THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH

The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820–1880
The Oxford History of the Novel in English

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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH

Volume Three

The Nineteenth-Century Novel
1820–1880

EDITED BY

John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Richard Maxwell, who died in July 2010.
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UNLIKE poetry and drama, the novel belongs entirely within the sphere of recorded history. Novels, like historical records, are written texts superseding the worlds of myth, of epic poetry, and oral storytelling. Typically they are commercial products taking advantage of the technology of printing, the availability of leisure time among potential readers, and the circulation of books. The growth of the novel as an art form would have been unthinkable without the habit of silent, private reading, a habit which we now take for granted although its origins are much disputed among scholars. While novels are not always read silently and in private, they are felt to belong in the domestic sphere rather than in the public arenas associated with music, drama, and the other performance arts. The need for separate histories of the novel form has long been recognized, since the distinctiveness of fictional prose narrative is quickly lost sight of in more general accounts of literary history.

The Oxford History of the Novel in English is a multi-volume series offering a comprehensive, worldwide history of English-language prose fiction, and drawing on the knowledge of a large, international team of scholars. Our history spans more than six centuries, firmly rejecting the simplified view that the novel in English began with Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe in 1719. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century prose fiction has, in fact, been surveyed by many earlier historians, including Ernest A. Baker whose History of the English Novel appeared in ten volumes between 1924 and 1939. Unlike Baker’s strictly chronological account, the Oxford History broadens out as it approaches the present, recognizing the spread of the English Language across the globe from the seventeenth century onwards. The ‘English’ (or British) novel becomes the novel in English. While we aim to offer a comprehensive account of the novel in English, our coverage cannot of course be exhaustive; that is a task for the bibliographer rather than the literary historian. All history has a commemorative function, but cultural memory is unavoidably selective. Selection, in the case of books, is the task of literary criticism, and criticism enters literary history the moment that we speak of ‘the novel’ rather than, simply, of the multitude of individual novels. Nevertheless, this Oxford History adopts a broader definition of ‘the novel’ than has been customary in earlier histories. Thus we neither focus exclusively on the so-called literary novel, nor on the published texts of fiction at the expense of the processes of production, distribution, and reception. Every
volume in this series will contain sections on relevant aspects of book history and the 
history of criticism, together with sections on popular fiction and the fictional subgenres, 
in addition to the sequence of chapters outlining the work of major novelists, move-
ments, traditions, and tendencies. Novellas and short stories are regarded for our 
purposes (we would stress ‘for our purposes’) both as subgenres of the novel and as 
aspects of its material history.

Our aim throughout these volumes is to present the detailed history of the novel in a 
way that is both useful to students and specialists, and accessible to a wide and varied 
readership. We hope to have conveyed our understanding of the distinctiveness, the 
continuity, and the social and cultural resonance of prose fiction at different times and 
places. The novel, moreover, is still changing. Reports of its death—and there have been 
quite a few—are, as Mark Twain might have said, an exaggeration. At a time when new 
technologies are seen to be challenging the dominance of the printed book and when the 
ovel’s ‘great tradition’ is sometimes said to have foundered, we would present these 
volumes as a record of the extraordinary adaptability and resilience of the novel in 
English, its protean character, and its constant ability to surprise.

Patrick Parrinder
Introduction

JOHN KUCICH AND JENNY BOURNE TAYLOR

This volume in the *Oxford History of the Novel in English*, like Volume 4 (1880–1940) which follows it, challenges the usual chronology of the ‘Victorian’ period by beginning in the 1820s and ending at 1880. The later dividing line may seem less controversial than the earlier one, since there are clear precedents for setting the end date of the volume where we have. In 1954, in *The English Novel: A Short Critical History*, Walter Allen drew a sharp distinction between fiction written before and after 1880, devoting separate chapters to each, and this division remained a common feature of histories of the novel over the next fifty years. ‘It was the great strength of the nineteenth-century novel that all who read could read it’ (308—9), Allen declared, whereas British fiction was profoundly changed, he contended, when reading audiences began to be rigidly stratified in the 1880s. ‘Serious fiction’, the writing of which Henry James referred to as ‘a sacred office’ in his 1884 essay ‘The Art of Fiction’, gradually became a preserve of elite writers and readers.

