters have placed her as a leading woman novelist of the Victorian era. Her most famous novel Cranford is less of a novel and more of a series of papers.

Mrs Gaskell's novels are full of concrete details. They are also full of pity for the working class. She had a talent for combining social criticism and melodrama. Her style is simple and lucid. It has grace and charm. She could handle pathos with great effect.

### **Bronte Sisters:**

Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and Anne Bronte – the Bronte Sisters – occupy a distinctive place in the history of English fiction. The Brontes painted the sufferings of an individual personality instead of the detached observation of a society or a group of people. They presented a new concept of the heroine as a woman of vital strength and passionate feelings.

Charlotte Bronte began her career as a poetess and then a novelist. She aimed at making her novels a realistic picture of society. She is best known for her novel Jane Eyre. It is autobiographical as it shows the author's own experience as governess. It is a rags to riches story and a novel of passion, love and mystery. Shirley is an extremely realistic and tactful in character. Villette is based on the personal

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experience of the author. Her work is the product of imagination and emotion as of the intellect. In her novels there is little preaching or moral teaching. Her characterization has great emotional intensity. Her plot construction is rather loose. She was primarily interested in diving deep in human character.

Emily Bronte is the greatest of the three sisters. Her only novel Wuthering Heights is unique in English literature. The passionate love between Heathcliff and Catherine is tied up with issues of succession, property and a critique of class consciousness. The intensely passionate words of Catherine, the protagonist of the novel, are replete with startling frankness and depth of understanding: "My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries... If all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger... Nelly, I am Heathcliff!" The novel is remarkable for its mature plot and structure. It is almost tragic in its scope, dealing in good and evil. It rises up above conventional morals and codes of behavior. There is immense violence and passion in the novel. The novel is also known for the lyrical tone, which is new in the English novel.

Anne Bronte's main works are Agnes Grey, The Tenant of the Windfell Hall. Agnes Grey is the story of Agnes, younger daughter of a clergyman who loses her fortune in a sea venture. The latter novel provides an interesting study of a drunkard who meets his tragic end because of his addiction to liquor.

### **George Eliot:**

Mary Ann Evans who wrote under the pen name of George Eliot, began to write late in life. George Eliot's world was that of the old fashioned provincial life which she had been familiar in her girlhood. Her notable works are Middlemarch, Romola, Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner. The strong features of her work are realism, ability to write accurate dialogue, knowledge of provincial life. But it is characterization that is her strongest feature as a novelist. William Long remarks, "In George Eliot's novels the characters develop gradually as we come to know them. They go from weakness to strength or from strength to weakness, according to the works that they do and the thoughts that they cherish." She developed the method of psychological analysis of her characters. She had the ability to go deeper into the minds of her characters. She successfully draws out that mind with its complexity and depth. Maggie Tulliver and Tito are her memorable complex characters. There is a strong autobiographical element in her work. She is a moralist at heart and laid great emphasis on leading a virtuous life. Her characters are dominated by moral consideration. She is also known for her humour and pathos.

### **Other Novelists:**

Some other minor novelists of the Victorian era are Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and George Meredith. Disraeli dealt with romance, political issues and historical events. Kingsley's works combined the themes of social reform with moralizing, concern for the poor and the exploited. Meredith's fiction is centered around commentaries on religion, education, politics.

### **Conclusion:**

Victorian Age is essentially the age of the novel. The middle class rose in power and importance during this period. The novel became a vehicle of ideas as well as a means of amusement during the Victorian Age. Writers used it to offer their general criticism of life. The novelists came to close grips with the problems faced by society and tried to find a solution thorough their works. Variety of subject matter and treatment are unique to Victorian novel.

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