

Victorian Period Authors (1837-1901)

The Victorian period in English literature spans from the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 to her death in 1901. This era was characterized by rapid industrialization, social reform, scientific advancement, and imperial expansion. Victorian literature reflects the period's complex moral, religious, and social concerns, often addressing issues of class, gender, and the impact of industrialization. The novel became the dominant literary form during this time, with writers producing works of unprecedented length and complexity.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Life

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England, to John and Elizabeth Dickens. His early childhood was happy, but his father's financial irresponsibility led to his imprisonment for debt when Charles was 12. Young Charles was forced to leave school and work in a shoe-blackening factory, an experience that profoundly affected him and influenced his later writings about social injustice and child labor. After his father's release, Dickens returned to school briefly before becoming a law clerk, then a court reporter, and finally a journalist. His first collection of pieces, "Sketches by Boz," was published in 1836, followed by "The Pickwick Papers," which brought him immediate acclaim. In 1836, he married Catherine Hogarth, with whom he had ten children, but they separated in 1858. Dickens maintained a demanding writing and speaking schedule throughout his life, including public readings of his works that further strained his health. He died in 1870 after suffering a stroke, leaving his final novel, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," unfinished.

Works

- **Oliver Twist:** A novel exposing the cruel treatment of orphans and criminal exploitation of children
- **A Christmas Carol:** A novella about the redemption of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge
- **David Copperfield:** A semi-autobiographical novel following the protagonist from birth to maturity
- **Bleak House:** A complex novel criticizing the legal system, centered around a long-running inheritance case
- **Great Expectations:** A novel about a young orphan's journey to becoming a gentleman
- **Hard Times:** A critique of utilitarianism and industrial society
- **A Tale of Two Cities:** A historical novel set during the French Revolution

Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered serialized publication, making literature accessible to a wider audience
- Created some of literature's most memorable and distinctive characters
- Exposed social injustices through compelling narratives
- Developed a unique blend of humor, pathos, and social criticism
- Mastered multiple genres, including comedy, mystery, historical fiction, and social commentary
- Influenced public opinion on social issues, contributing to actual reforms
- Established the tradition of the Christmas story in English literature

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880)

Life

Mary Ann Evans, who wrote under the pen name George Eliot, was born in Warwickshire, England. She received a good education, unusual for girls at that time, and was largely self-taught through extensive reading. After her mother's death, she kept house for her father until his death in 1849. She then moved to London to pursue a literary career, becoming assistant editor of the Westminster Review. Evans scandalized society by living openly with the married philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes, who encouraged her fiction writing. After Lewes's death, she married John Cross, a man twenty years her junior, but died only seven months after the wedding. Throughout her life, she was known for her intellect and wide-ranging knowledge, maintaining friendships with leading intellectuals of her day.

Works

- **Middlemarch:** Her masterpiece, a study of provincial life with multiple interconnected storylines
- **The Mill on the Floss:** A novel exploring the conflict between individual desires and family loyalty
- **Silas Marner:** A moral fable about a reclusive weaver transformed by raising an orphaned child
- **Adam Bede:** Her first full-length novel, set in a rural community
- **Daniel Deronda:** Her final novel, addressing antisemitism and Jewish identity
- **Felix Holt, the Radical:** A political novel set during the Reform Act of 1832
- **Scenes of Clerical Life:** Her first published fiction, a collection of three stories

Contribution to English Literature

- Elevated the realist novel to new heights of psychological depth and moral seriousness
- Pioneered the omniscient narrator who provides psychological insights and ethical commentary
- Created complex characters shaped by their social environment and moral choices
- Explored the inner lives of ordinary people with extraordinary sensitivity
- Addressed controversial social issues including religious hypocrisy, the status of women, and prejudice
- Demonstrated how provincial life could be the setting for universal human dramas
- Influenced the development of the novel as a form for serious intellectual and ethical exploration

