

The Victorian Age

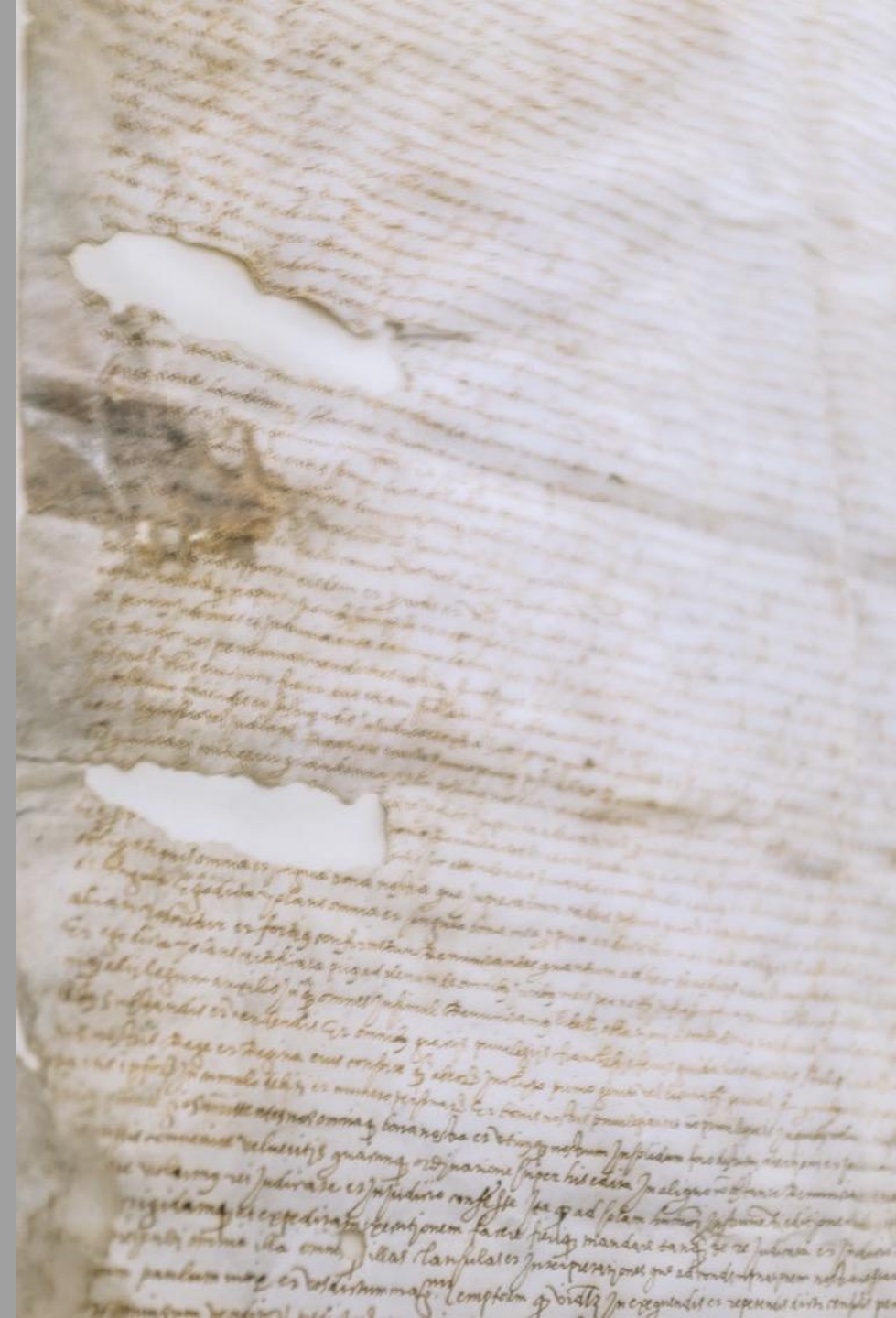
Literature

The Victorian Age

1660 - 1776



Words from the Empire



As with Latin and the Roman Empire, the geographical extension of the British Empire meant for Britain not just new political and commercial opportunities, but also an **unprecedented expansion of the English language**.



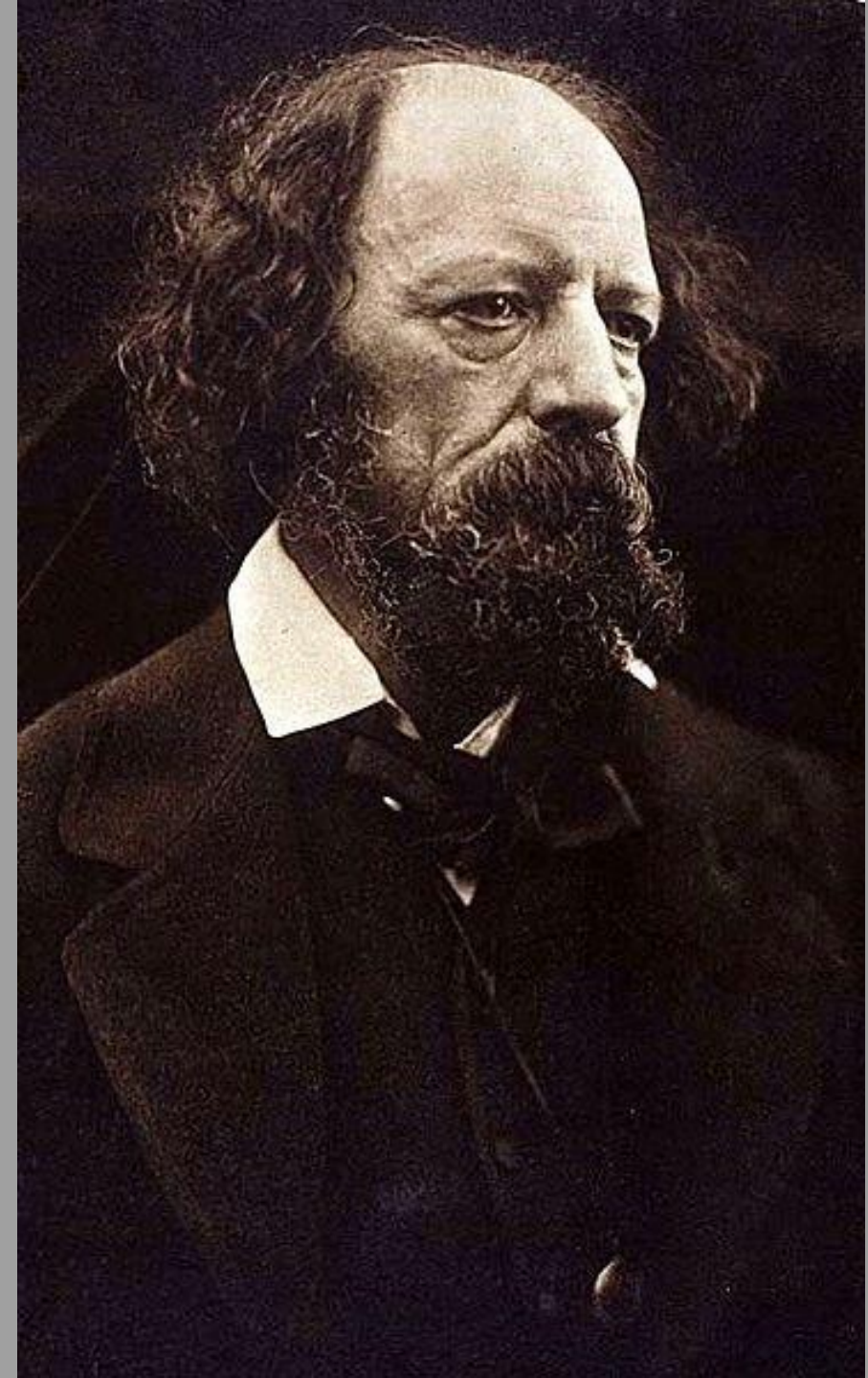
LAHORE. A.H. Murray 1891

The expansion worked in **many ways**:

- English was spoken from Canada to Australia, from Malta to South Africa;
- the English spoken in the colonies resulted in many local variations – American English is the **most notable** one;
- in the new territories they encountered different flora and fauna, new products, food, customs, and all this was naturally **reflected** in the language.



Victorian poetry



Early Victorian poetry: late Romantic tendencies

Between Queen Victoria's accession and about 1850, two outstanding poets emerged and became fundamental models for the poets of the second half of the century: **Alfred Tennyson** and **Robert Browning**.

Unlike the Romantic poets, however, the early Victorian poets **did not believe in a life vision**.



The dramatic monologue

The early Victorian poets privileged indirect ways of dealing with human and social problems. The most typical example of this tendency is the **dramatic monologue**: a fairly long poem in which only one character speaks about himself or something important that has happened to him. The best use of this form was by **Robert Browning**.



Poetry of sensual dreaming

The most representative poet of the age was **Alfred Tennyson**; his verse has a **musical grace** tinged with sadness and a desire for a lost world, often set in a **dreamy past**.

Typical of Tennyson's poetry is *Ulysses* (1842), a dramatic monologue where the classical hero expresses a Romantic restlessness and desire to break conventions but at the same time is sadly disillusioned about the possibility or the necessity of heroism.



The sentimental comedy and the comedy of manners

For Tennyson's Ulysses, as for its author, the world of epic action is **over**. Tennyson's poetry, with its languid **melody** and **sensuality**, leads to Aestheticism in the last part of the century. In Italy, Giovanni Pascoli felt its influence.



The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

The **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood** was founded by a group of artists and poets in 1848. They advocated a return to the purity of late medieval Italian art, before the stylization that set in with Raphael and his followers.

They wanted to return to the simplicity tempered with **mysticism** of the Middle Ages, when **spiritual values** when mechanization had not yet destroyed individual creativity.



The Aesthetic Movement

Aestheticism spread through Europe during the latter part of the 19th century, and became a cultural force in Britain particularly in the 1890s. Its major representative on the theoretical side was **Walter Pater** (1839-94), the author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), where he states that the only way to combat the meaninglessness of existence is to live hedonistically, devoting oneself to pleasure.



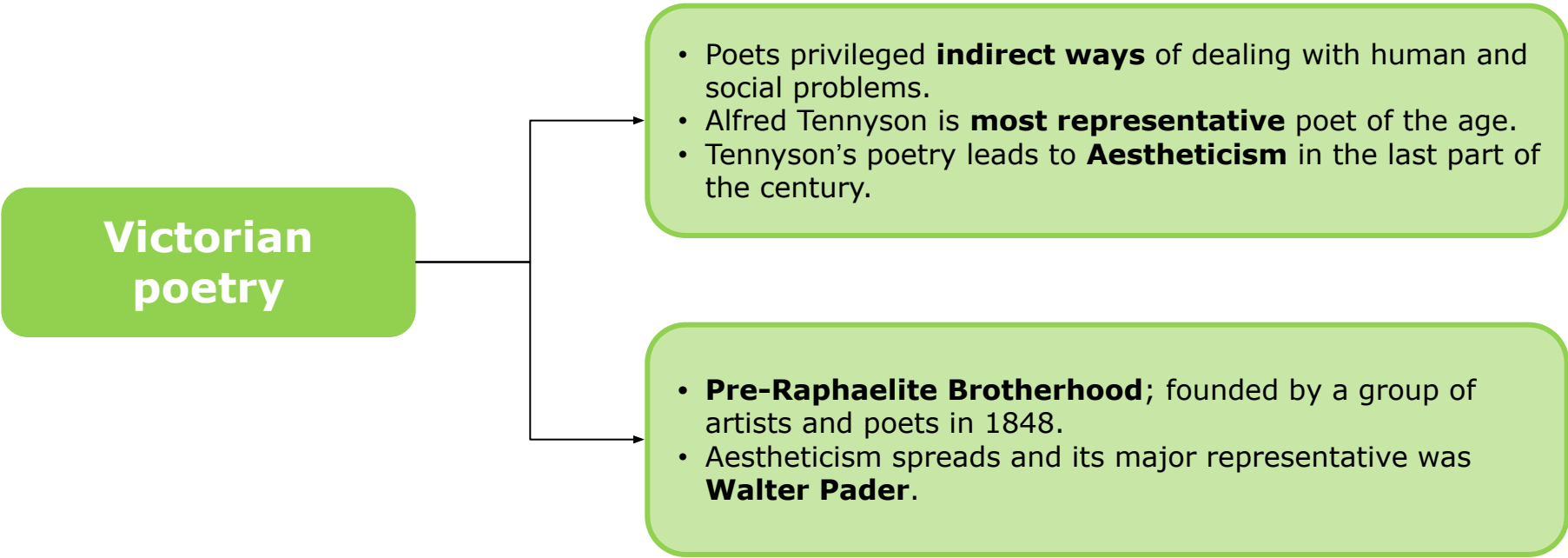
UNLOADING TEA-TRUCKS IN THE BAY OF SINGAPORE

The culmination of Aestheticism in Victorian England was reached with the figure and works of the Irish-born **Oscar Wilde**, who enjoyed a reputation as the **leader of the Aesthetic Movement**.

His best-known poem, however, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) shows no traces of Aestheticism but is derived from a tragic experience: Wilde's imprisonment in Reading jail.



