



Negotiating Identity and Social Change in British Literature: From Victorian Realism to Modernist Fragmentation

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the negotiation of identity and social change in British literature from the Victorian realism to the modernist fragmentation. It examines the portrayal of identity through class, gender, poverty, industrialisation, education, morality, family and social institutions by Victorian writers including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and by modernist writers including Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. Qualitative and comparative analyses of selected primary texts are used, such as *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Middlemarch*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waste Land*. The analysis illustrates the difference between the Victorian realism, in which the individual experience is related to larger social contexts, and modernist literature, which used stream of consciousness, non-linear narratives, multiple perspectives, memory, and complex inner experience. The study proposes that fragmentation is not a rejection of the Victorian realism but an extension of its preoccupation with issues of identity, social inequality, gender, alienation and social change.

Keywords: Victorian Realism; Modernist Fragmentation; Identity; Social Change; Class; Gender; Industrialisation; Modernity.

1. INTRODUCTION

British literature in the Victorian era to the early twentieth century is marked by a notable shift in social values, cultural systems and conceptions of individual identity. Victorian era was characterized by industrialization, urbanization, shifting class dynamics, increasing imperial influence and shifting gender norms. Victorian realist writers like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy described social change in literature using an extensive portrait of daily life, family, class, poverty, morality and institutions. They often depicted identity as bound up with social status and social expectations.

In the early 1900s, common beliefs regarding social stability, progress and discrete individual identity were increasingly challenged. Modernist writers like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot tried to throw themselves a challenge in the form of experimental literary devices: fragmented narration, stream of consciousness, multiple viewpoints, symbolism and non-linear depictions of time. The concept of identity thus became progressively subjective, psychological and fluctuating. Instead of showing the self as a whole and sharply demarcated object, modernist literature dealt with the fractured nature of consciousness and the self's experience of an increasingly modern and complex world.



Figure 1: Victorian Era

This study focuses on the transition from Victorian realism to modernist fragmentation, both as a literary and a cultural shift. It was concerned with the changes in representations of identity and their linkages to the broader processes of class, gender, industrialization, and urbanization, imperialism and modernity. In rejecting the Victorian realism, the study does not reject it as a whole but rather it extends and transforms many of its social and psychological concerns.

1.1 Research Objectives

The main objectives are:

- To examine identity in Victorian realist literature.
- To analyse identity and fragmentation in modernist literature.
- To compare Victorian realism and modernist fragmentation in relation to social change.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Halim (2025) analysed the process of the formation of Late Modern English language and literature as a transitional period. It underscored the evolution of the language/literary expression/social and cultural context dynamic of the modern era. It offered a context for the development of literary forms and linguistic practices as a result of wider historical developments, which enabled it to serve as a useful backdrop to the study of a shift from a traditional literary practice towards a new way of expression.

Efrizah (2025), in *English Literary Trails: From Shakespeare to Postmodernism*, traced the historical development of English literature from Shakespearean writing to postmodern literary thought. It included an examination of the elements of literary periods, movements, writers and changing ways of communicating ideas and feelings; it illustrated the



development of English literature in relation to the changing cultural and intellectual contexts. Its wide scope in its historical analysis was especially important in the understanding of literary forms and ideas through the ages, including the shift towards modernism and postmodernism.

Fauzi et al. (2026) offered an overview of English literature which led to a general understanding of literary heritage, advancement, and major works. In 2026, it was published by Star Digital Publishing and it was recognized as a reference book in English literature. Overall, its literary perspective was useful in helping to place the various periods and movements in literature in the context of English literature's evolution.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is qualitative, and comparative literature study by close text analysis of the selected works in the Victorian and Modernist period. The main texts are *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Middlemarch*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waste Land*. The analysis is concerned with identity, class, gender, industrialisation and imperialism, social change and fragmentation, memory and consciousness, and is based on a comparison between Victorian realism and modernist narratives.

3. VICTORIAN REALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Victorian realism was a major factor in the depiction of the interaction between people and the evolving social institutions of the Victorian era in Britain. The perception of individuals and the way they thought of themselves changed as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, the growth of capitalism and shifting class relations, and evolving ideas of gender. Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy were Victorian novelists who put their characters in recognisable social settings and illustrated how identity was formed through class, family, gender, occupation, morality, economic circumstances, and social institutions. The works, therefore, did not offer identity as an absolute property, but as a process of negotiation in society.

