

LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH

Fundamentals of Drama, Poetry and Prose

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Chapter 3

Prose Fiction – *Peter O. Makinde*

Prose fiction is an imaginary story, usually written down. It is a story that someone tells in everyday, natural language. It is presented in a narrative or story form compared to the drama which is presented in dialogue. Prose fiction comprises the short story, the novella and the novel.

Prose fiction generally uses a variety of techniques such as narrative and has a wide range in terms of length. Although individuals label these stories by form and genre, a common thread is the use of universal themes that trigger emotional responses from readers (Dan Cavallari (2022:1).

In the words of Kermode (23), prose fiction is an artistic work that “has a personal narrative, a hero to identify with fictional inventions, style, and suspense – in short anything that might be handled with the rather personal ventures of creativity and artistic freedom”. Prose fiction depends on the style of the writer and/or what the writer wants to achieve. Therefore, the story in prose fiction is invented by the writer but it is presented in a realistic manner in order to treat essentially personal subject matter which is open to various interpretations by the reader.

Furthermore, prose fiction relays human experience from the writer’s imagination; as it is seen, in the words of Whiteman (12), as a field of “cultural significance to be explored with a critical and didactic interest in the subjective perceptions both of artists and their readers”.

Studies have shown that the development of modern prose fiction in its present form particularly the novel is traced to the development of *belles-lettres* (beautiful letters) which is associated with elegance and style. These included an amalgam of genres that included history and science in vernaculars, personal memoirs, political discourse, fiction and poetry. Gradually, prose fiction soon became a prominent medium for the creation of a distinct style of writing and communication.

Writers of prose fiction like Historians could document and present facts but not as accurately as the historians because historians present real names of the people involved, places, and dates; whereas in prose fiction, real names are not used though known places and dates could be mentioned. This in essence means that a historical event in the hands of novelist is an indispensable tool because such historical event is presented in prose fiction as the writer manipulates the story in an artistically satisfying manner. In this way, the writer uses fictitious names to avoid litigation. This is why in many works of prose fiction, the author/publisher indicates that the names are fictitious and regrets resemblance of any known person. Prose fiction could use informal language for particular effect.

The novelist therefore mediates facts in pursuit of both specific and universal truths while trying to please in the process. The literary artist, according to Chidi Amuta (89), is therefore "...faced with the problem of disciplining history to obey his artistic purpose".

There is no doubting the fact that novelists depict the social, political, and personal realities of a place and period with clarity and details more than historians. History is factual documentation while prose fiction is a work of art. Prose fiction could be based on history but the author uses vivid and graphic representations of characters and incidents to present an entertaining story.

The Development of the Novel

Until the 14th century most of the literature of entertainment was in narrative verse, particularly the epic and the romance. (*Romance* eventually yielded the word *roman*, the term for novel in most European languages.) In some ways the modern novel is a descendant of the medieval romances, which were first written in verse, later in prose. By end of the 17th century, verse narratives had been replaced by prose.

Spain was ahead of the rest of Europe in the development of the novel form. The greatest of Spanish novels, Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615), first appears at the beginning of the 14th century; this work is a proto-typical picaresque novel, which satirized chivalry and a number of earlier novels. Apart from *Don Quixote*, the only other works in Europe which could be called novels are the French *Gargantua* (1534) and *Pantagruel* (1532), by Rabelais. These are 'novels' of fantasy along the lines of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1736), *Candide* (1759), and *Zarathustra* (1883-91).

In England, the novel is still in its infancy at the close of the 16th century; even in the 17th century, only Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1668) could be seen as a kind of allegorical novel. Early in the 18th century Congreve published *Incognita: or, Love and Duty Reconciled* (1713). He called it a novel, and in his preface, he stated what he thought a novel is:

first of romances, which are composed of the constant loves and invincible courages of heroes, heroines, kings and queens, mortals of the first rank, and of extraordinary things that happen in romances.

But novels are of a more familiar nature. "Come near us, and represent to us Intrigues in Practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresented [sic], such which being not so distant from our Belief bring also the pleasure nearer us. Romances give more wonder, Novels more Delight."

Soon after this (1719) Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* — the first in a long line of desert island fictions. From now on the novel comes of age, and within another 70 years is a major and matured form. But because it is developing, the range and variety, especially in the 18th

century, are extraordinary: romances, picaresques, satirical novels, philosophical novels, and — notably — the epistolary novel (the use of the letter) all make appearances.

The development of the novel in the 19th century is a European phenomenon. But for the purposes of this particular course or study, our focus is on literature in English. The 19th century in England is the period of the novel. In the early years, Sir Walter Scott established the historical novel, and Jane Austen the comedy of manners. The middle years were astonishing for their output: Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray, George Eliot, R.S. Surtees. The 1840's belong to the Brontë sisters (Anne, Emily, Charlotte); the last quarter of the century to Thomas Hardy.

At the turn of the century Somerset Maugham and D.H. Lawrence begin a new course, and in the 20th century, the novel remained strong, and showed constant innovation. In 1915 Dorothy Richardson was the first English novelist to introduce the stream of consciousness technique; in 1916 the Irishman James Joyce (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) made the technique more famous. In *Ulysses* (1922) he perfected this technique, and in *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) may have pushed it beyond its probable limits. He also experimented with language to a point where he seems to transcend the limits of the genre.

After Joyce the novel was never quite the same. His influence was profound. Virginia Woolf, in the 1920s and 1930s extended this technique even further. She was also one of the great innovators.

