

## VICTORIAN WRITING AND PERIODICAL LITERATURE

**Lavinia Hulea, Assistant, PhD, University of Petroșani**

*Abstract. Perhaps one of the most notable observations that concern Victorian writing was the wide range of British periodicals which came to be perceived as a new and powerful literary force that left its mark on the nineteenth-century literary milieu. It is generally considered nowadays that both the periodicals and the newly developed printing technologies truly represented the spirit of the age. And, as early as 1828, periodicals were predicted an increasingly influential future while periodical literature was regarded as being capable of acting upon the minds of all social classes and of setting up its own definitions of what 'right' and 'wrong' meant. The changed social environment that witnessed the growth of population and of literacy - owing to the widespread of general minimal education, the widening of the social system, and the implementation of the innovative technical devices enabled periodical literature to assert its remarkable influence throughout the Victorian age.*

*Keywords: Victorian age, writing, periodical literature, education, printing devices*

The Victorian Age was one of the longest periods in the history of Great Britain and affected as well the countries that entered, at one moment or another, under its influence as colonies (the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand), territories (in Africa and Asia), dominions (Canada), and regions under British control (Egypt, Sudan).

The delineation of the Victorian Age ranged between 1830 and 1901 and covered, for its most part, the reign of Queen Victoria; it is largely accepted that Victorianism, in its broader meaning, included both the formal Regency which stretched between 1811 and 1820 (in 1810 King George III was deemed unfit to exert his prerogatives due to the fact that he manifested signs of a recurrent mental illness and his eldest son, George, Prince of Wales, ruled as Prince Regent), the Napoleonic wars (1803 – 1815 comprising several wars between the French Empire of Napoleon and the coalitions led by Great Britain) as well as the interval that closely succeeded Queen Victoria's reigning years – the Edwardian age and the period before World War I.

Nineteenth-century literature bears the imprint of change: the Romantic starting shifted into a realistic perception of the world and subsequently into a profound awareness of the determination of individual destiny through personal social and biological conditioning. Owing to the remarkable growth of periodical publications and to the spreading literacy, the epoch displayed a wide range of fiction and non-fiction prose, poetry and drama. The novel may be considered the most prevalent genre of the time and well suited the writers' new interest in grasping the vastness of industrial life. Non-fiction prose also appeared to have emerged so remarkably owing to periodical publishing and became a vehicle for focusing on and dealing with the issues of the country. Although fiction and non-fiction prose were largely circulated at the time, poetry maintained its status as 'high literature' and that despite the assumption that poetry was considered to have narrowed its status with the recent deaths of Byron, Shelley, and Keats.

One of the most notable observations that concern Victorian writing, according to a wide number of scholars, was the wide range of British periodicals that were seen as a new and powerful literary force that left its mark on the nineteenth-century literary milieu. It is

considered that both the periodicals and the newly developed printing technologies truly represented the spirit of the age. As early as 1828, Henry Stebbing, the editor of the *Athenaeum*, assessed that periodicals would exert an unprecedented influence while periodical literature would be able to act upon the minds of all social classes and set up its own definitions of what ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ meant. Historians assert that the new social environment including population increase, the widening of the educational system, and the implementation of the new technologies had been the main reason that enabled periodical literature to have such a remarkable influence. Printing gradually became less expensive so that the lower prices and the more rapid circulation of periodicals owing to improved transport means resulted in larger audiences.

Already around 1837 almost half of the population of England was literate and Victorian age enabled the growth of the number largely due to a series of reforms that stipulated general minimal education. The immediate result of widely spread literacy determined the increase of the reading public which gradually ceased to display a unified taste and demanded the writers to reconsider their audiences.

Literature of the time used to be published in periodicals appearing weekly, monthly or quarterly. Generally, Victorian periodicals used to focus on a vast range of subjects and appeared to have constantly reiterated one of the major characteristics of the epoch: the belief in progress. For their most part, nineteenth-century publications expressed a “unity of learning and a community of knowledge” which made historians appreciate that the period between 1830 and 1880 had been characterized by a sense of community and affiliation to societies and clubs. Editors like Henry Stebbing even proposed a series of categories of the literary concerns of their periodicals: the “works of imagination”, those questioning “moral nature” which encompassed philosophy, history, and theology, and the category of “those which are composed from the results of philosophical enquiry into natural causes”.

Periodicals as *Quarterly*, established in 1809, *Westminster*, founded in 1824, or *Edinburgh Review* (1802) provided substantial articles which, according to the epoch’s habits, were not signed. *Blackwood’s Magazine* founded in 1817 and *Fraser’s Magazine* (1830) used to publish new fiction as well as poetry while *Ainsworth’s Magazine* (1842) and *Household Words* (1850) mainly addressed to common people. It is significant to notice that the first of these last two magazines was edited by William Harrison Ainsworth, a historical novelist, while the second one belonged to Charles Dickens who not only published his own novels in his magazines (besides *Household Words*, he also edited *All the Year Round* that first appeared in 1859) but also recruited other writers (Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *A Strange Story*, etc.)

The major writers of the Victorian age were intrinsically connected with the periodicals of their time either owing to their work being published by those periodicals or owing to their direct participation as members of the editorial boards or as editors. *Cornhill Magazine*, for instance, founded in 1860 and having Thackeray as an editor, included both works belonging to the most important writers of the era – George Eliot, Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, Trollope, Meredith, Tennyson, Arnold, Elizabeth Barret Browning, and Charlotte Bronte) and illustrations designed by English artists.

Not only did the important Victorian journals publish great literary works of contemporary novelists, they also asserted themselves as public forums engaging debates on

politics, religion, society, and literature. It was in *Edinburgh* and *Fraser's* that Carlyle, for instance, first wrote articles and reviews while Thackeray had published critical articles on fiction in periodicals before having written his own novels.

Victorian periodical literature, perceived as one of the most remarkable characteristics of Victorian writing and determined by the population's growth and literacy as well as by the widespread of general minimal education, the widening of the social system, and the new innovative technical devices, managed to operate a shift in the perception of the works of the intellect which thus became "public property".

### **Bibliography:**

- Reynolds, G.M.W. 2008. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*. Eds. Humphreys, Anne & Louis James, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rogers, P. editor. 1987. *The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York.
- Shattock, J. 1989. *Politics and Reviewers: the Edinburgh and the Quarterly in the Early Victorian Age*. London, Leicester & New York: Leicester University Press.
- Sumpter, C. 2008. *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, M.W. 2000. *Trollope and the Magazines in Mid-Victorian Britain*. London: Macmillan.
- Waters, C. 2008. *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words*. Aldershot: Ashgate.