

in the American magazines *Harper's* and *Scribner's*, carriers of much fiction from both sides of the Atlantic, models on which to base another magazine, *The Strand*, which he began in 1891 (and which carried Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories). Coverage of the Jack the Ripper case helped circulation figures of these papers skyrocket. By the end of the century, it was impossible to separate the commercial interests of 'The Fourth Estate' (the term appropriated by Carlyle to denote a powerful press) from its mandate to convey with objectivity the news.

George Gissing – author of the unpublished book *Mrs Grundy's Enemies* – made the literary market the subject of his 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*. In it he excoriates the supremacy of cheap, sensational writing and depicts with gritty realism the social and economic barriers that compromise the integrity of authors struggling to establish their reputations. Gissing describes the despondency of one such author in the character of Marian, who is disheartened to be 'exhausting herself in the manufacturing of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market'. Gissing continued,

She herself would throw away the pen with joy but for the need of earning money. And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of them? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print – how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit.

(p. 138 [Ai])

A variety of forces converged late in the century not only to enable more people to buy, rather than borrow, books, but also to fuel discontent with the three-volume novel and to facilitate the publication of more affordable one-volume novels. Guinevere Griest cites the rise of free libraries in the provinces, the increasingly availability of cheap reprints and a flood of new novels on the market as key features of this changing literary market (*Mudie's Circulating Library*, pp. 168–70 [Cv]). When Mudie's finally relinquished (or lost) the control on the market it exerted via its determination of what books to market as its Select Library, publishers became more receptive to alternative forms, content and writers.

Language, forms, genres and Styles

The Victorian novel

To name just a handful of the major fiction writers of the Victorian period – e.g., Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy – is to grasp why the era is invariably associated with the ascendancy of the novel. The literary market that Dickens, via *The Pickwick Papers*, helped to create was one of novel readers. The novel as genre did not, of course, spring full-grown from Dickens's head, but Romantic poetry clearly commanded the

literary stage during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In the years between the heyday of Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen at one end and Charles Dickens at the other – *terra incognita* to most students of the period – certain types of fiction prospered, most notably depictions of high society (the ‘silver-fork novels’) and narratives of criminal life (often referred to as ‘Newgate novels’). Inspired in part by the social vision and idealism of Carlyle, Dickens entered this scene eager to experiment in new ways with representing the social realities of urban life.

He was not alone. In the late 1830s and throughout the 1840s, ‘Condition of England’ and social-problem novels appeared. With this literature writers sought overtly to reflect and respond to the wide-ranging problems encountered by a newly urban and industrial nation; their narratives of family and domestic crisis unfold against

backdrops of urban squalor. References abound to socio-economic problems of urban life such as prostitution, drug addiction, starvation, slum conditions and crime. In works such as Frances Trollope’s *Michael Armstrong, or, The Factory Boy*, Disraeli’s *Sybil; or The Two Nations*, Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* and Alton Locke, Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and, later, *Ruth* and *North and South*, novelists addressed complex problems of economic and social strife, often

providing solutions by representing resolutions within the domestic sphere. Looked at this way, the social-problem fiction of the 1840s seems less distinctively linked to the historical moment of the Hungry Forties and Chartist fervour and more integral to the development of an art form that throughout the Victorian era would grapple with the relationship between romantic and realist impulses and agendas. Indeed, in her preface to *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell explains her decision to focus on Manchester in language that conflates the two modes: ‘I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided’ (p. 37 [Ai]).

The tension between romantic and realistic impulses is everywhere evident in the novels of William Makepeace Thackeray, who, like Dickens, began work as a journalist. In his earliest work Thackeray indulged a penchant for the comic sketches of burlesque, but his later works depict men and women confronting personal failure and disappointment. His best-known

David Masson on realism/romance

A Romance originally meant anything in prose or in verse written in any of the Romance languages; a Novel meant a new tale, a tale of fresh interest. It was convenient, however, seeing that the two words existed, to appropriate them to separate uses; and hence, now, when we speak of a Romance, we generally mean ‘a fictitious narrative, in prose or verse, the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents’; and when we speak of a Novel, we generally mean ‘a fictitious narrative differing from the Romance, inasmuch as the incidents are accommodated to the ordinary train of events and the modern state of society.’ If we adopt this distinction, we make the prose Romance and the Novel the two highest varieties of prose fiction, and we allow in the prose Romance a greater ideality than in the Novel.

(*British Novelists and Their Styles*, David Masson, 1859 [Ai]).

novel was *Vanity Fair*. Published in monthly parts between 1847 and 1848, the novel is what Henry James famously (and derisively) termed a 'loose and baggy monster' – that is, a multi-volume work casting its representational net over a panoramic cast of characters. Many dozens of Victorian novels fit this bill, among them Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. The multi-plot novel may well owe some of its success to its status as a profitable format for publishers working in concert with circulating libraries, but clearly it appealed for other reasons as well. Some literary historians contend that it enabled novelists both to mirror and to critique the spectacular nature of commercial society at mid-century – that the genre itself was exhibitionist at just the moment that the Great Exhibition was celebrating the inventions of the industrial nation. Other critics, including George Levine, associate complexly plotted narratives with the metaphor of entanglement so crucial to emerging Darwinian models of understanding species and their development. Peter Brooks offers a more psychological perspective when he writes that 'it was part of the triumph of the nineteenth-century novel in its golden age to plot with a good conscience, in confidence that the elaboration of plot corresponded to, and illuminated, human complexities' (*Reading for the Plot*, p. 114 [Cii]).

Multi-plotted works such as *Vanity Fair*, *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* are also characteristically Victorian in their didactic function and overtones. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, for example, Thackeray makes heavy-handed and frequent use of an intrusive narrator, the 'Manager of the Performance'. Thackeray's narrator is often a spokesperson for the work's moral message, as when near the narrative's end he proclaims, 'Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in the world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?' (p. 666 [Ai]). In his *Autobiography*, Thackeray's fellow novelist Anthony Trollope wrote that he 'always thought of [himself] as a preacher of sermons' (p. 8 [Ai]), and many other Victorian novelists (including Dickens, Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot) might have said the same. Comments like 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult', in *Adam Bede* (p. 151 [Ai]), flow thick and fast through much of George Eliot's fiction. In his study of the novel's emergence as a dominant form in nineteenth-century England, Michael Wheeler rightly points out that such moral teaching – what Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* referred to as 'a wish to proselytise' (Carlyle, p. 328 [Ai]) – helped to placate Evangelical critics who, early in the century, were particularly suspicious of the novel (Wheeler, *English Fiction*, p. 10 [B]).

The relationship of novelistic form to the religious and moral impulses of the author reveals itself in many other ways as well, perhaps most overtly in Evangelical literature in the first half of the century. Evangelical writers and publishers exerted an especially forceful emphasis on the development of children's literature, for example, with stories published by the Religious Tract Society and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge often