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Bridging the Centuries: Teaching the Nineteenth Century English Novel Today

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by Pamela M. Price-Anisman

Most high school seniors and English teachers share a common dread of “The English Novel”; viewed with particular horror is that inevitably long, endlessly descriptive piece of fiction that was popular in the nineteenth century. Students who are otherwise willing to read the huge works of a Harold Robbins or a Peter Blatty feel alienated from the English lifestyle, the English writing style, the English language itself. The reflex action of most teachers who have made the perilous journey with a class through a Hardy or Dickens work is reminiscent of pulling away from a hot stove. Once burned—and so on. Ridiculous. There has to be a more painless way to teach this essential ingredient in the literary chain.

My objective is to create deliberate and accessible bridges between specific elements of life in Victorian England and their parallels (or perhaps their contrasts) in contemporary American society. Students will not automatically reject what they assume will be understandable. High School history texts have never offered the flavor or depth the English teacher needs for such background. First hand and/or authoritative historical accounts offer a wealth of material on life under Queen Victoria. Nice fantasy, my fellow teachers are thinking. The already overburdened English teacher does not have the time—or the energy—for all this research. This unit reflects my distillation and selection process from the vast resources available. Several aspects of the Victorian experience have emerged as among the most interesting and/or crucial to the period; more than simply a description of events, the major portion of this narrative is a modified “introduction” to the teaching of Victorian fiction in the classroom of today.

Before journeying back nearly 150 years to the official beginning (1837) of the Victorian era, the teacher must decide whose eyes will be interpreting what is shown; as often as possible, this material will stress what it was like to be young in 19th Century England. Presented in two parts, the narrative will first include a recapitulation of the highlights of my research: this information will be interspersed with suggested strategies for creating links to the classroom. Following this overview, several of the currently taught Victorian novels will be summarized (with reference to areas of English life mentioned in the narrative). Other readings that offer alternatives in length and content will also be reviewed.

An interesting place to begin is an event that occurs in the middle of the century. From this point, students can look back to the great social and industrial changes that affected all England during the reign of the popular Victoria and her Prince Consort, Albert. Students can watch the rapid growth of the cities and the middle class as they again pass through mid-century on their way to 1900.

The architectural and industrial symbol of British supremacy was the Crystal Palace, the home of the Great Exhibition of 1851. ¹ Students of today have been to a variety of local exhibitions: trade shows, home shows, college fairs. Many may have visited theme parks (Disneyworld, Great Adventure, and so on) or the remains of “Expo” in Montreal. Perhaps the easiest parallel would be either one of the many space and science museums (New York, Boston) that emphasize the progress of modern technology, or, ideally, the vast historical and visual experience known as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Somehow, though, a building like the Crystal Palace, with its huge glass walls and gigantic exhibition space, is beyond parallel. Here, hundreds of thousands poured into this monument to 19th Century science and invention. As Roger Hart, in his work on Victorian England points out, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was a “bold and imaginative mixture of idealism and materialism” ²

Understandably, there was an uproar over the plans to build so large a structure. Certainly, in an era of growing environmental concern for the protection of our open spaces, students could relate to the fear many Londoners shared over the impending loss of sixteen acres of extremely popular and central parkland. Could New Yorkers visualize a Manhattan without Central Park? Would Boston survive without the Common? It should be mentioned that, after the Exhibition, this unbelievable architectural feat was torn down.

Further concern over this event emerged as Parliament began to fear the influx of foreign imports. When Victoria officially opened the Crystal Palace on the first of May, 1951, many nations and colonies were displaying their best examples of progress. Students need only be reminded of the on-going struggle over foreign imports to this country; Japanese cars have often been described as a major threat to the American automobile industry.

Students should be reminded of the close proximity of countries on the European continent. There are not the vast tracts of land that separate capitals in North America. England is only a rather long swim from French shores. Why, then, would the English have reason to fear contact with Europe? There was much more at stake than foreign imports alone. Travelling back to the closing decades of the 18th Century, students will find that the European social and political landscape was strongly marked by the French Revolution (and the Napoleonic Wars that followed). Until well into the 19th Century, the dark clouds created by the stormy Revolution continued to drift across England. John Bull ³ was not as outwardly fascinated as his fellow Europeans by the violent overthrow of the French monarchy. Students, however, should be reminded that everyone was keenly aware of the public executions of thousands beneath the blade of La Guillotine. At the same time, youngsters should read (one hopes they will be re-reading) news coverage of the overthrow of the Shah of Iran by the supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Although the religious and political climates differ, there are obvious similarities between these two uprisings. Public opinion had turned against a system of aristocratic rule in both cultures. The people became a force too large to ignore; the masses successfully ousted (or executed) tremendously wealthy, “all-powerful” monarchs, leaving room for a new form of domination.

