Victorian Literature

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Part One
Introduction

This book aims to introduce students to the literary culture of the Victorian period and to open out some of the cultural, social and political debates with which Victorian literature engaged. The boundaries of Queen Victoria’s reign, 1837–1901, mark the remit of this critical text. It will also, however, gesture to pre- and post-Victorian literatures and encourage readers to make connections across periods and to consider the ways in which the Victorians understood their past and their modernity.

The sixty-four years of Queen Victoria’s reign saw Britain develop in the areas of industry, urbanisation and technology. Its empire grew, its attitudes to women, democracy, science and religion shifted. We often recognise the Victorian period as a time of material achievement and progress as we ride along the railway lines that nineteenth-century engineers laid down, cross the bridges they built, or admire the Neo-Gothic confidence of Victorian buildings such as the Houses of Parliament or the Blackpool Pavilion. We would indeed find it difficult to miss many such robust and physical reminders of the Victorian period. However, we sometimes stereotype the Victorians themselves as less dynamic than their buildings. We see them as prim, earnest, staid, or even dull. The non-standard behaviours of men such as Oscar Wilde are figured as the exceptions that prove the rule. Emerging historical and literary research continues to complicate the stereotypes that
characterise the Victorians in this way. In his *Inventing the Victorians*, Matthew Sweet aimed to:

challenge the assumption that nineteenth-century culture was less sophisticated than ours; that the Victorians were people with sensibilities irremediably different from our own; that they were no good in bed and no fun at parties; that we should consider them our moral inferiors – our enemies.¹

We might bear these challenges in mind as we read Victorian texts and explore nineteenth-century culture.

If we want to challenge modern stereotypes about the Victorian period, should we look to the Victorians’ own pronouncements on their age? Like every era, the Victorian period reflected on itself in diverse ways. Oscar Wilde’s narrator in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) argues that civilised Victorian society ‘feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals’.² G. B. Shaw, meanwhile, saw late nineteenth-century England as a space in which ‘to have a sense of art is to be one in a thousand, the other nine hundred and ninety-nine being either Philistine volupptaries or Calvinistic anti-voluptuaries’.³ Thirty years earlier Matthew Arnold, while recommending the pursuit of ‘the best which has been thought and said’, categorised Victorian society into ‘Barbarians, Philistines, Populace’.⁴ Earlier in the century Elizabeth Gaskell, writing in agreement to her friend Lady Kay Shuttleworth, thought: ‘What you say of the restlessness of the age, of the “search after the ideal in some, and morbid dread of the ideal in others”, strikes me as very true; and it is difficult to steer clear of these two extremes, between which characters seem thrown backwards & forwards like shuttlecocks.’⁵ J. S. Mill also saw the age as one of ‘transition’. In *The Spirit of the Age* (1831), he wrote that ‘Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones.’⁶ How do we find our way through these various observations and definitions of the Victorian age when almost every Victorian we encounter seems to understand and articulate the spirit of the age differently? One strategy is to be wary of all such generalising
pronouncements, even when they are made by the wisest sages of the period. We might think about where such generalisations come from, who they are aimed at and what truths, conceptions or ideologies might lie behind them. We might also want to consider the advice of Thomas Carlyle. Writing just before the start of the Victorian period, he said:

We were wise indeed, could we discern truly the signs of our own time; and by knowledge of its wants and advantages, wisely adjust our own position in it. Let us, instead of gazing idly into the obscure distance, look calmly around us, for a little, on the perplexed scene where we stand. Perhaps, on a more serious inspection, something of its perplexity will disappear, some of its distinctive characters and deeper tendencies more clearly reveal themselves; whereby our own relations to it, our own true aims and endeavours in it, may also become clearer.

