

The realist Victorian novel – A dead end?

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This article aims at demonstrating that Victorian fiction is not outdated, and that at a closer and responsible analysis novels like “Bleak House”, “Vanity Fair”, “Jane Eyre” or “Wuthering Heights” are works of visionary artists and which can easily be read in a modern key. Obsolescence, redundancy of descriptive passages, the choice of narrative perspectives are the highlights of the article. The events which constitute the plot of the novels mentioned above are by no means exclusively characteristic of the Victorian era, the frequent descriptions are a significant part of the whole structure, and the narrative perspective is oftentimes as complex as a modern reader might expect. The conclusion of the article is that Victorian fiction, far from being old-fashioned and boring, anticipates symbolical, even fantastic elements in modern prose.

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1. Introduction

It is a fact that twenty-first century culture consumers tend to underestimate the nineteenth century art as being superseded, and, therefore, hard to connect to. Their argument is that the world has changed a lot these past two hundred years, that it continues to change right in front of our eyes, and that it is almost impossible to keep pace with progress. Why then bother to go back in time and search for answers if we can find them more easily in contemporary art?

Notwithstanding, we could find an answer if we read Shelley’s well-known poem *England in 1819*. Things do not seem to have changed so much in a span of two centuries:

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,-
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, - mud from a muddy spring, -
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,

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Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow, -
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field, -
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless - a book sealed;
A Senate, - Time's worst statute unrepealed, -
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

Is the world we live in nowadays very much different? Don't we know about tyrants who rule their countries for their own benefit? Are poverty and starvation maladies of the past? Does religion bring comfort and support today more than of old? Let us face it: in 2018 we are not very far from the reality depicted by Shelley in this poem.

In this article we will try to prove that, although Victorian novelists lived and worked so long ago, their novels are by no means anachronistic. Quite on the contrary, major authors, such as Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Austen, the Brontë sisters, trespassed the barriers of social realism and anticipated the twentieth century psychological issues.

2. Is Victorian fiction outdated?

Thus, by far the most frequently mentioned reason why Victorian novels are deemed to be less and less popular, especially with young and very young readers, is the claim that Victorianism is obsolete. Most of those who dismiss Victorian literature as an old hat state that it is impossible for them to put themselves into the shoes of the Victorian heroes and heroines and their world.

Nevertheless, at a closer look, this proves to be false. Thus, the characters of these novels, their behaviour, their social and psychological issues are not unknown to the modern reader. Quite on the contrary, many of the realist novels of the nineteenth century bring to the fore social and moral questions and dilemmas which have constantly preoccupied the human mind, irrespective of the age. Here is what Philip Davis argues:

Victorian literature, the realist Victorian novel, is the most accessible of all, in terms of its commitment to a recognizably ordinary, mundane life. As such, it offers the portrait of such lives to real-life equivalents and identifiers as a form of emotional education. (Davis 2008, 14)

This statement gives voice and agency to the undeniable truth that, no matter the chronological age during which these works were written, they are an important

part of the living history and culture of humanity. Therefore, Victorian literature (like language as a means of communication) is part of a living organism exposed to change, but at the same time contributing to the multifariousness of the Whole.

The main concern of realistic prose is to dig deep into the different layers of reality and find serious, complex social aspects of everyday life. Notwithstanding, in Dickens' novels, for instance, "what often appears to be reality is a world in which there is a barrier between self and others, between inside and out" (Davis 2008, 42). In other words, the awareness of psychology almost constantly accompanies the author's preoccupation with social intricacies.

Thus, the claim that the shift from plot to character is exclusively a concern of the modern novel can be easily contradicted if we look closely at main characters in Victorian novels: "The increased awareness of psychology is part of that process of continuous adjustment and readjustment that is the inner drama of the Victorian story" (Davis 2008, 23).

