

# THE RISE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

## -Definition

The novel is a fictional prose narrative of considerable length, typically having a plot that is unfolded by the actions, speech, and thoughts of the characters. The novel is a worldwide cultural instrument that helped redefine the time and space where people live. It is extended in terms of length and more elaborated in terms of characterization, plot and themes being compared with the short story and the novella.

## -Social Background

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century is the most fertile period for the growth and evolution of the English novel. It was after 1740 that the English novel came to embody the spirit and temper of the age. The English novel blossomed at the hands of the great novelists of the age like **Samuel Richardson**, **Henry Fielding**, **Tobias Smollet** and **Lawrence Stern**. In larger measures, the novel is the product of the middle class intellectuals appealing to the middle class life and sensibility. It is a picture of imagined events set against the contemporary social background.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the middle class section of the English society prospers strongly due to the immense growth of trade and commerce both locally and internationally. The spread of education increased the number of both writers and the reading public. The growth of the reading public led to an increased demand of new and more literary products. The growing flood of newspapers and magazines needed more contributors; the reason why many people turned to literary production. Realistic works were produced portraying the life of ordinary middle class people. Besides, the rise of the English novel is considered as a result of the democratic turmoil and the political changes of the 18<sup>th</sup> C.

The rise of the novel coincides with the rise of the middle classes in Western Europe. Profound social and economic changes brought the novel into popular prominence:

- \*Advances in the technology of printing made written texts available to a growing population of readers.
- \*Changes in modes of distribution and in literacy rates brought books and pamphlets to populations excluded from education, such as working-class men and women.
- \*Authors became free agents in the literary marketplace, dependent on popular sales for success and sustenance, reflecting the values of a middle-class readership.
- \*Reading became a prestige symbol because of the increasing number of middle class members who showed interest in reading at leisure.

**-Earlier Works:** Novels began in England in the early 1700s. However, there were some novel prototypes prior to this period, such as:

- Sir Thomas Malroy's *Le Mort d'Artur* (1485)
- Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1588)
- John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)
- Aphra Behn's *Oronooko, or The Royal Slave* (1688)

## **-Literary Aspects:**

Early novels were dedicated to realism. Realism and drama of individual consciousness had precedence over external drama. The focus was on the experience of the individual as subject matter. Novels explored individual consciousness and perception. Realism was synonymous with veracity and denial of functionality. The descriptions featured “photographic” attention to detail (verisimilitude). Early novelists rejected the fabulous imaginings and idealism of romances.

Early novelists made significant choices in subject matter. They wanted the appearance of probability in character, setting, and event and logical cause-and-effect sequencing. They focused on solidity of detail in order to achieve the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief. More novels began to feature middle-class protagonists.

## **-Anti-Novel Campaigns**

Attacks on the new genre identified it with French romance, derided it as a sensationalistic import, and considered it antithetical to English values. Some of the objections to novels were:

-Novels have a great impact on the unconscious mind of readers. Readers may imitate wrong and irrational ideas about love, life, and other aspects of life. Also, it may develop certain stereotypes in the mind of readers.

-Novels were believed to have its roots in French romance, thus it was incompatible with English ethics. Many novelists including Eliza Haywood and Aphra Behn were attacked as their prose was based on French style.

-It was and still considered as a waste of time. People were spending most of their spare time reading novels. Also, it diverts people from living in reality and encourages them to sail in the imaginary world. It affects the reader physically as the reader sits for hours without any physical activity.

-As the novels were written in simple prose, unlike poetry, which requires skill and creative illumination, there was a crowd of unskilled writers who interiorized their status. The content produced by this undesirable crowd was of poor quality and thus created a bad reputation for the genre.

-Women were and still are perceived as sensitive, weaker, and more emotional, thus they were more exposed to bad influence and may engage in immoral activities. Also, some novels fuelled this approach as they exhibited young girls searching for love. Novel reading was even considered a symptom of hysteria in women.

**-Important Figures and Novel Types:** During the 18<sup>th</sup> C, different types of novels started to emerge:

\*Daniel Defoe’s “The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe” (1719): A **Realistic** Novel; it is about a shipwrecked man’s survival on a deserted island. This book laid the foundation for realistic fiction, capturing readers with its detailed narrative of human perseverance.

\*Jonathan Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels” (1726): A **Philosophic** Novel treating the depths of the human nature and some religious themes.

\*Samuel Richardson's "*Pamela*" (1740): An **Epistolary** Novel, the first example of the epistolary novel where the plot is advanced by letters or journal entries of one or more characters. It is a unique story told through letters and chronicles a young woman's resilience against her master's advances, emphasizing virtue and morality. It was a standout work of its time.

\*Jane Austen's novels: **Bildungsroman** type of novels referring to the "novel of formation", Bildungsroman means a novel that traces the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social development and growth of the main character from childhood to maturity.

\* **Gothic Novels**: Gothic Novels combined fiction, Romanticism, horror, and touches of the supernatural. They were over-dramatic and not necessarily realistic. They relied heavily on suspense. Example:

"*The Castle of Otranto*" by Horace Walpole (1764)

"*The Mysteries of Udolpho*" by Anne Radcliffe (1794)

Other types of novels emerged later like: the Historical Novel, Science Fiction novels, Mysteries, Horror novels,.....

### **-Women Writers and Readers during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century:**

The 18th century saw more women writing and reading books. Before, the literary world was primarily male. Nevertheless, women writers like **Jane Austen** (*Pride and Prejudice*), **Mary Shelley** (*Frankenstein*), and **Fanny Burney** (*Evelina*) began penning novels, adding new perspectives. Their works explore women's lives, dreams, and challenges.

With women also reading more, they became a big part of the book's audience. Their interest in novels like these helped boost the book market. This era marked a time when women's voices in literature started to shine brightly.