The Sensation novel emerged in Britain in the 1860s and quickly became one of the most popular, most scandalous, and most disparaged literary forms. What made the Sensation novel ‘sensational’ were its stories of blackmail, crime, murder, bigamy, adultery, illegitimacy, and all other sorts of skeletons hidden in the closets of seemingly proper middle-class households. Victorian reviewers criticised sensation fiction for its supposed vulgarity and immorality, branding it cheap and degradingly formulaic, hastily produced to excite the “nerves” with plot twists and shocking revelations borrowed from the Gothic, the penny dreadful, or melodrama. However, these critics also recognised the social and political subversion offered to readers of this fiction: since Sensation fiction was generally set in the historical moment in which it appeared, it probed and questioned many of the cultural anxieties of Victorian society, such as sexuality, gender, class, and race. Although by the 1880s the Sensation novel was no longer a sensation, the genre did not simply die but was transformed into new forms of popular literature, such as the detective novel, New Woman writing, and science fiction.

In this module we will follow the evolution of the Sensation novel, from the stories of common criminals in Newgate Prison to the *femmes fatale* of the fin-de-siècle. We will situate the genre and its authors in their historical, social, and political contexts, and examine how Sensation fiction participated in contemporary debates over sexuality, class, and race.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Trace the emergence and development of Sensation fiction through the Victorian era;
- Identify and examine key themes in Sensation fiction and discuss them in relation to their historical, social, and political contexts;
- Identify tropes and key concepts distinctive to Sensation fiction and be able make parallels and comparisons with other genres of the time;
- Understand and take part in existing critical debates over the definition and meaning of Sensation fiction;
• Master skills in close reading, analysis, archival research, oral and written communication.

This module will be assessed by one 5000-word essay.

**Week 1:** Introduction

**Week 2:** From Newgate to Sensation: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Lucretia; or, the Children of the Night* (1846)

**Week 3:** Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859-60)

**Week 4:** Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn; or, the Brides of Garryowen* (1860)

**Week 5:** Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (1861)

**Week 6:** Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862)

**Week 7:** Reading Week

**Week 8:** Charles Reade, *Hard Cash, a Matter-of-Fact Romance* (1863)

**Week 9:** J. S. Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas* (1864)

**Week 10:** Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867)

**Week 11:** Towards New Woman fiction: Florence Marryat, *Her Father’s Name* (1876)

**Week 12:** Reception, legacy, conclusions (on Blackboard)

**Preliminary bibliography:**


• Hughes, Winifred, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1981)

• Mangham, Andrew (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2013)


• Rance, Nicholas, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (1991)