
Unit-3 □ Victorian Prose: Fictional and Non-Fictional

Structure:

- 1.3.0 Introduction**
- 1.3.1 Victorian Fictional Prose**
 - a. Early Victorian Novelists**
 - b. Late Victorian Novelists**
 - c. Women Novelists**
- 1.3.2 Victorian Non-Fictional Prose**
 - a. Major Victorian essayists**
 - b. Minor Victorian essayists**
- 1.3.3 Summing Up**
- 1.3.4 Comprehension Exercises**
- 1.3.5 Suggested Reading**

1.3.0 Introduction

The aims and objectives of this unit are to acquaint you with the trends and tendencies of English prose during the Victorian period, which embraces both fiction and non-fiction. The fictional prose consists of such literary types as novel and short story, while the non-fictional prose includes the essays— popular and social, critical and literary. The unit will also inform you about the novelists and essayists, who have enriched the literary realm with their imaginary texts and/or critiques.

1.3.1 Victorian Fictional Prose

The rapid growth of Victorian fiction owes to different factors—social, cultural and literary. In most of the cases the major Victorian novelists intended to satisfy the ethical and aesthetic demands of the contemporary middle classes. The middle class preference for prose fiction as the source of diversion and edification was also determined by various journals and literary magazines who patronized the serial publications of novels on a regular basis to increase their sale and circulation among

the educated section of middle classes. We may classify the Victorian novelists in two groups- **the early Victorian novelists, the late Victorian novelists** and the **women novelists**. These include the social novelists, the novelists devoting themselves to the writing of historical novels and romances, and lastly, those who combined in their works the spirit of social realism with that of psychological realism.

a. Early Victorian Novelists

i. Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Any critical account of Victorian prose fiction should appropriately begin with Charles Dickens. Born in a lower middle class family, living in London, Dickens spent his early life in the midst of economic hardship. His father, John Dickens was a government clerk and was extremely extravagant in his habits. He was imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea (the debtors' prison). It was a shocking experience for young Dickens. Incidentally, the image of prison house, directly or indirectly, recurs in his different novels. Dickens began his writing career as a journalist, and all his novels were serially published in periodicals, especially in two edited by himself- *Household Words* which started in 1850 and *All the Year Round* which started in 1859, both of them being weeklies.

Dickens' long and eventful career as a novelist, according to Edmund Wilson, may be divided in three phases. The first phase begins with *Pickwick Papers* (1837) followed by *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge* (both in 1841) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). In the second phase, he wrote two novels *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *David Copperfield* (1850), considered to be one of the best known novels of Dickens, largely autobiographical in its content. In the third and final phase Dickens wrote his mature novels, enriched with symbols and symbolic meanings, thematic ideas and sociological imagination. In *Bleak House* (1852), Dickens employs fog as a natural and sociological symbol. Everything in the state of England is affected by a foggy confusion- whether it is law or legal procedure, politics, the reformist tendency. In the next novel *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens exposes the basic limitations of utilitarianism and industrial capitalism. In *Little Dorrit* (1857) Dickens criticizes the red-tapism of English bureaucracy under the disguised title of Circumlocution Office. The next novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) shows Dickens attempting to re-create the tense political atmosphere of the Revolution of 1789 against the backdrop of personal relationships of love and friendship among its major characters. Dickens,

however, went back to the social themes and problems both in *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). According to the Dickens- critics *Great Expectations* is perhaps the best ever novel written by Dickens. The story of Pip and Estella, the complex relationship between them is situated against a large panorama of mid- Victorian society, mainly dominated by the spirit of cash-nexus, moral confusion and dilemma.

Dickens's entire career as a novelist traces his gradual progress from the simple and straightforward to the complex and the subtle. The evolution in his fictional art shows how in his later novels he fuses together the essence of social realism with that of psychological realism. You will be better acquainted with Dickens and his novelistic style and features in the Module 3 Unit 1 where we take up *David Copperfield*, his autobiographical novel, in detail.

i. William Makepeace Thackeray(1811-1863)

The name Charles Dickens is frequently coupled with that of William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) just as in earlier ages of English literature the names Caedmon and Cynewolf, Chaucer and Langford, Spenser and Sidney, Marlowe and Shakespeare, Dryden and Poepe, Richardson and Fielding, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats are cited for the sake of comparison and contrast.