The English, on the surface, continued to operate on their clearly defined class system: “The invincible obstinacy with which our ruling class had persisted in the struggle against half a continent in arms, was born of a deep, sub-conscious determination to keep things as they were.” ⁴ Though obstinacy would not be eroded by violent revolution in England, it was challenged and ultimately weakened during the Victorian era. Again, the common man was responsible for the change. His weapons were not guns; they were machines. This was the century of the Industrial Revolution, an era that saw tremendous increases in both wealth and poverty, success and suffering.

The Industrial Revolution shifted the emphasis of the British social structure from the aristocracy to the emerging middle class. Students should be made aware of the class system that had defined life in England for centuries. The aristocracy was a definable group of noble families, that is, land-owning peers who, for the most part, had controlled the same properties for generations. Americans have no real notion of an aristocratic class; however, the “bluebloods” of Philadelphia and Boston do take on the same mythic connotations for Americans that the great houses of England do for the British. Our students, who are probably unfamiliar with names like Astor and Vanderbilt, would enjoy a pictorial visit to Newport mansions (those enormous “summer retreats”) or Fairmont Park townhouses or Beacon Hill homes. Contrasting American homes with the huge winter residences and summer estates of the peerage (as well as the less definable upper class that included long established country families, senior officers in the Army, distinguished barristers, among others) will, quite simply, blow the youngsters away. The opulence of the buildings, the furnishings, the clothing, the service, will amaze them. To help them identify with the upward strivings of the English toward “respectability” and “gentility,” the teacher need only recall tales of Joe Kennedy and the rise of his three sons, John, Robert, and Edward. Even today, there is the sound of dynasty in the Kennedy name—the sound of power, of money—if not of privilege. Like the upper classes in England, the Kennedys (and the Rockefellers) would never be considered part of the American “nobility,” those families with unquestionable Mayflower pedigrees.

Below the wealthiest level was the more flexible upper middle class. In Britain, this group was filled with the British equivalents of clergy like William Coffin or Billy Graham; with doctors like Michael deBakey (or even the infamous Herman Tarnower); with writers like Hemingway and scholars like Carl Sagan.

These three groups—the nobility, the upper class, and the upper middle class—included the men who ruled England; they belonged to the “good” London clubs, they enjoyed hunting and large parties, they read *Punch* (often finding satires of themselves), they watched the London Library be built for their use.

Beneath these upper strata was the true middle class. It is with the lives and problems of, for example, the yeoman farmers, or the prosperous tradesmen, or the mill managers or grammar school teachers, that students can most easily identify. “The ancient order of the countryside, with its roots running back into prehistory, was giving place to a strange new town-based society of machinery and mass production, looking to the twentieth century and beyond.”⁵ The emergence of this new ruling class in England was due, in large part, to the Industrial Revolution. Although the stubborn fat cat aristocrat did also prosper during the age of increased mechanization, it was the middle class that successfully mirrored the rapid pace established by Britain’s burgeoning industries: “It is not love that moved the sun and the other stars, but merciless competition, red in tooth and claw, with the devil perpetually taking the hind most and the fittest surviving.”⁶

Youngsters are extremely competitive in all phases of their lives. They all dream of acquiring the same degree of prosperity many of the Victorian middle class came to enjoy. The miracle of technology and the opportunities it provides would not be lost in the classroom.

Another outgrowth of the industrial Revolution begins thirty years before the Great Exhibition—the railroads. The pride of England for three-quarters of the 19th Century was her railroad system. Transportation became the major link between agriculture and industry, between village, town, and city. By the time Victoria opened the Crystal Palace, London roads were paved and passenger trains were rumbling in and out of Euston Station (hailed as the eighth wonder of the world when it was opened in 1837). Ironically, the railroads were not a boon to everyone. The 1840s, for example, was a period of great agricultural depression and unemployment. The “Hungry Forties” were not helped by the ability of trains to move people and materials quickly. On the

contrary, villages became even more isolated than they had been traditionally. Cities grew as workers and farmers flocked to urban centers in search of relief from the bitter lives they had led in rural communities. Meanwhile, railroads were continuing to crisscross more of the country, tying cities closer together. By the turn of the century, relatives of those same farmers and villagers who had migrated to London were travelling on an underground railway system and commuting from the outskirts of the city. The era of “suburbia” had begun.

Students can most certainly identify bedroom communities that exist outside of their own city. At the same time, they can identify reasons for wanting to live near large centers rather than in relative isolation in the country. The youngsters we teach continue the dream that bigness is somehow more exciting, more enriching, more romantic. Use their knowledge of “future myths” as a link to the characters in Victorian novels who also reject the cloistered nature of the rural environment in favor of the more rapid lifestyle of the city. Like the Victorians, students are immersed in dreams of urban prosperity; given the same options the Victorians faced, they, too, would run to the train station and head for the city.

By mid-century, the increase in the number of factories and large farms led to an increase in an already large class of society: the working poor. From 1850 to the turn of the century, the population of England and Wales doubled, further complicating the lives of the lower classes. The conditions under which this multitude of people was forced to work were all too often abysmal, and matched in quality by the tragically low wages paid. Workers were literally not much better off than slaves. Children were severely abused, often working sixteen hours or more a day for next to nothing. Remind students of their own desire to receive a fair salary for part-time after-school jobs; it is a good place to begin comparison between their lives and the far from ideal world of the uneducated, underfed, overworked Victorian youngster. Life was not any romanticized urban picnic if you were young and poor in London.

A description of the tiny chimney sweep would engage any audience; it is a perfect choice for our students. These children worked for long hours in cramped, dark, dangerous chimneys. They became sickly; they became cripples; they died. Ultimately, the blackened faces and lungs, and the desperate lives of these children, did not go unrecognized in England. The Children’s Employment Commission Report (1842) investigated the terrible treatment of these and other child laborers who were put to work as early as four years of age.

The first piece of reform legislation, the Factory Act of 1825, concerned only the cotton mill workers. It led the way, however, to a similar act in 1833 that banned children under thirteen from working over 48 hours a week or nine hours in any one day.⁷ Later in the century, legislation was passed that set standards for working conditions in mines and in a variety of non-textile factories. Each year, there are major disagreements on the working conditions here in America. Students need only look at mine workers fighting for safety codes that would lessen the risk of black lung disease. The crises at Three Mile Island and Love Canal represented threats not only to the workers but also to large numbers in the surrounding areas. The possibilities for pollution and exposure to harmful substances seem endless today. So, too, in 19th Century England. Describing a hot, dirty, smelly, rainless summer may result in students naming conditions in major American cities. True. This same scene, however, could just as easily have been London in 1855 during the “Great Stink,” when bad sewers forced the luckier members of the aristocracy and upper classes to flee to their country havens. Some problems simply do not go away.

Although legislation did improve conditions for various groups of workers, including women and children, some of those treated unfairly did organize themselves into labor unions. Workers entered the final quarter of the

century involved in a great number of violent strikes. In fact, the trade unions ran full-scale campaigns of terrorism. Certainly, students can review the frequently violent undercurrent of the American labor movement. Students should be reacquainted with such cases as the disappearance (and rumors about it) of Jimmy Hoffa in the 1970s and Teamster Union demonstrations that frightened an entire nation. Strikes are a familiar occurrence in our society. How many students cannot recall a lack of public transportation or too much garbage piling up outside their doors? Strikes demonstrate the degree to which 20th Century economic issues are a perpetuation of the same struggle for an improved quality of life that English workers knew.

Violent demonstrators in the second half of the century would often face the English police. It is interesting to note that the first police force was not organized until 1829. There would not be universal police coverage until 1856. At first, these men were often dismissed as more of a bother than a help. Respect grew as city dwellers became more dependent upon the protection the police offered. Today's youngster would give mixed reviews to the police. The 1960s and 1970s are over; the police have recovered from the negative image of the riot-helmeted heavy who busted the heads of peace marchers. Even now, however, students are often resentful of the authority of the blue uniform and badge.