Bleak House, which undoubtedly is a daring critique of the British legal system of that time, proves to be much more than that. Each character, scene or situation has a counterpart somewhere else in the novel, all of these creating a web of connections in which the psychological component plays an important role. Ultimately, all walks of life are masterfully represented in the novel. Very often, despite a realistic way of describing people and places, they acquire larger than life dimensions. Miss Flite, for instance, is not just one of the very numerous active participants in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. She is clearly unbalanced psychologically. Thus, she keeps caged birds which she treats as if they were human companions. At the same time, she has given them abstract, symbolical names like: Death, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness or Cunning. Significantly, Lady Jane, the cat is after the birds, constantly spying on them. She also regularly goes to the Court of Chancery, carrying a purse with documents, eagerly waiting for 'the Day of Judgement'. At a closer analysis, Miss Flite is a typical case of manic depression.

Esther Summerson, the subjective voice in the same novel, impresses an attentive reader to the point of shedding tears. Moreover, twenty-first century readers can easily identify with her when she "recollects forward":

Esther weeps at every mark of kindness and love that she encounters; at our best, when we are not caught in death in life, we are tempted to weep also. Trauma recollects forward; ever remission from it brings on tears of relief and joy. (Bloom 1994, 311)

Esther Summerson's tragedy is universal, as it is caused by parentlessness and, therefore, lack of love and tolerance.

An even more relevant case is that of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. From a waif found by Mr. Earnshaw in the street this character turns into an obsessed revengeful enemy who does not waver from his monstrous design until his cruel goal has been reached. All along, Emily Brontë succeeds in minutely and masterfully analyzing her character. Step by step the reader witnesses Heathcliff's transformation from a suffering, humiliated child, to a frustrated, jilted youngster, to an unscrupulous deceiver and, ultimately, a psychotic mature man who does not refrain from sacrificing his own son in order to accomplish his inhuman plan. Having accomplished his diabolical scheme, Heathcliff realizes how vain and appalling his life had been: "Oh, damn it! It's unutterably too much for flesh and blood to bear, even mine" (Brontë 1965, 364). As a consequence, he breaks down, and in his despair, he starves himself to death.

Another case of self-destructive vanity is Michael Henchard, in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. After having sinned against his wife and child in an unpardonable way, Henchard starts his fast ascension to power. When he finally becomes the mayor of the town, he loses control over his actions and feelings and behaves like a cruel dictator. A successful, self-sufficient, arrogant ruler he behaves in a tyrannical way forgetting his own origins. This is the moment when he commits another sin against decency and kindness by forcing Abel Whittle to go to work in his underwear. From this moment on, his psychological and physical downfall is inevitable. It is obvious that his past haunts him and finally causes his breakdown. The novel is, therefore, both a depiction of rural England facing industrialization and a tale of human weakness and resolution. Consequently, the economic and emotional rise and fall of "a man of character" is the real concern of the novelist.

Moreover, an attentive analysis of Hardy's prose reveals the novelist's preoccupation with the emphasizing of features which matter when portraying his characters. In Hardy's biography *Life*, the author expresses his opinion about art:

Art is a disproportioning – i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art. (Wheeler 1994, 198)

In other words, Hardy's concern was not to mirror life as we see it, but to change the actual proportions of reality according to his idiosyncrasy. The world is depicted in various lights and colours and from different perspectives. Thus, for instance, his heroine, Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is 'painted' in candlelight or moonlight, at dawn or in the evening light, in bright sunshine or in the flickering of the fire. She is viewed not only from a distance and compared to "a fly on a billiard-table of infinite length" (Hardy 1978, 16), but also in a series of close-ups. Therefore, the

statement that Victorian photographic reality is of no consequence to our modern reader cannot be sustained.

A larger than life character is also Thackeray's Rebecca Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, a novel in which money and financial advantages constitute the main theme. Thackeray succeeds in this novel to represent Greed and Vice in an allegorical way. In the preface of the novel *Before the Curtain*, the novelist presents the Vanity Fair, a place where all walks of life move to and fro, their only preoccupation being gaining money. The leading figure behind the plot, Becky Sharp, daughter of a penniless artist, is adamant in feuding for a wealthy life and does not refrain from any immoral act. It is more than obvious that she is not the typical Victorian young woman, educated in a boarding school for young girls to become a sympathetic, efficient, reliable and attractive housewife and a dedicated mother.

