

The Representation of Social Realities in 19th–Century British Novels

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1.Abstract: This research paper aims to explore the depiction of social realities in 19th-century British novels. By examining the works of renowned authors such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot, this paper will analyze how these writers reflected the societal issues, cultural norms, and class distinctions prevalent during their time. The research will delve into the thematic nuances and character portrayals that offer insights into the socio-economic conditions of the Victorian era. It's an attempt to explore the social conditions of the Victorian Era, where economic growth influenced the lives of the people in the country. The era of development in every aspect of humans starts influencing the lifestyle of the people in the world. Class and social norms started taking a new shape in the new age of industrialization. The growing middle class is another feature of this time. Their demand for goods and services is centered on the materialistic approach.

Keywords: 19th-century literature, Romanticism & Realism, Modernity, Child labor, Industrialization.

2. Introduction

Studying 19th-century British literature holds immense importance due to its rich historical, cultural, and literary significance. This period, which spans from the late 18th to the early 20th century, witnessed a tremendous transformation in British society and politics, making it a pivotal era for understanding the evolution of literature and the shaping of the modern world. Here are some key aspects of its background and significance:

- 2.1. Historical context: The 19th century was a time of profound change in Britain, marked by the Industrial Revolution, the growth of the British Empire, urbanization, and the rise of the middle class. These developments brought about significant shifts in social structures, class dynamics, and cultural norms, all of which are reflected in the literature of the time.
- 2.2. Technological advancements: The 19th century saw rapid advancements in technology, particularly in transportation and communication. The advent of the steam engine, railways, and the telegraph had a profound impact on society, altering the way people

lived and interacted. These changes are mirrored in the literature as authors grappled with the implications of the industrial age on human life and relationships.

2.3. Romanticism and Realism: The early 19th century was characterized by the Romantic movement, which emphasized emotion, individualism, nature, and imagination. Later in the century, realism emerged as a literary response to portray life as it was, depicting the everyday struggles of ordinary people. These contrasting literary movements provide valuable insights into the changing literary tastes and philosophical ideas of the time.

2.4. Social and political commentary: British literature of the 19th century often served as a platform for social and political commentary. Authors like Charles Dickens highlighted the plight of the working class and exposed social injustices (Brown 246). They critiqued the impact of industrialization on society and advocated for social reform, shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse.

2.5. Exploration of human psychology: Many 19th-century authors delved into the complexities of human psychology and emotions. The works of authors like Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, and Thomas Hardy provided deep insights into characters' motivations, inner conflicts, and the moral dilemmas they faced.

2.6. Influence on modern literature: The literature of this era laid the groundwork for the development of various literary genres and styles that continue to influence writers today (Johnson 322). Elements of Victorian literature can be seen in contemporary literature, and many modern writers continue to draw inspiration from the themes and techniques of 19th-century British authors.

2.7. Literary masterpieces: The 19th century produced a plethora of literary masterpieces that continue to be celebrated and studied worldwide. Iconic works like "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen, "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte, "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens, and "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte, among many others, have left a lasting impact on literature and popular culture.

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Studying 19th-century British literature offers a window into the societal, political, and cultural upheavals of the time while also providing timeless insights into the human condition. By analyzing the works of the authors from this period, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human nature and the lasting influence of literature on shaping societies.

1. Social Realities in Charles Dicken's Novels: Charles Dickens, the renowned Victorian-era novelist, was known for his keen observations of social realities and his ability to depict the social issues and inequalities of his time through his works (Smith 114). He used his novels to highlight the harsh conditions of the working class, the abuses of the

poor, and the various injustices prevalent in 19th-century England. Here are some of the key social realities portrayed in Charles Dickens's novels:

- 1.1 Poverty and Social Inequality: Dickens often focused on the stark contrast between the wealthy elite and the impoverished working class. He depicted the harsh living conditions, overcrowded slums, and lack of basic necessities that the poor had to endure. Examples of this theme can be found in novels such as "Oliver Twist" and "A Christmas Carol."
- 1.2 Child Labor and Exploitation: Dickens shed light on the exploitation of children in the workforce during the Industrial Revolution (Smith 125). In "Oliver Twist," he exposed the brutal conditions in workhouses and the use of child labor in factories, revealing the dark side of rapid industrialization.
- 1.3 Education and Illiteracy: Dickens highlighted the importance of education and the lack of access to it for the lower classes. Characters like Jo in "Bleak House" and Smike in "Nicholas Nickleby" represent the struggles faced by illiterate or poorly educated individuals in society.
- 1.4 Social Responsibility: Dickens believed in the responsibility of society and its institutions, such as the government and charitable organizations, to address the issues faced by the poor and downtrodden. He often criticized the ineffectiveness of the Poor Laws and the lack of empathy from the privileged class.
- 1.5 Legal and Judicial System: Dickens exposed the flaws and corruption in the legal and judicial systems of his time. In "Bleak House," he criticized the lengthy and convoluted legal proceedings and the impact they had on the lives of ordinary people.
- 1.6 Women's Rights: Though Victorian society was patriarchal, Dickens portrayed strong female characters who challenged traditional gender roles and social norms. For instance, in "Great Expectations," Miss Havisham is a memorable character who embodies the tragic consequences of thwarted love and societal expectations.
- 1.7 Social Marginalization: Dickens illustrated the plight of individuals who were marginalized due to their social status or appearance. In "David Copperfield," the character of Mr. Micawber represents the struggles of individuals trapped in debt and financial instability.
- 1.8 Urbanization and Industrialization: Dickens addressed the rapid urbanization and the social consequences of industrialization during the Victorian era (Dickens 221). His works often depicted the stark contrast between the bustling cities and the rural countryside.

