Lesson 6: Realism and Social Critique: Charles Dickens & George Eliot

Duration: 3 hours

In this lesson, we will explore the emergence of Realism in 19th-century literature through the works of Charles Dickens and George Eliot. This lesson will focus on how both authors critique Victorian society, addressing issues such as class inequality, gender roles, and moral responsibility. By examining *Hard Times* and *Middlemarch*, we will analyze how Realism shifts the narrative focus from idealized representations to more complex, socially engaged portrayals of everyday life. Through this, we will understand how these novels challenge prevailing social norms and highlight the struggles of marginalized individuals.

Historical and Intellectual Context

The emergence of literary realism in 19th-century England cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader socio-economic and philosophical transformations of the Victorian era. The Industrial Revolution, a period of unprecedented technological and economic change, restructured the very fabric of British society. Mechanized production, rapid urbanization, and the expansion of factory labor led to profound social dislocation. Cities like Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham became epicenters of industrial growth, but also sites of overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the exploitation of the working poor. This new social order sharpened class divisions and provoked questions about justice, morality, and human dignity. Within this context, literary realism arose not merely as a stylistic preference but as a critical mode of engagement with the historical present, one that sought to represent the everyday struggles of ordinary individuals in an unidealized, empirical manner.

At the heart of this historical moment was the philosophical doctrine of utilitarianism, championed by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Emphasizing the maximization of happiness for the greatest number, utilitarianism profoundly influenced Victorian policy-making, from educational reform to the administration of poverty relief. Yet in practice, this logic often reduced complex human experiences to quantifiable data, neglecting the ethical, emotional, and imaginative dimensions of life. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* offers a trenchant satire of this reductionism, portraying characters whose humanity is stifled under a regime that privileges facts over feelings. Similarly, George Eliot's novels expose how such instrumental rationality fails to accommodate the moral development and inner lives of individuals, particularly women.

Complementing utilitarianism was the rise of positivism, a philosophy that prioritized scientific knowledge, empirical observation, and verifiable truth claims over metaphysical speculation. Inspired by Auguste Comte, positivism became emblematic of Victorian confidence in progress and the belief that social problems could be solved through rational planning and data accumulation. However, this epistemological framework also contributed to a devaluation of affective knowledge and moral reasoning. In realist fiction, authors such as Eliot deployed narrative omniscience not only to mirror the scientific ethos of the age but also to challenge its ethical myopia. Her narrators often pause to instruct the reader in sympathy, interiority, and moral reflection, elements that positivist logic tends to disregard.

In sum, the realist novel in the Victorian period functioned both as a product of its historical milieu and as a critical intervention within it. Dickens and Eliot, among others, crafted narratives that reflected the material and ideological tensions of industrial modernity while simultaneously questioning the human cost of progress when defined purely by economics or science. Literary realism, thus, emerges as a powerful vehicle for social critique, one that insists on the ethical importance of representing, and responding to, the ordinary lives that history might otherwise overlook.

Conceptual Keywords and Literary Terms

An informed reading of 19th-century realist literature requires familiarity with the intellectual and literary vocabulary that underpins both the narrative strategies and the ideological critiques embedded within these texts. Realism, as a literary mode, is distinguished by its commitment to verisimilitude: the faithful depiction of everyday life, social conditions, and ordinary individuals. In contrast to the heightened emotion and imaginative idealism of Romanticism, realism is grounded in plausible events, complex moral dilemmas, and the nuanced representation of social environments. It privileges causality, coherence, and psychological depth, often focusing on characters whose lives are shaped by class, gender, and historical circumstance.

Central to the ethical and narrative frameworks of Charles Dickens and George Eliot are two dominant Victorian ideologies: utilitarianism and positivism. Utilitarianism, the consequentialist moral philosophy advanced by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, asserts that the morality of any action should be judged by its capacity to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. While this principle influenced reforms in education, labor, and public health, it also rendered invisible the suffering of those who did not contribute directly to utilitarian calculations. In *Hard Times*, Dickens targets the depersonalizing effects of utilitarianism through characters like Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby, who are blind to the emotional and ethical dimensions of human life. George Eliot similarly critiques this moral arithmetic by portraying how such reductive logic fails to account for the subtleties of human aspiration and emotional deprivation, particularly in the lives of women.

Positivism, another philosophical current of the age, foregrounds the belief that valid knowledge must be derived from empirical observation and scientific reasoning. Positivist thought, associated with Auguste Comte, shaped the Victorian worldview by asserting that all meaningful statements must be verifiable through direct experience or data. In the literary realm, positivism contributed to the realist project by encouraging detailed observation of social life. Yet both Dickens and Eliot problematize this epistemological stance: Dickens does so by emphasizing emotional intelligence and the imagination as correctives to scientific rationalism, while Eliot adopts the tools of empirical analysis, observation, causality, and psychological inquiry, only to exceed them through a deep investment in ethical consciousness.