The stratification of reading audiences after 1880 is not the only reason to insist on this particular division in the history of the novel. In the following pages, we will summarize a number of reasons why the period 1820–80 in British fiction constitutes a discrete whole, encompassing many distinctive features and achievements. Indeed, the expansive coverage of this volume, which is vital to its aspiration to be a history rather than a scholarly or pedagogical companion (our contributors refer to over five hundred works of fiction published during this sixty-year span), has offered us a rare, collective opportunity to reflect on questions of periodization and cultural convergence, and to approach such questions on extended empirical ground. Yet the segmenting of the readership for fiction cited routinely by Allen and others must still be regarded as a primary condition for the striking transformations in novelistic form and content that occurred from the 1880s onwards. Although the division between ‘light’ and ‘serious’ fiction began to emerge by the 1860s, mass literacy had advanced to such a degree by the 1880s that it created rising pressures among both readers and writers to differentiate sophisticated from ‘vulgar’ novels. Robert Louis Stevenson, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and many others whose careers started or reached maturity after 1880 agonized about whether or not they were popular—and whether they wanted to be—as major novelists simply had not done before them. Mainstream reading audiences began to
respond to ‘serious’ fiction with increasing indifference or hostility, which was sometimes reciprocated by novelists themselves. Earlier in the century, it would have been unthinkable for a writer of Hardy’s talents to give up writing fiction because he had offended his public—and was offended by them—but by the turn of the century, such alienation had become almost a requisite sign of one’s genius. John Eglinton, quite an educated man and a good friend of James Joyce’s, yet one of many publishers to turn down A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1914–15), famously wrote to the author in explanation: ‘I can’t print what I can’t understand’ (Magee 1935, 136).

The displacement of the triple-decker by the one-volume novel, which began to occur in the 1880s, also created possibilities for formal economy that helped foster an elevated style. Such economy would have crippled the expansive social imaginations of Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, and William Makepeace Thackeray, and frustrated the elaborately detailed approach to character and plot as well as the leisurely pacing cultivated by these and other mid-century writers. This shorter form also encouraged a more strict differentiation of subgenres—detective novel, mystery, science fiction, adventure novel, and so forth—which corresponded to the splitting up of the readership. Mid-nineteenth-century fiction, by contrast, may have substantially developed the formal conventions, plots, and themes of these various subgenres, but it often did so while freely mixing them together for an audience not terribly fastidious about novelistic categories.

Whatever the aesthetic opportunities this growing differentiation between ‘serious’, ‘middle-brow’, ‘popular’, and other kinds of fiction made possible, it ended what was arguably the great age of the novel. In the mid-nineteenth century, the relative unity of writers and readers across social classes created an environment that nurtured long, productive careers and fully ripened, artistically self-conscious, stylistically fluent works, which were widely acknowledged both in their own time and afterwards as masterpieces of the genre. When one speaks of British novels as ‘classics’, it is usually those of this period that are singled out. In social terms, too, fiction of this period reached its zenith: as Franco Moretti claims, it was in the decades before the middle of the nineteenth century that the novel ‘moved very close to the core of the national culture’ (2009, 134).

From the perspective of later periods, accommodations with mainstream readers could be perceived as timidity, vulgarity, or hypocrisy. But the unified culture of writers and readers engendered many salutary features of mid-nineteenth-century fiction at its best. One was the possibility of using the novel to mount social criticism that was understood as part of a collective self-examination, rather than special pleading, class grievance, or intellectual snobbery. Such social criticism was predicated on the optimistic belief that things might improve, and it assumed the existence of a widespread consensus about the forms of social distress brought about by nineteenth-century urban and industrial transformations. To be sure, the political cast of nineteenth-century fiction varied widely; but when novelists such as Dickens, Thackeray, or Elizabeth Gaskell
preached against what they saw as social injustice, readers of all social classes—working-class radicals as well as MPs—tended to feel that their own concerns were being voiced. The unified mid-century culture of writers and readers also promoted an empowering sense that novelists could make a difference, socially and culturally. This sense of engagement contributed to the nineteenth-century novel’s characteristic emphasis on intellectual growth, moral development, and social enlightenment as part of the rationale for both the reading and the writing of fiction. The sense of accountability novelists felt toward their readers also encouraged a taste for dispassionate, objective narratorial voices, which fostered useful political, social, intellectual, and moral observation and commentary. All these attitudes toward the relationship between the novel and society, which depended on the relative unity of the novel-reading public, began to erode in the last decades of the nineteenth century—for better or worse—and the consequences for the novel as a genre were profound. It is easy to hear the envy and nostalgia mixed with patronizing disdain when the narrator of Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), observing an old seaman reading Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Pelham* (1828), comments: 'What ideas do his polished and so curiously insincere sentences awaken in the simple minds of the big children who people those dark and wandering places of the earth? What meaning can their rough, inexperienced souls find in the elegant verbiage of his pages? What excitement?—what forgetfulness?—what appeasement? Mystery!' (ch. 1).