Thackeray's writings include satiric humorous studies of London manners, i.e. *The Yellowplush Correspondence* (1837- 1838), the memoirs and diary of a young cockney footman written in his own vocabulary and style; *Major Gahagan* (1838–39), a fantasy of soldiering in India; *Catherine* (1839–40), a burlesque of the popular “Newgate novels” of romanticized crime and low life and so on. The parodies and satirical writing laid the foundation of his later career as a novelist, since in his works of prose fiction he showed his fondness for ironical and satirical presentation of characters and situations with the definite strain of humour and parody.

His first major novel is *Vanity Fair* (1848), followed by *Pendennis* (1850), *The Newcomes* (1853-55), *The Virginians* (1859) and *Esmond* (1852). It is in *Vanity Fair* that Thackeray reaches the maturity of his literary art and the critics consider that it expresses the strong social consciousness of the writer. The narrative of *Vanity Fair* gives an unusual perspective of the Napoleonic Wars covers historically a long stretch of time beginning with the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and ending with the enactment of the First Reform Bill (1832). The source of the main title is directly taken from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, while the sub- title “A novel without

a hero” primarily draws the attention of the readers to Becky Sharp, the central protagonist who appears to be constantly throwing a challenge to the long-cherished social and moral values of a male-dominated society, mainly governed by the spirit of cash-nexus, and social snobbery. *Pendennis* traces the career of Arthur Pendennis: his first love affair, his experiences at “Oxbridge University,” his employment as a London journalist, and so on. *The Newcomes*, ostensibly tracing the lives of Colonel Newcome and his generations, focuses on marriage for the sake of money. Capitalism and Methodism have been dealt with. *The Virginians* tells the story of Henry Esmond and his two grandsons and, with the temporal reference being the American war of Independence and circumstances of lives centering it.

ii. Anthony Trollope (1815-1882)

Trollope was mainly famous for his novels on the ecclesiastical life, commonly identified as the Barsetshire novels. The series contain *The Warden* (1855), *Barchester Towers* (1857), *Dr. Thorne* (1858), *Framely Parsonage* (1864), *The Small House at Allington* (1864) and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867). *The Barchester Towers* basically mocks at the intense antipathy in between High Church and Evangelical supporters. *Dr. Thorne* is a significant inspection of the relationship between money and morality and also considers illegitimacy as a factor for marriage. Trollope’s novels offer considerable insight into the ‘progress’ of society in Victorian England. His plots contain all the manifold contrivances and complications which have come to be seen as typical of the Victorian novel: inheritance, intrigues, scheming and manipulating, property and propriety.

iii. Wilkie Collins (1824-1889)

Wilkie Collins is considered to be the first ever detective novelist in English. In fact, the atmosphere of mystery and suspense prevailing in his novels *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) indirectly influenced Dickens in the depiction of underworld figures in his novels, both early and late. Wilkie Collins’s mastery rested mainly over plot-construction. Generally, typified as the ‘sensation novelists’, particularly in *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*, *A Message from the Sea*, *No Thoroughfare*, *No Name* and *Armadale*, Collins in these works, succeeded in the presentation of the marginalized figure of the Victorian others.

In the next part of the discussion about early Victorian novelists let us focus our attention on the social novelists of the Victorian period. **The social novel** as a distinctive fictional genre emerged and developed in the Victorian periods, propelled

and inspired by several factors. There were the rapid industrialization of the society, the growth of industrial capitalism, the divide of the country into the industrial south and the agrarian north, the spread of utilitarianism as an economic force, and the emergence of young England movement in imitation of Young France and categorize the social novelists of the period, since the contemporary English society with all its variegated problems was taken up for their fictional rendering almost by all the Victorian novelists.

iv. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881)

Disraeli, a social novelist like Dickens, wrote more than one hundred novels. *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845) and *Tancred* (1847) make his 'Young England Trilogy'. The themes of these novels are supported and sustained by some political agenda, rooted in Disraeli's faith in the Young England movement as a regenerating force for an anarchical and corrupt industrial society. *Sybil* echoes Carlyle's Past and Present in its concern for the poor, one of the two nations that the novel identified. While the abovementioned novels were thematically political, *Lothair* (1870) was different. Amidst the treatment of the themes of money, religion, aristocracy and patriotism, Disraeli makes his protagonist Lothair searching for Christian truth.

