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Narrative Authority and Narrative Time in the British Novel: A Comparative Reading from Defoe to Barnes

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Abstract

Historical accounts of narrative form often describe a movement from linear realism to modernist fragmentation and postmodern uncertainty. This article examines the limits of that sequence through a qualitative comparison of selected passages from seven British novels, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*. The analysis combines distinctions among narrative voice, focalization, temporal order, and reliability with close reading of identifiable textual sequences. It asks how temporal design shapes claims to narrative authority and whether later techniques replace earlier ones. The comparison identifies retrospective mediation in Defoe, the interaction of character perspective and evaluation in Austen, divided authority in Dickens, layered testimony in Conrad, and coordinated temporal and perspectival movement in Woolf. Ishiguro and Barnes rework retrospective narration to expose the limits of self-interpretation. These readings support an account of formal change as the recombination of narrative resources, rather than a succession of uniformly coherent and fragmented periods. Temporal disorder does not necessarily imply unreliability, while chronological clarity does not establish interpretive authority. The article offers a comparative framework for examining these relations, with conclusions limited to its purposively selected passages and works.

Keywords: *British novel; narratology; narrative authority; narrative time; focalization; free indirect discourse; unreliable narration*

1. Introduction

Narrative structure determines when information becomes available, whose perspective organises it, and how a reader can assess competing accounts. A novel's events and their presentation are therefore analytically distinct. The same incident can become a record of achievement, an unresolved moral problem, or a belated discovery depending on its placement and mediation. Narratology supplies a vocabulary for examining these differences, but that vocabulary should also prevent broad historical labels from substituting for textual analysis. Calling a novel realist, modernist, or postmodernist does not establish how a particular passage distributes knowledge.

A familiar account of English literary history associates eighteenth-century fiction with autobiographical or documentary realism, Victorian fiction with omniscient narration, modernism with subjective time, and postmodernism with self-conscious uncertainty. These associations can introduce important developments. As an explanatory sequence, however, they risk making each period internally uniform and treating formal change as the abandonment of earlier resources. Retrospective narration already separates experience from interpretation; third-person narration can restrict information; and a temporally fragmented account may still provide a coherent reading of events. Conversely, a chronologically intelligible narrative can conceal its teller's misjudgements.

Established scholarship offers grounds for a more discriminating comparison. Watt (1957) relates early novelistic realism to the presentation of particular experience, while Genette (1972/1980) and Chatman (1978) distinguish events from their narrative organisation. These approaches concern different explanatory levels. The first situates forms historically; the others describe relations within narratives. A historical interpretation becomes stronger when it demonstrates the relation between these levels instead of inferring a period's beliefs directly from a formal device. Recent work on narrative pace similarly treats movement as an effect produced through changing arrangements of scene, summary, and other resources (Gingrich, 2021).

The present article examines selected passages from seven novels published between 1719 and 2011. It asks two questions. How do temporal arrangements and perspective support or complicate claims to narrative authority? What continuities become visible when novels conventionally associated with different periods are compared through the same analytical distinctions? Its central argument is that formal change in these examples involves recombination. Devices associated with documentary assurance, psychological intimacy, or interpretive uncertainty coexist and are redirected towards different problems.

The contribution is a focused comparison of authority and disclosure. Authority concerns a narrative's grounds for asking readers to accept a report or evaluation; disclosure concerns how access to information is arranged. Their interaction is important, but they are not interchangeable. The study develops this distinction through passage-level analysis and an interpretative comparison, rather than proposing an exhaustive history of the British novel.

2. Materials and Method

2.1. Selection and scope

The primary works are *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Emma* (1815), *Bleak House* (1853), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). They were purposively selected because they enable comparison among retrospective first-person narration, free indirect discourse, alternating narrators, framed testimony, and mobile focalization. They also provide cases in which narrative confidence and uncertainty operate within the same work. The selection is analytical, not statistically representative. It does not imply that these novels define their periods or constitute the only significant developments in English-language fiction.

The term British novel identifies the literary tradition examined here, including writers whose biographies cross national boundaries. It does not make that tradition synonymous with all literature written in English. American and Irish examples, although relevant to a wider history of modernist experimentation, are outside the present comparison. The first publication dates identify the historical works; the references specify the editions used for citation. Original and republication dates appear together in citations to republished primary texts.