Our society has the same violent instincts as did Victorian society. Students therefore find it intriguing to compare Victorian street crime (and the penalties for it) with the run-of-the-mill muggings, robberies, and murders that occur in our cities all the time. There was a huge market for stolen goods in England and thieves were everywhere. Pickpockets usually worked in small teams headed by a "fence" or trainer, a Fagin-like character⁸ who was far from the affectionate old rascal Dickens immortalized. On the contrary, crime was a grave social problem in the first half of the century. Students are used to a slap on the wrist or a fairly strong reprimand the first time they encounter "the law." In England, the sentences were severe. Charles Dickens, like so many of his contemporaries, was thoroughly outraged by the barbaric public hangings that attracted constant crowds: "The horrors of the gibbet and of the crime which brought the wretched murderers to it, faded from my mind before the atrocious bearing, looks and language of the assembled spectators. . . it made my blood run cold."⁹ The brutality Dickens observed influenced his vivid portraits of public executions in France during the Revolution.

To be young and poor in England or the United States was and is no joy. To be a woman was even worse. Girls were granted no rights under the law. Married women could own no property. Charlotte Brontë discovered with no little surprise that after her marriage to her father's curate in 1854, the ownership and direction of her copyrights and royalties then belonged to her husband. Students of our "enlightened" age would be horrified if working meant they were no longer "ladies" or "refined." Women only gradually began to have careers and to attend colleges (not for degrees, however) as the century rolled along. The greatest change for women came with the Married Women's Property Act of 1881. Finally, a woman could own more than the clothes on her back. Young women who are aware of the issues behind the Equal Rights Amendment can certainly sympathize with the painfully slow progress women made in an otherwise rapidly changing century. Despite any progress achieved, women still suffered under the stereotype of the dewy-eyed, meltingly beautiful, completely obedient lady portrayed in popular magazines. Female students will begin to see that the notion of a Stepford wife did not begin in their own brief lifetimes. Ideally, every woman aspired to be the "perfect lady" who existed only to serve a man. There was little question of equality. Students would enjoy a lively debate over which world—then or now—was a better environment for women.

The Victorian era was, in many ways, the beginning of the "modern" world as we now know it. Tremendous changes occurred in all areas of life. Social upheaval resulted in a powerful middle class. England was made smaller while the cities grew as a direct consequence of rapidly improving railroads. Women and children

found themselves the subjects of legislation that would change their lives forever. Finally, the Industrial Revolution made England a world power that was constantly metamorphosing throughout the 19th Century. Joan Evans summarizes the era beautifully: ¹⁰

It was unquestionably an age of violent contrast and often of conflict: between Tractarian and Evangelical; between aesthete and athlete; between Tory and Liberal; between landowner and industrialist; between man as the dominant sex, and woman, his legal inferior; between Have and Have-not. Yet in the end the balance of these forces presented a remarkably coherent society

Certain nineteenth century novels appear on all the standard high school reading lists. Whenever I have taught, one “long” Victorian novel is available (although often it is left unused) for freshmen while three or four are more commonly reserved for the senior year course in English and classical literary traditions. Relax. There are alternatives available to both the disheartened and the non-believer, neither of whom has any desire to teach the familiar titles:.

1. Teachers should not be afraid to teach part of a novel. Advanced students may, in fact, read the whole work anyway. With more hesitant basic or college-level students, isolated chapters offer the appeal of the short story while delving into as little as one carefully developed moment.
2. Teachers should look for shorter works by some of the same authors.
3. Twentieth century writers who use Victorian themes and/or style could be tapped to demonstrate how appropriate and readable Victorian fiction still can be.

Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* is an enormously popular novel in the classroom. Many students love the colorful albeit inaccurate portrait of the French Revolution. A teacher might, in fact, devote a whole class to the importance of fictionalized history. After all, it is quite true that much of what we think we know about the French Revolution comes from Dickens—not from historians.

Teachers often hate the book. It is certainly sentimental and the characters are FLAT! Nonetheless, it is a useful introduction to plot sequence and the significance of setting in a given novel. Scenes that depict the obsessive nature of the revolutionaries (through the characterization of Mme. DeFarge) and the horror of the guillotine offer students the opportunity to find subtler nuances of good and evil.

Seniors enter their classrooms each Fall knowing that English must be passed before a diploma is issued. Teachers should be kind—not easy—to such a captive audience. Students are deeply involved with themselves, their friends, their loves, their jobs, in short, with the newness of adulthood. Victorian novels, especially the three suggested below, are all about young women and men engaged in battles with themselves, with each other, with their environment. The way a teacher presents these characters, especially the women, will determine the outcome—successful or not—of the project.

A marvelous hook is to describe a character from a HUGE novel students will not be likely to read: Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* . Becky is the consummate bitch who rises from the poor orphaned status of mere governess to the wealthy position of mistress of a popular salon. Using the overview in this unit, the teacher can demonstrate how the nobles look down at Becky no matter how much money or

power she acquires. Her advantage—her triumph—lies in the fact that Becky sees right through these shallow aristocrats; she blackmails, she ensnares, she seduces even the toughest snobs. Becky breaks every rule; students love her for it because the rules—class distinctions, sex roles, social proprieties—are wrong. Students understand Becky’s clawing and scraping; they applaud the survivor.

Eustacia Vye, in Thomas Hardy’s *Return of the Native*, should be presented as the same kind of aggressive, bright, attractive character. Hardy deliberately keeps his characters out of the city in this novel; Eustacia’s struggle is against the English countryside, against an unyielding land that will not let her leave. The opening chapter should be read separately (and then reread if the entire novel is used) because of its singularly evocative quality. Here on Egdon Heath, history, nature, and folklore run together to form an endless landscape. The inhabitants are integral parts of the total picture. Eustacia maneuvers brilliantly, energetically, emotionally, to free herself from the powerful shadows of a narrow Wessex society. Tragically, her fate is sealed and revealed in that initial sequence; the opening sweep of the Heath culminates in a description of the silhouette of Eustacia, a solitary figure who completes a scene from which she so desperately and hopelessly flees. It is her unconquerable spirit that will attract students. They, too, so often feel trapped by their surroundings; given the opportunity, they will cheer for Eustacia.

Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* is a nineteenth century soap opera. Taught as such, students will not hesitate to argue for or against Cathy’s stubborn burning nature. They will alternately adore and fear the orphaned street urchin, young Heathcliff, who grows up to be the unpredictable wealthy owner of Wuthering Heights. Students would not fail to share a young woman’s attraction to two distinct worlds: the realization of a childhood dream in the form of Thrushcross Grange (with its graceful traditions and guarantee of serenity) versus the magnetic force of unfathomable chaotic love that engulfs both Cathy and Heathcliff. Again, the countryside is a living part of the novel. The city produces exotic heroes like Heathcliff, men who disturb the expected patterns of the local society. Students will be fascinated by the magnitude of the love and the dreams that transcend any period.

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is a stronger novel than her sister’s. For students, it is immeasurably more difficult. The love story, although as deep, is secondary to the development of the character of Jane. A victim of a conservative society governed by convention, taboo, and stereotype, this “plain Jane” must fight for happiness. Students will draw on very personal reactions to contemporary feminist ideas. Making distinctions between a woman’s position today and in the Victorian period will lead to empathy for Jane’s dilemma. The pivotal decision in the novel, to live “in sin” with Rochester or to leave and be miserable without him, is determined against the backdrop of a repressive society. This one section of the novel, where Jane opts to leave despite all of Rochester’s emotional pleadings, could be used to help students gauge their own ability to make choices independent of their society.

In addition to these standard works, John Fowles’ *French Lieutenant’s Woman* can be read (in part or as a whole) to demonstrate how a contemporary writer recreates the flavor of the period. Here, too, the protagonist triumphs by using the taboos of the society to enhance her own uniqueness.

Shorter works would certainly be excellent substitutes for excerpts from longer ones. Hardy’s short stories offer the same broad view of pre-industrialized rural England. As expected, they retain the imaginative, often tragic view of life expressed in Hardy’s Wessex novels.

Joseph Conrad extends the time period beyond Victoria’s reign; however, he writes about it with authority. In *The Duel*, a manageable novella, he captures the notion of honor for its own sake. Fate repeatedly throws two French cavalry officers together. Rather than fight for Napoleon when they meet, they follow a private course

of battle against each other. It is an endless battle. As Conrad points out, “No man succeeds in everything he undertakes. In that sense we are all failures.”¹¹ The metaphor (as well as the goriness) of the duel will appeal to students. Stubborn pride and the determination not to be beaten are qualities youngsters admire—even in defeat. This work will activate their fantasy worlds. We all fight duels.

