



The Significance of Education in Victorian Fiction

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Abstract:

The Victorian era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901, saw great changes in the social, political, and economic domains. During this time, changing viewpoints on social advancement, individual growth, and class mobility helped to make education a major concern. The intensifying debates about women's responsibilities in society, the expansion of public education, and the growth of industrialisation all had an impact on Victorian writers. They examined the changing conceptions of education through their books, highlighting both its liberating and confining elements. This essay explores the significance of education in Victorian literature, particularly as it is portrayed by authors like Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot.

Keywords: social advancement, Education Systems, reform, emotional intelligence, Class Mobility

Introduction:

Historical Context of Education in the Victorian Era

Working-class children were frequently forced to work as domestic servants or in factories instead of attending school during the early Victorian era, while upper-class children had more educational opportunities. However, with the passing of the Factory Acts, which restricted child work, and the primary schooling Act of 1870, which required primary schooling, there was a change towards greater access to education. Movements for educational reform gained momentum as the importance of education for social mobility and national advancement became increasingly apparent. The Victorian novel emerged as a crucial discourse tool for comprehending these shifts. Novelists addressed the ramifications of education as a societal institution through their characters, settings, and storylines. They saw self-education, tutoring, and schools as formative experiences that influenced people's moral, intellectual, and social growth. At the same time, they condemned Victorian education for its flaws, pointing out that it helped to perpetuate class and gender differences. Using Education to Promote Class Mobility Many Victorian novels present education as a means of achieving social mobility.

Education as a Vehicle for Class Mobility

Education is shown as a potential vehicle for social mobility in a lot of Victorian novels. This is seen in Charles Dickens' writings, where characters frequently use education as a means of escaping poverty or moving up the social scale. In David Copperfield (1850), for example, the protagonist's journey revolves around education. David Copperfield is able to rise in society and feel

more fulfilled personally since he can read, write, and eventually become a writer.

Dickens does, meanwhile, also criticise the disparities in the educational system. The utilitarian educational philosophy, personified by Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* (1854), prioritises data and statistics over creativity and emotional intelligence. The book shows how this mechanical system of instruction kills creativity and fails to uplift the soul, particularly in the case of working-class kids like Sissy Jupe. Dickens emphasises the shortcomings of an education that ignores the whole development of the individual in favour of a narrowly focused economic utility through *Hard Times*.

The Role of Education in Personal Development

In Victorian fiction, education is frequently associated with personal development and self-realization, regardless of its social connotations. *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë is among the most well-known instances of a protagonist's life being transformed by education. As an orphan with little hope for the future, Jane Eyre uses her education as a governess to overcome the obstacles in her social status and achieve independence. As significant as her amorous journey is her moral and intellectual growth, and Brontë employs education as a metaphor for individual strength.

In a similar vein, education is crucial to the life of the astute and driven Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's 1860 novel *The Mill on the Floss*. Eliot does, however, also address the disappointments that women have when they are not afforded the same educational chances as males. Maggie's gender and social expectations limit her ability to pursue her academic goals, which reflects the larger social discussion around women's

education throughout the Victorian era. Maggie's struggle serves as a vehicle for Eliot to condemn the inflexible gender conventions that prevented women from pursuing higher education even when they were capable and willing to do so.

Education and Gender Dynamics

Discussions of gender roles and education are commonly entwined in Victorian fiction. Female characters' educational experiences are more nuanced than those of male protagonists, who frequently use education as a springboard to success in the workplace or social advancement. Education was not viewed by women as a method of achieving intellectual or professional success, but rather as a way to develop moral qualities or prepare them for home tasks.

Brontë disproves this idea in *Jane Eyre* by showing Jane to be on par intellectually with Mr. Rochester and the other male characters. Her degree allows her to work as a governess, giving her some financial freedom but yet keeping her in a domestic capacity. The book presents Jane's moral independence and self-education as essential to her ultimate strength.

Likewise, the literary pieces of George Eliot, such as *Middlemarch* (1871–72), underscore the constraints imposed on the educational prospects of women. Dorothea Brooke is a brilliant lady who wants to use her education to better society, but she is dissatisfied by the few opportunities that aren't open to her because she is a woman. Eliot offers a critique of Victorian society's devaluation of women's intellectual capacity as well as a reflection on the larger exclusion of women from the fields of education and employment.

Critique of Victorian Education Systems

Victorian novelists not only emphasised the individual but also criticised the larger educational structures of the day. Numerous books depicted schools as establishments that upheld societal inequalities and hierarchies. Because he believed that the Victorian educational system was involved in the exploitation and dehumanisation of the working classes, Charles Dickens was especially critical of it. Dickens portrays the brutality of badly operated schools like Dotheboys Hall, where teachers mistreat and ignore their charges, in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). The book is a critique of a system that did not safeguard children who were at risk and gave preference to the demands of affluent donors over the academic needs of pupils.

In a similar vein, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) depicts life in an English public school with an emphasis on the boys' moral and physical education. Although the book romanticises the friendships and moral development that Rugby School provides, it also emphasises the brutal reality of bullying and the inflexible class divisions upheld by the public education system.

Conclusion

The complexity and inconsistencies of the social and intellectual environment of the Victorian era are reflected in the function of education in novels. Even though education is frequently presented as a means of achieving moral development, class mobility, and personal improvement, it is also criticised for having flaws, most notably for failing to address gender norms and larger social injustices. Novelists such as Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot advocated for changes to education that would increase its accessibility and equity for all parts of society, using their works to examine the possibilities and constraints of education.

Because it highlights the conflicts between education's potential to promote social mobility and its function in maintaining pre-existing social structures, Victorian literature offers a wealth of information for comprehending the changing idea of education in the 19th century. These novelists provided timeless insights on the relationship between knowledge, power, and societal advancement through their characters and stories, effectively capturing the significance of education in moulding both individual lives and the larger society.

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