

The Novel in the Victorian Age

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Abstract

This essay aims to show the ways in which Victorian novelists represent the exigencies of their particular contexts within the framework of artistic creativity and the need for popular appeal. The three novelists I have chosen to illustrate my views are Hardy, Dickens and Thackeray. The novels are *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Vanity Fair*. I believe these three novels best illustrate their author's opinions and comments on the society in which they lived. These novels allow us a glimpse into Victorian society and thought“ and also provide examples of how the respective authors reproduce aspects of nineteenth century society. For the sake of clarity I will discuss each novel separately.

One of the most distinctive features of Victorian literature is its social orientation...The chief preoccupation of the major novelists... was the structure,

internal movement, and moral atmosphere of contemporary society... The novelists, Thackeray above all but closely followed by ...Dickens...were especially concerned with the anxieties, envy, insecurity, snobbery, and kindred psychological malaises that stemmed from the ambiguities of rank and wealth in a time of social flux. (Altick, 1973, p. 17)

The first thing readers should notice (and often fail to do) about *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Hardy (1974), is the title page of the novel:

TESS OF THE / D'URBERVILLES / A PURE WOMAN / FAITHFULLY PRESENTED BY
/ THOMAS HARDY / "...Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed / Shall lodge thee." – W.
SHAKESPEARE.

The reason Hardy starts the novel with the name of the central character is that the central character does duty as the title. The circulating libraries, those all powerful reflectors of taste during the second half of the 19th century, found a most ready market for novels simply titled for the central character. Perhaps it was because such a title suggested to the reader a straight forward biographical fiction without too much subtle complication.

Why does Hardy tell us that she is “of the D’ Urbervilles?”

He does this to make us aware of the ironies of her birth. She is a Durbeyfield by social status but a d’Urberville of the spirit. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* Hardy shows us the arrogance, brutality and even the vulgarity of the aristocracy and gentry. He seems to have made a distinction between the women and men of the aristocracy. He implies that upper-class life is such that women are refined in spirit while the men tend to be bathed in blood sports and violent behaviour.

He illustrates his point by showing us that Tess inherits nobility of nature from her knightly ancestors while Alec Stoke- d'Urberville, whose money-lender father has attached the decayed name to his own, inherits with his father's wealth the power and sensual brutality that go with the medieval robber baron's name. The violent power he employs on Tess makes the contemporary reader ask "What sort of society were they living in?" Tess inherits the pride associated with noble families.

Much of the tragedy of her life results from the clash between her pride and her social and economic position. She is born into a family of poor rural tradesmen, into a group of "waiters upon Providence", and she inherits many of their social attitudes, including fatalism. The phrase "pure woman" on the title page was used by Hardy as a challenge to the standards of contemporary readers and it caused much uproar when the first edition was published (Johnson, 1968, p. 142).

Hardy used the word "pure" meaning the readers to see Tess as an emblem of purity on the one hand and as the quintessential female on the other. He makes a great effort to portray Tess as a real person. He does this by telling us that she will be "faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy". Various instances of the trueness of the account are to be found in the novel:

Then their sister... poured forth from the bottom of her heart the thanksgiving that follows, uttering it boldly and triumphantly, in the stopt-diapason note which her voice acquired when her heart was in her speech, and which will never be forgotten by those who knew her. (chap. XIV)

Tess of the d'Urbervilles reveals Hardy's fatalistic view of a hostile universe, where men and women cannot control their destinies but are obliged to follow "the commands of a

destructive demiurge – styled by Hardy “the President of the immortals” (Quennell, 1981, p. 441).

Darwinism also affected Hardy’s views of life and the universe (Altick, 1973, p. 233). This life-view of his permeates the novel. Not only is it Tess’s destiny to fall victim to Alec d’Urberville but her destiny is in part a product of her upbringing. What with Mrs. Durbeyfield’s sleazy good humour and “Sir” John’s beery indolence, their superstitions, ambition and a flock of younger children, the dice are loaded against Tess from the start, as (Hardy implies) they are loaded against all the rural poor, who have no longer even the traditional support of village life to lean on, because they are pushed by economic pressure into a desperate mobility (Johnson, 1968, p. 145).

An important theme Hardy introduces into the novel is the contrast between illusion and reality. Hardy attacks the “arbitrary laws of society” which make Tess impure.

Hardy saw society’s preference for the ideal (a virginal Tess) over the real (Tess in her “fallen” state) as the most wide-spread and dangerous of human prejudices (Johnson, 1968, p. 145)

He embroiders on this line of thought, or theme, throughout the novel. One of the more memorable of these being where Tess moves silently through the garden to listen to Angel Claire playing the harp: “She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her arms sticky blights” (chap. XIX).