The analysis concentrates on identifiable sequences: Crusoe's opening retrospect and the journal introduced in Chapter V; Emma's self-questioning after Box Hill in Volume III, Chapter VII; the opening narrator and Esther's introduction in Chapters I and III of *Bleak House*; the movement from Marlow's oral account to written transmission in Chapter 36 of *Lord Jim*; the opening sequence of *Mrs Dalloway*; the prologue of *The Remains of the Day*; and the opening recollections and school history discussion in Part One of *The Sense of an Ending*. Contextual observations about the latter novels are distinguished from the close analysis of these passages. The study does not claim to inventory every narrative technique in the seven complete works.

2.2. Analytical procedure

Each sequence is examined through four questions: who narrates; whose knowledge or experience governs access to information; how the sequence relates remembered, present, and anticipated events; and what textual grounds invite acceptance or revision of its evaluations. The procedure identifies formal features, explains their local effects, and then compares those effects across works. Chapter, volume, or section references locate the passages because pagination differs between editions, especially electronic texts.

The analysis distinguishes direct textual observations from interpretative inferences. A change from third-person narration to Esther's first person, for example, is identifiable in the text; the claim that this redistributes authority is an interpretation requiring explanation. Similarly, a narrator's hesitation does not automatically establish deception. Alternative explanations, including restricted knowledge, self-correction, and rhetorical modesty, are considered before a passage is characterised as unreliable. The resulting comparison is qualitative. No frequency counts, reader-response experiment, or independently coded corpus is reported.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Voice and focalization

Genette's distinction between voice and focalization separates the narrator's position from the regulation of information (Genette, 1972/1980). A third-person narrator can present events through a character's restricted perspective; a first-person narrator can alternate between remembered experience and subsequent understanding. Accordingly, grammatical person does not by itself determine the extent or credibility of knowledge. Chatman (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) provide complementary accounts of the relations among story, discourse, and narrative mediation. These distinctions are used here as descriptive tools, not as claims that every passage belongs permanently to a single category.

The representation of consciousness also requires differentiation. Cohn (1978) distinguishes modes of presenting mental life that include narratorial description, quoted thought, and narrated monologue. Free indirect discourse can retain third-person grammar while incorporating a character's questions, evaluations, or expressive idiom. Its effect depends on contextual cues; an evaluative word in an opening sentence is not sufficient evidence on its own. Nor is stream of consciousness a transcription of an unedited mind. Fictional consciousness is linguistically selected and organised. Fludernik's (1996) account of experientiality helps explain why narrated experience matters without treating its representation as transparent access to actual psychology.

3.2. Narrative time and disclosure

Temporal order concerns the relation between the sequence of events and their presentation. Analepsis returns to earlier events; prolepsis anticipates later ones. Duration concerns how much discourse is devoted to an interval of story time, while frequency concerns relations between occurrences and their telling (Genette, 1972/1980). A novel can move broadly forward while repeatedly revisiting an episode. It can also coordinate several perspectives within a stable chronological frame. These possibilities make linearity an insufficient description of an entire work.

Gingrich (2021) examines pace as a historically changing effect of narrative movement, while Brooks (1992) connects plotting with the reader's movement towards retrospective understanding. The present analysis draws on these approaches to distinguish chronology from the timing of explanation. A reader may know that an event occurred before another and still lack the information needed to judge it. Delayed explanation can therefore reshape an apparently ordered sequence. Represented subjective duration is distinguished from chronological sequencing.

3.3. Authority and reliability

Narrative authority is used here for the textual and rhetorical grounds on which a report, interpretation, or judgement asks to be accepted. It is neither an intrinsic property of third-person grammar nor identical with authorial intention. Booth (1983) establishes influential distinctions among authors, narrators, and the norms inferred from fiction. Olson (2003) further differentiates fallibility from untrustworthiness, and Phelan (2017) treats reliable and unreliable narration through a range of rhetorical relations. These accounts support local judgements: a teller may report an event convincingly while interpreting its ethical significance inadequately.

Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) demonstrate the complexity of competing explanations for apparent inconsistency. This cautions against labelling any uncertainty unreliable. Culler's (2004) critique of omniscience likewise makes it necessary to describe what narrators do instead of assuming unlimited, objective knowledge. Dawson's (2009) account of renewed omniscient narration in contemporary fiction challenges a simple history of its disappearance. Together, these interventions provide the basis for comparing changes in authority without reducing them to a universal transition from certainty to doubt.

