CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

Chapter 1

Why the novel matters

Passions awakened: the dangers of fiction *2*
Women and the novel *4*
The novel becomes an "art" *8*
Novelistic realisms and realities *12*

In the famous schoolroom scene that opens Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), the pedantic Mr. Gradgrind asks the novel's heroine to define a horse. Although she has spent her life around circus ponies, Sissy Jupe is struck dumb. Her horrible classmate Bitzer supplies the answer:

> "Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Thus (and much more) Bitzer.[1]

Dickens wants us to feel that this definition is as wrong as it is right, that for all its factual precision it doesn't really bring us much closer to apprehending the object of study. After all, Sissy the circus girl knows horses far better than Bitzer does, but she couldn't care less about grinders, incisors, and the shedding of hooves in marshy countries.

This is the risk you run when you try to define the novel. In response to the Gradgrind imperative to begin by saying what a novel is, we might propose something along these lines: "A novel is a self-contained piece of fictional prose longer than 40,000 words." There are famous exceptions to this definition – Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1833) is a novel in verse, for example, while the modern "**non-fiction novel**" pioneered by Truman Capote tells you that a novel needn't even be fictional. As a general rule, though, it does the job of identifying what makes the novel different from other forms of **narrative**, even if it stops far short of explaining why we feel the way we do about it. If I say that those of us who read ***fiction*** know better than to share Gradgrind's conviction that "facts" are "the one thing needful," of course I don't mean to suggest that

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

facts about fiction always miss the mark, but only that stripped of their human relevance they don't take you far enough.[2] Reducing a novel or a horse to its constituent parts, whether you're talking about four legs, forty teeth, or forty thousand words, leaves out the huge social, historical, cultural, and emotional significance of the thing you meant to describe.

Novels are like horses to the extent that you generally know one when you see one, and the definition of the novel offered in this book is mostly a matter of slowing down to consider what we take for granted in that first unconscious instant of recognition when we see a novel and know that's what it is. This is why most of the following chapters are about characteristics and qualities that novels share, features such as **narration** (Chapter 3), **character** (Chapter 4), **plot** (Chapter 5), **setting** (Chapter 6), time (Chapter 7), and finitude (Chapter 11) that seem as easily taken for granted as the four legs of a horse. Those chapters aim to explain how and why critics and theorists have brought particular aspects of the novel into the foreground. But there are other questions to be asked: When did novels first appear and where did they come from? (See Chapter 2.) How do we categorize different kinds of novel? (See Chapter 8.) What do we do with novels that resist or overturn our expectations of the genre? (See Chapter 9.) What role does the novel play in the making of communities and nations? (See Chapter 10.) So, in short, this book is about what novels are and what they do. I'll return in the next chapter to the problem of defining the novel when we address the question of its origins, but I want to begin by considering the claims that have been made for its unique importance – or why we think the novel is worth studying in the first place.

Passions awakened: the dangers of fiction

You might call it a backhanded tribute to the novel that it aroused such suspicion and hostility in its early, eighteenth-century years. If the novel mattered in those first decades when it really *was* "novel," it was because this wildly popular new genre seemed too dangerous to ignore. A typical indictment of the novel in its first century in English is put into the mouth of an imaginary critic in the novelist Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785), one of the first book-length studies of the novel, and an attempt to rescue good fiction from the prevailing critical prejudice. Reeve's character argues that, first, novels leave the habitual reader "disgusted with every thing serious or solid"; second, "seeds of vice and folly are sown in the heart, – the passions are awakened, – false expectations are raised"; and, last, novels make "young people fancy themselves capable of judging of men and manners."[3] In other

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

words, novels instill intellectual frivolity, give girls unrealistic ideas of what to expect from their future (for "future" read "suitor"), and mislead the young into believing they know how the world works. These common eighteenth-century claims help to explain what was so unusual about the novel when it first appeared in English: *its seductive proximity to the real world*.