Victorian poetry

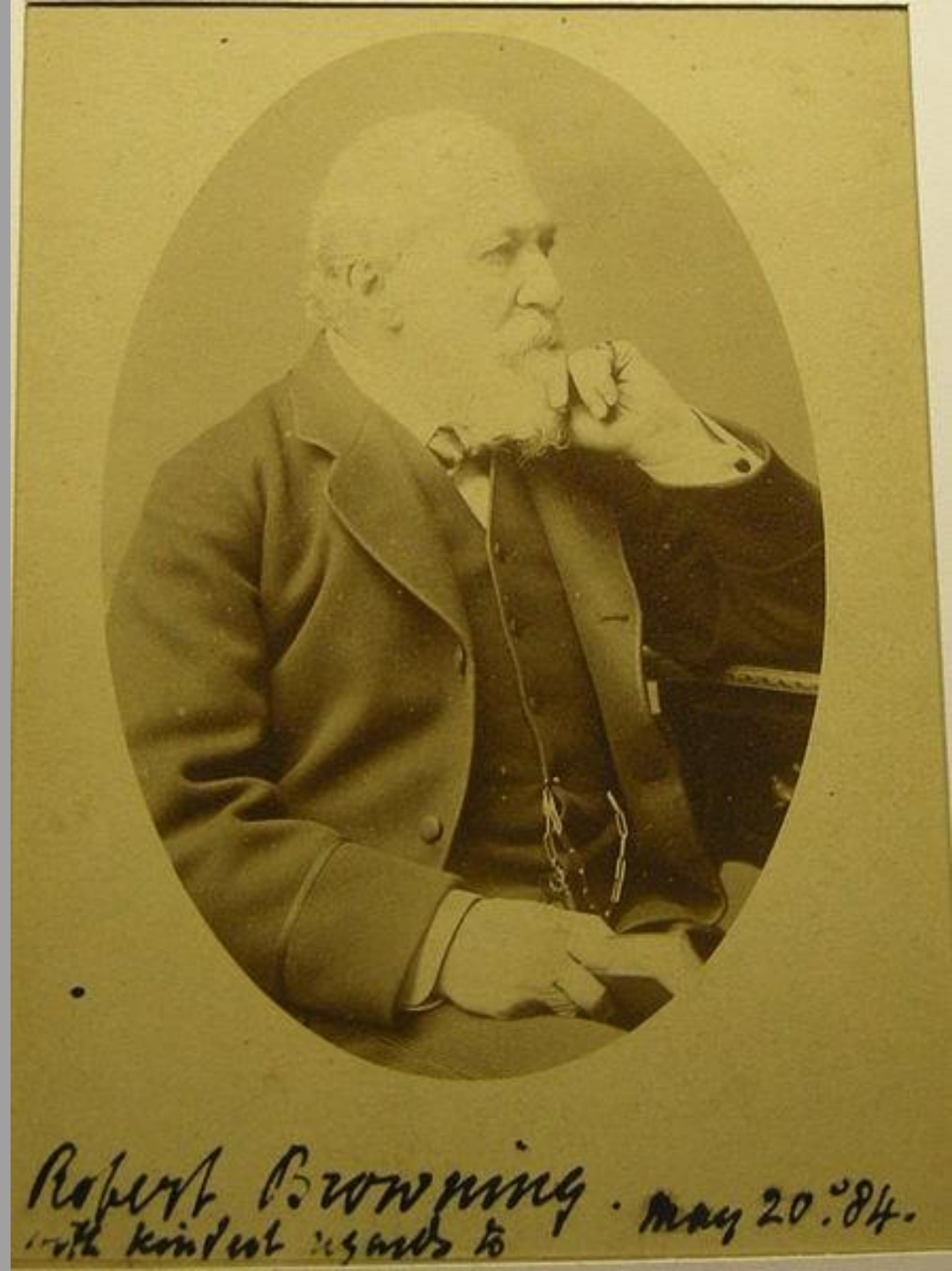


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graph LR; A[Victorian poetry] --> B["• Poets privileged indirect ways of dealing with human and social problems.  
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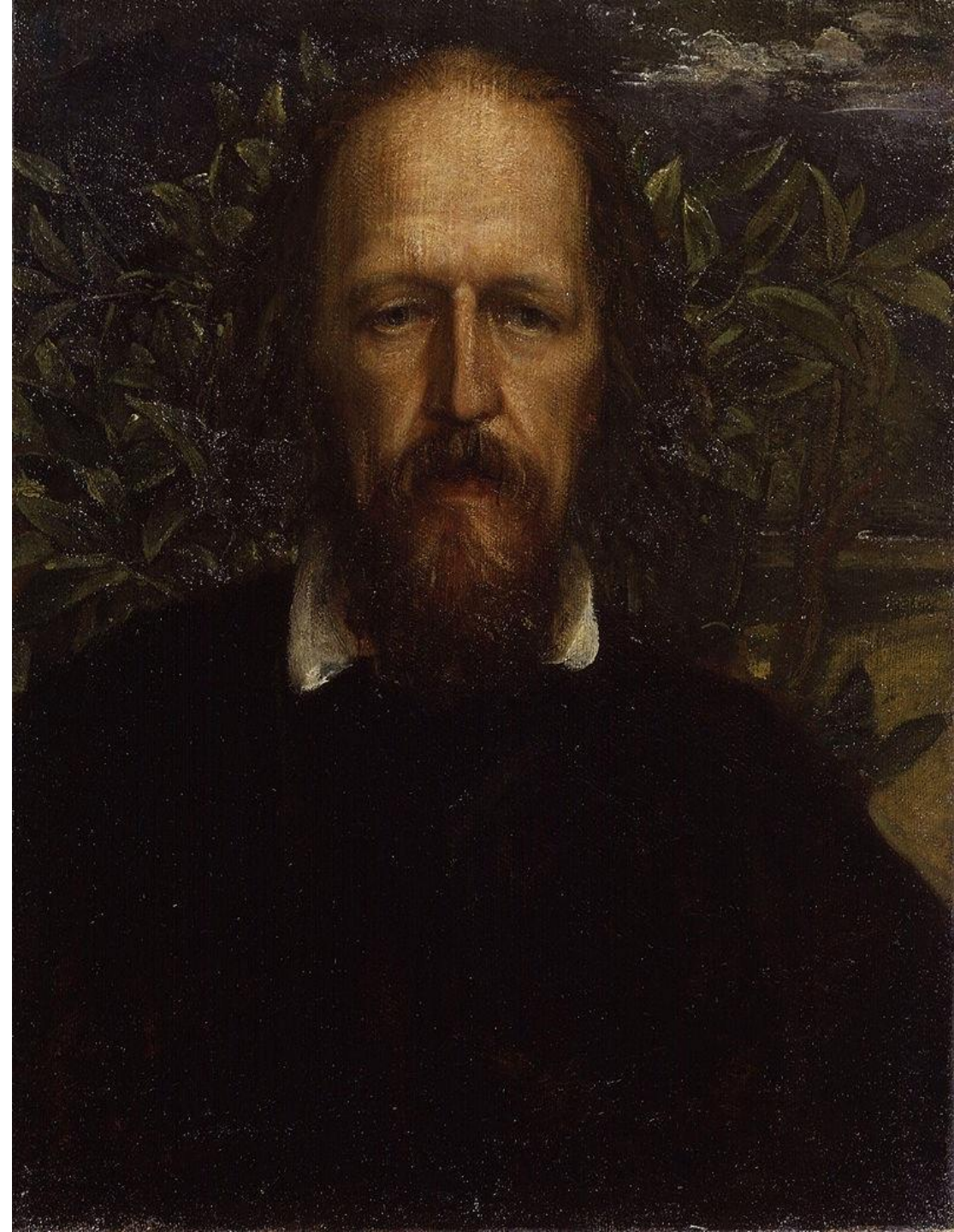
The dramatic monologue



Technical features

A dramatic monologue is a fairly long poem in which only one character speaks about himself/herself or something important that has happened to him/her. The features of the dramatic monologue can be summed up as follows:

- it is recited by a first-person speaker, usually a historical figure;
- it is set in a precise historical and geographical context;



- there is a silent listener who is essential to the dramatic or theatrical quality of the piece;
- it centres on a crucial point or problem in the speaker's life;
- the language is colloquial and the rhythm as abrupt as that of real live speech;
- irregular or unusual syntax and punctuation are used.



Actor and story

The best use of this form was by the Victorian poet **Robert Browning** (1812-89) who took the subjects of many of his dramatic monologues from Italian medieval and Renaissance history. In *My Last Duchess* the “actor” of the monologue is an imaginary Duke from the **Italian Renaissance**, possibly Alfonso II of Este (1533-97).



Here, as in many other monologues by Browning, the speaker is a man who is **powerful** but **unhappy** in his private life, though he refuses to admit it. Browning's monologues present a very modern awareness of the way the human mind works: in speaking their minds, the characters reveal their personalities through **unexpected mental associations**.



The dramatic monologue

- A fairly long poem in which only one character speaks about himself or something important that has happened to him.
- In **Robert Browning's** (1812-89) monologues the speaker is a man who is **powerful** but **unhappy** in his private life, though he refuses to admit it.
- Plain, factual language.
- Popular with the middle class.

The early Victorian novel



The leading genre

For the first time in literary history, the novel became the leading genre. It reflected the new **social** and **economic** developments, scientific discoveries, and the ethical problems raised by the Industrial Revolution.

Novels were commonly read aloud by well-to-do families. **Public readings** were also common among the lower class, where larger groups listened to the best reader in the group.

The NELSON LIBRARY

The
Pickwick
Papers

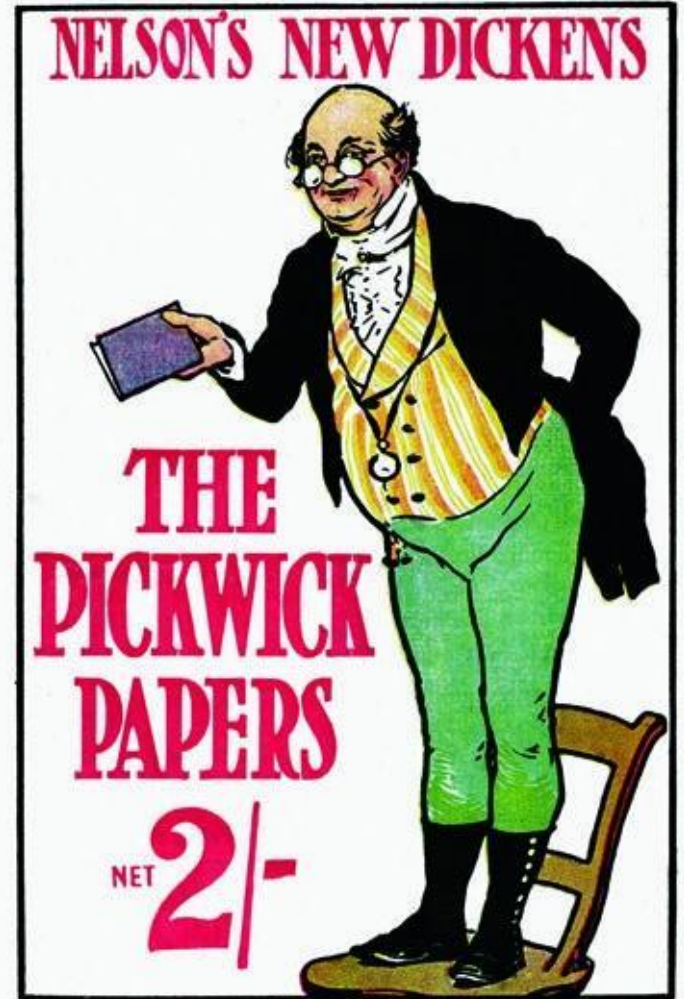
Charles
Dickens



With all the
Original
Illustrations

Nelson's
New
Dickens

1.



For Particulars, Titles, etc., see over.

