

TEMA 50: *La novela victoriana***Autor: Valentín Ramos Salvador****Contents:**

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INTRODUCTION

In writing about Victorian novel an important choice must be made on the selection of writers and aspects to comment, since it is impossible to include the vast amount of novels and novelists that this socially and culturally rich time produced.

I have left out perhaps the most famous of them all, Dickens (since he is the specific subject of a previous theme) and was considering the possibility of studying only the writers of the last part of the period; but it is also difficult to draw a line either historical, stylistic or thematic among these writers. Some books divide the period in two, depending on social and political circumstances, others make a line among social, provincial, humorous, ironic or just entertaining writers; a novelist like Emily Brontë, however, escapes any classification, and all the writers are social in the sense that they show, as in no other time, the society they live in. I have decided to make a general comment on the age and their background and analyse a bit more profoundly the four writers which I think are more important if we leave Dickens out:

Thackeray, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, including a short analysis of one of their most significant novels. To finish I have included short comments on the rest of important writers, trying to give a general idea of the types of novels produced so as to draw a general picture of literary tendencies.

1. 1. Social background

The dynamic of the Industrial Revolution made the reign of Queen Victoria the great period of the novel in Britain. Britain was the richest country in the world, but it was also the first to face the social problems that arise from the rapid development of urban industry. England was quite ahead of the rest of Europe in economic development and had become through industrialisation and free trade “the workshop of Europe”. The writers identified themselves with their age and were its spokesmen. This sense of identity with their time is very important in any analysis of the novel.

We limit the Victorian period to the years between the Queen accession to the throne in 1833 and her death in 1901, but a new era really began with the passage of *The Reform Bill* in 1832 and closed with the Boer war in 1902.

This time produced the biggest change in English, the transfers of large masses of the population from the countryside to the towns; the basic social classes were transformed from small farmers and rural craftsmen into an urban proletariat and a lower middle class of industrial employers. This was much more visible in the north and parts of the Midlands than in the south; the evidence of the contrast is clear in the novel, for example in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, or in Dickens's *Bleak House*.

This was a time of very important and big social changes. The emancipation of slaves in British dominions; *The Factory Act*, the first effective act regulating child labour in factories was passed in 1833, it limited the hours and kinds of child labour and provided for inspectors to enforce it; *The Poor-Law-Amendment Act* of 1834 faced the problem of pauperism with the extension of the system of workhouses with salaried civil servants employed in each workhouse; the ignorance, and heartlessness of many of these employees moved Dickens and other writers to bitter satire; but the new policy was an important change. The repeal of the corn laws, in 1846 was important in changing the political balance from country to towns; with the disappearance of taxes over imported corn a new free trade era began and prices went down, relieving the situation of the working and poor classes, and saving England from the revolutionary movements which took place over Europe in 1848. There was a great expansion of communication, in 1825 the Manchester and Liverpool Railway had been opened and in 1848 there were 5000 miles of railway in Great Britain; the growth of the electric telegraph was almost contemporaneous with the change of

locomotion; Faraday made his discovery of the electromagnetic current, and the same decades saw the triumph of the penny post, a postal delivery system.

The different *Reform Bills*, the first of which was passed in 1832, changed the political participation and rights of the whole population by giving the right of vote to all in different stages; when this reached the working classes, it also brought a new education system which generalised education since the working classes ought to be educated (A politician said: "We ought to educate our masters"). The first Reform Bill gave more representatives to the cities, but limited the franchise to the middle classes. The *Reform Bill* of 1867 extended the franchise to the working class in the towns, and that of 1884 to the rural working class. (Women were not enfranchised until well in the 20th century).

Different religious movements, such as the Methodists and the evangelists, were very active and important in the life of the nation. The Church of England went through strong critics for being under the state. Some Anglicans, the evangelists, started to emphasise their closeness to the parent Catholic tradition, and others insisted on their Protestant differences. *The Oxford movement* of the 1830s, affirmed the continuity of Anglicanism with Catholicism. It was very important in the English literary and artistic life. In 1828 and 1829 *Tests Acts* were repealed, giving nonconformists and Catholics the right to vote in elections. The ceremonies and order of religious worship were widely neglected by the clergy who were divided into rich and poor and obtained promotion through aristocratic connections or family favour. *The Oxford Movement*, originated in 1823, was a counter-attack on these secularising tendencies; also called *Tractarianism*, its Tracts tried to reassert the spirituality of the Church of England, its dignity and its right to independence, associating its tradition with that of the medieval Christendom. It became a focus for the expression of the growing interest in the Gothic forms of medieval art. But when Newman, its most representative thinker, joined the Catholic Church in 1845, the Movement lost its force.

