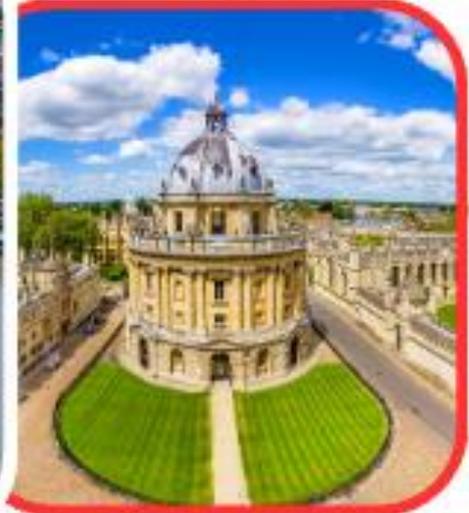




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Realism and Social Critique in the 19th century English novel

Bobojonova Dilrabo Dilshodbek qizi

Student, Chirchiq State Pedagogical University

dilrabobobojonova644@gmail.com

Scientific adviser: **Akmalxonov Saidfozilxon Akmalxonovich**

Teacher, Chirchik State Pedagogical University

s.akmalxonov@cspu.uz

ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century marked a turning point in English literature, as writers began to move away from the romantic idealization of life and toward a more realistic representation of society. Realism in the English novel emerged as a response to the rapid industrial, social, and moral changes of the Victorian period. Novelists such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy portrayed the everyday struggles of ordinary people, focusing on class inequality, poverty, and moral hypocrisy. Their works not only mirrored the realities of industrial England but also offered a profound critique of the social structures that sustained injustice and oppression. This article explores how realism functioned both as a literary movement and as a tool of social criticism in the nineteenth-century English novel, emphasizing the writers' moral responsibility to reveal truth and inspire reform.

Keywords: idealization, realistic, social, hypocrisy, social criticism, reveal

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was a period of extraordinary transformation in England. The Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and shifting social hierarchies created new forms of wealth and poverty, comfort and suffering. Against this backdrop, the English novel became one of the most powerful means of representing and questioning the conditions of human life. Realism, as a literary approach, sought to depict life truthfully, without exaggeration or romantic embellishment. It focused on the moral, social, and psychological dimensions of ordinary existence, presenting characters and settings drawn from real experience rather than idealized fantasy. Realist writers believed that literature should serve as a mirror of society, exposing both its virtues and its flaws. Authors such as Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist* highlighted the brutal consequences of industrial capitalism, while Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* examined the tensions between labour and industry. Similarly, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* explored the moral dilemmas and limitations of provincial life. The rise of realism was therefore not merely a stylistic change but a moral and intellectual movement. It questioned the values of progress, wealth, and respectability that dominated Victorian England, and it gave a voice to the marginalized and the poor. In doing so, the realist novel became both a reflection of its age and a critique of the forces that shaped it.





LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

The development of realism in nineteenth-century English fiction has been the subject of extensive critical discussion. Scholars often associate the rise of realism with the broader intellectual and social movements of the Victorian period, including positivism, utilitarianism, and the growing faith in empirical observation. According to Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* 1957, realism emerged as an effort to represent individual experience in a credible social context, emphasizing ordinary life and psychological depth. Similarly, Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution* 1961 highlights that realism evolved as a democratic form of art, reflecting the expanding readership and the moral concerns of the middle class. Charles Dickens is frequently viewed as one of the foremost realists of his time, using vivid detail and satire to expose the injustices of industrial society. Elizabeth Gaskell's social novels, such as *Mary Barton* 1848, also played a key role in shaping social realism by portraying the struggles of working-class families. George Eliot, in contrast, developed a more philosophical realism, emphasizing moral complexity and human sympathy. Critics such as Barbara Hardy and Terry Eagleton have noted that Eliot's narratives combine moral insight with an analytical understanding of society, making her works both emotionally rich and intellectually rigorous. Overall, critical literature shows that realism in nineteenth-century English novels was not a uniform movement but rather a spectrum of approaches. Some authors focused on documentary-like depictions of urban life, while others used realism as a vehicle for moral inquiry and reform. This diversity underscores the flexibility of realism as both an artistic technique and a tool for social critique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Realism in nineteenth-century English novels served as a mirror reflecting the complexities and contradictions of industrial society. The realist writer's task was to reveal the truth behind appearances to depict not only how individual lived but also how they were shaped by social institutions and moral expectations. Through detailed description and psychological depth, authors like Dickens and Eliot transformed fiction into a means of moral and social inquiry. In *Hard Times*, Dickens criticizes the utilitarian education system and the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism. The fictional town of Coketown symbolizes the mechanical, joyless nature of modern life, where human emotions are suppressed in favour of productivity and benefits. Dickens's vivid portrayal of factory workers and poor children exposes the moral blindness of those who equate wealth with virtue. His realism lies not only in his attention to social detail but also in his emotional engagement with the suffering of the poor. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* complements Dickens's vision by exploring class conflict through the experiences of Margaret Hale, a young woman who witnesses the harsh realities of industrial labour. Gaskell's balanced perspective sympathetic to both employers and workers reveals her belief in moral





understanding as a path to social harmony. Her realism thus operates as a form of mediation, emphasizing empathy and dialogue rather than condemnation.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* takes realism to a more introspective level, examining the moral and psychological dimensions of human behaviour. Her focus on the inner life of characters such as Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate shows how personal ideals are often constrained by social conventions. Eliot's realism is distinguished by its moral seriousness; she portrays life not as it should be, but as it is complex, flawed, yet profoundly human. Together, these novelists demonstrate how realism became a form of social critique. By depicting ordinary lives and everyday struggles, they questioned the dominant values of Victorian England its faith in progress, its rigid class structure, and its moral hypocrisy. The realist novel, therefore, did not simply imitate reality; it interpreted it, inviting readers to confront the ethical challenges of their time.

CONCLUSION

Realism in the nineteenth-century English novel was far more than a stylistic choice; it was a moral and intellectual response to the realities of modern life. As England experienced industrialization, urban growth, and shifting social values, novelists sought to represent the truth of human experience in all its complexity. Writers like Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy used fiction not merely to entertain, but to awaken the public conscience and challenge social injustice. Realism allowed them to transform literature into a means of social critique, giving voice to those who were often silenced or ignored. The realist novel thus became a space where moral reflection, empathy, and reform could coexist. In conclusion, the realism of the nineteenth-century English novel laid the foundation for modern narrative art. By uniting truthful observation with ethical insight, these writers established a literary tradition that continues to influence how society and human behaviour are represented in fiction today. Their commitment to truth, justice, and moral inquiry ensures that the realist legacy remains a vital part of English literary history.

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