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THE DIALECTICS OF FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH REALISM

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Abstract. This study explores the complex interaction between freedom and determinism in nineteenth-century English Realist literature. It examines how major authors, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy, represent human agency and moral choice within social, economic, and environmental constraints. The analysis reveals that freedom in English Realism is not understood as complete autonomy but as ethical awareness, personal responsibility, and the capacity to make meaningful decisions within societal and natural boundaries. By combining textual analysis with historical, social, and philosophical contextualization, this research demonstrates that nineteenth-century realism functions as a literary medium through which philosophical debates regarding human agency, morality, and social determinism are dramatized and explored.

Key words: Freedom, determinism, English Realism, moral responsibility, social constraint, Victorian literature, ethical choice, industrial society, moral philosophy, human agency.

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century in England was characterized by significant social, economic, and intellectual transformations. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancements reshaped society and altered individuals' experiences, roles, and expectations. Victorian England was a period of tension between tradition and modernity, moral certainty and scientific skepticism, and social mobility and structural constraint. It is within this context that English Realism emerged as a literary movement, aiming to provide accurate depictions of ordinary life, social interactions, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals.

A central concern of realist literature is the dialectical relationship between freedom and determinism. Authors of the period frequently questioned to what extent individuals can control their destinies and how much their lives are determined by social, economic, or natural forces. This question is particularly significant because it touches upon both moral philosophy and the emerging scientific ideas of the era, such as evolutionary theory and social determinism. Realist writers used their novels to examine





how human agency operates within constraints imposed by class, gender, and economic conditions, thus bridging the literary, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of the Victorian world.

The aim of this study is to investigate how Dickens, Eliot, Gaskell, and Hardy depict the interplay between freedom and determinism, focusing on the ways in which moral, social, and structural factors shape individual choice. In doing so, this paper seeks to highlight the philosophical depth of realist fiction and its capacity to illuminate questions of human agency within a socially and morally complex world.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative literary approach that combines close textual reading with historical and philosophical contextualization. The analysis focuses on how characters in selected novels navigate freedom, moral responsibility, and social constraints. By examining their decisions, relationships, and the social environments surrounding them, the study explores how nineteenth-century English Realism dramatizes the tension between individual agency and determinism.

The theoretical framework draws on Victorian philosophical and ethical thought, incorporating the ideas of John Stuart Mill regarding liberty and moral responsibility, Herbert Spencer's theories of social evolution, and Baruch Spinoza's deterministic philosophy. Mill's writings provide insight into the ethical dimensions of freedom and responsibility, emphasizing the importance of moral reflection and the consequences of human action. Spencer's social theories highlight the structural forces influencing human behavior, including class, economic development, and societal norms. Spinoza's philosophical determinism allows an understanding of human action within natural and causal constraints, emphasizing the limited autonomy of individuals in the face of larger forces.

The primary texts examined in this study include George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The analytical approach combines thematic analysis with contextual interpretation, investigating the ways in which characters exercise freedom, confront social pressures, and experience moral growth or limitation. Particular attention is paid to differences in the depiction of freedom: some authors present freedom as achievable through ethical reflection and empathy, while others portray it as constrained by structural or natural determinism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that nineteenth-century English Realist literature consistently portrays freedom and determinism as interrelated rather than mutually exclusive concepts. Realist authors depict human agency as embedded in, and responsive to, social, moral, and environmental constraints.





George Eliot emphasizes ethical freedom achieved through self-knowledge and moral responsibility. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke's aspirations toward intellectual and spiritual fulfillment are constrained by social expectations and gender norms. However, Eliot suggests that ethical reflection and conscious moral decision-making allow individuals to exercise meaningful agency, even within societal limitations. The novel presents a vision of freedom that is closely linked to personal and social responsibility, emphasizing the importance of informed and deliberate action.

Charles Dickens presents freedom as socially conditioned and morally grounded. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's pursuit of wealth and social status initially reflects a desire for personal freedom. However, Dickens illustrates how social class, ambition, and societal expectation limit genuine autonomy. True freedom, according to Dickens, is realized not through the attainment of wealth or social rank, but through moral insight, empathy, and the capacity for ethical choices. Characters achieve self-fulfillment and moral liberation by reconciling personal desire with social responsibility.

Elizabeth Gaskell focuses on the social and economic dimensions of freedom, examining how industrialization and class structures influence human agency. In *North and South*, characters' lives are shaped by the pressures of industrial capitalism, including labor disputes, class conflict, and economic inequality. Despite these limitations, the novel portrays the possibility of moral and social reconciliation through empathy, understanding, and ethical action. Gaskell emphasizes that while structural forces constrain freedom, human agency is expressed through moral decision-making and social engagement.

Thomas Hardy presents a more tragic vision of determinism, in which individuals are subjected to forces beyond their control. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess's efforts to assert agency and pursue personal fulfillment are repeatedly thwarted by social pressures, patriarchal constraints, and natural events. Hardy's work reflects the influence of Darwinian thought and fatalistic philosophy, portraying human freedom as fragile and often illusory. Nevertheless, Hardy's novels explore moral and emotional dimensions of human choice, even when external forces appear insurmountable.

Across these authors, a recurring theme is that freedom is inseparable from moral and social responsibility. Realist literature does not present freedom as absolute autonomy; rather, it is depicted as a negotiation between personal will and external constraints. The novels illustrate how ethical reflection, self-awareness, and empathy enable individuals to exercise agency within the limits imposed by social, economic, and natural forces. Realism thus provides a literary framework for exploring philosophical questions about human freedom, determinism, and morality.

CONCLUSION





Nineteenth-century English Realist literature offers a nuanced exploration of the interplay between freedom and determinism. Authors such as Dickens, Eliot, Gaskell, and Hardy demonstrate that human agency exists within social, economic, and moral constraints. Realist narratives show that meaningful freedom involves ethical reflection, moral responsibility, and thoughtful decision-making, even in contexts where external forces are limiting or deterministic.

English Realism, therefore, serves not only as a literary form but also as a medium for philosophical inquiry. By portraying human lives in relation to societal and natural constraints, realist literature engages with central Victorian concerns about morality, human potential, and social responsibility. The works of these authors reveal a complex understanding of freedom: it is neither unbounded nor purely illusory, but realized through ethical engagement and moral deliberation within a structured and often restrictive social world.

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