Science at the time is mainly related with the evolutionist theory and Darwin, but the development of Science in the 19th century was very important in general. Until the 19th century scientists were philosophers concerned with the physical world. Now science separated from philosophy and religion; with the expansion of knowledge the idea of God had less and less relevance. A large number of intellectuals were forced into religious disbelief. The sciences which started this were geology first (*The Principles of Geology* by Charles Lyell demonstrated that the age of the world was far greater than had been supposed) and

mainly Biology with the appearance of *On the Origin of the Species* (1859); the concepts of change and adaptation, struggle for survival or evolution could be applied to man himself, destroying the idea of a created spirit. Evolution implies a principle of progress in nature, improvement was inevitable so long as natural energies were allowed their freedom. Optimism was a natural reaction, and there was every reason to believe that progress would extend indefinitely into the future.

1. 2. Cultural background

The 19th century was the great age of the English novel to a great extent due to the increase of the importance of the middle classes, but also because of the steady increase of the reading public with the growth of the lending libraries, the development of publishing in the modern sense and also because the novel was the best way to present a picture of life in a given society against a background of moral values and with people like the ones encountered by readers; the reader wanted to be entertained, but he wanted to be close to what he was reading about. Novels were serialised in many different magazines which also flourished at the time, and many of the main writers, such as Dickens or Thackeray, edited their novels in instalments in magazines. Side by side with the argumentative novel flourished the novel as entertainment at different levels of skill and seriousness; the line between art and entertainment had not been yet made and it is often difficult to draw; rooted in the popular life of their age they produced an art that was truly national, but the great Victorian novelists produced symbolic meaning that went much deeper than the simple patterns of the age.

At a time when there was such religious, economic and scientific concern and turmoil, it's only logical that a vast amount of critical thought was written. Some Victorian intellectuals detested the optimism of the time and tried to find some spirituality in the widespread agnosticism of the time. The most influential of all them was Thomas Carlyle, but also Benjamin Disraeli, who tried to propagate a new faith in politics, John Ruskin, who taught the spiritual value of graphic arts and Matthew Arnold, who thought that poetry and culture would provide civilisation and the values which religion was ceasing to supply.

Carlyle showed his cult for great men in *Religion and Hero Worship*. In his *Sartus Resartus* describes his rebellion against spiritual despair. His essay on Chartism (1839) shows how the meanness of contemporary social ideas justified the working-class revolutionary movement. He inspired the stream of 'social problem' novels, notably some of the best by Elizabeth Gaskell, Disraeli and Dickens.

Ruskin was mainly a great art critic, but also a moralist. The Industrial revolution not only impoverished the poor, but also debased and vulgarised the taste of the richer classes. He demonstrated the human enrichment to be found in the great art forms of the past, specially in the spontaneity and variety of the Gothic Middle Ages.

Matthew Arnold, on the other hand, raised questions about society and culture; he brought forward many of the conflicts of his time; the parts played by reason and by emotion; the problem of what can replace religion as a means of human integration or how to get beyond the pressing materialism.

As artists the novelists of the time were awakened to the factor of environment, in the sense both of the social structure and of the physical surroundings. They saw it either as social change, or as force for social stability. In literature and thought as well as in society and politics it was an age of transition from aristocracy to democracy, from authority to mass judgement, and for literature and thought such conditions were propitious.

The Victorian period is also the time of the women artists; no other time has produced such a number of women novelists and of such importance; their existence must be linked with the struggle of women towards personal independence. It wasn't a self-consciously conducted campaign, as it was in the 20th century, but it showed itself in the awareness of both sexes that women were developing a will to self determination which traditional customs were not able to admit. Women in these novels have strong characterised identities.

