

In 1966 when Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Saragasso Sea* no one would have guessed that she was starting a new literary movement whose very essence dwelled in re-thinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories which Sally Shuttleworth named the retro-Victorian novel¹. As a matter of fact, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* published in 1969, brought to public attention the parody of Victorian social, sexual and literary conventions² but it was really in the 1980's and 1990's that many British novelists rekindled the great Victorian tradition.³

Retro- or neo-Victorian novels take up themes, motives, characters - which are either factual, as in Peter Ackroyd's *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, or fictitious, as in George McDonald Fraser's *Flashman* series. Neo-Victorian novels imitate texts from the Victorian era and in most cases they follow the Victorian narratives structurally, formally and/or thematically.⁴

These contemporary rewrites of the Victorian texts also seem to imitate the average physical length of Victorian novels in as much as they are often very hefty tomes indeed, something which may be problematic for many readers in the bit/byte generation. Structurally, in most cases the texts are divided into books or chapters, sometimes preceded by chapter summaries or epigraphs. They imitate the most popular genres of the nineteenth century, such as the Bildungsroman (David Copperfield, *Great Expectations*), or the social (*Middlemarch*), industrial (*North and South*, *Hard Times*) and sensation novels (*The Woman in White*) carefully blended with biographical aspects (*Life and Labours of John Ashworth. The profits to be devoted to the Chapel for the Destitute*) and (pseudo)historical novels (*A Tale of Two Cities*). All of these contribute to the hybridity of genres, rich in parody and pastiche, which is so characteristic of postmodern novelistic discourse⁵.

The narrative design of these novels also follows the pattern of their Victorian predecessors' typical employment of narrative voice dominant in nineteenth-century texts. Using Gerald Genette's classification, neo-Victorian novels engage either the first person homodiegetic narrator (where the narrator is one of the protagonists of the story), or the third person (omniscient) heterodiegetic narrator who is not a character in the novel.