The Victorian period looked different from a chronological distance. While many Victorians frequently saw themselves as modern, the writers we now regard as Modernists, Virginia Woolf or Lytton Strachey for example, often disavowed their Victorian inheritance or satirised their predecessors. Modernism was reconfiguring the rules of writing. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, among many others, moved away from the principles of realism so integral to much Victorian art. Morals and manners were also shifting and the Great War of 1914 to 1918 seemed to mark off the Victorian period as a bygone world. While a number of canonical writers such as George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy have been continuously read, enjoyed and even revered, the reputation of many Victorian cultural figures dimmed and declined in the first half of the twentieth century.

John Sutherland has called Victorian fiction ‘one of the larger lost continents’. His Companion to Victorian Fiction, along with seminal texts such as Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1982) or Richard Altick’s The English Common Reader (1957), made efforts to recover forgotten Victorian texts. While a handful of canonical authors are still read and studied far more frequently than any others,
scholarship of Victorian literature in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries has opened out to engage with a much wider range of texts. Specialist journals such as Victorian Studies (started in 1956) or Victorian Literature and Culture (started in 1973) have nurtured research into under-read Victorian texts and facilitated the growth of specialist scholarly communities. The sensation novelists, such as Wilkie Collins or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who we now find on many undergraduate syllabuses, found their way into the canon over the last twenty years or so thanks to the work of critics such as Winifred Hughes. Hughes’s The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s (1980) has been supplemented and questioned by a gamut of critical texts. Wilkie Collins even has an academic journal dedicated to his writing career. While this book explores many of the canonical texts with which readers might be familiar, it also juxtaposes Dickens, Tennyson and Eliot with less frequently read Victorian writers, poets and playwrights.*

Following on from this introduction, Part Two provides a ‘Cultural Overview’ of the period that tries to evade generalisation in favour of contextualisation. This section provides a culturally rich background to the period. It introduces some of the major social issues of the day such as the Chartist agitation for electoral reform, debates around the position of women in society and increasing industrialisation. It invites us to think about how a number of Victorians were reacting to major political events, such as the Reform Bill or the Sepoy Rebellion, and major cultural ones, such as the Great Exhibition. New technologies and scientific developments affected the wider population and meant that many Victorian writers reconsidered their position in the world. The section provides a canvas made up of the literary, social and political background upon which the rest of the book can be read.

* Several projects to digitise Victorian texts have gone some way to overcome problems of access to works that may have been out of print for decades. These include large-scale digitisation, such as Project Gutenberg, as well as those that work on a smaller scale but subject the digitisation to more rigorous editorial checks, such as the Nineteenth Century Serials Edition at www.ncse.ac.uk/index.html.
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Part Three: ‘Texts, Writers and Contexts’, forms the backbone of the book. It examines six major genres and a selection of the writers and works belonging to them. It also sets these genres into important social and cultural contexts. The first chapter in this section, for example, considers Victorian poetry through the recurrent preoccupation with memory and mourning. It discusses the difficulties that poets such as Matthew Arnold expressed in living up to a perceived Romantic poetic inheritance and examines the ways in which dramatic monologues by Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning make memory questionable. In the light of these discussions, the chapter concludes with an Extended Commentary on Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s In Memoriam (1850), a poem which deals exactly in memories and which subsequent writers found hard to forget. Each of the chapters in this part proceeds in a similar manner to bring together canonical and lesser known texts across a genre in the light of particular themes or debates. They provide a critical perspective and invite readers to formulate their own interpretations rather than giving an overview or survey of the genres in question.

‘Critical Theories and Debates’ are the focus of Part Four of the book. Each of its chapters concentrates on a topic or debate that resonated across literary genres. The areas covered are: reader reception and the popular author; the woman question; literature of empire and national identity; and religion and evolution. The chapters map conflicting ways in which Victorian writers engaged with these large issues. They also give a sense of modern critical conflicts to provide an interpretative framework for the reader. The annotated Further Reading guides readers towards further critical texts that intervene significantly in these areas of scholarly contestation. The Timeline gives a useful reference point for the overlapping literary and historical chronologies of the Victorian period. These features, along with the other main sections of the book, provide guidance to further study and stimulation for new readers of Victorian literature to bring fresh interpretations to these inspirational texts.

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