2. THE WRITERS AND THEIR WORK

2. 1. Thackeray (1811-63)

He was once considered the great counterpart of Dickens in the mid Victorian novel. Dickens conveyed a panorama of the lower part of society, and Thackeray of the upper half; both were great humorists with a strong sense for satire and a capacity for social indignation. Like Dickens he opposed the utilitarianism of his time with an appeal to spontaneous affection, and he tried to oppose its vulgarity showing 18th century proportion and elegance.

He was born in Calcutta of a family of Anglo-Indian officials. After his father's death he returned to England, where he had a conventional upper class education at a public school -Charterhouse-, and Cambridge University, which he left in 1830 without taking a degree. He travelled to Germany and Paris, and returning to London he made some law studies

(he included some memories of this time in *Pendennis*). In 1836 he married, and his wife's insanity after a few years of marriage is the tragedy of his life. Since he left university he had worked as a comic illustrator and journalist; he published most of his writing in magazines like *Frasers* and *Punch* writing satirically humorous studies of London manners like "The books of snobs" (defining the snob as one who, seeking to emulate his social superiors, 'mainly admires mean things'); parodies of contemporary fashion for the criminal hero, like "Barry Lyndon", recounting with ironic detachment a rascal's actual exploits; humorous travel books like "The Paris sketch book", where he includes a miscellany of episodes of travel, chats on French politics and history and comments on art, literature of theatre in Paris where he lived for a while after his home was broken up.

From the beginning he had a keen eye for social pretension, for the disparity between professed and actual motives, for the hypocrisies with which men cover their true intentions. Some of his earlier works illustrates the irony of social success at the expense of virtue, and he produced powerful satirical sketches.

He presented himself as a moral realist who looked at society as it really was and brought to the surface the hypocrisies of the socially successful. "Barry Lyndon", for example shows the life of an unscrupulous scoundrel narrated by himself in a tone of apparently innocent moral self-congratulation; while "The book of snobs" exposes snobs and double dealers in every phase of society. "Barry Lyndon", on the other hand, shows a perfect capture of eighteenth century atmosphere, and the tone of innocence adopted, shows a gift for irony and a skill in historical introduction.

His first major novel, and the one which is most appreciated today is *Vanity Fair*; it came out in 1848 and was published serially, as were most of his novels; it was a social panorama of English upper middle classes, satirising their heartlessness and pretentiousness at the height of their prosperity; it was followed by novels in a similar field like *Pendennis and The Newcomes*. *Esmond* is a historical novel set in the Reign of Queen Anne

Vanity Fair was published in monthly instalments between 1847 and 1848 when the religious forces of the time were very energetic; the previous year had seen the Oxford movement and the evangelical religious revival, and the government had been engaged in the remedy of social abuses; but Thackeray shows his men of religion to be hypocrite. The novel is subtitled 'A novel without a hero', and there isn't in fact any hero as such; but the central character, Becky Sharp, is an

ingenious and vigorous adventures of poor parentage; she is in fact the victim of society, for Thackeray makes it clear that if she had been born in better circumstances she would have been a good housewife and mother. She begins her socially ambitious career with a friendship with Amelia Sedley, the sentimental heroine, and she marries her brother, who is rich but foolish. Frustrated she makes love to the mean and avaricious Sir Pitt Crawley, and marries his second son, an ignorant and dissolute man who, despite his incapacity is made governor of the Coventry Islands. Her marriage does not prevent her from pursuing her social ambitions still further, becoming the mistress of the aristocratic but degenerate Lord Steyne. Her ambition is defeated at the end, but she manages to end up as a respected member of society. Amelia Sedley on the other hand first marries the worthless young officer George Osborne, who is killed in the battle of Waterloo. He marries again to Dobbin, the only character with good human values who is an English gentleman in the moral rather than in the social sense, but who is a simpleton, like Amelia herself.

Thackeray provides us with all the details necessary to have a clear picture of the characters and the plot; he rarely falsifies the facts; it's his attitude to the facts what disconcerts us. The novel lies in the succession of scenes which presents the characters in action, is the sense of social context which comes through so vividly, the acid picture of man as a social animal, so if his moralising irritates the reader, one can easily skip those passages without losing the thread of the novel. The novel is an impressive, though negative landscape of upper class society in the first part of 19th century, though it is essentially a novel of contemporary life; he picked up the novel of manners where Jane Austin had left it, but his field is larger; he is concerned with the commonplaces in the life of people who have "no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything except success", "a set of people living without God in the world"; he wished both to tell the whole truth about man and to be edifying.