It may seem more controversial to choose 1820 as our starting point, but in doing so we are making the case that a tectonic shift in both material and political culture, which laid the groundwork for the great novels of the mid-Victorian period, occurred in the 1820s, and that this shift helps explain many common features of the novels written from that point onwards. This was the decade in which Walter Scott inaugurated the three-volume novel, as well as the moment when many narrative subgenres, conventions, and preoccupations associated with Victorian fiction were first established. In 1821, Scott’s *Kenilworth* set a standard for the format and pricing of the three-volume novel that was to remain constant until the *fin de siècle*. This publishing milestone was the product of a revolutionary consolidation of the publishing industry in the first decades of the century, which resulted in a number of large firms dedicating themselves solely to fiction, as opposed to the constellation of small printers and booksellers who had produced eighteenth-century works of all kinds. Dramatically altering the scale of novel production, this transformation fuelled an abrupt, enormous expansion that was assisted by key technological advances: steam driven presses in the 1820s; high-speed rotary presses and stereotyping in the 1830s. The aggressive cultivation of multiple forms of publication and distribution at this time further broadened the novel-reading audience by reaching different sets of readers with different vehicles. Serial publication, which became the dominant mode by mid-century, amplified this effect by encouraging communal reading and creating an intimate relationship between readers and writers, since the latter could monitor the effects of their work while it was still in progress.
A massively expanded readership increased the potential financial rewards, which made a new kind of professionalized authorship possible. Few before the 1820s could afford to live off writing novels. Samuel Richardson was a successful printer, Henry Fielding a barrister and justice of the peace, Tobias Smollett a doctor, and Laurence Sterne and Jonathan Swift both clergymen. Women writers were even more dependent on other sources of income. Frances Burney was patronized by Queen Charlotte before marrying a French aristocrat, Maria Edgeworth belonged to the Anglo-Irish gentry, and Jane Austen’s life—as well as those of her female protagonists—revolved around economic dependence. Only in the 1820s did it become possible to imagine writing novels as a self-sufficient commercial vocation. The degree of crossover between novel-writing and journalism, which was unique to British writers throughout the middle decades of the century, also made it possible for them to maintain a stable income despite fluctuations in sales of their novels—as well as to fine-tune their sense of the broad reading public’s appetites. So it was that the major novelists of the 1820s and 1830s—Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton, G. P. R. James, Scott, and many others—all supported themselves by their pens. The great talents of the mid-Victorian period could never have scaled their aesthetic ambitions as they did if they had not learned in their adolescence, from the example of these pioneering professionals, that novel writing was now imaginable as a way of life.

Novel-writing would not have become a viable profession, of course, if literacy rates had not also expanded. Steadily increasing from the late eighteenth century through the end of the nineteenth, they had reached a watershed by 1823 that enabled William Hazlitt to declare, in an article titled ‘The Periodical Press’, that ‘Knowledge is no longer confined to the few’ (Edinburgh Review, 22 May). Hazlitt’s somewhat wishful assessment emerged, in part, from efforts on the part of middle-class reformers to disseminate literacy more aggressively. Such reformers were spurred by the hope that novel-reading would inculcate middle-class moral values and discourage the radicalism that had flared among the working classes in the late 1810s and throughout the 1820s. They began establishing Mechanics Institutes at increasing rates, and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (founded in 1826) orchestrated a systematic campaign to encourage literacy. Middle-class efforts to spread literacy were met by a concerted working-class commitment to self-education, driven both by the upsurge in radical agitation after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and by the desire to assimilate upwards—motivations that were not mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, the stability of the circulating library system from the 1820s onwards (monopolized by Mudie’s Library after its founding in 1842) made novel-reading more affordable for all. These and other material developments of the 1820s and 1830s, which set the stage for the careers of the great mid-Victorian novelists, are explored in detail in Part I. Although they helped produce a somewhat heterogeneous reading audience and encouraged a variety of inconclusive debates about the value of reading fiction, these changes in production and consumption had the
overall effect of making Britain a novel-reading nation, with a great deal of common literary ground. In fact, the enormous scale of this expanding marketplace for fiction has made inclusiveness one of the greatest challenges faced by our contributors, who have nevertheless striven for comprehensive coverage at the same time that they attend to transformations in form and content that transpired across the volume’s six decades.

As important as these material changes in literary production and consumption undoubtedly were, Britain also underwent a massive social transformation after defeat- ing Napoleon in 1815, one which profoundly shaped all areas of culture. For the first time in nearly a century, the nation was able to gain some distance on foreign affairs and concentrate its attention inwardly, a national self-absorption that largely persisted until the imperial expansion following Disraeli’s ascension to the premiership in 1874 (even though it was punctuated by such riveting overseas events as the Crimean War [1853–6], the Indian Rebellion [1857–8], and the Governor Eyre crisis [1865–6]). One of the crucial political developments during this period of relative insularity was the emergence of coherent class identities at a number of points on the social scale. In *Imagining the Middle Class*, Dror Wahrman has demonstrated that the invention of a unified middle-class consciousness did not occur until the decade or so before the First Reform Act of 1832, when the political consolidation of the mercantile classes could proceed without arousing fears of revolution and foreign invasion. The 1820s and early 1830s also saw the maturing of a self-conscious working-class culture, in the wake of the food shortages and unemployment caused, in part, by the massive demobilization of the post-Napoleonic period and by the historic episodes of class conflict they engendered: the high prices militated by the Corn Laws (imposed in 1815), the ‘Peterloo’ massacre in 1819, the Captain Swing agitation of 1830, the Birmingham Political Union and the riotous Days of May in 1832. These dramatic social and cultural changes—all linked, in one way or another, to the takeoff of the second wave of the Industrial Revolution after the cessation of chronic warfare reopened international trade—are one reason why throughout the rest of the century writers tended disproportionately to set novels about ‘the English past’ in or slightly before the 1820s. Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), ostensibly set in 1827–8, draws its local colour from an era before coaching inns had been displaced by the railway system emerging at the time the novel was written. Eliot found the 1820s a compelling period in which to set retrospective novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871–2). Her *Adam Bede* (1859) is set during the Napoleonic Wars, as are Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Shirley* (1849), Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–8), Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), Hardy’s *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), and many others.