Authority also has social dimensions. Lanser (1992) connects narrative voice with gender and the conditions of discursive legitimacy; Bakhtin (1981) emphasises the interaction of socially differentiated languages within the novel. These perspectives inform the reading of deference, status, and professional idiom below. They do not require every multi-voiced narrative to be called polyphonic, or every apparently personal account to be treated as independent of social values.

4. Retrospective and Divided Authority Before Modernism

4.1. Robinson Crusoe and the ordering of experience

The opening of *Robinson Crusoe* identifies a birthplace, a date, and a family history, establishing a particularised account of an individual life. Yet its explanatory position is already retrospective. The narrator describes the youthful desire for travel through knowledge of later suffering and recognises the father's warnings as prophetic (Defoe, 1719/1996, Chapter I). The experiencing self's uncertainty and the narrating self's interpretation are therefore separated at the beginning. Chronological intelligibility does not mean that the discourse merely reproduces experience as it happened.

The journal introduced in Chapter V complicates the temporal arrangement further. Its first entry returns to the shipwreck of 30 September 1659, an event already presented in the surrounding retrospect (Defoe, 1719/1996, Chapter V). A dated record is embedded within a later account. The reader encounters both a developing sequence of practical difficulties and an arrangement produced by someone who knows their consequences. The documentary appearance of daily entries does not eliminate retrospective selection; it places one temporal perspective within another.

The interpretative effect is a division between evidence and explanation. Dates and material details support the impression of a record, while the older teller supplies a moral framework for that record. The two functions reinforce one another but remain distinguishable. Watt's (1957) account of particularised experience helps situate this arrangement within early novelistic realism. It does not warrant the stronger claim that eighteenth-century narration is uniformly linear or that its authority derives from reason alone. Here, a technique later used to unsettle self-knowledge already serves the construction of a purposeful life history.

4.2. Emma and the revision of a governing perspective

Emma demonstrates that character-centred perception and its correction precede modernism. After the Box Hill episode and Knightley's criticism, the narration asks, “How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!” (Austen, 1815/1994, Volume III, Chapter VII). The third-person pronoun coexists with the urgency of Emma's self-questioning. The sentence supplies more precise evidence of free indirect representation than an isolated qualifier such as “seemed” in a narratorial description. It brings a character's evaluative movement into the discourse without converting the narrative into direct first-person confession.

The local sequence matters. Emma's discomfort follows a social encounter in which her confidence has been challenged. Her perspective continues to organise emotional access, but the questions register a revision of judgement. Intimacy and criticism consequently coexist. Readers are not required to choose between complete identification with Emma and an entirely detached narrative correction. The narration makes self-recognition available through the same proximity that elsewhere permits mistaken interpretation.

This relation also complicates the assumption that interiority entails ethical progress by itself. A character can recognise humiliation while remaining concerned about another person's opinion of her. The passage gives access to that mixture instead of resolving it through a simple moral label. Cohn's (1978) distinctions clarify its presentation of thought, while Lanser's (1992) attention to socially situated voice encourages consideration of the status relations surrounding judgement. The case shows how later discoveries can reorganise earlier impressions within an otherwise legible sequence. Its importance for the comparison lies in this combination of chronological continuity and perspectival correction.

4.3. Bleak House and the coexistence of narrating positions

The opening of *Bleak House* presents London and Chancery through a conspicuous third-person voice. Its geographical reach is extensive, but its rhetoric is strongly evaluative. The fog becomes connected with the court's obstructive operations, and the accumulation of legal activity supports an indictment rather than an impartial overview (Dickens, 1853/1997, Chapter I). Wide access and objective judgement must therefore be distinguished. The voice's authority is created partly through pattern, repetition, and the ability to relate dispersed locations.

Chapter III introduces Esther's retrospective first-person account with difficulty about writing her “portion of these pages” (Dickens, 1853/1997, Chapter III). She declares intellectual modesty while also describing a sustained practice of noticing. This contrast should not be reduced to the opposition between an authoritative public narrator and an emotionally warm private narrator. Esther's deference is itself a rhetorical position. The apparent withdrawal of authority accompanies an account that asks readers to value attentive, relational observation.

The alternating design brings different grounds of knowledge into contact. The third-person discourse can construct a social pattern beyond Esther's immediate experience, while Esther can make relationships intelligible through recollection and care. Neither narrating position is simply the neutral remainder of the other. Bakhtin's (1981) concern with socially differentiated discourse is useful here, although the presence of two narrators does not automatically establish full polyphony. Their juxtaposition nevertheless prevents Victorian narrative from being adequately described as a single, undivided omniscient voice.