v. Charles Kingsley (1819-1875),

Kingsley professionally a clergyman and temperamentally a reformer, is the other notable social novelist of the period. His best-known work of fiction is *The Water Babies* (1863) with the subtitle "A Fairy Tale of a Landbaby". Apparently, the book remains as the children's classic for the sake of the ingenuity of its fantasy, actually the exploitation of the child labour and brutalization of the poor. The novels *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850) are concerned with the theme of social injustice. In his social novels Kingsley on the one hand exhibits his reformist tendency and on the other hand has attempted to fictionalize the basic principles of the movement, known as Christian socialism, led by F.D. Maurice. According to the famous French critic Caramian, the basic of the theory of Christian socialism are self-contradictory because like his great contemporary Dickens, he aims at socio economic equality to be perpetrated in the different social classes simply on the basis of the change of heart.

Among the social novelists of Early Victorian England was also Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell, about whom you will learn later in this Unit, under the sub-section 'Women

Novelists'. The social novelists of the Victorian period succeeded in situating the contemporary fiction against some specific social contexts and problems. The delineation of the problems is almost always very intense, distinguishes and characterized by the spirit of social realism, sometimes sporadically blended with the spirit of psychological realism.

b. Late Victorian Novelists

We will discuss about the late Victorian novelists— George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. In their novels we may notice the last twilight-glow of Victorianism and the early sunshine of modernism.

i. George Meredith (1828-1909)

Meredith was educated in Germany, and his writings were influenced by the Germans, especially the novelist Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825) who stimulated his concept of comedy. The *Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1851) was his first novel, followed by *Evan Harrington* (1861) which is now regarded as one of his best. In 1862 came out his most famous volume of poems *Modern Love*. George Meredith was a prolific writer and the fecundity and richness of his imagination as a fiction writer in his several other publication- *Sandra Belloni* (1864), *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), *Vittoria* (1867- a sequel to Sandra), *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871), *Beauchamp's Career* (1875). *The Egoist* (1879) is one of his best known novels. The reference may also be given to other fictional works like *The Tragic Comedians* (1880), *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), the first of his novels to have wide publicity.

ii. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

In his art of writing, and in his attempt to bring out the psychological complexity in the man- woman relationship Hardy temperamentally belongs to the twentieth century. The essence of Victorianism may be perceived in his commitment to social realism. The novels he wrote may be stratified into three groups. There are for example, the novels of character and environment like *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders*(1887), *Tess of the D'urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896), 'romances and Fantasies' belong *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), *The Trumpet- Major* (1880), *Two on a Tower* (1882), *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), *The Well Blessed* (1897) and the novels of ingenuity *Desperate*

Remedies (1871), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), *A Labodicean* (1881). Hardy's poetic self has frequently converged upon his identity as a novelist, so much so that in the descriptive details of nature and the natural of the English countryside, in his novels the fictitious geographical space Wessex, Hardy appears to be more a poet than a simple narrator. In his early novels the rustic characters appear to be the embodiments of the spirit and essence of Wessex- the microcosm of the English rustic life with all its manners and mannerisms, rituals and festivals, simplicity and straightforwardness. But in his later novels like *Tess* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the rustic characters and rustic life undergo the distinctive changes due to the incoming forces of industrialization. Hardy in his later novel depicts the conflict between the old agrarian and the new industrial society.

Hardy is also called a tragic novelist. He is also mentioned as an evolutionary meliorist. Hardy's tragic vision is crystallized in the concluding lines of *Tess*, which bring out adequately this duality in Hardy's philosophy of life:

“Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess—The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in proper, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on.”

He has incorporated the chances and coincidences to illustrate man's futile struggle against the impersonal forces of Destiny or Immanent Will.

Apart from Meredith and Hardy, Samuel Butler with his utopian novel *Erewhon* (1872) and satirical novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), George Gissing with his naturalism in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884) and *The Netherworld* (1889), George Moore with his *A Modern Love* (1883) set in Bohemian artistic society too contributed versified thoughts to Victorian novel. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) has brought diversified views and its content was an initial shock to the Victorian morality.

