



Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department

**English Novel
Lectures by**

**Prof. Shaima Abdullah
M.A. Studies
2025-2026**

Lecture: The Rise of the English Novel

1. Introduction and Definition of the Novel

1. What is a Novel?

The term **novel** originates from the Italian *novella* (meaning "new story" or "a little new thing") and the French *roman*. In modern literary criticism, a novel is defined as an extended work of written prose fiction that depicts complex human experiences, individual character development, and social reality over a sustained narrative arc.

Unlike ancient epics or medieval romances, the novel focuses on contemporary or recognizable human life rather than heroic myth, divine intervention, or aristocratic idealization.

Ancient Epic / Medieval Romance	18th-Century English Novel
• Mythic, divine, or legendary heroes	• Ordinary, middle-class individuals
• Verse or stylized poetic prose	VS • Plain, realistic prose narrative
• Universal, timeless, or allegorical settings	• Specific temporal & spatial settings
• Idealized virtue and chivalry	• Complex interiority & flawed morality

2. The Distinction Between Romance and Novel

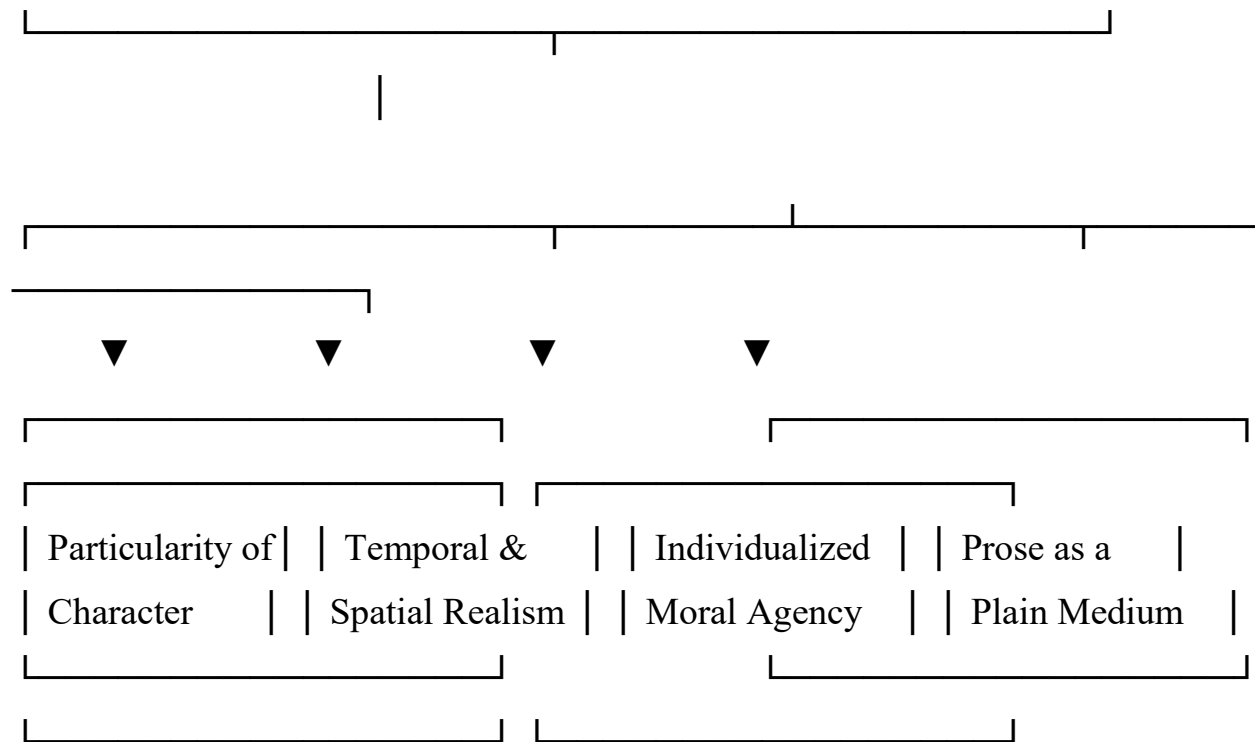
To understand the novel, one must contrast it with the genre it largely displaced: the **romance**.

- **The Romance:** Written primarily for aristocratic audiences, romances featured chivaloric knights, magical elements, high-flown language, and idealized morality. Time and space were vague (e.g., "Once upon a time in a distant kingdom").
- **The Novel:** Written for an expanding, literate middle class, novels insisted on verisimilitude—the appearance of truth. Characters had ordinary names, operated in recognizable locations (such as London inns, country estates, or real ships), and faced financial, domestic, or moral dilemmas common to modern life.