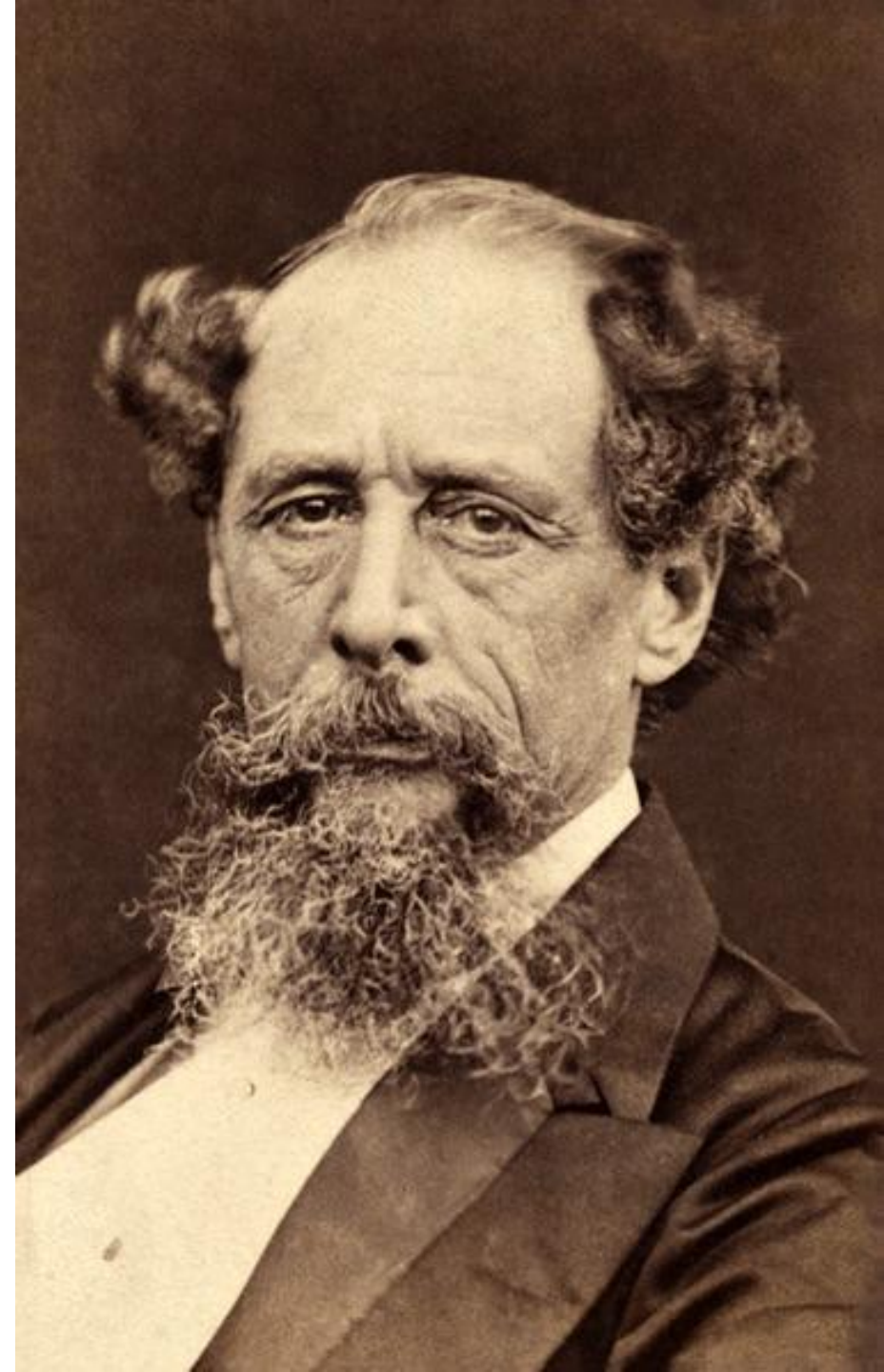
The writers' compromise

Generally speaking, Victorian readers expected to be **instructed** and at the same time to be **entertained**. Novelists were conditioned by their readers' expectations and so they clearly show both the desire to please and the fear of shocking. This explains why early Victorian novels present conformity to accepted **moral standards** together with a great **liveliness**.



Charles Dickens is the most representative novelist of the age; in his great novels he shows his consciousness of social injustice, the poverty and suffering of the masses, political incompetence and corruption.

Dickens' social concerns, however, don't make him seriously question the foundations of Victorian society.



Hard Times (1854) is typical of such ambiguity. It deals with the themes of the inhumanity of the **factory system** and the unnatural teaching methods of the **utilitarian philosophy**; it treats them with great participation and efficacy but, in the end, chooses a narrative solution that divides the characters into good and bad.

HARD TIMES.

FOR THESE TIMES.



BY CHARLES DICKENS.

LONDON:
BRADBURY & EVANS, 11, BOUVERIE STREET.
1854.

Novels of Romantic love

The Romantic Age in England never produced great novels of Romantic love: in Jane Austen, for instance, love is always subordinated to social conventions. Novels of Romantic love came with two early Victorian women novelists: **Emily Brontë** and **Charlotte Brontë**.



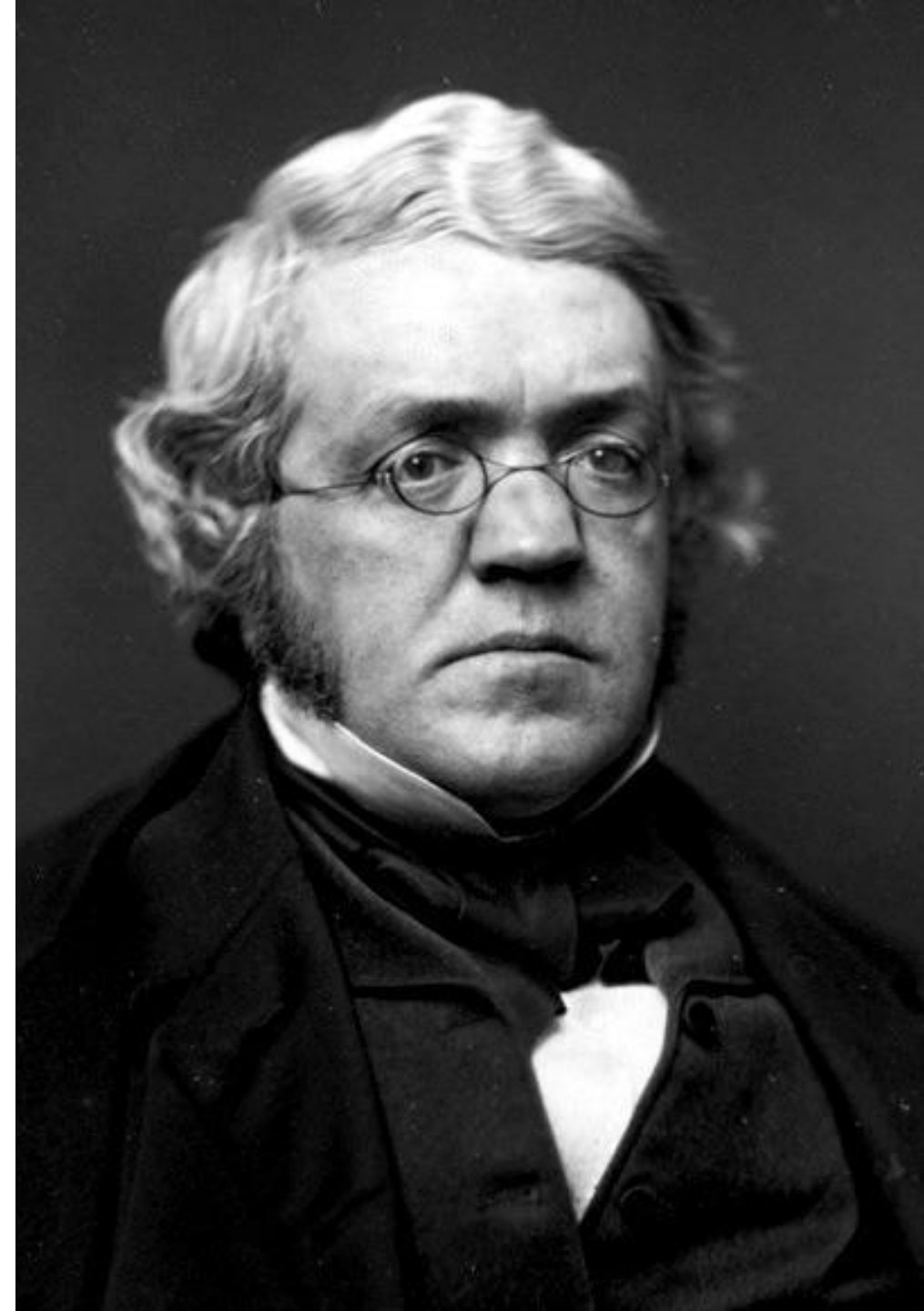
They lived a life of isolation in the countryside, but they were also well-educated and part of a larger literary family.