Political self-consciousness and class conflict during the 1820s and early 1830s went hand in hand with an increased sense of social mobility among the lower and middle classes, as well as a heightened curiosity about unfamiliar social niches, both high and low. This curiosity underlay the acute sociological scrutiny characteristic of mid-century
fiction. The turn toward a sociological temperament highly sensitive to class differences informed the enormously popular 'sketches' filling periodicals of the 1820s and 1830s, as well as the fascination with crime (or 'Newgate') fiction and the penny dreadfuls of this period, which inspired the careers of popular novelists such as Theodore Hook and Pierce Egan, as well as the early work of Dickens and Thackeray. The familiarity with lower-class life that was to pervade serious mid-century fiction was reinforced by a wave of adventure fiction with plebeian heroes arising at this time, exemplified by Frederick (Captain) Marryat’s *Frank Mildmay* (1829) and *Peter Simple* (1834). Meanwhile, in the mid-1820s, so-called 'silver fork' novelists were gratifying the public’s hunger for knowledge of the other end of the social spectrum, the world of fashionable society. The consciousness of class these novels fostered was developed more comprehensively by the writers of historical fiction succeeding Scott in the 1820s and 1830s, who specialized in depicting demographic panoramas—most notably Ainsworth, G. P. R. James, Bulwer Lytton, and G. W. M. Reynolds. This ambition to map the social hierarchy from top to bottom carried directly over to the mid-century fiction of Dickens, Thackeray, Gaskell, Eliot, and Trollope.

The spectacular rise in the prestige of science from the first decades of the nineteenth century also reshaped novelists’ sense of their mission as observers of the human species. Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830–3), which summarized a set of discoveries that had been widely discussed in the periodical press during the preceding decade (spurred, in part, by the great fossil discoveries along the Devon coast of the 1820s), prepared the popular mind to accept the astonishingly ancient age of the earth and the increasingly secularized, empirical view of the world often accompanying the new natural history. Significant advances in astronomy, made possible by improvements in optics after 1800 (the Astronomical Society was founded in 1820) as well as the professionalization of medicine (*The Lancet* was established in 1823), together with the development of sensory-motor physiology (which emphasized the intimate connections between the brain and the nervous system) also paved the way for the scientific worldview that conditioned early nineteenth-century assumptions about how to best understand human life. Not coincidentally, the year 1818 saw the publication of the first novel to feature a scientist as its central character, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. That Shelley viewed her protagonist with apprehension, as a threat to traditional norms of civility and human relationship, does not diminish the fact that her novel was the first to be fully informed by an up-to-date knowledge of scientific progress in various fields, or that it anticipated the frequently sympathetic treatment of scientists in later fiction, such as Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil* (1859), Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* (1866), and Hardy’s *Two on a Tower* (1882).

From the early nineteenth century onwards, a fascination with science consumed all social classes, and the work of scientists was widely available in non-specialized periodicals and popularizations. Scientists and novelists published side-by-side in journals such as the *Westminster Review* and the *Fortnightly Review* (and, for the working classes, in the
Penny Magazine), before a more insular, professional scientific culture emerged late in the century. In their spare time, avid readers devoted themselves to amateur collections of fossils, shells, minerals, botanical specimens, and insects. Mid-century fiction responded to this popular craze for natural history by bristling with the latest scientific discoveries: Dickens’s use of what turned out to be the spurious discovery of spontaneous combustion in Bleak House (1852–3); Eliot’s use of optics in Middlemarch (in her famous comparison of egoism to the concentric circles formed by placing a candle on a scratched surface); Wilkie Collins’s fascination with forensic science in his detective plots of the 1860s and 1870s. The impact of evolutionary theory was absorbed through novelists’ characteristic interest in causation, change, and development. Novels such as Middlemarch, with its faith in incremental social progress, and George Meredith’s The Egoist (1879), with its belief in an inexorable moral evolution toward altruism, bear the deep impress of Darwinian thought. It was not until the 1880s that sceptical or anti-scientific views began to emerge in the later Hardy, Richard Jefferies, and H. G. Wells; before this time the two disciplines were usually regarded as complementary. Perhaps the most important result of the ascendancy of science and its compatibility with literary culture during this period was that novelists were inspired to adopt a dispassionate, objective view of their subject matter. Many of the aesthetic ideals of Victorian fiction, as well as its moral values—disinterestedness, self-denial, truthfulness—closely parallel the experimental ethos of science. In Middlemarch, to cite just one example, Eliot claims to explore ‘the history of man’, showing ‘how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of time’ (Prelude). Much of the careful sociological observation that pervaded mid-century fiction drew on this clinical spirit.