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Life

Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, to a stonemason and a domestic servant. Though from humble origins, he was educated at local schools and later apprenticed to an architect, practicing this profession until he established himself as a writer. Hardy's novels were initially published in serial form, often censored to conform to Victorian moral standards. After facing harsh criticism for the pessimism and controversial themes in his later novels, particularly "Jude the Obscure," Hardy abandoned fiction and devoted himself to poetry for the last thirty years of his life. His first wife, Emma Gifford, died in 1912, inspiring some of his finest poetry. He remarried in 1914 to Florence Dugdale, who was 39 years his junior. Hardy died in 1928 at the age of 87. In a curious arrangement, his heart was

buried in Emma's grave in Stinsford, Dorset, while his ashes were interred in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Works

- **Tess of the d'Urbervilles:** A tragic novel about a pure woman victimized by social conventions
- **Jude the Obscure:** A novel about a working-class man's thwarted ambitions and tragic marriage
- **Far from the Madding Crowd:** A pastoral novel about a independent woman and her three suitors
- **The Mayor of Casterbridge:** A novel about a man who sells his wife and daughter and later faces the consequences
- **The Return of the Native:** A novel set on the brooding Egdon Heath
- **Collected Poems:** Including "The Darkling Thrush," "Neutral Tones," and the epic drama "The Dynasts"
- **Under the Greenwood Tree:** An early novel depicting rural life

Contribution to English Literature

- Bridged Victorian and Modernist literature with his increasingly pessimistic worldview
- Created the fictional "Wessex," a detailed regional setting based on southwestern England
- Developed tragic narratives driven by character, circumstance, and chance
- Challenged Victorian moral conventions, particularly regarding marriage and sexuality
- Portrayed rural life with both nostalgia for its traditions and awareness of its hardships
- Explored the conflict between human desires and indifferent or hostile natural forces
- Influenced the development of literary naturalism in English fiction

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855)

Life

Charlotte Brontë was born in Thornton, Yorkshire, the third of six children of Patrick Brontë, an Anglican clergyman, and Maria Branwell Brontë. After her mother's death in 1821, Charlotte and her sisters were sent to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, which she later depicted as the brutal Lowood School in "Jane Eyre." Two of her sisters died of tuberculosis after harsh treatment at the school. The surviving children—Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and their brother Branwell—created elaborate fantasy worlds, writing stories and poems about them in tiny handmade books. Charlotte worked as a governess and later studied languages in Brussels, where she developed unrequited feelings for her married professor, Constantin Heger. In 1846, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne published a joint collection of poems under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. After the deaths of Branwell, Emily, and Anne within an eight-month period in 1848-49, Charlotte continued writing and made literary connections in London. In 1854, she married her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, but died during pregnancy the following year.

Works

- **Jane Eyre:** Her masterpiece, a bildungsroman following the moral and spiritual development of a plain, independent governess
- **Shirley:** A novel set during the industrial depression of 1811-12, addressing themes of women's roles and industrial relations
- **Villette:** A novel drawing on her experiences in Brussels, exploring loneliness and unrequited love
- **The Professor:** Her first novel, published posthumously
- **Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell:** A joint publication with her sisters
- **Juvenilia:** Early writings including tales of the imaginary kingdom of Angria

Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered the intimate first-person female narrative voice
- Created one of literature's most independent and morally autonomous heroines in Jane Eyre
- Explored female passion and desire with unprecedented frankness
- Developed psychological realism in the portrayal of a character's inner life
- Addressed issues of social class, gender inequality, and women's limited opportunities
- Combined Gothic elements with realistic social observation
- Influenced the development of the bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel) tradition

Emily Brontë (1818-1848)

Life

Emily Jane Brontë was born in Thornton, Yorkshire, the fifth child of Patrick and Maria Brontë. After her mother's death, she was raised by her aunt and then briefly attended the Clergy Daughters' School with her sisters. Unlike her sisters, Emily was uncomfortable away from home and quickly returned to Haworth parsonage when she became ill. She was the most reclusive of the Brontë siblings, preferring the isolation of the Yorkshire moors to social interaction. With her siblings, she created the imaginary world of Gondal, which inspired much of her poetry. Emily briefly worked as a teacher at Law Hill School but found the experience stressful and returned home after a few months. She published her poems alongside those of her sisters in their 1846 collection, and her only novel, "Wuthering Heights," was published in 1847. Emily caught a severe cold at her brother Branwell's funeral, which developed into tuberculosis. She refused medical attention until the day before her death in December 1848, at the age of 30.

