

Appreciating English Literature

Part Five

The English Novel

This is our last full unit and covers the most ground historically – around 300 years. Opinions vary as to what was the first true novel written in English, but whatever the view, we can broadly agree it appeared in the early decades of the 18th century.

There are also divided opinions on what actually makes a novel. If it is viewed solely as a narrative, then surely we can go back as far as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, but these are usually seen as epic poems. Actual story telling, *per se*, is probably as old as humanity. What makes the novel unique is that it is typically written in prose and the story usually unfolds in the past with either an unseen narrator (the 3rd person) or as a personal recollection (the 1st person). As we shall see, modern novels have played fast and loose with these conventions, however.

The great period of the English novel is the 19th century, although judging by book sales of new authors, it seems to be very much alive and well in our own time.

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The Earliest Examples

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) are all examples of narratives, although the latter is shown through a consecutive series of letters – the epistolary novel.



They may appear to be a bit wordy for contemporary taste but were highly popular in their own day. There is also a significantly moral, uplifting element to them – the subtitle of *Pamela*, for example, is *Virtue Rewarded*. Today, Swift is usually seen only as a screen adaptation for children, with all the smutty tales removed. Robinson Crusoe doesn't suit political correctness, and Pamela, frankly, is just too good to be true.

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Sir Walter Scott

Scott is sometimes regarded as the man who “invented Scotland” for the rest of the world. A poet, he completed at least nine novels and was a big influence on many who came after him, such as Jane Austen. He is sometimes accused of weak plotting and slapdash prose, and for people who like shorter, punchier sentences, he suffers (with Dickens) of being too wordy for many in our time. *Ivanhoe*, *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *Kenilworth* and *Quentin Durward* have seldom been out of print.

Waverley is set in the time of the Jacobite Rebellion (1745) and the eponymous hero's name is a reflection of his conflicting loyalties.



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Jane Austen

Probably more people watch TV and movie versions of Austen novels than actually read them these days. This is a great pity. Their construction is tight, the sentences of a decent length for modern readers and her sense of humour is often caustic and always witty. Of the six finished novels, I particularly recommend *Emma*. Not only do we see the eponymous heroine grow before our eyes into a wise and mature woman, but Austen gives us a wonderful snapshot of the England of her day.



Pride and Prejudice, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* are the novels she completed in her short life (1775 – 1817). Two others, *Sanditon* and *Lady Susan* were unfinished at the time of her death.

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Charles Dickens

Dickens wrote 23 novels, of which he said his “favourite child” was *David Copperfield*.

This is not surprising since it has been considered the most autobiographical of his novels. Young David’s experience of working in a blacking factory is taken directly from Dickens’ own life, while his aim of becoming a professional writer again mirrors that of his creator.

Dickens is usually praised for highlighting the cruel indifference of the Victorians to children’s working conditions, but he is also criticized for his weak portrayal of women, his sentimentality and affection for “grotesques.” Nonetheless, he remains Britain’s major 19th century novelist and only Shakespeare beats him for popularity.



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William Makepeace Thackeray

Although he wrote many popular novels in his day, Thackeray is chiefly remembered today for *Vanity Fair*, a great, sprawling novel covering the excesses and hypocrisies of 19th century England. It takes in the Battle of Waterloo and all kinds of societal changes as the century progresses.

Above all, in Becky Sharp, Thackeray has created a very modern heroine. She is at times unscrupulous, always on the make, but demonstrates occasional acts of kindness

E.M. Forster created the concept of “flat” or “rounded” characters in novels. Using this criterion, Becky is one of the most complete personalities in English fiction. Love her or loathe her, she is impossible to ignore.



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The Brontë Sisters

The story of the three Brontë sisters, together with their dissolute brother, Branwell, busily creating fiction in a remote parsonage in Haworth on the Yorkshire moors, is almost the stuff of legend. The fact that two of them, Anne and Emily, died tragically young, leaving only Charlotte to find fame and fortune at the end, is a similarly romantic tale. The two most famous novels, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily, have captured readers for nearly 200 years. The brooding sensuality of Mr Rochester and his love for doughty, determined little Jane Eyre is matched with the passion of Heathcliff's destructive, doomed love for Cathy.



This famous painting of his three sisters is by Branwell, (whose ghostly image can be seen behind the pillar since he failed to erase himself completely). From left to right, we see Anne, Emily and Charlotte.

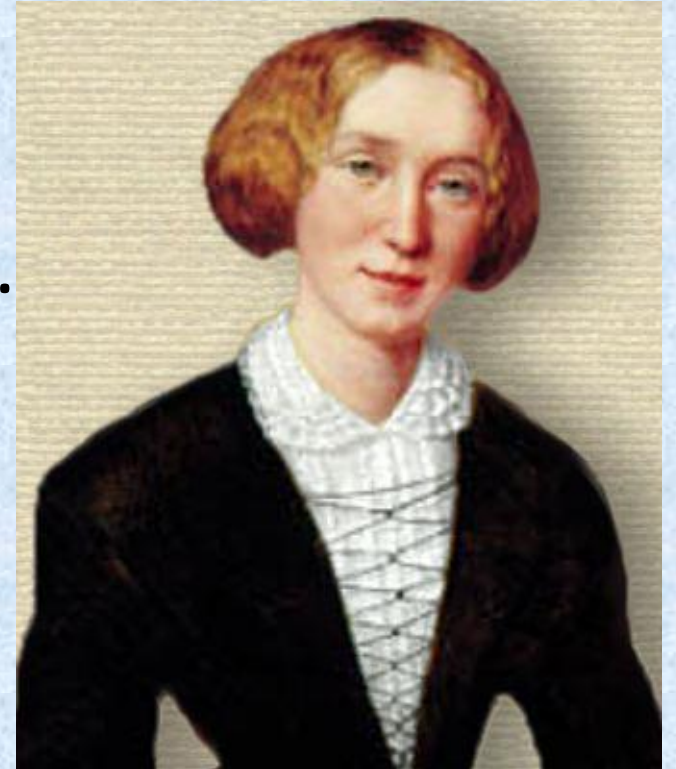
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George Eliot