The relatively unified reading public that emerged in the 1820s shaped the intellectual character of the novel in yet other ways. For example, unlike their Russian and French counterparts, such as Gustave Flaubert, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, mid-century British novelists were unlikely to be concerned with metaphysics or with philosophical issues generally. The less rarefied British reading public tended to be more engaged by such intellectual questions as the erosion of religious faith that many perceived scientific advancement to have caused and by a concern with the fate of ethics in an increasingly secular (and aggressively capitalist) society. Those novelists not explicitly addressing religious subjects nevertheless tended to represent certain social groups as spiritual communities—whether to argue that downtrodden constituencies deserved political recognition or to advocate that powerful classes be given yet more authority. Others tried to recreate a consoling sense of social wholeness through the secularization of traditional religious values. The ethical principles Victorian novelists espoused motivated certain aesthetic devices as well, such as the providential love plot, which suggested a bedrock faith in the power of Christian love, and the resolute pilgrimages toward moral enlightenment that routinely structured the narratives of mid-century heroes and heroines. The broad-based readership for fiction after 1820
also encouraged novelists to attend closely to topical issues of all kinds. As many of our contributors demonstrate, fiction of this period offers remarkably detailed social, political, and cultural snapshots because of novelists’ scrupulous attention to the news and events of the day.

The close bond between writers and readers—particularly their mutual fascination with science—also tended to make the study of the self a central object of interest. Psychology was emerging as a specific discipline out of the intellectual traditions of physiology, philosophy, and medicine, and novelists intently followed the developments of early nineteenth-century associationist and physiological psychologists, as well as more marginal branches of mental science such as mesmerism and phrenology. Moreover, many novelists were psychological pioneers in their own right—both in their experiments on their readers’ affective responses and their explorations of their characters’ psyches. In tandem with mid-century psychology, novelists exploited the flexibility of the form to dramatize the inextricability of physical, mental, and emotional response, to explore the role of experience and memory in shaping identity, and to probe the mind’s extraordinary capacities, including those displayed through dreams and trance. Indeed, the development of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century was heavily indebted to mid-century novelists for their representations of unconscious processes, their keenly drawn studies of aberrant mental states and childhood development, and their attention to fragmented and vulnerable individual psyches.

This interest in the life of the mind and the development of the self was one aspect of the centrality of emotional life in fiction from the 1820s onwards. The cultural ascendency of the middle-class family also reinforced the popularity of domestic life as the privileged context within which to explore the emotions. Yet novelists often found themselves constrained by explicit and tacit forms of censorship precisely because the middle-class family was their most vocal audience and their richest economic vein. ‘The question about everything was, would it bring a blush into the cheek of the young person?’ (bk 1, ch. 11), Dickens wrote bitterly in Our Mutual Friend (1864–5), and both Charles Mudie and editors of magazines such as The Graphic frequently invoked the middle-class family in order to justify their strict codes of moral censorship.

Nevertheless, the prominence of the family in nineteenth-century fiction provided fertile ground to explore psychological and emotional issues. Like their eighteenth-century forebears, for example, nineteenth-century novelists were preoccupied with the central themes of courtship and kinship, but they tended to explore them exclusively in domestic settings. This trend began in silver fork fiction, given its fascination with the effects of manners and rank on marital relations. It continued through the domestic realism that developed in the 1840s, with its focus on ordinary middle-class life, and on into sensation and detective novels in the 1860s, which were centrally preoccupied with family secrets. Marriage plots had long been the means by which class differences and social tensions might be overcome, too, but in the middle decades of the nineteenth
century this narrative structure took increasingly more open—and more interrogative—
forms. The regional distinctions and class conflicts that Gaskell investigates in *North and South* (1854–5), for example, are finally resolved by the marriage of John Thornton and Margaret Hale. But the intricate process of negotiation that underpins their romance takes the form of a series of three-way encounters that complicate the simple oppositions implied by the novel’s title, and these conversations shape the progressive paternalism embodied in the marriage as the emotional expression of a new social order. Similarly, ‘Reader, I married him’—Jane Eyre’s concluding announcement—may be one of the greatest moments of triumph in nineteenth-century fiction, and it may emphasize how much passionate romantic love retained its narrative and emotional power throughout the period. But as the erotic struggle between governess and her employer in Brontë’s novel makes clear, it was the psycho-social tensions at the heart of the middle- and upper-class family that provided mid-century novelists with their most engrossing material, making the domestic arena a crucial one through which social as well as psychological processes could be intimately investigated, and in which the boundary between public and private life became most blurred.