2. 2. The Brontës

Though the most important of them is Emily Brontë (1818-48) and the best novel belongs to her, she can't be properly studied without the necessary reference to her brothers and sisters, specially Charlotte Brontë (1816-55) who also wrote several novels and was the most successful of all of them during her lifetime. Their father was an Irish clergyman from Methodist background, but who believed firmly in the Church of England. He became perpetual curate of Haworth, Yorkshire, and since then for his children home was a parsonage on the edge of

the moors. Emily was his fifth child, and Charlotte the third; all of them had short lives (Charlotte, by far the longest lived died at the age of thirty nine).

Their mother died in 1821, leaving the family to the care of her sister. The reverend Patrick Brontë did not lead a social life, and the children kept to themselves and had to depend on their own resources. They walked on the moors and developed a love for its scenery. At home they read whatever came to their hands and lived more and more in the world of the imagination. Emily had brief excursions to school and to a private house as a children's governess, but for the great part of her life she remained at home. But her imagination went very far; together with her brother and sisters they were involved from early childhood in writing the chronicles of imaginary countries in elaborate detail and with remarkable gusto. Charlotte wrote about the passionate lives of the people of Angria and Emily wrote together with her sister Anne the *Gondal Chronicle*, of what all the prose is lost and only some poems remain, but which seem to have provided some of the situations and atmosphere later to be developed in *Wuthering Hights*.

After attending a boarding school for a short time, Charlotte helped in the education of her younger sisters, and for years later she was governess of the same school while Emily and Anne were pupils there. She planned with Emily to open a school of their own, and to learn proficiency in French and other subjects they went to Brussels and became pupils in the Pensionat Héger. They spent only eight months there and had to come back due to the death of their Aunt, but Charlotte returned later as a teacher in the same establishment; her passion for Constantin Héger seems to be the motive of the passional atmosphere present in most of her novels which are considered to be highly autobiographical. Her four novels have been regarded as variations upon her own story of frustrated passion. The parallelism between the novel and her former Angrian stories, though reducing the element of autobiography, doesn't invalidate the fact that she wrote, directly or indirectly, of her love for Héger, who was married to another woman.

Jane Eire, her first published and best novel, shows her writing out of her passions, dreams and frustrations; parts of the book are practically straight autobiography. The novel moves at high speed, and its emotional temperature never drops; normal conventions governing the relations between the sexes are not so much defied as simply ignored.

But the outstanding novel of the Brontës is Emily's *Wuthering Hights* which has always been regarded as one of the most singular and isolated of English novels, and it is also seen as one of the remotest

from social conditions. The north of England had always lagged behind the south in development and social conditions; now for the first time, with the industrial revolution its industrial countries were much in advance of the rest of the country, but there were still many places in its moors and hills which contained forgotten ways of life. To ensure the relatively primitiveness of her setting she places the plot of the novel in the end of the 18th century; *Wuthering Heights*, in the moorland, is a household which is still almost medieval; but there is an element more primitive than the farm itself, this is the waif, Heathcliff, who is never assimilated by that household, though he was introduced into it as a child. The heroine, Catherine Earnshaw is torn between her devotion to Heathcliff, with the offer of instinctual freedom he represents, and her desire to advance in society by marrying Edgar Linton.

The novel, told by Nelly, a servant, and Lockwood, a gentleman from the civilised south of England, tells the story of the Earnshaw family. Due to the remoteness of their setting, they live in a very traditional style; the family and servants have a kind of democratic equality, which accounts for the independent judgement of the housekeeper (Nelly). Into this house Mr. Earnshaw brings a child taken from the slums of Liverpool, and adopts him under the name of Heathcliff. However Mr. Earnshaw treats him as a pet animal; he is also despised by his son Hindley, and Heathcliff can only have a human relationship with the daughter, Catherine. He keeps his strong bond after Mr. Earnshaw's death, when Hindley, now master of the house makes him live like a despised animal. But Cathy marries Edgar Linton, from the "civilised" household of Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff runs away and comes back three years later as a rich man, as deeply identified with Cathy as ever and hating the Earnshaw and Linton family, but he is still socially excluded. Cathy dies when giving birth to a daughter, and Heathcliff tries to destroy Hindley; he nearly succeeds, but he is withhold by the love of Hareton Earnshaw and Catherine Linton (Catherine's daughter). Heathcliff becomes detached from external reality and lives only for his union with Cathy in death.

