



Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses

William A. Cohen

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What does it mean to be human? British writers in the Victorian period found a surprising answer to this question. What is human, they discovered, is nothing more or less than the human body itself. In literature of the period, as well as in scientific writing and journalism, the notion of an interior human essence came to be identified with the material existence of the body. The organs of sensory perception were understood as crucial routes of exchange between the interior and the external worlds.

Anatomizing Victorian ideas of the human, William A. Cohen considers the meaning of sensory encounters in works by writers including Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Rather than regarding the bodily exterior as the primary location in which identity categories—such as gender, sexuality, race, and disability—are expressed, he focuses on the interior experience of sensation, whereby these politics come to be *felt*.

In these elegant engagements with literary works, cultural history, and critical theory, Cohen advances a phenomenological approach to embodiment, proposing that we encounter the world not through our minds or souls but through our senses

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