



THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH NOVEL: A DESCRIPTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Novel as a literary genre enjoyed the highest level of glory in the 18th century. The authors namely Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne contributed significantly to the development of English novel. They influenced the writers who came after them. The 18th century coincided with the industrial revolution which significantly contributed to the rise of the novel (with the invention of printing machine). The chain effects of industrial revolution improved people's life and living standard. The rise of the educated middle class people further increased the reading public which correspondingly led to demand of novels for reading. Books such as 'Don Quixote', 'Decameron', 'Morte d' Arthur' and 'Pilgrim's Progress' laid the foundations for the development of the novel. 'Pamela', 'Joseph Andrew's', 'Tristram Shandy', and 'Robinson Crusoe' were some of the notable books that became famous in the 18th century. However, novels continued to evolve in the 19th and 20th century giving rise to different genres or classes of novel.

Keywords: Bunyan, Defoe, Epistolary novel, Fielding, Origin of the novel, Picaresque tradition, Rise of the middle class, Sterne.

Introduction

Though English novel as a literary genre gained popularity in the eighteenth century, its beginning can be traced back to 612 BC when world's oldest literature Epic of Gilgamesh was written. Homer, who lived in 700 or 800 BC, was the first



notable poet or a literary pioneer who wrote the famous Greek epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey. He established the tradition of epic which had particular structure and subject matter.

In 900 BC Roman poet Virgil produced epic poems Beowulf and Aeneid with the latter becoming a model for John Milton (1608-74) to write his Paradise Lost. The epics were narrative verses telling stories of human encounters with monsters and accounts of accomplishments of heroic deeds in battles. After the epics came a new form of literature called the romances originating in France in the 12th century. It was also popularly known as chivalric romance or medieval romance (having flourished in the medieval times or medieval age between 1000 AD to 1450 AD). The scholars deviated from the tradition of epic by choosing subjects such as bravery, honour, adventure and courtly love with unique features of using magic, spells and enchantments in the romances to arouse curiosities and interests in the readers.

According to Abrams, (1995) “Romances were first written in verse, but later in prose as well” (p.22). One of the notable English romance is Malory’s Morte d’Arthur written in prose (in about 1470) which accounted the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-4000) used both verse as well as prose in The Canterbury Tales. Among the 24 stories included in The Canterbury Tales, two stories, the ‘Tale of the Melibeus’ and the ‘Parson’s Tale’ were written in prose. He had also included a romance, The Knight’s Tale. However, it was Chaucer’s long poem Troilus and Criseyde (written in about 1380) which introduced new characteristics of literary tradition with the use of plot and conversations in the poem. Chaucer gave “a new turn to fiction” (Roy, who undertakes a pilgrimage from his home in the city of destruction (world) to the celestial city (heaven). Coincidentally the elements of modern day novel such as settings, characters, and conflicts were used well to present the journey of Christian. “The ideas of repentance, of faith, of resisting temptation, and of perseverance” (Kuiper, 2012, p.4) that Christian goes through in the story are the elements of the modern novels such as beginning, conflict, the rise in action, fall in action and resolution.

According to Bora (n.d) Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress “provided an important model for story-telling, with vivid characterization and recording of dialogue which influenced a lot of later novelists” (p.4). Thus at the dawn of the eighteenth



century, the foundation for the development of novel as a new genre of literature was well established paving way for the rise of the novel. Besides exploring the forerunners of the novel such as epics, poetry and romances to gather overview of how development of novel progressed until the 18th century, it is necessary to understand the origin of the word ‘novel’ itself.

According to The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, novel is “a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity” (cited in Rees, 1973, p.106). Another definition by an anonymous author state that a novel is “a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length”. Both the definitions highlight the word ‘prose’ meaning the common or ordinary spoken form of language without the presence of poetic rhythmic structure. However, there are a few novels written in verse as well, such as Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate* and Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.

The other aspect of the definition is related to the length. The first definition points out ‘considerable length’ and second definition states ‘reasonable length’ to distinguish the novel’s unique feature as a genre vis a vis genre of short story. The lengths of some novels are similar to the length of short stories and hence a term such as ‘novella’ is often used for shorter novels. The word novel is considered to have been derived from the latin word *novellus*, Italian word *novella* (which meant a little new thing) and French word *novelle*.

It was Boccaccio who first used the term *novella storia* (short tale in prose) when he first experimented writing prose. Boccaccio popularized the vogue of collections of novella with his collection of ten short stories titled *Decameron* in fourteenth century. However, the meaning of the word novel meant the kind of short stories written and collected by Boccaccio until the 17th century. With the rise in the development of novels in the 18th century the meaning of the word novel underwent change from short tale in prose to ‘prose narrative of considerable length’ as stated by The Shorter Oxford Dictionary. Thus with understanding of the definition of novel, it is relevant to discuss what factors or situations provided opportunities for the rise of the novel in the 18th century.

Majority of the literary critics attribute 18th century as the time period in which novel took its birth, subsequent growth and development. With adequate literary predecessors such as Bunyan, Behn, Chaucer, Malory, Cervantes, Boccaccio and



numerous other writers of the 17th century, the 18th century writers availed opportunities to further experiment and produce novel as a literary genre. Further the increase in literacy rate, industrial revolution, rise in the middle class and coming up of libraries created favourable situations for the rise of the novel.

In the new form of literature namely the 'novel' the construct of the story departed from the romance and attempted at verisimilitude depicting the pragmatism and morality of the middle class people. Alexander Pope's dictum, "The proper study of mankind is men" influenced the interest of the people to study human character. Thus 18th century novels explored human characters with the novelist creating real life characters in their novels unlike giants, dragons and super human characters in the romances.

Since romances were mainly suitable to be read by elite, aristocratic or noble families, it could not sustain the readership. The common people got bored with romances for they had no relevance of any sort to them. In addition, the stories themselves being centuries old were no longer of interest to the people. The settings in which the stories in the romances took place were also unrealistic. Therefore, romances as a literary genre started to decline. People started to take interest in the contemporary issues. Unlike romances, the novels were written in first person (making it appear 'more personal and recent') with ordinary characters that the readers could relate with. Decline of drama was also one factor that promoted the rise of the novel. In the 17th century, during the rule of Cromwell, theatres (which were so popular during the Elizabethan times) were banned (Shah, n.d). Moreover, novel could reach vast audience when theatre could reach only to a limited audience. When drama came back with the restoration age, it could not establish its essence since novels got well established then.

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