

The Rise of the English Novel

1. Factors
2. The Concept of the Novel
3. The Novel & the Romance
4. The Novel and Realism
5. Features of the Eighteenth Century Novel

The Eighteenth-Century Novel

- This course in eighteenth century novel and prose fiction aims to introduce you to the novel as a new genre. The eighteenth century is viewed by many critics as the point when the novel as a recognized genre emerged and rose to become the most popular literary kind of its time.
- Some of the questions on why the novel emerged in this century were answered in the first lecture where we tackled the 18th-century society and culture and how the influential middle class, with its emphasis on education, reading and individual value and merit helped pave the way for the novel.
- In this lecture, we are going to examine the factors of the rise of the novel, the concept of the novel (used in this century for the first time), similar literary kinds (Romance), realism as the determining feature of the early novel, and a list of the features of the eighteenth century novel as agreed upon by critics of the field.

THE RISE OF THE NOVEL: FACTORS

- 1) The Rise of Literacy: Unlike earlier literary kinds (Poetry which normally orally recited, and drama which is performed), the novel is a written form. To be able to consume the novel, one had to be able to read. Literacy rates in the eighteenth century were rising. By the end of the century, no less than 75% of the population were literate, including women.
- 2) Printing: to rise as a popular literary kind, the novel had to be sold in affordable prices and large numbers of copies. This was facilitated by the invention and improvement of the printing machine in the eighteenth century, which made it possible to make more copies, using less time and effort, and sold at reasonable prices. Prior to that, copies of books were written by hand; this was a time consuming process, which resulted in a limited number of copies and high prices.

THE RISE OF THE NOVEL: FACTORS

3) Market Economy: The relationship between author and reader is mediated by publishers. Novel writing in the eighteenth century was no more a hobby to pass time than a profession. Writers wrote to earn their living, since market economy controlled this process in a similar way to manufacturing commodities: the writer writes the novel, gives the manuscript to the publisher who makes copies and publishes it and sells it via libraries and bookshops to readers. The novel, in other words, become more of a commodity. This also entailed that writers comply with the wishes of their readers and appeal to their tastes (if readers enjoy reading adventure stories, writers had to write these...etc).

THE RISE OF THE NOVEL: FACTORS

- 4) Individualism and Secularism: Characters in novels are individualised (not type characters). In previous literary kinds (morality plays for example), characters were abstract figures, or type characters (ex. The characters in *Everyman: Good Deeds, Beauty, Strength...etc.*). They do not represent individualized characters: no proper name, physical appearance, psychological depth, history, family...etc. Characters in the newly emerging novel on the other hand were individualized, i.e., drawn in imitation of real individuals, but are not real. They are fictitious imitations of reality. The titles of some 18th century novels reflect this individualism: *Moll Flanders, Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Clarissa, Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews...etc.* The pivotal aspect of the novel was the individual protagonist, struggle to survive in society, hard work and labour, adventures, feelings, conflicts...etc.
- Focus is, therefore, on the relationship between man and man, not man and God. Although the novel touched on aspects of man's relationship to God (spiritualism), yet focus was on how man survived conflicts in social reality with other individuals. The novel therefore was secular not religious. It was not against religion, but it focused on mundane, worldly issues of life and society, rather than religion.

INDIVIDUALISM

- Individualism refers to:
 1. The method of introspection adopted by eighteenth century novelists to explore individualised characters: granting readers the privilege of entering the hearts and minds of characters in novels, to hear their thoughts, explore their conflicts and sentiments. This is the introspective technique.
 2. Interest in personal freedom and rights.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVEL

- John Richetti, a renowned critic, suggests in his book *The English Novel in History 1700-1780*:

"The eighteenth-century British novel is a unique set of **documents** by which we can try to hear voices that speak something **very like our language**. We now recognize that the novel adds up to an unprecedented attempt to project a new sort of **particularized presence**, and to imagine persons speaking about themselves in their singularity, asserting themselves as **unique individuals** and thereby **breaking with** those **generalized types** and with those communal affiliations that had long served as the primary markers of identity."

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVEL

- Notice the important points in Richetti's passage:
 - 1) The novel is represented as a 'set of documents'. Documents are factual reports. In other words, the novel was realistic, embodying the style and technique of reports. This is meant to convince readers (give them the illusion that the novel is real and not fiction) that the novel is real.
 - 2) It uses everyday language (very like our language), simple, plain, non poetic language, which is used for communication. This is what made it easier for readers of the 18th century to read novels without facing the difficulty of poetic symbols and imagery.
 - 3) Characters are not type characters (particularized presence). They are similar to real individuals. They have proper names, history, family, relations, a place and time framework they belong to. (a character, for example, has a proper name like Moll, born in London which is a specific place, in a certain year...etc. This is what we call particularized presence)
 - 4) Characters are unique individuals: they have obstacles, challenges in life, but they are defiant. They struggle to survive, they use skills, knowledge, smartness...etc, to overcome their difficulties.

NOVEL AND ROMANCE

- The Eighteenth century Novel came into shape gradually, having been distinguished from earlier literary forms like the Epic, Drama and Romance. The Romance was a piece of writing in prose, which generally portrayed strange, improbable situations, heroic characters, and idealised settings. The Romance had a lengthy, loose structure. It was similar in nature to fairy tales with supernatural creatures and strange incidents.

CONTEMPORARY QUOTES ON THE NOVEL

- Clara Reeve in *The Progress of Romance* (1775) draws the distinction between the novel and Romance:

"The word Novel in all languages signifies something new. It was first used to distinguish these works from Romance, though they have lately been confounded together. The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. - The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written."

The Romance

Vs

The Novel

- It derives from the epic tradition of Homer & Virgil
- It is set in distant, idealized settings
- It has an aristocratic focus
- It has a lengthy, loose episodic structure
- It involves supernatural elements and exalted personages.
- It displays improbable or impossible situations

- It derives from history and journalism
- It is set in present-day actualities
- It has a middle-class focus
- It is written in the first person or epistolary (letter) form
- It delineates characters drawn from actual observation
- It presents accurate or captivating view of real life.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY REALISM

- According to Terry Eagleton, Realism is the dominant style of the 18th-century novel:
"To call something 'realist' is to confess that it is not the real thing. Realism is the form which seeks to merge itself so thoroughly with the world that its status as art is suppressed."

FEATURES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVEL

- As suggested by J. Paul Hunter in his *Before Novels*, the features of the 18th century novel which most critics agree on are:
 - 1) **Contemporaneity**: Novels are stories of now, rather than of the far-away in place and time.
 - 2) **Credibility and probability**: People and events are believable, and the laws governing fictional events are like those that govern our everyday world.
 - 3) **Familiarity**: People are of a social rank similar to that of the majority of readers, rather than being heroes, kings, and the like.

FEATURES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVEL

- 4) Rejection of traditional plots: Stereotypes in plots, character and naming typical of earlier, more aristocratic forms, are abandoned.
- 5) Individualism, subjectivity: There is a greater degree of self-consciousness and awareness of the processes of thought and feeling that affect individuals.
- 6) Empathy and Vicariousness: Novels give the reader a sense of what it would be like to be another individual. Readers can 'identify' or 'empathize' with characters.

FEATURES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVEL

- 7) Coherence and Unity of design: The incidents and actions of the novel are drawn together by a guiding design and by a serious engagement with ideas that add up to the presiding 'theme'
- 8) Inclusivity, digressiveness, fragmentation. Within the coherence described above, novels also digress and parenthesize, but in a way that relates to the printed novel.