Activity for Learners

Learners, to know more about the topography you may consult Herman Lea's book *Thomas Hardy's Wessex*. You are also advised to read the essay on Hardy by D.H. Lawrence, 'The Study of Thomas Hardy'. Also read more about Hardy in Module 3, Unit 2.

c. Women novelists

The Victorian prose fiction was considerably enriched under the hands of the women novelists like Mrs. Gaskell, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot.

i. Mrs. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-1865)

She was primarily a novelist and thereafter a biographer who spent her married life in the industrial town of Manchester and the memories and associations of the Manchester life left their impact on *Mary Barton* (1848) that pleaded for justice and sympathy for the industrial workers. Her next novel *Cranford* (1851-1853) was published in Dickens' periodical *Household Words*. The immediate social background of the novel is in an imaginary little town, Kinsford. Her next novel *Ruth* (1853) is based on the same place. *North and South* (1855) is another study of industrial relations, rooted in the binary oppositions between the agrarian north and the industrial south of England. The novel fictionalizes the binaries of oppositions between two different cultures, social and economic status. Her best novel is, however, *Wives and Daughters* (1864-1866) is more a novel of manners than an industrial novel in its design, story-element and 'motif'.

Psychological realism got the upper hand of social realism in the novels of the women novelists of Victorian period. These novelists are the three Brontë sisters and George Eliot. The heroines in these novels established their identities as human beings, and in many occasions they protested against the conventions of the patriarchal society, constantly dominating and supporting them as individuals simply because of their gendered position. Women as social protestants emerged in their different novels, although ultimately they were made to compromise with the conventional values of Victorian patriarchy.

ii. The Brontë sisters

Emily Brontë (1818-48)'s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) has always been regarded as one of the most singular and isolated among English novels. The novel with the perceptible prance of the Gothic Fiction is its background and story elements depict the gender-relationship in the most convincing style. The social context of the novel is as complex as the human context. The novel tells the story of human relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine (Cathy), the daughter of Mr. Earnshaw, the foster-father of Heathcliff, originally an orphan of the slums of Liverpool. The lovers in their relationship are sometimes violently passionate, sometimes moderately romantic,

but never indifferent to each other. The class-consciousness of the Victorian bourgeoisie is presented in the relationship between the members of the Earnshaw family and the social marginals, represented by the young Heathcliff. *Wuthering Heights* is further remarkable for its nature background. Heath itself is as stormy and violent as the human passion. Emily Brontë's attempt to synchronise between man and nature anticipates Hardy's and D.H. Lawrence's treatment of nature. The narrative strategy, adopted by Emily Brontë, is as innovative and experimental as any modern novel. The polyphonic voices (the multiple voices) of different characters are heard throughout the narrative. These voices have their self- entity, although at the same time they sometimes converge, and sometimes mingle with one another.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) wrote the following novels- *The Professor* (posthumous publication in 1849), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853). In *Jane Eyre*, figure of the heroine Jane Eyre, appointed a governess in the household of Mr. Rochester, a widower with the mad woman in the attic with her horrifying and shocking presence provides the ideal setting for an extraordinary love story, since the attitude of the Jane towards Mr. Rochester tentatively moves between love and hatred, sympathy and antipathy, fascination and repulsion. Written in the first person narrative technique, the novel seems to present Jane as opposing the Victorian patriarchy, but finally succumbing to the conventional values of the society. This is suggested by confident self- declaration; "Reader, I married him."

Anne Brontë (1820-1849) was at once a novelist and a poet. Under the pseudonym of Aston Bell she contributed to the volumes of poems by all three sisters. Her two novels are *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall* which are the books of some distinction, but they are not on the same level of importance as the works of her two sisters.

iii. George Eliot (1819- 1880)

Mary Ann Evans' (who wrote under the pseudonym George Eliot) novels began with *Scenes of Clerical Life* followed by *Adam Bede* (1850), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1862-63), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). As the delineator of the English countryside life, she may be compared to Hardy because like the later, she presents the country life with details. She idealizes some of the countryside figures. For example, Silas Marner, Adam Bede, Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss* are the idealized portraits of English countryside persons who represent the simplicity and moral

integrity, supposed to be the adorable human qualities, at least, to the novel reading people mostly belonging to the Victorian middle class. The heroines in her novels are, however much superior to their male counterparts, whether she be Dinah Morris, a Methodist preacher in *Adam Bede*, Romola, and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. These heroines have in common one basic characteristic quality- steadfastness, supported by intense moral earnestness. George Eliot's modernism in the embryonic form may be perceived in her attempt to blend together the essence of social realism with that of psychological realism, to depict the man-woman relationship more frankly while the strain of Victorianism lies in her final appreciation of sobriety and seriousness not only in human relationship but also in the man- society equation.