To explore characters in depth, Eliot pioneered psychological realism, a narrative approach that investigates the interior motivations, moral anxieties, and cognitive dissonance experienced by her protagonists. Rather than depicting characters as fixed moral types, psychological realism allows for contradiction, growth, and introspection, marking a significant development in the realist tradition. Related to this is Eliot's use of narrative omniscience, whereby the narrator functions not merely as an observer but as a moral and philosophical commentator, often guiding the reader's interpretations and reflections. This omniscient voice is didactic in nature, intended to cultivate empathy and moral attentiveness.

Another crucial term is gender ideology, which refers to the normative social codes and expectations assigned to individuals based on perceived gender roles. Both *Hard Times* and *Middlemarch* confront the constraints of Victorian patriarchy, albeit in different ways. While Dickens critiques the emotional sterilization of both men and women under industrial capitalism, Eliot goes further in interrogating how marriage, education, and social ambition systematically suppress female autonomy. Her characters such as Dorothea Brooke embody the tension between individual ethical striving and the social scripts of womanhood.

Primary Text Analysis: Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854)

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* stands as one of the most polemical works in the English realist canon, foregrounding the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism and the mechanistic ideologies that shaped mid-Victorian England. Set in the fictional manufacturing town of Coketown, the novel is a scathing indictment of utilitarian ethics, rigid empiricism, and social engineering. Through its symbolic geography, caricatured but ethically charged characters, and narrative irony, *Hard Times* dramatizes the corrosive consequences of subordinating imagination, emotion, and morality to an abstract logic of productivity and profit.

The novel's critique of utilitarian pedagogy is immediately evident in its portrayal of Thomas Gradgrind, whose very name suggests severity and reductiveness. In one of the most iconic opening passages of Victorian literature, Gradgrind asserts:

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of

reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them." (*Book the First: Sowing*, Chapter I)

This passage encapsulates Gradgrind's belief in a rationalist, mechanistic epistemology that excludes imagination, affect, and subjective experience. The repetition of "Facts" becomes a rhetorical battering ram, signaling not clarity but intellectual tyranny. Dickens's satire targets the educational doctrines of the time, particularly those inspired by Benthamite utilitarianism and positivist empiricism, which sought to shape future citizens as units of economic value rather than moral agents.

The novel's urban setting, Coketown, operates not merely as a physical space but as an allegorical representation of industrial uniformity and environmental degradation. Dickens writes:

"It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness." (*Book the First: Sowing*, Chapter V)

Here, Dickens uses visceral imagery and grotesque similes to depict industrial modernity as a kind of dystopian sublime: both overwhelming and dehumanizing. The town's visual and olfactory landscape is saturated with signs of mechanization, pollution, and alienation. Coketown becomes a spatial metaphor for the homogenization of human life under capitalism, where individual difference and spiritual vitality are sacrificed to efficiency and repetition.

Josiah Bounderby, the self-declared "self-made man," serves as a satirical embodiment of Victorian meritocratic ideology. He repeatedly declares:

"I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. I am a self-made man. I am the friend of the working man, and I'll stand by him till the last. I never took a penny from any human being. I was born in a ditch, and my mother ran away from me before I was a month old; and my grandmother was the wickedest and worst old woman that ever lived in the world." (*Book the First: Sowing*, Chapter IV)

Dickens exposes the performativity of Bounderby's narrative, which relies on the fetishization of poverty to legitimize authority and economic domination. In truth, Bounderby's story is a fabrication designed to mask systemic privilege. His inflated ego and cruelty toward workers reveal the moral bankruptcy of laissez-faire capitalism and its accompanying myths of self-reliance.

In contrast to the exploiters and ideologues, Stephen Blackpool emerges as a voice of working-class dignity and quiet resistance. His moral suffering and lack of social mobility are laid bare in a moment of confessional despair:

"I ha' gone home. 'Tis a muddle. That's where I last left off. I ha' read i' the paper that great fortunes bring great responsibilities. If that be true, I ha' a'most enough o' to be put on me now, wi'out havin' nought to do wi't. I ha' never had no happiness, nor had no means of finding any. I ha' never had no comfort but when I were a little child, some four or five year old, no more. I ha' never had no peace in me since I coom to ha' knowledge o' mysel', and the world at which I were too yoong. I ha' lived wi' that ever sin'. And now I feel I'm getting unready for the work I ha' to do, and I feel I'm goin' to be put out o' the way." (*Book the Second: Reaping*, Chapter VI)

Stephen's dialect and broken syntax reflect both his limited formal education and his deep existential pain. His life is presented not as one of development or choice, but of entrapment and exhaustion. His very voice disrupts the bourgeois ideologies that celebrate individual agency and economic freedom. Dickens thus elevates the voice of the subaltern through affective realism, positioning Stephen as the moral conscience of the novel.