The novels chosen (*Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Middlemarch*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*) embody various aspects of Victorian social identity. Dickens' attention is given to poverty, industrialisation, and the power of institutions; Eliot is concerned with marriage, gender, and the expectations of community. Hardy considers the impact of class, sexual morality, education and social convention on individual aspirations. Together, these works demonstrate the manner in which Victorian realism brought together the personal and the broader social context, and revealed the conflicts between personal desires and social identities.

3.1 Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*: Poverty, Institutions and Social Identity

The connection between poverty and social identity is well represented in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. How Oliver is treated by the workhouse system and society depends on his status as an orphan and poor child. The novel does not just define poverty as a state of economic deprivation; it is also the social characteristics of poverty that shape a person's life opportunities, dignity, and how they are treated by institutions. In Oliver's case, he has been

repeatedly categorized as a pauper and a dependent child, reflecting how people are categorized by their social situation.

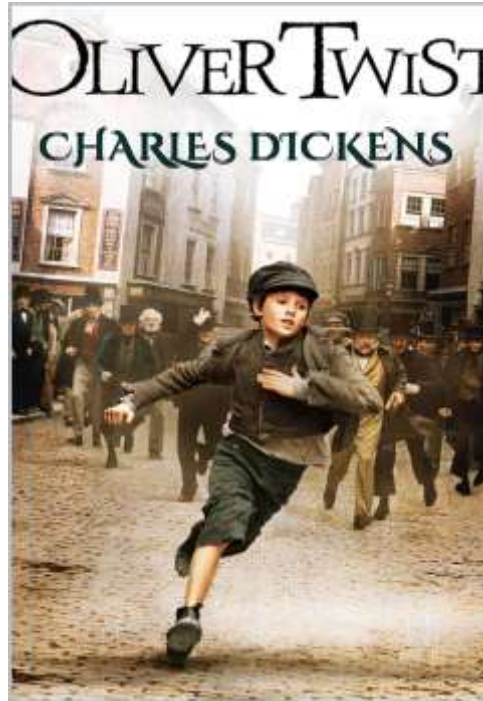


Figure 2: Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist

Meanwhile, Oliver's life serves to question the tendency to socialize the man. Meanwhile, Oliver's life questions the tendency to socialise the man. His passage from the workhouse, criminal world and respectable household illustrates social identity and the way that identity can shift based on circumstances. Dickens uses both of Oliver's experiences to highlight the inequalities of Victorian society and the need to see the individual human being rather than the economic entity. So Oliver Twist links poverty, institutional power and class identity, and seeks to show the contrast between an imposed identity and individual dignity.

3.2 Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*: Industrialisation and Economic Identity

In *Hard Times*, Dickens explores the impact of industrialisation on individual and collective identity. The industrial town of Coketown is a fictionalized image of an industrial society in which factory, economics, productivity, and utilitarianism dominate. Emotions and imagination are regarded as less significant than workers' economic utility. Blackpool's experiences tell of the construction of working-class identity based on occupation, poverty, and economic power.

Dickens also pitted rational considerations of industry against the imagination and emotionality of humanity. Thomas Gradgrind's philosophy is one that seeks to organise life based on facts and utility, but the novel shows that someone may not be explainable solely on an economic or functional basis. In industrialisation, *Hard Times*, thus, suggests a force that affects material and personal conditions. It shows the clash of the needs of an industrial economy and the emotional, social and imaginative needs of human beings.

