

## Plots and Prospects: The English Country House in Literature and on Screen

### Overview:

Country houses have long offered evocative settings for English storytelling. Whether as idyllic retreats or sites of social division, they have staged competing visions of ‘Englishness’ from the seventeenth century to the present. This course traces the country house through the literary imagination and onto the screen, following three distinct phases. First, we consider its role in the rise of the novel, reading extracts from Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, and William Makepeace Thackeray to see how houses and estates lent form to narratives and definition to characters. Next, we turn to modern fiction, exploring the house as a site of social tensions in the work of E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Finally, we examine the country house on screen, from the nostalgia of *Downton Abbey* and *Grantchester* to its more ambivalent portrayals in contemporary film. Cambridge connections will be highlighted throughout the course, via writers who attended the university or visited it, and the use of nearby estates as filming locations for recent film and television.

Each class will begin with a brief talk on the session’s topic, offering historical context and key concepts. The talk will be followed by discussion of excerpts from the texts, focusing on close analysis of their language or images, themes, and historical significance. The passages for discussion will be supplied, but students are encouraged to delve into the complete works; there will be no expectation that anyone has already read widely in any of these areas of literary history.

### Outline:

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| 1. | Laurence Sterne, <i>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman</i>                          | Character and Its Properties |
| 2. | Jane Austen, <i>Persuasion</i> ; and William Makepeace Thackeray, <i>The History of Henry Esmond</i> | Housing the Plot             |
| 3. | E. M. Forster, <i>Howard’s End</i> ; and Virginia Woolf, <i>Orlando</i>                              | Modernism’s Inheritances     |
| 4. | Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Remains of the Day</i> ; <i>Atonement</i> (dir. Joe Wright)                       | Plots of Memory              |
| 5. | <i>Downton Abbey</i> , <i>Grantchester</i>   | Nostalgic Halls              |

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