Margaret Oliphant's series *Chronicles of Carling-ford* (1863-76) and *Stories of the Seen and the Unseen* (1880), Elizabeth Braddon's sensational novels *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) and Eliza Lynn Linton's anti-feminist journal *The Girl of the Period* (1883) gave different dimensions to Victorian Prose fiction.

The woman novelists of the Victorian period, because of the intrinsic qualities in their writings, have found a permanent place in any critical account of Victorian fiction. In their novels they have simultaneously focused their attention on the social and sociological aspects and attempted to probe psychologically the complexities of the characters, the men and women they have created.

1.3.2. Victorian Non-Fictional Prose

The world of fiction being introduced to you, you will now be given a foray into the factual writings of the Victorian period. The Victorian non-fictional prose is a rich sequel to the earlier traditions—the English prose that began with Sidney's 'An Apology of Poetry' and continued through eighteenth century essays and diaries till the criticisms and critiques of the Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, although it has the distinctiveness of its own. You should also keep it in mind that the non-fictional prose of the Victorian period is to be situated against a specific social, economic and cultural background. In the previous units, you have already been acquainted to the Victorian social setting, and hence have an idea of the zeitgeist of the Victorian non-fictional prose. The age, as it has already been stated, was an age of various social and philosophical movements which conditioned the Victorian mood and temper.

We may now concentrate on the major non-fictional prose writings of the period, whose writings are also distinguished as “sage writings”, and accordingly, the writers are addressed as sage writers. Sage writing emerged in the early Victorian period as a distinctive form of non-fictional prose. This kind of writing confronted the new and difficult problems, posed by modern, industrial urban life and proposed solutions to these problems with the help of specific modes of action or more general philosophical principles. John Holloway, the literary historian, gave the name “sage writing” to this body of Victorian Literature. In this connection it may be said that the wide-spread popularity of sage writing during the Victorian period was due to the dramatic increase in nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers like *The Edinburgh Reviews*, the *Quarterly Reviews*, *Fraser’s Magazine*, *Blackwoods Magazine* and similar such publications.

a. Major Victorian essayists

The most meaningful contributions to the storehouse of sage writing are made by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888),.

i. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)

He was a Scottish essayist, historian and philosopher. In his writings he is found to be highly and intensely critical of the intellectual and spiritual mediocrity of his time. He is no less critical of the self-contentment with material prosperity, moral lassitude, the surrender to scientific skepticism and analytic reasoning. In fact, in his non-fictional prose writings he speaks against the dilettantism of his contemporaries. Carlyle had his own original idea about history which he looked upon as the storehouse of examples, provided by some great men, designated as ‘heroes’ by him. He made his clear unambiguous in *On Heroes, Heroworship and the Heroic in History* (1841). The list of ‘heroes’ includes in itself Mahomet, Napoleon, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther and others under the categories of the heroes as ‘divinity’, ‘prophet’, ‘poet’, ‘priest’, ‘man of letters’ and ‘king’. The book was preceded by *French Revolution* (1837) and succeeded by other historical works like *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches* (1845), *Frederick II of Prussia* (1858- 65). In *Past and Present* (1843) he reconstructed the life of a medieval abbot to contrast his vigour with the mediocrity of 19th century middle-class rulers. With the ascetic attitude of a sage he denounced the monetary greed, defined by him as ‘Mammonism’ the materialist tendency of the contemporary middle class. Like Matthew Arnold, he

had the belief that the members of the middle class, to a great extent, are responsible for the spiritual degradation of his age. *Chartism* (1839), expresses the writer's sympathy for the poor and the industrial class in England and dwells on the 'Condition of England Question'. Carlyle's own personality was strong and individualistic; this, combined with his own intention of contracting the abstract intellectual thought of writers like Bentham, caused him to write in a prose which is eccentric, passionate and oratorical. The following excerpt from *Past and Present* may give you some idea about the distinctive features of Carlyle's prose style:

But it is my firm conviction that the "Hell of England" will cease to be that of "not making money"; that we shall get a nobler Hell and nobler Heaven! I anticipate light in the Human Chaos, glimmering, shining more and more; under manifold true signals from without that light shall shine. Out deity no longer being Mammon,- O Heaven, each man will then say to himself: "why such deadly haste to make money? I shall not go to Hell, even if I do not make money! There is another Hell. I am told! (**Past and Present** Book 4, chap. 4).

ii. John Ruskin (1819-1900)

Ruskin began his career as an art critic and in that connection he pointed out the relationship of proximity between art and society. He had the conviction that great art is moral, and the working men of industrial England were spiritually impoverished. As a writer on the aesthetics of painting, he had great similarity with the Pre-Raphaelites because like them he had the belief that medieval writers were more free in their thoughts and expressions than the Victorians. Though a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin like them did not lean towards the principle of 'art for art's sake' but towards 'art towards the spiritual health of man'. In the latter part of his life he directed his critical offence against the social philosophy of political economists, particularly John Stuart Mill, although his attacks, none of them appear to be unjustified.