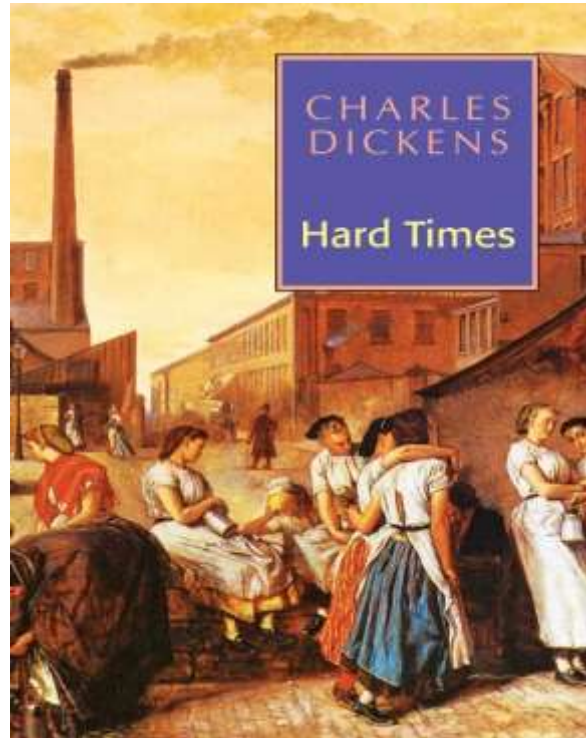


Figure 3: Charles Dickens's Hard Times

3.3 George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: Marriage, Society and Gender Identity

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, identity is the result of a complex interaction of social environment and individual. The characters are living in a tightly knit community that affects the choices that people make regarding marriage, family, class, religion, education, and social standing. Dorothea Brooke is significant for her intellectual and moral ideals clash with the few opportunities that are open to women in Victorian society. Her experiences illustrate the interrelationship between a woman's identity and expectations related to marriage and domestic responsibility.

Eliot also demonstrates the effect that social expectations have on not only the treatment people receive but on their understanding of themselves as well. As Dorothea's development takes place, there is a continuous process of negotiation between her own wishes and those of her community. Her experience shows the nature of identity is not solely social nor entirely a-social. *Middlemarch* in this way shows how gender, marriage, and social relations form part of the social framework of individual identity and how characters can challenge and find a way to negotiate identities assigned to them.

3.4 Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: Sexual Morality and Female Identity

Tess of the d'Urbervilles explores the complexities of female identity, sexuality, morality, and social judgment. Tess's experiences illustrate the Victorian society's expectations of women regarding sexual behaviour and purity. Her first contact with Alec d'Urberville has a significant impact on how society views her and her identity is linked to a moral characteristic that isn't necessarily the same as his. Hardy reveals the inequalities in the assessment of male and female sexuality.

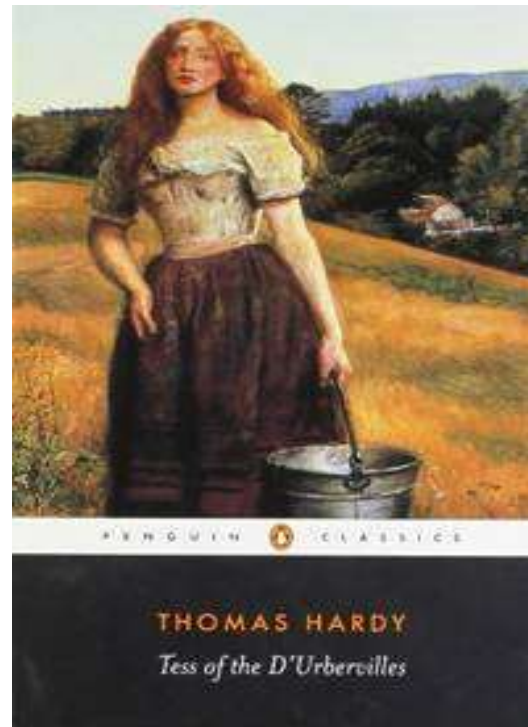


Figure 4: Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles

In Tess's experiences with Angel Clare, the power of social morality is further highlighted. While Angel seems to be feeling sorry for Tess at first, his reaction to her history exemplifies the notion of the purity of women that is still alive and kicking. In Hardy, Tess's training proves that women's opportunities to make independent decisions are limited by patriarchal social values. The novel as a whole thus constructs female identity as a space of contestation in which personal experience meets moral definitions imposed from outside.

3.5 Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*: Education, Class and Social Mobility

Thomas Hardy looks at the nature of identity in *Jude the Obscure*, in the fields of education, class, ambition, and social mobility. Jude Fawley wants to be educated and to be part of a more intellectual and privileged social class. His dreams represent the Victorian attitude towards self-improvement, but he has many obstacles imposed upon him by his working-class roots. Education signifies personal aspiration and is institutionalized as a means of sustaining social divisions.

There is a conflict between individual ambition and structural constraints, as shown through Jude's experiences. He has intellectual aspirations but his social and economic situation limits his opportunities. So, his identity is defined by the conflict between him and society between what he wants to be and what he can be. Using Jude's story, Hardy explores how far Victorian society really permitted people to transcend class and secure meaningful social mobility.

3.6 Comparative Analysis of the Selected Victorian Texts

The 5 novels explore various aspects of Victorian identity. Poverty and institutional classification are the themes of *Oliver Twist*, while industrialisation and economic identity are the themes of *Hard Times*, *Marriage and gender in Middlemarch*, *Female identity and*

sexual morality in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Education, class and social mobility in *Jude the Obscure*. Although each of the five works is in a different theme, all five are linked to individual identity and broader social structures.

