

## The Treasure of History ---- British Novels

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### Abstract

In this essay an attempt has been made to consider the English novel historically. Its principle aim, however, is to help us, English majors, to become more aware of the variety of the novel as a form of literature, of the pleasure it has to offer, and of the interpretative skills which a careful reading of novels may help to develop. Through the general recognition of novels, especially British novels, English majors may have a systematical study, which will make their study more effectively.

### Keywords

British, Novel, History, Literature.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Definition of Novel

A novel may seem less open to interpretation, and its definition can be reached as a descriptive one rather than a prescriptive one. And the definition may be caught "by etymological study, by distinguishing between what we call the novel and what we think is not, and by synthesizing previous definitions." [5][p.5].

"A novel is a highly stylized prose account of fictional reality in the form of story with profundity for the purpose of changing the reader's mind by the aid of the reader's active involvement while providing entertainment and superior truth of life." [5] [p.8]

After getting the definition of novel, we should classify novels by some standards, which are widely recognized: length, subject matter, setting, and technique. A novel can be made up of some elements because it is an organic whole. Every element together gives a complete novel. The elements are story, character, plot, theme, setting, and narrative point of view. Through the above introduction, it is easy to know about the most flexible form of literature—novel. It cannot possibly be my object to analyse here or to discuss fully so wide and complicated the history of British novel. Rather than offer some representative novelists and works in each era, the author wish to give a general knowledge about it.

## 2. The History of British Novel

British novel, as a 'new' genre, plays a very important role in British literature, although it appears in the Elizabethan age. "Lily's *Euphues* started a fashion which spread in books and conversation." [6][p.30-31] British literature begins in the old English language, also called Anglo-Saxon, which is the earliest form of English. "Old English is spoken from about A..D. 600 to about 1100." [6][p.7] Novel appears about 500 years later than old English literature. Before it comes up, poetry dominates the British literature, such as *Beowulf*, an epic, the greatest old English poem, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In the following pages, novel will be discussed from the 16th century in which novel first appears, to the 20th century, including significant novelists, works, and significant events.

## 2.1. Significant novelists, works of prose fiction written, and significant events before 1700

"In the last decades of the 16th century both romances and realistic fiction flourished in England." [2][p.113] Before 1700, the form of literature—novel began in the Elizabethan age(1558-1603), and John Lily's *Euphues* started a fashion, although the novel was of little value on the whole. In *Euphues*, the sentences are long and complicated, also some similes are brought in.

"Author novelist was Robert Greene, whose story *Pandosto* gave Shakespeare the plot of his play—*The Winter's Tale*." [6][p.31] And Thomas Nash, his book *The Life of Jacke Wilton* was a story of adventure. John Bunyan's work set an example of clear, simple expression, such as in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

In 1642, Civil War broke out. The King, Charles I escaped and the war was renewed. Finally, he was defeated and was beheaded in 1649. Then England was proclaimed a republic. In 1660, as the King Charles II, the son of the beheaded King, was back and welcomed. That was known as the Restoration.

## 2.2. Eighteenth Century

### 2.2.1. Representative Novelists and Works

In this part, it is inevitable to talk about Daniel Defoe(?1661—1731). "The English novel proper was born about the middle of the eighteenth century." [6] [p.85] Defoe finished his work nearly 60 years old. And his work is one of the first in English. His work *Robinson Crusoe*(1719), *Moll Flanders*(1721—1722), indeed, are almost a novel.

Jonathan Swift(1667—1745) was a bitter satirist. His work *Gulliver's Travels*(1726) was a famous satire. It shows the evil of human to disclose the darkness of the society at that time.

"It is not, therefore, surprising that in 1740 a real novel appeared." [4] [p.87] It was *Pamela*(1740) by Samuel Richardson. Pamela is a novel written in the form of letters.

Henry Fielding, a man of gay character, began a novel, *Joseph Andrews*(1742), as a kind of satire on *Pamela*. His greatest novel, *Tom Jones*(1749), is a romantic novel.

Another important novel of the time was *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Oliver Goldsmith. It is the story of a good and virtuous family which has great misfortunes; but all come right in the end.

Jane Austen brought the novel of family life to its highest point of perfection. Her first novel is *Elinor and Marianne*(1795), then *Sense and Sensibility*(1811), *Pride and Prejudice*(1813), *Mansfield Park*(1814), *Emma*(1816) and *Northanger Abbey*(1818). She was the founder of the novel which deals with unimportant middle class people and of which there are many fine examples in latter British fiction. Her style is easy and effortless.

Sir Walter Scott wrote *Ivanhoe*(1819) and so on. He is rather difficult to read, especially in those places where his characters speak dialect. He is the creator and a great master of the historical novel. Scott's novels give a panorama of feudal society from its early stages to its downfall.

### 2.2.2. Literature Schools and Significant Events

Romanticism was formed in the middle and last decades of 18th century, and this kind of movement was affected by Enlightenment, which "was a progressive intellectual movement through out Western Europe in the 18th century". [3][p.4] The rise and flourish of modern English novel is another important phenomenon of the 18th century British literature. The novelists we mentioned above are among that time of realistic writers.

From 1775 to 1783, the War of American Independent broke out. Finally, America was proclaimed a independent nation. French Revolution broke out in 1789, and in 1794 French people subverted the reign and set up the capitalistic system.

