

## LESSON 8.

## ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

### The novel in transition:

### Jane Austen, Walter Scott, William Thackeray, George Eliot

#### AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit explains the significance of the novelistic genre in the Victorian era, and offers a brief introduction to the major prose writers of the transitional period between Romanticism and Realism.

#### KEY FIGURES:

Jane Austen, Walter Scott, William Thackeray, George Eliot

#### COMPULSORY READINGS:

Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*

#### KEY WORDS & TOPICS:

subgenres of Victorian novel (novel of manners, historical novel, *Bildungsroman*, social satire, etc)

### THE VICTORIAN PERIOD, THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE NOVEL


The English novel becomes the dominant form in the Victorian Age. As *Fraser's Magazine* put it in an 1850 issue, "Whoever has anything to say, or thinks he has...puts it forthwith into the shape of a novel." The novelistic genre of the era is characterised by popularity, abundance, variety, and artistic growth.

Novels are distinguished by comprehensiveness. Most works offer a total, **panoramic** picture of society. They focus on the interrelation of Man and Society; to trace the unfolding of interrelated destinies on public and private levels. A popular theme is **social mobility**, the rise (or fall) from one social class to another. Widely read **novels of education** (*Bildungsromans*) are fuelled by the promise of progress. They deal with the moral, psychological maturation and often financial development of their protagonist, the self-made man. The genre's multi-layered, multi-voiced, dialogic nature allows for the exploration of **heteroglossia** (Bakhtin), the parallel presence of a diversity of voices, discursive styles, points of views in a single literary work. Novels address sentiments and provide amusement but they also represent extended arguments in **social, political, religious, scientific, or philosophical questions**. Favourite themes include: **the modern mass urban experience, malicious effects of industrialisation, institutional abuses, sense of community in teeth of materialism, inequality and socialism, science vs religion**.

Books were produced for the **mass market**. The number and range of readers radically increased due to the easy availability of cheap editions like shilling shockers, penny dreadfuls, or **dime novels**, as well as circulating libraries lending books. **Serialised novels** were published on a weekly or monthly basis in periodicals in instalments stretching over the course of several months. Serialisation allowed for audience interaction. (Dickens responded to outraged readerly reactions by rewriting the not-so-happy-ending of *Great Expectations*.) Episodes usually culminated in cliff-hangers conforming to the slogan of the medium: "Make them [the audience] laugh, make them cry, make them wait!"

To get an idea of the diversity of novelistic subgenres and the different themes, styles, and attitudes which could merge in a single oeuvre take a look at the chart below. Note *Propaganda/ Social critical message* at one end and *Entertainment/ Fantasy* at the other end of the scale, and study where individual subgenres are located in between the two extremes.

PROPAGANDA (novel with a purpose)	
Social Problem Novel (Mrs Gaskell)	
Industrial Novel (Kingsley, Charles Reade)	
Political Novel (Benjamin Disraeli)	
Clerical Novel (Anthony Trollope)	
Moral Fable	
Existentialism (Hardy)	
Novel of Education, Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman	
Novel of manners (Jane Austen)	
Historical novel (Walter Scott)	
Realism (Dickens, George Eliot)	
Social Satire (Thackeray)	
Picaresque (Dickens)	
Regional Novel (Hardy)	
Sensation Novel, Detective Novel (Wilkie Collins)	
Sentimental novel of sensibility	
Gothic Romance (Brontës)	
Adventure Novel, Sea Novel (RL Stevenson)	
Sporting Novel (RS Surtees)	
Gothic (Bram Stoker)	
Fantasy (MacDonald)	
Children's Lit, Fairy Tale Fantasy	
Nonsense (Carroll)	
Symbolism, Aestheticism (Oscar Wilde)	
ENTERTAINMENT (novel of escape)	

<b>EXPLORE</b>	<b>WEB BROWSE</b>
	<a href="#">Click here and take a look at <i>The Circulating Library</i>, an online database of Victorian fiction. Browse through magazines and journals which published serialised fiction.</a>