The comparison with Austen and Defoe identifies three distinct arrangements before the conventional modernist break. A retrospective self interprets prior experience; a third-person discourse accommodates and corrects character perception; alternating narrators make different kinds of access available. Each design contains an interval between what can be presented and what can be justifiably understood. Later fiction intensifies or redirects that interval rather than inventing it from nothing.

5. Modernist Reorganisation of Time and Testimony

5.1. Lord Jim and the transmission of incomplete knowledge

Lord Jim makes the conditions of telling increasingly visible. Chapter 36 marks the dispersal of Marlow's listeners after his oral narrative and then gives a privileged recipient access to written materials concerning Jim's subsequent history (Conrad, 1900/2006, Chapter 36). The shift is not merely a change of medium. Information reaches different audiences at different times, and a previously shared account becomes an unevenly distributed continuation. A narrative that concerns judgement also displays the pathways through which grounds for judgement are acquired.

This arrangement separates an event's temporal position from the time at which it becomes narratively intelligible. Later testimony can require a reconsideration of an earlier account, while the framework reminds readers that information has passed through intermediaries. Marlow's involvement does not disqualify him from reporting; neither does familiarity with Jim guarantee final knowledge of his motives. The narrative's force arises from this combination of commitment and limited access.

The chapter's privileged reader also complicates a simple opposition between traditional omniscience and modernist subjectivity. The framework can describe the recipient's surroundings and organise the transmission of a packet even while the enclosed information remains partial. Organising power and restricted testimony coexist at different narrative levels. The appropriate analytical question is therefore not whether the novel has abandoned authority altogether, but which claims are supported by which mediating position. Genette's distinctions among levels and temporal relations offer a vocabulary for this differentiation (Genette, 1972/1980).

Conrad's placement at the turn of the century further limits explanations that make the First World War the single cause of fragmented narration. This example establishes a

chronological counterpoint, not a causal history of modernism. Its layers of transmission show that formal uncertainty can be organised through techniques already available in framed and retrospective storytelling. What changes is their concentration on the difficulty of interpreting another person.

5.2. Mrs Dalloway and coordinated perspectives

The opening of *Mrs Dalloway* moves from an ordinary present-day intention into remembered experience at Bourton. The sensation of a morning connects Clarissa's current movement with an earlier opening of windows and an uncertain recollection of Peter Walsh's words. The passage then gives Scrope Purvis's view of Clarissa before returning to her experience of Westminster and the striking of Big Ben (Woolf, 1925/2023, opening sequence). These shifts combine temporal movement with changes in perceptual access. They are structured transitions, not evidence of an unedited record of thought.

The clock's sound does not disappear when memory enters the narrative. It supplies a shared temporal marker within a passage that also represents variable subjective duration. Public time and remembered time are thus coordinated rather than mutually exclusive. Describing the novel solely as a rejection of chronology would conceal the work performed by such anchors. The contrast is between different temporal scales and ways of organising access, not between time and the absence of temporal order.

Perspectival movement also affects authority. Clarissa's experience is made available without permanently confining the discourse to her knowledge. The brief external impression from Purvis shows that a character can simultaneously be a perceiving subject and an object of another person's perception. The narrator's ability to connect these positions remains a form of compositional authority. Psychological intimacy redistributes access; it does not necessarily abolish a capacity to arrange relationships beyond one individual mind.

This reading develops the comparison with *Emma*. Both works bring discourse close to a character's experience, but Woolf's opening makes movement between minds and temporal layers more conspicuous. The difference concerns an arrangement and its effects, not the first appearance of interiority. Fludernik (1996) and Cohn (1978) help describe the representation of experience, while Gingrich's (2021) approach to pace makes the coexistence of public progression and expansive recollection analytically visible. Modernist experimentation can consequently be understood here as a reorganisation of inherited resources.

6. Retrospection and Self-Interpretation in Later Fiction

6.1. The Remains of the Day and qualified self-presentation

The prologue of *The Remains of the Day* places Stevens at Darlington Hall in July 1956, contemplating a journey. Its opening is qualified rather than simply assertive: “It seems increasingly likely” (Ishiguro, 1989/1990, Prologue). Stevens then explains how his employer's suggestion helped bring the journey into consideration. The movement back to that conversation accompanies recurrent clarifications of how his account should be understood. Retrospective organisation and rhetorical self-monitoring are visible before the journey begins.