Emily Brontë anticipates the restlessness of women in the 20th century, refusing a code of behaviour which repressed their energies, but she also raises the question whether a tamed society can assimilate instinctual impulse. Such questions were not raised again until D.H. Lawrence. Cathy, more than Heathcliff is the central character; women were not supposed to possess the wilder, instinctive feelings which were acknowledged in men. Heathcliff on the other hand represents the savage forces in human beings which civilisation tries vainly to eliminate. It is important to remark the original way of telling the story through

relatively external narrators, what gives a kind of detachment to a wholly passionate and personal novel. It is also noticeable the mixture of the most careful realism in the description of physical objects with the purely imaginative conception of the nature of human life; but the reader is always unconscious of any gap between the realistic and the imaginative symbolic aspects of the novel.

Wuthering Hights is the work of a woman who deliberately separated herself from normal human intercourse and lived throughout her life in a private world of imaginary passion; Charlotte also lived, to some degree like this, but she made an effort to come to terms with it, and her concession to a social world is reflected in her novels.

2. 3. George Eliot (1819-80)

George Eliot is the pen name of the novelist Mary Ann Evans. She was the daughter of a land agent in the rural midlands (Warwickshire); her father's work, the management of states, gave her wide experience of country society, and this was greatly to enrich the insight and the scope of her novels. Brought up in a narrow religious tradition, in her early twenties she adopted agnostic opinions about Christian doctrine, but she kept the ethical ideas associated with it.

She was decisively influenced by Hennell's *Concerning the Origins of Christianity*, where he concluded that Jesus Christ never resurrected. When she read Hennell's book, her natural earnestness led her to admit the logic of his arguments. Through him she was drawn to the biblical and theological scholarship of Germany and this led her to the translation of Strauss' *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, both of them with the same critical approach as Hennell. They convinced her of the emotional and moral values of Christianity, but doubting its historical doctrines. She no longer accepted that a merciful providence had created and was guiding the human race, but she believed in the duty of understanding and responding to human needs, reverence was due to humanity, and her novels are the rich testimony of this. She was both idealist and agnostic, and derived both from her own intellectual inquiries into moral and religious questions.

After a trip in Europe she met a group of rationalists in London, among them John Chapman who was trying to resuscitate the *Westminster review*, and in 1851 he took her as an assistant editor. In the society where she moved she met many important men of the time; Herbert Spencer became a close friend of her and through him she met George Lewes, a philosopher and critic who wrote on a variety of subjects and

who in 1854 left his wife but couldn't get a divorce; In 1854 they entered into an irregular union which both regarded as marriage; this was a bold decision given the social opposition to unions not legalised by marriage. The moral conflict of this situation is part of her background as a novelist. For a time they lived in Germany, occupied with philosophical and psychological studies. Her first fiction consisted of tales later collected together as *Scenes of Clerical Life*, then came her novels *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1862), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1872), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Her first novels deal with life in the countryside where she was brought up, and the novelist combines humorous observation and imaginative sympathy. *Romola*, a historical novel placed in Italian Florence in the 15th century, seems to mark a turning point in his writings. Her last three novels, and specially *Middlemarch*, have very interesting themes in which the relationship of the individual to society is interpreted with an intelligence outstanding in the history of the English novel, and often compared with the genius of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy.

Before her the primary purpose of novel was to entertain; this doesn't mean that such authors as Richardson, or Thackeray or Dickens lacked moral purpose, but their job was to construct stories, not to exhibit new ideas. George Eliot was the first novelist to move on the vanguard of the thought and learning of her day, and doing this expanded the scope of the novel. She was concerned with moral problems of character, but she always took her characters from the environment; she knew England, both town and country, metropolitan and provincial, agricultural, commercial, industrial, and professional, and she made her characters move naturally in their daily occupations. Up to her, novels referred to their trades or professions only as a background, but Eliot's Dr. Lydgate is a doctor with real medical problems, we are told exactly the subject of Mr. Casaubon's research in *Middlemarch*, the agricultural activity of the Poysers in *Adam Bede* is presented with wealth of detail. It is the relationship into which people are brought in the course of their daily activities that precipitate the changes and the crisis which result in moral meaning.