## 2.3. Nineteenth Century

### 2.3.1. Representative Novelists and Works

In 19th century, the Queen Victoria reigned British. That time is from 1832 to 1902. "The critical realism of the 19th century flourished in the forties and in the beginning of fifties." [7] [p.153] The greatest British realist of the time is Charles Dickens. He creates a vivid picture of bourgeois civilization, describing the misery and suffering of common people. His works includes *Pickwick Papers*(1836), *Oliver Twist*(1837), *David Copperfield*(1850), *Bleak House*(1853), *Hard Times*(1854), *Great Expectations*(1861), and *Our Mutual Friend*(1865) and so on.

Another critical realist—William Makepeace Thackeray, his works "mainly contain a satirical portrayal of the upper strata of society." [7][p.154] His best-known book is *Vanity Fair*.

Now we must turn to Charlotte Bronte, her finest work is *Jane Eyre*(1847), which describes the life of a poor and plain girl. The book is very successful. This poetic, imaginative story of the love of a young governess for her married employer also has undoubted connections with Charlotte's experiences in Brussels. And her sister Emily Bronte, wrote one of the greatest British novel *Wuthering Heights*(1847). Their works began to bring the novel an introspection and an intense concentration on the inner life of emotion.

Another woman novelist, known as George Eliot, and her real name is Mary Ann Evans. She wrote *Adam Bede*(1859), *The Mill on the Floss*(1860) and *Silas Marner*(1861). Her preoccupation was always with the serious consideration of the moral position of the individual in the universe, but her psychological insight into the development of character, her flair for country scenes and speech, her fine sense of fun, and the narrative interest of her novels gave her a general popularity not common to didactic novelists.

"In the novels of Thomas Hardy nature plays an important part; indeed Nature is herself a character." [6] [p.131] Hardy was the last and one of the greatest of Victorian novelists. Over pages of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1886, hangs the shadow of an inexorable fate hounding a man to miserable death by means of the flaws in his own character. And *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 1891, and *Jude the Obscure*, 1896, which are his two finest works.

### 2.3.2. Literature Schools and Significant Events

"The years between 1832 and the early 50's are marked by one important chain of events, the Chartist Movement." [4] [p.177] "The English working class, however, created a literature of its own—Chartist literature...the struggle of the proletariat for its rights." [7] [p.155] So, in the early 19th century, romanticism is the trend, then critical realism, which not only gave a satirical portrayal of the bourgeoisie and all the ruling classes, but also showed profound sympathy for the common people. Hence humor and satire abound in the English realistic novels of the 19th century. Critical realism reveals the corrupting influence of the rule of cash upon human nature. There are some representative events in 19th century. From 1802 to 1815, Napoleonic Wars broke out, and in 1815 Battle of Waterloo started. In 1832, First Reform Bill was published. In 1837, Queen Victoria is accessed.

## 2.4. Twentieth Century

### 2.4.1. Representative Novelists and Works

"With Conrad we are in the twentieth century. It is not merely a question of the dates of publication: it is a whole historical vista that has changed." [1] [p.159] Conrad's(1857-1904) *Nostramo* shows "the world of modern imperialism, of war and violence and concentration camps, of displaced persons and mass neurosis, all on a scale and of a kind radically different from previous human experience." [1] [p.59] And the tone of 20th century British literature is one of uncertainty and tension. It is easy to see that the complexity of modern life makes writing become difficult.

D. H. Lawrence's view of the writer's purpose was very different. Much of *Sons and Lovers*(1913) is taken from his own early life. The novel certainly reflects the problems of Lawrence's young age. *The Rainbow*(1915) tells the story of a family through three couples of different ages. His works belong to modernism, which shows the very truth of life.

James Joyce was born and educated in Ireland. His *Ulysses*(1922), as his masterpiece, is regarded as one of the most important novels in English of the century. There is no story, no plot, almost no action, and little account of man's life during one day in Dublin. He is the master of the stream of consciousness.

"One of the most interesting development in the writing of the 20th century is the greater number of women writers." [6] [p.159] Virginia Woolf, as the most important woman writer, explores the consciousness of her characters. *Mrs Dalloway*(1925) gives one day in June 1923 as it was experienced by Mrs Dalloway and other characters. *To the Lighthouse*(1927), *Orlando*(1928), *The Waves*(1931) are also her important works.

Doris Lessing's Drabble's main characters are also women, such as in *The Millstone*(1965), *The Waterfall*(1969) and *The Ice Age*(1977).

#### 2.4.2. Literature Schools and Significant Events

In twentieth century, imperialism, modernism, and stream of consciousness occupy their own space of literature, especially of novel. And feminism shows its powerful influence at that time. Some female writers stand up and try to defend their rights in society. And surrealism, as a movement flourished between World War I and World War II, which emphasizes the world of dream and fantasy and believing that the unconscious mind reveals a true reality than the natural world.

In 1901, Queen Victoria was dead. And from 1914 to 1918, was the World War I. World War II broke out in 1939 and ended in 1945. These significant events influence literature very much.

### 3. Conclusion

It is legitimate and desirable to build up a sense of the historical development of the novel. At an element stage of our study, there may be some point in disregarding the differences of history. But it is true that there is no enough room to list or generalize all novelists of British novel, so in the essay only the representatives are showed. From this kind of summary, the author believe a clear historical clue will be showed. And this kind of task will be finished better in the future.

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