The professional relationship provides a frame for this self-presentation. Stevens describes an opportunity for travel through its relation to the employer's permission and possessions. His account places personal action within service. This does not, in itself, prove that every assertion is false. It establishes a vocabulary through which experience is classified

and made acceptable. The relevant authority problem concerns how far that vocabulary can adequately interpret a life organised around professional deference.

Khosravi's (2022) study of disnarration in the novel offers a related account of possibilities that are mentioned without becoming realised events. Such work helps distinguish incompleteness from overt contradiction. What remains outside a teller's acknowledged possibilities can matter as much as an inaccurate report. Olson's (2003) distinction between fallibility and untrustworthiness likewise prevents the interpretation from equating constrained self-knowledge with deliberate deceit. In the present comparison, the prologue demonstrates how a composed, ordered voice can invite scrutiny of its grounds for explanation.

The connection with Crusoe is therefore formal without being an assertion of direct influence. Both works use a first-person account to organise experience through an evaluative vocabulary. In Defoe's selected sequences, retrospect strengthens a purposeful explanation; in Ishiguro's prologue, qualification and professional framing make the limits of self-description available for examination. The difference is not chronological order alone. It concerns the relation between a teller's preferred explanation and the interpretative demands placed upon the reader.

6.2. The Sense of an Ending and the status of remembered evidence

The opening of *The Sense of an Ending* presents recollections “in no particular order” and distinguishes remembering from witnessing (Barnes, 2011/2012, Part One, opening). Tony subsequently turns to school incidents, describing them as memories that have acquired the assurance of anecdote. The passage makes the status of the evidence part of the telling. Temporal irregularity is declared, but the more consequential problem is whether confidence in recollection is justified.

The school history discussion develops this problem through alternative ways of assigning responsibility. Individual blame, historical process, and disorder become competing explanations whose adequacy is questioned within the narrated scene (Barnes, 2011/2012, Part One, history lesson). The juxtaposition connects the retrospective teller's account with an earlier discussion about the grounds of historical judgement. The reader can consider the relation between the person making an explanation and the explanation offered, rather than treating uncertainty as a statement that no judgement is possible.

This self-reflection should be distinguished from a disruption of fictional levels. Waugh (1984) associates metafiction with attention to fiction's constructed character, while Hutcheon (1988) examines the relation between formal self-consciousness and historical representation. Tony's attention to memory makes the act of narrating conspicuous, but it does not by itself establish multiple fictional worlds, authorial intrusion, or an ontological paradox. The more specific description is metanarrative reflection on testimony and responsibility.

The comparison with Stevens identifies a shared use of retrospective first person with different rhetorical emphases. Stevens's qualification works within a professional idiom; Tony explicitly questions the conversion of recollection into certainty. Both require a distinction between the temporal intelligibility of an account and its evaluative adequacy. Later fiction in these examples returns to an established narrating form to redistribute the work of interpretation. The presence of self-questioning is an invitation to evaluate evidence, not sufficient grounds for declaring every remembered event untrue.

7. Comparative Discussion

Table 1 summarises the relations identified in the selected sequences. It is an interpretative comparison rather than a measurement of entire novels or a chronological scale of increasing complexity. Each row distinguishes temporal design from the principal question of authority raised by the analysis.

Table 1

Temporal design and narrative authority in the selected sequences

Novel and first publication	Temporal design in selected passages	Principal question of authority
Robinson Crusoe (1719)	Retrospect containing a dated journal	How a later teller makes experience morally intelligible
Emma (1815)	Forward movement with retrospective self-questioning	How proximity to a character accommodates corrective judgement
Bleak House (1853)	Third-person present and first-person retrospect	How social overview and relational observation coexist
Lord Jim (1900)	Oral account followed by written transmission	How knowledge depends on intermediaries and uneven access
Mrs Dalloway (1925)	Present-day movement interwoven with memory	How shifts of perspective remain compositionally coordinated
The Remains of the Day (1989)	Anticipated journey explained through recollection	How professional idiom frames a life's interpretation
The Sense of an Ending (2011)	Unordered recollection followed by narrated school incidents	How remembered evidence acquires or loses interpretative assurance

Note. Author's interpretative synthesis of the passages analysed in Sections 4–6. Dates refer to first publication. The table does not classify entire novels or measure historical prevalence.