In each novel there is a moral clash, generally involving the need for a woman to choose between two men or a man between two women. She maintained firmly her belief in the freedom of the will.

Her more ambitious and best novel is without any doubt *Middlemarch*, a novel whose material was initially intended for two novels, one centred on Dorothea Brooke and the other a study of provincial life in the town of Middlemarch, in Coventry. Unity is achieved by joining two senses of

provincial, a geographical one (situated outside the capital), and a local one (ignorant of current ideas). The action is placed just before the first Reform Bill, but the ideas are more typical of the mid-Victorian period when it was written. The book is very long (like most novels of the age) and has two plots running at the same time.

Dorothea, the daughter of a country gentleman is very ambitious but is geographically, socially and intellectually isolated in her provincial town. This leads her towards Mr. Casaubon whom she marries; he is a parson and scholar who is writing an important book on Mythology, trying to demonstrate that Christian faith is central in human beliefs, but, in fact, he is behind and unaware of the German research in this field, so his work is useless. He is egotist and narrow minded which contrasts with Dorothea's ardour and ambition. Dorothea finds her marriage a total disillusionment.

This story runs parallel to that of Tertius Lydgate and Rosamund Vincy. Lydgate is a young medical scientist who is equally engaged in important research, but he is alert to the intellectual centre of his thought (Paris); he has chosen to live in a provincial town to escape the social involvement and professional rivalries of the metropolis; however he is unable to conduct his own affairs and gets involved in the intrigues of the chairman of the Hospital Board, a banker who supposes he has a divine mission to direct the lives of others. He gets ruined at the end and his ruin nearly drags down Lydgate. Rosamund, his wife is the daughter of a manufacturer who wants to raise his family social level to metropolitan fashion; she has been attracted to Lydgate only because he has aristocratic relations, but she doesn't understand her husband intellectual interest and does nothing but frustrate it. Both Lydgate and Casaubon get into marriage assuming that a beautiful wife is a mere ornament to the life of a beautiful man, without a will of her own, but soon they realise that they are mistaken.

The theme of failure is counterbalanced by the theme of fulfilment; Dorothea learns from her own mistakes; after the death of her husband she acquires a capacity for humble and open-minded human sympathy. She falls in love with Casaubon's young relative, Will Ladislaw, who is very cosmopolitan in background and outlook.

The book is also full of other minor but very important characters like the Garth family who are conscious of their provincial character and by avoiding illusions achieve balanced insights and clear directions for their energies. Another not very important character, but valued by George Eliot is the free-thinking parson Farebrother, condemned to a life of self-sacrifice by external causes, but living without bitterness.

At first sight *Middlemarch* seems to be as narrow in its environmental setting as it is complex in its structure, but George Eliot touches upon so many aspects of 19th century intellectual and social experience as to make it one of the richest and most spacious of all English novels. The rest of her novels are also rich in individual characters, showing their worries and ambitions, they all show the contrast between provincialism and metropolitan ways of living, and they show with vividness and criticism all the social and political concerns of the time always from the point of view of the ordinary man and woman; but in no other novel as in *Middlemarch* has she portrayed a whole society and has she given the right emphasis to each of its component parts.

2. 4. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

He is as well known by his poetry as by his novels, but only his novels belong completely to the time we are treating here. His life extended well into the twentieth century, where literary style and concerns, specially after the first world war, suffered a great change; but his novels, and specially the best ones, were written almost completely in the latest part of the Victorian period and show the life and social situation of this time especially in relation with the decadence of rural England.

He was the son of a village builder in Dorset, so he was close to the country peasantry by his origins, and he never lost feeling for them. As he grew up he suffered the loss of religious faith which was so frequent among the intellectuals of the epoch, this led him to a tragic philosophy that human beings are the victims of indifferent forces. At the same time he witnessed the decadence and weakening of the rural England he knew and was so identified with, the most south western region of England which he named Wessex; he placed here the plot of his best novels, the novels of Character and environment which include *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1894). He also wrote other group of novels, called "Romances and Fantasies", but these have much less prestige, due perhaps to the fact that they have lost the relationship between characters and environment and this makes them less convincing.

