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A STUDY ON EARLY FORERUNNERS OF THE NOVEL

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Introduction

A novel is a long prose narrative written by a novelist that describes fictional characters and events, usually in the form of a sequential story. The genre has historical roots in antiquity and medieval and early modern romance and in the tradition of the novella. The latter, an Italian word used to describe short stories, supplied the present generic English term in the 18th century. The first significant European novelist is Miguel de Cervantes, author of Don Quixote, the first part of which was published in 1605.

A more precise definition of the genre is historically difficult. However, the main elements that critics discuss are: the construction of the narrative, the plot, the relation to reality, the characterization, and the use of language. Most of these requirements were theorized in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The present English (and Spanish) word, for a long work of prose fiction, derives from the Italian novella for "new", "news", or "short story of something new", itself from the Latin novella, a singular noun use of the neuter plural of novellus, diminutive of novus, meaning "new". Most European languages have preserved the term "romance" (as in French, Russian, Croatian, Romanian, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian "roman"; German "Roman"; Portuguese "romance" and Italian "romanzo") for extended narratives.

Novels displayed in a German bookshop in February 2009.

Defining The Genre

Madame de Pompadour spending her afternoon with a book, 1756 - religious and scientific reading has a different iconography. A novel is a long, fictional narrative that makes use of a literary prose style to describe intimate human experiences. Its development was encouraged by innovations in printing, and the introduction of cheap paper, in the 14th-century.

A Fictional Narrative

Fictionality is most commonly cited as distinguishing novels from historiography. However this can be a problematic criterion. Throughout the early modern period authors of historical narratives would often include inventions rooted in traditional beliefs in order to embellish a passage of text or add credibility to an opinion. Historians would also invent and compose speeches for didactic purposes. Novels can, on the other hand, depict the social, political and personal realities of a place and period with clarity and detail historians not found in works of history.

However, up until the 1750s historians were the main critics of the novel and they emphasised its lack of veracity and therefore serious worth. That it was merely entertainment. Then in the second half of the 18th-century criticism evolved and with Romanticism came the idea that works of fiction could be art.

Literary Prose

While prose rather than verse became the standard of the modern novel, ancestors of the modern novel were verse epics in the Romance language of southern France and Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. Even in the 19th-century fictional narratives in verse, such as Lord Byron's Don Juan (1824) and Alexander Pushkin's Yevgeniy Onegin (1833), competed with modern prose novels.

However, in the 15th century, following the invention of printing, prose began to dominate European fiction. This immediately led to the development of a special elevated prose style modeled on Greek and Roman histories, and the traditions of verse narrative. The development of a distinct fictional language was crucial for the genre that aimed creating works that readers would actually identify, and appreciate, as fiction rather than history.

At the beginning of the 16th century, printing had created a special demand for books that were neither simply published for the non academic audience nor explicitly scientific literature, but belles letters. This included modern history and science in the vernacular, personal memoirs, contemporary political scandal, fiction and poetry. However, prose fiction was soon far more popular than verse, rhetoric and science. Fictional prose, though aiming for stylistic elegance, was closer to everyday language, to personal letters, to the art of "gallant" conversation, and to the personal memoir and travelogue. By the 18th century, however, English authors began to criticize the French ideals of belles letters elegance, and a less aristocratic prose style became the ideal for them in the 1740s. When, in the 1760s, it became the norm for the author to open his or her novel with a statement of the work's functionality, the prose became even more informal.

Early Forerunners of the Novel

The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740, combines historical analysis and readings of

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extraordinarily diverse texts to reconceive the foundations of the dominant genre of the modern era. Now, on the fifteenth anniversary of its initial publication, The Origins of the English Novel stands as essential reading. The anniversary edition features a new introduction in which the author reflects on the considerable response and commentary the book has attracted since its publication by describing dialectical method and by applying it to early modern notions of gender.

Challenging prevailing theories that tie the origins of the novel to the ascendancy of "realism" and the "middle class," McKeon argues 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. The novel emerged, McKeon contends, as a cultural instrument designed to engage the epistemological and social crises of the age. Unlike poetry and drama, which go back thousands of years to works such as the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2000 B.C.) and the Greek play Oresteia (458 B.C.), the novel is a somewhat recent literary creation. Lengthy fictional narratives written in prose had appeared sporadically before 1700; examples include the stories in Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (1351-1353), the English romancer Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur (c. 1469), and Don Quixote (1605, 1615), by Miguel de Cervantes of Spain. These early precursors aside, some scholars date the birth of the modern novel to the eighteenth century, specifically the publication of the English printer Samuel Richardson's Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded (1740-1742), a long story recounting the trials of an English girl in a battle against a man trying to seduce her. As Richard Freeman explains in The Novel, Richardson's book came at an opportune time in English history, as the presence of a literate middle-class, the appearance of London's first circulating library, printing innovations, and other factors helped prepare the soil for the new genre to grow. Over the next century, English readers saw the publication of many other long fictional narratives, including Richardson's own Clarissa (1748), Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews (1742) and Tom Jones (1749), Tobias Smollett's Roderick Random (1748) and Humphry Clinker (1771), Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1760-1767), and Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility (1811) and Pride and Prejudice (1813). In general, these books were longer than Boccaccio's narratives and more unified than Don Quixote. Furthermore, rather than recount the far-fetched adventures of knights and other idealized heroes and heroines, as Malory's book does, this new breed of narrative tended to recreate the worlds and everyday lives of ordinary people. Thus we have the strict definition of a modern novel: a lengthy fictional narrative, written in prose, presenting a realistic picture of believable characters and events.

From these origins, the novel quickly became a popular form in England and elsewhere. Between 1840, when publishers often offered them to readers in installments, and 1900, virtually all of the most important works of English literature are novels, including Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847), Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1847), Charles Dickens's David Copperfield (1849-1850) and Great Expectations (1860-1861), George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871-1872), and William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1848), and Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891). In the next century, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and others kept the form alive and well in England. The novel has flourished elsewhere, as well. Indeed, over the past three centuries, a number of the major writers in many European countries have been novelists, including James Joyce in Ireland, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann in Germany, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevski in Russia, and Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, and Marcel Proust in France.

There is one other component to the study and appreciation of novels, and that is research. In addition to interacting with one another in class, we will be using the library and the Internet to explore research done by experts on the various authors and on the novel it. Specifically, we will practice finding, evaluating, and using sources such as subject encyclopedias, scholarly monographs and periodicals, and credible Internet sites to track down both factual and interpretive information that can help illuminate the novels we are studying.

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