This suggests the purity of Tess whom these things only appear to defile, just as the opinion of society sticks to her reputation like the “slug-slime” and “sticky blights”.

I have, I believe, shown so far how Hardy uses a fictional character (Tess) to make some pointed and rather scathing attacks on contemporary society. Society’s values, upper-class

behaviour, the “purity” of the rural poor (as embodied in Tess) all form part of this. Where does his work of fiction and contemporary reality intersect?

The intersection of these two is in a county called “Wessex”. Hardy set *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in the fictional county of “Wessex”. He used the county of Dorset, where he grew up, as inspiration for his idea, and amalgamated its features with an ancient West Saxon kingdom to form Wessex. To add credibility and realism to his creation he drew a map complete with county boundaries and natural features (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 224).

His Wessex novels, of which *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is one, contain descriptions of life in the region which are completely authentic.

In the rural Dorset of the 1840’s, where Hardy was born, extreme poverty and want were common. *A Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, young Persons and women in Agriculture* of 1864 reported that as late as 1867 children under the age of six were working in the fields of Dorset. The Royal Commission also commented on “the bad moral effects” on young girls of employment in field labour” – an effect Hardy chronicled in the plight of Tess Durbeyfield, “a fieldwoman pure and simple” (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 225).

Her fellow workers are the “dark virago, Car Darch, dubbed Queen of Spades” and “Nancy, her sister, nicknamed the Queen of Diamonds”. For the innocent Tess they are a “whorage” (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 225).

In real life, as Hardy is at pains to portray in the novel, field labourers of both sexes sought relief from their bleak existence in weekly bouts of drunkenness often followed by illegitimacy. To the Victorian moral consciousness the life of the rural poor was shocking. At village social gatherings, such as that reported in *The Times* of 3 August 1846, “scenes (were)

enacted which can at least rival, if not exceed, the disgusting orgies of antiquity” (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 226).

By means of fusing “pure” fiction with the realities of his own personal experiences and the social realities of Victorian England, Hardy has produced a remarkably “true to the period” novel. When he was young he witnessed several public hangings. One of these was the hanging of a woman named Martha Brown, who killed her husband in a crime of passion. Emotionally and factually this memory inspired *Tess*” (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 217)

As Richard Altick says in his excellent book *Victorian People and Ideas...* “Thomas Hardy was the first major novelist to portray in realistic detail the life of the humble rural labourer...” (Altick, 1973, p. 38)

Like Hardy, Dickens (1910) was inspired by his own personal experiences as well as the major national events and conditions of society in writing *The old Curiosity Shop*.

The death of his wife’s sister, Mary Hogarth (she died in his arms), affected him deeply and an idealised version of her is seen as Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. (TOC)” (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 124)

Many social issues are also raised, which I shall discuss later. One of the more amusing of these being Dickens’ illustration of the decay of the Regency. In *TOC* Dick Swiveller dresses and behaves like a “swell” – emulating what he believes to be a dandy gone to seed (Altick, 1973, p. 10)

In writing his novels Dickens had to keep the needs of his reading public in mind. The Victorians did not appreciate subtlety in art and they wanted to be addressed directly, on a simple, unambiguous level of communication (Altick, 1973, p. 278)

Dickens kept this in mind in writing *TOC* and as a result it appealed to almost every sector of the middle-class public and also the more literate reaches of the working-class public (Altick, 1973, p. 62)

There was an extreme interest by its readers when it appeared in weekly instalments of *Master Humphrey's Clock* in 1840. Sales soared to over 100, 000 for each serial part. The readers felt a particular affection for Little Nell, an affection Dickens exploited by not revealing to the readers for many instalments that the novel would end in her death. As a result of her death the novel has evoked extremes of reaction over the years as the following anecdotes show:

...Lord Jeffrey, a stern Scottish judge and the founder of the *Edinburgh Review*...was discovered by a neighbour, Mrs Henry Siddons, leaning his head on his desk. Hearing her enter, he looked up, and she was astonished to see tears streaming down his face. "Forgive me", stammered the lady, "I had no idea that you had any bad news or cause of grief or I would not have come. Is anyone dead?"

"Yes, indeed", answered Lord Jeffrey. "I'm a great goose to have give way so, but I couldn't help it. You'll be sorry to hear that Little Nelly is dead" (*Giants of Literature*, 1977 , p. 91).

...Daniel O'Connell , Irish parliamentary leader and champion of independence...read the instalment describing Little Nell's death while on a railway journey. He too burst into tears and shouting, "He should not have killed her", hurled the magazine out of the window. (*Giants of Literature*, 1977, p. 91).

These incidents suggest how closely fiction was perceived to reflect reality for the Victorians.

