

Female Victorian Fiction: Shaping the Reader's Mind

Petra Schenke

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As always, a historical study on literature should never start "ab ovo" as the Latin poet Horace had already pointed out but relies on the talent and hard work of previous centuries. Thus we should acknowledge among many others the groundbreaking work of the British academic Kate Flint on *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, first published in New York in 1993 and then reprinted (unchanged) in 2002, because it had begun to explain the differences between female and male 'reader response'. The American Jane Eldridge Miller had complemented Flint's results with *Rebel Women* (1997) by explaining that the *Realism and Feminization of Fiction* at the end of the 19th century was in fact either challenged or catalyzed by influential men in the domain of literature.

This is also the place to acknowledge Sean Purchase's impressively clear-cut *Key Concepts in Victorian Literature* (2006), which show a simplified connection between Britain's social history and the literature of the Victorian Age.

Last but not least a warm thank-you to my partner Chris, whose critical remarks on my manuscript made me think again.

Dr. Petra Schenke, Brighton, Chinese New Year 2013

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Introduction

In the 21st century the attribute ‘Victorian’ still seems to be omnipresent in people’s minds and appears to function as a positive reminder of past achievement. In British culture, not only in literature but also in the architecture of numerous railway stations, major national monuments, and through the exhibits of the *Victoria and Albert Museum*, ‘Victorianism’ has been given permanent expression and meaning. More importantly, industrialist modernity, aspirations for world-leadership and new radical intellectual theories have propagated ever since under the umbrellas of Victorian science and arts. In sum, achievements under Queen Victoria presumably carry emotional connotations for the British today, as the sports audience of the world may have noticed during the historic Opening Ceremony of The Olympic Games in London 2012.

“Victorian”, as we employ the term in our ordinary usage is unique among historical labels, or very unusual in the amount of meaning it can carry beyond the chronological.
(Mason 1994:2)

Rather than choosing an arbitrary time-scale for placing revolutionary developments in fiction somewhere along the lines of multiple 19th-century events, it appears necessary to follow literary academic convention. It is commonly agreed by leading scholars that Victorian literature marks the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), although these particular dates would have to be treated as flexible. Neither Victoria’s accession to the throne nor her final moments as British Sovereign actually coincide with any drastic changes in the world of literature. Consequently, *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (Tucker ed. 1999:xiii) roughly claims the period 1830-1900 as its chronological frame. Strictly on calendar grounds, the editor neither wanted to enlist the romantic poet Wordsworth nor the neo-Gothic writer of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly.

Looking at the Victorian Age most readers of historical fiction would have conjured up the vast almighty British Empire ruling over a quarter of the world’s population. But many fans of Victorian literature may also agree that the relationship between imperialistic policies and the perception of ‘Britishness’ or ‘Englishness’ by a female novelist may be very different, indeed.

Sean Purchase (2006:58) concludes in his *Victorian Key Concepts* that

Victorian fiction is typically uncomfortable with its images of the empire, and popular writers such as Dickens rarely, if at all, acknowledge it in their novels.

From the viewpoint of post-colonial criticism, plenty has been said about the political incorrectness of Britain's trade involvement in the West Indies, a remnant of the former Atlantic slave trade (cf. *ibid.*). Nevertheless, even when Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) portrayed a family-business that used these old trade-links, he obviously did not want to advocate the exploitation of slaves. Purchase (2006), though, in his relentless search for imperialism in the British novel, found that *Imperialism* began to resonate more and more in Victorian society and literature by the end of the century:

*By the 1880-90s, when it had reached the height of its popularity in Britain, places such as Africa and India found a series of complex representations in the popular novels and poetry of the day. These reaches of empire became especially prevalent in the work of writers who seemed to take the cultivation of imperial attitudes, Englishness and the idea of colonial adventure as their starting point, rather than as their background, as in Dickens's work. The most popular of these works include Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), set in India... (*ibid.*:59)*

It has to be clarified, however, that the stories of Mowgli, the 'man-cub' brought up by wolves in the jungle and his friends Bagheera, the Panther, Baloo, the Bear, and Shere Khan, the Tiger, merely constitute a fantasy story that is still popular today with children and adults alike around the world. The Indian setting might have enhanced the magic of the unlikely tale for Westerners but there are no implications of any racial prejudice against native Indians, unless one is determined to opt for over-interpretation with preconceived ideas. Kipling was born in Bombay in 1865 and lived there as well as in Vermont with his American wife, where he wrote the *Jungle Book*. Finally – a year after Queen Victoria's death – he travelled as a journalist to South Africa where the British were involved in the Boer War. It was then presumably that he was quoted and disliked for his violent and imperialistic statements. In view of his background, Kipling may hardly qualify as a Victorian novelist of the British homeland, although he did become the first English writer to receive the *Nobel Prize for Literature* in 1907.

