

**21L471 – Major English Novels: Reading Romantic Fiction  
Spring 2002**

**Course Description:**

Though the era of British Romanticism (ca. 1790-1830) is sometimes exclusively associated with the poetry of these years, this period was just as importantly a time of great innovation in British prose fiction. Romantic novelists pioneered or revolutionized several genres, including social/philosophical problem novels, tales of sentiment and sensibility, and the historical novel. Writing in the years of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the early industrial revolution, these writers conveyed a spirit of chaos and upheaval even in stories whose settings are seemingly farthest removed from those cataclysmic historical events. In this year's offering of "Major English Novels," we will read of plagues, wars, hysterics, monsters and more in novels by authors including William Godwin, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Walter Scott. In the final weeks of the semester, we will read two Victorian novels, by Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens, in light of these earlier texts. There will be two essay assignments, one 5-7 pages and one 8-10 pages in length, and required presentations.

**Texts:**

Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (Broadview).

Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium Eater (Penguin).

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (Penguin).

Maria Edgeworth, Belinda (Oxford).

William Godwin, Caleb Williams (Penguin).

Walter Scott, Waverley (Penguin).

Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (Oxford).

Mary Shelley, The Last Man (Nebraska).

## Requirements:

Students are required to attend all class sessions and to participate. I do not evaluate class participation in terms of how many brilliant things you say in the course of the semester, but I require you to have read the texts thoroughly and to come to class prepared to talk about them. In addition, every student will be required to deliver at least one presentation on an assigned work during the semester. These presentations, between 15-20 minutes in length, should be conceived as exercises in literary interpretation through close analysis, and should ideally help to stimulate a discussion through arguments and questions.

For each essay assignment, I will distribute a handout detailing requirements and due dates. Feel free to come and discuss with me written assignments before they are due if you have any questions or problems.

## Reading/Assignment Schedule (subject to change)

Class 1	Introduction
Class 2	Godwin, <u>Caleb Williams</u> , vol 1; Burke, <u>Reflections</u> <u>on the Revolution in France</u> (sel.)
Class 3	Godwin, <u>Caleb Williams</u> , vol. 2
Class 4	Godwin, <u>Caleb Williams</u> , vol. 3
Class 5	Edgeworth, <u>Belinda</u> , vol. 1; Wollstonecraft, <u>Vindication of</u> <u>the Rights of Woman</u> (sel.)
Class 6	Edgeworth, <u>Belinda</u> , vol. 2
Class 7	Edgeworth, <u>Belinda</u> , vol. 3
Class 8	Austen, <u>Sense and Sensibility</u> , vol 1
Class 9	Austen, <u>Sense and Sensibility</u> , vol. 2
Class 10	Austen, <u>Sense and Sensibility</u> , vol. 3
Class 10	<b>Essay #1 Due (5-7 pages)</b>
Class 11	Scott, <u>Waverley</u>
Class 12	Scott <u>Waverley</u>

Class 13	Scott <u>Waverley</u>
Class 14	Scott <u>Waverley</u>
Class 15	De Quincey, <u>Confessions</u>
Class 16	De Quincey, <u>Confessions</u>
Class 17	Shelley, <u>Frankenstein</u> , vols. 1-2
Class 18	Shelley, <u>Frankenstein</u> , vol. 3
Class 19	Shelley, <u>The Last Man</u> , vol. 1
Class 20	Shelley, <u>The Last Man</u> , vol. 2
Class 21	Shelley, <u>The Last Man</u> , vol. 3
Class 22	Dickens, <u>Great Expectations</u>
Class 23	Dickens, <u>Great Expectations</u>
Class 24	Dickens, <u>Great Expectations</u>
Class 24	<b>Essay #2 Due (8-10 pages)</b>
Class 25	Dickens, <u>Great Expectations</u>

### **MIT Literature Department Statement on Plagiarism**

Plagiarism – use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement – is a serious offense. It is the policy of the Literature Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work. For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution consult the style guides available and the MIT Website on Plagiarism located at:

<http://web.mit.edu/writing/Special/plagiarism.html>

MIT's academic honesty policy can be found at the following link:

<http://web.mit.edu/policies/10.0.html>

**Major English Novels**  
**21L471**  
**Essay #1**

Please write a 5-7 page essay on one of the following two topics. If you have questions, problems, or simply want to talk through your proposed thesis, feel free to schedule a meeting with me.