Finally, the character of Sissy Jupe: a young circus girl taken into Gradgrind's household, operates as a narrative foil. Her emotional intelligence and imaginative vitality challenge the sterile doctrines of Fact. Her refusal to abandon her father and her intuitive understanding of human suffering represent a different mode of knowledge: one rooted in empathy and lived experience. She gradually destabilizes the Gradgrindian order from within, not through rebellion but through gentle perseverance and moral clarity.

Through caricature, irony, and sentimental pathos, Dickens constructs a form of social realism that seeks to provoke moral reform rather than document life dispassionately. His aesthetic is not neutral but ethically committed, aiming to awaken readers to the lived consequences of economic ideology. *Hard Times*, in this sense, functions as both a realist novel and a work of moral philosophy, interrogating the very foundations of Victorian modernity and advocating for a more humane social vision.

Literary Realism in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

Contextual Overview

Middlemarch, published in 1871-1872, is often considered one of George Eliot's masterpieces, offering a sweeping and complex portrayal of 19th-century provincial life. Set in the fictional town of Middlemarch, it tackles themes of political reform, social structures, and personal ambitions, providing a panoramic view of society. Unlike novels of its time that focused predominantly on social and political issues through external actions, Eliot's *Middlemarch* stands apart in its use of psychological realism, where the internal lives of characters play a crucial role in the narrative's progression.

- **Provincial Life:**
  Eliot captures the intricacies of provincial life, where individuals are often trapped within the boundaries of their social class, gender, and geographical location. Middlemarch serves as a metaphor for Victorian society at large—one that is in a state of flux, witnessing the decline of aristocratic privilege and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The setting is not just a backdrop for the unfolding events but is intimately tied to the characters' development. The novel's depiction of Middlemarch reveals a community where personal desires are frequently at odds with the demands and expectations of society. By focusing on the lives of ordinary people in a provincial town, Eliot emphasizes how deeply individual aspirations are shaped and constrained by the social, political, and economic contexts of their time.

- **Gender and Society:**
  Gender plays a central role in *Middlemarch*, and Eliot uses her female characters to critically explore the limited options available to women in Victorian society. Dorothea Brooke, for example, embodies the ideal of female intellectual and moral ambition, yet her ability to fulfill these aspirations is thwarted by the restrictions placed upon women of her time. Through Dorothea, Eliot critiques the notion that women should only aspire to domesticity, revealing the emotional and intellectual cost of such limitations. Similarly, characters like Rosamond Vincy, who embraces a more conventional and materialistic approach to life, represent the social pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. Eliot's treatment of gender and society is not one-sided; she explores both the overt and covert ways in which women are subjected to societal expectations, while also illustrating their capacity for resistance and transformation within those boundaries.

Character Studies:

1. **Dorothea Brooke:**
   Dorothea, the novel's protagonist, is a young woman of exceptional intelligence and moral depth, yet her desire for a purposeful life is in constant tension with the societal roles available to her. Her marriage to the elderly scholar Edward Casaubon, whom she marries in pursuit of intellectual companionship and a sense of higher purpose, represents her struggle to transcend the conventional role of a woman bound by marriage and domesticity. However, Dorothea soon discovers that Casaubon's intellectual ambitions are fruitless and his emotional neglect is a harsh realization of her dreams. In this sense, Dorothea's character encapsulates Eliot's critique of a society that forces women to abandon their intellectual and emotional aspirations in favor of conformity. Dorothea's eventual rejection of Casaubon's will, and her relationship with Will Ladislaw, represent a tentative move toward self-actualization, though her final choice of marriage to him can be seen as a continuation of the compromises women made in the face of societal expectations.

2. **Edward Casaubon:**
   Casaubon represents the failure of intellectualism when it becomes divorced from emotional and human considerations. His obsessive pursuit of writing a grand work, *The Key to All Mythologies*, symbolizes the futility of abstract academic work that is disconnected from real human lives. His inability to connect with his young wife, Dorothea, both emotionally and intellectually, exposes the limitations of intellectual ambition when it does not engage with the complexities of human relationships. Casaubon's character can be seen as a representation of an aging, stagnant intellectualism that prioritizes personal vanity over meaningful human connection. His demise serves as a commentary on the inability of such narrow pursuits to provide fulfillment or lead to any lasting impact.

3. **Tertius Lydgate:**
   Lydgate is the embodiment of the reformist spirit of the time, a progressive doctor whose desire to revolutionize medicine and improve society is stymied by his personal flaws and the pressures of social expectations. Lydgate arrives in Middlemarch with lofty ideals and the hope of instituting modern medical practices, but he is soon overwhelmed by the realities of provincial life. His marriage to Rosamond Vincy, motivated by physical attraction and a desire for social respectability, further complicates his career and moral vision. Lydgate's internal conflict highlights the tensions between idealism and reality, illustrating the moral cost of compromising one's ambitions to meet societal expectations. In contrast to Dorothea's intellectual struggles, Lydgate's downfall reveals the consequences of compromising one's ethical principles for personal gain.