The attempt to extend the domestic setting and send the protagonists out to the colonies of America and Australia had already been a popular feature of

the 18th-century realist novel, as we saw with Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. But rather than trotting down the well-travelled path of imperial and oriental adventure, this book aims to view a less publicized aspect of Victorian foreign policy and diplomacy. Young Brits enjoying the flypast of World War II aircraft over Buckingham Palace at the Royal Wedding (2011) and the Silver Jubilee (2012) may not be aware that Queen Victoria's anniversaries had marked a period of close European integration with a Royal preference for foreign marriage partners. Some historians have even referred to the longer Victorian period from 1815 with the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of World War I in 1914 as an Age of peace. The British Queen in fact was of German origin on her mother's side and chose a husband from the same house of Saxe-Coburg. Unsurprisingly, German was one of the languages spoken at Court as Royals enjoyed German music and literature. There also existed a close association with Belgium through Victoria's uncle Leopold, eventually King of the Belgians, who advised the very young Queen on her educational reading and helped to prepare her for political affairs. The preserved diplomatic letters of the multilingual Queen, including correspondence in French with Napoleon, show not only her active political involvement in the well-being of her country but also her genuine concern for other European countries. She was adamant that the small northern state of *Holstein* should belong to Germany and not Denmark. This royal approach to personal intervention in a closely knit European network was extended into the realms of arts and science with the help of her husband. As we might guess from her extended letter writing, the Queen was keen on using her pen, and she tried her hand at composing travel journals and essays. Moreover, she had an open ear for some women novelists at court who deplored the unsustainable legal status of the fairer sex. Luckily, as the most powerful woman in England, she was in a position to relate to the suffering outside her Royal enclave.

Outside Victoria's inner circle, highly educated multilingual authoresses were obviously rare to find. Whereas there is an abundance of biographical details on the Queen's schooling, there has been surprisingly little published on the foreign language education of ordinary citizens. After modern languages and/or the classics had long been on the school agenda of European Royals and their aristocratic associates, the necessity of language education for the middle and lower classes was still not acknowledged before the middle of the 19th century. Learning to speak in a foreign tongue finally became a school exercise

that was supposed to be managed by everyone after the Education Reform Act of 1870. Switching between a local British dialect and high-brow English, though, as well as speaking French fluently remained the privilege of the cultural and educational elite, who could invest in private tutors and trips abroad. It is this upper-class attitude to foreign languages and cultures that became reflected to a great extent in the female Victorian novel. To prove the novelist was writing according to higher educational standards, she commonly used French, German and Latin words in her English narration which in itself included various class-markers of native speech. But the preference for one particular foreign language expressed by female novelists did not always help to popularize its culture with the British. Even though George Eliot had acquired German with all its philosophical terms to perfection and had openly discussed German critical thinking in her essays, this never seemed to encourage much euphoria for German culture beyond her specific academic circles.

The French language of the Belgians became a favourite medium for Charlotte Brontë, who even interspersed her English novels with it. Although her friend and biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, shared her enthusiasm for using a foreign tongue, the Romanic languages were still being associated with Catholicism by conservative members of the Church of England such as Charlotte Brontë. In spite of their willingness to emerge themselves in the sounds of a foreign country, therefore, the Victorian authoress lets her English heroines record sensations of strangeness and loneliness abroad. There is also plenty of English self-irony portrayed in the behaviour and description of stereotyped native characters bumping into foreigners. Such satiric encounters as they were superbly managed by Dickens should not be misunderstood as a display of British narcissism as they merely show a funny exaggeration of national identity.

Although the heroines of female Victorian novels were – just like the Queen – happy to accept a husband from a foreign country, their English custom of drinking tea was not to be hampered with by any “foreign immigrant” who was expected to adapt to their local culture. The word ‘foreign’ was also being used in the Victorian novel to denote someone who does not live in the same neighbourhood.

To sum up, the use of foreign languages and literature in the English novel is bound to open a whole new spectrum of perspectives on British identity in a European context that has been previously overshadowed by post-colonial

obsessions with imperialism. It is this multicultural approach to personal relationships and exploratory journeys on the Continent that educated Victorian authoresses have presumably tried to convey. Their multilingual descriptions of intercultural encounters must have clearly worked against any xenophobic notion of a British Island State in diplomatic and mercenary isolation.

While there was a popular fascination with life in the colonies as reflected in dramatized travel journals and romanticized adventure stories, Liberal politicians developed a more realistic notion of the new cross-Atlantic homelands; in fact they tried to get rid of “undesirable” British citizens by sending them into the foreign “wilderness” under circumstances that were often satirized in Victorian fiction. Overall, the most pressing class and gender issues of mid-Victorian England seemed to have been reserved for the flourishing ‘domestic’ novel:

The ‘Condition of England’ novels of the 1840s and 1850s reflect the wretched state of the nation in that period and, not surprisingly, they contain numerous images of starvation. Some of them also reflect massive upheavals such as the Irish famine. (Purchase 2006:69)

There was, of course, only one renowned Victorian author who lived his life as a novelist, journalist and charitable organizer to fight the corner of the underprivileged poor: Charles Dickens, the grandson of servants, brought his deprived childhood of factory labour, life in the workhouse and debt prison into his fictional accounts of London’s underclass. There is not a single woman author, naturally, who would have been able to work herself up the social ladder from such humble beginnings, even if she had shared an equal amount of determination and talent. As we will see, the position of Victorian women writers was a very peculiar one, but by the end of the century they had nevertheless won considerable social recognition. When recording the female contributions to the Condition-of-England Novel, it is usually Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charlottë Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) that find appraisal. Brontë’s novel is set during the *Luddite* riots (1811-13) in Yorkshire: When new machinery gets introduced into a mill, the workers start rioting against redundancy and impending hunger.

But although Shirley is set in to the latter years of the Napoleonic period, it can also be read as the projection of the historical concerns and anxieties which surrounded the novel’s publication in 1849. With the spectre of working-class uprisings in the 1840s –