Emily's novel is the archetypal novel of Romantic love: in *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff, is dominated by his self-destructive passion for Catherine; Catherine, the heroine, is forced to sacrifice her love for Heathcliff for the sake of **social conventions**.



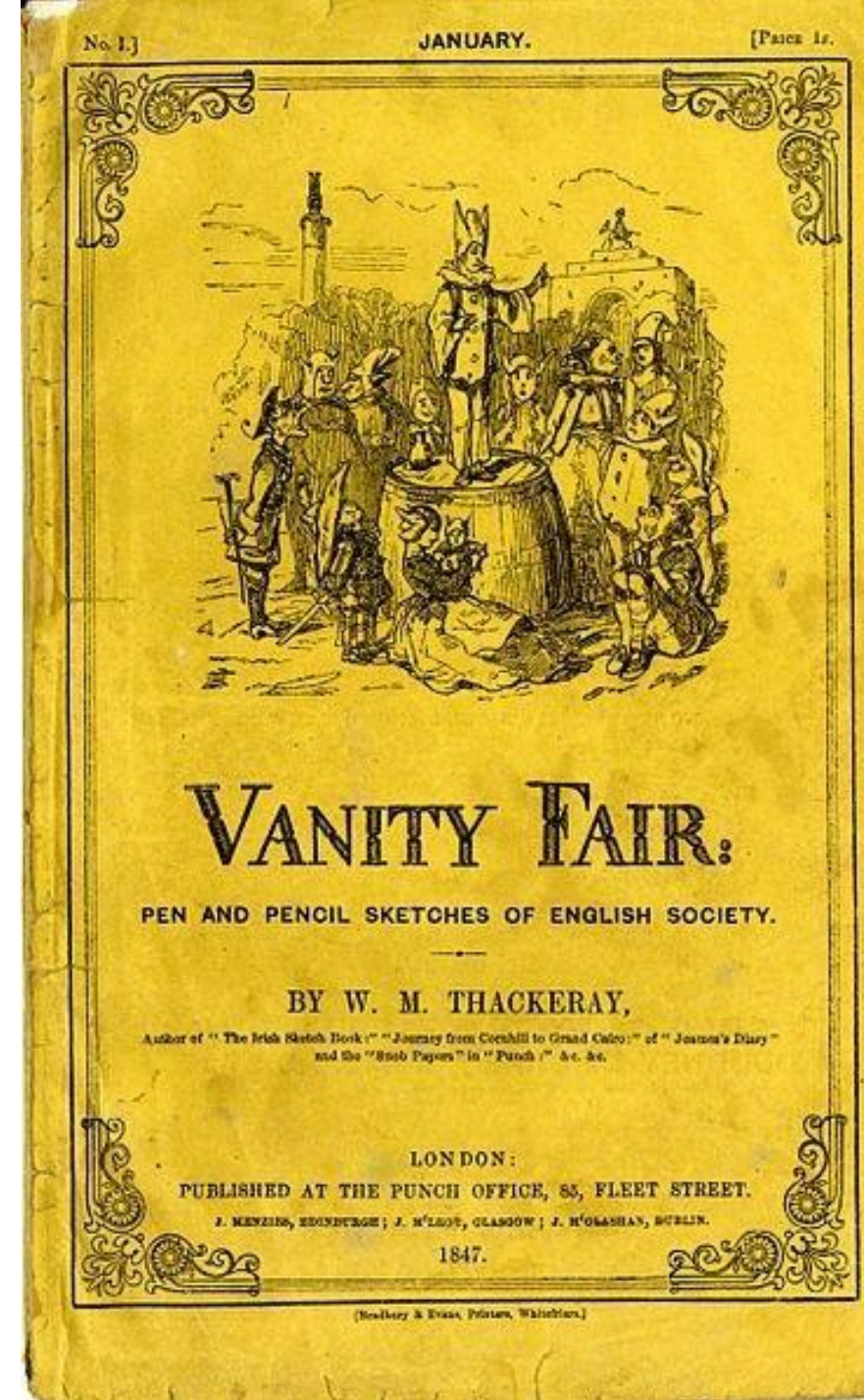
Novels without heroes

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) was Dickens' counterpart as a novelist. He reflected the point of view of the upper class. The scenes and characters of his greatest novel, *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), come from the upper class and are precisely described through Thackeray's refined style. The novel's title points to its author's intentions: to reveal the hypocrisy and lack of morals of the ruling class.



Technical features of the early Victorian novel

The general tendency of the period was towards a **mild realism**. The characters of the novel tended to be acceptable to the majority of readers, and identification on the part of the public was mainly in terms of **comedy** (especially Dickens' characters) or the **drama of passion** (especially the Brontë sisters' heroines).



Narrators were generally **omniscient**, at different levels: the narrator in Dickens, for example, is usually **a companion to the reader**, and shows sound common sense; in Charlotte Brontë it is a passionate **deeply-involved** first-person narrator. Emily Brontë, however, is a **notable exception** since in *Wuthering Heights* she makes use of three different narrators involving a shifting point of view.

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

A NOVEL,

BY

ELLIS BELL,

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

THOMAS CAUTLEY NEWBY, PUBLISHER,
72, MORTIMER ST., CAVENDISH SQ.

1847.

Early Victorian novel

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graph LR; A[Early Victorian novel] --> B[Novel reflected the new social and economic developments. Public readings were also common among the lower class. Victorian novels present conformity to accepted moral standards together with a great liveliness.]; A --> C[Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë wrote the first Victorian romantic love. The general tendency of the period was towards a mild realism. Narrator is omniscient.]
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- **Emily Brontë** and **Charlotte Brontë** wrote the first Victorian romantic love.
- The general tendency of the period was towards a **mild realism**.
- Narrator is **omniscient**.

The late Victorian novel

JAN. 9, 1895

THE SKETCH.

497



MR. OSCAR WILDE.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY ALFRED ELLIS, 177, BAKER STREET, N.W.

A general realistic trend

The late Victorian novel featured a much more decided tendency towards realism than that of the early Victorian novel. **Realism**, as an intellectual and literary movement, carefully studied the influence of the **social environment** on man. It also tended to concentrate on a **direct presentation** of its object, giving a precise picture of it avoiding any judgement or comment.



With its predilection for poor and degraded social settings and failed characters, it was in itself a **reaction against the triumphant Victorian ideology** and the official image of England as an imperial power and the world's leader in commerce and industry.



Crime and horror novels

The best writer in the horror and crime tradition, and one of the greatest English novelists by far, is **Robert Louis Stevenson**.

His masterpiece, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) on a second and deeper level casts serious doubts on human nature: man is in part inherently bad and science cannot hope to separate the good from the bad artificially, and so solve all the **problems** of mankind.