## JANE AUSTEN



The novels of Jane Austen (1775-1815) are important precursors of the Victorian novel. They are renowned for their unique combination of **sentimentality and social criticism**. The **novel of manners** subgenre – most often associated with her name – deals with the behaviour, values, customs, language and characters of a particular social class in a specific historical context: in her case the British bourgeoisie at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She often reveals the conflicts between the rebellious (and usually repressed) individual aspirations and the collectively accepted social codes of polite conduct. Austen's novels offer a realistic reconstruction of her contemporary social world through the detailed observation of her characters' psychology, their struggles with hypocritical social conventions, and the tensions between their desires (sensibility) and their responsibility (sense). Her critique of the Victorian marriage market is particularly harsh. She uses biting **irony** to reflect on women's subservient role and their dependence on "marrying well" to guarantee a favourable social standing and economic security.

Because of the complex emotional relationships fuelling her plotlines, posterity canonised Austen's novels as **romances** focused on themes of love, courtship, treachery, and heartbreak. Yet Austen is just as much a woman writer of **passion and rebellion** (similar in this respect to Georges Sand) as she is a novelist of cultivated intellect who offers a **smart satire** of the very novel of sensibility genre she is recycling. She exchanges the pathos of the classic sentimental novel (Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*) for a singular sense of humour. She plays with creating **witty parodies** of well-known writerly modes: sentimental romance, Gothic sensationalism, and popular historical writing. This critical viewpoint enables the **transition from 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism to 19<sup>th</sup> century literary realism**.

### Main Austenian themes: Social Criticism + Ironic Sentimentalism

- ✚ Conflict of marriage for love ↔ marriage for property
- ✚ Bildungsroman: maturation of youngster into adulthood implies loss of imagination, innocence, good faith → learning to live with compromises
- ✚ Things are not what they seem at first sight: illusion/social pretence ↔ reality
- ✚ Comedy of manners: irony grounded in recognition that proper conduct is sanctioned or condemned simply based on social convention → commentary on classism and hypocrisy: the possession of property entails responsibilities of which the public expression is good manners
- ✚ Social significance of ability to express and interpret emotions (influenced by Darwin's notions of natural selection, survival of fittest, study of facial expression, moral Darwinism)
- ✚ Reading, misreading, re-reading emotions → with the agenda to find appropriate partner to gain social prestige (women's only chance of survival/success)

### Jane Austen's Novels

Clearly, Austen was interested in anti-heroines who rejected the social script of docile, angelic femininity. *Lady Susan* (1793) is an ambitious first, an **epistolary novel** inspired by Restoration drama about the ploys of a recently widowed, beautiful and manipulative sexual predator, “the most accomplished coquette in England”. Lady Susan is selfish, unscrupulous and scheming, while the figure of spoiled, self-satisfied, rich girl Emma was created with Austen's bold intention “to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like” in *Emma* (1815). Emma irritates everyone by overestimating her own matchmaking abilities, meddling in other people's lives, and letting her imagination to lead her astray. *Northanger Abbey* (1818) pokes fun of Gothic sensationalism by introducing a naïve, tomboyish, otherworldly heroine with an overactive imagination. Catherine Morland regards morality rather than marriage to be a token of happiness. Her fantasising (influenced by her favourite book, *Mysteries of Udolpho*) leads her to incorrect speculations, and ridiculous assumptions. (She discovers a mysterious manuscript in her bedchamber at night when the candle goes out, but in the morning she discovers it is just a laundry list. She is a failed detective figure with nothing to detect.)



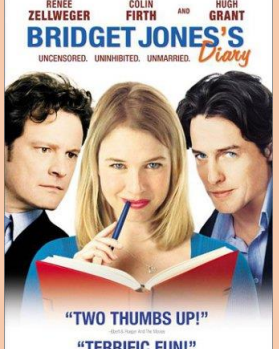
*Sense and Sensibility* (1811) was published under the pseudonym “A Lady”. Playing on the **philosophy of Cartesian dualism**, in a **double Bildungsroman** it tells the intertwined destinies of two teenage sisters of marriageable age, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who are driven by opposing principles in their lives: one being motivated by reason, the other by emotion. (‘Sense’ means good judgment, wisdom, or prudence, and ‘sensitivity’ refers to sensitivity, sympathy, or emotionality.) Ironically, the more sentimental younger sister eventually reconsiders her romantic inclinations as selfish and makes a rational choice to accept the marriage proposal of an honourable, elderly gentleman, while the more pragmatic sister marries of true love. Some compared the text to a “**dramatized conduct book**” that values “female prudence” (associated with Elinor's sense) over “female impetuosity” (associated with Marianne's sensibility). Others praised the novel for its authentic portrayal of **women's patriarchal oppression** – sometimes supported by women themselves who can “become agents of repression, manipulators of conventions, and survivors” against all odds. The book initiated a “**new privacy**” in the novel genre by virtue of the letters and the personal viewpoints of Elinor which rupture the predominantly omniscient narrative perspective.

