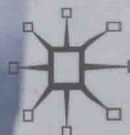


# SCANDALOUS FICTIONS

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVEL  
IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

**Edited by Jago Morrison  
and Susan Watkins**



# Scandalous Fictions

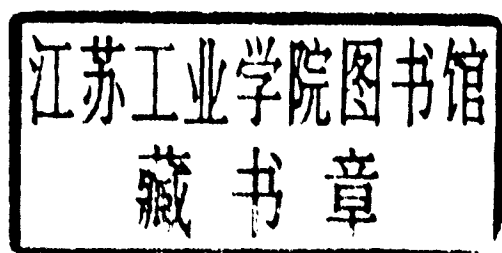
## The Twentieth-Century Novel in the Public Sphere

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and

Susan Watkins



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JAGO MORRISON  
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# Introduction: the Twentieth-Century Novel in the Public Sphere

*Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins*

*Scandalous Fictions* is an attempt to explore the twentieth-century novel as a public form, bringing a fresh critical gaze to some of its landmark texts. Our approach is to work by example, considering the multifarious development of fiction in this period through the prism of ten texts which, in different ways, have invaded public consciousness through scandal. In an attempt to reflect the cultural and geographical breadth of twentieth-century fiction in English, the book discusses the work of authors writing from five continents and from a variety of social and ideological contexts. Their fictions were accused, variously, of being obscene, blasphemous, libellous, seditious, even racist. Each of these cases is different: rather than attempting to fix some narrow definition of scandal, we are interested in representing the variety of challenges that the twentieth-century novel has offered to its readerships and at the same time, the challenges that readerships have often offered to texts. One of the book's starting points is to consider the ways in which such texts have been pilloried, traduced and appropriated, often disastrously for their writers.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel was already established as a major public form. Even in the mid-Victorian period, writers like Dickens enjoyed circulations of up to 100,000 for serial fiction<sup>1</sup> and the commercial explosion of the yellowback in Britain and the dime novel in the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century make it reasonable to speak of mass novel readership well before the turn of the century. By 1900, as David Vincent shows, almost 100 per cent of young adults in England could demonstrate a basic level of literacy<sup>2</sup> and by the middle of the century the ability to read and write was near-universal in both Britain and North America. By the century's end, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics was reporting total world literacy rates of over 80 per cent for all adults, rising closer to 90 per cent for those aged 15–24.<sup>3</sup>

How basic literacy rates might relate to a culture of novel reading is obviously a complex question. What is clear, though, is that the powerful upward trend in literacy in the twentieth century is directly reflected in the growth

of book consumption. To take the US example, the report of the Public Library Inquiry in 1949 estimated that 25–30 per cent of all adults were book readers.<sup>4</sup> In 1975, the polling organization Gallup found that 56 per cent of Americans had read at least part of one book in the previous month, with as many as 85 per cent having done so in the previous year. Moreover, within this mass book-reading culture in the United States, the novel was found to be a major presence: in the Gallup study at least, ‘serious’ fiction was found to account for a steady 40 per cent of all book reading by both regular and occasional readers. In other national and regional contexts, it is true, the novel’s prominence is much more variable. For example, it is difficult to argue that the novel’s popularity in anglophone Africa equals that in Britain and North America. The critic Wendy Griswold has argued that even in the case of a major fiction-producing nation like Nigeria, evidence from both polls of reading habits and from observation of the book trade suggests that the consumption of novels probably accounts for a much smaller proportion of all reading than it does in the UK or USA, with vocational and self-help books much more likely to top the sales lists. At Nigerian book markets, as she says, ‘textbooks or books on law and religion occupy the prominent front-of-the-store positions that would be given over to the latest thrillers or best-sellers in an American or European bookstore’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the mass success of the novel as, initially, a colonial import and later as an important strand of national culture in West Africa should not be underestimated. As Stephanie Newell’s work shows, for several decades prior to independence in the 1960s the market for novels in British Africa figured as a major part of the business of larger international publishers such as Faber & Faber and Heinemann.<sup>6</sup> After independence, the success of African writers like Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe signalled a radical extension of this novel-reading culture, in which the literary consumption of both children and adult readers was concertedly encouraged and reshaped.

