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The Role of Language in the representation of class in Victorian Literature

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Abstract. This article examines the role of language in shaping and representing class distinctions in Victorian literature, a period marked by rapid industrialization, social stratification, and changing notions of identity. Through an analysis of key texts by authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, this study explores how linguistic choices—dialect, vocabulary, and speech patterns—were employed to reflect and reinforce societal hierarchies. Victorian writers often used language as a tool to delineate class boundaries, giving voice to the struggles, aspirations, and prejudices of different social groups. Additionally, this article investigates how language served as a means of critique, exposing the inequities of the era and questioning the rigidity of class structures. By contextualizing these literary techniques within the broader framework of Victorian society, this study highlights the intricate interplay between language and class representation, offering insights into how literature both mirrored and shaped cultural attitudes of the time.

Keywords: Victorian society, literature, languages, George Eliot,

Introduction. The Victorian era, a time of significant social, economic, and cultural transformation, witnessed profound shifts in the dynamics of class and identity. Industrialization, urbanization, and expanding global trade brought unprecedented wealth to some while exacerbating inequalities for others. Amid this backdrop, literature emerged as a powerful medium to explore and critique the complex social hierarchies of the time. Central to these representations was the role of language, which became a vital tool in society, depicting class distinctions, aspirations, and struggles in Victorian.

Victorian literature, particularly in the works of authors like Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy, skillfully employed linguistic markers—dialect, diction, and speech patterns—to delineate characters' social positions. Language was not merely a mode of communication but a reflection of one's education, profession, and societal status. It allowed authors to highlight disparities between the working class, the rising middle class, and the aristocracy, often drawing attention to the prejudices and barriers that defined these divisions.

Moreover, language in Victorian literature often served a dual purpose: while it reflected existing social norms, it also acted as a tool for critique. Writers frequently used speech and dialect to evoke empathy for marginalized groups, challenge stereotypes, or expose the injustices of rigid class systems. For instance, the use of regional dialects in novels like *Mary Barton* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* brought authenticity to the experiences of working-class characters while simultaneously challenging the dominant ideologies of the Victorian elite.

Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* is the first book to be studied. The author of the book takes the class topic into account. He identifies with the bourgeoisies and proletariats in industrialised Victorian England because *Hard Times* depicts the realities of socioeconomic unfairness in Britain during that time. This is precisely what Inyang notices: In addition to various disparities between characters from the working,





middle, and higher classes in Coketown, Dickens depicts the living conditions, employment, and educational opportunities of these groups. The location of Hard Times also symbolised a Victorian industrial town. It is regarded as one of Dickens' most scathing social critiques.

In 1837, Victoria, then eighteen, had to face a world where her father, grandpa, and all three of her uncles had passed away. The fact that her grandpa was King George III, the ruler of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, made this particularly difficult. During Victoria's reign, England expanded its influence all over the world. British society became the norm for the Western world, and British business revolutionised worldwide technology. The period of Queen Victoria's rule (1837–1901) is actually known as the Victorian Period. During this period, English society became fixated on decorum, and Queen Victoria herself became a symbol of correct civility. Different people would interpret this differently because English society also established a rigid social structure, or the levels of power people had in society. In this class-based structure, everybody had their place, and mobility between classes was a practical impossibility. Let's take a look at these classes and see what life in Victorian England meant to people throughout society.

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) dominated Britain's Victorian era. It was a rich and tranquil period, but the social structure was still problematic. There were three social classes in this era: upper, middle, and lower. Most people who were lucky enough to belong to the upper class avoided manual labour. Rather, they owned land and employed lower-class labourers or made investments to generate a profit. According to the Victorian England Social Hierarchy, this class was further subdivided into three levels: Lower Upper, which included affluent men and company owners; Middle Upper, which included significant officers and lords; and Royal, which included people from royal families.

Conclusion. In Victorian literature, language serves as a powerful tool for representing and interrogating class distinctions. Through the strategic use of dialogue, dialects, and narrative tone, authors such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell vividly portrayed the social hierarchies and economic divides of their time. These linguistic choices not only reflected the realities of Victorian society but also revealed the prejudices and aspirations of different social classes. By giving voice to marginalized characters and exposing the inequalities of the era, Victorian writers used language as a means to critique the rigid class structures and advocate for empathy and social reform. The enduring legacy of their works underscores the importance of language in shaping perceptions of class and challenging societal norms.

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