

**UNIVERSITATEA „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA”, IAȘI
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**IRONY AND/OR REALISM IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE/DISCURSUL
IRONIC ȘI/SAU REALIST ÎN LITERATURA VICTORIANĂ
(CHARLES DICKENS, WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY, GEORGE
ELIOT)**

-ABSTRACT OF THE PAPER-

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Our paper, permissively called IRONY AND/OR REALISM IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE, with reference to Charles Dickens', George Eliot and William Makepeace Thackeray' works, wants to bring face to face two of the most controversial literary devices existing nowadays in the literary criticism. It is about the coexistence of the irony and realism in the same writings, with all their achievements and drawbacks in conceptualization, and if indeed they fully complete each other in a mixture that unravels the true essence of spirit. We have thus assumed the mission of demonstrating that the Irony and Realism, analyzed from the point of view of some of the most suggestive works published by the above named authors, are the exponent of some certain kind of literature, that was called, according to the approached topics and the style of writing, Victorian literature. The concept seemed convenient to us from the point of view of our research as well as in order to solve most of the controversies related to the literary status of the coexistence of the two concepts in the same works, considering it sufficient in holding the literacy of these publications exposed to prejudices for a long time. What is more, argumenting our scientific approach with examples from the literature of the Victorian age, we have inevitably directed our research in the side of emphasizing some distinctive particularities that should bring into discussion a way of being and writing about an age. Finally, looking for an interference point for our research, we have considered that the tie that should bring a new air to the interpreting approach results from a retrospective view towards the evolution of the concept of irony and realism, of whose recovery depends after all the orientation towards these of the modern writers, because, according to the socio-cultural contexts that have characterized the Victorian society during the 19th century, the irony and realism were perceived under different aspects that have, after all, contributed to the evolution of the realistic-ironic writing. We have this way assumed the trajectory of a demonstration in which the concepts have further become clearer, each of them imposing at some point the necessity of generalizing under some functional particularities that reconstruct the criteria of literacy, redefining them at the same time. What is more, opting for the particularizing the analysis towards the use of irony and realism in the Victorian writing, we have followed the way in which the three narratorial instances, so unitary even through the nature of the autobiographic agreement (author, narrator, character) prove their functionality in revealing the constants of some certain type of writing, the Victorian one.

The Victorian Literature raises constantly the interest of the contemporary criticism through the numerous controversies that it creates, as well as through the creating effervescence of the authors. Thus, far from obeying to the literary patterns since then, the Victorian Literature makes its best identity from the view of the new

criteria that it imposes to the criticism. Best illustrating the idea that in the space of humanistic studies and especially of literature, nothing is definitive, it comes to impose new ways of critical thinking and especially modern approaches that other literary trends relatively miss, or, at least, do not have it at its maximum.

In this context, the paper we propose has in view exactly the strict delimitation of these aspects that make out of the Victorian Literature, with special reference to Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and George Eliot, a field of innovation. The Victorian literature has been staying in the shadow of the revolutionary behavior of the British society's industrialization process. Through an integrating approach, the majority of the social and cultural trends belonging to the industrialization were associated to the same tendency of rebellion within a society dominated by conservative moral principles. There can be noticed a 'moral fight' worn between the old aristocracy and new bourgeoisie, in order to conquer the ideological territory. The problematic of differentiating within this approach between the social and the cultural nature intervened though in the moment in which the literary productions of some community members started to reflect their specific features compared to the dominant literature, on the one hand, and 'the other literatures', on the other. As a consequence, we can presently discuss about a literature based upon philosophical principles, but in which the ideological characteristics and the social preoccupations have created distinct directions: the literature with social background (the careful investigation of the social strata), the loss of authorship (the author is lost in the system), the introspection (psychological self analysis of the hidden parts of personality). The Realism is no more perceived as being a flat description of reality, but an interpretation of it.

Another sociological issue connected with the period would be the feminism. In the 19th century, the history of women cannot be isolated from the history of the feminist movement. The cause of this movement was, as Ray Strachery calls it, "the eternal prison-house of the wife." The concept of 'feminism' sporadically appears only in 1901. It was launched shortly before in France and was to gain international spread only in the 20th century. Though, its meaning was known even since the 19th century: it was about the women's right of determining their place in society by themselves, about the development of personality and, as well, as they used to emphasize, about promoting the general welfare. The historical reflections of the protagonists clearly show that they were aware of the fact that indeed, the problem of women was an old one, but, at the same time, marked by the changes brought by an own present to each period. It was about socio-economic issues, as well as about cultural ones.