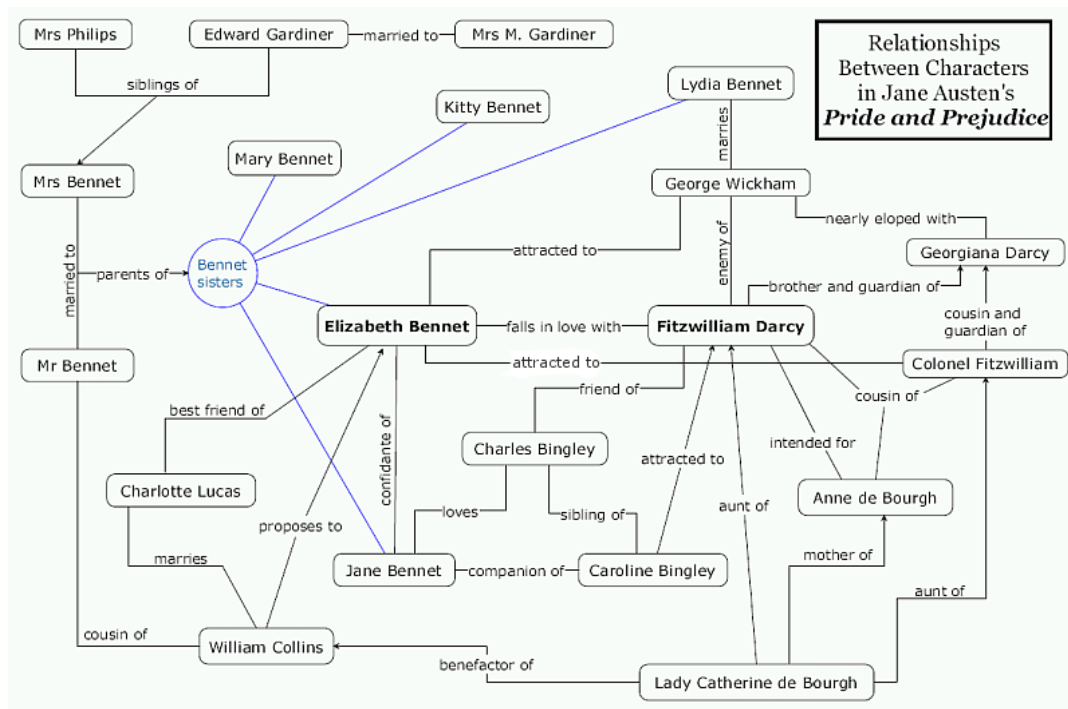
*Pride and Prejudice* (initially entitled *First Impressions*) (1813) is a **romantic coming-of-age Bildungsroman** of manners that follows the personality development of young Elizabeth Bennet who learns to differentiate between superficial appearances and actual moral values. The novel is famed for its ironic depiction of genteel rural society's manners, its witty commentaries on social prejudice, women's limited possibilities, fashion, education, the **marriage market**, class bias and financial interests in Regency era Great Britain. Already the opening line – “**It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.**” – sets the **satirical** tone of the book. According to the initial dilemma, Mr Bennet's five daughters must marry well because none of them can inherit the family estate (fortune can only be passed on to male heirs). Despite its sarcastic comments on pride, prejudice, and **hypocrisy**, the novel stresses the importance of intimate relationship grounded in true love. It celebrates how the initial misunderstanding between lively, spirited Lizzie Bennet and haughty Mr Darcy is followed by later mutual enlightenment and a romantic happily ever after. The most predominant discursive mode of the novel is **drawing room small talk** but the plot revolves around the **quest for the self**.

