

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84325-6 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel

Gregg Crane

Excerpt

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Defining the novel is easy: it is a fictional prose narrative of substantial length. While one may question the distinction between fact and fiction or the requirement that the novel be written in prose, this simple definition seems generally apt, describing the books we commonly label as novels. It does not, however, say anything about why we read novels. A few key features accounting for the genre's appeal seem fairly plain. First, the novel lives and dies by its ability to create the fictional illusion of a complete world. This world may be highly realistic in the sense that it conforms closely to a recognizable historical moment, or it may be utterly fantastic. In either case, we must be able to see ourselves in it, imagine breathing its atmosphere and encountering its creatures and landscapes. Second, the reader must be driven to know what happens next, or, in all likelihood, he or she will put the book down. The other pleasures of the prose will probably not be sufficient to hold the reader in the absence of a compelling storyline and/or characters. Third, even if it is only to suggest the impossibility of finding meaning in art and experience, the narrative will have some significance beyond a mere recitation of characters and events. Stories of all types tempt us to connect them with explanations of larger meanings, values, and phenomena. Indeed, it is often impossible to explain such things without resort to stories (as any parent, lawyer, cleric, or scientist giving a public lecture can attest).

Having glanced at features shared by all novels, we should briefly consider a couple of traits apparently dividing the genre. First, while some novels are easily consumed, others obstruct our progress through the narrative. These "slower reads" are characterized by a density of description and/or complexity of plot and/or opacity of language resisting translation or paraphrase. Balking the reader's progress through a book of some length would seem to be a considerable risk. Why take that chance? Answers would probably vary, but it seems likely that the authors of these more taxing stories generally hope that their readers will feel that the extra work was rewarded by some deeper,

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broader, or richer experience or some significance not otherwise available. Second, some novels overtly seek to push society in a particular direction. All artifacts, even those posing as pure entertainments, have some economic, material, psychological effect on society, but certain works of art are manifestly designed to advance social change, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). As a result of these differences, novels can be arrayed on a sliding scale of complexity or a gradient of social engagement, and, for some critics, complexity and social efficacy represent competing principles of literary appreciation (though we might well demur that this opposition of values is neither inevitable nor particularly coherent).

When compared to the elaborate structural and metrical requirements of certain poetic forms, such as the sestina or villanelle, the novel seems remarkably flexible. Open-ended and amorphous, it is capable of taking any number of particular shapes and drawing on a wide variety of formal elements. It is "plasticity itself," in Mikhail M. Bakhtin's words, "a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review" (39). As a highly plastic form, the novel readily receives the impress of historical change, and many scholars and theorists focus on historical change to define and locate the genre. In a well-known essay, Walter Benjamin distinguishes the novel from the earlier narrative form of storytelling. The term "storytelling" conjures the image of people sitting around a fire, listening to tales that have been told and retold over the ages. It is a communal occasion, a practice not a product. The novel, by contrast, is purchased or borrowed by the individual and consumed individually. The storyteller's oral tale invisibly weaves new or discrepant facts into a seamless and apparently unchanging web of tradition. Once such a tale is in print, however, discrepancies between different versions become apparent, and continuity is replaced by a sense of change (Benjamin 87).

In a similar vein, Northrop Frye, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georg Lukács, Ian Watt, and Michael McKeon describe the novel as a modern replacement for the epic. Unlike the epic recounting the larger-than-life actions of heroic characters caught up in an archetypal and timeless drama, the novel resembles a newspaper or a history. Its dramas are time bound, and its characters are particular individuals rather than mythic types. The epic addresses universal issues and eternal conflicts, but the novel (even in its more fantastic formulations) describes specific causes and effects. Emphasizing social change, particular individuals rather than mythic types, and the concrete particularities of the world it describes, the novel is, as Georg Lukács says, "the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in

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terms of totality” (56). The novel may be epic in scope (e.g., Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1863–69) or Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862)), but it uses grand conflicts, such as war and revolution, as a backdrop for its main concern – the smaller, more particular triumphs and defeats of specific and flawed individuals.

