

## **Reading the Victorians: Literature, Culture, History**

**Co-Ordinator: Dr. Jarlath Killeen.**

The Victorian period was a dynamic and contradictory one. In the 64 years of the reign of Queen Victoria, British life and culture changed in dramatic ways. There was a transport, communications, and multi-media revolution (the railway system, photography, telegraphy, telephony, the invention of cinema, the emergence of the automobile and the aeroplane), and extraordinary scientific innovation (use of anaesthetic in surgery, the germ theory of disease, thermodynamics, electro-magnetic radiation, evolution, the beginnings of quantum theory). The period also witnessed a number of religious and moral campaigns and revivals, campaigns to extend the franchise and for women's rights, as well as intense debates about race, gender, sexuality, identity and human nature. It was also the period in which some of the most important and influential writers who have ever lived, with whose work contemporary Anglophone culture has remained invested. On this module, we will read a variety of Victorian texts from across many genres – including novels, short stories, long and short poems, essays, and drama – to explore many different issues and themes including: print culture; periodicals and serialisation; religious, sexual, national and ethnic identity; the women's movement; the crisis of faith; industrialisation and the city; ecology; human and non-human animal identity; imperialism. Although the module is structured around the work of major representative writers, we will consider a variety of literary and non-literary texts to get a sense of the dynamism and variety of writing and debate in the period. This module will examine a range of English writing across the Victorian period, some of it very familiar and some of it neglected or forgotten work. Authors studied will vary from year to year, but representative authors

include: the Brontës, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Hardy, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Braddon, H. G. Wells. A major focus of this module is the exploration of relationships between literary texts and the historical, social and political contexts which shaped their imaginative creation. Essentially, this is a module about setting Victorian writing in its intellectual and cultural context.

Each week, the lecture will address a particular topic and/or controversy in Victorian literary and social culture, and examine it in relation to a primary text, and reference will also be made to a variety of other primary material that may be pursued in tutorials and research for assessment.

At the end of the module you should possess a knowledge and understanding of a range of Victorian texts in different genres. As well as gaining familiarity, through close reading, with important works of the period, you should have attained an awareness of the significance of historical perspectives in the interpretation of literature, and knowledge of how to access relevant resources. You should be able to think and write about Victorian texts in a way that demonstrates both close engagement with their specificities, and consciousness of relevant cultural and social contexts.

In assessment, students of this module will need to demonstrate:

- familiarity with a range of literary genres from the period, and ability to apply close reading skills to individual texts

- awareness of relevant cultural and/or social contexts, and a sense of what that awareness contributes to your understanding of the text(s)
- the ability to argue coherently and independently and to adduce secondary materials appropriately and in a scholarly manner.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- The student will be expected to gain detailed knowledge and understanding of a range of authors, texts and genres of the Victorian period.

Students studying this module will develop:

- critical skills in the close reading and analysis of texts
- an ability to demonstrate knowledge of a range of texts, authors, genres, and critical approaches within this literary period
- an ability to discuss a range of texts in their intellectual, historical and critical contexts
- an informed awareness of formal and aesthetic dimensions of literature and an ability to offer cogent analysis of their workings in specific texts relating to this literary period
- a sensitivity to generic conventions and to the shaping effects on communication of historical circumstances, and to the affective power of language
- an ability to articulate and substantiate an imaginative response to literature
- an ability to articulate knowledge and understanding of concepts and theories relating to this literary period
- an ability to demonstrate skills in critical reasoning, including the ability to assess other critical readings
- skills of effective communication and argument

**Week One: What were the Victorians really like? Uncovering ‘Victorian’ Culture**

Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

**Week Two: Victorian Identities I. Gender**

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1846); Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894).

**Week Three: Victorian Identities II. Nation and Ethnicity**

Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857).

**Week Four: Victorian Human and Non-Human Animals**

Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty* (1877).

**Week Five: Victorian Popular Fiction I – Sensation Fiction**

Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862).

**Week Six: Victorian Popular Fiction II – Science Fiction and Empire**

H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1897, 1898)

**Week Seven: Reading Week**

**Week Eight: Reading the Victorian Novel I: George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-72).**

**Week Nine: Reading the Victorian Novel II: *Middlemarch* (1871-72).**

## **Week Ten: Victorian Religions**

Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850); Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (1862).

## **Week Eleven: Victorian Afterlives**

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (1846), and *Wuthering Heights*, dir. Andrea Arnold (2011).

## **Week Twelve: Victorian Popular Culture – Reimagining Christmas**

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

## Further Reading

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- Baucom, Ian. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
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2007.

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Thames and Hudson, 1979.

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Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds. *The English Novel in History, 1840-1895*. London:  
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Flint, Kate. *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Frederickson, Kathleen. *The Ploy of Instinct: Victorian Sciences of Nature and Sexuality in Liberal Governance*. Fordham University Press, 2014.

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