Primary Text	Major Issue	Identity Dimension
<i>Oliver Twist</i>	Poverty and institutions	Class/social identity
<i>Hard Times</i>	Industrialisation	Worker/economic identity
<i>Middlemarch</i>	Marriage and society	Gender/social identity
<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	Sexual morality	Female identity
<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	Education and class	Social mobility

This comparison illustrates how a Victorian identity was developed within the relationship between self and others' expectations. Oliver wants more than to be a pauper; Stephen lives in a world of class identity; Dorothea fights against the restrictions of class and gender; Tess deals with the moral judgement of the patriarchy; and Jude deals with the limitations of class identity. These characters show that identity in Victorian realism was not hard-coded or entirely independent of society, but was constantly negotiated between individual and society.

3.7 Victorian Realism and the Social Construction of Identity

In total, the works selected illustrate how the individual's identity was largely defined by his or her relation to class, family, gender, occupation, morality and social institutions in Victorian realist literature. Dickens, Eliot and Hardy explored the social issues of their time through person-to-person experiences and were fascinated by how institutions and cultural expectations influenced the opportunities for people. Because of their realism, their stories were thus linked to broader processes of social and historical change.

Victorian realism also laid a valuable groundwork for the development of modernist literature. Realist writers tended to depict identity in terms of familiar social settings and fairly stable plots, but there was already psychological drama and doubt, social isolation and a conflict between the personal and the social. Modernist writers would take up these concerns, breaking narratives, using stream of consciousness, multiple viewpoints, and manipulating time. As such, Victorian realism can be viewed as a symptom of the Victorian era society as well as a significant departure from the Victorian era in the quest of the modernist fragmented identity.

4. CLASS, GENDER, INDUSTRIALISATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The Victorian literature was a reflection of the great changes that took place in 19th century Britain, especially industrialisation, class divisions, changing gender roles, urbanisation and the growth of educational systems. Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy demonstrated how these factors affected the individual and how they produced tensions between personal aspiration and social expectation in their writing.

- **Industrialisation:** Dickens uses Coketown to represent factory life, mechanisation and utilitarian thinking in *Hard Times*. Emotions and individuality are overlooked and workers are valued according to their economic usefulness. This novel thus demonstrates the impact of industrial capitalism on social conditions and on personal identity.



- **Class:** Class strongly influenced identity and social opportunities. *Oliver Twist* is about poverty and social exclusion and *Jude the Obscure* is about the struggles of an individual who tries to gain access to education and social mobility. The economic inequality and class structures that are suggested by these works restricted the opportunities of individuals.
- **Gender:** Gender expectations formed the identity of the females in Victorian society. Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* fights a personal battle between her aspirations and expectations for marriage and domesticity, while Tess of the d'Urbervilles battles social judgement about woman's sexuality and morality. Both characters show how these restrictive patriarchy social structures affect the characters.
- **Social Change:** Victorian literature reacted to urbanisation, industrial capitalism, education, new family structures, social reform. These changes affected relationships, opportunities and social identities. The general sense that Victorian literature conveyed was that social, economic, and cultural structures had a profound impact on individual identity and not simply one that was a reflection of personal creativity.

5. IMPERIALISM, URBAN MODERNITY AND THE CRISIS OF VICTORIAN IDENTITY

Established notions of imperialism, civilisational superiority, national identity and civilisation began to be challenged in late Victorian literature. The transition is important and is illustrated by the work of Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow's "trip in the Congo" is a journey into the paradoxes of European claims to civilisation and of colonial exploitation. The 'civilisation'-'barbarism' dichotomy is becoming less and less clear, and challenges conventional notions about the identity of Europe.

The way in which the story is told also raises questions about reality and experience in the novella. Marlow's story is told in a mediated manner, depending on his memory, interpretation and subjective perception. Thus, one does not get a truly objective narrative of colonial experience from the reader. Conrad's foregrounding of uncertainty and his difficulty in portraying experience foreshadows the psychological and narrative experimentation that characterizes modernism.

This sense of crisis of identity was exacerbated by urban modernity. As the population of London and other cities grew, they carried with them crowds, anonymity, technological change, social fragmentation and new psychological isolation. Therefore, in the late Victorian period, there was a growing doubt about the possibility of depicting the complexity of modern experience using a single, stable and objective point of view. It was an uncertainty that made a significant shift from Victorian realism to modernist fragmentation, experimentation and subjectivity.