So those books we call novels were felt to be different from the fanciful **romances** of earlier centuries, even if, somewhat confusingly, you often find the terms "romance" and "novel" used interchangeably in the eighteenth century (as in the title of Reeve's own book, *The Progress of Romance*). On this view, novels were distinctively dangerous because distinctively **realistic**: while no one would be foolish enough to model his or her behavior on the wildly implausible fictions of earlier times (so the argument goes), this new type of narrative fiction, with its complex characters, its recognizable settings, and its broadly credible sequence of events, might dupe the sequestered and susceptible into believing it a reliable guide to the world. It would be hard to overstate the importance of this feeling that the novel matters because of its closeness to the real world; over the last three centuries, many claims for the novel's significance have rested on exactly this sense that, among all the literary forms, the novel – for better or worse – has an especially intimate relationship to ordinary life. As the novelist Milan Kundera has recently put it: "'Prose': the word signifies not only a nonversified language; it also signifies the concrete, everyday, corporeal nature of life. So to say that the novel is the art of prose is not to state the obvious; the word defines the deep sense of that art."[4] Although Kundera approves of it, this emphasis on the "everyday" was once felt to be the novel's most troubling characteristic.

The novel, according to Samuel Johnson in 1750, focused on "life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind."[5] The trouble with persuasive "realism," however, is that it may not be as realistic as it seems:

> These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.[6]

By appealing to the wrong people for the wrong reasons, novels could influence their readers in all the wrong ways. "Example is always more efficacious than precept," a character points out in Johnson's one fictional narrative,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

Rasselas (1759), a philosophical fable about the life well lived.[7] Indeed, Johnson's decision to convey philosophy through fiction underlines his alertness to the novel's exemplary force; a characteristically mid-eighteenth-century awareness of the "trite but true Observation, that Examples work more forcibly on the Mind than Precepts," as Henry Fielding put it in his novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742).[8]

Of course, the idea that novels teach by examples realistic enough to elicit the reader's identification was necessarily a double-edged affair: if fiction can make you a worse person, it can surely also make you a better one? This question is especially important to the eighteenth-century novel, the product of a culture profoundly interested in the links between imagination and empathy. In his immensely popular **novel of sensibility**, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), Henry Mackenzie would reprise a familiar attack on the novel when he attributed the downfall of the prostitute Emily Atkins to a habit of novel-reading that left her easily seduced by the scoundrel Winbrooke, and yet as we read the novel we feel that Mackenzie is *also* encouraging the reader to learn from the sympathetic capacities of the novel's weepy hero, Harley, the "man of feeling" in the book's title.

The eighteenth-century attentiveness to the novel's capacity to effect change through example helps to explain why even quite risqué early novels should reach us buttressed by authorial preambles announcing virtuous designs – however scandalous the ensuing material. From the title page alone of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) we learn that Moll was a thief, a "whore," and a bigamist who married her own brother, but the preface tells us that Moll's outrageous career has to be seen in the properly edifying light of her subsequent repentance. And if the reader finds Moll's repentance less interesting than the crimes she commits at such voluptuous length throughout the novel, this is because of "the Gust and Palate of the Reader": your problem not Defoe's, because "it is to be hop'd that … Readers will be much more pleas'd with the Moral, than the Fable; with the Application, than with the Relation."[9] Not *very* likely, and Defoe surely knew it. Prefatory claims separating the novelistic substance from its ostensibly edifying "moral" were commonplace in the eighteenth century, and thankfully never convincing enough to make you want to put the book down.

Women and the novel

It's unlikely that such prefatory declarations of virtue made the novel seem any more respectable – or any less appealing. Looking ahead to the other end of

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

the eighteenth century from Defoe, Frances ("Fanny") Burney first published her **epistolary novel** *Evelina* (1778) anonymously, for reasons that become clear in her preface where she writes of the novelist's situation that "among the whole class of writers, perhaps not one can be named, of whom the votaries are more numerous, but less respectable."[10] She goes on to mount an attack on the novel *generally* at the same time as she defends the one we are about to read: if novels in their entirety could be wiped out "our young ladies in general … might profit from their annihilation," but since the "distemper" or "contagion" has taken such inexorable hold, "surely all attempts to contribute to the number of those which may be read, if not with advantage, at least without injury, ought rather to be encouraged than contemned."[11]