Becky Sharp does not fit in this Victorian pattern. The moment she leaves Miss Pinkerton's Academy she throws the dictionary, which she had received as a farewell present, out the window of the carriage. It is a gesture of spite and revenge for all the humiliations and frustrations she has experienced in this institution. This arrogance might well be a characteristic of a young girl of our days, but it is outrageous for a Victorian heroine. Becky's behavior all through the plot is that of a woman determined to reach her goal by any means and this is not a typical Victorian conduct. Even though her appearance is not a remarkable one, the adventuress uses her "very large, odd, and attractive" (Thackeray 1968, 2) eyes on Sir Pitt, Rawdon's brother, George, Jos Sedley, Lord Steyne. Inevitably, Becky's life ends in moral and financial bankruptcy. By creating Rebecca Sharp, Thackeray implies that, even though she is unique, many of her features are common to mankind in general.

Furthermore, if we look at the female protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, it will be obvious that the Victorian standards are questioned and sanctioned by the author. Jane's story is the old and new tale of loneliness, frustration, rebellion, independence, disappointment in love, and, ultimately, reconciliation with life. What is significant about Jane's evolution is her hot desire to achieve independence and appreciation. Far from being the shy orphan, the humble student at Lowood, the obedient governess, she wages a constant war with injustice, cruelty, conventions, and, finally, wins this battle.

Moreover, when creating her heroine Brontë gave her response to life and experience. With her passion becomes a topic, sexual taboos no longer count. Before Charlotte Brontë, sexual love was described in two ways: as a decent affection between a woman and her husband or as a sinful animal sensuality. For Brontë, real love is a blending of the physical with the spiritual. It is easy to imagine how Jane's words offended the Victorian prudery:

I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking, - a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (Brontë 1992, 324)

What Brontë is really concerned with is the depiction of the soul responding to the experiences of life with great intensity. Seventy years later D.H. Lawrence demonstrated in his novels that sexual love was part of human experience, not a taboo. Needless to say that both Brontë and Lawrence were misunderstood and condemned by their contemporaries. Sadly and ironically, nowadays their work is considered to be outdated. Nonetheless, a closer analysis will reveal the fact that, far from being the typical Victorian heroine, Jane is clearly a forerunner of independent, hardworking unbiased modern women. This is what she concludes in the end of the novel: "I hold myself supremely blest – blest beyond what language can express..." (Brontë 1992, 546).

Subsequently, it is safe to argue that Victorian heroes and heroines can acquire huge dimensions, and become spokespersons of existential dilemmas, thus bringing them closer to our times. Krook and Flite dedicate their lives to the achievement of justice, Henchard loses his family and his life, too, because he denies human nature, kindness and modesty, Heathcliff and Catherine are the tragic victims of a boundless love which verges on hate, Jane Eyre, on the contrary, fights for her love and life and wins. In addition, Esther Summerson's universal trauma brings her very close to modern readers. Thus, it is not far-fetching to state that these characters live among us, that they are not mysterious and outdated Victorians.

3. Why descriptions?

Another flaw of Victorian prose in the eyes of prejudiced readers is the abundance of long descriptions which make reading tedious and uninteresting. Once again an attentive reading will reveal the importance of descriptions in the structure of the Victorian novel. Thus, we believe that if we were not impatient and in a constant hurry, it would be obvious that the descriptive passages bring additional information and, most often, anticipate coming events. At the same time, they create a specific atmosphere rendering colour and nuance to the plot. A classic example would be the grey atmosphere depicted in Dickens' *Bleak House* which is undoubtedly in keeping with the mysterious and, at the same time, dramatic events:

Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like a elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. (Dickens 1971, 49)

The opening lines of the novel anticipate the dark atmosphere and tragic events in the novel. Fog, rain, mud, dirt are recurrent symbolical elements pointing at the numerous tragic lives of the victims of the Jarndyce case.