Key Takeaway: As literary critic Clara Reeve famously noted in 1785: "*The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things... The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written.*"

2: Core Characteristics of the Early English Novel

In his landmark study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), literary scholar Ian Watt identified the foundational traits that define the novel as a distinct literary genre.



1. Particularity of Character

Earlier literature used allegorical or generic names (e.g., "Everyman," "Patience," "Sir Gawain"). The novel introduced characters with realistic, non-symbolic names (e.g., Robinson Crusoe, Pamela Andrews, Tom Jones). Characters were given specific backgrounds, psychological depth, and personal memories.

2. Temporal and Spatial Realism

- **Time:** Events in a novel occur in chronological sequence, tied to specific dates, hours, and historical timelines, rather than timeless mythical ages.
- **Space:** Locations are detailed and geographically authentic. Actions occur in specific streets, rooms, or landscape settings rather than generic "enchanted forests."

3. Individualized Moral and Economic Agency

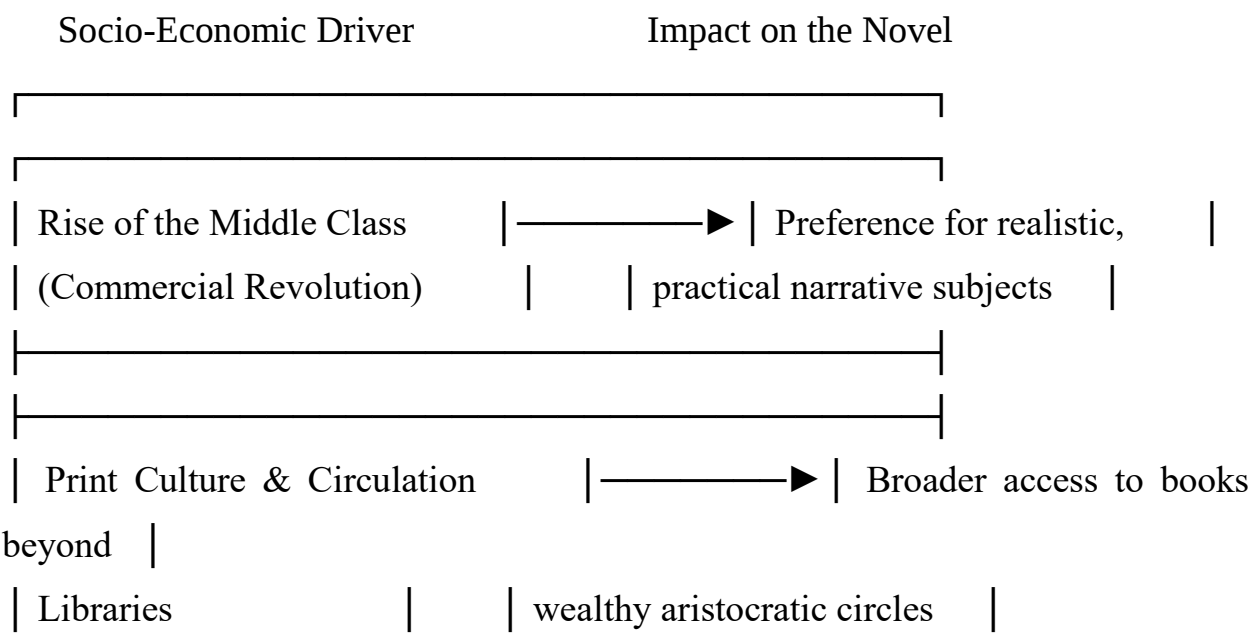
Characters in early English novels are driven by modern individualist concerns: money, social mobility, personal identity, and personal conscience. The individual's internal psychology and personal choices take precedence over traditional communal duties.

