

The Novel

INTRODUCTION

The novel is only one of many possible prose narrative forms. It shares with other narratives, like the epic and the romance, two basic characteristics: a story and a story-teller. The epic tells a traditional story and is an amalgam of myth, history, and fiction. Its heroes are gods and goddesses and extraordinary men and women. The romance also tells stories of larger-than-life characters. It emphasizes adventure and often involves a quest for an ideal or the pursuit of an enemy. The events seem to project in symbolic form the primal desires, hopes, and terrors of the human mind and are, therefore, analogous to the materials of dream, myth, and ritual. Although this is true of some novels as well, what distinguishes the novel from the romance is its realistic treatment of life and manners. Its heroes are men and women like ourselves, and its chief interest, as Northrop Frye said, is "human character as it manifests itself in society."

Development of the Novel

The term for the novel in most European languages is *roman*, which suggests its closeness to the medieval romance. The English name is derived from the Italian *novella*, meaning "a little new thing." Romances and *novelle*, short tales in prose, were predecessors of the novel, as were picaresque narratives. *Picaro* is Spanish for "rogue," and the typical picaresque story is of the escapades of a rascal who lives by his wits. The development of the realistic novel owes much to such works, which were written to deflate romantic or idealized fictional forms. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-15), the story of an engaging madman who tries to live by the ideals of chivalric romance, explores the role of illusion and

reality in life and was the single most important progenitor of the modern novel.

The novel broke from those narrative predecessors that used timeless stories to mirror unchanging moral truths. It was a product of an intellectual milieu shaped by the great seventeenth-century philosophers, Descartes and Locke, who insisted upon the importance of individual experience. They believed that reality could be discovered by the individual through the senses. Thus, the novel emphasized specific, observed details. It individualized its characters by locating them precisely in time and space. And its subjects reflected the popular eighteenth-century concern with the social structures of everyday life.

The novel is often said to have emerged with the appearance of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). Both are picaresque stories, in that each is a sequence of episodes held together largely because they happen to one person. But the central character in both novels is so convincing and set in so solid and specific a world that Defoe is often credited with being the first writer of "realistic" fiction. The first "novel of character" or psychological novel is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41), an epistolary novel (or novel in which the narrative is conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters). It is a work characterized by the careful plotting of emotional states. Even more significant in this vein is Richardson's masterpiece *Clarissa* (1747-48). Defoe and Richardson were the first great writers in our literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend, or previous literature. They established the novel's claim as an authentic account of the actual experience of individuals.

Reasons for the Novel's Popularity

Since the eighteenth century, and particularly since the Victorian period, the novel, replacing poetry and drama, has become the most popular of literary forms--perhaps because it most closely represents the lives of the majority of people. The novel became increasingly popular as its social scope expanded to include characters and stories about the

middle and working classes. Because of its readership, which included a large percentage of women and servants, the novel became the form which most addressed the domestic and social concerns of these groups.

Experimentation: The Developing Role of the Narrator

As it evolved, the novel expanded in terms of its form. Writers began to experiment with different modes of presentation. Central to experimentation was the role of the narrator. In a given novel, who talks to the reader? From whose point of view is the story told? Is the narrator identifiable with the author? Is the narrator a character in the story or another character who simply observes the actions of others in the story? Is the narrator reliable--can you believe him or her? Or is he or she unreliable, unable to convey the story without distortion? How does the device of the narrator "frame" the story? How does the reader determine what the truth is about the events reported?

Nineteenth-century novelists like Thackeray and Dickens often told their stories through an [omniscient narrator](#), who is aware of all the events and the motivations of all the characters of the novel. Through this technique the writer can reveal the thoughts of any character without explaining how this information is obtained. Henry James, who began writing in the last third of the nineteenth century, used the technique of point-of-view narration so completely that the minds of his characters became the real basis of interest of the novel. In such works, our knowledge of events and characters is itself limited by the limitations of this character or central consciousness.

Since Henry James' time, many writers have experimented with shifting the focus of the novel further inward to examine human consciousness. Writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner used a method of narration known as stream of consciousness, which attempts to reproduce the flow of consciousness. Perceptions, thoughts, judgments, feelings, associations, and memories are presented just as they occur, without being shaped into grammatical sentences or logical sequences. In stream-of-consciousness narration, all narrators are

to some degree unreliable, which reflects the twentieth century's preoccupation with the relativity and the subjective nature of experience, of knowledge, and of truth.

Proliferation of Types

The novel continues in its popularity to this day. It has moved away from a primarily realistic focus and has evolved into the expansive form that incorporates all other fictional modes. Today, for example, there are many types of novels. There is the allegorical novel, which uses character, place, and event to represent abstract ideas and to demonstrate some thesis. The science fiction novel relies on scientific or pseudo-scientific machinery to create a future society which parallels our own. The historical novel is set in the past and takes its characters and events from history. The social novel is concerned with the influence of societal institutions and of economic and social conditions on characters and events. These three types, the science fiction, social, and historical novel, tend to be didactic, to instruct readers in the necessity for changing their morality, their lives, and the institutions of society. The regional novel presents the influence of a particular locale on character and events. The detective novel is a combination of the picaresque and psychological novel in that it reveals both events and their motivation. And there are many others.

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