Marriage came under unprecedented scrutiny during the 1850s and 1860s as both a legal contract and a means of transmitting wealth and property. The debates around the 1857 Divorce Act, the first of the Married Women’s Property Bills, the Yelverton bigamy trial of the early 1860s, and the publication of anthropological studies such as J. F. McLennan’s *Primitive Marriage* in 1865 all led to a greater public consciousness that marriage and legitimacy were slippery legal concepts, and that the ancient common law of coverture, whereby a wife’s legal person was assimilated into her husband’s, was out of place in a modern liberal society. Novelists actively participated in these conversations and helped to define their limits. Jane Eyre’s triumphant announcement was the culmination of a struggle for equality with Rochester that many contemporary critics saw as revolutionary, and which reinforced the case for equitable, companionate marriage that underpinned mid-century liberal feminist campaigns. Nevertheless, the enduring legal subordination of wives still retained its frisson: witness the incarceration in an asylum of Laura Fairlie in Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60), the emotional and sexual incompatibility of Dorothea Brooke and Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, and Trollope’s studies of marital power-struggles, such as *Is He Popinjay?* (1878), as well as his compelling study of a husband’s pathological possessiveness, *He Knew He Was Right* (1868–9).

Moreover, despite tacit or explicit forms of censorship, themes of sexual transgression—bigamy, adultery, divorce, and illegitimacy—were fictional constants, even if at times they appeared in coded or oblique forms. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, and Rhoda Broughton made open use of bigamy and adultery as sensational devices in *Aurora Floyd* (1862–3), *East Lynne* (1861), and *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867). Other novelists circumvented the demands of censorship in a variety of ways: instead of writing
about adultery, for example, they wrote about men and women who were torn between
their desires for two different people—Harriet Martineau’s *Deerbrook* (1839), for example,
is perfectly plain about Edward Hope’s agonized attraction to his wife Harriet’s sister
Margaret. Adultery could also be safely represented in the pages of novels as long as it
was punished, as was the case for Isabel Vane in *East Lynne* and Edith Dombey in
Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846–8). And while foundlings, lost heirs, and secret inher-
itations remained a staple ingredient of melodrama—one that Dickens made full use of in
*Oliver Twist* (1837–9)—illegitimacy was put to more complex uses after 1850. It remained
a means of embodying the power of the repressed past, as with Esther Summerson’s
secret bond with Lady Dedlock in Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Arthur Clennam’s haunting
sense of unresolved wrong in his *Little Dorrit* (1855–7). But it was also the means of
exposing the fragile legal and performative fictions on which a legitimate identity relies,
as in Trollope’s *Ralph the Heir* (1870–1) and in his final novel, the darkly comic *Mr
Scarborough’s Family* (1883).

Indeed, any ideal vision of the family as a unit in which formal legitimacy, blood
relationships, and affective bonds are seamlessly blended is rarely found in nineteenth-
century fiction. Foundlings and orphans may acquire social identities and lost inheri-
tances through the discovery of kin, but blood ties are more likely to prove the source of
problems, as in the perverse relationships between fathers and daughters or mothers and
sons in Dickens’s fiction, and in his celebration of adoptive, voluntarily created family
groups. Just as the boundaries of the family are shown to be flexible and unstable, so,
too, the lives of women outside it are given an unprecedented depth: for example, the
mental vulnerability of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853); the strength and
resolution of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*; and the sympathetic exploration
of the choices a woman has to make in Trollope’s *Miss MacKenzie* (1865).

These social and cultural shifts—a finely tuned class consciousness and sociological
awareness; the rising cachet of dispassionate, scientific empiricism; an increasingly
secularized moralism; the heightened interest in psychology and the family; and the
growing frequency of women’s resistance to traditional gender roles—contributed to
many of the distinct formal features of fiction after 1820. Novelists may have retained
from their eighteenth-century forebears a strong social conscience, a Hogarthian will-
ingness to examine the underside of social life, and a deep interest in sensibility and
sentimentalism. They may also have retained some of the well-worn plot devices—
missing heirs, mistaken identities, forged wills—that had been incorporated into the
novel from theatre by Fielding, Smollett, and their contemporaries. But the didactic
moralism, the broad comic satire, the picaresque horseplay, the intensity of dramatic
action, the rapid pace of narration, and the restricted number of characters that are key
features of eighteenth-century fiction gave way to a more sober, detached, and socially
capacious repertoire of narrative conventions from the 1820s onwards that enabled more
complex investigations of both social and psychic life.
This transition was facilitated by two monumental, pivotal figures whose principal works were published in the 1810s and 1820s, and who shaped the formal resources available to every novelist who followed them. In their different but strangely complementary ways, Austen and Scott helped inaugurate the self-disciplined, quasi-sociological, clinically observant novelistic sensibility that held sway from the 1820s onwards. Austen, whose reputation grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century, did more than popularize the courtship plot; she also inspired a new self-consciousness about the integrity of narrative form and an unprecedented attention to psychological depth and complexity, as well as a minute interest in the nuances of class gradation as they showed themselves in behaviour, taste, wit, and conversation. Scott left his mark in a number of more subtle ways, in particular his peculiarly intense sense of the relationship between characters and their immediate environment, which resonates in both the urban and the rural landscapes of Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot, Hardy, and many other mid-century writers, together with his ambivalence about Romanticism, which pervades the Waverley novels. This ambivalence, in particular, profoundly structured subsequent fiction. The inclinations of the Brontë sisters may appear to be wildly romantic, for example, but Charlotte opened *Shirley* (1849) by insisting that her goal was to write a tale ‘as unromantic as Monday morning’ (ch. 1), while Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* begins with an extravagantly romantic plot and setting only to subject them to a withering critique from the perspective of the unsentimental realism of the novel’s second half. The huge social canvas on which Scott worked, as well as his enormous gallery of characters, also inspired his successors, as did his sense that social misery was not the result of individual villainy but the product of large economic and political forces. In all these convergent ways, Austen and Scott fostered the new, professionalized attention both to minute particulars and to large social issues that would become the foundation for the broad array of forms taken by ‘Victorian realism’. Austen and Scott also helped make the novel socially respectable in a way it had not quite been before, and in their wake readers of all social classes began to regard it as the most universally recognized form of cultural capital.

The chapters that make up this volume reflect the range, flexibility, and ambition of the novel during the years between 1820 and 1880. They also demonstrate the many different kinds of literary history that this period demands—implicit historiographies which can encompass the formal development of subgenres and narrative modes, on the one hand, and the more ‘externalist’ focus on the economic, social, and intellectual determinants that shaped fiction, on the other—as well as the necessity of not drawing too rigid a boundary between methodological approaches. The opening part draws on the recently renewed critical interest in the material history of the novel (the economics of book production, the social and cultural composition of audiences, the working lives of novelists), an interest shared by all the volumes in this series. Part II is concerned with the many generic transformations that shaped key modalities of the novel through the
nineteenth century—historical fiction, Gothic, the *Bildungsroman*, and so forth. Many of these subgenres, it should be noted, reflect the international influences operating on British fiction—another theme running throughout the series. Although the most distinguished nineteenth-century writers did not begin to dominate the novel-writing landscape until the 1840s, subgenres that developed various aspects of mid-century fiction sprouted from the 1820s onwards, and Part II is proportionately larger than others in the volume precisely because it traces the key emergence of specific forms from this historical moment, illustrating their interconnectedness and their impact on later fiction.

Most importantly, it was in the 1820s that many novelistic subgenres began to achieve their paradoxical combination of sharp definition and dynamic intermixture, a cross-fertilization frequently addressed by contributors to this part. The career of Bulwer Lytton is symptomatic of this early-century nimbleness with subgeneric hybridity: he was by turns a writer of silver fork fiction (*Pelham*), historical novels, Newgate fiction (*Paul Clifford* [1830]), the novel of ideas (*Eugene Aram* [1832]), domestic novels, and, toward the end of his career, supernatural tales and early science fiction novels, such as *A Strange Story* (1862) and *The Coming Race* (1871); yet he also combined many of these subgenres in popular works such as *Zanoni* (1842), which jumbles the supernatural tale together with the conventions of historical fiction and domestic romance. Similar hybridity characterizes many of the great novels of Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and other mid-century writers. *Vanity Fair* mixes the fashionable novel with historical romance; *Wuthering Heights* borrows from romance, crime fiction, Gothic tales, and domestic realism; *Our Mutual Friend* borrows from melodrama, detective fiction, domestic realism, and the sensation novel. One of the most striking instances of this generic hybridity is the way in which, from Scott’s *The Monastery* (1820) onward, Gothic elements were incorporated into decidedly non-Gothic novels with contemporary settings, such as *Villette*, Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850), and many sensation novels: Wilkie Collins’s *Basil* (1852), *The Woman in White*, and *Armadale* (1864–6); and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861–2).

Many novelists, of course, did identify themselves with one or another of the subgenres that emerged in the 1820s and 1830s. Although there was historical fiction in the eighteenth century, for example, Scott established the form later novelists would follow and branded it as his own, largely by focusing on periods of national upheaval in which one or more protagonists negotiated the process of historical transition through their own internal transformation. Scott also set the pattern for the ‘national tale’, while the fashionable novels that date from the mid-1820s defined the careers of Catherine Gore, Elizabeth Caroline Grey, Robert Plumer Ward, and many others. Newgate novels became, at least for a time, the staple of Ainsworth and Bulwer Lytton. The first instance of domestic fiction was arguably *Deerbrook* in 1839, and although it was the only such novel Martineau wrote, the genre became a mainstay for many of the most well-known
mid-century writers, including Charlotte Brontë, Eliot, and Trollope. The development of a specific subgenre of children’s fiction was an important exception to this pattern, since it emerged directly out of the didactic and evangelical traditions of the 1790s. The religious impulses that first inspired it were sustained through the mid-nineteenth century in works such as \textit{Jessica’s First Prayer} (1867) by Hesba Stretton, as well as being radically transformed by an expanding publishing industry into a differentiated and segmented children’s market.

