

Social Representation in Nineteenth-Century Literature



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● Research Outline

Science and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Although we are used to thinking of science and the humanities as separate disciplines, in the nineteenth century this division was not recognized. Science and literature shared a common language and cultural heritage, both questing for “origins” and understanding the nature of the relationship between the individual and the society.

Cultural critics now acknowledge how profoundly the broad concerns of nineteenth-century science shaped contemporary thought, providing crucial narrative models of social and organic change that were actively adapted and used by nineteenth-century novelists, but as yet there has been little work done on the close connections between Victorian narrative and the wider concerns of the emerging materialist science of the self. Therefore, I aim to explore the exchanges and interactions between scientific and literary materials.

In light of historical backgrounds, above all the “discovery” of the unconscious and the developments of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century, I try to interpret literary texts which include active representations of the contemporary society; they reflect on various problems based on class and gender and they precisely correspond to social changes.

I focus on some of the wide range of writing on the self identity in the growing area of mental science that emerged in the nineteenth century. My concerns include the complex relationship between the mind and the body; the workings of individual consciousness; the power of unconscious processes and the limits of self control; the problematic boundary between normal and aberrant states of the mind, and the connections between individual life and long-term genealogy. Together they formed an intricate, varied, and at times contradictory discourse that permeated Victorian intellectual culture.

Victorian Novels, Contemporary Culture, and Modern Criticism

Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) and George Eliot (1819-1880) took up and reworked the widespread current interest in the slippery definition of madness, the mutability of the self, the problematic nature of memory; while the various kinds of rational explanation of the supernatural provided a crucial source of narrative tension, testing and expanding the boundaries of realism.

I aim to interpret Victorian narrative from a multilateral standpoint, especially within the paradigm of political, cultural and scientific discourses of the time. By investigating the mutual interactions of Victorian texts and various cultural events, I focus attention on the self identity involved in the interactions, and eventually try to illuminate the systematization of knowledge in the Victorian period.



Charles Dickens (1812-1870)