His father profession helped him to choose architecture as a profession and at the time when church restoration was important he was articulated to one of his father's employers as a practitioner; later he followed this vocation in London, but his natural bend was for literature. He was at the centre of intellectual debate during the critical eighteen sixties. He read Spencer's *First Principles*, what made him meditate on "Casualty" in human destinies; chance is sometimes personified as a malignant deity

which deliberately “sports” with human misery. For this angry fatalism he found support in Swinburne, who was a strong influence on him.

His first masterpiece was *Far from the Madding Crowd*; its anonymity provoked widespread speculation as to its authorship; its success was enormous, and Hardy now a successful writer was able to marry. After a honeymoon in France and Belgium, the Hardys lived either in London or in one or another southern town till 1885, when they settled on the outskirts of Dorchester, where he lived for the rest of his life.

His novels are directed to the very condition of human existence. Setting his characters in an agricultural region, slow to emerge from the old rhythm of rural life into the modern industrial world he saw them as elemental figures whose passions were doomed to run the course that human condition sets for them; they are always contemplated against a background of indifferent nature, of the recurring procession of the seasons and of suggestive and mysterious relics of the human past. Nature is not a setting for his stories but an integral part of them. Man is a plaything in the hands of vast forces. For him, if there was no longer a merciful Power sustaining the human race, there were still powers, but they were indifferent to its destiny. Hardy was a countryman, who lived among a declining rural peasantry; it was not surprising that he should see Darwinian evolution as remorseless and ambivalent- as destructive of life and happiness as it was creative.

Hardy's work has many faults; he wasn't a subtle psychologist and his novels and characters are not very profound; his prose is often pretentious and generally rough; but it is precisely this roughness what gives a note of authenticity to his writing, what fills it with weight and integrity; and in all his best novels we can appreciate what Henry James called “the sense of felt life”.

The Return of the Native, one of his most representative novels, is placed in Egdon Heath, in Dorset, in the south West of England. The atmosphere of the Heath prevails over the whole book; as an environment, it repels some and absorbs others of the characters. The central character, “the native”, is Clym Yeobright, a Paris diamond merchant who has returned to the Heath in revulsion from the futility of his urban life and occupation. He intends to become a schoolmaster and marries Eustacia Vye who is unfaithful to him; her affair with the unscrupulous Damon Wildeve leads to the death of both. Other characters include Thomasin Yeobright whom Wildeve marries to her misfortune; and Diggory Venn, the travelling sheep dyer, who represents sincerity and truthfulness, and Mrs Yeobright, Clym's mother. Clym eventually becomes a travelling preacher.

The Return of the Native is not his best novel, but I have chosen to comment it because it includes all the main elements in Hardy's work and that makes it one of his most characteristic. It has been criticised for its defects in craftsmanship, the weakness of some of the characters, the plot is perhaps too obvious and too much importance is given to coincidence and chance, misunderstanding and eavesdropping. But the role of nature is quite clear in it - it is well known the beginning of the book, where he describes the heath-; the march of events is in the long run at the mercy of the impersonal logic of fact and coincidence. The dark violence of Eustacia Vye, the idealistic intelligence of Clym Yeobright, the will and affections of Mrs. Yeobright, the weakness of Wildeve, produce in their mutual interactions a tragic pattern which seen against the background of the heath, the daily rural activities of the minor characters, and the sense of history, seems to reduce all life to a doom that is never final. The novel as a whole is saved by its epic tone, its suggestion that here is a microcosm of human fate.

