



## The Adaptability and Flexibility of the College Student's Mentality Through the Use of English Novel

A Subject Review

Dr. Hiba Meteab Faja Al-Khuzai

Department of English -College of Education

University of Al-Qadisiyah

hibam.sultan@qu.edu.iq

### ABSTRACT

This subject review examines the significance of studying English novels in the development of adaptability and flexibility in college students' mentalities. The researcher aims to illuminate the connection between engaging with English literature, especially novels, and the improvement of students' mental and psychological skills in university settings. The review will conclude with a presentation of the findings.

**Key words:** theory of mind, reading novels, adaptability and flexibility of mind.

قابلية التكيف والمرونة في عقلية الطالب الجامعي من خلال استخدام الرواية الإنجليزية

مراجعة موضوع

م.د. هبة متعب فجة

قسم اللغة الانكليزية – كلية التربية – جامعة القادسية

الملخص

تتناول هذه المراجعة للموضوع أهمية دراسة الروايات الإنجليزية في تنمية القدرة على التكيف والمرونة في عقليات طلاب الجامعات. يهدف الباحث إلى تسليط الضوء على العلاقة بين التعامل مع الأدب الإنجليزي، وخاصة الروايات، وتحسين المهارات العقلية والنفسية لدى الطلاب في البيئات الجامعية. وستختتم المراجعة بعرض للنتائج.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** نظرية العقل، قراءة الروايات، التكيف ومرونة العقل.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world and across all universities, students should prepare themselves not only with the education they receive but also with the adaptability and flexibility of mind. The latter can be clearly obtained through the study of English literature, particularly the novel. This subject review addresses the following questions:

1. How does the English novel contribute to the mentality of students or readers?



2. What is the most effective method for studying novels to enhance students' mindset?
3. When and where do students develop their adaptability and flexibility of thinking?

Through these questions, the objectives of this review will address the gap in focusing on the importance of studying, reading, and teaching novels to develop students' psychological and social behaviors. It is essential for literary teachers to believe that they are responsible not only for explaining the plot and background of literary works but also for creating an environment that helps students become the best versions of themselves. This can be achieved through literary analysis and criticism of novels in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and sociology.

### **The Relation Between Mind and Novel**

Zunshine (2006), in her book entitled *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, stated that reading fiction provides fertile soil for those interested in modern cognitive psychology, recognized as "Theory of Mind."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, she encouraged readers or students to choose novels not only for their artistic perception but also for their effect on the mind and psychology. The writer believed that the words of a novel can unlock hidden mental doors in the minds of students. Therefore, she tackled many novels such as *Clarissa* by Richardson, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and others.

Reading such novels, for example, Dostoevsky's works, shows the diverse characters, each afflicted by a particular psychological complex or disorder. This is why patterns of behavior are reflected, allowing readers or the students of literature to identify similarities between themselves and the characters. Later, this understanding helps them in self-discovery. Knowing oneself is of paramount interest to psychiatrists and philosophers alike. Self-awareness grants people full control over their lives and enables them to shield themselves from harm, facilitating a better, perhaps happier life. It is commonly understood that life is short, and everyone should strive to spend it, if not in happiness, then at least in peace. This can only be achieved if individuals know themselves well.

<sup>1</sup> Theory of mind is simply defined as the ability to understand and infer the states of others' mentality (Westra & Carruthers, 2018).



Novels, often described as imitations of life (Brannen, 2013), offer a pathway to navigate this complex journey.

Additionally, the students who study novels use stories to make sense of the world and explain it to their families or friends, to build societies, and learn about each other. Experimental and correlational evidence shows that reading novels enhances the capacity to understand others' mental states, or theory of mind. Experimental studies suggest that this effect is specific to novels (Kidd et al., 2016). By using a unique set of manuscripts, one can claim that literary fiction improves cognitive performance. In practical terms, it has been demonstrated that readers understand novel characters through mental processes similar to those they employ in real-life situations, such as applying social script patterns and stereotyping. Consequently, individuals who read more novels have been shown to perform better in tests of theory of mind (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

For those who study or read novels, it is crucial to understand that simply reading for the sake of gaining marks or knowledge is not enough. One should read for the pleasure of reading as well. For this reason, the process of enhancing one's mentality becomes much easier. Therefore, a desire for reading will help the reader engage more with the characters, perhaps even allowing them to live through the characters and understand their actions and reactions. This, in turn, contributes to understanding people in real life. This approach can be the most effective method for studying novels to enhance one's mentality.

