

Britons and Other Life Forms

George Eliot wrote in *Middlemarch* that “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” This course will require us to think about the various ways in which Britons conceived of and represented precisely our potential—or, as Eliot suggests, our inability—to comprehend “all” life, or even just “other” life forms, in the nineteenth century. To this end, we will consider approaches to relationality in Romantic and Victorian literature: how did British literature envision the connections between individuals and organisms, and how did it conceive of intimacies, environments, and totalities? To what extent did British writers imagine themselves as able to represent those connections? And how did these understandings impact literary form?

In this course, we will focus on formal questions such as those of protagonist and minor character, poetic “I” and listener, as well as on two major forces of nineteenth-century culture: an emergent social theory that tried to conceive of humanity in terms of communities, populations, and “social bodies,” and an increasingly prominent science that was starting to think in terms of environments and ecologies (it’s worth noting that both the terms “environment” and “ecology” are nineteenth-century in origin). We will read novels by Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy; poems by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins; social and political writing by Edwin Chadwick, J. S. Mill, and Herbert Spencer; and scientific works by Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers, John F. W. Herschel, Charles Darwin, and G. H. Lewes, among others.

Course Objectives

This course has three main goals. First, it aims to expose you to a wide variety of nineteenth-century British literature. The nineteenth century was a period of social change and literary and scientific innovation—I hope that in this course you will not only gain familiarity with and appreciation for representative works and concepts, but also (and this is our second goal) start to recognize how approaches to relationality in the nineteenth century (whether those relations involve humans, nonhumans, or both, and whether they are intimate, total, or anything in between) have structured the ways in which we view our position in larger worlds today. Finally, this course is aimed at developing and sharpening your critical thinking, strengthening your writing skills, and honing your ability to interpret literature and culture. This latter goal depends not only on your effort on writing assignments, but also on your careful and close reading of the assigned texts.

Course Schedule

Nineteenth-Century Relationality: an Introduction

September 6: Key Terminology and Theoretical Background
Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. “Science” and “Society”

September 13: Nature, Community, and Knowledge in Poetic Form (A week)
William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, selections from *Lyrical Ballads* (“The Nightingale,” “The Thorn,” “Old Man Traveling,” “Tintern

Abbey"); Wordsworth, from "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"; Coleridge, from *Biographia Literaria*.

September 20: Individuality and Society in the Novel Form (B week)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*: author's introduction, Shelley's preface, Volume 1

September 27: Humanity and its Others (A week)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*: volumes 2-3

The New Theory, the New Science

October 4: Historicizing the Natural: Science's New Temporality (B week)

Tennyson, "In Memoriam." Charles Lyell, selections from *Principles of Geology*.

Robert Chambers, selections from *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*

October 11: The Urban Environment: Social Theory's New Space (A week)

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

October 18: Contagion: Imagining the Nonhuman in Urban Environments (B week)

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*. Edwin Chadwick, selections from "Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain"

October 26: FALL BREAK, NO CLASS

November 1: Political Theory: The Individual versus Society (A week)

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*; J. S. Mill, selections from *On Liberty*

November 8: Rethinking All Life: Darwin and his Peers (B week)

Charles Darwin, selections from the *Origin*. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Optional Reading: Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, ch. 1-3

Responses: Representational Possibilities and Limits

November 15: The Ethics of Representing Other Life (A week)

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*; G. H. Lewes, selections from *Studies in Animal Life*

Paper Proposals due today!

November 22: The Limits of Representation (B week)

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

November 29: Looking Closely (A week)

Thomas Hardy, *Return of the Native*. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," "The Windhover"

December 6: The Pains of Taking a Wide View (B week)

Thomas Hardy, *Return of the Native*. John F. W. Herschel, selections from *A Treatise on Astronomy*