

The Victorian Period (1837-1901)

It began with the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837, and lasted until her death in 1901. The 19th century is considered by some to be the Golden Age of English Literature, especially for British novels. It was in the Victorian era that the novel became the leading literary genre in English.¹ This was partly due to improvements in education which meant that more people could read, and partly due to the emergence of cheap books and magazines.²

English writing from this era reflects the major transformations in most aspects of English life, from scientific, economic, and technological advances to changes in class structures and the role of religion in society. Famous novelists from this period include Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, the three Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling.¹

Charles Dickens' realistic novels were immensely popular and succeeded in combining satire and seriousness. Thematically, Dickens focuses on social class, the need for social reforms, and the consequences of industrialization. Some of his most famous novels include *Oliver Twist* (1837-1838), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Great Expectations* (1860-1861). A different topic, the role of women, was explored by female authors such as the **Brontë sisters**. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) depicts an unusually independent woman who pursues love and equality despite starting out as an orphan and governess. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) focused on the passionate, destructive romance between Catherine and Heathcliff.²

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_literature

2. <https://primestudyguides.com/the-victorian-era/literature>

*Realism

The realist movement in literature first developed in France in the mid-nineteenth century, soon spreading to England, Russia, and the United States. Realist literature is best represented by the novel, including many works widely regarded to be among the greatest novels ever written. Realist writers sought to narrate their novels from an objective, unbiased perspective that simply and clearly represented the factual elements of the story. They became

masters at detailed descriptions of everyday life, and dialogue that captures the idioms of natural speech. The realists endeavored to accurately represent contemporary culture and people from all walks of life. Thus, realist writers often addressed themes of socioeconomic conflict by contrasting the living conditions of the poor with those of the upper classes in urban as well as rural societies.³

One of the major themes addressed by realist writers is socioeconomic **class conflict**. Many realist writers, in their efforts to depict characters from all levels of society, highlighted differences between the rich and the poor. In *David Copperfield*, by Dickens, the protagonist experiences the suffering of impoverished children forced to work in urban factories.

Setting (place and time) is an important element of Realism in literature. Realist novels were set in both the city and the country, the authors taking care to accurately portray the working and living conditions of characters from every echelon of society. Thus, realist novelists documented settings from all walks of life in major cities, such as London, and the living and working conditions of peasants and serfs in rural settings. Realist writers also set their fictional stories in the midst of specific historical events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is set during the French Revolution.³

3. Milne, I. M., & Gale Group. (2009). *Literary movements for students: presenting analysis, context, and criticism on literary movements / Ira Mark Milne, project editor*. (2nd ed.). Gale.