The description of Krook's shop, where everything is bought and nothing sold, acquires larger than life dimensions. Krook collects all sorts of 'useless' things like: old documents, parchments, rags, ink bottles, even human hair. Significantly enough, Mr. Krook does not know how to read or write, and he does not even want to be taught the alphabet because he does not trust anybody. His strong conviction is that the document which would solve the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is in his shop. This is why he needs to be sure that he will be the one who discovers and reads the incriminating paper. Just like Krook, the reader has to piece the document together, to interpret it.

Krook's death by spontaneous combustion, too, has a clearly symbolical meaning: as a potential possessor of the document he is suddenly consumed by an internal fire and disappears into thin air leaving behind a dark spot on the floor. This strange disappearance prefigures the end of the story: the trial does not have a solution or an end. It only kills some of the suitors and leaves a deep dark mark on those who survive the trial. Thus, Krook's shop is clearly a replica of Chancery, and Krook himself the Lord Chancellor's reflection.

In the same vein, descriptions in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are undoubtedly an instrument in the hands of the novelist and, therefore, suggest and introduce important events. Thus, the Roman Amphitheatre of Casterbridge, or the Ring as it is named locally, is the part of the town which conceals past secrets, even crimes:

It was impossible to dig more than a foot or two deep about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier or other of the Empire, who had lain there in his silent unobtrusive rest for a space of fifteen hundred years. (Hardy 1994, 69)

The Ring is described as a huge circular construction, which the author compared to the Coliseum in Rome. This place becomes suggestive at dusk, an appropriate time for concealing the truth or planning a crime. It is "...melancholy, impressive, lonely, yet accessible from every part of the town" (Hardy 1994, 70). One of the mysterious furtive meetings which take place at the Roman Amphitheatre is that of Henchard and the wife he had sold to a sailor twenty-one years ago. They share the

secret of this unfortunate event which haunts Henchard but both have their own secrets to hide: Henchard conceals his love affair with Lucetta, Susan does not reveal the truth about Elizabeth-Jane. Therefore, the spot itself comes to life and influences the characters in their endeavours.

Even more impressive is the description of Egdon Heath in the opening of *The Return of the Native*. It is not a mere depiction of a place but a portrayal of a breathing entity. It exhales darkness and gloom: "Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries..." (Hardy 1994, 4). Egdon Heath, as it is described by Hardy, is obviously the materialization of the Immanent Will, the omnipotent force which governs human beings and determines their destinies.

Likewise, in *Wuthering Heights*, the most surprising Victorian novel, descriptions are an inseparable part of the plot. *Wuthering Heights* is, thus, situated at the crossroads of winds and storms, while *Thrushcross Grange* lies in an enclosed park. *Wuthering Heights* is a heaven of wilderness and freedom, whereas *Thrushcross Grange* represents the civilized realm deprived of liberty. The inhabitants of these two worlds bear the imprints of their respective environment and clash because they ignore their limits and the tremendous power of the Intruder, Heathcliff, who has been sinned against and takes revenge.

The novel ends with a reconciliation between the two separate universes materialized in a zoomed picture of the three headstones on a slope next to the moor. The oldest marks Catherine's grave. It is grey with age and is almost hidden by heath. Next to it, Linton's grave is only half-covered by moss and ivy, whereas Heathcliff's is still bare. The spot is finally calm, the sleepers quiet, harmony has won, death has put an end to hatred and revenge.

Therefore, the assumption that the descriptions in the novels chosen as examples are redundant cannot be taken seriously. Quite on the contrary, the close-ups and bird's eye views in the remarkable Victorian novels we have mentioned are a significant part of the whole and cannot be separated from the plot or the portraying of characters. They are interwoven with the events in the lives of the protagonists, with their feelings and thoughts and form a complex picture in which each and every element is of utmost importance.

