

History of the Novel

The novel originated in the early 18th century after the Italian word "novella," which was used for stories in the medieval period. Its identity has evolved and it is now considered to mean a work of prose fiction over 50,000 words. Novels focus on character development more than plot. In any genre, it is the study of the human psyche.

The Beginning

The ancestors of the novel were Elizabethan prose fiction and French heroic romances, which were long narratives about contemporary characters who behaved nobly. The novel came into popular awareness towards the end of the 1700s, due to a growing middle class with more leisure time to read and money to buy books. Public interest in the human character led to the popularity of autobiographies, biographies, journals, diaries and memoirs.

English Novels

The early English novels concerned themselves with complex, middle-class characters struggling with their morality and circumstances. "Pamela," a series of fictional letters written in 1741 by Samuel Richardson, is considered the first real English novel. Other early novelists include Daniel Defoe, who wrote "Robinson Crusoe" (1719) and "Moll Flanders" (1722), although his characters were not fully realized enough to be considered full-fledged novels. Jane Austen is the author of "Pride and Prejudice" (1812), and "Emma" (1816), considered the best early English novels of manners.

Novels in the 19th Century

The first half of the 19th century was influenced by the romanticism of the previous era. The focus was now on nature and imagination rather than intellect and emotion. Gothic is a strain of the romantic novel with its emphasis on the supernatural. Famous romantic novels include "Jane Eyre" (1847) by Charlotte Bronte, the prototype of many succeeding novels about governesses and mystery men; "Wuthering Heights" (1847) a Gothic romance by Emily Bronte; "The Scarlet Letter" (1850), and "The House of Seven Gables" (1851), gothic, romantic tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne about puritanism and guilt; and "Moby Dick," (1851) Herman Melville's work on the nature of good and evil.

Victorian Novels

The novel became established as the dominant literary form during the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837-1901). Victorian novelists portrayed middle-class, virtuous heroes responding to society and learning wrong from right through a series of human errors. Sir Walter Scott published three-volume novels and ingeniously made them affordable to the general public by making them available for purchase in monthly installments. This marketing tactic led to the writing innovation of sub-climaxes as a way to leave readers wanting more each month. Notable Victorian authors include Charles Dickens, considered the best English Victorian novelist, who wrote "A Christmas Carol" (1843) and Lewis Carroll, (Charles Ludwidge Dodgson), who wrote "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1864) and "Through the Looking-Glass" (1871).

Realism and Naturalism

The rise of industrialization in the 19th century precipitated a trend toward writing that depicted realism. Novels began to depict characters who were not entirely good or bad, rejecting the idealism and romanticism of the previous genre. Realism evolved quickly into naturalism which portrayed harsher circumstances and pessimistic characters rendered powerless by the forces of their environment. Naturalist novels include "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which was a major catalyst for the American Civil War; "Tom Sawyer" (1876) and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" (1885), the latter of which is considered the great American novel written by Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens).

Modern Novels

The 20th century is divided into two phases of literature--modern literature (1900-1945) and contemporary literature (1945 to the present), also referred to as postmodern. The characters in modern and contemporary novels questioned the existence of God, the supremacy of the human reason, and the nature of reality. Novels from this era reflected great events such as The Great Depression, World War II, Hiroshima, the cold war and communism. Famous modern novels include "To The Lighthouse" (1927) by English novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf; "Ulysses" (1921), by Irish novelist and short story writer James Joyce; "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1929), the most famous World War I anti-war novel by German novelist and journalist Erich Maria Remarque and "The Sound and the Fury" (1929) by American novelist and short story writer William Faulkner, which depicts the decline of the South after the Civil War.

Postmodern Novels

Realism and naturalism paved the way into postmodern surrealistic novels with characters that were more reflective. The postmodern novel includes magical realism, metafiction, and the graphic novel. It asserts that man is ruled by a higher power and that the universe cannot be explained by reason alone. Modern novels exhibit a playfulness of language, less reliance on traditional values, and experimentation with how time is conveyed in the story. Postmodern novels include: "The Color Purple" (1982) by Alice Walker; "In Cold Blood" (1966) by Truman Capote; the non-fiction novel "Roots" (1976) by Alex Haley; "Fear of Flying" (1973) by Erica Jong; and the leading magical realist novel, "A Hundred Years of Solitude" (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.