Realism and The Rise of The Novel in Victorian Literature: A Study of Narrative Method, Social Commentary and Genre Evolution

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Abstract: This article constructively explores the emergence and development of realism in Victorian literature, particularly within the novel genre. It provides insight into the socio-political context of the period and discusses the creative methodologies utilized by influential writers like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the Bronte sisters. By examining the transition from romantic to realist narrative modes, the study highlights the significant contributions of Victorian novels in portraying complex social realities and giving a voice to marginalized groups. Furthermore, it underscores how these works contributed to the moral and intellectual development of society. The paper also reflects on how the genre's formal features, such as scope, character complexity, and length, effectively mirror the broader cultural transformations occurring in 19th-century Britain, fostering a deeper understanding of the literary landscape of the time.

Keywords: Realism, Victorian literature, novel, genre, character complexity, the literary landscape, narrative techniques, artistic discourse, English literature.

Introduction: The Victorian era has been the subject of thorough analysis within global literary studies, particularly regarding its extensive output of novels and the narrative techniques employed. The reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) is marked by significant modernization and relative affluence within British society. Literary critic David Mitchell highlights this period as one of unprecedented industrial, economic, and social growth, which not only elevated living standards but also fostered the expansion of democratic principles. Such a transformative backdrop inevitably shaped literary production, prompting writers to confront and engage with critical socio-political issues of their time.

As a result, it is clear from the content and underlying intentions of many writers who were active during this period that their works brought pressing socio-political issues to the forefront. Indeed, Victorian literature, grounded in the principle of depicting reality truthfully and rich in works written in the realist style, ushered in a new phase in English literature. The realist novels of the time explored major contemporary social issues through artistic discourse, offering comprehensive portrayals of British society, transforming lived experience into artistic truth, and encouraging changes in people's way of life. These works often called for resistance against the discrimination faced by women in society. The literature of this period, especially its novels, exhibits a pronounced dedication to realism, offering intricate depictions of everyday life while simultaneously critiquing systemic injustices entrenched in society. Scholars like John Sutherland have lauded this era as the "golden age of English literature," recognizing its artistic innovation and ideological complexity. The Victorian novel emerged as a powerful medium through which authors articulated responses to the pressing challenges of their day, including class disparities, gender inequities, and the pursuit of moral reform.

METHODS

However, the era under investigation possesses a number of distinctive features that set it apart from other literary periods. Scholars who have studied the literature of this period often highlight one of the distinctive features of Victorian literature: the fact that writers initially focused on seemingly modest, relatively minor social issues. This observation is valid. For instance, Charles Dickens began by writing in a satirical-sentimental style, portraying the hopeless daily lives of ordinary people. Later, in Oliver Twist (1838), he used the character of Oliver to expose the existence of a repulsive criminal underworld hidden beneath the vibrant surface of urban life. Here, Dickens effectively employed elements of critical realism. In his 1844 novel, David Copperfield, Dickens addressed political ideologies associated with power, class conflict, and the problem of social stratification. Though the events in the novel unfold in the United States, the main characters are wealthy Englishmen, through whom Dickens reflects on political attitudes and social class issues within English society.

Russian scholars U. V. Anikin and N. P. Mukhailyanskaya note that William Makepeace Thackeray's mid-19th-century novels The History of Henry Esmond, The Newcomes, and The Book of Snobs artistically depict societal flaws such as excessive pride, arrogance, vanity, and a general lack of respect among people. The Book of Snobs, in particular, stands out for its critical realism and satirical tone, offering a critique of the moral contradictions within society.

In the works of the Bronte sisters Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Mary Barton we find an exploration of women's real status in society, the discrimination against women's rights, and the divisive effects of religious ideologies split between evangelical and atheistic worldviews, all of which are shown to have negatively impacted social progress. Thus, while the initial focus of Victorian literature was on social issues, later developments reveal a deeper concern with political and educational reforms. These include advocating for safe working conditions for social reformers, promoting universal education, and encouraging empathy for the emotional experiences of the common people, along with a more honest and perceptive engagement with everyday reality. These concerns represent some of the defining features of Victorian literature.

Another significant point raised by scholars is the relative decline of poetry especially lyrical and epic poems, which had been dominant genres during the Romantic period in favor of the novel. English literary critics George Antoine Caddon and Michael Carter have acknowledged that "the dominant genre of Victorian literature was the novel," and that "the novel represented the major achievement of Victorian literary endeavor, becoming not only the most popular and prominent genre in England but also in world literature". While this view is largely accurate, it is especially important to emphasize the development of realism within the novel, particularly the rise of critical realism. Movements such as Chartism, the increasing activism of the working class, and the growing exploitation of children and women in labor forced writers to adopt a more socially conscious, realistic narrative approach.

RESULTS

Another important hallmark of this period is the development of the novel as a literary genre. During the Victorian era, novels written in a realist mode gained remarkable influence and scope, stimulating the interest of ordinary people in literature and intellectual life. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), one of the major figures of Victorian literature, addressed this in her novel Adam Bede, stating: "We must be ready to depict the ordinary aspects of life, and its painful points, with realism, credibility, and, most importantly, compassion." This quotation clearly reflects Eliot's belief shared by her contemporaries that the purpose of literature is to offer an authentic representation of the world by depicting complex, realistic life experiences through believable characters and scenes.