Although certainly indebted to Burney (whose novels are socially sharp accounts of young women on the marriage market), Jane Austen had little time for this opportunistic sort of maneuvering. Her passionate reading helps Marianne Dashwood to put the "sensibility" into *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) but her vice is poetry rather than the novel. Initially, however, the heroine of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) seems to fare worse. While a guest at the ancient abbey, the avid novel reader Catherine Morland becomes convinced that her host, like a villain from one of her favorite **gothic novels**, has murdered his wife; General Tilney, however, proves to be simply a greedy bully of the everyday kind. And so far, so familiar, you might think: reading novels is bad for impressionable young women. This is not the whole story, though, because in a very famous defense of the novel Austen's **narrator** intervenes on behalf of novelists, "an injured body" whose works (whatever the snobbish male reviewers say) "have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them":

> "I am no novel reader – I seldom look into novels – Do not imagine that *I* often read novels – It is really very well for a novel." Such is the common cant. – "And what are you reading, Miss – ?" "Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. – "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda"; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.[12]

Rather provocatively, Austen defends the degraded novel by invoking the highly traditional, neoclassical criteria for judging art: *utile dulci*; the novel pleases and instructs. Although the feminist element in Austen's defense of the novel ("And what are you reading, Miss – ?") sounds much more modern than her use of neoclassical precept, such attention to the woman reader is no less

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

embedded in Austen's own time, when women were coming to be a powerful force in literary culture.

That women were believed to be the major consumers of fiction during the eighteenth century is evidenced by the alarmist rhetoric about the corruption of impressionable minds, and by an explosion of comic caricatures of the charming but silly novel-reading girl (Austen's Catherine Morland is only one of many). Lydia Languish in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775) refuses to be wooed by the impeccable Captain Absolute because what could be less romantic than marrying someone of whom everyone approves? This is "the natural consequence of teaching girls to read," Captain Absolute's absurd father expostulates: "I'd as soon have them taught the black art as their alphabet!"[13]

And women had already come into their own as novelists, too, because this kind of writing did not require the classical education to which men enjoyed privileged access. As Fielding explains in his romping but erudite *Tom Jones* (1749), "all the arts and sciences (even criticism itself) require some little degree of learning and knowledge … whereas, to the composition of novels and romances, nothing is necessary but paper, pens, and ink, with the manual capacity of using them."[14] Critics often point out that women writers like Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Eliza Haywood began to produce their sexy and much-read novels many decades before the **canonical** triumvirate of early novelists Defoe, Fielding, and Samuel Richardson. Indeed, it was long believed that most eighteenth-century novels were authored by women – and, rather strikingly, a male character in Tobias Smollett's novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771) goes so far as to speculate that women write not only *more* novels but *better* novels: a paid-by-the-volume hack novelist, his career is over because "that branch of business is now engrossed by female authors, who publish merely for the propagation of virtue, with so much ease and spirit, and delicacy, and knowledge of the human heart, and all in the serene tranquility of high life, that the reader is not only inchanted by their genius, but reformed by their morality."[15]

In view of the new importance of women as novelists and novel readers, it's no wonder that the experiences of women should have provided so much of the novel's traditional subject matter: "the whole domain over which our culture grants women authority," Nancy Armstrong summarizes: "the use of leisure time, the ordinary care of the body, courtship practices, the operations of desire, the forms of pleasure, gender differences, and family relationships."[16] Although Armstrong goes much further than this, proposing that the novel wasn't *describing* a female field of knowledge so much as *inventing* one, at least it can be said with certainty that such "feminine" concerns as those she lists were central to the gentrification of the novel during its first century in

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

English, novels written by men as well as by those genteel lady novelists who put Smollett's hack writer out of business in *Humphry Clinker*. With this gentrification in mind, the most important of the major male novelists of the eighteenth century is the one with, to put it crudely, the most stereotypically "feminine" sensibility, Samuel Richardson.