While the careers and styles of individual authors are not the primary focus of this volume, we have acknowledged the crucial roles of specific major figures in the context of the particular model of authorship they embodied. Part III charts Dickens’s reshaping of the novel for a mass reading public within a political public sphere; the Brontë sisters’ influential reworking of romantic themes (and of romance itself); and Eliot’s active engagement in an intricate and rapidly changing intellectual culture. The latter two chapters also highlight the central importance of women writers and women’s issues in the fiction of this period.

The nineteenth-century novel’s capacity to dissect a society’s economic, political, and legal institutions, and yet at the same time to probe the complexities of private life, was enabled by the extraordinary range of narrative strategies that emerged through the period: first-person autobiographies, multiple narrators and plots, diverse forms of omniscient narration and free indirect discourse. Part IV explores some of these modes, together with the cross-fertilization between novels and the shorter tales and sketches that were as much an aspect of the expansion of magazine industry as full-length works of fiction. These short pieces blurred the boundary between fiction and journalism, and their tight focus and marginal literary position offered novelists an important arena for generic experimentation, as well as a space to pursue kinds of stories and narrative resolutions not found in mainstream work. The changing use of diaries, letters, memoirs, and testimonies is also a striking example of how older modes such as the epistolary novel were reworked and put to new purposes between 1820 and 1880. The popularity of framed story collections, too, offered writers the opportunity to experiment with different personae and perspectives, often generating a relativism that is extended in the double or multiple narrative strands within slow-burning, longer works. Other cultural forms—particularly theatre and the visual arts—also played important formal and thematic roles in shaping various kinds of the period’s fiction.

Parts V and VI complete the volume by elaborating some of the topical issues we have enumerated—and many others—in complex detail. Part V explores the ever-present tensions between a domestically focused culture and the reading public’s developing sense of its own national identity, as well as its persistent intra-national constituencies and conflicts. Part VI contextualizes the evolution of the novel by documenting its extensive engagements with contemporary political, social, scientific, intellectual, and cultural transformations. Contributors to both these sections have integrated the most
recent social history with an understanding of the novel’s ongoing engagement with the non-literary (and, in many cases, the non-British) world.

“The men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business’, noted Virginia Woolf in her 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’. Early twentieth-century novelists may have defined themselves against what they saw as the long-winded and tendentious fiction written before 1880, but many of the techniques we typically associate with twentieth-century modernism began to emerge within the nineteenth-century novel. The term ‘stream of consciousness’, for example, has often been traced to William James’s preference in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) for ‘a “river,” or “stream” as the metaphors by which [consciousness] is most accurately described’ (vol. 1, ch. 9). But those metaphors had already been deployed by the mid-nineteenth-century psychologist George Henry Lewes in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859–60), and his partner George Eliot animated them in the forces which suspend Maggie Tulliver between conscious and unconscious mental states in *The Mill on the Floss*. In James Hogg’s narrative dramatization of mental doubleness in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), in the recollections of Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849–50) as David attempts to work through his past, in Meredith’s narratorial enactment of intricate shifts of consciousness in *The Egoist*, and in Eliot’s exploration of mixed motives and self-delusion in *Middlemarch*, the flexibility of nineteenth-century fiction to explore interior mental states was equal to its ability to engage in contemporary social movements and intellectual debates. But both aspects of the novel between 1820 and 1880 underpinned its popularity as a mass cultural form. By contrast, it was in the early stages of modernist fiction that the development of these kinds of aesthetic strategies—as well as the repudiation of nineteenth-century fiction’s focus on domestic life and topical matters, and of its broad-based but circumspect critique of social inequities—acquired the specialized rigour and purity that marked the end of the ‘classic’ age of the novel. They also contributed to the loss of the unprecedented cultural centrality nineteenth-century British novelists had enjoyed.
Editorial Note

The system of referencing adopted in this volume depends on a distinction between primary and secondary works. Primary works (novels, short stories, and essays) are referred to by title and date in the text, and do not appear in the bibliography. Quotations from novels are normally identified by chapter reference, so that they can easily be found without referring to a specific edition. However, in the case of novels without chapter breaks (for example, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*), we give a page reference and list a specific edition in the bibliography.

All quotations from secondary material are referenced in the text and listed in the bibliography.
Note on British Currency before Decimalization

BEFORE the introduction of decimal currency into the United Kingdom in 1971, the pound sterling was divided into twenty shillings, with twelve pence (pennies) to the shilling. The lowest value coin was the farthing (a quarter of a penny). The crown was five shillings—hence the popular 2s 6d coin known as the half-crown—while the guinea, much used in commercial transactions, was twenty-one shillings. In the present book we use the conventional abbreviations ‘s’ for shillings and ‘d’ for pence, and prices are given as follows: £1 3s 6d (one pound three shillings and sixpence).