7.1. Recombination rather than replacement

The comparison challenges three strong historical assumptions. First, realism does not require the identity of story order and discourse order: the journal embedded within Crusoe's retrospect establishes more than one temporal position. Second, third-person reach does not guarantee objective interpretation: the opening of *Bleak House* makes social judgement explicit. Third, movement among perspectives does not remove all organising authority: Woolf coordinates character-centred experience with external anchors and changes of access. These distinctions make coexistence and local function central to literary-historical explanation.

Dawson's (2009) account of the return of omniscience in contemporary fiction provides a further reason not to turn the selected later first-person narratives into a claim about the extinction of panoramic narration. The present sample deliberately includes works in which retrospective testimony is important; other selections would reveal different combinations. Its findings describe mechanisms available across periods, not their relative prevalence. Abbott's (2021) account of narrative as a broad representational practice supports examining those mechanisms without assuming that one historical form represents a final stage.

The study consequently proposes a modest account of change: writers select and recombine established ways of controlling access, timing disclosure, and directing evaluation. Formal novelty can arise from a changed relation among these resources. A memory within a stable chronology, for example, can authenticate an experience, modify its meaning, or expose a teller's partial interpretation. The presence of a technique is less explanatory than the work it performs within a sequence.

7.2. The relation between information and judgement

Across the readings, access to information and grounds for accepting judgement remain distinct. A narrator may know many events without supplying an ethically neutral interpretation. A character may sincerely acknowledge uncertainty while still organising an account through a limited social vocabulary. Reliability should therefore be considered through particular claims and textual relations. Phelan (2017) and Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) provide complementary cautions against binary classifications: rhetorical relationships and explanatory alternatives need to be examined locally.

This distinction also clarifies reader involvement. Dickens's dual design asks readers to relate social overview to personal account; Conrad's transmission asks them to evaluate mediated testimony; Ishiguro and Barnes ask them to scrutinise retrospective explanation. These are different interpretative demands. The article does not infer actual reader responses from them. They identify activities invited by textual arrangement, which a reception study could investigate separately.

Historical conditions remain relevant, but the evidence here does not demonstrate a direct causal chain from industrialisation, psychology, or war to a particular form. Such claims would require additional archival and contextual research. The comparative readings instead establish what needs explaining: the timing and social position of an account, the limits of its access, and the forms of judgement it supports. This yields a more precise basis for historical interpretation than a general contrast between coherent earlier worlds and fragmented later ones.

8. Limitations and Further Research

The selection privileges canonical novels and passages that make mediation especially visible. It excludes many alternative traditions, genres, and English-language literary contexts. The findings cannot determine how common a technique was in a period or establish a comprehensive account of the novel's development. Passage-level analysis also gives stronger support to local observations than to claims about a complete work's architecture. These constraints are part of the study's design, rather than evidence against the usefulness of its comparison.

The analysis depends on theoretical distinctions that are themselves debated. Terms such as authority, focalization, and unreliability describe related phenomena without offering universally agreed boundaries. A larger study could compare competing interpretations of the same passages, extend the sample to less canonical fiction, and examine manuscript or serial-publication evidence. Reception research could test how readers handle delayed disclosure and changes of perspective. Those extensions would add historical or reader evidence that the present qualitative comparison does not provide.

9. Conclusion

The selected novels support an account of narrative development in which techniques coexist and acquire new functions across periods. Defoe's retrospective record already separates experience from later interpretation; Austen makes character-centred access compatible with corrective judgement; and Dickens distributes knowledge between narrating positions. Conrad intensifies the problem of mediated testimony, while Woolf coordinates subjective experience with public temporal markers. Ishiguro and Barnes reuse retrospective first person to scrutinise the adequacy of self-explanation.

The principal result is a distinction between temporal design and narrative authority. Temporal displacement can complicate disclosure without establishing unreliability;

chronological clarity can organise an account whose evaluations remain questionable. Comparing these dimensions separately makes their interaction more visible. Within the limits of its selected passages, the article therefore replaces a uniform progression from linear realism to fragmentation with a comparison of how inherited narrative resources are reorganised. It offers a basis for closer historical and contextual investigation rather than a final developmental model for English literature.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI assisted with structural revision, language editing, literature and reference checking, and drafting of analytical explanations. No participant data, quantitative results, or experimental findings were generated.

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