Nowadays, also, the classical feminist movement is regarded again as a cultural learning process that crossed with the gradual or revolutionary transformations of the century. During this learning process, the women have acted and reacted also against some other movements and loyalties, represented by the religion or class, of nation or the empire and had into view how many were the fields that bore the trace of the hierarchical order of the sexes. The new and old have confronted or mingled, more or less, in the way of approaching of the sexes' problem. It has become an ordinary thing nowadays to be attributed to the 'Victorian' period (queen Victoria has reigned between 1837 and 1901) or to the 'bourgeois' society a specific image, clearly and precisely drowned, of the relation between sexes: a strict delimitation and distinct spheres between man and woman, a net boundary between the private character of the feminine existence and the public one, of the masculine existence, a polarization and a 'ontological' side of the specific character of sexes, whose particularities contrast and complete mutually.

According to a saying, the work and the 'world' belonged to the man, the home and the domestic life belonged to the woman. While researching the exegesis of the Victorian literature, upon which the present paper focuses, we can notice a constant preoccupation for defining, from within, of the resorts that lead to its emergence. Therefore, may it be about a sociological projection, characteristic to the initial phase of this literature, or a hermeneutical one, specific to the middle and final phase of the trend, the Victorian literature raises the reader's interest due to the different areas it approaches, but also thanks to a relative reticence manifested by the critics.

In this environment, the paper we propose wants to be a trial of widening of the critical horizon, at a theoretical level, as well as in what regards the interpretation of some specific texts. Moreover, taking into account the fact that the Victorian literature still echoes in the works of some contemporary writers, it does not totally exclude the critical focus upon some of its innovative features, especially because of the fact that the reinventing of the shapes and of the ideas contents is one of the key elements of the Victorian vision. The perspective this analysis proposes is not a historical one, because from the diachronical point of view the texts are relatively close. Starting from some conceptual delimitation that has been already made in the field criticism, the paper proposes a bilateral approach of the concepts/ideas of 'irony', with all its aspects, 'realism', 'introspection' and 'perception of reality' in the Victorian literature. It is about making the conceptual distinction between the composing elements of the Victorian literature, in order to justify the opportunity of placing these themes in the center of the auctorial preoccupations and of approaching, through analysis, a corpus of works belonging to some authors in the Victorian period, placed under the same dominant feature. A necessary distinction would be the one between the classical perception of the terms of 'realism' and 'irony', manifested under different means in literature and the way they are used by the Victorian authors upon whom we stopped in our study, in order to highlight certain aspects of reality.

Thus, the Dickensian writing confers a new interpretation to the concept of Realism. If up to that period, the realism was only a rigid, traditional, irrelevant interpretation of reality, with Dickens there are made the first steps towards a new interpretation of reality: the transfer from the social perspective to the psychological one. As well as at George Eliot, the realist character becomes the victim of the oppositions. The boundary amongst these oppositions becomes so relative that the character cannot any longer make a sure distinction between good or bad, by himself. The character becomes the victim of this indecision.

In what regards the work of William Makepeace Thackeray, we can notice a new form of psychological representation; the tendency is of migrating from melodrama to tragedy. The irony also becomes a significant means in the Victorian novel. It represents a discrepancy between the reality and the appearance. We are thus found in front of a complex issue, within which the distinctions of a hermeneutic kind seem to be completed by the natural ones, those related to genre, but also the psychological and social ones.

The work corpus thus comprises a series of titles grouped according to formal criteria, in order to simplify the analytical procedures. Conversely, taking into account the fact that another specific feature of the Victorian literature is represented even by a deliberately destruction and reinventing of the forms (the genre jumpers) even this distinction can prove to be irrelevant in some spots. But being subsumed to the same question of the psychological realism and the discrepancy between appearance and evidence, they justify their relevance within the belonging to the same trend and especially to a unique vision.

The main objective of the proposed paper was that of achieving a hermeneutical synthesis of the idea of realism and irony in the Victorian literature. But given the interdisciplinary issue that the topic in itself approaches, we can distinguish amongst some subsidiary objectives, characteristic to each part of this paper. Therefore, the proposed study had as one of the objectives the making of some historical and social correlations with the literary phenomena, in its initial stance, up to the present manifestation. Moreover, within the analysis we can also find the intention of identifying those features that make out of the Victorian literature a literary trend in itself, beyond the programmatic preoccupations of the industrial revolution.

Another objective of the paper was the comparative analysis of the topics subsumed to the same ideology. Though, the approach had as an aim a systematization of the concepts sporadically met in the specialized criticism, in order to offer the approximate image of the Victorian vision upon the two literary features, irony and realism. These expand the theoretical analysis so that to justify a further putting into practice of the principles thus established. This part of the paper had this time as objective the concrete analysis of the literary works, the selection being based upon the structural and thematic differences that lead towards a justification of the initial presumption, that according to which the Victorian literature especially values the ideas of irony and realism and their subsidiary topics.