Through his powerful storytelling and memorable characters, Dickens used his novels as a platform to advocate for social reform and to encourage readers to empathize with the suffering of the less fortunate. His works continue to be relevant today as they remind us of the importance of addressing social inequalities and advocating for a more just society.

2. **George Eliot's Critique of Rural Society:** George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, was a prominent Victorian novelist known for her insightful critiques of various

aspects of society. In several of her works, she specifically explored and critiqued rural society, shedding light on its complexities, limitations, and prevailing social norms. Here are some of the key themes and critiques of rural society in George Eliot's novels:

- 4.1. **Narrow-mindedness and Prejudice:** Eliot often criticized the narrow-mindedness and prejudices that characterized rural communities (Eliot 112). In her novel "Middlemarch," she portrays the insular nature of the small town, where gossip and judgmental attitudes often hinder personal growth and progress.
- 4.2. **Social Hierarchies and Class Divide:** Eliot examined the rigid social hierarchies prevalent in rural society. She highlighted the limitations imposed on individuals based on their social class and the challenges faced by those aspiring to transcend their social status (Eliot 221). "Silas Marner" is a novel that delves into the impact of class divisions on the lives of its characters.
- 4.3. **Lack of Education and Intellectual Stagnation:** In rural settings, access to education and intellectual pursuits was often limited. Eliot criticized the lack of opportunities for intellectual development and how this could lead to stagnation and unfulfilled potential in individuals.
- 4.4. **Gender Roles and Women's Limited Roles:** Eliot was also critical of the restrictive gender roles imposed on women in rural society. She depicted the struggles of women who sought to challenge traditional expectations and the consequences they faced for doing so.
- 4.5. **Superstition and Religion:** Eliot explored the influence of superstition and religious beliefs on rural communities. She questioned the blind adherence to tradition and the consequences of dogmatic thinking on individual lives.
- 4.6. **Lack of Social Progress:** In some of her works, Eliot criticized the resistance to social and technological progress in rural areas. She portrayed characters and communities that resisted change, leading to stagnation and missed opportunities for improvement.
- 4.7. **Individualism and Community:** Eliot also examined the tension between individual desires and the needs of the community. In "Adam Bede," for example, she explored the consequences of personal choices on the fabric of a close-knit rural community.

Through her nuanced characterizations and intricate narratives, George Eliot provided a multifaceted critique of rural society. Her works continue to resonate with readers for their deep understanding of human nature and the complex social dynamics that shape rural communities (Eliot 89). Moreover, her critiques of rural society often serve as a reflection of broader societal issues and challenges faced by individuals living in various social settings.

5. **Comparative Analysis of Themes and Techniques:** Charles Dickens and George Eliot were both prominent Victorian novelists, but they had distinct writing styles and explored different themes in their works. Below is a comparative analysis of the themes and techniques used by these two authors in their novels:

Themes:

a. Social Realities and Critiques:

- Dickens: Charles Dickens was renowned for his keen focus on social issues and inequalities of his time. His novels often portrayed the harsh conditions of the working class, child labor, poverty, and the injustices prevalent in 19th-century England.
- Eliot: George Eliot also delved into social issues but in a more introspective manner. Her works explored the complexities of rural society, the impact of social hierarchies, gender roles, and the consequences of narrow-mindedness and prejudice. While Dickens' critiques were more direct and emotionally charged, Eliot's were often more subtle and psychological.

b. Morality and Redemption:

- Dickens: Themes of morality and redemption were central to many of Dickens' novels (Dickens 33). His characters often faced moral dilemmas and underwent transformative journeys towards redemption, as seen in works like "A Christmas Carol" and "Great Expectations."
- Eliot: George Eliot also delved into moral dilemmas, but she approached them from a more philosophical perspective. Her characters confronted ethical choices that had profound consequences for their lives and the lives of others, as exemplified in "Middlemarch" and "Daniel Deronda."

c. Individual vs. Society:

- Dickens: Dickens frequently explored the struggles of individuals against the oppressive forces of society. He depicted characters fighting against social injustice and advocating for the marginalized.
- Eliot: George Eliot examined the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. Her novels often portrayed characters who challenged traditional norms and social conventions, highlighting the conflict between personal aspirations and societal constraints.

Techniques:

a. Characterization:

- Dickens: Dickens was renowned for creating vivid and memorable characters, often with exaggerated traits. His characters were often symbolic representations of different social classes and moral stances.
- Eliot: George Eliot was known for her deep psychological insights into her characters. She provided nuanced portrayals of complex individuals, delving into their inner thoughts and motivations, making them feel more like real people.

b. Narrative Style:

- Dickens: Dickens' narrative style was often dramatic and emotionally charged. He used humor, satire, and pathos to engage readers, drawing them into the lives of his characters and the societal issues they faced.

- Eliot: Eliot's narrative style was more introspective and contemplative. Her novels often had a philosophical undertone, and she used omniscient narrators to explore the inner lives and motivations of her characters.

c. Social Commentary:

- Dickens: Dickens' social commentary was more overt and direct. He used his novels as a platform to advocate for social reform and to criticize the injustices and inequalities of his time.
- Eliot: George Eliot's social commentary was more nuanced and subtle. Her novels provided a deeper exploration of the human condition and the complexities of societal norms and values.

In conclusion, while both Charles Dickens and George Eliot addressed social issues and moral dilemmas in their novels, they did so with distinct styles and focuses (Dickens 44). Dickens' works were characterized by their emotional intensity and direct social critiques, while Eliot's novels were more introspective and philosophical in their exploration of human nature and societal complexities. Both authors remain celebrated for their contributions to literature and their enduring insights into the human experience.

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