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Intro to Intros: Victorian Literature in Brief

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Classics of British Literature

Introduction to Victorian Literature

Intro to Intros: Victorian Literature in Brief

Abstract:

Often, teachers struggle with a way to introduce students to a large canon (such as Victorian Literature) without overwhelming them with a heavy reading load. Many teachers can also not expect that students will read outside of class, and cannot devote great swaths of time to in-class reading. This lesson seeks to introduce students to some exemplary representational examples of Victorian literature by reading a portion of the novel's first chapter, and allowing them to discuss what they have seen, analyze, make predictions, and draw conclusions, based on their reading. This lesson is most suitable for students who have already done some critical reading in their English courses, and are positioned to make predictions about characters, plot development, atmosphere, and literary styles.

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Procedure:

Something that may be helpful to consider before starting this lesson is what the instructor wants the students to most gain from it. In that regard, deciding which passages to select for the lesson will be key. For example—an instructor might want to select only female-authored texts, or only texts involving social upheaval/struggle. Depending on the time-frame of the class/lesson, teachers also might opt to just look at the first lines of a large selection of Victorian novels. The instructor is also the best judge of the ability level of their class, and should plan accordingly. As students will have a limited frame of reference (unless they are independently aware of the novel) they may find it difficult to make judgements on the passages.

If students receive at least a mini-lecture in some of the historical occurrences that brought about the unique period in literary history known as the Victorian era, it may also give them a better foundation and understanding for discussing the literature of this time period.

The instructor should distribute the passages in whichever way they deem best for their class, either by making a packet beforehand, or directing students to the passages on a course or external website (Blackboard, Moodle, etc.) The teacher should give the students several minutes to read each passage, and, as indicated below, can use that as a mini-lesson in active reading. Students could underline, annotate, and write in questions as they read.

It may prove easier to discuss the passages after the students have read each one (rather than reading through all the selections) to help ensure the information and the passage's contents are fresh for them and to address any comprehension questions that may have arisen from the passage.

After the students have completed a passage, the instructor can ask any number of guiding questions. These will depend heavily on what passages are selected, but a beneficial way of starting the discussion could be in asking students about the role of the narrator. Do they seem emotionally detached from the action? Are they a direct participant in the actions? What does their tone or mood seem to indicate?

Another potential side-benefit from this lesson is that students may gain an increased interest in Victorian literature through getting this brief introduction to the novels and may seek those out on their own.

Materials:

Because the nature of the lesson is flexible—an instructor could choose whichever passages and works they deemed most beneficial for their students. I included the first passage from: Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854); Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847); and George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860).

When I used this lesson in a British Literature course, I gave each student a packet containing the passage I wanted them to examine. They were able to then actively annotate as they read, which I felt gave them a better overall experience with the lesson.

Depending on the resources available, students could also access many copies of full-text books utilizing websites such as Bartleby.com, and read the passages there.