A third important objective of this paper was that of originality, because the topic approach was not always present in the exegesis of the trend. Moreover, through integrating the historical, psychological, social and literary aspects, the paper wanted itself to be an instrument in the further analyses of the literary phenomena brought into discussion. As a dominant feature, the study we propose attended to be a hermeneutical type of approach, this fact being justified firstly by the study of some works of varied complexity, but also by the opening it allows to interdisciplinarity. So the research developed through studying, in parallel, of the sources, the critical synthesis of the opinions, the analysis of the works, based upon deductions and demonstrated hypotheses, as well as through appealing to the issues of the connected fields-history, philosophy, sociology, psychology.

The first chapter of the paper, *The Argument*, proposed an approach from the historic and social perspective, of the genesis of the Victorian literature in the British space, in order to differentiate between the socio-historical and literary nature and to identify within the critical preoccupations those characteristic features.

The second chapter, *Theories and Systematizations of the Concept of Irony*, is a theoretical approach of the concept of irony, from the diachronic perspective of its usage in literature, as well as a categorizing of the concept.

The third chapter, *From Irony to Realism, a Possible Utopia*, consists of a hermeneutical approach of using the realism in works, as well as the innovations brought by using them. We have tried to demonstrate the possibility of irony that supposes the usage of the figurative style, in texts of realistic nature. The approach also comprises psychological and social references, especially in the extent in which being aware of a different social status and its acceptance within the community is made on the background of the two components. Thus, in order to highlight the relations established between these concepts and the way they influence the literary productions, is one of the objectives of this study.

The fourth chapter, *Charles Dickens - an ironic representation of reality* analyses the environment the Dickensian novel develops, as well the influence it has upon the characters' actions and decisions.

The fifth chapter, named *George Eliot - Realism converted into psychology* has into view the management of the realist devices in elaborating the literary work and the psychological impact the social environment has upon the characters, with direct reference to the evolution of the character according to the society.

The sixth chapter, *William Makepeace Thackeray - A realistic approach of the ironic side of life*, deals with the way in which the two literary trends, the irony and the realism are used by the author in order to highlight the characters' becoming and their attitude to facing the social ascension and decadence.

The seventh chapter, and the last, as a conclusion, called *Irony and/or Realism?* develops mainly the identification and analysis of the previous relations, according to the characters, within the literary works. The chapter tries to be a practical application in which the results of the theoretical research in the initial chapters are corroborated with the personal interpretation of the texts. Thus, the irony is mainly related to the Victorian literature. While some critics - theorists of irony- reconstruct (Wayne C. Booth) or deconstruct (Paul de Man), the Victorian writers do both in using irony. While the deconstructionists insist on the death of the meaning and reconstructionists pretend that the meaning is fixed and final, the Victorian ironists are less concerned with the meaning than with the possibility of meaning.

In what regards Realism, it is different for any single author, based upon his or her life experiences, just as any reader may interpret a different reality than another. However, in general, realism emerged as a form of fictional literature that attempted to capture qualities of real people and events. Traditionally, in Realistic writing, there is a tendency of good characters to end well, while the bad characters end in dismay. Well, in Victorian literature the reality disagrees, as the actual people exhibit a complexity of character and outcomes in their lives. The 19th century witnessed the development of a variety of narrative approaches in the attempt to depict, even solve, the social and cultural dilemmas. This thing resulted in the Victorian novels and the culture they respond to.

The work we propose is a theoretical synthesis upon the complex Victorian issue in the British literary environment, but also an analysis of the particular aspects that make the authors thus named to be representative. From the theoretical point of view, the study covers general aspects related to the Victorian literature, operating the necessary distinctions within the field in discussion and focusing the hermeneutical practice in the respect of identifying the modalities in which the issue of the terms "realism" and "irony" is valued in the individual auctorial visions.

From the analytical point of view, the proposed paper approaches a corpus of works selected from the bibliography of the Victorian writers, grouped according to the approach given to the literary terms of "irony" and "realism". As a result of this study, there appears the possibility to develop a series of theoretical aspects, such as the innovations brought to the realism in the Victorian novels, from the perspective of multiple approaches, historical, social and psychological, as well as upon the varied and innovative means of using the concept of "irony". The study also questions the possibilities of interdisciplinary approach, the problem of the social migration from margin up to the center and back, according to the social class, issue that is to be put into practice especially in the contemporary environment.

In conclusion, for the Victorian writers and works we have approached in our paper, the meaning rendered by Irony and Realism is neither fixed, nor absent. It is always becoming, achieving itself in different styles, forms, ways and perspectives, all these driving to a provisional meaning, sometimes perhaps nothing more than a fiction, but nevertheless an enabling fiction in a world of possibilities.

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