4. Victorian narrative techniques

A frequent statement concerning the use of narrative techniques in realist prose is that its major characteristic is a strictly chronological succession of events in the tradition of the canonical novel. Again, if we look closely, this assertion proves to be false.

In *Bleak House*, there are two major narrators and several minor ones. The multiple voices which are heard all through the novel make the novel extremely

complex and mysterious. From among the multiple narrators, the objective anonymous reporter and Esther Summerson, the subjective storyteller, stand out without any doubt. The two storylines, the double perspective, interconnect and enrich the narration in a very subtle way. In Harold Bloom's opinion she is "the unifying figure" (Bloom 1994, 312). Her and John Jarndyce's connection with the trial is the negation of Chancery. The anonymous narrator's ironical, even sarcastic contributions are doubled by Esther's serene and kind interpretations: "Esther stands apart, so different from Dickens' flamboyance that he sometimes seems lovingly in awe of her... She is a survivor, and her mildness is a defense against trauma" (Bloom 1994, 313). The bringing together of the two narrators, the various plots, and the very numerous characters create a web of connections in which no one is free. Therefore, we cannot speak about linearity in *Bleak House*. Although the events are told in a chronological order, the whole structure branches off in all directions until the whole picture is complete and Lady Dedlock's secret is revealed.

In *Vanity Fair* the narrative technique is by no means an obsolete one. In the preface of the "novel without a hero" – the subtitle of the novel which is soon contradicted by an outstanding portrayal of the snob – Thackeray introduces the authorial voice as the Manager of the Performance. To make matters even more sophisticated the 'Puppeteer' who manipulates his puppets by pulling numerous strings, acts as a character, too. Without any doubt, the main marionette – and heroine – is Becky Sharp whose destiny is connected with almost all characters in the novel. Even though the reader is confronted with a chronological chain of events, the flow is constantly interrupted by the authorial voice which comments, judges, gives advice or simply watches from above. In other words, the novel seems to be written as it is being read. Metafiction is not unknown to modern writers either.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë uses two main narrators, too, but she also creates an interesting circularity of the plot. On the one hand, Nelly Dean unfolds the saga of the two families in a personal, subjective, and therefore prejudiced manner. On the other hand, Lockwood filters the events through the lens of a watcher, an outsider and recreates the chronicle by writing his own diary. Lockwood's contribution to the storyline is most interesting. As he is the looker-on, his account should be an objective one. Nonetheless, his judgment is influenced by Nelly Dean's comments and side taking.

Interestingly, Mrs. Dean's contribution claims to be objective but is deeply subjective and opinionated. Lockwood's view is apparently totally objective and viewed from the outside but a strong subjective element penetrates his tale. To this complex narrative structure Brontë adds a circular narration. It starts in November 1801 with Lockwood's arrival at Wuthering Heights, then goes back to 1771 the year when Heathcliff was found on the streets of Liverpool and brought home, and then closes the circle in December 1802, when Lockwood returns to

Thrushcross Grange. This is undoubtedly a pattern which we can detect in modern or even postmodern fiction.

5. Conclusion

All assertions and examples mentioned in this article lead to one major conclusion: literature in all its multifariousness and complexity is a living whole. When we divide it into currents, movements and periods, we sin against its entirety. We have looked at several aspects of Victorian fiction, whereas we should have concentrated on the fact that innovative, original techniques are characteristics of literature irrespective of the period in which it was created. To isolate a novel from the whole literary context is already a mistaken endeavour. Unfortunately, our power of synthesis is by far less complex than the literary phenomenon and this is why we need to fragment and analyze. Starting from this thesis we are entitled to ask the following question: what do Dickens' *Bleak House* and Kafka's *Trial* have in common? Harold Bloom gives the answer: "Chancery, like the *Trial* and the *Castle* in Kafka, is a Gnostic vision: the Law has been usurped by the Cosmocrator, the Demiurge" (Bloom 1994, 312). And this happens all the time.

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