Nevertheless, if the reading of fiction was a mass phenomenon across many areas of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century, the cultural position occupied by the novel itself has often been a strange and ambivalent one. On one level, as this book will demonstrate, the novel has continually been feared by educationalists and others for its irresponsibility, lack of ethical seriousness and/or tendencies towards sedition. In England in the 1930s, the influential critic Queenie Leavis felt able to liken popular novel reading to an unpleasant ‘drug habit’;<sup>7</sup> such anxieties are reflected in public discourse on fiction in other countries as well. The Ghanaian schoolmistress Marjorie Mensah is far from alone in voicing her concerns about the pernicious effects wrought by novels on her students in 1935, complaining in *Times of West Africa* that ‘many of our girls are reading books that can do them no earthly good’.<sup>8</sup> Over the century as a whole, such concerns, especially about the dangers of exposure to the ‘wrong’ sort of fiction, persist to a remarkable degree, even amongst progressive educationalists such as Richard

Hoggart, whose classic *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) includes censorious discussion of 'railway reading' such as gangster fiction, sold to commuters 'who would not . . . take this kind of book into the house'.<sup>9</sup>

In the same period, however – and partly through those very qualities of transgressiveness and slippage that render it an object of suspicion – the novel has continued to be acknowledged as an important site for the negotiation of communal mores, social identities and collective memory. Riven as it was by world wars and cold wars, atrocities and genocides, the twentieth century was also an era of sexual, cultural and ideological revolutions, each variously inscribed across the fictions it produced. In recognition of this, a major concern in this book has been that of understanding the ways in which the eruption of scandal around iconic texts is interwoven with vaster shifts and tensions around gender identities, nationalities, ethnicities and sexualities. At the same time, in selecting ten texts whose reception has been transfigured by notoriety, we have sought to build a better understanding of the ways in which scandal itself becomes, in the twentieth century, one of the primary means through which a public space and voice are negotiated for fiction.

## Public/private fictions

As a product of European modernity, one of the fascinating and provocative features of the novel in the course of its development has been its capacity to test the boundaries between ostensibly separate spheres of public and private life. Amongst many early practitioners, certainly, the novel is seen as a form which, in contradistinction to the romance, on the one hand, and journalism on the other, engages concerns of public virtue and probity partly through an attention to the domestic and the quotidian. Even in the case of an early, hybrid text like Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), there is a characteristic appeal to eye-witness evidence and journalistic integrity in the narrator's address, 'there being enough of Reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention'.<sup>10</sup> A generation later, such spurious appeals to authenticity are already sufficiently established as part of the pleasure of the text for Defoe to tease the reader of *Moll Flanders* (1722) with an account of the cares he has taken as 'editor' to give 'no lewd ideas, no immodest turns' to his report, even if the transcription of a wicked life 'necessarily requires that the wicked part should be made as wicked as the real history of it will bear, to illustrate and give a beauty to the penitent part'.<sup>11</sup>

In this example, the public/private boundary is exploited in a particular way, with the address to public virtue working partly as a ruse for the titillating exploration of private indecency. In the equally powerful, metonymic tradition in the novel, on the other hand, this equation is often reversed, with the representation of private lives providing the framework for exploring

larger social, political and historical concerns. In a text like *Caleb Williams* (1794), for example, if we follow Godwin's own commentary, the use of single personalized narrative is specifically chosen as an accessible way of encoding a larger political analysis.<sup>12</sup> In response to critics, indeed, Godwin defends the novel in quite instrumental terms, as an attempt to make readers of lesser education question the axiomatic status of current social and political structures, 'in a word, to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry'.<sup>13</sup>

