



INTRODUCTION TO NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

ENG 7340: Neo-Victorian Novel

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❖ Victorians & Neo-Victorianism

❖ Neo-Victorian Fiction

- Historicity
- Postmodernism
- Borders
- Then & “Neo”
- Spectrality
- Ghosts of Empire

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY VICTORIAN?

The term *Victorian* literally describes things and events during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), including the preoccupations of the era:

- ❖ Race and Empire
- ❖ Science and Technology
- ❖ Religion, Faith, and Doubt
- ❖ Ideology, Politics, and Society
 - Marxism, Feminism, Social Darwinism, etc.
- ❖ Social Responsibility and Reform
 - Poverty, Prostitution, Child Labor, Public Health, etc.



WHAT IS NEO-VICTORIANISM?

- ❖ Contemporary cultural and literary engagement with the Victorian past – its textual conventions, historical contexts, social politics, and cultural signifiers
- ❖ An interdisciplinary area of scholarship and study of texts, including film, television and other media, that critically return to and examine the Victorian period and its relationship to our own time
- ❖ Emerges in the 1990s with the increase in literary and cultural productions that reflect on our “contemporary cultural desire to revisit and rework the nineteenth century” (Smith 1)

NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

❖ According to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, the Neo-Victorian “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4).

❖ In other words, the Neo-Victorian novel does not simply borrow from or reiterate the Victorian period but “adopt[s] a postmodern approach to history” through metafictional narrative strategies and blurring boundaries between fact and fiction (Shiller 558).



HISTORICITY

❖ The historical actuality of persons and events, the quality of being part of history as opposed to myth, legend, or fiction. Historicity focuses on the truth value of knowledge claims about the past (denoting historical actuality, authenticity, and factuality).

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity>



HISTORICITY & THE NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL

- ❖ Neo-Victorian novels often make conscious efforts to assert and convince readers of their historical authenticity.
- ❖ However, this reconstruction of the past forces us to explore two critical questions: 1) what do we think we know about history?; and 2) how does the present shape historical narratives? (Shiller 558, 540).
- ❖ Thus, this “conscious historicity demands our attention, and invites comparison with our own age” (Banerjee).

POSTMODERNISM

A theory that rejects hierarchy, stability and category:

- ❖ Attacks and deconstructs grand narratives that attempt to systematise and control us;
- ❖ Disrupts our sense of centredness and stability, suggesting instead that the world is innately subjective and unstable;
- ❖ Interested in Jacques Derrida's notion of 'play', the fact that systems are not stable structures but in a constant state of flux (de Groot 185).

POSTMODERN ELEMENTS IN THE NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL

- ❖ **Authentic Fallacy:** the concept that readers of historical novels want to believe that what they are reading is somehow real or authentic, provoked often by the realist or mimetic mode of writing (postmodern texts often attempt to disrupt this) (de Groot 183).
- ❖ **Metafiction:** fiction which is self-referential and self-conscious; it might also have a metanarrative: a narrative *about* narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge (de Groot 184, Wikipedia).
- ❖ **Historiography:** the theory or methodology of History and particularly the writing of History (de Groot 184).
- ❖ **Historiographic Metafiction:** a term coined by Patricia Waugh to refer to novels which are self-conscious and interested in their own representations of the past (de Groot 184).



POSTMODERN ELEMENTS IN THE NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL

❖ **Postmodern Turn:** a trend in historiography which emphasizes the linguistic element of all history (as narrative) and therefore which suggests that ‘truth’ in historical inquiry is an impossible, and ill advised, end to aim for (de Groot, 185).

❖ **Intertextuality:** a term coined by Julia Kristeva to describe the way in which any text, deliberately or not, is constructed of citations from, allusions to, and echoes or fragments of earlier texts, which may or may not be visible to the writer and/or to readers (West-Pavlov 182)



BORDERS

❖ “The blurring of the line between fact and fiction is another characteristic of neo-Victorian fiction. ... [And] part of the challenge and pleasure of reading these books lies in *not* knowing, or at least in not knowing *exactly*” which elements are historically accurate and which ones imagined (Bannerjee).

❖ This also encompasses the blurred boundaries between past and present, and “encourages both writer and reader to probe the values of past and present, and to ask their own questions about where the two overlap or differ” (Bannerjee).

THEN AND “NEO”

❖ Neo-Victorian novels often attempt to “expose the prejudices of the past, and the exploitation that went hand in hand with them, by empowering a previously marginalised character or class of characters” (Bannerjee).

❖ **Raises important questions about ourselves and our present:**

- How far have we progressed in our moral standards?
- To what extent have we regressed or remained stagnant?
- What is our common humanity, including our common failures?

❖ Through exploring such questions we might discover that “we are always accompanied by the ghosts of bygone days” (Shiller 555).

SPECTRALITY

❖ One of the most common tropes found in neo-Victorian fiction “involves the concept of the ghost and/or practice of spiritualism” which is related “to the ‘haunting’ presence of the Victorians in (post)modern life” (Stetz 343, quoted in Smith 3)



❖ Connects Neo-Victorian fiction to the Gothic as well as theories of trauma and memory in psychoanalytic and poststructuralist discourses.



GHOSTS OF EMPIRE

Neo-Victorian fiction often confronts and re-assesses Britain's socio-cultural and political heritage of imperialism:

- ❖ How does the (post)colonial nation imagine and narrate itself, and particularly through the tensions of gendered and racialized identities?
- ❖ Does contemporary British culture dream its way back to the British Empire in order to articulate social insecurities of a globalized world?
- ❖ What are the dangers of nationalist nostalgia and to what extent do our appropriations of and obsessions with the Victorian past critique its myths of nation and empire?

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