The **ambiguities** governing the text include:

- + deepest subject of novel is happiness ↔ concerned w how difficult to attain happiness
- + light and omnipresent irony ↔ irony illuminates much that is disturbing and unkind
- + funny, silly characters ↔ subtext of anxieties: humiliation, fear, male privilege, threat of spinsterhood
- + politically irresponsible ↔ criticise bourgeois aspirations, conservative mythmaking
- + avoids any explicit mention of sex ↔ a predatory rake seduces two underage girls
- + a love story ↔ cold economics are at the root of the action and behaviour
- + Elizabeth & Jane triumph ↔ Charlotte, Lydia, Mrs Bennet live in loveless marriages
- + class barriers are overcome ↔ class barriers are never overturned
- + feminism pervades novel ↔ ends with fantasy weddings to rich, privileged men.
- + Happiness triumphs ↔ happiness comes at a cost, if it comes at all. (Morrison 4)

At the centre of *Mansfield Park* (1814) is a poor relative brought to Mansfield Park as an act of charity. Fanny demonstrates Austenian virtues of modesty, firm principles, and a loving heart while she witnesses her rich cousins' dangerous flirtations, romantic entanglements, and scandalous elopements. *Persuasion* (1818) is Austen's last novel, written during the author's race against her failing health. Its protagonist, Anne Elliot is already an aged **spinster** at 27 with few romantic prospects. Eight years ago she was persuaded by her friend Lady Russell to break off her engagement to a handsome naval captain with neither fortune nor rank. When he returns he has acquired both, but still feels the sting of her rejection. A splendid **satire on pretension and vanity**, this last novel captures the heartache of missed opportunities and brings back the hope in second chance.

 <p>PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES BY JANE AUSTEN AND SETH GRAHAM-SMITH</p>	<p><b>Janeite fan culture</b></p> <p>Jane Austen completed only six novels, but the enduring passion for the author has driven fans to re-read her books repeatedly, inspiring book clubs, countless film adaptations, sequels, spoofs, fan art, and cosplay.</p> <p> <a href="#"><u>CLICK HERE FOR A LIST OF JANE AUSTEN FILM ADAPTATIONS.</u></a></p>	 <p>RENEE ZELLWEGER COLIN FIRTH AND HUGH GRANT <b>BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY</b> UNCENSORED. UNINHIBITED. UNMARRIED. "TWO THUMBS UP!" "TERRIFIC FUN!"</p>
<p><b>READING exercise</b></p> <p><u>IRONY</u></p> <p>"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."</p> <p>PRIDE AND PREJUDICE Jane Austen</p>	<p><b>Read the extracts below and discuss Austen's irony.</b></p> <p><b>SATIRE ON MARRIAGE MARKET</b> A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment.</p> <p><b>SATIRE ON MODERN LANGUAGE</b> "I do not understand you." "Then we are on very unequal terms, for I understand you perfectly well." "Me? Yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible."</p> <p><b>PROTO-FEMINIST SATIRE ON FEMININE ROLES</b> A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.</p> <p><b>SATIRE ON PSYCHOLOGY</b> But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever.</p> <p><b>SATIRE ON MONEY</b> A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of.</p>	



## WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY



William Makepeace Thackeray's (1811-1863) novel *Vanity Fair* was first published as a monthly **serial** in 19 illustrated instalments from 1847 to 1848 in *Punch* magazine. While its initial subtitle *Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society* reflects the intention to provide a panoramic, picturesque portrait of contemporary Britain's wide variety of social classes, personality types, and lifestyles; the subtitle of the 1848 single volume edition *A Novel without a Hero* reveals the agenda to reject the literary conventions of heroism through the focus on the **fallibility of humankind**.



WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

The novel **satirises** the upper-middle class London life in 1810s, commenting on **modern manners, hypocrisy, snobbery, opportunism, consumerism, the abuse of power, the effects and aftermath of war**. In line with the **domestic realistic** genre, the plot follows the parallel lives of **two stereotypical female figures**, the angelic, innocent, dependent Amelia Sedley and the manipulative, coquette, social climber Becky Sharp in a **(mock)Bildungsroman**, a double novel of education. Due to the **unreliable narrator's sceptical, satirical tone**, the moral-psychological maturation of characters is occasionally dubious. (Becky becomes from an orphaned social outsider a picaresque heroine, a cunning society lady who uses her charms to achieve her aims. Yet she is one of the most likeable figures of the novel.)