Richardson's psychologically absorbing *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–8) purport to be collections of the heroine's letters, and so aim to represent the operations of her mind as intimately and immediately as possible. "Writing to the moment" was Richardson's term for this practice, and he has a character in *Clarissa* contrast "lively and affecting" letters written "in the midst of *present* distresses" with "the dry, narrative, unanimated style of persons relating difficulties and dangers surmounted."[17] Richardson's epistolary form was not new; the libertine Behn had imported the style from France sixty years earlier with her *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7). The technical common ground, the epistolary form, shared by Behn and Richardson is not coincidental, since Richardson's accomplishment with the **sentimental novel** would be to refocus those interests that had made the novel such a dubious and (of course) pleasurable affair in the first place. In the story of how the novel came to be taken seriously, Richardson is vitally important because he helped to redirect the erotic energies of fiction like Behn's toward the socially respectable ends of the courtship novel.

Ever alert to fiction's exemplary potential, Johnson admired Richardson because he "taught the passions to move at the command of virtue."[18] "Virtue" is the key term here because the full title of Richardson's sensationally popular first novel is *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. The servant girl Pamela is kidnapped and locked up by her rich employer Mr. B because she refuses to have sex with him, and, after a timely, rape-averting swoon (Clarissa will be less fortunate), Pamela's moral superiority compels the chastened Mr. B to "reward" her virtue with marriage (to him!). So the "virtue rewarded" in the subtitle comes down in the end to a sort of spiritualization of bodily intactness, and Richardson's single-mindedly tenacious attention to Pamela's virginity tells us that the early novel's sexual preoccupations may be serving new purposes but they haven't really gone away. Probably envious of Richardson's splashy success, many of his contemporaries produced sometimes very funny send-ups of *Pamela*, drawing out the pornographic prurience and vulgar opportunism underlying its ostentatious moral rectitude. In *Shamela* (1741), the wittiest and best-known of these, Fielding appropriated Richardson's epistolary form in order to expose the heroine as a sexual adventuress cannily exploiting the brainless Squire Booby: "I thought once of making a little Fortune by my Person," Fielding's sham heroine tells a correspondent, "I now intend to make a great one by my Vartue."[19]

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

To a correspondent who queried his potentially compromising use of the novel as a vehicle of moral education, Richardson explained that "Instruction, Madam, is the Pill; Amusement is the Gilding."[20] You might recall that Defoe had attempted a similar splitting of form and content when he divided "Moral" from "Fable," "Application" from "Relation," in the preface to *Moll Flanders*. Going further back still, the Puritan proto-novelist John Bunyan had prefaced his **allegorical** *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) with a warning to the reader along the same lines: "Take heed also, that thou be not extream, / In playing with the out-side of my dream."[21] The "pill" Bunyan asks us to swallow in that book is a pretty uncompromising fundamentalism; its "gilding" consists of novel-like qualities that Bunyan certainly never intended to be taken as such – unexpectedly vivid characterization, for instance – but which helped to make *The Pilgrim's Progress* one of the most popular fictions of all time. Because most readers of fiction are pretty adept at, so to speak, spitting out the moral pill, what Richardson was trying to do when he followed Protestant forefathers like Bunyan and Defoe in distinguishing between alluring forms and rigorous moral content is much too neat because good novels have a habit of jeopardizing their declared aims. Just as *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be admired for what Bunyan would have thought of as exactly the wrong reasons, and just as – I have to assume – no one has ever read *Moll Flanders* for the purposes of moral edification, Richardson's intensely vivid scenes of sadistic compulsion stay with you long after the virtuous pronouncements have been forgotten.

This was the propensity for unraveling-from-within that the English novelist D. H. Lawrence diagnosed as endemic to the form when he wrote in a 1925 essay that the novel "won't *let* you tell didactic lies, and put them over."[22] "If you try to nail anything down," he wrote in another essay on morality and the novel, "either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail."[23] Directly in opposition to attempts to redeem the novel by harnessing it to socially and morally respectable ends, this resistance to the single didactic purpose would be another reason "why the novel matters." I took the title of this chapter from Lawrence's essay of the same name.