For a critic of realist and post-realist conventions in the novel like Elizabeth Ermarth, one of the most important features of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel is the way its evolving use of narrative perspective enables the illusion of an intersubjective point of view. That is, a view which partakes of multiple private perspectives in order to generate the sense of an empirically observable, objective world.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, questions about the nature and possibility of such a collective, public vision, and challenges to the complicity between realist authors and readers that it is founded upon, are a major feature of the literary history of the twentieth century, from Modernism to Postmodernism. As the texts examined in this book demonstrate, the century saw extensive experimentation with the formulation of narrative perspective in the novel. In the midst of this long revolution in fiction, however, the novel's basic, straddling stance between private and public seems to have survived comparatively unscathed. In an important way, as we will see, the scandalous intermixture of private and public continues to be what we expect from the novel.

If a text like Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is simultaneously hailed as a new cultural landmark and derided as the 'literature of the latrine'<sup>15</sup> in the 1920s, then this is only for doing, albeit in a new way, what the novel has always done: exposing the private to a public scrutiny. On one level, this process of exposure in Joyce's novel involves his use of the novel form as a means of baring the innards of consciousness in a shocking and unprecedented way. At the same time, however, as Sean Latham demonstrates in Chapter 1, an equally important aspect of the 'scandal' of *Ulysses* is the way in which it attempts to subvert the principle of privacy in contemporary public life. Constantly flirting with the law of libel, as Latham shows, Joyce radically extends the tradition of the *roman-à-clef*, inserting dozens of satiric references to Dublin contemporaries and teasing the reader with a host of further puzzles about the sources for other characters. In this sense the scandal of the novel lies not just in its frank depiction of sexuality, but in its refusal to domesticate the novel as a realm of comfortable fictions which need not impinge on private and public lives.

As Latham argues, moreover, one of the consequences of the denouement between law and criticism engendered by the novel is to expose the mutually problematic nature of authorial control and of the construct of libel itself. In this sense, the novel can be seen as offering a fundamental challenge to the

orthodox modernistic demarcation between the privatized sphere of aesthetics and the 'public' sphere of the law. If Joyce soon discovered in the course of his court battles that his intentions as author were inadmissible as a defence of his text, the trials of *Ulysses* demonstrated equally clearly the bluntness of defamation and libel as tools to contain the novel's subversive and deconstructive potential. As Latham suggests, one of the unacknowledged legacies of *Ulysses* is therefore the unanswered questions it raises about the nature of the autonomy ascribed to the novel as art, on the one hand, and the ability of the law to circumscribe its representative terrain, on the other.

Towards the other end of the twentieth century, with a text like Morrison's *Beloved* (1988), the novel's licence to trouble the private/public boundary causes storms of a different kind. Resented by some as a cynically constructed 'blackface holocaust novel'<sup>16</sup> and received by many others as a 'new masterpiece' portraying slavery 'with a moving intensity no novelist has even approached before',<sup>17</sup> the reception of *Beloved* and Morrison in the late 1980s seemed to mark a sea change in the global reception of African American fiction. In an important way though, as Marilyn Sanders Mobley argues in this book, it is important to recognize that what *Beloved* offers is not some new historical revelation in the traditional sense, nor the introduction of a topic that had not already been well aired. In an important sense, Morrison's text merely fulfils one of the established tasks of the novel, that of rendering the public past through the prism of individual and private lives. As Mobley shows, nevertheless, what this entails in *Beloved's* case is a profoundly discomfiting process of translation, in which the contents of 'slavery' are carried out of the safety and abstraction of empirical history and into the 'domestic tranquillity' of the American home. Like an unquiet corpse, the novel reinserts the dead-and-buried of the archive in the most personal and visceral terms, re-inscribing the public past as a scene of innumerable open wounds that refuse easy closure. Arriving at a pivotal moment of the US 'culture wars' in the 1980s, the imaginative imposture of *Beloved* can be seen in this sense as a significant intervention in the debates of its time about the foundations and trajectory of America's democracy.

