

Charles Dickens is the most famous Victorian novelist. Extraordinarily popular in his day with his characters taking on a life of their own beyond the page; Dickens is still one of the most popular and read authors of the world. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) written when he was twenty-five, was an overnight success, and all his subsequent works sold extremely well. The comedy of his first novel has a satirical edge and this pervades his writing. Dickens worked diligently and prolifically to produce the entertaining writing that the public wanted, but also to offer commentary on social problems and the plight of the poor and oppressed. His most important works include *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), *David Copperfield* (1849–50), *Bleak House* (1852–53), *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1860–61). There is a gradual trend in his fiction towards darker themes which mirrors a tendency in much of the writing of the 19th century.

William Thackeray was Dickens' great rival in the first half of Queen Victoria's reign. With a similar style but a slightly more detached, acerbic and barbed satirical view of his characters, he also tended to depict a more middle class society than Dickens did. He is best known for his novel *Vanity Fair* (1848), subtitled *A Novel without a Hero*, which is an example of a form popular in Victorian literature: a historical novel in which recent history is depicted.

The Brontë sisters wrote fiction rather different from that common at the time.

Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë produced notable works of the period, although these were not immediately appreciated by Victorian critics. *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Emily's only work, is an example of Gothic Romanticism from a woman's point of view, which examines class, myth, and gender. *Jane Eyre* (1847), by her sister Charlotte, is another major nineteenth century novel that has gothic themes. Anne's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), written in realistic rather than romantic style, is mainly considered to be the first sustained feminist novel.^[1]

Later in this period George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), published *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860, and in 1872 her most famous work *Middlemarch*. Like the Brontës she published under a masculine pseudonym.

In the later decades of the Victorian era Thomas Hardy was the most important novelist. His works include *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

Other significant novelists of this era were Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865), Anthony Trollope (1815–1882), George Meredith (1828–1909), and George Gissing (1857–1903).

Poetry

Main article: English poetry

Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate

The husband and wife team of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning conducted their love affair through verse and produced many tender and passionate poems. Both Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote poems which sit somewhere in between the exultation of nature of the romantic Poetry and the Georgian Poetry of the early 20th century. However Hopkins's poetry was not published until 1918. Arnold's works anticipate some of the themes of these later poets, while Hopkins drew inspiration from verse forms of Old English poetry such as *Beowulf*.

The reclaiming of the past was a major part of Victorian literature with an interest in both classical literature but also the medieval literature of England. The Victorians loved the heroic, chivalrous stories of knights of old and they hoped to regain some of that noble, courtly behaviour and impress it upon the people both at home and in the wider empire. The best example of this is Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which blended the stories of King Arthur, particularly those by Thomas Malory, with contemporary concerns and ideas. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also drew on myth and folklore for their art, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti contemporaneously regarded as the chief poet amongst them, although his sister Christina is now held by scholars to be a stronger poet.

Drama

In drama, farces, musical burlesques, extravaganzas and comic operas competed with Shakespeare productions and serious drama by the likes of James Planché and Thomas William Robertson. In 1855, the German Reed Entertainments began a process of elevating the level of (formerly risqué) musical theatre in Britain that culminated in the famous series of comic operas by Gilbert and Sullivan and were followed by the 1890s with the first Edwardian musical comedies. The first play to achieve 500 consecutive performances was the London comedy *Our Boys* by H. J. Byron, opening in 1875. Its astonishing new record of 1,362 performances was bested in 1892 by *Charley's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas.^[2] After W. S. Gilbert, Oscar Wilde became the leading poet and dramatist of the late Victorian period.^[3] Wilde's plays, in particular, stand apart from the many now forgotten plays of Victorian times and have a closer relationship to those of the Edwardian dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw, whose career began in the 1890s. Wilde's 1895 comic masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was the greatest of the plays in which he held an ironic mirror to the aristocracy while displaying virtuosic mastery of wit and paradoxical wisdom. It has remained extremely popular.

Children's literature

The Victorians are credited with 'inventing childhood', partly via their efforts to stop child labour and the introduction of compulsory education. As children began to be able to read, literature for young people became a growth industry, with not only established writers producing works for children (such as Dickens' *A Child's History of England*) but also a new group of dedicated children's authors. Writers like Lewis Carroll, R. M. Ballantyne and Anna Sewell wrote mainly for children, although they had an adult following. Other authors such as Anthony Hope and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote mainly for adults, but their adventure novels are now generally classified as for children. Other genres include nonsense verse, poetry which required a childlike interest (e.g. Lewis Carroll). School stories flourished: Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* are classics.

Rarely were these publications designed to capture a child's pleasure; however, with the increase in use of illustrations, children began to enjoy literature, and were able to learn morals in a more entertaining way.^[4] With the newfound acceptance of reading for pleasure, fairy tales and folk tales became popular. Compiling folk tales by many authors with different topics made it possible for children to read literature by and about lots of different things that interested them. There were different types of books and magazines written for boys and girls. Girls' stories tended to be domestic and to focus on family life, whereas boys' stories were more about adventures.^{[5][6]}

Science, philosophy and discovery

Charles Darwin's work *On the Origin of Species* affected society and thought in the Victoria era, and still does today.

The Victorian era was an important time for the development of science and the Victorians had a mission to describe and classify the entire natural world. Much of this writing does not rise to the level of being regarded as literature but one book in particular, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, remains famous. The theory of evolution contained within the work shook many of the ideas the Victorians had about themselves and their place in the world. Although it took a long time to be widely accepted, it would dramatically change subsequent thought and literature. Much of the work of popularizing Darwin's theories was done by his younger contemporary Thomas Henry Huxley, who wrote widely on the subject.

A number of other non-fiction works of the era made their mark on the literature of the period. The philosophical writings of John Stuart Mill covered logic, economics, liberty and utilitarianism. The large and influential histories of Thomas Carlyle: *The French Revolution*, *A History* and *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* permeated political thought at the time. The writings of Thomas Babington Macaulay on English history helped codify the Whig narrative that dominated the historiography for many years. John Ruskin wrote a number of highly influential works on art and the history of art and championed such contemporary figures as J. M. W. Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites. The religious writer John Henry Newman's Oxford Movement aroused intense debate within the Church of England, exacerbated by Newman's own conversion to Catholicism, which he wrote about in his autobiography *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.

A number of monumental reference works were published in this era, most notably the *Oxford English Dictionary* which would eventually become the most important historical dictionary of the English language. Also published during the later Victorian era were the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.