George Eliot (real name Mary Anne Evans) is one of the most formidable intellects of 19th century English fiction. Hailing from rural Warwickshire, she was an autodidact because of the lack of opportunity for women to be educated at the time.

Her great work is *Middlemarch*, but for people coming to her for the first time, I recommend *The Mill on the Floss*, an absorbing story of brother and sister set in a similar background to her own. The character of Maggie Tulliver is almost certainly a partial self-portrait and the ending of the novel is one of the most heart-rending in all of literature.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to regard Eliot as some kind of proto feminist. Certainly, she flouted Victorian convention by openly living with a married man, G.H. Lewes, from 1854 until his death in 1878.



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Virginia Woolf

The daughter of Victorian intellectual, Sir Leslie Stephen, and the husband of Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf is one of the outstanding cerebral novelists of the early 20th century. With her husband, she co-founded the Hogarth Press in 1917 and published works by key modernist writers as well as important works in translation.

She is a key figure in the early years of feminism, writing the seminal book *A Room of One's Own*.

However, as a writer of novels, Woolf's contribution is particularly significant. *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *The Years* are works that push back the frontiers of the novel to encompass psychological insights and the examination of character via "stream of consciousness."



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James Joyce

James Joyce is a colossus of 20th century fiction, creating novels the like of which had never been seen before – and rarely since. *Ulysses* is his masterpiece, mirroring the story of the Odyssey but in the actions of relatively humble characters throughout a single June day in Dublin

Initially banned in many parts of the world, the novel was eventually recognised as a work of genius. Joyce himself made little money from his writing and lived in Europe on the edge of penury for much of his adult life.

After effectively banishing himself from Ireland where he was regarded as an obscene writer, it is ironic today that Dublin declares him a favourite son. Every year, June 16th is celebrated as Bloom's Day (after the central character in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom).



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D.H. Lawrence

Lawrence is a novelist and poet of the early to mid 20th century. His novels are considered “naturalist” and a reaction against the more radical fiction of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. His great semi-biographical novel, *Sons and Lovers*, describes a Midlands mining community much like the one he grew up in.

He felt the need to escape England and after marrying Frieda Von Richthofen in 1914, they travelled extensively. He died in France in 1930 at the age of 45 and is buried in a ranch in New Mexico, bequeathed to his wife.

Lady Chatterley's Lover was first published privately in 1928, but not available in England until 1960, after a court case decided that it was a work of art and not obscene.



The English Novel

Graham Greene

Graham Greene was a prodigious writer of novels, short stories and plays. He identified some of his novels as “entertainments” so as to separate them from more serious fiction.

As a journalist, he travelled the world, often to very inhospitable places, and wrote extensively about what he saw. *The Power and the Glory* is a novel set in Mexico highlighting the plight of religious persecution. *A Burnt Out Case* is set in a leper colony in West Africa while *Brighton Rock* explores the seedy world of juvenile crime in pre-war Brighton.

Greene converted to Roman Catholicism in 1926. Many of his books are concerned with religious faith and those who struggle to maintain it.



The English Novel

Salman Rushdie

Rushdie is one of a handful of British novelists, including Kazuo Ishiguro (Nobel Literature prize, 2017), Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, who came to prominence in the 1980s and 90s. *Midnight's Children* (1981) is a work of magic realism that tells the story of a group of people born at the stroke of midnight on the day India becomes independent of the British. Now settled in America, his books continue to cause an international stir whenever a new one is published.



Because his book *The Satanic Verses* was considered blasphemous, the Iranian theocracy pronounced a *fatwa* on Rushdie in 1989 which was only withdrawn in 1998. During that time he lived in hiding, protected by the UK security services.

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Hilary Mantel

Mantel was a highly respected novelist until the publication of *Wolf Hall* (2009) the first in her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell. It, and *Bring Out The Bodies* (the second volume) both made history by each winning the Booker Prize – the first time both a novel and its sequel had done so. Mantel has raised the historical novel to new heights. Told entirely in the present tense, the trilogy has an immediacy and impact that is both powerful and immediate. The trilogy's success catapulted Mantel into the premier league of novelists.



The Mirror and the Light, the final volume in the series was published in March, 2020, to international acclaim.

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A Few Last Words

One of the difficulties of writing a survey such as this is not what you include, but what you leave out. I'd like to end the unit by pointing you in the direction of novels that space forced me to omit which you would certainly benefit from looking at.

In the early days of the genre, check out Tobias Smollett and Aphra Benn. The latter has come to the fore recently as one of the first women in history to support herself by writing.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen pokes gentle fun at Gothic novels, a form of fiction that aims to scare the reader. The genre reaches its height with *Frankenstein* (1818) and culminates in *Dracula* (1897).

Major US authors such as Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*, 1851) and enormously influential 20th century authors such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Philip Roth and John Updike are worth your close attention.