This account of the “rise of the novel” is propelled by a particular historical narrative. In this story, Western societies were once unchanging, primarily rural affairs in which the people shared bloodlines, religion, language, and culture, but things have changed. Modern society is highly volatile, primarily urban and industrial, and largely held together by either various forms of economic and political coercion or voluntary agreements. With the splintering of traditional society comes the alienation of the individual from society and the fracturing of the individual’s identity (Lukács 66; Todorov 103). For Lukács, Watt, McKeon, and others, the novel is plainly marked by such momentous changes as the Reformation, the emergence of print culture, and the advent of mechanical reproduction, empiricism, and capitalism, as well as the rise of the middle class. The stream-like linear narrative of what happens to a character becomes a vital element of continuity in the novel’s always-changing world. Whatever else changes, including the characters themselves, a measure of coherence and unity is furnished by the mere fact that the events of the narrative happen to or are observed by a particular set of individuals.

This intertwined narrative of Western history and the emergence of the novel can be easily extended into the American context. What Ian Watt describes as the novel’s Protestant focus on the interior landscape of the individual’s mind and its empiricist emphasis on a perspective in which the individual is responsible for his own scale of moral and social values can also serve as a sweeping description of the perspective of the American novelist (Watt 78–80, 12–22). Looking at the rise of the American novel, critics find an emphasis on notions of independence and beginnings. As Terence Martin puts it, the American novel seeks “to wipe the slate clean of European history and institutions (sometimes with festival energy) and thus establish the conditions for a national identity” (x). For William C. Spengeman, an appetite for discontinuity helps to define the national character of the American novel. The British novel, Spengeman contends, centers on the domestic scene as a source of social repose and continuity. Home “represents the unconditioned ground of man’s being; the eternal unchanging place from which he has fallen into the world of time and change; the native land to which the exiled pilgrim longs to return so that he may be blessed” (71). American fiction, by contrast, is characterized by a competition between the poetics of adventure and the longing for domestic equilibrium (3, 69). Romances by Twain, Hawthorne, and Melville, he argues, embody both dreams, and “they prove just how irreconcilable the two visions are. For it

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is the failure of these abortive romances to recover the sheltering assurances of a home long since abandoned which confirms, finally and ironically, the lesson of the Romantic American adventure: we have made ourselves and our world and cannot go home again" (117).

Given the scale of the transformations characterizing the nation in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising to find critics focusing on change as a central theme in the era's fiction. By conquest, purchase, and treaty, the nation's land mass quadrupled. Its population grew from approximately 4 million to 76 million by 1900. It endured the bloodiest war in its history (at least 620,000 soldiers were killed in the Civil War, almost as many as in all other US wars combined) and the assassination of two presidents, Lincoln and Garfield (McKinley was assassinated in 1901). Bloody conflicts were waged with Native Americans, Britain, Mexico, and Spain. At its inception, the nation's economy was predominantly agrarian, and its society was chiefly rural. Barter and trade were still prevalent modes of economic exchange. By 1900, after undergoing an industrial revolution of its own, the United States produced 35 percent of the world's manufactured goods, more than the combined output of Germany, France, and Great Britain. The nation's population had relocated to urban centers. The slower agrarian economy had been replaced by heavy industry, the stock market, currency controversies, and boom and bust economic cycles, producing an astonishing number of bankruptcies, panics, and depressions as well as a staggering record of economic growth. As Melville put it in *Pierre* (1852), the fortunes of nineteenth-century "families rise and burst like bubbles in a vat" (13).

The book trade exemplified the rapid pace and thoroughgoing nature of the era's transformation. In the early republic, publishing was a small and primarily local affair. From these relatively rudimentary beginnings, the production and sale of printed material underwent a technological and commercial revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century. The advent of mechanized printing and improvements in papermaking, book binding, and improved means of shipping books (by new roadways, turnpikes, canals, and railroads) lowered the cost and greatly facilitated book production on an unprecedented scale. During the same period, the audience of literate readers grew. These and other factors resulted in the emergence of a mass market for printed materials of all kinds and the novel in particular. As Cathy Davidson and others have shown, novels attracted wide readership among both genders and across other social divisions (Davidson vii, 9–10). Where sales of a few thousand copies of a novel in the early republic would have been a dramatic success, by 1860 sales of hundreds of thousands of copies of a novel were not uncommon (Davidson 16–37; Gilmore 46–54).

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Never homogeneous and always stratified by differences in wealth, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender, in 1790 the nation's populace included free and enslaved African Americans, different Native American tribes or nations, and people of English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, German, Dutch, and French backgrounds. There were Anglicans, Congregationalists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Dutch and German Reformed, Lutherans, Mennonites, Catholics, Jews, and Baptists. This social picture would become considerably more diverse in the course of the nineteenth century, as the nation expanded into Texas, California, and the Southwest, and as wave upon wave of immigrants came to the US from England, Ireland, Wales, Germany, Scandinavia, China, Austria-Hungary, Poland, Russia, Romania, Italy, and Greece.