These few brief observations on the fiction of the period are meant to encourage, not to limit. The creativity and planning involved in the introduction of any of the fiction is crucial. Every one of these characters is struggling to some degree against the society in which each lives. If students can begin to comprehend the structured worlds that they will read about, they will then be able to understand the emotional and social successes (and failures) of the characters they encounter.

Sample Lesson Plans

Overview

This unit is designed to be included in that part of the English 4 curriculum covering the English novel. Although the material will be more easily absorbed by college level and advanced students, the activities can be adjusted for classes with low to average reading capabilities. Much of the emphasis is on accumulation of detail about a specific era. All students feel they have accomplished *something* if they know more facts than when they started. The long range expectations vary for each level:

1. remedial classes— short stories

excerpts from novels
one complete short novel

2. grade level and
college level classes—short fiction
poetry
non-fiction
one full-length novel

3. Honors classes— short fiction

poetry

non-fiction

2 full-length novels (and a

short paper on a third)

The unit should be used in one block of time, perhaps one half of a semester, depending upon the group and the amount of material read.

Outline of Activities

1. Pretests—students discover how much they don't know
2. Time Line—students visualize the closeness of the nineteenth century
3. Slides/Lecture—In search of common sights and background material
4. Victorian language—excerpts that would appeal to a variety of readers
5. Victorian themes—poetry that captures the undercurrents of conflict

Victoriana—A Survey

Objective To measure students' knowledge of nineteenth century England

Preparation Distribute copies of questions to students

Procedure

1. Students are to complete each survey in 10 to 15 minutes.
2. This is a self-graded test; students will need time to make corrections.
3. Suggestion: Use the same test at the end of the unit to measure improvement.

Results

1. Teachers will be able to more accurately assess the depth of review needed.
2. Students will realize how little they actually know.

Note Imagination is a major tool during any review. Facts are helpful. Flavor is immeasurably more important. The greater the anticipation, the easier the hurdles will seem as the unit progresses. With upper level classes, a challenge might be issued before the pretest. Each

student must find as much as possible before the survey.

Victorian England—Sample Survey Questions

Short Answer Type

1. What monarch had the longest reign in English history?
2. Who was the Prince Consort?
3. What was the architectural triumph of the Great Exhibition?
4. What was the purpose of the Great Exhibition?
5. Where did the Royal family live?
6. What was the governing body of England?
7. What major form of transportation expanded?
8. Workers frequently engaged in what form of protest?
9. The capital of England was _____?
10. The official Church of England was also called ____ _____.
11. Name the only universities in England.
12. What controversy did Charles Darwin spearhead in 1859?
13. Name two political parties.
14. Who was the “Grand Old Man” of the liberal party?
15. Name the influential Jewish novelist who became Prime Minister.

True—False Type

1. George Eliot was a woman.
2. Emily Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* .
3. Most of the English were wealthy.

4. The US was still a group of colonies.
5. The main form of transportation was by chariot.
6. England is surrounded by water.
7. Shakespeare was alive during most of the century.
8. Edmund Burke was a famous London retailer.
9. The middle class became the most powerful political class.
10. A wealthy businessman could vote prior to 1832.

Elimination

(Remove all names of people not living and writing in Victorian England)

Graham Greene	John Buchan	
Ben Jonson		Dante Gabriel Rosetti
Cardinal Newman	Thomas Carlyle	
Samuel Jonson	Charles Darwin	
John Stuart Mill	John Donne	
Benjamin Disraeli	Gerard Manley Hopkins	
William Shakespeare	Diana Spenser	
John Fowles		T.S. Eliot
Thomas Hardy	Charles Dickens	
Henry Fielding	John Ruskin	
Emily Brontë	Jane Austen	
Robert Browning	Matthew Arnold	
Geoffrey Chaucer	Samuel Richardson	
William Makepeace Thackeray	Alfred Lord Tennyson	
James Joyce		Sir Francis Bacon

Time Line Search

Objectives

1. To demonstrate the shared history of the last century and the present.
2. To construct a chronological list of events for the purpose of review.