Ruskin's major works include *Modern Painters* (1843- 60), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1840) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851- 53). In the above mentioned works Ruskin mainly introduced himself as an art- critic, an aesthetic who is well familiar with the ways of Victorian paintings, specially the paintings of Turner, considered to be the greatest Victorian Painter. After 1850, Ruskin focused his attention on the problems, related to the industrial society, in *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), *The Two Paths* (1859), his best- known work, *Unto this Last* (1862),

Sesame and Lilies (1865), *Ethics of the Dust* (1866), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866). The literary historians consider these works as essays in criticism on the age. Of all these works *Unto this Last* deserves special mention. There are altogether four essays in political economy, published in *The Cornhill Magazine*. The publication aroused contradictory responses from the contemporaries of Ruskin. The middle-class people considered Ruskin's attack because in their opinion Ruskin had transgressed his specialized area of art criticism to attack the predominant economic theory of trading relationships. Dickens, however, was inspired by Ruskin when the principle of utilitarianism is subjected to satiric criticism in *Hard Times*. Ruskin's main argument in *Unto this Last* is that, what is called political economy is really 'commercial economy'. In spite of the hostility of some of Ruskin's contemporaries, his ideas have been largely accepted by later sociologists and economists. As the stylist of prose Ruskin employed two different types of style in his writings on art, and these on society. In his books on art his style is characterized by elaborate but precise and delicate eloquence, while his social gospels have more concentrated and direct fervor.

iii. Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

Matthew Arnold, well known and celebrated headmaster of Rugby School, spent his boyhood and early youth under the strict guardianship of his father who partially succeeded in installing the liberal ideas, reformist tendency and moral earnestness in the mind of his son. The academic programmes at Rugby School acquainted him with classical literatures and languages. This helped substantially in the formation of the critical principles and social ideas in his writings as a literary critic and social philosopher. It will not be irrelevant to mention that, owing to his early training in the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, and the study of the *Bible*, in his poems too there is a graceful fusion of classicism and Romanticism to the students of English language and literature.

Arnold's major non-fictional prose works include *Essays in Criticism*, First and Second series, published respectively in 1865 and 1888; *On Translating Homer*, 1861 and *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869, "The Study of Poetry", (1880). In *Essays in Criticism*, he repeatedly shows how authors as different as Marcus Aurelius, Leo Tolstoy, Homer and Wordsworth provide the virtues he sought in his society. In *On Translating Homer* reveals Arnold's intimate reading of and passionate attachment to the literary heritage of the classical past. Arnold had the belief that the poet, being

a serious thinker, could offer guidance to his readers. It is this belief that caused him to undervalue other qualities in literature.

Arnold's best-known non-fictional prose work is *Culture and Anarchy* where he mainly introduces himself as a critic of society. Victorian middle classes were ignorant, narrow-minded and suffering from the intellectual dullness. They were addressed as "Philistines", while the aristocrats were called 'Barbarians' and the working classes a "Populace". Arnold borrows the phrase "sweetness and light" from Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books* and insisted that his "Philistine" contemporaries were lacking in sweetness of temper, and enlightenment of spirit, that resulted in the moral anarchy. The sole remedy to this anarchy is the study and pursuit of perfection—the two basic attributes of culture. The forces of the two races of man are called Hebraism and Hellenism. Arnold's prose style is at once terse and vigorous, satiric and semi-bantering. The following excerpt from *Culture and Anarchy* may give you some idea of his prose style:

"Our coal, thousands of people were saying, is the real basis of our rational greatness; if our coal runs short, there is an end of the greatness of England. But what is greatness?—culture marks us ask greatness is a spiritual condition worthy to excite love, interest, and admiration... Well, then, what an unsound habit of mind it must be which makes us talk of things like coal or iron as constituting the greatness of England..."