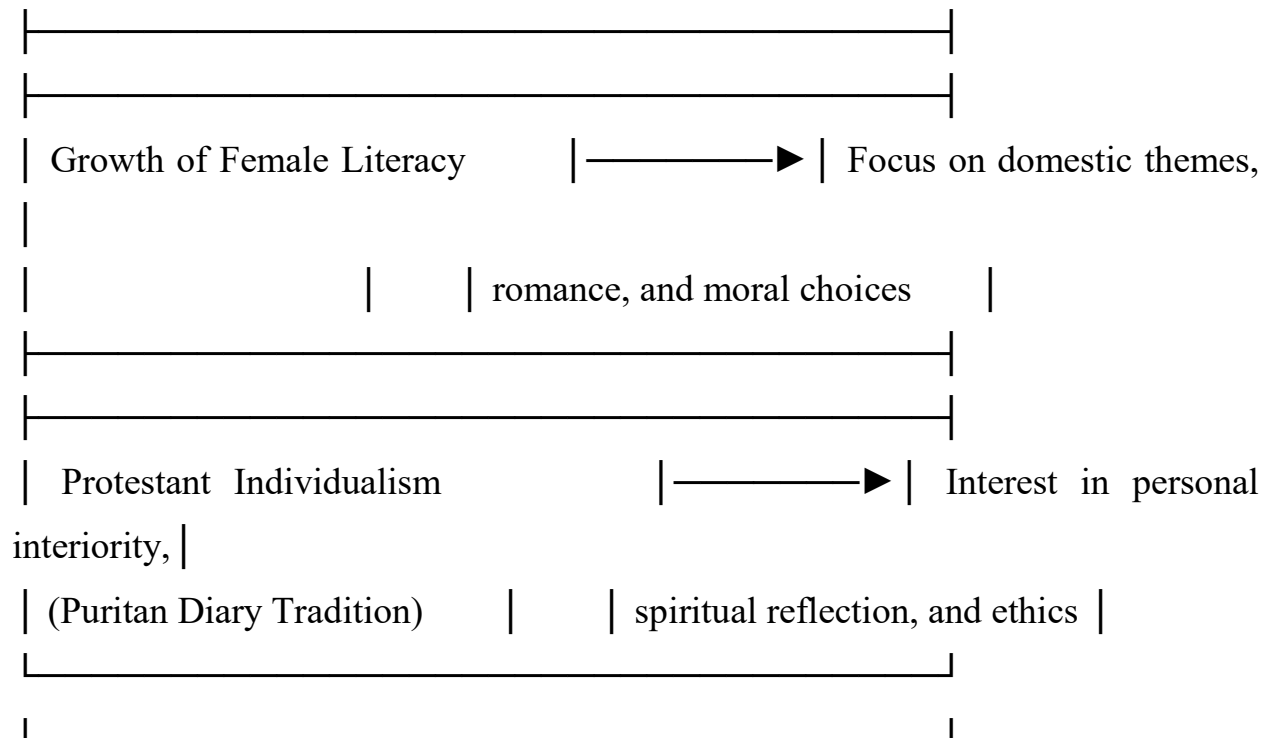
4. Direct, Documentary Prose Style

The early novel rejected decorated, classical rhetoric in favor of a clear, denotative prose style. Writers like Daniel Defoe borrowed from the language of journalism, court testimony, personal diaries, and travelogues to give readers the illusion that they were reading a authentic factual record.

3: Socio-Historical Contexts Behind the 18th-Century Rise

The English novel did not emerge in a vacuum; it was the product of profound political, economic, and cultural transformations in 18th-century Britain.





1. The Rise of the Bourgeoisie

The Industrial and Commercial Revolutions created a prosperous merchant and middle class. This new socio-economic group lacked classical educations in Latin and Greek, leading them to reject traditional classical epics in favor of entertaining, accessible stories written in English about people like themselves.

2. Print Technology and Circulating Libraries

The expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695 allowed printing presses to spread beyond London. The rise of newspapers, periodicals (such as Addison and Steele's *The Spectator*), and cheap pamphlets created an infrastructure for prose consumption. **Circulating libraries** allowed subscribers to borrow expensive multi-volume novels for an annual fee, drastically widening the reading public.

3. Female Literacy and the Domestic Sphere

Women became a major demographic among both novel readers and writers. Middle-class women, often restricted to the domestic sphere, found in novels a medium that explored marriage, social expectations, emotional psychology, and personal autonomy.

4: The Pioneers of the English Novel

Four 18th-century authors are traditionally credited as the primary architects of the English novel, each establishing a distinct narrative mode.

Author	Key Works	Primary Innovation	Narrative Style
Daniel Defoe	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> (1719) <i>Moll Flanders</i> (1722)	Documentary Realism	Pseudo-autobiographical journal; focus on individual survival and economic gain.
Samuel Richardson	<i>Pamela</i> (1740) <i>Clarissa</i> (1748)	Epistolary Novel & Psychological Depth	Letters exchanged between characters; intense focus on moral dilemmas and inner emotional states.

Henry Fielding	<i>Joseph Andrews</i> (1742) <i>Tom Jones</i> (1749)	Comic Epic in Prose	Third-person omniscient narrator; satirical observation of broad social classes.
Laurence Sterne	<i>Tristram Shandy</i> (1759–1767)	Metafiction Experimental Structure	& Nonlinear timeline, stream- of-consciousness precursor, parody of narrative conventions.

