

**REPRESENTATION OF DISEASES AS SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN  
REALISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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**Abstract:** *This article includes representation of diseases as symbols of social issues in realism in English literature, in Victorian age in the works of some writers as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Bram Stoker, Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Hardy. These writers used diseases as the symbol of some social problems.*

**Key words:** *Victorian age, symbolize, realism, social issue, fatal, immorality, consumption.*

In English literature of the 19th century, the portrayal of diseases was often used as a metaphor for social issues. Realist writers used diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and syphilis to symbolize the societal problems of their time.

The use of diseases as symbols of social issues in literature was a powerful tool for realist writers to critique the societal problems of their time. These writers used diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and syphilis to highlight and comment on the societal issues that plagued their societies.

For instance, tuberculosis was a prevalent disease during the Victorian era and was commonly associated with poverty and overcrowding. In literature, TB became a symbol of the societal issue of the poor living conditions of the working class. The death of the protagonist due to TB in Charles Dickens' "Bleak House" highlights the societal problem of inadequate living conditions for the poor. This use of TB as a symbol of societal issues was also present in other literary works, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton," where the disease was used to represent the fatal consequences of industrialization and urbanization.

Similarly, cholera was a water-borne disease that was often associated with the unsanitary conditions of the urban poor. In Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South," the outbreak of cholera is used to symbolize the social issue of industrialization and the exploitation of workers. The disease was also used to highlight the class differences and the unequal distribution of resources in society. In Dickens' "Hard Times," the outbreak of cholera is used to criticize the utilitarian philosophy that prioritized economic progress over the well-being of the people.

Syphilis, on the other hand, was a disease that was associated with sexual promiscuity and immorality. Its use in literature was a commentary on the social issue of the double standards of morality for men and women. In Thomas Hardy's "Jude the Obscure," the protagonist's wife contracts syphilis from her previous lover, highlighting the societal

problem of the unequal treatment of men and women in matters of sexual morality. The use of syphilis as a symbol of societal issues was also present in other literary works, such as Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts," where the disease was used to criticize the hypocrisy of Victorian society and the destructive consequences of suppressing sexuality.

The Victorian era was a time of widespread disease and illness. Life expectancy was low, and many people suffered from severe and life-threatening conditions. It was during this time that authors began to use literature as a way to shed light on the impact of illness on their characters, and to draw attention to the social, economic, and cultural realities of the time.

One of the most striking examples of this is Charles Dickens' "Bleak House," where the character Jo is afflicted by tuberculosis, which was common among the poor during the Victorian era. Although Jo is a minor character, his slow, painful death is a powerful commentary on the social and economic inequalities of Victorian society. Dickens uses Jo's illness to highlight the living conditions in Victorian London, where overcrowding and poverty were rampant.

Another example of disease in Victorian literature is Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre." The character Helen Burns dies of consumption (tuberculosis) at Lowood School, where she was a student. Consumption was a common disease among young women during the time, and Bronte's portrayal of Helen's death serves as a reminder of the harsh realities of life for women during this period.

Bram Stoker's "Dracula" also explores the theme of disease, with the vampire representing a disease that spreads through Victorian society, corrupting and destroying those it infects. Although Dracula is a work of fiction, it reflects the fear and uncertainty surrounding disease during the Victorian era, as well as the societal anxieties about sexuality and the body.

Finally, in Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," the character Alec d'Urberville contracts syphilis, which leads to his eventual downfall. This portrayal of syphilis as a disease that leads to social and moral decay reflects the Victorian era's attitudes toward sexually transmitted diseases and the societal shame associated with them.

These examples, along with many others, demonstrate how disease was woven into the fabric of Victorian life and impacted the literature of the time. By exploring these themes, authors were able to provide a commentary on the social, economic, and cultural realities of their world. They were also able to draw attention to the widespread suffering that occurred during this era and the need for societal change.

In conclusion, Victorian literature provides a fascinating insight into the ways in which disease affected the lives of people during this period. By examining the portrayal of disease in literature, we gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the time, as well as the human experience of living with illness and suffering. Moreover, the use of diseases as symbols of social issues in English literature of the 19th century was a

powerful tool for realist writers to critique the societal problems of their time. These writers used diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and syphilis to expose the inequalities, injustices, and hypocrisies of their societies. Through their literary works, they raised awareness and provoked discussions about these societal issues, contributing to the social and cultural changes that followed.

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