STRANGE CASE
OF
DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE

BY
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

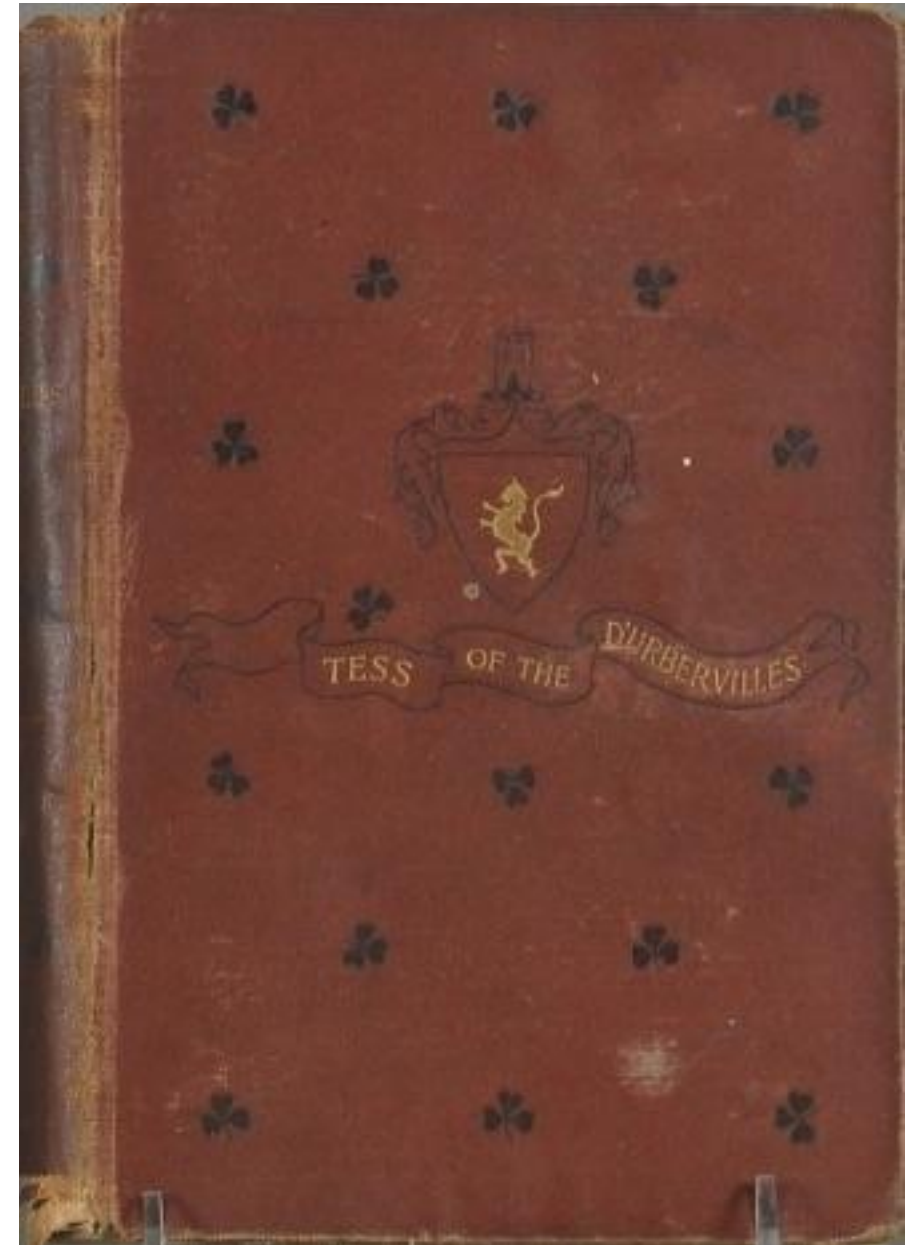


LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
1886

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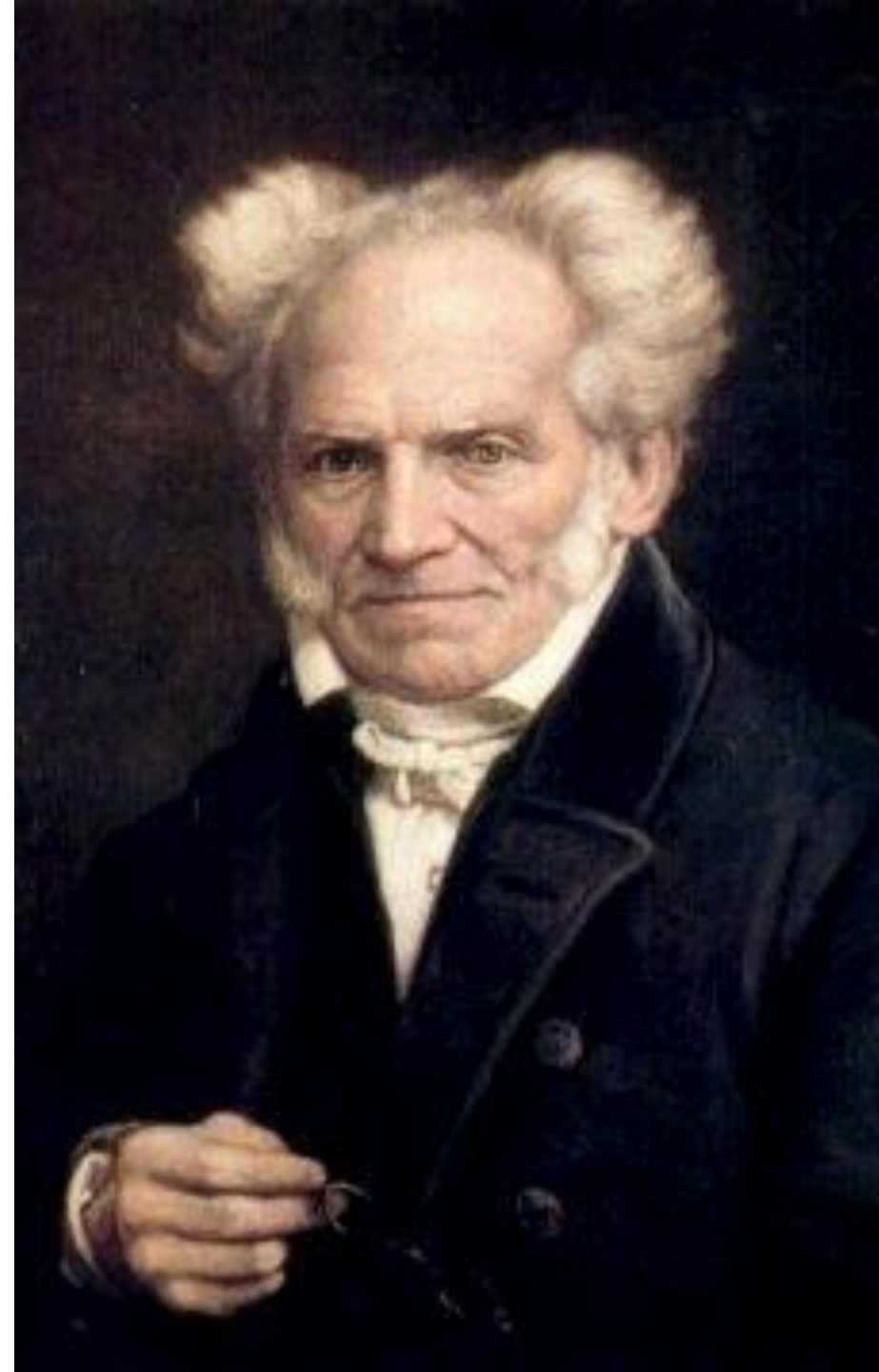
Novel of philosophical pessimism

An extremely original reaction to accepted Victorian standards came from **Thomas Hardy**. His stories are mostly set in **rural Wessex**, a fictional region in South-West England. This is the world of Hardy's major novels – such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) – which all have love as their central theme.



Hardy called these works “**Novels of Character and Environment**”, to stress the two elements that he thought shaped man’s destiny.

In contrast with a too easy Victorian optimism based on progress, he adopted, from the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the notion of an “immanent will”, a universal power indifferent to the fate of man.



Aestheticism

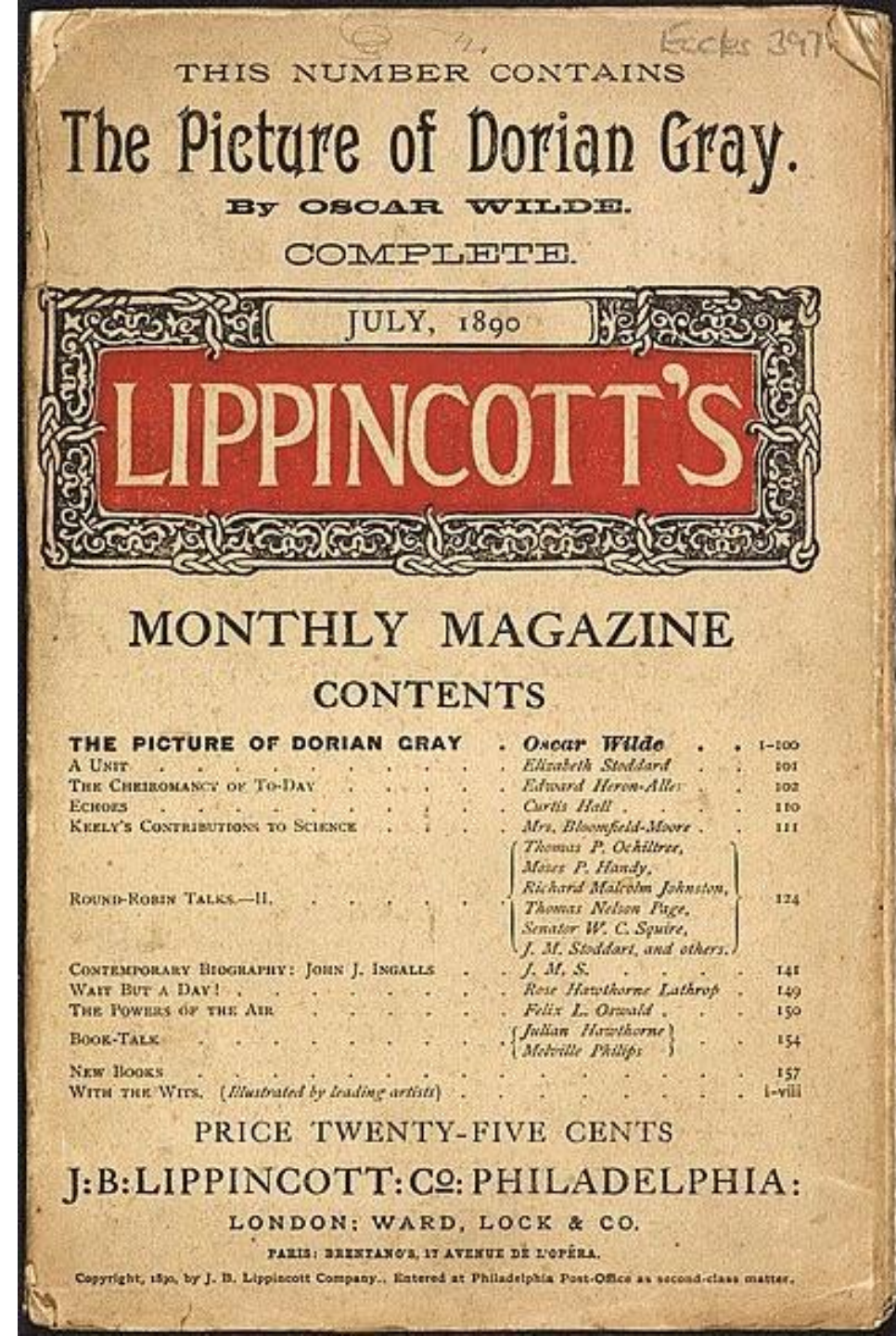
As the century went on, other novelists followed the general anti-Victorian trend. This culminated in the disengagement of the **Aesthetic Movement**, with its belief in “Art for Art’s sake”.