This growing, increasingly diverse, and often fractious society was characterized by a considerable degree of ferment, much of it violent, such as Shay's Rebellion of 1786–87, the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion of 1831, the Anti-Rent War of 1839, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, the Draft Riots of 1863, the Haymarket Affair in 1886, the Homestead Strike in 1892, the Pullman Strike in 1894, as well as race riots and the rise of lynching following Reconstruction. Even a simple list of such incidents gives one a sense of the significant social divisions running through nineteenth-century American society. Reform movements, such as abolitionism, suffragism, the temperance movement, and the labor union, played a role in inspiring some of the period's tumult, and such arguments for reform did not go unopposed. Newspapers and politicians inveighed against the abolitionists and the nascent women's movement. Organized labor had to contend with increasingly powerful corporations, the Pinkerton Detective Agency (which played a central role in repressing the Homestead Strike and in infiltrating the Molly Maguires in 1875), hostile courts, and elected officials. Some Americans were convinced that the unlimited immigration of certain groups posed a threat to the nation (the antebellum Know-Nothing party and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were products of such xenophobia). But reformers also had victories, such as Reconstruction, the Civil War Amendments, Married Women's Property Acts, statutory regulations protecting the health and safety of workers, and the Sherman Antitrust Act. In the early part of the twentieth century, reformers succeeded in pushing through the federal Income Tax and the Nineteenth Amendment entitling women to vote. Reforms of a different sort included the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 and eugenic sterilization laws.

American fiction could not help reflecting something of the turbulence of nineteenth-century life. The ups and downs were simply too dramatic to overlook or ignore. "In this republican country," Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, "amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the

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drowning point” (*Seven Gables* 35). Some novels directly engage in a cultural tug of war over whether or how to transform American society. For example, some vehemently call for the end of slavery; others stridently support the South’s peculiar institution and reject the very notion of reform as contrary to the design of God and nature. Often the conflict is internal to the individual novel. Many nineteenth-century fictions simultaneously embrace and reject various forms of social mobility, such as the greater autonomy and freedom of women or the crossing of class, racial, or ethnic boundaries. At times, the era’s fiction seems to desire a rational compromise or balance between change and stasis, freedom and order, being able to create or revise the society one inhabits and having to yield to certain traditional, natural, or divinely prescribed values and forms of association. At other times, it seems intent on plunging into the tides of change, come what may.

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The nation’s earliest novels express considerable uncertainty about the coherence and stability of American society. How far would the ideal of self-rule be extended? What happens to the social order when each member of society is authorized to judge for him (or her?) self what is proper? The Revolution ostensibly represented a powerful endorsement of such autonomy. Ordinary people, according to republican political theory, are “the best Judges, whether things go ill or well with the Publick,” for they are “the Publick,” and “Every ploughman knows a good government from a bad one” (Wood 235). State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor, said Thomas Jefferson, echoing this line of thought, “the former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules” (Wood 240). But this belief in the agency of the common folk to decide for themselves how to live licenses a considerable degree of social innovation. Is one really comfortable with the resultant movement and change? If not, what does the feeling of discomfort say about one’s egalitarianism, one’s faith in democratic principles such as self-rule? And how would one regulate or curb such revolutionary enthusiasm without betraying the principles authorizing the new republic?

For the person recalling the ringing endorsements of self-rule justifying the American Revolution, it is perhaps surprising to find that the very first American novels were seduction tales. In novels such as William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), and Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), the exercise of independent judgment and the flouting of convention are criticized and dutiful obedience

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to established authorities is recommended.¹ The storyline of these tales is fairly straightforward – a young man seeks to conquer the virtue of a particular maiden. The young woman resists but ultimately succumbs to her own desire and/or to her beau's fraud or coercive measures. In each case, the romantic connection violates some norm of social and sexual propriety, and the affair results in disaster for both parties. In Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, the eponymous heroine deviates from accepted social norms (instead of waiting for her parents' approval and patiently enduring a proper courtship, she elopes) only to be deceived and abandoned, dying pitifully after being briefly reunited with her father. Her lover Montraville lives but is tortured by the memory of the evil his cavalier disregard for social custom and sexual morality has wrought. Foster's independent and freedom-loving heroine, Eliza Wharton, dies with her illegitimate baby unattended by family and friends in a remote inn. Losing everything – his wife, his estate, and his good name – Eliza's lover, Peter Sanford, cautions, "Let it warn you, my friend, to shun the dangerous paths which I have trodden, that you may never be involved in the hopeless ignominy and wretchedness of Peter Sanford" (Foster 255). In Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, Harriot and Harrington's love affair is doomed by the fact that she is the offspring of her mother's prior seduction by Harrington's father. When faced with the choice between incest and living apart, the lovers commit suicide. It is hard not to feel some retrenchment of revolutionary ardor in the fact that these first American novels feature disasters brought on by various breaches of convention.