The book is a strange **historical novel**: it deals with the impact and aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, but the battle scenes are left in the background, and the focus falls on

romantic affairs such as love, courtship, seduction, betrayal and marriage. The military festivals take place in ballrooms. Thackeray is more interested in the subjective experience of the psychological, social, economic effects of war than the actual, (pseudo)objective historical events.

The title makes an intertextual allusion to **John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)**, a Christian allegory, and moralizing puritan classic that narrates Everyman's journey from the City of Destruction (this world) to the Celestial City (that which is to come= Heaven). In Bunyan, just outside the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the traveller Christian meets Faithful who accompanies him to Vanity Fair, a place built by the arch demon Beelzebub where commodities on sale are meant to satisfy human greed, vanity, and lust. The title also resonates with the Biblical trope **Vanitas Vanitatum** that reminds mortals of the shallow, transitory, futile nature of earthly delights and the timeless worth of Christian moral, spiritual values.

The World identified with a fair, a marketplace calls attention to the fact how **financial interests, materialism, snobbery, vanity, pretence, selfishness, and classism organise interpersonal and social relations**. Thackeray's aim *"to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue."* However, he regards corrupted humanity with **compassion** mingled with sad detachment, profound melancholy, and witty satire.

Thackeray renounces of the prestigious privileged authority of the author-creator and positions himself as a **puppeteer**, a master of lowly street entertainment form. In the Preface called "Before the Curtain" the story is framed as a puppet play. The narrative guise of the author is a manager of performance, a clowning moralist, and a peculiar scepticist who presents a puppet show in one of the booths of Vanity Fair. The lofty concept of **Art is debased into a fairground performance**. Identifying his characters with puppets – "the famous little Becky Puppet", "the Amelia Doll", "the Dobbin Figure", "the Little Boy's Dance", "the figure of the Wicked Nobleman" – also means that they cannot be held responsible for their vices. Tongue-in-cheek he spares his readers of moralising.

The novel is organised on **three temporal levels**:

1. It makes a timeless, universal, allegorical statement about human pride and selfishness
2. It is a novel of the 1850s: satire on bourgeois snobbery, social climbers, manipulators
3. It is a novel of 1815: about the aftermath of Waterloo, individual life enmeshed in the great events of History, war formative of 19th century society and spirit (unlike Tolstoy's *War & Peace*, a hymn to Russian nationhood)

*"I have no other moral than this to tag to the present story of "Vanity Fair." Some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families; very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances. There are scenes of all sorts; some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery, and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles."*

**[CLICK HERE TO SEE THACKERAY'S ILLUSTRATIONS TO VANITY FAIR](http://www.victorianweb.org)**  
**@ [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org)**

## WALTER SCOTT



**Sir Walter Scott** (1771-1832) is often regarded as the founding father of the **historical novel**, a genre that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact albeit in a fictional form. The insistence on **truthfulness** was a counter-reaction to the fake medievalism of Gothic novels. The focus on history was motivated by **patriotism**, and a desire to **revive the former glories of Scotland**. Scott was inspired by Scottish legends, tales, and folk songs. He celebrates the last heroic struggles of Highland Clans against modern urban civilisation of the Lowland region. His work is permeated by a certain ambiguity, an irresolvable conflict between the bitter nostalgia for Scotland's lost independence and the satisfaction with the progress assured by the Union with England. As a born storyteller, he organises a **huge cast** of vivid characters in exciting historical settings, while familiar with customs and events of the era he plays the role of the **social historian**, and excels in linguistic stylistic skills. A master of dialogue he feels equally at home with Scottish regional dialects and polished courtesies of knights and aristocrats. He was also the first to introduce **ordinary people into historical fiction** that previously concentrated only on nobility and royalty.

