

# READING AND WRITING WOMEN IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

## LEAD IN

**1** Look at this stereograph, representing a 'new woman' in the Victorian Age. Then answer the following questions.

1. What is the woman doing?
2. What is the man doing in the other room?
3. What does this picture reveal about the way in which 'reading women' were perceived in the Victorian Age?

Share your ideas with the rest of the class.



How did the increase in the number of female readers affect the development of Victorian novels?

**Women as readers.** One of the historical reasons for the success of novels in the Victorian Age is the role **women** played as **readers and consumers of fiction**. It is a historical fact that in the Victorian Age, more women, mainly of wealthy origins, were granted the opportunity to obtain a **formal education**, increasing women's presence within the Victorian reading public. Reading was also perceived as a perfectly **suitable activity** for a Victorian woman. It was considered a virtuous and acceptable pastime according to Victorian moral standards, which confined women almost exclusively to **the private sphere of their homes**.

The increase in the number of female readers in the Victorian Age implied the need for novelists to consider the tastes of this 'new' type of readers: many Victorian novelists tackled **topics** that were particularly **interesting to an audience composed of women**, such as the role of women in society, the dynamics of domestic life, the relationship between free will and marriage, and the need for women's financial independence. The relationship between women and reading became so common in the Victorian Age that many **visual artists represented it** in their paintings, transforming an exclusively male privilege into a less gender-related activity.



## VOCABULARY Lab

**2** Match the adjectives (1-6) with the nouns (a-f). Write a letter in the boxes. Check your answers in the paragraph above.

- |               |                          |              |                          |              |                 |
|---------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1. historical | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. reading   | <input type="checkbox"/> | a. public    | d. independence |
| 2. wealthy    | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. domestic  | <input type="checkbox"/> | b. education | e. life         |
| 3. formal     | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. financial | <input type="checkbox"/> | c. fact      | f. origins      |

← 'A leisure hour' by Myles Birket Foster. Illustration from *The Girl's Own Annual*, 1893/1894.

**FIRST** Reading and Use of English | Part 3

**3** For questions 1-8, read the text below. Use the word given in capitals at the end of some of the lines to form a word that fits in the gap in the same line.

**What were women allowed to read in the Victorian Age?** Novels were held **1** ..... for women, because they were seen as creatures of the imagination, of limited **2** ..... capacity, both frivolous and emotional.

The novel was the antithesis of practical and **3** ..... literature.

It demanded little, and its sole **4** ..... was to amuse readers with time on their hands.

Above all, the novel belonged to the domain of the **5** .....

**6** ....., reporting on public events, were usually a male preserve; novels, dealing with the inner life, were **7** ..... of the private sphere to which **8** .....-century bourgeois women were relegated.

SUIT  
INTELLECT

INSTRUCT  
OBJECT  
IMAGE  
NEWS  
REFLECT / NINETEEN

What role did Victorian female writers play in the history of English literature?

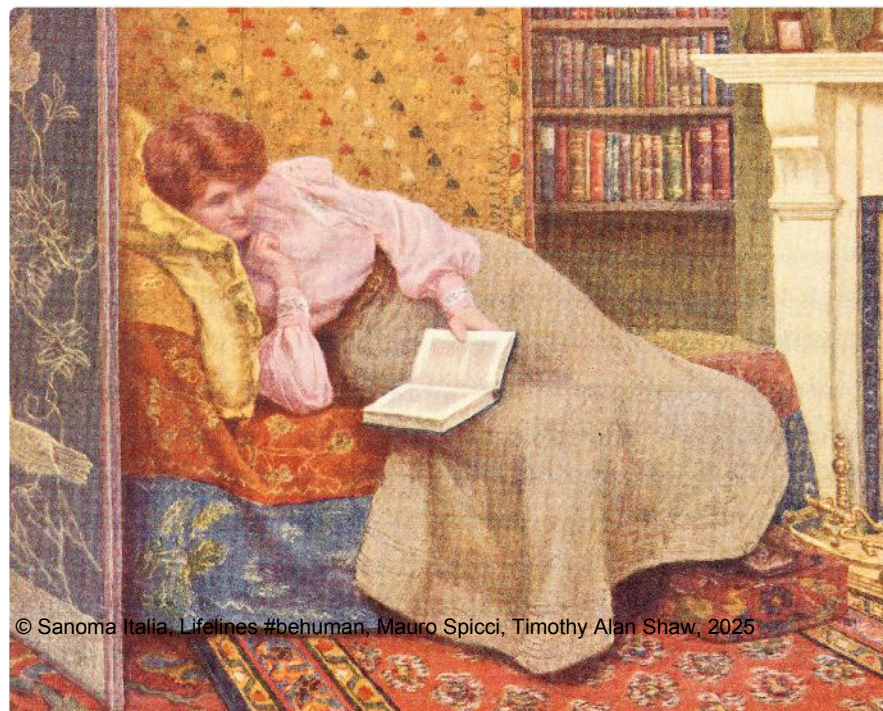
**Women writers.** In the Victorian Age, women were not only consumers of fiction; they also played a very active role in producing it. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, **many female writers published their literary works**, many of which became popular among readers and are still extremely popular today.