The novel becomes an "art"

In the almost two hundred years that separate Richardson and Lawrence the novel shed its air of moral hazard but still had much further to go than simply passing as harmless entertainment. After all, to say that the novel is not *actively harmful* seems a weak case for its importance. Through the nineteenth century the novel's popularity and perceived suitability as "family" reading only

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

accelerated, and the novelists Sir Walter Scott (or "the author of *Waverley*" as he was initially known) and Charles Dickens were international superstars in their lifetimes. Even so – or perhaps thus – the novel still had none of the prestige of poetry, and none of the credibility it would need in order to be studied in universities as it is now.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a number of books on the novel authored by academic literary critics (as distinct from gentleman amateurs). Broadly, those early efforts come in two forms: the synoptic history and the structural analysis of the novel. Exemplary of the historical approach are Walter Raleigh's *The English Novel* (1895), which begins with the ancient romance and ends with Scott, and George Saintsbury's still very readable *The English Novel* (1913), which goes all the way up to the 1890s. Exemplary of the structural approach is Selden L. Whitcomb's grim manual *The Study of a Novel* (1905), of historical interest because it lets you see what critics considered worth saying about narrative technique in the years before the novel was fully institutionalized ("The paragraph has undergone great development in the course of its history").[24]

However, much of the credit for making the novel what it is in our time, institutionally speaking, should be attributed not to scholars but to novelists at the turn of the last century. Particularly influential was the American-born Henry James, who argued most forcefully in "The Art of Fiction" (1884) that the English novel needed to start taking itself seriously as a highly crafted form, that there was something deeply philistine about the inclination to think that "a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it."[25] It was high time, James argued, to jettison moralistic assumptions that would sound downright nonsensical in the discussion of other art forms: "You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue…? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair."[26] One of his contemporaries, the Polish-born Joseph Conrad, also tried to elevate the novel by likening it to more prestigious forms, to the *fine* arts:

> [The novel] must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music – which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.[27]

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88575-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel
Marina MacKay
Excerpt
More information

Here Conrad evoked sculpture, painting, and music as models, as if to suggest that we might attribute their higher prestige to their being less hampered by crude expectations of real-world **representation**; after all, no one could confuse their artistic medium with the ordinary means of communication, whereas novels have to be assembled from "the old, old words" of everyday life. Although the novels of James and Conrad were so profoundly interested in moral questions that it would be a mistake to represent their position as "art for art's sake," they were clearly trying to make a case for the novel as something to be judged on its formal execution rather than on its subject matter alone. Many writers of the next generation would share their sense of artistic mission, and thus create the **modernist** novel – or the "art-novel," as Mark McGurl instructively terms it in his study of James's legacy.[28] "I have had my vision," ends Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as the authorial surrogate, the artist Lily Briscoe, puts down her paintbrush.[29]

To recover the force of this claim that a novel could be as legitimately artistic as a painting it is important to remember that no one had ever felt the same need to reclaim *poetry* for the realm of high art. Even the novel-advocate Saintsbury had taken an apologetic turn at the end of his 1913 history of the novel when he began to acknowledge the "inferiority" of fiction to poetry ("a higher thing by far").[30] So the extravagant claims made on the novel's behalf by early twentieth-century writers – "The novel is a great discovery," Lawrence wrote: "The novel is the highest form of human expression so far attained"[31] – would have sounded even more inflated to those reading Lawrence in an era when the novel was thought of primarily as popular entertainment. Showing why the novel was more than this was the aim of such critical landmarks as Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), and F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948).

By the 1940s, the novel was well on its way to becoming an essential object of literary study. For this, much is owed to the Leavises, two married Cambridge scholars who thought of themselves as outsiders but who would have massive influence around the middle of the century. Lawrence's claim that "being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet … The novel is the one bright book of life" sounds exorbitant, but the Leavises would have agreed with him.[32] Q. D. Leavis argued in her groundbreaking *Fiction and the Reading Public* that the purpose of novels "is not to offer a refuge from actual life but to help the reader to deal less inadequately with it; the novel can deepen, extend, and refine experience by allowing the reader to live at the expense of an unusually intelligent and sensitive mind."[33] The ultimate target of her book was a culture in which people read mediocre commercial fiction as an escapist way of killing time when they

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org