## The novel as public writing

Since the translation of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* into English in the late 1980s, there has been a vogue for considering earlier manifestations of the novel in relation to the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere during the heyday of European modernity. In this book, however, the notion of fiction as a repository for a certain kind of public, liberal-democratic voice is explored in a context different from that of Habermas's work, that of the emergent public sphere in Nigeria in the years surrounding independence. Looking at *A Man of the People* (1966) in Chapter 6, Jago Morrison explores the ways in which Achebe's writing in the

late 1960s seems to be trimmed to an ideal model of the novel as a space of public philosophical and political exchange that bears a detached and critical relationship to state authority. *A Man of the People* is read as, in a sense, a last-ditch attempt by the writer to force imaginative contemplation of the trajectory of political culture in Nigeria, at a time when conflicting ethnic loyalties and the problematic architecture of the independence settlement seemed to be propelling the nation towards civil war.

Taken as an empirical analysis of European modernity, Habermas's own description of the bourgeois public sphere is certainly problematic. As feminist scholars such as Nancy Fraser have shown, in historical terms it is difficult to separate out an eighteenth-century public sphere of coffee houses and gentlemen's periodicals from the wide penumbra of 'subaltern counter-publics' that challenged the character and the cultural geography of the bourgeois 'republic of letters', especially along lines of gender.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in the Nigerian context, it is possible to see the ways in which a multifarious marketplace literature, often catering to specific ethnic and linguistic communities, both complicates and undercuts the attempt by a writer like Achebe to mount a disinterested national address in his fiction. In the wake of the Biafran war, such difficulties are compounded by the writer's own problematic relationship to the notion of Nigerian nationhood itself.

It is by no means the purpose of this book to defend the historical credentials of Habermas's work, or to extrapolate his analysis, in its historical specificity, to a wider context. What Achebe's example does show, however, is the potential pertinence of Habermas's description of the 'public sphere' as an idealized model of free expression and liberal debate, against which the work of many twentieth-century writers can usefully be considered. In the earlier work of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958), the notion of a public, political sphere is defined importantly in opposition to that of the private and domestic (blurred though this demarcation might have become in recent times).<sup>19</sup> In Habermas's analysis, by contrast, it is useful to note that the key public/private dichotomy is not primarily that of the state versus the home, but rather that of the public versus the courtly. For him, the existence of the public sphere is premised on the notion of (male) individuals meeting to discourse on matters of common interest, in a way that is defined neither by their narrow private interest nor by their relationship to church or state. The importance of the literary in the formation of this idealized public space is seen most importantly in terms of the ways in which critical exchanges in gentlemanly periodicals, salons and coffee houses in the early eighteenth century provided the template for a form of public interchange that was to become much more sharply politicized in later decades. As Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts suggest:

These spaces of literary debate effectively constituted the infrastructure of what became political publics . . . as topics of debate shifted from art

and literature to politics and economics. And literary debate played a considerable role in generating the cultural resources necessary for critical and rational political debate. Literary 'jousts' spawned and sharpened tools of argument which would later be set to work on more political materials. They generated the convention of meeting to discuss and also the rhetorical competence, discipline and 'rules of the game' constitutive of public reason.<sup>20</sup>

In this analysis, the discussion of poetry, drama and fiction is seen as, in effect, a 'safe' space of cultural exchange whose primary significance is as a precursor to more weighty and trenchant public debate. However, as this book demonstrates, as far as the novel is concerned the relationship between the production and reception of literary texts and the kind of disinterested rationality of which the bourgeois public sphere purports to be composed is clearly a much more complex one. Moreover, what is equally clear is that, product of modernity though it might be, the novel is far from being as rigorously disconnected from systems of patronage as the Habermasian analysis might tempt us to assume. Though the commercial market for fiction in the twentieth century is clearly a major discipline on its producers, the significance of legislative, political and ideological influences of all kinds also imprints itself on twentieth-century texts in innumerable ways.