But these tales do not simply recommend deferring to parental authority and the imperatives of tradition. They also voice many of the overt themes of the American Revolution: independence, freedom, and equality.² For example, Rowson plainly endorses the decision of Charlotte Temple's father to marry a poor but worthy girl in defiance of paternal instruction (18–21). And despite the fact that Brown's would-be rake, Harrington, pays lip service to social class, deeming Harriot too lowborn for marriage, he also expresses disgust at the spectacle of class prejudice: "INEQUALITY among mankind is a foe to our happiness . . . and were I a Lycurgus no distinction of rank should be found in my commonwealth" (11, 34). Hannah Foster condemns her heroine's coquetry, but she also appreciates Eliza's independence of spirit. When one female character defers to male authority in all things political, another responds, "'Miss Wharton and I,' said Mrs. Richman, 'must beg leave to differ from you, madam. We think ourselves interested in the welfare and prosperity of our country; and, consequently, claim the right of inquiring into those affairs, which may conduce to, or interfere with the common weal'" (139).

The founders' notion of an indwelling moral sense shared by the ploughman as well as the professor is the central theme of *The Power of Sympathy*. The

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epistolary form of Brown's novel, in effect, allows us to overhear Harrington planning his seduction of Harriot. He tells a friend that he intends to use the venerable lover's gambit of arguing that the lovers' natural passion should take precedence over mere social conventions: "Shall we not . . . obey the dictates of nature, rather than confine ourselves to the forced, unnatural rules of – and – and shall the halcyon days of youth slip through our fingers unenjoyed?" (14). Harrington's invocation of nature is a familiar one (recalling Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"), but, in the revolutionary context, one is also reminded of the rebellious colonists' claim that their natural rights trump the hollow traditions of royal preeminence and authority. When Harrington's own innate feelings of sympathy prevent him from pursuing his illicit sexual ends, the connection between the seduction tale and the founding fathers' political philosophy comes to the fore. Faced with Harriot's implicit question, "because I am a poor, unfortunate girl, must the little I have be taken from me?," Harrington finds himself incapable of pursuing her seduction (14–15). His native compassion stops him from ruining Harriot. The founders' claims for the legitimacy of the Revolution and the propriety of self-government depended in part on the assumption of an inherent human ability to discern right from wrong by means of such feelings of sympathy.

The seduction novelists' belief in the capacity of the common man and woman for virtuous self-rule is manifest in the overt didacticism of their tales. If ordinary people were not capable of learning and using their own judgment, there would be no point in tutoring them by fictional or other means. Primarily justifying their fiction on the basis that it educates young women about the dangers of seduction, Brown, Rowson, and Foster also hope that their tales model the kind of fellow feeling that should animate and knit the commonwealth together. Because fiction can speak "the language of the heart," the novel's combination of educational material and gripping entertainment makes it uniquely useful to the education of a virtuous citizenry (Brown *Sympathy* 53). To advance this goal, these novelists are quite willing to sacrifice complexity, ambiguity, and irony. Thus, Rowson embraces the novel as a lesser art, which is redeemed by its potential moral instruction rather than its artistry:

If the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the error which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent, I shall feel a much higher gratification in reflecting on this trifling performance, than could possibly result from the applause which might attend the most elegant finished piece of literature whose tendency might deprave the heart or mislead the understanding. (L)

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Given the presence of both more and less socially conservative views in these novels, we may well doubt that these tales are quite as simple and clear as Rowson and others claim, but it is nonetheless telling that these authors expressly conceived of their fictions as unvarnished moral lessons (Brown *Sympathy* 7, Foster 241).