His most popular works are:

- ✚ **Waverley** (1814), a story of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 commemorated the loyalties of a vanished Scottish Highland society through the adventures of a young English dreamer and soldier Edward Waverley. The novel was first published anonymously but met immediate success and quickly became a popular bestseller.
- ✚ **Rob Roy** (1817) centred on 18th century Highland outlaw, the Robin Hood like folk hero, who rebelled against the government, supported the poor, and represented the virtues of old heroic Scotland, and the unstable place of tradition in modern times of progress.
- ✚ **Ivanhoe** (1819) revisits England under the reign of Richard I, features ploys of his evil brother John, chivalric tournaments, romance, and crusade.

Scott's novels according to their subject can be grouped as follows:

1. Stories of English history: Tudor & Stuart period (*Kenilworth*)
2. Stories of English, European history set in the Middle Ages (*Ivanhoe*)
3. Stories of the Scottish past, near present (*Waverley*)

## GEORGE ELIOT



**Mary Ann Evans** (1819-1880) known by her pen name **George Eliot**, was the novelist who developed the method of **psychological analysis characteristic of modern fiction**. She used a pseudonym to escape the stereotype of women's writing limited to light-hearted romances in the era. Novel was a serious art form for her, in no need of sentimentalism, nor a central hero, nor a happy ending. She also worked as poet, critic, journalist and editorial assistant of the left-wing journal *The Westminster Review*. She translated serious philosophical works such as Spinoza's *Ethics* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, and embraced the latter's ideas which considered faith to be an imaginative necessity of man, and equated the idea of God with the moral, aesthetic imperative of goodness. In her fiction she combined deep human sympathy and rigorous moral judgment.

The aim of her **psychological realism** was to portray illiterate, simple men struggling with the hypocrisy and harshness of country life in provincial England. Conforming to her agenda, the **realistic representation of ordinary people** sparks sympathy, and thus exercises the highest ethical potential that fiction has to offer. Just like in Wordsworth's poetry, the common folk's proximity to nature rather than to culture is taken as emblematic of human nature in its purer form. In a **panoramic view of society**, she portrayed the interactions of different classes and sexes. Her metaphor of **life as a labyrinth** explored our egotistic view of existence, scratches on the mirror surface seen as concentric circles. The **organic structure of her novels** is composed of an inner circle, a group of individuals involved in moral dilemma, and an outer circle, referring to the social world where the dilemma has to be solved.

She described her first long novel, *Adam Bede*, published in three volumes (1859) as "a country story—full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay," "the faithful representing of commonplace things." The plot revolved around a rural love rectangle and was inspired by an anecdote her Methodist aunt told about a girl condemned for child murder.

### GEORGE ELIOT'S NOVELS

***Adam Bede***  
(1859)

***The Mill on the Floss***  
(1860)

***Silas Marner***  
(1861)

***Romola***  
(1862–63)

***Felix Holt, the Radical***  
(1866)

***Middlemarch***  
(1871–72)

***Daniel Deronda***  
(1876)

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is a double Bildungsroman that depicts the failed efforts of siblings Tom and Maggie Tulliver to adapt to their provincial world, embrace their socially prescribed gender roles, and eventually survive a final climactic flood. The drift of the river represents how the **individual spiritual aspirations are overwhelmed by social obligations**, the clash of free will and determinism or fate.

*Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72) is set in a fictitious Midlands town from 1829 to 1832 and follows intersecting stories with many characters from different social classes (the landed gentry, the clergy, manufacturers, professional men, shopkeepers, publicans, farmers, labourers...). The novel reflects with realistic insight on **social issues**

(status of women, marriage, hypocrisy, self-interest, idealism, political reform, education), **historical events** (the 1832 Reform Act, early railways, accession of King William IV), and **epistemological crisis** (religion, science medicine, reactionary political views in a settled community facing unwelcome change).



## READ & LISTEN

### EXERCISE

See the [manuscript of \*Middlemarch\*](#) and read [essays on George Eliot's work](#) on British Library's website. Listen to *Middlemarch* in a [public domain audiobook at LibriVox](#). Browse through an [overview of \*Middlemarch\*](#) at the Victorian Web.



THINK

### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeWCrabiDkRcSDe-9qgz6VF9YB9pt7v3X03L14AQnqb6Z9clQ/viewform>

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