Dickens succeeded in keeping his readers interested in the weekly instalments of the novel by means of colourful characters (Quilp, Dick Swiveller, Kit and others), boldly contrasting scenes and vigorous plotting. Although I have mentioned that Dickens addressed his reading public in simple unambiguous terms (*The Old Curiosity Shop* can be read for entertainment devoid of “messages”), he was also a subversive writer. All his novels contain “hidden” social messages. It is at this deeper level of meaning and the techniques he employs that I now wish to look. Many of his more sophisticated readers noticed these and encoded the silences of the text as well as the more direct social/moral criticisms therein.

As a result of these deeper levels of meaning and techniques no work of Dickens ever aroused such extremes of admiration and distaste. *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s visions of life and art function on at least six different levels, namely:

- 1) Sensibility *
- 2) Tragedy
- 3) Melodrama **
- 4) Allegory
- 5) Dickens' personal life

*OED. *Capacity to feel, exceptional openness to emotional impressions, susceptibility.*

** *characters are seen as exteriorised images of virtue or villainy and are unchallenged in their integrity by anything outside them.*

- 6) Urgent public events of the time

1) Sensibility

The basis of Nell's heroism is her long care and steadfast loyalty to her grandfather. She is kind and courteous to each of the many personages she meets on her travels. Her behaviour is Christian. She is selfless in proffering them assistance and deep feeling in her responsiveness to their sorrows.

The reader can't help but notice her abiding concern with lost things. This is a primary expression of her sensibility. In chapter 25 she is present at the bedside of the dying schoolboy and in chapter 17 she speaks sympathetically to the old widow. She also takes solemn pleasure meditating in graveyards on man's mortality, (chap. 53)

Unfortunately it is Nell's sensibility which leads to her death. She is terrified of Quilp (understandably) and all rough people she meets during her travels. The last straw is when her grandfather betrays her trust by stealing her money. This undermines her health and her fortitude – she never recovers.

In the 1830's there were a host of pressures that lead to a growing concern with respectability and refinement. Dickens capitalised on this by introducing sensibility, as epitomised by Nell, in the novel.

2) Tragedy

Dickens' favourite tragedy was *King Lear* and he drew direct parallels between it and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (*Giants of Literature*, 1977, p. 92).

Nell and her grandfather are, like Lear and Cordelia, a sinning old man and a forgiving and loving female child.

Like Cordelia, Nell herself is flawless, yet has to endure sorrow, threats and hardship. Despite all adversity she emerges with all her loving impulses intact.

Her tragic stature derives from the survival of her affections despite the harrowing circumstances she has to endure. Contemporary readers would be able to identify with her due to their knowledge of *King Lear*. Dickens was aware of this and made good use of it.

3) Melodrama

Dickens purposefully created Nell without any individuating characteristics. She is there solely as an icon of innocence and moral goodness in a hostile (Victorian?) world. Victorian readers would be able to identify with this state of innocent goodness represented by Nell. The poverty of her surroundings in which Master Humphrey finds her (Coventry Gardens) would be all too familiar to many readers. The unsavoury characters she meets would also form part of a Victorian reader's frame of reference, and identification with her situation would thus be easy.

In sharp contrast to her is Quilp, Dickens' most extraordinary character. He has sufficient function in the novel as a money-lender and a sexual tyrant to have credibility as a human personage. At the same time he is also an uncanny figure of the grotesque. Dickens achieves this by making him a hideously ugly dwarf and giving him seemingly superhuman powers. His portrayal of Quilp would have satisfied the Victorians' morbid curiosity with death and the supernatural.

The Victorians were fascinated with the unusual and displays (shows) with dwarfs and mis-shapen people were common as were public hangings (only stopped in the late 1860's). The readers would also probably have noticed the parallelism between characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This is one of the characteristics of melodrama. In his delight of

domineering over everyone Quilp shares characteristics with Punch, just as the puppets of Codlin and Short represent a Quilp-like threat to Nell. Conversely, Barbara, the Marchioness, and Mrs. Quilp share qualities of Nell which ensure that the values she represents live after her in them.

4) Allegory

In chapter 15 we can see a kind of allegory when Nell tells her grandfather that she feels the two of them are like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, fleeing from the worldliness of London to the purer existence she hopes they will find in the countryside. Here Dickens' message is clear yet, at the same time, disguised.

There are many others but a study of them fall beyond the scope of this work and it is a lengthy study on its own. Angus Wilson says; "...the Little Nell story is about death- not the meaning of death, but about the spectacle of death upon the mourners, particularly the death of a child..." (Wilson, 1970, p. 140)

5) Dickens' personal life

As I mentioned earlier the death of his wife's sister affected him deeply. He was emotionally very attached to Mary Hogarth and never fully recovered from her death. An idealised version of her remained with him, and appeared in novels as Rosie Maylie (*Oliver Twist*), Little Nell (*The Old Curiosity Shop*) and Little Dorrit (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 124; Wilson, 1970, p. 115).