During the 1920's and 1930's the English novel flourished. Some famous writers include Ford Maddox Ford, John Galsworthy, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett, V.S. Pritchett, Christopher Isherwood, Rebecca West, and Graham Greene. In the 1940s and 1950s there are Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, and Joyce Cary. And in recent years William Golding, Kingsley Amis, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, Vladimir Nabokov, Anthony Burgess, V.S. Naipaul, Margaret Drabble, R.K. Narayan, Zoe Smith.

During the 20th century the novel also flourished in America. Some of the more famous writers from the earlier part of the century include Upton Sinclair, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dashell Hammett, and Thomas Wolfe.

The middle years are represented by Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, John Updike, and Truman Capote. More recent writers include Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Thomas Pynchon, John Irving, and Toni Morrison.

Types and Forms of Prose Fiction

Sub-Genres of the Novel

During the development of the genre, a number of specialty novels, or sub-genres, have developed. The most important, or at least the most common, include:

Romance: This is principally a form of entertainment which must not be confused with the love story. It may be 'didactic,' but this is usually incidental. It is a European form which has been influenced by such collections as *The Arabian Nights*. It is usually peopled by characters (and thus with events) who live in a courtly world (the court of the kings and queens) somewhat remote from the everyday. This suggests elements of fantasy, improbability, extravagance, and naivety. It also suggests elements of love, adventure, the marvellous and the "mythic". Often the word "romance" is used loosely to describe a narrative of heroic or spectacular achievements, of chivalry, or gallant love, of deeds of "derring-do". Some examples include *Don Quixote*, Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

Gothic novel: This is a type of romance which was very popular in the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th. It has had a considerable influence on fiction ever since. Most were tales of mystery and horror, intended to chill the spine, curdle the blood. They contained a strong element of the supernatural and the now-traditional "haunted house" props. Settings are their distinguishing feature: medieval castles (or similar locations) with secret passages, dungeons, winding stairways, a stupefying atmosphere of doom and gloom, a proper complement of spooky happenings and, occasionally, spectral visions. There is usually at least one mysterious character, and some kind of dark secret. Examples include the works of Poe, the Brontës, some of Dickens (*Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*); Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Historical novel: This is a form of narrative which reconstructs history and recreates it imaginatively; both historical and fictional characters may appear. The author aims at verisimilitude (likeness to the truth, and therefore the appearance of being true or real even when fantastic). Historical novels include, for example, the works of Sir Walter Scott, and the "biographical" series on the United States by Gore Vidal.

Picaresque: These novels tell the life of a knave or "picaroon" who is the servant of several masters. Through his experiences he satirizes his society. Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and Smollett's *Roderick Random* are examples.

Psychological novel: This is a vague term used to describe fiction concerned with the spiritual, emotional, and mental lives of characters and with the analysis of character rather than the plot and action.

Epistolary novel: These are novels in the form of letters, which were especially popular in the 18th century (noted earlier); it has not been uncommon since then to use letters to constitute part of a novel. Examples: *Pamela*, *Humphrey Clinker*.

Social or Thesis novel: Either of these is one which treats a social, political, or religious problem with a didactic and, perhaps, radical, purpose. It sets out to call attention to the shortcomings of society. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, much of Dickens, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Lord of the Flies*.

Documentary novel: This is a form of fiction based on such documentary evidence as newspaper articles, archives, legal reports, and recent official papers; it is sometimes described as "instant fiction", or the contemporary 'historical novel.' T. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* was based on a sensational murder of the time, as was T. Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

Bildungsroman: [German: 'formation novel'] This is a term used to describe a novel which is the account of the youthful development of the hero or heroine. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Dickens, *David Copperfield* are best known, although the novel is not always autobiographical.

The **Künstlerroman** shows the development of the artist from childhood to maturity and later.

Roman a clef [*livre a clef*, key novel, *Schlüsselroman*]: This is a work of fiction in which actual persons are presented under fictitious names. (*Primary Colours*).

Novel of manners: a type of novel concerned primarily with social class and appropriate or inappropriate social behaviour (manners). Typically, it narrates the story of a female protagonist, a single woman who is trying to find an appropriate husband. She meets several suitors in different social and economic situations. As she is trying to make the right choice, the novel examines and compares the characteristic 'manners' of each social position. Famous examples are Jane Austen's and Henry James's novels.

Anti-novels: This form tends to be experimental, and breaks with the traditional storytelling methods and form of the novel. Often there is little attempt to create an illusion of realism or naturalism. It establishes its own conventions, a different kind of realism, and deters the reader from identification with the characters, yet at same time persuades him to participate but not vicariously. The beginnings of this category are in James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (e.g. *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*), the early fiction of Samuel Beckett, and the early work of Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*. Later writers include Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut. Some principal features include lack of an obvious plot; diffused episode; minimal development of character; detailed surface analysis of objects; many repetitions; innumerable experiments with language (vocabulary and syntax), punctuation; variations in time sequence; alternative endings or beginnings. Some extreme

features include detachable pages; pages which can be shuffled like cards; blank pages; coloured pages; collage effects; drawings; hieroglyphics.

Fantasy novel: A kind of fiction which is not primarily devoted to depicting realistic events but aims at developing an imaginary world. Best known examples these days include J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Ring* trilogy and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

Science fiction: A popular modern branch of fiction which diverts into the realm of the possible or the probable, often investigating new technological possibilities, e.g. that of robots, time travel or parallel universes. Examples could include Gene Roddenbury's *Star Trek* or Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

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