Preparation Reproduce the sample time line (or make a similar one with your own events)

Provide students with a jumbled list of the corresponding events only (no dates)

Procedure

1. Explain the purpose of a time line.
2. Point out where we are now.
3. Allow time for students to rearrange events.
4. Correct and annotate the final list together.
5. Have students fill in events on their time lines and place them in a permanent “file” or notebook.

Results Students will be startled by the jam up of recent history on the line. England will become—quite literally—part of their world.

Sample Time Line Events

1800 BC—Stonehenge building begun
55 BC—Julius Caesar briefly invades England
43 AD—Roman conquest underway
406—Departure of Roman troops
1066—Norman conquest: William I, king
1215—Magna Carta
1284—Conquest of Wales
1337—Beginning of 100 years war with France
1529—English Reformation begins
1577—Drake sails around the world
1588—Defeat of the Armada
1603—Death of Elizabeth I

1616—Death of Shakespeare
1642—Civil War between forces of Charles I and Parliament
1649—Execution of Charles I
1776—American Declaration of Independence
1789—French Revolution
1829—Foundation of London Police Force
1837—Queen Victoria begins her reign
1851—Great Exhibition in London
1868—First Trades Union Congress
1901—Death of Victoria
1914—Great War
1939—Second World War
1947—Independence of India and other colonies follow
1969—British troops sent to Northern Ireland
1981—Now

Looking at Life: Then and Now

Objective To demonstrate to students their limited recognition of historical and modern landmarks.

Preparation Pick up slide sets (available at Institute office) and list identifying each slide.

Procedure Select randomly scenes of England and America.

1. Explain the two periods the slides will cover.
2. Show the slides quickly.
3. Go through them again, more slowly, giving students time to identify the country of each slide.
4. Discuss the methods students used to determine their answers.
5. Go through the slides a third time, explaining what each location is.
6. Give the students the opportunity to total their wrong answers and to find percentages of what they *do not* know. (Forget about explaining guesswork; students will insist they truly knew what they answered correctly.)

Results Visual activities appeal to students. Products of a televised age, they both believe in and are captivated by what they see. Similarities that are strong enough to deceive will also be interesting enough to study.

Accepting Victorian Prose

Objective To illustrate the readability of Victorian language.

Preparation Select a passage from a novel or short story that will eventually be read in full by the class. Be certain it includes at least one unfamiliar term or phrase and that it is very interesting.

Procedure

1. Distribute the passage, allowing time for oral reading.
2. Discuss the mood; what feelings do the students sense?
3. Analyze the words. What words or phrases create problems? (Can they be solved using context?)
4. Create a story line based loosely on the passage (individually as writing projects or together as a group effort). Encourage imaginative brainstorming!
5. Briefly outline the skeleton plot of the actual work, stressing any trump card the work offers: romance, mystery, wealth, power, and so on.

Results *Writing that involves the student will be worth the struggle even if the language is very difficult. An interesting passage, coupled with a well-planned introductory cliffhanger, will prepare students for the entire work.*

Suggested Passage

. . . I remembered I was lying in the oak closet, and I heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard also, the fir-bough repeat its teasing sound I resolved to silence it, if possible "I must stop it nevertheless!" I muttered, knocking my knuckles through the glass, and stretching my arm out to seize the importunate branch: instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little ice-cold hand!

The intense horror of nightmare came over me; I tried to draw back my arm, but, the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice, sobbed,

"Let me in— let me in!"

As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window—Terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, "Let me in!" and maintained its tenacious gripe, almost maddening me with fear. ¹²

The Age of Conflict

Objective *To illustrate the extremes that existed in Victorian England and, by extension, in our world.*

Preparation *Present two poems or passages from the period that have clearly conflicting themes.*

Procedure:

1. Students are to read the two passages on their own.
2. Theme analysis should be the focus of the discussion.
3. Arguments supporting one of the two positions should be developed in terms of today's society.

Results *Here, again, the nearness of nineteenth century art and ideas should become obvious.*

Suggested Excerpts

Note *These two selections were written in the later part of the century. Both poets were moving their art into the twentieth century with the use of new themes and rhythms. Gerard Manley Hopkins reaffirmed the majesty of God through his sprung rhythm. Hopkins believed each individual possessed original qualities (his term was "inscape"); in order to capture this*

individuality, he invented a “stress” system that required a unique diction in his poetry. Thomas Hardy, perhaps the first modern poet, turned away from God to face a meaningless, orderless universe.

from Pied Beauty

Glory to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced-fold fallow, and plough;

And all trades their gear and tackle and trim.