6. MODERNIST FRAGMENTATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY

Modernist writers profoundly influenced the notion of the stable, unified, and continuous self by challenging it. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot all used experimentation like

writing in stream of consciousness, writing in interior monologue, using multiple perspectives, fragmented narratives, and non-linear time in their works. The methods displayed the complexity of the contemporary experience in which identity now resided in the realm of memory, perception, psychological conflict, and shifting social conditions.



Figure 5: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot

The many styles of narration and interior consciousness in James Joyce's *Ulysses* symbolise the fractured nature of the individual self. Stream of consciousness was used to show the psychological experiences and memories of the characters, particularly those of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Taking the concept of identity further, Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* interrupts the idea of the present self and links past to present through memory, thereby creating a sense of identity that is shaped by an individual's past, not present, experiences.

The *Waste Land* by T.S Eliot takes fragmentation one step further to the cultural level. The text consists of several voices, sudden jumps and literary echoes, with language that jumps from place to place, creating a fractured impression of modern civilization. In all these pieces, identity is conveyed as dynamic, fragmented, self-referential, and somehow more or less psychological. In all these pieces memory and perception become the key to a sense of self, and identity becomes fluid, discontinuous, subjective and psychologically complex. The fragmentation of modernist style is thus not only a stylistic device, but also a literary reaction to the ambiguity, alienation and lack of cultural cohesion in modernity.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: FROM REALISM TO FRAGMENTATION

The Victorian realism and modernist literature had a vast difference in how it depicted identity, reality, narrative, and individual experience. In the Victorian realist writers, identity was typically defined as socially constructed and characters were defined by class, gender, family, occupation and institutions. They tended to be brief and external in terms of social circumstances. By contrast, modernist writers were increasingly seen as portraying identity as psychologically fractured and subjective, as employing non-linear time, shifting perspectives, interior consciousness and experimental language.

A difference can be seen in the characters that were chosen. *Oliver Twist* is a symbol of poverty, and institutional control, while *Stephen Blackpool* is a symbol of working-class

identity and the industrial capitalism. Dorothea Brooke's character represents the bonding of gender and social expectation, while Tess's character stands for the impact of the sexual moral and social judgment. In modernist literature, Leopold Bloom is an example of a fragmented consciousness, Clarissa Dalloway is an example of a consciousness that keeps track of memory and social and personal identity, and Septimus Smith is an example of a consciousness that is psychologically broken by the experience of war. In *The Waste Land*, the fragmentation is expanded to cultural identity, via more than one voice and broken-up language.

Table 1: Victorian Realism and Modernist Fragmentation: A Comparative Analysis

Category	Victorian Realism	Modernist Fragmentation
Identity	Socially constructed	Psychologically fragmented
Reality	External/social	Subjective/psychological
Narrative	Generally linear	Non-linear
Character	Socially developed	Internally experienced
Time	Chronological	Psychological
Perspective	Relatively stable	Multiple/shifting
Language	Descriptive	Experimental
Society	Directly represented	Filtered through consciousness
Individual	Located within society	Alienated/fragmented
Major concern	Social conditions	Consciousness and uncertainty

Therefore, it would be incorrect to see a total break between Victorian realism and modernism. Many issues already discussed in Victorian texts were reimagined by modernist writers using new literary techniques like class, gender, social inequality, alienation and identity. The most significant change was the transition from a mainly external, socialised and representative form to an internal, subjective and fragmented one, which illustrated how literary form evolved as new concepts of identity and modern society came into being.

8. CONCLUSION

The study argues that the shift from Victorian realism to modernist fragmentation is a significant shift in literary perceptions of identity, society and individual experience. Identity was woven into the fabric of class, gender, poverty, education, occupation, morality, family, and social institutions in Victorian authors like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. They gave expression to this in novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Middlemarch*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, which illustrated the way in which social and economic systems affected people's hopes and constrained their freedom. Meanwhile, the late Victorian era was producing works that challenged the perspectives of post-Civilization, imperialism, objective truth and stable identity, such as the works of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. These issues were further explored by modernist writers including James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot, who employed stream of consciousness, multiple voices, non-linear time and memory to depict the complexity of modern consciousness. Therefore, the comparative analysis makes it clear that the modernism did not simply abandon Victorian



realism, but carried on and developed some of its themes and concerns such as social inequality, gender, alienation, and identity. The most important shift was from identity being externally and socially created, to it being more subjective and emotional, psychologized and uncertain. Therefore, the shift from Victorian realism to modernist fragmentation is not only a change in literary style but also a cultural shift in the way that people were living in society, modernity, and in their own identity.

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