Victorian writers: preachers, reformers or public entertainers?

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Abstract
Taking into account the English nineteenth century, it is worth mentioning that the Victorian age was the frame of some characteristic social-economic-political circumstances that produced a specific literature. It is true that there is a clear division between Early Victorians and Late Victorians, but the general assessment of considering the Victorian writers sometimes as preachers and reformers, always as public entertainers can be accepted as valid in a general sense. Therefore, in this article the aforementioned statement will be justified, and those relevant factors that are directly related to this period writers will also be analysed.

Keywords: Victorian writers, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Industrial Revolution, Reformers, Entertainers, Darwin

Titulo: Los escritores victorianos: ¿predicadores, reformistas o animadores?
Resumen
Si tenemos en cuenta el siglo diecinueve inglés, hay que mencionar que la era victoriana fue el marco de algunas circunstancias socio-económico-políticas que dieron lugar a una literatura específica. Es cierto que hay una clara división entre los primeros escritores victorianos y los últimos, pero la consideración general de que todos ellos eran a veces predicadores y reformistas y otras, animadores del público se puede dar por válida en un sentido general. Así pues, en este artículo justificaremos este hecho y analizaremos los factores más relevantes relacionados con los escritores de esta época.

Palabras clave: Escritores Victorianos, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Revolución Industrial, Reformistas, Animadores, Darwin.

Recibido 2016-01-16; Aceptado 2016-01-20; Publicado 2016-02-25; Código PD: 068043

ENTERTAINMENT AND REFORM

Considering the literature of the nineteenth century England between 1837 and 1901 it is almost an obligation to study Victorian readers, since it was because of them that a novel was built in a specific way.

This reading public was characterised by its heterogeneity, and the main distinction we can discern is that between the middle class and the lower classes, mostly illiterate. Therefore, the writer had to please that middle class public, also called bourgeois, the educated public, the one who knew how to read. It is worth mentioning that, though this bourgeois was not illiterate, they were not very cultivated either.

When reading a novel Victorian public looked for entertainment in the first place. This fact meant that these readers partly marked the course of a novel. If they required more action, the writer had to give them more action. In this way, the writer was in a close communication with the reader: his works were conditioned by the public.

Secondly, the readers only wanted to see themselves reflected in the novels. The fact that some writers saw themselves as preachers and reformers may be explained with this consideration. Victorian writers criticised their continually evolving age in the same way as their public did. That is, in the writers’ criticism about society and age, the readers found their own feelings, and thus the writer became the conscience of the public. But, what kind of reformers were Victorian writers? They felt identified with their times though they were aware of the evils caused by the industrial revolution, such as the enrichment of the middle class and the rise of poverty in the lower classes.
PROSE: AN EARLY VICTORIAN WRITER: CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens has been considered by many critics the most representative writer of Early Victorianism. He created a range of memorable and often odd characters, and his ability as a story-teller is beyond doubt.

Dickens has also been considered the greatest entertainer in the history of fiction, and his works are an example of how the public conditioned his writing. His novels were normally published partly, so depending on the reaction of the readers, he wrote one or another thing. Dickens developed with a magnificent prose what the public wanted to read. As his main objective was to entertain, he used different devices mixed among his skill as a novelist: he had a great imagination that used in the construction of the plot. He was able to create a world where characters seemed to live outside the book. Secondly, it is also significant the fact that he was a man of little education himself, writing for a not very much educated audience. Therefore, his language appealed a great number of readers.

Another important fact when dealing with Dickens is that of him being a reformer who condemned those terrible aspects of his society. The rising capitalism and the industrial revolution were destroying Victorian values. Victorian times were also the scenery of a philosophy called Utilitarianism, the creed of the bourgeois, which defended the belief that actions were good if they were useful for the greatest number of people. It also wanted to create a population dominated by factories, a population without feelings. As a consequence of this philosophy, the new economic doctrines allowed people to exploit others in order to attain wealth. Dickens attacked this philosophy in his novel *Hard Times*, another deplorable element of that society in which he lived. In this novel the first chapter entitled “Murdering the Innocent” is very telling, a title which surely shocked the reader of the time.