Major Contributions Explained

Daniel Defoe (1660–1731)

Defoe brought journalism's eye for detail to fiction. *Robinson Crusoe* presented an unbelievable tale of shipwreck with such minute, practical detail—logging timber, counting supplies, building fences—that contemporary readers treated it as a true autobiography.

Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)

Richardson perfected the **epistolary novel** (novels written as letters). By having characters write "to the moment" while under emotional distress, he captured unprecedented interiority and psychological conflict, particularly regarding female autonomy and moral pressure.

Henry Fielding (1707–1754)

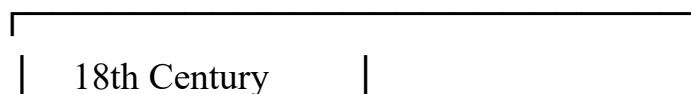
Reacting against Richardson's high moral tone, Fielding introduced structured plots, comic vigor, and an intrusive, humorous third-person narrator. He described the novel as a "comic epic-poem in prose," expanding its scope from private letters to a broad canvas of English society.

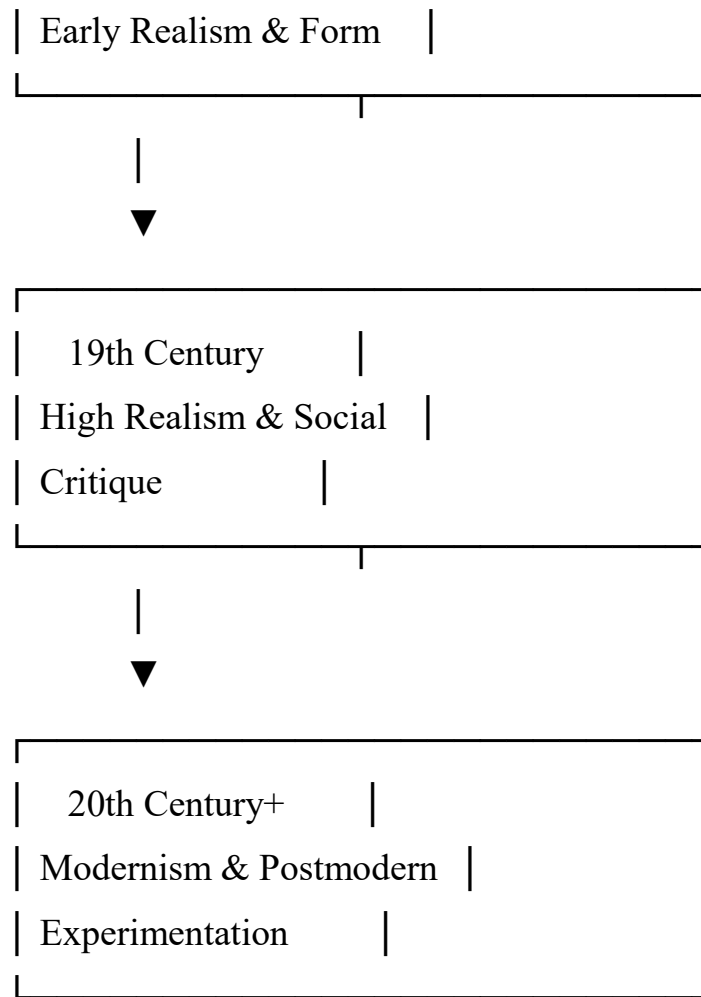
5: Evolution Beyond the 18th Century and Conclusion

1. 19th-Century Maturation

Following its 18th-century emergence, the English novel evolved rapidly across several distinct movements:

- **Gothic Fiction (Late 18th Century):** Writers like Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole introduced terror, eerie settings, and sublime emotion, countering strict Enlightenment rationality.
- **Jane Austen and Domestic Realism (Early 19th Century):** Austen refined narrative perspective by popularizing **free indirect discourse**—a technique blending third-person narration with a character's internal thoughts. Her novels (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*) brought unprecedented irony, structural balance, and psychological acuity to domestic life.
- **The Victorian Social Novel (Mid-19th Century):** Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters expanded the novel to address industrial poverty, social inequality, class struggle, and existential isolation. The novel became the dominant cultural medium of the era.





2. Summary and Conclusion

The rise of the English novel represents one of the most important shifts in Western literary history. What began in the early 18th century as a controversial, "low-status" commercial product—often dismissed by elites as corrupting or vulgar—became the primary storytelling medium of the modern world.

By shifting the focus of literature from gods and kings to ordinary human beings navigating daily existence, the novel mirrored the modern world's emphasis on democracy, individual agency, and psychological introspection.