4. **Rosamond Vincy:**
   Rosamond represents the materialistic, socially ambitious side of Victorian womanhood. Initially, she appears as the polar opposite of Dorothea: shallow, focused on beauty, social status, and wealth, and primarily concerned with securing a good marriage. However, her character is not without depth. Through her, Eliot critiques the ways in which women's societal roles often force them to place their self-worth in external factors like beauty and marriage. Rosamond's calculated approach to life, which involves manipulating situations and people to achieve her ends, highlights the limitations of a purely materialistic worldview. While she does not share Dorothea's intellectual aspirations, Rosamond's journey serves as a counterpoint, emphasizing the consequences of a life lived solely for social gain.

Key Passages & Analysis:

1. **Dorothea's Moral Vision:**
   "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life... we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."
   In this passage, Eliot articulates a profound ethical reflection on the human condition.

The "roar" of ordinary life represents the overwhelming emotional and moral weight of human suffering, which, if fully perceived, could be unbearable. Dorothea's awareness of this suffering, however, leads her to a moral vision that encourages empathy and selflessness. This passage underscores one of the novel's central themes: the importance of moral vision and understanding the plight of others, even when it is painful. Through Dorothea, Eliot suggests that true moral growth involves confronting and attempting to alleviate the suffering of others, even when it is difficult to bear.

2. **Unfulfilled Aspirations:**
   "What we call our despair is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope."
   This quotation speaks directly to the internal experience of frustration and yearning that many of Eliot's characters face. For Dorothea, Lydgate, and others, the despair they experience is not a result of hopelessness, but of the unfulfilled potential they feel as a result of their unmet desires and dreams. This passage exemplifies Eliot's psychological realism, offering insight into the complex emotional lives of her characters. Rather than a simple expression of disappointment, despair is portrayed as a visceral, ongoing struggle to fulfill one's potential in a world that imposes limitations.

Eliot's narrative technique employs omniscient narration to give readers unparalleled access to the inner thoughts and emotions of her characters. This allows her to present a deeply layered psychological realism that highlights the internal struggles and moral dilemmas individuals face when their aspirations are stifled by societal constraints. Eliot's focus on the psychological depth of her characters serves to foster a sense of empathy in her readers, encouraging them to look beyond external appearances and societal roles to understand the more profound, often painful, internal conflicts that drive human behavior.

Reflection and Synthesis

As we conclude our exploration of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, it is essential to reflect on the enduring significance of realism as both a literary movement and a tool for social critique. These novels not only offer incisive portrayals of 19th-century British society but also illuminate timeless issues that continue to shape our world today, such as class inequality, gender oppression, and the ethical consequences of economic systems.

Dickens and Eliot, through their richly developed characters and intricate depictions of societal forces, invite readers to critically examine the world around them, challenging both the systems that perpetuate injustice and the ways in which individuals navigate these systems. Realism, with its emphasis on empirical observation and psychological depth, remains a powerful mode of storytelling, one that compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about human suffering and resilience.

By engaging with these texts, we not only gain insight into the past but also develop a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its most

profound moral and social dilemmas. In doing so, literature encourages empathy, social awareness, and the critical reflection necessary for enacting meaningful change.

In this lesson, we have explored how Dickens's and Eliot's works reveal the complex interplay between individual lives and broader societal forces. Both authors used their narratives to question and critique the status quo, urging readers to reflect on issues of class, gender, and morality with renewed urgency. Through their vivid portrayals of suffering, aspiration, and moral complexity, they remind us that literature is not merely a form of entertainment but a means of ethical engagement and a call to action.

As we move forward, it is essential to recognize that the themes of realism, its focus on everyday life, its concern with social justice, and its commitment to the moral development of individuals, are just as relevant today as they were in Victorian England. By continuing to study and engage with these works, we not only honor the literary traditions they represent but also foster a more compassionate and critically aware society.

Next, we will explore Aestheticism and Decadence through Oscar Wilde, a movement that rejected Victorian moralism in favor of beauty and individualism. Wilde's works, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, challenge societal norms with wit and irony, focusing on art, identity, and morality. This lesson will offer a contrasting perspective to the social critique in Dickens and Eliot, examining the tension between moral duty and aesthetic freedom.

Evaluation Task

Write an analytical essay that critically engages with the themes of class struggle, gender dynamics, and moral responsibility in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. In your essay, compare and contrast the ways in which the authors use their characters, settings, and narrative techniques to critique Victorian society. Focus on how each novel portrays the socio-economic and philosophical issues of the time and how these critiques remain relevant today.