For Brown, Rowson, and Foster, the educative function of fiction requires that characters, events, and emblems should be relatively transparent in their significance. For instance, when Charlotte's father meets the young woman who will become his bride, he sees that "a pellucid drop had stolen from her eyes, and fallen upon a rose she was painting. It blotted and discoloured the flower. 'Tis emblematic,' said he mentally, 'the rose of youth and health soon fades when watered by the tear of affliction'" (8). Emblems, for Rowson, should be pellucid, transparently communicating a clear and single meaning. The tears staining the painting cannot be permitted to improve it in some curious fashion, for that would obscure the meaning of the comparison of the painted rose and the young girl. If the painting became subtly more beautiful by the accident of the tears, the unforeseeable or the unknowable would be introduced into Rowson's consideration of suffering. Suffering might become something to be appreciated, even courted, and Rowson's depiction of Charlotte's suffering might be rendered ambiguous. Instead, the seduction tale wants to insist that the interpretive task before its characters and its readers (especially the young female reader) is to recognize the signs of moral character and reach correct conclusions about people and their intents. Thus, in *The Coquette*, Eliza is warned that Sanford is "a second Lovelace" and that she may wind up a second Clarissa if she is not careful (134).³ Foster's equation of fiction and life assumes that real people as well as fictional characters are highly legible.⁴

However, the sheer frequency of the insistence that moral character is legible (e.g., that blushes offer indisputable evidence of Harriot's feeling for Harrington and Charlotte's feeling for Montraville or that Charlotte's features convey her unmistakable goodness) hints at a fear that some people will not be readable (Brown *Sympathy* 9, Rowson 3, 66, Foster 130, Ziff 17). This fear is plainly manifest in the figure of the rake, who uses fraud and disguise to deceive the young maiden and her friends. The prominence of anonymous or mysterious characters in these novels suggests a general apprehension that, as society becomes more fluid, it becomes increasingly obscure and undecipherable. The absence of a well-established and clear social context and well-known family histories creates the possibility of some rather nasty surprises: Harriot turns out to be Harrington's sister, Mademoiselle La Rue is not a proper young lady of impeccable virtue, and Sanford is not wealthy. Seduction novels hold up the value of legibility but acknowledge its frequent absence; as a consequence, their

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endorsement of independent judgment is hedged. Because she is incapable of reading Montraville, her suitor, or La Rue and Belcour, Montraville's confederates, Charlotte Temple must not rely on her own reason but must submit to parental authority and clear-cut traditional prohibitions.

Even if Charlotte were more experienced and skilled, interpreting such characters as Mademoiselle La Rue would be a considerable challenge given their mutability. La Rue approaches human connection as an entrepreneur speculating about the desirability of a particular asset and, consequently, her relations are entirely fungible (Rowson 60–1). Appalled by the shifting affections of La Rue and Belcour, Charlotte questions Montraville about Belcour's decision not to keep his word and marry La Rue. "Well, but I suppose he has changed his mind," Montraville says, "and then you know the case is altered" (65). Charlotte is horrified to realize that her romantic relation with Montraville is secured only by their continuing mutual affection and their ongoing consent to be with each other. Everything could change, and she could be replaced by another (of course, the stakes of this fungibility for Charlotte as a woman without other practical means of support are much greater than they are for Montraville [65]). What Charlotte wants and expects is a romantic relation that will be as pure and fixed as her relation to her parents. Instead of the frightening specter of an endlessly changing society held together only by temporary agreements based on shifting notions of self-interest, Charlotte wants what is freely chosen to ascend to the level of the given or ordained, which is what the founding fathers wanted the American Revolution to seem like – a choice made inevitable by certain fixed and inalienable principles and rights.⁵ La Rue and Belcour, as their French names suggest, represent the excesses of the French Revolution, the pursuit of self-interest without restraint of divine norms or social traditions, which results ineluctably in a "vortex of folly and dissipation" (55). In *The Power of Sympathy*, the monstrous potential of consensual relations severed from the restraint of moral tradition can be felt in Harriot and Harrington's temptation to commit incest (Brown 86–7). Unalloyed with some other principle of regulation or restraint, consent will permit any form of human relation, including incest.

In Foster's novel, Major Sanford represents both the allure and the danger of this more volatile manner of existence. Unlike Eliza's "good" suitor, the Rev. Boyer, Sanford is, as he puts it, "a mere Proteus, and can assume any shape that will best answer my purpose" (121). This is part of Sanford's appeal to Eliza. The Rev. Boyer offers Eliza a calm and sedate life as a minister's wife; by contrast, Sanford represents the excitement and pleasure of variety, invention, and excess (118, 126, 135). And, despite the fact that such a response is not overtly sanctioned by the novel's sad outcome, contemporary readers are justifiably tempted to endorse the appetite for transformation and excitement manifest