-Gerard Manley Hopkins ¹³

from Hap

If but some vengeful god would call to me

From up the sky, and laugh: “Thou suffering thing,

Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,

That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,

Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;

Half-eased in that Powerfuller than I

Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so.

-Thomas Hardy ¹⁴

Time Line Search

(figure available in print form)

Notes

1. There will be slides of many scenes made for the Institute Office.
- 2.. Roger Hart, *English Life in the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1957), p. 47.
3. John Bull represents England; it is a stubborn, proud, resourceful metaphor.
4. EsmE Wingfield-Stratford, *The Victorian Cycle* (New York: 1935), p.4. 5. W. G. Reader, *Life in Victorian England* (New York: 1964), p.15.
6. Wingfield-Stratford, *The Victorian Cycle* , p.45.
7. Children up to 18 years of age could not work more than 69 hours a week as a result of the same Act.
8. Fagin is a likable although despicable character in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* .
9. Hart, *English Life* , p. 88.
10. Joan Evans, *The Victorians* (Cambridge:1966), p.20.
11. Joseph Conrad, *The Duel* (New York: 1925), p. 82.
12. Emily Bront', *Wuthering Heights* (Boston:1956), p.20.
13. Hazelton Spencer et al ., eds., *British Literature from Blake to the Present Day* (Boston: 1963), p.827.
14. Ibid., p.833.

Student Reading List

Victorian Fiction

Bront', Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.

Bront', Emily. *Wuthering Heights* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Duel* . New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1925.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities* . New York: Modern Library, 1967.

Hardy, Thomas. *Selected Stories* . London: Macmillan London Limited, 1966.

Hardy, Thomas. *The Return of the Native* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962.

Annotated Teacher Bibliography

Allen, Walter. *The English Novel* . New York: E.P. Dutton, 1954.

A critical history of the novel from Bunyan to Lawrence and Joyce.

Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy* . J. Dover Wilson, ed. London: Cambridge University Press, 1932.

Primary source on the impact of expanding industry and social reform on a society in transition.

Briggs, Asa. *The Age of Improvement : 1783-1867* . London: Longman Grop Limited, 1959.

A study of the impact of the French Revolution and social cleavage in a changing Great Britain.

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Victorian Temper* . New York: Vintage Books, 1951.

A study of literary culture at various points in the century.

Evans, Joan. *The Victorians* . Cambridge: University Press, 1966.

A great source book filled with photos and excerpts from the people themselves.

Hart, Roger. *English Life in the Nineteenth Century* . London: Wayland Publishers, 1957.

A concise description of aspects of Victorian life coupled with excellent pictures.

Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

A comprehensive study of Victorian ideas that stresses their interrelationship with our own thinking.

Mountfield, David. *History of England* . New York: Leon Amiel Publisher, 1978.

A concise, easy to read overview with many illustrations.

Muir, Richard. *The English Village* . London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Some history but the value is the beautiful photographs of villages that still exist in the English countryside.

Preyer, Robert O. *Victorian Literature* . New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966.

A fine short collection of essays about major Victorian novels.

Reader, W.J. *Life in Victorian England* . New York: Putnam, 1964.

A very readable study of the tenor of life in Victorian days.

Spencer Hazelton Walter E. Houghton, and Herbert Barrows, eds. *British Literature from Blake to the Present Day* . Boston: D.C. Heath, 1963.

An excellent college anthology of non-fiction and poetry with first-rate introductions to each section.

Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class* . New York.: Pantheon Books, 1963.

THE authoritative study of the English working class. A must for teachers who really want to explore the century.

Vincinus, Martha, ed. *A Widening Sphere : Changing Roles of Victorian Women* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.

A collection of essays and lectures on an important contemporary issue.

———. *Suffer and Be Still : Women in the Victorian Age* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.

Included are essays on women in various aspects of English life. These are interesting to read in light of the importance of the female characters in the suggested literature.

Willcox, William B. *The Age of Aristocracy : 1688 to 1830* . Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1976.

A detailed history of the English nobility prior to Victoria.

Wingfield-Stratford, Esmé. *The Victorian Cycle* . New York: William Morrow, 1935.

A readable trilogy that includes history, social life, and customs.

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