

Core English ³⁰¹

His. Of Eng. Literature:1832-1890

Unit 1

C. Victorian Novelists.

The Victorian era roughly corresponds with the life of Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901), but according to some it does spill out a little to each side as well. Before the Victorian era comes the Georgian period, and the Edwardian period followed after.

This period features Britain as the dominant global power, the Irish famine, high standards for personal morality in Britain, and increasing population there as well as improved living conditions (especially re universal education). Although many people were still very poor, as depicted by the writers of this period.

The best Victorian novelists are *the Brontë sisters, Dickens, Eliot, Wilde, and Stoker.* This period is particularly productive of great works (perhaps partially because the Victoria era is so long?). Many of these authors, and their greatest works, remain familiar to the layperson. So let's take a look!

Victorian Novelists.

1. The Brontë Sisters

Three sisters in one family, all literary geniuses: very slim odds! Charlotte, Anne, and Emily Brontë all wrote novels which are regarded as masterpieces.

Unfortunately due to prejudice against female writers at the time they felt they had to publish under male pseudonyms: Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell.

They lived a rural and isolated life, in Thornton, West Yorkshire, England.

They were very close with each other, and the deaths of immediate family members such as their two older sisters affected them profoundly (they also had a brother but the genius was apparently reserved for the X chromosome).

They all died before the age of the forty, two of them before thirty!

Thanks to Victorian medicine.

Emily wrote *Wuthering Heights*, an astonishingly powerful Gothic inflected Romantic Victorian novel which shocked society at the time with its depiction of the raw and devastating power of love: it challenged the Victorian preference for staid affairs.

This novel is regularly quoted as among people's favorites, and has inspired several popular screen adaptations.

Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Jane's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* ensured that the sisters became the toast of the London literary scene, even after revealing their true identities.

These sisters are a must read in the Victorian literary category.

2. Charles Dickens:

Charles who? Just kidding. You know this guy.

An absolute titan of literature, he wrote fifteen novels, many of which remain household names (if novels can be household names).

I bet you can name a few (or at least recognise these titles): *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities* (one of the best selling novels of all time).

This list goes on and on.

Dickens was put to work in a boot blacking factory when he was twelve, and was on intimate terms with Victorian poverty.

His novels feature a high degree of sympathy with the working classes, and he became a champion of the poor.

His works feature a superabundance of unforgettable characters getting into all-time scrapes.

3. George Eliot:

Middlemarch, Middlemarch, Middlemarch.

A study of provincial life, which while coolly received at first, has come to dominate the lists of greatest works of all time.

Virginia Woolf adored this novel, referring to it as one of the few British novels for grown ups.

That should be enough of a recommendation for anyone to pick it up, considering Woolf's status as one of the all time fiction greats.

Of course Eliot has numerous other classics to her name, including *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*.

Unfortunately, Ms Eliot, real name Mary Ann Evans, is another writer who felt they had to publish under a male pseudonym to escape the prejudices of her age.

But thankfully no prejudice could prevent her genius from emerging to acclaim.

4. Oscar Wilde:

Wilde is probably best known for his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* which features some of the most witty lines of all time.

It's also a showcase for his belief in Aestheticism, which pushed the notion that the beauty of a thing was enough to justify its existence.

Beauty for beauty's sake: we don't have to tie ourselves in knots finding more noble reasons for enjoying something.

His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains such sentiments, all blended with Wilde's incomparable wit and witticisms.

The novel shocked society upon publication due to the inclusion of horror and even satanic themes: wherein a man makes a deal with the devil to remain young and attractive while a portrait of him ages in an attic.

It's a classic and the plot is totally unforgettable, all undergirded by Wilde's ferocious intellect.

5. Bram Stoker:

This Irish writer penned the epistolary (written as letters) Gothic horror classic *Dracula*: which has since become one of the most famous works in the English language.

Interestingly, during his own life he was actually better known as the personal assistant to theatrical titan Sir Henry Irving, and as a business manager at the Lyceum Theatre.

We all know *Dracula*, and what better way for a modern reader to dig into the roots of this excellent Victorian tale than by diving into the original material, and following along with Dr Abraham Van Helsing in the hunt of the beast.

Conclusion:

So there you have it, if you love literature, the best Victorian novelists to read are the Brontë sisters, Dickens, Eliot, Wilde, and Stoker. The language of the time is still entirely accessible to modern readers, and the world's they describe are distinctly familiar. Although we've got better medicine, and sanitation, thank goodness.

Jump into these novels as a starting place and you can't go wrong!

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