The Aesthetic creed derived from the French writer Théophile Gautier’s theory, summed up in his slogan “L’Art pour l’Art”, according to which art is good in its own right, an end in itself.



The movement spread all over Europe during the last part of the 19th century and became a cultural force in Britain in the 1890s. Its major representative was **Oscar Wilde**.

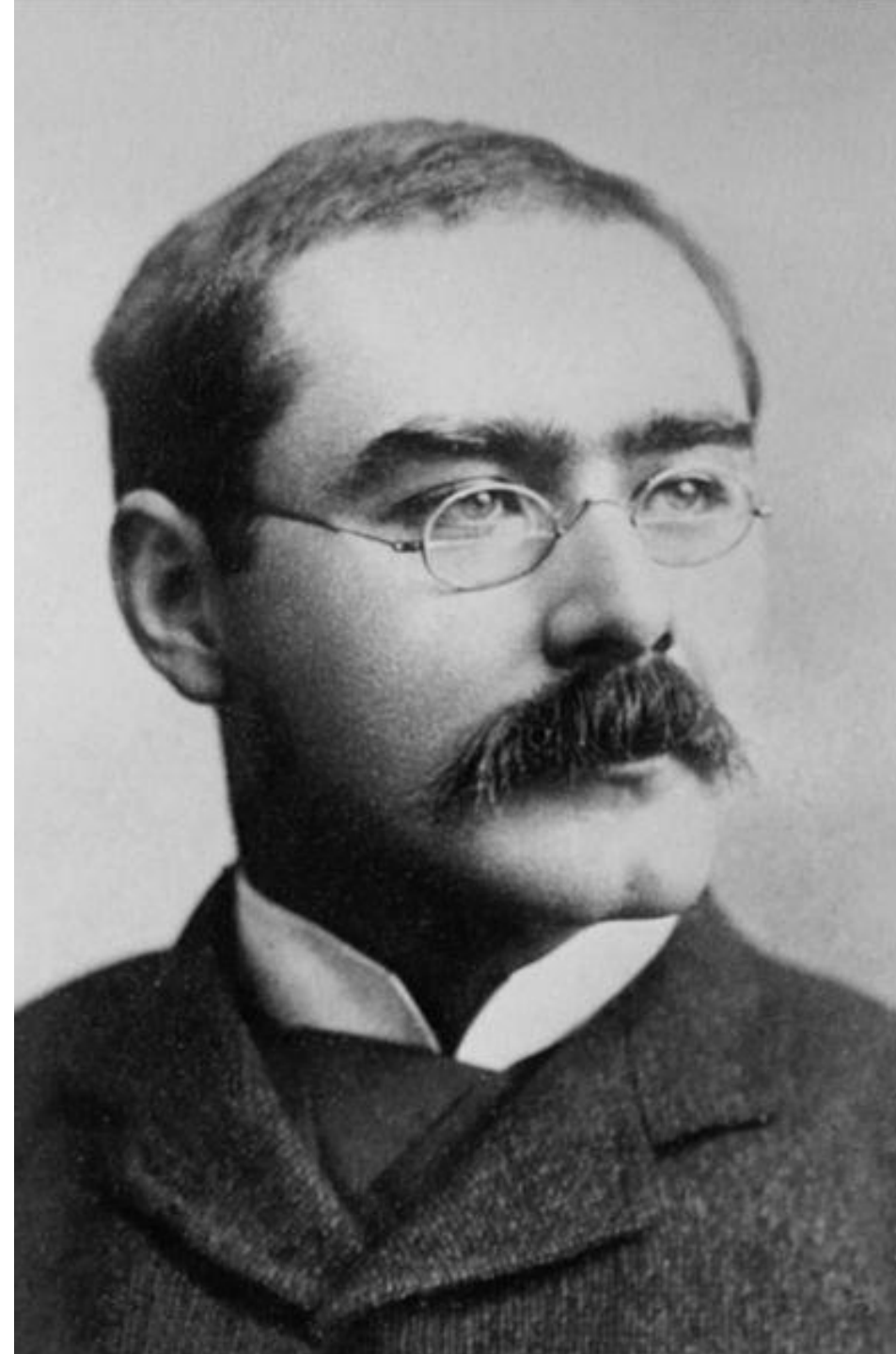
He only wrote one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which met with an immense success and is the most outstanding work of fiction in the Aesthetic tradition



First examples of colonial novels

The greatest expansion of the British Empire, in the last quarter of the 19th century, corresponds to the first examples of novels which both came from and were about the overseas colonies.

Rudyard Kipling was the first major writer to explore the **relations between the British and the Indians.**



He never seems seriously to question the **right of the British to be in India**, but, however, was seriously attached to and fascinated by the Indian continent. His best-known novel, *Kim* (1901), contains **colourful** and **passionate** descriptions of India's various races and beliefs.



Late Victorian novel

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- Features a tendency towards **realism**.
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Victorian drama

PUNCH'S FANCY PORTRAITS.—No. 43.



