


## The Victorian Novel

- The Novel had a big success in the Victorian Age because it reflected the great social changes of this period.
- It was very popular among the educated middle-classes; it reflected their values. Many readers were women. They often borrowed books from “circulating libraries”.
- Novels were often published in instalments  importance of linearity.
- Popularity of the **Bildungsroman** (= novel of formation), that told the story of a life of a character in a realistic way, especially considering the relation between individual and society. These novels showed on one hand the typical values of Victorian society: conformism, respectability, faith in progress, but on the other hand they also denounced some social injustices.
- **Omniscient narrator** : a moral guide, he analyses the Psychology of the characters (especially for the early Victorian writers).

## EARLY VICTORIAN NOVELISTS

- They felt they had a moral and social responsibility. They described the social changes, they were aware of the evils of society and denounced them, although it was never radical criticism (they didn't question the foundations of society).
- **Charles Dickens:** the most representative Victorian writer. He was the first urban novelist, most of his novels are set in London. He described different social classes and professions, different conditions of life, even the most miserable ones. He showed different speech patterns. He criticised certain aspects of the “Victorian compromise” (greed, hypocrisy, indifference of the rich).
- **William Thackeray:** he described more the world of the upper classes, but was critical of their lack of morals, of a society based on money and appearances (*Vanity Fair*).

## Women writers

In the Victorian age women were considered the “**angel in the home**”: they were educated in order to become good wives, but were not sent to university. They were responsible for the education of children. Many middle and upper- class women were great readers, and there were also some good women writers.

- **Charlotte and Emily Bronte:** novels of Romantic love (*Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*), also influenced by the Gothic tradition.
- **Elisabeth Gaskell:** particularly interested in the condition of working class people and of fallen women (unmarried mothers, prostitutes...).
- **George Eliot** (her name was Mary Ann Evans but she, like the Bronte sisters, adopted a male pseudonym as a writer): she described in detail the rural life of the provinces and she expressed a deep psychological insight into her characters' minds.

## LATE VICTORIAN NOVELISTS

- In the second half of the century writers no more identified with the values of society and openly criticised them. Their **new realism** was influenced by *Darwin's theory of evolution* (individual characters influenced by the environment, by the historical moment and by hereditary traits), and by *Positivism* (scientific precision in describing social and psychological aspects).
- **Thomas Hardy:** pessimistic view of the world. His characters follow their nature and are outsiders, often in conflict with the values of a narrow-minded society (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*).
- **Henry James:** American by birth, he showed the conflict between the American and the European culture. Also his characters are outsiders, but typically they are upper-class people forced to live in a narrow-minded bourgeois society (*The Portrait of a Lady*). He started to experiment with new narrative techniques.

- **Lewis Carroll** : (*Alice in Wonderland*). In his children's books he liked to play with words and logic. He created the genre of "Nonsense Literature". In his apparent lack of logic, he exposed the conventions, prejudices and hypocrisy of the adult world and of Victorian society.
- **Oscar Wilde**: the main representative of Aestheticism, an anti- Victorian trend that considered art completely detached from any morals.

## American writers

- The main concern of American writers was to avoid the influence of European (especially British) tradition and to create a distinct American literature. James Fenimore Cooper and Nataniel Hawthorne wrote stories linked to American history.
- **Edgar Allan Poe:** he was fascinated by the decay of European values. He was influenced by the Gothic tradition, but went beyond it. He mixed psychological insight with extreme ratiocination, anticipating the modern detective story.

## The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood

- Formed in 1848, it was a group of poets and painters who reacted against the artificiality of the art of the period. They wanted to return to the purity and simplicity of the Italian art of the 13<sup>o</sup> and 14<sup>o</sup> century (before Raphael).
- They were influenced by the ideas of the art critic **John Ruskin**, who considered art as a way to react to the ugliness of modern, urban life.
- **The main characteristics** were: fidelity to nature, sensuality, use of non-industrial materials, re-evaluation of medieval religion and legends.
- The main representatives were: **Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.**
- William Morris created the **Arts and Crafts Movement**, which designed and manufactured a great variety of objects for interiors (stained glass, wallpapers, tapestries, rugs etc...). They used handicraft and simple decoration in reaction to industrial machinery.

- The Pre-Raphaelite movement influenced **the Aesthetic Movement**.
- It originated in France, following the ideas of Theophile Gautier; it was a reaction against the materialism and the strict moral code of the bourgeoisie.
- Aesthetes were not interested in political and social matters but isolated themselves in a world of beauty and art.
- Their motto was “**art for art’s sake**”, which means that art doesn’t have any moral aim but it’s an end in itself.
- The followers of Aesthetism led an unconventional life, full of sensations and excess (they wanted to be different from the working masses and they also rejected the Victorian moral values).
- The main representative in Britain was **Oscar Wilde**.



## Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 49)

- He was born in Boston. Both his parents died when he was very young, so he was adopted by the Allan family, in Virginia.
- He was brilliant at school, but didn't finish university because he started drinking and gambling.
- After a short period in the army, he went to live in Baltimore with his aunt and cousin Virginia, who he married in 1835 ( she was only 13). He worked as a journalist and published his first poems and short stories. His first great success was *The Gold Bug* (1843).
- His essay *The Philosophy of Composition* contains his aesthetic theories: he believed that POETRY should create an emotional effect on the reader, and not convey a message. So the object of poetry should be pleasure and not truth.
- When his wife Virginia died in 1847, he began to drink heavily, and he died in 1849.

## Poe's tales

- He wrote poems (in which the emotional effect was very important), but mainly **short stories**, which can be divided in two groups:
- **Stories of ratiocination:** the protagonist is the detective Dupin, who anticipates more modern detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes. He is extremely rational, follows a deductive method, and he's very good at psychological analyses.
- **Stories of the grotesque (or of imagination):** he uses some conventions of the Gothic fiction, but goes beyond them: the horror doesn't come from the outside, but from the inside of the characters. He explores the psychology of his mentally-disturbed characters.
- Most of his characters lose the sense of reality because they reject the conventional aspects of life and lead a life of their own, cut off from the world. In this condition they develop **an exceptional acuteness of the senses, an expanded consciousness** that makes them lose their sanity. So madness for Poe was a matter of higher awareness.

- **Main themes:** the double, being buried alive, confinement in a very small place, cruelty, perverseness, madness, fusion of beauty and death (for some aspects he anticipates the aesthetic movement).
- **First-person narrator:** he made the reader explore directly the interior world of the narrator's mind. Often the narration becomes a long interior monologue in which he describes a great variety of moods and sensations.

## The Fall of the House of Usher

- For **the plot** see page 236.
- **Main themes:** it's a good example of synthesis between **rationality** and **intuition/ imagination**. The characters live in a closed-off world,, where every day conventions are suspended, and are taken over by madness, obsession and mental disintegration. However, they follow an impeccable logic in their actions.
- **Typically Gothic setting**, that contributes to create a feeling of terror.

- **Text on page 237:** to present and comment the text you should be able to answer these questions:
- Describe in your own words what kind of day it is when the narrator arrives at the house of Usher.
- How does the narrator feel when he sees the House of Usher?
- Is the description of the house objective or is it coloured by the narrator's perceptions? (Support your answers quoting from the text).
- What's the difference between the narrator's feeling and the feeling of the sublime?