Works

- **Wuthering Heights:** Her only novel, a passionate, complex tale of love, revenge, and the supernatural spanning two generations
- **Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell:** Including her poems "No Coward Soul Is Mine," "Remembrance," and "The Prisoner"
- **Complete Poems:** Collected and published posthumously
- **Gondal Poems:** Verses related to the imaginary world she created with her siblings

Contribution to English Literature

- Created one of the most powerful and original works of fiction in English literature
- Developed complex narrative structures and multiple narrators
- Explored the darker aspects of human psychology, including obsession and revenge
- Combined realistic, Gothic, and Romantic elements in a unique literary vision
- Portrayed passion and the supernatural with extraordinary intensity
- Challenged conventional Victorian morality and narrative expectations
- Influenced later writers with her poetic prose and psychological depth

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

Life

Alfred Tennyson was born in Somersby, Lincolnshire, the fourth of twelve children of a rector. He began writing poetry as a child and published his first collection with

his brother Charles when he was still a teenager. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge, where he joined the exclusive society known as the Apostles and formed a close friendship with Arthur Henry Hallam. Hallam's sudden death in 1833 profoundly affected Tennyson and inspired his masterpiece, "In Memoriam A.H.H." After early mixed reviews, Tennyson achieved both critical and popular success with his 1842 collection. He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1850, succeeding William Wordsworth, and held the position until his death. That same year, he married Emily Sellwood, with whom he had two sons. Queen Victoria was an admirer of his work and granted him a baronetcy in 1884. Tennyson died in 1892 at the age of 83 and was buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner.

Works

- **"In Memoriam A.H.H.":** An extended elegy for his friend Arthur Hallam, exploring grief, faith, and doubt
- **"The Lady of Shalott":** A poem based on Arthurian legend about a cursed woman
- **"Ulysses":** A dramatic monologue in which the aged hero contemplates one last journey
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade":** A tribute to the heroism of British cavalry in the Crimean War
- **Idylls of the King:** A cycle of twelve narrative poems retelling the legend of King Arthur
- **"Locksley Hall":** A poem exploring love, disillusionment, and social progress
- **"Crossing the Bar":** A meditation on death, written near the end of his life

Contribution to English Literature

- Defined the poetic sensibility of the Victorian age
- Mastered a wide range of poetic forms and meters
- Addressed contemporary anxieties about science, religion, and social change
- Revitalized medieval legends for Victorian audiences

- Developed the dramatic monologue as a vehicle for psychological exploration
- Combined technical virtuosity with emotional resonance
- Created some of the most memorable and frequently quoted lines in English poetry

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

Life

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, London, the son of a bank clerk and a musical, religious mother. He was largely educated at home, with access to his father's extensive library. He briefly attended London University but left after his first year. Browning's early poetry received little attention until he began corresponding with the already-established poet Elizabeth Barrett. They married secretly in 1846 and fled to Italy to escape her domineering father. Their fifteen-year marriage was by all accounts a happy one, ending with Elizabeth's death in 1861. Browning returned to England with their son and gradually achieved the literary recognition that had eluded him earlier. His dramatic monologue "The Ring and the Book" (1868-69) finally established him as one of the foremost poets of his age. In his later years, he was a popular figure in London literary society. He died in Venice in 1889 and was buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner.

Works

- **"My Last Duchess"**: A dramatic monologue revealing the sinister character of a Renaissance duke
- **"The Pied Piper of Hamelin"**: A narrative poem based on the German legend
- **"Fra Lippo Lippi"** and **"Andrea del Sarto"**: Dramatic monologues exploring the nature of art

- **The Ring and the Book:** A 21,000-line poem telling a murder story from multiple perspectives
- **Men and Women:** A collection including many of his finest dramatic monologues
- **Dramatis Personae:** A collection of poems published after his wife's death
- **"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came":** An enigmatic quest narrative

Contribution to English Literature

- Perfected the dramatic monologue as a poetic form
- Developed complex, morally ambiguous characters who reveal themselves through speech
- Explored psychological complexity and the darker aspects of human nature
- Created distinctive, realistic voices for characters from different historical periods
- Challenged Victorian optimism with a more nuanced view of human motives
- Influenced modernist poetry with his experiments in form and language
- Demonstrated how poetry could engage with philosophical and ethical questions