Extreme poverty and its effects on children was an issue Dickens had close to heart and presented in most of his work. His parents' poverty and the fact that he worked for a time as a child in a blacking warehouse left a deep impression on him. There are numerous instances of poverty and suffering children in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

6) Urgent public events of the time

There were severe Chartist uprisings in 1839-40 as described in chapter 45. In the same year Queen Victoria married. She was the leader of the nation during troubled times. She was a reminder that an inexperienced young woman was a symbol of hope and promise. In the same way Nell serves as a cultural icon representing cherished values in troubled times. In the same year Bartholomew Fair was officially suppressed. Although there is no mention of the fair in the novel Nell spends much of her time amongst the kind of people who frequented the fair. Dickens shows them as “down and out” and ready to do almost anything for money. They are not above betraying each other and Nell for financial gain. Gambling was also increasing rapidly as well as the negative effects it brought about (Altick, 1973, p. 22).

Dickens shows us the effects of old Mr Trent’s (grandfather) gambling habits on Nell. Nell’s adventures on the way (to death) with “various entertainers against the background of the Black Country and the industrial riots there, are a brilliant journalistic description showing England in her many guises. (Wilson, 1970, p. 143)

Why did Dickens kill little Nell?

Wilson answers this best when he says;” May not an energetic, productive, materialistic society have wanted some assurance that the death of the young “paid off” here and now in an uplifting sense, that comes upon the mourners? That ‘a hundred virtues rise...to walk the world’ from the vitality that appears to have been stilled” (Wilson, 1970, p. 144).

Thackeray’s personal life also entered into his work. His wife’s insanity in 1840 and his unrequited love for Jane Brookfield (a close friend’s wife) have parallels in *Vanity Fair*.

Major Dobbin's unrequited love for Amelia responded to his own experience (Quennell, 1981, p. 340).

Vanity Fair, like *The Old Curiosity Shop* was published in parts and Thackeray found it necessary to "stuff each part with the literary ingredients that a reader then expected" (Quennell, 1981, p. 341).

These ingredients were dramatic interest, sentiment, humour and an overriding moral message.

Vanity Fair is an extraordinarily real book showing the stratification of Victorian society and the often shallow and dissolute lifestyle of the middle and upper classes. The central character is Rebecca Sharp, a thoroughly amoral social climber. The book shows how she affects the lives of the Osbornes and Sedleys. Part of the criticism against *Vanity Fair* is that Thackeray does not distance himself from his characters (Ackroyd, 1990, p. 466).

In this he is similar to Hardy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, but clearly finds *Becky attractive* despite the fact that he stigmatises her wickedness and selfishness.

It is interesting to note that *Vanity Fair* ends on a note of sober disillusionment. Amelia, the "good woman", has herself a shallow, selfish nature. An effective comment on certain members of society.

Vanity Fair is, unlike *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a character study and in this aspect resembles *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* regarding authenticity of characters.

Vanity Fair was published in twenty monthly instalments in 1847-8 and was an instant success. Despite this good fortune for Thackeray the Victorian reading public did not like its cynical attitude to society (*Colour Library Book*, 1993, p. 111).

The reason for this is that Thackeray exposes a whole range of Victorian behaviour in an extremely accurate way. Rebecca is an unscrupulous “social climber”. Lord Steyne, (drawn from the crapulous Marquis of Hertford) (Altick, 1973, p. 10), is an old manipulating rake and Joe Sedley a pompous, and as it proves at Waterloo, cowardly buck. In my opinion the only persons who seem to recover any of their lost virtue are Rawdon Crawley (on exposing and divorcing Becky and in his true love and affection for his son) and Dobbin, who follows Amelia and helps her through the difficult and wealthy stages of her life while remaining true to his dead friend George Osborne .All the other characters are shown up as shallow schemers. Thackeray’s negative (and at times scathing) attacks on high-society came from personal experience. As a literary celebrity he was much in demand by high-society and wrote that he spent his time reeling “ from dinner party to dinner party- [he] wallowed in turtle and [swam] in Claret and Shampagn”(*Colour Library Book* 1993, p. 111).

Hopefully I have managed to show how these three great writers fused fiction with the realities of their Victorian existence, both personal and public.

In a way they were social reformers – certainly they were mirrors held up to the face of society, and as such received much criticism. It is a pity that our present age, so similar in many ways to the Victorian age, has delivered so few literary giants of equal stature.

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