

50. The Victorian Novel

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1. Introduction

The Victorian era, which spans the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, represents one of the richest periods in the history of English literature. The novel emerged as the dominant literary form, addressing the complex social, moral and economic issues of the time. With the expansion of literacy, the rise of a middle-class readership and the increasing availability of printed material, literature became both a mirror and a moral compass for a society in transition.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study of the Victorian novel offers an invaluable opportunity to foster students' linguistic, literary and cultural competences. Through its vivid portrayals of historical settings, complex characters and social dilemmas, the Victorian novel allows learners to explore universal themes such as justice, gender roles, education or poverty. Additionally, integrating these texts into the English classroom, even through excerpts or adaptations, contributes to the development of key skills such as reading comprehension, critical thinking and empathy.

The present analysis is grounded in critical contributions such as *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Sanders, 2019), which offers a comprehensive view of the period; *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Abrams and Harpham, 2015), which provides key theoretical frameworks; and *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers* (Lazar, 1993), which supports the didactic integration of literature in the EFL classroom.

2. Historical, Cultural and Literary Background

The Victorian era was a time of sweeping transformations across virtually every aspect of British life. The Industrial Revolution, which had begun in the late 18th century, reached its height in the 19th century, bringing about unprecedented urbanisation, technological innovation and economic growth. This led to the expansion of the middle class and the consolidation of capitalist society, but also to social instability, child labour, exploitation of the working classes and poor living conditions in rapidly growing industrial cities.

At the same time, scientific discoveries and philosophical developments began to challenge traditional religious beliefs. The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was a major turning point that introduced new perspectives on human existence and sparked fierce debates on science and faith. Education also underwent significant reforms, particularly with the Elementary Education Act of 1870, which contributed to rising literacy rates and the emergence of a mass readership. These social and intellectual tensions are deeply reflected in the literature of the time.

Victorian Britain was also an empire at its zenith, and imperialist ideology filtered into the literature in both subtle and overt ways. Novels of the period often reveal unconscious biases, but they also open a space for critique and discussion about race, otherness and cultural identity, all of which are relevant for the modern multicultural classroom.

Literary production flourished in this context, and the novel became the most popular and respected literary genre of the time. Thanks to innovations such as serialization in periodicals, novels reached a wide and diverse audience. Writers responded by crafting long, intricate stories filled with suspense, moral conflict and detailed depictions of society. As literacy extended across classes and genders, literature became a means of both entertainment and social reflection.

3. Characteristics of the Victorian Novel

Victorian novels are marked by a strong realist impulse, aiming to depict the social and moral fabric of their time with precision. Authors portrayed a wide range of characters across class lines, often exploring their psychological depth and the impact of societal pressures on their lives. Rich descriptions, complex plots and a clear moral purpose were common features, as writers sought not only to entertain but to raise awareness of pressing social issues through compelling and reflective narratives.

These novels are also profoundly moral in orientation. They frequently address issues such as poverty, child abuse, women's rights, corruption or education, encouraging readers to reflect on social injustices and moral responsibilities. The idea of personal redemption through suffering, integrity and perseverance is a recurring theme.

Narrative structures in Victorian novels are typically elaborate, often weaving together several storylines that culminate in a unifying resolution. The Bildungsroman is a frequent framework, tracing a character's moral and psychological growth. These works often feature an omniscient narrator who not only recounts events but also offers direct commentary, guiding the reader's interpretation and reinforcing the novel's ethical perspective, an aspect that lends itself well to classroom analysis of narrative voice and rhetorical intent.

4. Main Victorian Novelists and Representative Works

Among the many writers of the period, **Charles Dickens** stands out as the most emblematic Victorian novelist. Born into a modest family in 1812, Dickens experienced hardship from a young age, including child labour and the imprisonment of his father for debt. These biographical elements are recurrent in his fiction, which often centres on the struggles of the poor, the corruption of institutions and the possibility of social mobility. Novels such as *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and *Great Expectations* (1861) blend satire, pathos and moral reflection, offering memorable characters and intricate plots. In the classroom, his works can be explored through selected passages or adapted versions, focusing on issues like childhood, injustice and resilience. Activities may include role-play, rewriting scenes or comparing the literary text with film adaptations.

The **Brontë sisters**, raised in isolation in the Yorkshire moors, brought a unique psychological depth and emotional intensity to the English novel. **Charlotte Brontë**,

in *Jane Eyre* (1847), tells the story of a strong, independent woman who seeks love and equality in a restrictive social system. The novel's first-person narration and internal monologue provide students with excellent material for analysing point of view and voice. **Emily Brontë's** *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is a darker, more ambiguous work, where themes of obsession, revenge and nature challenge traditional morality. **Anne Brontë**, often overlooked, wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), a daring critique of alcoholism, domestic abuse and women's legal status. These novels offer fruitful discussions about gender roles, emotions and identity, and can be approached in the classroom through creative writing tasks or guided debates.

Thomas Hardy, though writing later in the century, provides a transition between Victorian and modern sensibilities. Born in rural Dorset in 1840, Hardy trained as an architect before turning to fiction. His novels are set in a semi-fictional rural region known as Wessex and often portray the clash between traditional ways of life and modern industrial forces. Works such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) deal with tragic destinies shaped by social conventions, sexuality and fate. Hardy's pessimistic worldview and criticism of religion and marriage shocked Victorian audiences. His rich descriptions and social commentary can be analysed in excerpts to explore language use, tone and narrative irony.

Finally, **George Eliot**, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, represents one of the most intellectually ambitious voices of the Victorian era. A scholar, journalist and translator of German philosophy, Eliot infused her novels with psychological insight and ethical complexity. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72) depict provincial life with meticulous realism and highlight the constraints placed on women, the tensions between individual ambition and communal obligation and the importance of empathy. Eliot's moral vision is particularly valuable in the classroom, where her characters' dilemmas can lead to reflection on personal responsibility and ethical choices.

6. Conclusion

The Victorian novel stands as a cornerstone of English literary heritage. It reflects the moral, social and cultural concerns of its time while offering timeless insights into human nature. Through the works of Dickens, the Brontës, Hardy or Eliot, readers are invited to examine the structures of society, the power of institutions and the resilience of the individual spirit. These narratives, often marked by emotional depth, ethical complexity and social critique, continue to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Incorporating elements of the Victorian novel into the Secondary Education classroom supports the development of key competences such as linguistic communication, cultural awareness and ethical reflection. Literature becomes not only a tool for language development, but also a gateway to exploring the historical context in which it was produced. The culture and society of the Victorian era, including its class system, gender roles, family life and attitudes towards progress, can be studied meaningfully through literary texts and adapted works. These materials foster intercultural learning, helping students reflect on how societies evolve and how literature acts as a mirror of its time.

Even when working with simplified versions or selected excerpts, students can engage with fundamental issues related to justice, identity and equality, all while improving their

reading and interpretative skills. Literary texts also serve as excellent material for integrated learning tasks that include writing, speaking and listening, promoting creativity and autonomy in language learning.

This thematic approach aligns with the Organic Law 3/2020, known as LOMLOE, and the Order ECD/1172/2022, comprising the Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education, which emphasise a competence-based model of teaching that values critical thinking, social and civic awareness and appreciation of cultural heritage. The use of literary texts is explicitly encouraged in the development of communicative competence and intercultural understanding.

In sum, the Victorian novel is not only a valuable object of literary study, but also a dynamic pedagogical tool capable of enriching the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in meaningful and lasting ways.