The result of this method of reading novels will enhance the adaptability and flexibility of the student's mentality. Therefore, the student's ability to adapt to daily life situations is a significant skill that they will need in their future career. Adaptability involves knowing how to avoid unfavorable situations and how to handle them effectively. It also entails the ability to embrace change and adopt new, evolved ways of thinking. It means learning new methods to navigate the world without recklessness or hesitation (Robertson & Abkhezr, 2023).

Additionally, studying novels also helps students become mentally flexible in two ways: Firstly, it teaches them that their ideas may not always be the best, reducing their stubbornness. Secondly, it instills in them the courage to admit when they are wrong, fostering humility and acceptance that there is always more to learn. Exposure to new characters and patterns of behavior in the world of novels helps students learn how to deal with different cultures and



viewpoints. This understanding can be applied in the workplace, personal lives, and even in the way they raise their children. Viewing situations from another character's perspective equips individuals to face any challenges and fears they may encounter in the future (Tsatsaroni & Sarakinioti, 2018).

From practical perspective, the syllabus of third years students in the university of Al-Qadisiyah, College of education, department of English contains studying a Victorian novel for Charles Dickens entitles as *Hard Times* which focuses on the wrong philosophy of living and teaching. The novel shows how the character of Mr. Gradgrind adopt the philosophy of utilitarianism, particularly in relation to education and social welfare. From the first page, this character tries to teach his students only facts, no emotions, no sensation, no imagination or fantasy;

‘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. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!’ (Dickens, 1995, p.3)

The novel is a critique for using the wrong philosophy in life. The end of Mr. Gradgrind is a failure. He failed as a father and a teacher. The lesson of the novel reflects how the journey took the students through the world and life of a character to prove to them that they must avoid following the same philosophy. It is an unnatural and inappropriate way of living to strip away the fantasy of children. Mr. Gradgrind did not have the flexibility and adaptability of thinking, and that is why he failed in the end. He used to hate reading fiction or any literary work.

These ideas can help the readers of this novel and enlighten their minds to never blindly follow extremist concepts or thoughts in the experience of living. They should have the flexibility of mindset to accept the idea that humans are emotional creatures, and no one can deny this truth. Human beings are unable to live like machines. It is acceptable to shape and control these sensations or the imagination, but not to neglect or oppress them. Psychologically speaking, oppressing any kind of needful emotion will lead to it exploding at the wrong time and place. This is what happened to Mr. Gradgrind's daughter, Louisa, because she was raised according to the philosophy of Facts, ending up in a broken marriage with a secret affair and becoming a broken woman.



Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of literary studies strengthens adaptability by adopting connections across disciplines. Analyzing English novels requires students to draw upon insights from history, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, among other fields. By creating different perspectives, students develop a full understanding of human nature and societal dynamics, enhancing their ability to adapt to interdisciplinary challenges.

## CONCLUSION

It is common knowledge that words have power. The words of a good writer can be described like a sword, capable of being used for or against its wielder. Almost all revolutions throughout history started with art, with literature. The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and even the Feminist movement. For example, in the Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, the need for women to be free and independent is reflected. Later, a century later, the Feminist movement flourished.

Therefore, as the discussion section shows, reading novels will help students or readers in general to develop their mentality. The best method to do so is by linking the study and desire for reading literature. The truth is, there is no specific time or place to start reading. The matter is concerned with the necessity for such a need which enhances and grows the mentality. Life has its way of teaching lessons, which can be in long and painful experiences. One can gain these lessons through reading novels.

Lastly, the study of English novels offers a multifaceted approach to cultivating the adaptability and flexibility of college students' mentalities. By engaging themselves in various narratives, engaging with complex themes, and making interdisciplinary insights, students develop the mental agility and resilience necessary to succeed in an ever-evolving world. As such, mixing English literature into college curricula not only enriches academic discourse but also prepares students with invaluable skills for lifelong learning and growth.

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