1. Novelists of this period frequently describe or define the faculty of reason in relation to some other human faculty or condition (emotion/passion, superstition, madness, etc.). Write an essay reflecting on the relationship between reason and its others in Godwin, Edgeworth, or Austen; or, if you like, you may consider how two novelists define and evaluate characters based on their possession or lack of reason. While clearly reason is a desirable quality in all cases, how do individual novelists describe this faculty and its ideal exercise? What are the attributes of the reasonable person, and what are the principal obstacles to reasonable behavior? Finally, how do novelists conceive the status of reason relative to human faculties and experiences such as emotion, faith, etc.? Are these faculties necessary to each other, mutually reinforcing, or dangerously opposed?
2. In discussion thus far, we have had occasion to observe how frequently novelists reply to and engage with central social/political ideas of their time. While obviously fiction has qualities distinct from political prose, novelists do clearly respond to the political world of which they are a part. Write an essay reflecting on the relationship between one novel (by Godwin, Edgeworth, or Austen) and one or both of the political texts by Burke and Wollstonecraft. If we can see the novel as entering into a conversation with the political theorist, what sort of conversation is it? Does the novelist confirm, oppose, modify, or subvert the terms of the argument? Remember that the views of one character may not be the same as the novelist's, and that more than one character may contain elements of truth in the novelist's eyes. Does the novelist offer one perspective on the political argument, or several? Are these views consistent? Finally, how might you imagine Burke or Wollstonecraft responding to these fictional engagements with their ideas?

**\*\*ESSAY #1 DUE IN CLASS 10\*\***

**Major English Novels**  
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**Essay #2**

For your second assignment, please write a 8-10 page essay on one of the following two topics; or, if you prefer, devise a topic of your own. You may, if you wish, write an essay on a single novel, or you may focus on and develop an argument out of a reading of two novels. In either case, be sure to organize your observations and reflections into a tightly-

focused argument about the text(s) in question. As always, please feel free to contact me for an appointment to talk about your essay.

1. Scenes of education are integral to many of the novels we've read this semester. From the harsh lessons of Marianne's illness to Pip's sentimental education, many 19th-century novelists make the processes by which characters learn, grow, and change a central component of plot. Just as often, these novelists describe various forms of mis-education, depicting characters whose flawed intellectual or emotional upbringing causes them to take a turn for the worse. Write an essay analyzing the theme of education in any of the following novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Waverley*, *Confessions*, *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man*, *Great Expectations*. Feel free to focus on a character's education in a broad sense – his/her formative experiences – as well as on one's formal education (or lack of it). How do novelists conceive the objectives of education and/or the attributes of the fully educated person? What the potential obstacles to education or sources of miseducation, and how are these pitfalls to be avoided? Finally, how if at all does the theme of education support the novelist's didactic intent?

2. As a literary form narrating a character's development from youth to maturity, the Bildungsroman might be understood as the story of a protagonist who rises above his/her surroundings to become the person s/he is. In many if not all of the novels we have read this semester, however, a character's capacity for self-determination is often closely entwined with or defined by forces beyond that individual's control. Indeed, many characters in these novels are shaped by the various contexts in which they find themselves. For your second essay assignment, discuss the relationship between character and context in texts by any of the following authors: Godwin, Shelley, Scott, Dickens. Consider the lives of different characters of the novel in relation to their surroundings and the contexts that shape them: familial background, social class, education, etc. How do these various environmental factors act on or define the individual? Why do some characters struggle against their external circumstances while some passively accept the roles they are allotted in life? Which if either possibility leads to a greater degree of success and happiness? Above all, what do these authors seem to be suggesting about the capacity of the individual to become the author of his or her own life?

3. As a third alternative, you may write an essay on a topic of your choice, provided that you meet with me in advance to discuss your ideas for the topic. See me to schedule an appointment.

**\*\*ESSAY #2 DUE IN CLASS 24\*\***