Given the strict moral boundaries which limited women's participation in the cultural life of the age, Victorian female writers had **to face many challenges and constrictions**: in particular, almost all of them had to hide their female identity under **male pseudonyms** to be able to have their works published and circulated. This is what happened, for instance, to **George Eliot**, whose real name (Mary Ann Evans) was hidden by a male pseudonym: her novels – including *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) – stood out for their realism and psychological insight. The same thing happened to the so-called **Brontë sisters**, three talented sisters who could not publish their works of fiction using their real names because that would have been unacceptable according to Victorian gender norms.

Victorian female writers played a significant role in the history of English and Western literature not only because of the literary quality of their works but also because they fiercely contributed to breaking down the boundaries that prevented women from having a voice in literature. Their works helped the reading public become aware of **women-related issues** and promoted **the development of women's rights and active participation** in a healthy society.



↑ Portrait of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), replica by François D'Albert Durade (1850), oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London.



← Woman Reading, from a painting by C.W. Hopper (19<sup>th</sup> century).

What do the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë explore?

**The 'golden isolation' of the Brontë sisters.** The Brontë sisters do not fall easily into any of the traditional classifications of Victorian literature. Emily and Charlotte were considered the most talented of the three sisters and published two of the most famous English novels of all time, respectively *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Jane Eyre* (1847). These two novels represented an alternative to the triumph of mainstream Victorian novels: rather than focusing on social issues, the works of the Brontë sisters explored the world of passion and feelings. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (→ p. 56) follows the literary tradition inaugurated by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) (→ volume 1, p. 384) and explores the **impossible love** between Heathcliff, a Byronic hero, and Catherine, a woman torn between passion and social conventions. The novel also explores the **condition of life of women** and their lack of independence in a world dominated by men as well as the contrast between individual aspirations and the limitations imposed by life.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (→ p. 66) revolves around a strong and passionate female character, Jane, who falls in love with a mysterious man called Rochester. Charlotte's novel contains a subtle exploration of the theme of **womanhood** and opens a window on the **dark sides of human personality** through the analysis of Jane's alter-ego Bertha Mason, Rochester's secret (and supposedly crazy) wife.

Having spent much of their lives in a remote village in Yorkshire, with little to no connections to the literary panorama of the age, the Brontë sisters represent a fascinating and unique case in the history of English literature. The **extreme isolation** in which they lived was not an obstacle, but gave them the opportunity to develop a very personal voice and to deploy a level of freedom no other Victorian writer could use: this allowed them to challenge old literary conventions and to produce works that are still considered extremely modern by contemporary readers.



Social Reading club  
with Betwyll

THE HIDDEN CANON

Leggi e commenta con  
gli studenti di tutta Italia!



↑ Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë painted by Branwell Brontë (ca. 1834), oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London. He painted himself among his sisters, but later removed his image.

## CHECKPOINT

### 4 Answer the following questions.

1. Why was reading considered an acceptable activity for Victorian women?
2. What topics were commonly addressed in Victorian novels to appeal to female readers?
3. Why did many Victorian female writers have to use male pseudonyms?
4. How did Victorian female writers contribute to developing women's rights and participation in society?
5. What is peculiar about Emily and Charlotte Brontë's novels?

## ORACY Lab PRESENTATION

- 5 Use information contained in the paragraphs above to make a 2-minute presentation of the role of women in Victorian literary history.

## WRITING Lab SHORT ESSAY

- 6 Focus on the picture you analysed in the Lead In activity. What aspects of Victorian society does it highlight? Are they still relevant today? Write your ideas in a short essay (max. 250 words). You may want to focus on:

- gender-related home activities;
- the right to 'free time' for men and women;
- the equal/unequal distribution of household tasks at home.