

The Novel in England and Ireland, 1749-1949: Samuel Richardson to Elizabeth Bowen

Overview:

Today, the novel is taken for granted as the vehicle for prose fiction. But the origins of what we now call ‘novels’ can be traced to England in the mid-eighteenth century, where the idea of ‘fiction’ (as distinguished from falsehood or untruth) was still in the process of developing. The novel has since gone through many changes of dress, and although the ‘death of the novel’ has been predicted more than once, the form remains alive and well. This course will focus on a selection of moments over two hundred years in the life of a literary form, tying generic innovations in novel-writing to the broader political, cultural and personal contexts which shaped their composition: from how conduct writing and epic poetry informed the early novels of Richardson and Fielding, to how the experience of war fed into the differently experimental novels of Sterne and Woolf.

Each class will begin with a brief talk on the topic at hand, in the style of a lecture, offering biographical, geographical, political or historical context. This will be followed by an analysis of excerpts from the texts under discussion, in the format of a Cambridge practical criticism class, and further discussion of the kind usually conducted in a seminar. Texts and passages to be considered will be supplied during the sessions. Students might wish to read or look at the works of some of the novelists mentioned in advance, but there will be no expectation that anyone has already read widely in any of these areas of literary history.

Outline:

1.	Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne	The mid-eighteenth century and the ‘rise of the novel’
2.	James Hogg, Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë	The Gothic novel
3.	Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot	Realism and the nineteenth-century novel
4.	Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, Henry James	The Fin de siècle novel
5.	Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen	Modernism and the novel

Dr Megan Beech (she/her) recently received her PhD from the University of Cambridge. Her doctoral thesis, entitled “Dickens and the Making of His Readings,” examined the author’s performance career through his surviving manuscripts. She has taught supervisions at Newnham College, Cambridge, lectured and taught literature, culture, and creative writing for King’s College London, City Lit and Working Men’s College, Camden. She is also a critically-acclaimed performance poet, author of two collections of poetry and has performed her work on the BBC and Sky One, as well as venues including Southbank Centre and Glastonbury Festival.