

UNIT 45. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY GREAT BRITAIN: SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL BODY; CULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL EVENTS. GREATEST EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NOVELISTS.

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1. Introduction

The eighteenth century marks a period of radical transformation in British society, marked by major developments in politics, economy, culture and technology. It was a century that witnessed the consolidation of constitutional monarchy, the expansion of global trade, the emergence of the middle class and the first signs of industrialisation. These changes provided fertile ground for new literary forms, among which the novel emerged as the dominant genre. This unit explores the key historical, cultural and technological changes in eighteenth-century Britain and links them with the rise of the English novel, focusing on the major literary figures of the period.

The discussion is informed by authoritative works such as *The Rise of the Novel* (Watt, 1957), *Eighteenth-Century Britain, 1688–1815* (Langford, 1991), and *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Richetti, 1996). It also considers pedagogical applications in the EFL classroom in accordance with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001).

2. Socioeconomic and Political Context of 18th Century Great Britain

The eighteenth century in Great Britain was characterised by political stability, relative to the turmoil of previous centuries. Following the Glorious Revolution (1688), the monarchy became constitutionally limited, with increased parliamentary power. The Act of Union (1707) unified England and Scotland, creating the Kingdom of Great Britain and reinforcing London's status as the centre of political power and finance.

The expansion of the British Empire, through colonialism and global trade, brought enormous wealth to the nation and accelerated the growth of the bourgeoisie. Commercial capitalism flourished, and urbanisation increased significantly. The growth of cities such as London, Bristol and Liverpool reflected new economic realities. Simultaneously, the first stages of industrialisation began, with innovations in textile manufacturing, transportation and agricultural production, being the latter known as the Agricultural Revolution.

This economic and political transformation brought profound changes in social structure. A rising middle class, increasingly literate and politically aware, became both producers and consumers of literary texts, creating a demand for accessible and realistic narratives that reflected their own experiences.

3. Cultural and Technological Developments

The eighteenth century is also known as the Age of Enlightenment, a period that valued reason, science and empirical thought. Thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume and Adam Smith shaped intellectual discourse, influencing ideas about human nature, society, economics and governance. The ideals of progress and rationality permeated all areas of cultural production, including literature.

Technological and cultural innovations transformed the way texts were produced and consumed. The proliferation of printing presses, the rise of periodicals and newspapers and the growth of circulating libraries made books and pamphlets more widely available. Literacy rates improved, particularly among the middle class and women, and reading became a domestic and moral activity.

This new print culture encouraged forms of writing that were informative, moralising and entertaining. The period also saw the expansion of literary criticism, the professionalisation of authorship and the development of new genres; chief among them, the realistic novel.

4. The Rise of the English Novel

The English novel emerged in the eighteenth century as a new literary form that broke with the aristocratic and poetic traditions of previous generations. It was prose-based, focused on individual experience and aimed at a middle-class readership. Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), attributes the development of the novel to the rise of individualism, realism and economic conditions favouring publication.

Unlike previous forms such as epic or romance, the novel offered detailed portrayals of everyday life, moral dilemmas and character development. It dealt with ordinary people in recognisable social settings and featured linear plots grounded in causality and psychological depth. Furthermore, many early novels adopted an epistolary format, enhancing the sense of authenticity and immediacy.

5. Representative Novelists of the Eighteenth Century

5.1. Daniel Defoe

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is often regarded as the first English novel. It presents a realistic account of survival, self-reliance and civilisation through the lens of a single character's experience. Defoe combined journalism, travel writing and moral instruction in a narrative that reflected colonial and Protestant values. His *Moll Flanders* (1722) is another key work, exploring female agency, crime and social mobility.

5.2. Samuel Richardson

Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) exemplify the epistolary novel. *Pamela* tells the story of a virtuous maid resisting her master's advances,

eventually rewarded with marriage. It combines sentiment, moral discourse and social commentary. *Clarissa* offers a more tragic and complex portrait of virtue and victimhood, with detailed psychological depth and emotional intensity.

5.3. Henry Fielding

Fielding reacted against Richardson's moralism with irony and comic realism. His *Tom Jones* (1749) is a picaresque novel that follows a foundling's journey through English society. The narrative voice is self-aware and satirical, blending moral reflection with social critique. Fielding's legal background and engagement with public life are evident in his concern with justice, hypocrisy and social mobility.

5.4. Laurence Sterne

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) is a highly experimental and metafictional novel. It challenges narrative conventions through digressions, typographic play and non-linear structure. Though less widely read today, Sterne's influence can be traced in modernist and postmodernist literature, as well as in theories of narrative and self-conscious fiction.

6. Educational Applications in the EFL Classroom

Teaching eighteenth-century British literature in the EFL classroom allows learners to explore the origins of the modern novel, engage with accessible prose narratives and understand the sociocultural background of the English-speaking world. Although linguistic and cultural distance may pose challenges, adaptations and guided reading can facilitate comprehension and enjoyment.

Teachers can introduce simplified versions of novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pamela* to intermediate learners, using them to explore themes such as individualism, morality and gender. Excerpts from *Tom Jones* or *Tristram Shandy* may be used for advanced learners to analyse narrative techniques, humour and social satire.

Activities might include role-play, diary-writing from the perspective of a character, comparison with contemporary narratives (e.g. modern survival stories or epistolary novels) and vocabulary building through historical contexts. Integrating literature with history and social studies also fosters interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking.

By engaging with eighteenth-century novels, students not only improve reading comprehension and vocabulary but also gain insight into the evolution of literary forms, narrative voice and the interplay between literature and society.

7. Conclusion

The eighteenth century was a formative period for Great Britain, marked by profound political, economic and cultural changes. These transformations facilitated the birth of the English novel as a genre rooted in realism, individuality and social reflection. Writers like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne laid the foundations of modern prose fiction, shaping the literary landscape for generations.

This unit has examined the sociopolitical context of the eighteenth century, the cultural and technological forces that influenced literature and the emergence of the novel through the works of its most prominent practitioners. It has also highlighted the

relevance of these texts in the EFL classroom, showing how they can support both linguistic and cultural education.

The inclusion of eighteenth-century literature in secondary education is consistent with the goals outlined in the CEFR and aligns with the competencies and values promoted by the national and regional legal frameworks, including the Organic Law 3/2020, known as LOMLOE, and the Order ECD/1172/2022, comprising the Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education. Through these texts, learners develop a richer understanding of English language, history and literary heritage.