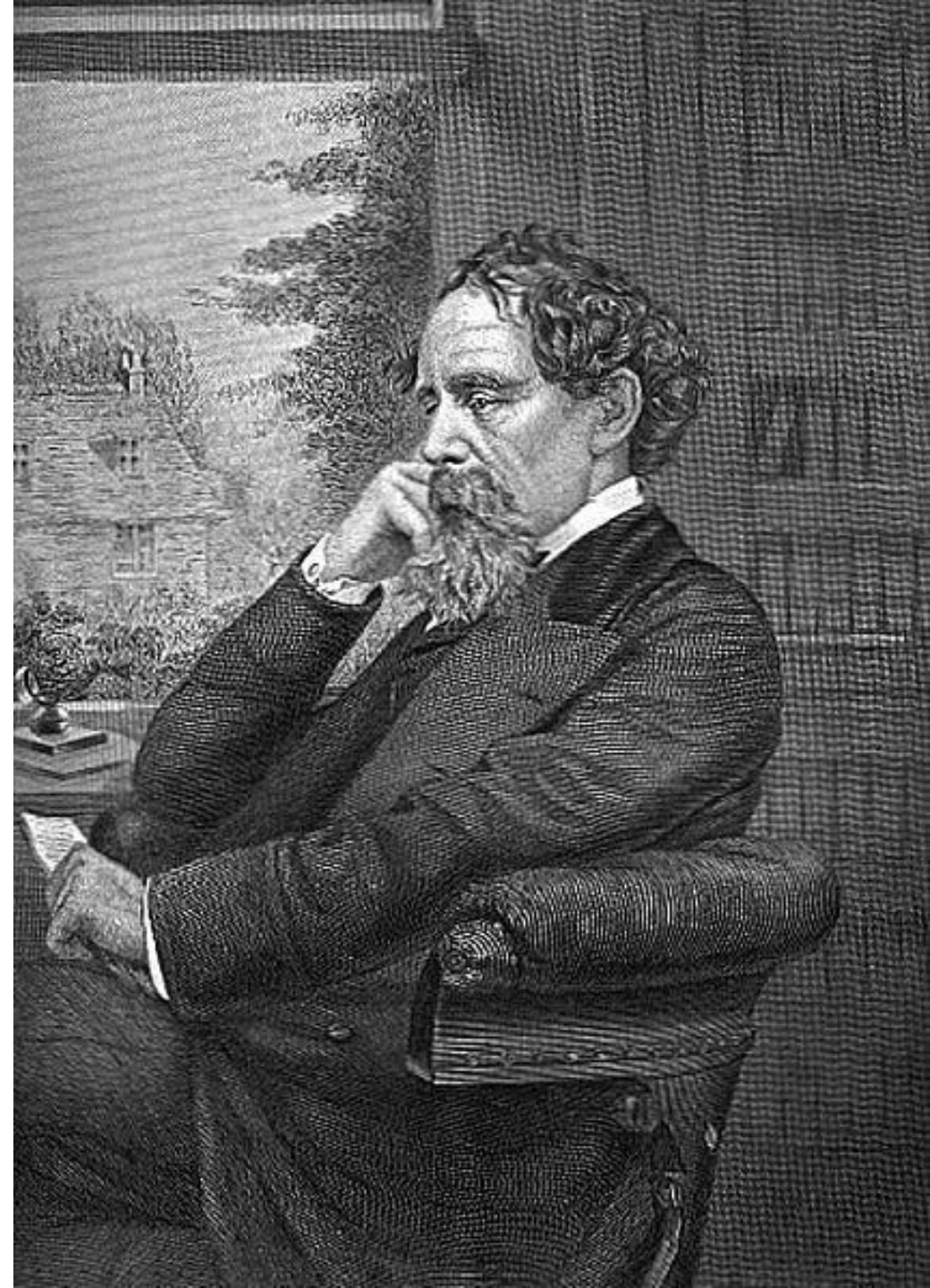
MR. W. S. GILBERT.

BUT IN SPITE OF SOME TEMPTATIONS
TO TRANSLATIONS AND SENSATIONS,
HE REMAINS—
A SORCERER YOUNG MAN,
A PINAFORE PIRATES MAN,
A BRILLIANT WHAT I CALL QUITE IDI-YACHT-ICAL
BALLADY BAB YOUNG MAN.

Drama in Victorian Age

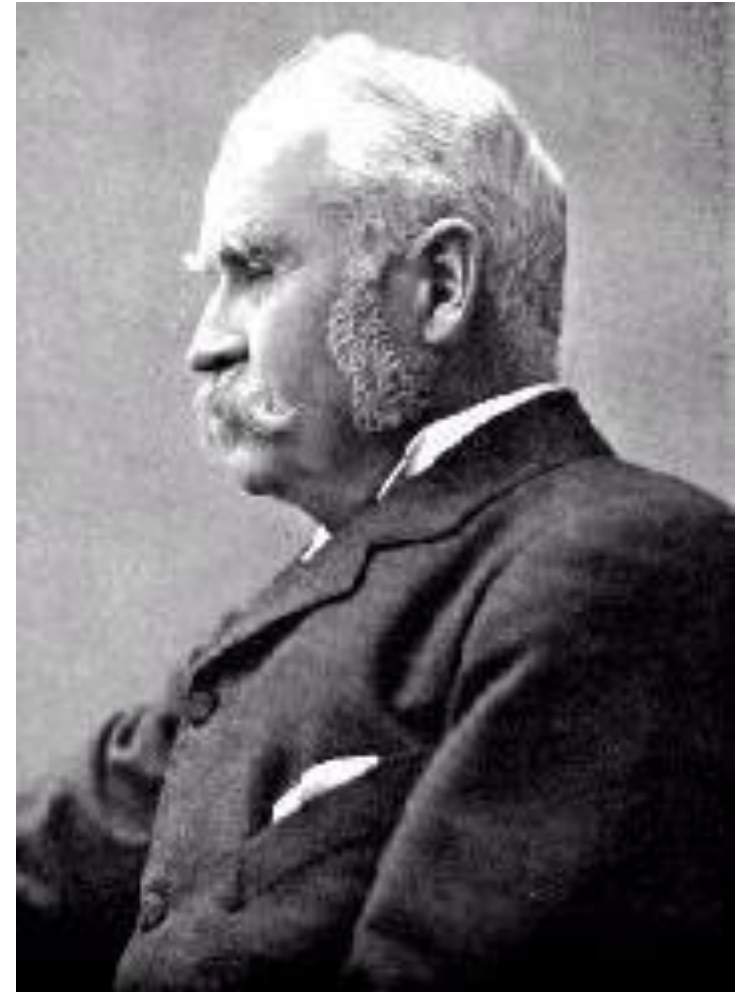
Apart from music- hall and farce, light **melodrama** was the favourite genre.

Melodrama was often adapted from popular French models and it also tended to follow the narrative of the Victorian novel, especially those of Dickens or the horror and crime novels.



The best plays before the triumphal appearance of Wilde on the London stage, however, were the **comic operas** by **William S. Gilbert** (1836-1911) and **Arthur Sullivan** (1842-1900), for which Gilbert wrote the libretti and Sullivan the music.

Their most interesting work is *Patience* (1881), a satire of the Aesthetic Movement and in particular of its main exponent: Oscar Wilde.



The new "comedy of manners"

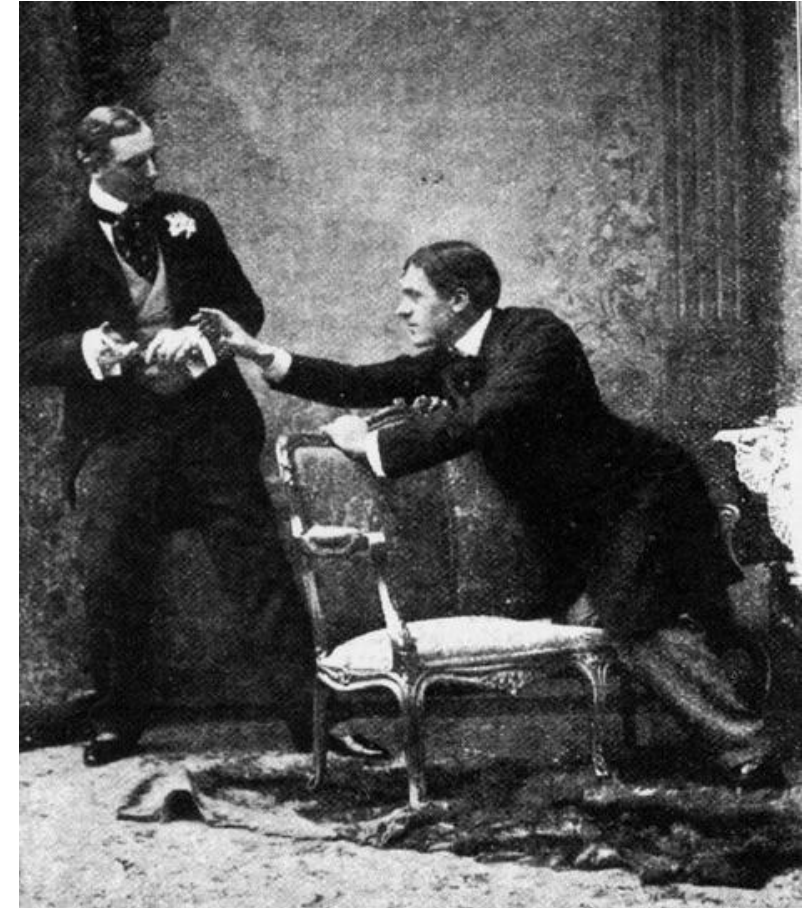
The era of modern British drama really begins with the plays of **Oscar Wilde** and **George Bernard Shaw** (1856-1950), in the 1890s, when for the first time since the Renaissance major writers devoted their literary talent to the stage and attracted the public just as poets and novelists did.

The **wit** of Wilde was carried further by Shaw who used it to **shock** the audience.



Wilde revived the Restoration “comedy of manners” adapted to Victorian society. His greatest play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), was immensely popular for its **wit and sparkling dialogues**.

Beneath its brilliant surface, though, the **superficial and shallow lives of the English upper classes** are exposed.



Victorian drama

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