

The Origin and the Growth of the Novel in the 18th Century

[BA (Hons.), Part-1]

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The rise and the growth of the English novel in the 18th century is one of the most remarkable incidents that English literature ever witnessed, for it in many ways contributed to the structuring of the future of English literature in the subsequent centuries. The rise of the novel was itself dependent on certain social and literary factors. The idea of the novel seems to have been worked out largely on English soil. The gradual rise of the middle class in English society produced a wide reading public who wanted to read something about themselves, for the romances and the neo-classical satires no longer held any importance to them. The periodicals of Addison and Steele added a new literary sensibility by their entertaining character sketching and the spice of delicate humour. Literature was gradually beginning to outgrow the cramping limitations of classicism. The writers wanted a fresh field and independence. The decline of drama also necessitated the rise of a new kind of literature. Men like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne seized this opportunity of reflecting life as it is. The Elizabethan prose romances like *Arcadia* and picaresque tales like *The Unfortunate Traveller*, prose allegories like *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the 17th century, the 18th century prose romances like *Gulliver's Travels* worked as inspirations.

Regarding the question as to whether Daniel Defoe-with his popular novels as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*-is a proper novelist, it can only be said that his writing is journalistic and he lacks any penetrating portrayal of characters. Keeping this in view,

Samuel Richardson may be called the pioneer among the 18th century novelists since he was the first to give a thorough portrayal of the complexity of human character. His epistolary technique was the right kind of method to deal with the moral conflict that haunted his characters and to express private anguish. *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) is the story of a simple maidservant haunted by her master Squire B's seductive designs. Richardson simply lets himself be Pamela to write the letters. *Clarissa* is the study of a woman. Clarissa, hurled forever into the extreme perdition of suffering, as is revealed from her letters to her friend Anne. Richardson's excessive preoccupation with moral concern earned him the notoriety of being sentimental.

With Henry Fielding one comes across the true representation of the standard 18th century society in both village and town. His novels are comic epics in prose, drawing on the picturesque tradition with occasional use of the mock-heroic, the satiric and the ironic. His *Joseph Andrews* is a parody of the extreme sentimentalism of Richardson's *Pamela*. *Tom Jones* and *Jonathan Wild* are in the picturesque tradition. The former is the story of the founding Tom Jones, tracing his life from innocence to maturity in three books set in the village, on the way to London and in London respectively, and abounding with satiric portrayal of human nature.

Tobias Smollett-following Fielding's picaresque tradition-takes his hero through a series of adventures and in the process adds social realism to his tales. Roderick Random, novel, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* are the novels on which his fame rests. Laurence Sterne in many ways foreshadows the modern stream-of-consciousness novelists in his capturing the thought process in the characters' minds. *Tristram Shandy* carries the mark of his so-called 'eccentricity', for it abounds with

pages completely blank, occasionally interspersed with asterisks, dashes. This adds a high suggestiveness to his novels.

In the late 18th century the novelists were attracted towards the popularity of the flight to the middle ages and the evocation of the supernatural as evidenced in the pre-romantic poets. Novelists like Horace, Walpole, Anne Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis soon captured the popular imagination with their Gothic tales full of horror, mysteries and sensational stories. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Lewis' *The Monk* are some popular examples.

As the age was one of sentimentalism, there were some pieces of 'Novels of Sentiment.' Such as Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* and Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

Thus the 18th century novel gradually developed towards a more entertaining and more varied form after its origin. The trend was kept up and was improved a lot in the next period of the novel's extreme popularity, the 19th century.