2. 5. Other novelists

The novel in the 19th century rapidly became the most popular way of presenting an extended argument on social, political or even religious questions; side by side with this there were also many novels aimed at entertainment at many different levels of skill and seriousness. A complete account of 19th century fiction, even if only a short paragraph was devoted to each particular writer, would take much more than this theme can cope with; so I'll engage only with a short account of the main literary types and writers. One of the most solidly competent of the Victorian novelists, who aimed to entertain by telling stories based in the life recognisable by his readers was Anthony Trollope (1815-82). His mother was also a novelist who wrote more than 50 novels; he himself was a very prolific novelist and considered writing like a craft and a skill, like shoe making; he produced novel after novel almost faster than readers could read them. He was a strong admirer of Thackeray and shared his contempt for the British upper middle classes, but he also had faith in the traditional values. His most popular novels are the Barchester series (*Barchester Towers*-1857-, *Doctor Thorne* -1858- and four others), which present life in a small cathedral city, against a background of ecclesiastical politics and the hopes, fears and intrigues of a society dominated by its clerical elements. His later work became more political; in his parliamentary series (*Phinneas Finn* -1869-, *The Prime Minister* -1876-) he had a very good sense of the relation between politics and daily life; he has an air of studied realism which makes his readers feel at home. The setting is commonly London, which Trollope considered a source of evil, and the tone is more critical with society.

Wilkie Collins (1824-89) is known as the father of the detective story, with his ingeniously plotted novels of crime and discovery; *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) are his best known novels, and in them he creates a disturbing atmosphere and specially intricate plot structures which influenced the later Dickens, but he is not so good at characterisation. He was also a documentary novelist of contemporary life and paid much attention to realistic detail and verisimilitude. Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65) moves the novel of social description at a deeper level and with deep psychological perception and humane feeling. As the wife of a Unitarian Minister in Manchester, she worked among the poor and knew at first hand the misery of the industrial areas and was in the middle of the Chartist agitation. *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) deal with social problems of the day, examining the effects of industrialisation and machinery and exploring the contrast between agricultural and industrial England and their human implications. She mixes humour, irony and sentiment in her account of English village life in *Cranford*, which is not properly a novel, but rather a series of sketches of simple, provincial people.

Charles Kingsley (1819-75) also used the novel as a means of discussing “the condition of England”. He presents the iniquities and injustice suffered by the British working classes in the age of Chartism. Another realist was Charles Reade (1814-84), who combined documentary rendering of the contemporary social scene with moments of dramatic vividness, often exposing some evil or abuse as in *It is Never too Late to Mend* (1856) and *Hard Cash* (1863); but his most popular work is his historical novel *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861). Lord Lytton (1803-73) followed the historical novel founded by Scott, who had many followers in the 19th century. He began under the influence of the Gothic novel, before turning into a historical novelist with *The Last Days of Pompey* (1834) and others.

Political novel had its main expression with Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81), a Tory politician who showed his romanticism in his vision of a “Young England”. In *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), this subtitled “the two nations” (the rich and the poor), he presents his political and social program for England, a conception of a society with classes tied by mutual bonds of loyalty, responsibility, and tradition, a properly functioning aristocracy.

A more important writer is Samuel Butler (1835-1902), whose novel *A Way of all Flesh* and specially its autobiographical style, was very influential in the 20th century; he attacks the despotism of Victorian

family life, the hypocrisy and cruelty of Victorian religion and the cruelty of Victorian education. It is a powerful novel, though the power is reduced by his evolutionary view which makes impossible to blame anybody as the process works itself out. He was against Darwin's theory of evolution, and favoured Lamarck's idea of the inheritability of acquired characteristics. Shaw admitted a great debt to his evolutionary theory; writers as different as D.H Lawrence and James Joyce wrote also autobiographical novels after him.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) was mainly an entertainer and a very good one. He travelled a lot, and part of his best writings are essays of travel; but his most famous works are the fantasy, so often used as an emblem of divided personality: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide* (1886), *treasure Island* (1883); equally known are his historical novels under the style of Scott like *The master of Ballantrae* (1889). His sense of moral ambiguity went side by side with a deep feeling for Scottish landscape and history. George Gissing (1857-1903) gives a sombre presentation of London poverty and has been compared with Dickens, but he presents it with an air of philosophic resignation quite unlike Dickens whom he claimed as his master.

Many more novelists should perhaps be mentioned and had relevance at the time; but the length of this review makes it impossible to treat them all. The idea in selecting these has been firstly their importance or influence in their epoch or in later periods of time and secondly to give a picture of what the interests and concerns of writers were in the Victorian epoch seen through the different types of novel: social, historical, political or just entertaining.

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