

Victorian Women Novelists

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The contributions and significance of a galaxy of women novelists of the **Victorian Age** are well discernible from the early development of the novel in the eighteenth century to the much expanded and complicated fictional craft of the Victorian period. The spread of education and the extension of franchise accounted to some extent for the emergence of women as novelists in this century. Their novels comprised the entire range of the human spectrum from the isolated individual to the collectively social. The three Bronte Sisters, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot and others occupy so much importance in the history of English literature as their male counterparts like Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Thomas Hardy.

In the novels of three Bronte Sisters-Charlotte, Emily and Ann, the social is eschewed for the subjective. Charlotte Bronte breaks a new horizon in the history of English novel and is assumed as the first woman novelist to show the human aspects of woman who impulsively writes of life from the woman's point of view. She revolts against the accepted convention of women's place in their routine life, and against the hypocrisy, the harshness and cruelty that she saw around her. The romanticism of the early Victorian novelists is visible with stark realism in her works. She is remembered with the trio of novels- *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853). "Jane Eyre is a profound and fascinating study of elemental love and hate, reminding us vaguely of one of Marlowe's tragedies" (W. J. Long). The greatness of it lies not in the melodramatic plot, but in the fiery imagination and poetic passion with which the characters and situations are conceived. In *Shirley*, she reveals a more normal and less impassioned portrayal of life. *Villette* is written in reminiscent vein and the character of Lucy is based on the author herself.

Emily Bronte stands outside the main current of 19th century fiction. She views human beings in relation of time and eternity, to death and fate. Like William Blake, she is a

mystic and had moments of vision in which she seemed to behold a transcendental reality usually hidden from mortal sight. Her *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is perfect and attains a tragic sublimity and its appeal arises from a struggle of archetypes representing universal forces.

George Eliot, the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans, is known for her novels, which were not for entertainment but for serious discussion upon mortal issues. *Adam Bede* is excellent novel of English country life, while *Silas Mariner* (1861) is about a foundling. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is partly autobiographical. *Romola* (1862-63) is historical novel on Italian Renaissance. Her greatest novels include *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). She gives to her novel a well-knit structural pattern and dramatic unity.

Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell is chiefly concerned with the social problems caused by the industrial Revolution. Mary Burton is an accurate and sympathetic picture of life of the working class. Her *Cranford* (1851-53) makes the interesting study of the female life and psychology. In *North and South* (1854–55), she deals with the struggle between capital and labour. *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) is a moralistic love story, which ends melodramatically. Her last novel *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66) is an ironic study of snobbishness. Mrs. Gaskell stands midway between Jane Austen who was a relatively detached observer of life and George Eliot who was a jealous crusader for morality.

Thus, these female novelists are of paramount importance in the realm of English fiction and their serious concern with the problems of human personality did much to determine the future course of the English novel.