the protagonist Julien Sorel's progress and decline are aligned with the fortunes of the monarchy during the French Restoration. The English version of the Bildungsroman is, I would argue, more tightly focused around an individual's progress than its European counterpart. Moretti credits George Eliot with continuing to refine the Bildungsroman in English literature, but with the exception of Stoker, all of the novelists represented in this book engaged with the form in some way.

A Bildungsroman often, but not always, begins with a character's birth or early life – Dickens gently parodies this trend in *David Copperfield* with its famous opening, 'Chapter One, I am born', which humorously registers the Bildungsroman's propensity to assemble every little detail of a character's growth. The form goes on to show the character developing and learning, often making mistakes along the way and perhaps being subjected to bad influences or moral danger. Usually the character is cast out into the world through leaving or being forced to leave home. Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre and Margaret Hale all undergo this type of experience, while Maggie Tulliver and Elizabeth-Jane Newson also face similar trials. The character gradually learns through her or his experiences, arriving at adulthood and at some form of success, whether it be fame, marriage (usually the crowning achievement of a female character, rather than a male) or a more general form of moral maturity and acceptance.

Realism

The nineteenth century is often referred to as the great age of realism. Novelists including Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell responded to the extraordinary changes brought about by industrialism by depicting their effects in their novels as realistically as they could. This is partly because the novelists shared a commitment to social reform and scrutiny of the present, but it is also because of a shared aesthetic through which they sought to create a narrative world that was plausible to the reader, populated by characters with whom he or she could empathize or identify.

George Eliot's relationship with realism was particularly self-reflective, and in her novel *Adam Bede* (1859) Eliot's narrator

speaks of her work as 'a faithful account of men and things, as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (177). Eliot's version of realism sought to be so true to life that although she admitted the subjective nature of her viewpoint, her narrator, in the same passage, continued, 'I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath' (25). While Eliot views realist writing as a responsibility, Dickens' approach differs in early novels like *Oliver Twist*, which combine comedy and realism. As a result characters like Bill Sikes seem absolutely real and utterly terrifying, while they are offset by lighter figures such as the slightly absurd Mr Grimwig, who is constantly threatening to eat his own head. Both Dickens and Eliot use realism as a way of narrating and negotiating a world that is in a state of dynamic and, at times, frightening change. It is therefore important, as we examine the uses and constraints of realist writing, to keep in mind just how closely the Victorian novel was tied to events and changes in the real world.

The realist novel sought to explore what Thomas Carlyle famously termed the 'Condition of England Question', examining some of the challenges thrown up by industrialism, including urban poverty, sanitation, disease and class tensions (Carlyle, 1980: 151). Those who wrote such novels knew that they weren't able to solve these problems, but hoped to focus attention on them through their writing. Victorian realist fiction is generally more democratic than the eighteenth-century novel, which tended to focus on the lives of the very affluent. Following the lead of the Romantic poets in depicting the lives of ordinary people, realist writers like Dickens and Gaskell drew attention to the working men and women who populated the growing cities, while George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are among those who concentrated on rural communities and the difficulties they experienced in the face of industrialism. Terry Eagleton reminds us, 'Dickens's London was a commercial rather than industrial metropolis, which is why the focus of his fictional attention is clerks, lawyers and bankers rather than industrial workers or manufacturers' (2005: 143). Eagleton points out that Dickens was completely ineffective when it came to depicting a manufacturing city; his only industrial novel, *Hard Times*, does not offer an extensive engagement with factory life, nor with Northern culture. Furthermore, Eagleton also alerts us to just how removed Dickens was, as a quintessentially metropolitan writer,

from the rural settings of novelists like George Eliot. We therefore need to keep in mind just how diverse the living conditions of these major Victorian novelists were and how these differences impacted upon the form and content of their novels.

There are inevitably tensions between what is actually real and what happens in a realist work. A novel must have a beginning, a middle and – in the Victorian context at least – it must provide adequate resolution and closure so that the reader is satisfied. Pam Morris has argued that there is a 'sense of doubt and ambivalence' underlying English literary realism, continuing to suggest an uncertainty about whether realist writing is really able to convey an accurate sense of reality (2003: 80). Following George Levine, Morris suggests that Victorian writers understood the tensions between the fabricated words on the page and the real world that they claimed to be depicting. For a novelist like Dickens this tension presented interesting creative possibilities, which he explored in some of his later novels, such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. In both of these novels he combined religious symbolism with realist writing to create what Chris Brooks has termed a symbolic realist mode, which could be read and interpreted as both real but also loaded with hidden meanings (see Brooks, 1984).

In trying to move itself beyond the constraints of language, Morris suggests that the Victorian novel also pushes the boundaries of what is considered to be 'normal', taking in elements of the supernatural and the Gothic (2003: 81). This is certainly true of Charlotte Brontë's writing, which uses labyrinthine Gothic imagery to explore many of her characters' psychological states and which pushes the bounds of our credulity by bringing in devices like telepathy or characters like Rochester's 'mad' wife, Bertha Mason. As Morris expresses it, '[t]his vein of otherness and madness undoubtedly contributes powerfully to the ambivalent and multiple sense of reality' (81). However, she also points out that the slippage between realist writing and the real allowed for the rise of the type of interesting, engaging and capable female characters we will meet in the novels we are considering in this book, at a time when the education and conduct of women was often shown to be lacking. Realism had its flaws and shortcomings, then, but Victorian novelists often negotiated them in thoughtfully creative ways.