("Sweetness and Light")

iv. Charles Darwin

The epoch-making *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 was a thundering blow to the Victorian religious Faith. The doctrine of the evolution of humans and the 'natural selection' and the consequent 'survival of the fittest' in Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Biology* had profound effects on the Victorian mind. It postponed the publication of any scientific work in the next few years.

b. Victorian Minor Essayists

Undoubtedly Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold with their philosophical, observant and enlightened thoughts had contributed to the domain of the Victorian non-fictional prose. There were some minor essayists too, like Walter Pater, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Macaulay.

i. Walter Pater (1839-1894)

Pater was a scholar, critic and an essayist at the same time. He was associated with the Pre- Raphaelite movement, since he personally believed in their idealistic worship of beauty. He exerted a potential influence on the cult of art which led to the Aesthetic Movement in the closing years of the century. His most important work was *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published in 1873. The book is a collection of essays on Italian painters and writers from fourteenth to sixteenth century. The conclusion to these essays is really important and interesting, in which he advocates a fusion of psychic, moral and sensuous ecstasy. Consequently, the conclusion reads like a manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement. His other works are *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), *Appreciation with an Essay in Style* (1889), *Plato and Platonism* (1893), *The Child in the House* (1894), *Greek Studies and Miscellaneous Studies* (1895).

ii. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861), that is another observant thesis, is an essay written to provide support for the value of utilitarianism as a moral theory, and to respond to misconceptions about it. Mill defines utilitarianism as a theory based on the principle that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Mill defines happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain. His *The Subjection of Women* (1869) attacks the concepts that have subjected women and considered them inferior to men.

iii. Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859)

Macaulay was a historian and political writer. His *Minutes on Indian Education* is a discourse on educational institutions and development. It is here that he opined for the 'downward filtration of education' in India that postulated that the institutions would educate the elite who in turn would educate the masses.

There were some biographies and autobiographies too. Anthony Trollope wrote an autobiography titled simply as *An Autobiography* (1883). Another great example of biographical writings is Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857). The reference should also be given to John Forster (1872-1876) who is merely credited as the biographer of his friend Charles Dickens- *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-1874).

1.3.3 Summing Up

On completing the detailed discussion of the Victorian Fictional and Non fictional Prose, let us now recapitulate briefly.

- The many-sidedness of the Victorian prose fiction reflects the many sided complexity of the age itself.
- In fact, any reading and understanding of the Victorian period remains incomplete if we do not try to realize the age vis- a- vis the Victorian fiction.
- The early novelists like Dickens, Thackeray and Disraeli's works manifest social concerns,
- The later novelists like Meredith and Hardy penetrate into complex human relationships and dwell on psychological realism, the latter with a tragic vision,
- While the women novelists' work portray psychological intricacies of the women.
- A brief history of the Victorian non- fictional prose reveals its range and variety, no less fascinating then its fictional counterpart.
- Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Mill, Darwin and Macaulay have, with their own literary virtuosity, enriched the Victorian literature.

1.3.4 Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer type questions: 20 marks**

1. Who according to you are the two major early Victorian novelists? Write a short critical note on any of them.
2. Write an essay on the Bronte sisters.
3. Write a critical essay on either George Meredith or Thomas Hardy as novelists. Why are they considered 'modern'?
4. Assess the contributions of the following non- fictional prose writers- (a) Thomas Carlyle, (b) John Ruskin, (c) Matthew Arnold.

● **Medium length questions: 12 marks**

1. Comment on the use of chances and coincidences in Hardy's novels.

2. Write a short note on the historical novels of the Victorian period.
3. Compare and contrast Carlyle's and Arnold's prose style.
4. Comment on the distinctive features of the prose style of either Carlyle or Arnold or Ruskin.
5. Comment on the social critiquing with a fictional touch by Mrs. Gaskell

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

1. Write short notes on the following:
 - (a) *Great Expectations*.
 - (b) *Vanity Fair*.
 - (c) *Wuthering Heights*.
2. Who are the major sage writers of the Victorian period? Name the important works of anyone of them.
3. Who was addressed as "the sage of Chelsea" and why?
4. Write short notes on the following: (a) *Past and Present* (b) *Culture and Anarchy*.

1.3.5 Suggested Reading

1. Gillie, Christopher- *Longman Companion to English Literature*. Longman. 1986
2. Greenblatt, Stephen (ed.)-*The Norton Anthology of English Literature (vol.2)*. W. Norton and co. 2006.
3. Harvey, Sir Paul (ed.). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford. 1983.
4. Tulks, Herbert (ed.) *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Blackwell. 1999.