The rapid development of the novel and its emergence as the most widely read genre is closely connected to the rise of the middle class and the increasing literacy rates among the population. The Industrial Revolution in Britain also left a visible mark on the content and structure of Victorian novels. These works increasingly turned away from historical or purely domestic themes and began portraying the lives of ordinary factory and mill workers. As a result, writers came to see the realistic depiction of social and moral values as a core literary mission. They committed themselves to illustrating the social issues of the Victorian period, the dynamics of family life, tensions between the individual and society, and the relentless pursuit of desire among the aristocracy all while giving voice to the suffering and hardships of the poor. Yet, it is important to acknowledge another significant aspect: although realism had well-defined ideological aims, traces of romanticism persisted in many writers' works. This blending of romantic and realistic modes occasionally gave rise to hybrid literary forms, which became a subject of interest in literary criticism. Some scholars sought to define realism more rigorously, emphasizing that writers should strive to perceive nature and answer philosophical questions using evidence, facts, and observable detail. However, other authors continued to represent reality under the lingering influence of romanticism.

This phenomenon was first analyzed in detail by the so-called "Apostles" group and the New Classicists, such as T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot—figures who were both writers and intellectuals. They were among the first to articulate substantial views on this interplay between literary traditions.

In fact, the merging of romantic and realistic elements was not unique to English literature. For example, in French literature, the idealism, imaginative flights, and emotional intensity characteristic of romanticism are also evident in Gustave Flaubert's realist novel Madame Bovary. The protagonist, Emma Bovary, is portrayed as deeply passionate, emotionally intense, and driven by a yearning for a grand, romantic life. However, in stark contrast to her temperament, the other characters surrounding her are depicted as dull, melancholic, and egotistical. While Emma embodies the romantic spirit, the novel itself is constructed in a realist style. Similarly, the character of Charles is drawn as a romantic poet figure, whereas Philippe represents realism. These contrasts illustrate the deliberate combination of romantic and realist elements within the same work. Indeed, the blending and intersection of creative methods is a phenomenon frequently observed in literary processes. The emergence of realism as a creative method is often evaluated as a response to the ideals of romanticism. This shift reflects a conscious departure by writers from the dominant principles of romanticism. As a result, from the second half of the 19th century, realism began to take root in English prose, particularly in the novel. The emphasis on detailed depictions of events and characters, and the faithful representation of reality as it is, distinguished realist narratives from those shaped by romantic conventions.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the view that realism emerged in direct response to the idealism of Romanticism. Whereas Romantic literature favored emotion, imagination, and individual heroism, Victorian realism turned toward empirical observation, everyday struggles, and the portrayal of ordinary individuals. This shift reflects broader cultural changes, including the rise of the middle class, increased literacy, and the influence of the Industrial Revolution on social consciousness. Unlike romanticism, which emphasized idealism, realism focused on real-life events, social issues, and verifiable details. For realist literature, it was more important to depict the lives of ordinary people such as laborers and members of the rural working class than to portray idealized heroes, aristocrats, or wholly virtuous fictional figures. Consequently, many writers increasingly sought to reflect the somber moods of the English populace and present vivid portraits of rural and working-class individuals. For example, George Eliot's Adam Bede is notable for its portrayal of rural characters, while Middlemarch explores the diverse fates of individuals from different social strata. Similarly, the depiction of the hardships and suffering of the working class in Charles Dickens's novels derives its authenticity from the author's own difficult childhood experiences.

Another defining feature of realist works is the frequent presence of tragic endings, reminiscent of classical tragedy. Such conclusions did not always appeal to upper-class readers accustomed to the happy resolutions typical of romantic works. However, realist writers explained this by linking literature more closely to real life, where human destinies are varied and often unpredictable. Take Dickens's novels, for instance: while virtuous characters may eventually find happiness, those driven by selfishness or lacking in moral values often face misfortune. Thus, the primary aim of these works is not necessarily how they end, but rather the promotion of moral development. Dickens's Great Expectations serves as a fitting example.

In Great Expectations, Dickens does not focus on the material success of his characters, but rather on the disillusionments they face. The protagonist, known as Pip (short for Philip Pirrip), loses his father at an early age and is raised by his elder sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery. At the beginning of the second chapter, the narrator explains: "My sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, was more than twenty years older than I and had established a great reputation with the neighbors because she had brought me up 'by hand.' Having no idea what the phrase meant, I supposed that Mrs. Joe was referring to the strength and hardness of her hands, which she used to discipline not only me, but also her husband."

This passage reveals two key elements: first, the story is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Philip; second, there is a subtle, almost sarcastic tone in the realistic depiction. It suggests that Mrs. Joe often physically disciplined both her husband and brother, a reflection of her strict nature. She hoped her younger brother would one day rise to join the ranks of respectable gentlemen. As a result, Pip grew up to be a morally conscientious boy, constantly monitoring his behavior and trying never to act against his conscience. Thus, in realist novels, the author sets a clear intention: to construct narratives grounded in believable developments and lifelike portrayals of character. The ultimate concern is not the resolution of the plot, but the message the author conveys to the reader often centered on ethical awareness and social observation.

CONCLUSION

Victorian literature, especially the realist novel, played

a crucial role in documenting and critiquing 19th-century British society. Through its detailed characterizations, focus on social realities, and departure from romantic idealism, the Victorian novel became a powerful medium for reform and reflection. Writers like Dickens and Eliot transformed literature into a tool of ethical education, while the formal evolution of the genre reflected broader changes in readership, class dynamics, and narrative purpose. The enduring value of Victorian realism lies in its humanism: its insistence that ordinary lives matter and that literature must reflect the world truthfully and responsibly.

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