The Origins of the English Novel

The Novel

The term “novel” is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of fiction written in prose. The novel is distinguished from the much shorter short story and the middle-length novella not only by its length, but by its greater development of complex plots, characters, and milieu. Scholars disagree on when the novel first appeared on the literary scene. Some feel that the long story Tale of Genji (c. 1000 A.D.), written by Shikibu Murasaki, a Japanese court lady, represents an early novel. Others argue that Madame de Lafayette’s La Princesse de Cleves (1678) or Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko (1678) are instances of early novel forms. Behn was undoubtedly a close precursor to the great eighteenth-century novelists, such as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, who followed her and who popularized the form with the reading public. Most critics, however, cite Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote de la Mancha (1605; 1615) as either the first novel or the first proto-novel.

The eighteenth century is noted for giving rise to the English novel. During the years between Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko (1678) and Jane Austen’s novels of manners (1816 – 1817) readers in England were introduced to the novel, a highly popular prose form that corresponded to cultural, social, and political shifts. The development of the concepts of affective individualism and companionate marriage, along with the astonishing rise of the middle class, rising literacy rates, and a new emphasis on the virtue and importance of the common man or woman, favored the novel form, with its focus on the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of an individual protagonist. Various types of sub-genres of the novel flourished during the long eighteenth century, including the epistolary novel, the amatory novel, the gothic novel, and the novel of manners. The novel form articulated, in ways that poems and plays could not, the interiority (psychological, spiritual, and emotional) of the individual human subject, and allowed readers to experience vicariously the adventures and misadventures of the protagonists.

The nineteenth century -- or more specifically, the Victorian age -- has traditionally been viewed as an age dominated by the novel form. It is not only that the century produced a remarkable number of major novelists (Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and Henry James, to name only a few), but that the novel form itself exhibited such an immense range and depth of interest, engaging a remarkably wide readership and addressing every major Victorian issue. “Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last appointed scullery-maid,” wrote Anthony Trollope in 1870. And, of the estimated 40,000 novels published during the century, most of them have remained in the common currency of popular rather than scholarly readerships. In order to assist our understanding of this important Victorian genre, I have assembled some literary terms and definitions related to the novel and its origins.

Theorists of the Emergent Novel:

**Ian Watt** – Watt’s The Rise of the Novel (1957) is the first great twentieth-century critical work on the development of the English novel. Despite its status as a seminal text in novel theory, it has been displaced by more recent considerations of the genre, such as those by McKeon, Richetti, and others.

**Michael McKeon** – Next to Ian Watt, Michael McKeon is probably most frequently cited as an expert on the eighteenth-century novel and the novel form. His The Origins of the English Novel: 1600 – 1740 (2002) is a foundational work which offers a helpful new historicist reading of the genre in relation to social and economic class. According to its publisher, the work, by “Challenging prevailing theories that tie the origins of the novel to the ascendancy of ‘realism’ and the ‘middle class’,” suggests that “this new genre arose in response to the profound instability of literary and social categories. Between 1600 and 1740, momentous changes took place in European attitudes toward truth in narrative and toward virtue in the individual and the social order.” McKeon is also the editor

**John J. Richetti** – Richetti’s *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700-1739* (1969) is a standard and foundational work in the field of novel studies.

**Margaret Anne Doody** – Doody’s *The True Story of the Novel* (1996) is a deconstructionist reading of novel theory, in which she “rejects the conventional Anglo-Saxon distinction between Romance and Novel. This eighteenth-century distinction, she maintains, served both to keep the foreign—dark-skinned peoples, strange speakers, Muslims, and others—largely out of literature, and to obscure the diverse nature of the novel itself.”

**Georg Lukacs** – Lukacs, a Hungarian-born Marxist, offers theories of literary realism and the novel that emphasize their ability to explore class struggle and class consciousness, as well as their ability to “to penetrate the laws governing objective reality, and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible of relationships that go to make up society.” See his texts *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) and *The Historical Novel* (1937).

**J. Paul Hunter** – Hunter is a foundational theorist and writer on the novel form, and producing seminal works on the novel such as *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (1990), *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance*, (1976), and *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe’s Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe*, (1966).


**Notable Feminist Novel Theorists Include:**

**Nancy Armstrong** – Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1990), a feminist analysis of the development of the novel, emphasizes the emergence of a female subjectivity within the novel form and its transcendence from literary to political realms of influence and power. Armstrong’s *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (2006) explores the relationship between the novel form and the emergence of the modern individual.


**Sub-Genres of the Novel:**

Please note that I have taken much of this information, including some of the language included here in the definitions, from M. H. Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edition, pages 190 – 196. This text is an excellent source of amplified information on the subject.

**Picaresque novel** -- a novel consisting of a framed set of tales in an episodic form which usually features an incorrigible rogue who lives by his wits and experiences many adventures. Examples include Mark Twain’s *The
Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Cervantes’s Don Quixote (1605;1615), and Saul Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March (1953).

**Novel of incident** -- a novel which presents a solid and detailed realistic world, and which focuses on the protagonist’s actions and choices -- attains unity of action from its focus on a series of incidents.  E.g.: Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722).

**Novel of character** -- a novel which focuses on the psychological, social, or moral development of the protagonist -- attains unity through its focus on the protagonist’s motives and on how the protagonist will turn out as a person.  Ex.: Samuel Richardson’s Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded (1740).

**Epistolary novel** -- a narrative conveyed entirely through an exchange of letters.  Ex.: Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740) and Clarissa (1747-48), Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982).

**Gothic novel** – a novel which may contain realistic elements and characters, but which features magic, mystery, chivalry, and horror.  The gothic novel typically includes haunted mansions, ghosts, supernatural events, tragic heroines, castles, dungeons, underground passages, trap doors, and mysterious sounds.  Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764) is generally understood to be the proto-typical gothic novel, and many eighteenth and nineteenth-century novelists imitated the form or included gothic elements in otherwise realistic or romantic novels.  Ann Radcliffe’s five novels (1789 – 1797), especially The Mysteries of Udolpho, popularized the form.  Other writers of gothic novels include Monk Lewis, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and, to some extent, Charlotte Bronte.

**Realistic novel** -- characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience.  Examples of realistic writers include Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, William Dean Howells, Henry James, George Sand, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Turgenev, and Tolstoy.

**Novel of manners** -- a realistic novel which focuses on the customs, conversations, and ways of thinking and valuing of a particular social class.  Ex.: Jane Austen, Edith Wharton.

**Prose romance** -- deploys characters who are sharply discriminated as heroes or villains; its protagonist is often solitary, and relative isolated from a social context; tends to be set in the distant past; emphasizes adventure, and is frequently cast in the form of a quest for an ideal.  Ex.: Walter Scott’s Rob Roy (1817), Alexandre Dumas’ The Three Musketeers (1844-45), Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights (1847), and the narratives of Edgar Allen Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville.

**Bildungsroman** -- the “novel of formation” or the “novel of education” -- focuses on the development of the protagonist’s mind and character throughout the passage from childhood to adulthood.  These novels often involve a spiritual or psychological crisis, and move the protagonist into eventual maturity.  Examples include Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847), Eliza Haywood’s The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless, George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860), and Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations (1861).

**Social novel** -- emphasizes the influence of the social and economic conditions of an era on shaping characters and determining events; often it also embodies an implicit or explicit thesis recommending political or social reform.  Examples include Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906), John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939), and the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell.