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19th century literature reflects modern life

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Regional

19th century literature reflects modern life

Most of us have read or seen adaptations of Victorian literature – think Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and the Brontë sisters. Even if you’ve never read one of their books or seen a film adaptation, their names are solidly fixed in popular culture. This was a period during which English literature became extremely popular worldwide, but also a period full of contradictions in the minds of those who lived through it.

“There are so many ideas circulating in the air during the Victorian times that some people saw salvation in industry and hard work, others in religion. Others saw it in aesthetics and beauty, still others in the family structure,” said Helena Gurfinkel, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. “Victorians are us and they are just as confused as we are.”

Gurfinkel’s route to become an English professor is an unusual one. She was born in a non-English speaking country and went to college in another non-English speaking country.

“I started studying English in the third grade and I just fell in love with the sound of the language,” she said. “I read ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ using a dictionary, so I struggled through it, but I fell in love with it and that strengthened my decision in terms of my career choices.” Because of that one book, she said, she became interested in Victorian literature at the age of 10. Born in Moscow, Russia, she obtained her bachelor’s degree in English language and literature from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a master’s degree in English literature from Northeastern University in Boston and her doctorate in English literature from Tufts University in Massachusetts.

Victorian literature is usually characterized by its idealization of life, love, luck and happy endings. But that is not



Dr. Helena Gurfinkel

always the case.

“Not all Victorian novels are like that and some of them end fairly unhap-

Photo courtesy of Denise McDonald

pily, or they end happily but if you read between the lines, not everything is perfect, not everything is ideal,” Gurfinkel

said. “Charles Dickens was actually one of the people who very smartly ended his novels in a sort of a bit of a sad note. Writers such as Dickens, Wilde, or Disraeli were very critical of the connection between the industrial revolution and the work ethic, knowing that it didn’t take into account the predicament of the poor, the predicament of child labor, the predicament of the people who migrated from rural areas to the cities to work in the newly emerging industries in cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. So, they were very critical about this ethics of work, which they considered the ethics of greed.”

Despite the horrors of child labor, the Victorian era also saw the birth of children’s literature, as exemplified by “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and “Peter Pan.”

“The emergence of the middle class family became basically the mainstream ideal family,” Gurfinkel explained. “It tends to idealize the child, makes the child special. It idealizes this parental love, so I think that that phenomenon may have been in response to the emergence of this market for children’s literature.”

This era also gave rise to literature that dealt with the influence of science on human existence. as exemplified by Robert Louis Stevenson in “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“The Victorians had a conflicting relationship with science,” Gurfinkel said. “On the one hand, scientific progress was responsible for the industrial revolution and the increase of wealth and development of society. On the other hand, Charles Darwin made this enormous impact in the middle of the 19th century, causing a lot of people completely to change their view of the world and produced a crisis of faith.”

Despite the fact that most of her stu-

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dents never studied Victorian literature in high school, she said that she sees a very positive response once they are introduced to it.

“Even though the students don’t know much about the Victorian period, their expectation sometimes is that the novels are going to be long, boring and written in a language to which now is difficult to relate,” she said. “But once we start talking about the extent to which the Victorians influenced our world, the extent to which their concerns are our concerns and the richness of the language, things get easier.”

Gurfinkel has authored a book titled, “Outlaw Fathers: Queering Patriarchy in Victorian and Modern British Literature,” which will soon be published. She is currently working on questions of ethics as they appeared in late Victorian literature.

“The concept of ethics that I’m choosing is actually very different from both what they had and what we have today,” she said. “That’s the concept of ethics that the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan came up with. It’s called ‘Ethics of Psychoanalysis.’ What’s interesting to me is that even though that concept appeared in the 1950s, you can find certain ideas in late Victorian novelists that basically pre-empt that concept of ethics, which is very unconventional.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.