Certainly, in the case of a text like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), it is by no means possible to assume that for the twentieth-century novelist, questions of patronage are no longer a concern. As the critic Kenneth Kinnamon has shown, the text of Wright's novel was ruthlessly edited and cut following submission of his manuscript to Harpers, at the insistence of the white liberal publisher Edward Aswell and under pressure from the Book of the Month Club. A scene of masturbation in a movie theatre, as Bigger and Jack see Mary Dalton and other white girls in a newsreel, was amongst the first casualties, as was material in the Dalton's car showing Mary and Jan having sex, whilst Bigger conceals his erection. In the published text, the scene in Mary's bedroom which precedes her death was stripped of much of its original eroticism, and Bigger no longer fantasizes that Bessie is Mary when they make love later in the novel, before her murder. Other overtly political sections, including sections of Max's analysis of racism in the contemporary USA, were amongst the cuts exacted from Wright's text, with only cursory consultation, as a condition of publication. It is not difficult to argue that the cumulative effect of such an editing procedure was significantly to blunt the political edge of Wright's text and to dilute its discomfitingly licentious elements, in an effort to render the novel more amenable for a white liberal reading public.

As James Smethurst shows in Chapter 4 of this book, the power of censorship produced by the interplay of patronage and the structure of the book market undoubtedly continued as a condition of writing for Wright and other authors in the mid-twentieth century. This is not to say that with



*Native Son* we confront a wholly sanitized text. As Smethurst demonstrates, if some of his more direct representations of race and desire did not make it to the printed version, Wright makes potent use of the 1930s' horror movie and its implicit racial anxieties in order to address issues of class and national consciousness in a more covert way. The novel borrows contemporary horror movie tropes such as the figuring of the monster as stereotypically 'Negro', the threat of 'miscegenation' and the chase as lynching. These conventions are all deployed, Smethurst argues, to heighten readers' awareness of questions about false consciousness and individual self-determination in a racially segregated, capitalist society. Such questions were already current in radical African American writing of the period. To suggest that Bigger Thomas can be conceptualized as a victim as well as the perpetrator of crime, however, was sufficiently scandalous in itself to require a major imaginative reworking of the fictional conventions available to Wright through the iconography of popular film. For readers, the text's innovative interplay between popular film tropes and fictional conventions generates, Smethurst argues, public dialogue about the moral and political situation of African Americans in this period in a new and arresting way.

With a later text like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), we see the tension between commercial pressures and critical patronage play out in a different way. In Chapter 5, R.J. Ellis's discussion of the novel and its background shows the ways in which Kerouac and those around him were able to manipulate the public reception of both author and text. A popular status for *On the Road* as the archetypal cult classic of the Beat generation seems to have been secured in this way, despite the fact that many more provocative fictions were published contemporaneously. In an interesting parallel to the case of *Native Son*, Ellis explores the distance between the cultural moment of *On the Road*'s first drafting in 1951 and the text published in 1957. Tracing the revisions that Kerouac made to the text to modify its treatment of homosexuality, he compares it with three novels published in 1952 that were far more daring in their dealings with sex, drugs and criminality. In this way, Ellis claims that the scandal of the novel derives from Kerouac's explicit self-fashioning of the author as model of a dissident sensibility, the leader of a celebrated coterie that was revolutionizing the canon of American fiction. Such re-workings of cultural capital take place, as Pierre Bourdieu claims, at times of social change and upheaval; Ellis demonstrates that the decade following the end of the Second World War was precisely such an era. It was this unique nexus of conditions that propelled *On the Road* towards celebrity status and allowed it to acquire the 'aura' of cult fiction, helping to define the terms of public debate around notions of personal freedom and social permissiveness which dominated America's process of self-examination and cultural realignment in the postwar period.

If the Habermasian opposition between the public sphere and the orbit of patronage can still shed light on the complex position of the novel in the