Victorian society was industrialising itself very quickly, and many factories, chimneys and other typical things from an industrialised country were replacing the preceding era. With this new industrial background, the richer the middle class became, the poorer the lower class. It is highly significant fact that women and children were exploited in those factories, and this is another aspect that Dickens attacked sharply in his novel *David Copperfield*, quite an autobiographical work, because Dickens himself suffered at the age of ten the fatality of working exploited in a factory. Meanwhile, in society some people fought firmly to reform through Parliament some of the terrible facts they were being victims of. Thus, in 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in order to help poor people to eat. However, the sponsors of this law decided to abolish the economic assistance obliging the father to work in the Work House and forcing him to separate from his children and wife who were sent to different sections in the Work House. Dickens objected to these facts in *Oliver Twist*.

A picture of Leadenhall Street by J. Hopkins, London, c. 1837. (Source: wikipedia.org)
In *Great Expectations* we can also notice a criticism to the moral decay and cult to money of those days, and it is precisely Pip, the main character of the novel, who sacrifices all he loves in order to become a rich and social distinguished man to please Stella. Through the novel we see that wealth turns to be a wrong way towards love. Notwithstanding, the greatest condemnation towards Victorian society in this novel is that of social distinctions. Dickens thought that everybody would be equal in the Final Judgement. The censure to moral decay is also present in the wedding cake. This rotten cake can be interpreted as a symbol of the corruption Victorian society was being a victim of.

It seems that criticism used as a means to reform society is widely used in some of Dickens’ novels. However, should we mention a more general common thread in his works, this would be the desire to entertain.

**PROSE: A LATE VICTORIAN WRITER: THOMAS HARDY**

The first peculiar aspect to mention when dealing with Thomas Hardy is the fact that he has always been considered a Late Victorian writer. This provides him with some characteristics different from those of the Early Victorians. We have already mentioned that Early Victorian writers were in communion with his audience. On the one hand, they wrote what their public wanted to read. On the other hand, there was a criticism against the moral and social decay that the industrial revolution and capitalism was providing. However, they had faith in traditional Victorian society. On the contrary, Later Victorian writers, those from the second half of the Victorian age, wrote against their age. These writers began to react against Victorian world and against the optimism of the first half of the period called “the roaring twenties”. One of their main characteristics is precisely the pessimism perhaps due to the agnosticism arising after the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Nevertheless, these late writers have in common with those of the first half of the Victorian period that purpose of entertaining the public and the criticism of society, though in a wider sense.

Thomas hardy was, like Dickens, a great entertainer. In his works there is visuality, that is, we are able to see the landscapes, the action, we can even see the feelings present in his stories. A good example of this is *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. This novel is a beautiful love story with all the ingredients of Romanticism. This love story is full of hate and passion, with real feelings that Early Victorians hid behind their puritan mask. This fact also makes the novel very attractive to the reader.

Another aspect present in the novel aforementioned is the everlasting conflict between love and social conventionalisms. This aspect is shown in this novel and *Jude the Obscure* is also a clear objection to those conventionalisms. In the novel we see the characters fighting to adapt themselves to a world in progress that is hostile to them. This aspect is present in many of Hardy’s novels. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we witness the decline of agricultural life and the oppression of a new rising social system.

**CONCLUSION**

As it has been shown, both entertainment and desire to reform are aspects that in a general sense are present in Victorian prose writers. Charles Dickens is a master in creating that entertainment required. His criticism to society is also very well attained in most of his books, and he might well be considered the greatest novelist in the nineteenth century in England.

On the other hand, Hardy is also admirable, above all for he goes beyond in the social critic. He is original in destroying some Victorian topics such as passions and pure love in real life.
Bibliografía