

The evolution of the novel

Mandy Brooks takes a journey through the history of the novel, drawing out the relationship between its form and the context of its production and reception.

The evolution of the novel form has been largely shaped by the social and cultural milieu at the time of writing, whilst the understanding of novels relies upon the context of reading. What is normally perceived to be a fairly stable genre has proved to be remarkably flexible. Like painted art, novels have adapted to the various demands of different historical contexts, so, according to social preferences, the size of the canvas has changed, colours and shades have been more or less fashionable and the brutality or delicacy of the brush strokes has hidden or highlighted the role of the artist. Socio-cultural influences have kept the novel form in a state of constant change.

The growth of the reading public

Great leaps in printing technology in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries meant a faster supply of reading matter, which in turn encouraged the growth of reading as a leisure activity amongst social classes that previously had little or no access to texts. Education for the up-and-coming middle classes improved vastly during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating a new, well-informed reader. Newspapers appeared and became popular. The printed word became the modern method of keeping an informed and socially aware mind.

The form of entertainment that was at its peak during these earlier periods was the theatre. Drama allows an audience to watch events unfold in a context that is provided for them; actions and dialogue carry the plot and meaning. When censorship in the Licensing Act of 1737 restricted what could be performed in the eighteenth century, the novel form grew in popularity. Early novelists like Richardson and Fielding were originally dramatists, who were compelled to write novels when the theatres were closed. The legacy of the theatre resounds throughout their work. Van Ghent describes Fielding's Tom Jones as possessing:

...the sharp silhouetting of characters...the bright lighting of the individual episode [and] the swift pacing of scenes so that they flash past the eye and the ear at the same time... Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function

Extended prose allowed the development of the detailed visual and aural imagery mentioned here, while some recognisably dramatic plot structures also emerged, such as the complete reversal of fortune in a 'rags to riches' story.

The start of the nineteenth century

Novels became increasingly popular at end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, novel reading was primarily taken up by women and was regarded by some as a scandalous, vulgar - and even dangerous - new form of entertainment (as we see in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*). In the nineteenth century reading was often a shared experience with novels read aloud in family or friendship groups. Like television today, novels were the popular medium and generated great interest as topics of social conversation. It took a while for the novel form to become fully established, however.

The Victorian age

The Victorian age showed significant developments in the novel form. The increasing pace of the Industrial Revolution produced a new middle-class with more leisure time on their hands. This new, bigger readership demanded regular doses of fiction and, consequently, writers such as Charles Dickens enjoyed 'rags to riches' stories of their own. It was possible to begin life as a poor factory worker and end it as a wealthy gentleman author. Women also earned money from writing, though they were often published under male pseudonyms - female writers would have struggled to find a publisher.

At this time of great social change in 'Condition of England' novels, themes were predominantly linked to class, education, human rights and workers' conditions. The female sphere of domestic family life was another important subject for novelists. Some novels were published in three volumes, known as 'three-deckers'. How they were published had some influence on their structure, shape and the way they were written: the three parts had to be manageable as separate reads, but linked in some way to provide continuity.

Serialisation

The publication of novels in serial form had an even bigger impact on the way novels were written and read. The trend towards publishing novels as serials in journals like *Household Words* (which Dickens set up and edited) was provoked by the insatiable appetite of the (growing) reading public. By offering serialisation on a monthly or fortnightly basis, publishers created a captive audience who wanted to have the latest episode as soon as it was out. Just as today's television audience hankers after the latest episode of a serialised drama and afterwards buys the entire series on DVD, magazine readers would later buy the entire novel. This also affected form because episodes that were later chapters in the full text had to be well-structured and sometimes had mini-plots of their own. Cohesion was achieved in the novel as a whole by retaining a strong narrative thread with complicated interweaving plotlines, detailed characterisation, extended descriptions and the use of imagery, metaphor and simile from the same field. This allowed links and relationships to be forged across the disruptions caused by waiting for the next episode.

Twentieth-century experiments in form

The unconventional style of 'stream of consciousness' writing used in the twentieth century by writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce moved away from this traditional narrative structure. This kind of 'difficult' experimental and self-conscious novel was not necessarily read by large numbers of people; nevertheless it has been highly influential in the development of the form. The lack of focus on events means that the reader is constantly aware of the reading process, and is prevented from 'suspending disbelief' and engaging with the unfolding action by the disorderly representation of mental processes. This shift in style is often plausibly related to the uncertainty of war-time and post-war Europe, during which period modernist writers, artists and musicians were responding to a fractured and fragmented

also been part of the novel's earlier development: Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, originally published between 1759 and 1767 in nine small, separate volumes could be considered a forerunner of the genre that mirrors the working of the mind.

Contemporary developments

Today's novels also challenge traditional models. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* uses a naive narrator, Christopher, alienated from society by his Asperger's Syndrome, a condition that prevents him from interacting easily with other characters. Haddon successfully uses the novel form to represent his narrator's experience of the world. Christopher uses graphic images when he has trouble expressing himself; this, too, has become a regular feature of twenty-first century novels. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is experimental in its use of graphics. Again Laurence Sterne shows there were some surprisingly early forerunners of such experiments with form: he left a page entirely black after the death of a character and used squiggles to represent the flourishes of a walking stick.

One thing the new millennium can claim as its own, though, is the replacement of traditional dialogue with text messaging and email. *ChaseR* by Michael J. Rosen is written entirely in the contracted language style of electronic interaction and could well set a precedent for the future of the novel form on paper. Another development is the digital novel, designed to be read onscreen. *The Daughters of Freya* consists of emails that can be delivered straight to your inbox at random times over a period of three weeks to intensify the sense of personal involvement. A Chinese author is the first to write a novel in SMS text messaging to be received via sixty separate texts to your mobile phone (see contemporarylit.about.com). Both could be seen as the twenty-first century equivalent of the eighteenth century's epistolary novel.

These changes to the novel form might be appropriate in today's 'sound-bite' society. However, with their episodic delivery and socially conscious styles they can be seen to conform to, as well as challenge, some features of the novel which have been recognisable throughout its history. Whether they are popular is another matter: whilst the novel that experiments with form is at the cutting edge of developments, it is still the traditional chunky narrative that has a monopoly in the bestseller lists.

The novel family

So with all these changes to the form of the novel over time, linked to changes in the context of both reading and writing, does the term 'novel' still hold up as an all-embracing term for the genre? There's a nice idea from the field of philosophy called 'family resemblance' that suggests a good way to think about the novel form. Within the 'family' there is no single defining factor that all members have; there is only a pattern of recognisable resemblances. Every novel is 'of the family'; the difference lies in how the novelist has chosen to use and combine some recognisable components of the genre. In analysis, recognisable devices such as characterisation, plot, setting, imagery, irony, antithesis, and so on, can be isolated and discussed. Individually, they tell us little about form, but talk about how they come together to forge relationships and structure a unique text and you're 'doing' form, because as Van Ghent notes, novels are 'coherent works of art'.

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