

英语小说与散文

THE ENGLISH NOVEL AND PROSE NARRATIVE

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Preface: the scope of the book and how to read it

This book introduces students to the novel and prose narrative. For the most part, it works with case-study readings of novels which are, in my experience, widely and frequently taught. They are: Jane Austen's *Emma*; Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*; Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*; Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*; Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*; H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica*; Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*; and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In other words, they are a selection of fictions dating from 1740 to 1980, which are explored in more or less chronological succession to illustrate the ways in which the narrative strategies of the novel have been subject to both change and continuity over the course of two and a half centuries, from the origins of the English novel in the eighteenth century to the postmodern and postcolonial novel in the late twentieth. In being considered in the final chapter and alongside *Midnight's Children* (1980), Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy* finds itself somewhat out of line: but readers who know anything about Sterne's wonderfully anti-linear novel will not be surprised at this. Moreover, the anti-linear nature of Sterne's narrative encourages a revised approach to the story of the novel in literary history. Generally, each novel is accorded its own itemised section (or sections) within a chapter. I have sought to use editions which are readily available.

In Chapter 4 I also demonstrate ways of reading two different kinds of short story from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an important transitional period in the history of fiction during which the short story became a genre acknowledged in its own right: the stories are Thomas Hardy's 'The Withered Arm' and Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party'.

In being concerned with prose narrative as well as the novel, the book

offers ways of reading non-fictional narratives which are coming to figure increasingly in students' programmes as the nature of literary studies itself changes. In Chapter 3 I explore ways of reading a nineteenth-century autobiography, Samuel Bamford's *Early Days*, and a nineteenth-century biography, Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. In selecting these narratives, I hope to show how, first, Bamford's autobiography can help readers to think about the relationship between writing and class (Bamford is generally recognised as a contributor to a tradition of working-class male writing). And, secondly, in the case of Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë, my aim will be to show how this work can be used in discussions of women's writing.

Of course, judgements are involved in making selections, and selections had to be made on the assumption that the average reader's principal study needs are still likely to be orientated towards the novel (which as a result remains the principal focus of the book). Consequently I should not like readers to assume that my readings of non-fictional prose narratives amount to a universal code for reading all autobiographies and biographies, different examples of which can be found from periods and contexts which, for reasons of space, I have not been able to tackle. My readings of non-fiction prose narratives offer broad principles to guide reading, backed up by examples, and are designed to act as starting points for further study. Of course, the same can be said for my readings of novels. Notes which follow the chapters point to sources for this further study, and additional information is provided in the annotated select bibliography. Where material is available in easily accessible anthologies and readers I have endeavoured to cite from these (whilst seeking also to refer to the original source).

One of the aims of this book is to provide students with a framework for thinking about the relationships between novels and other forms of prose narrative, in historical and cultural context, in the light of recent developments in literary studies. In addition, the book provides a basic introduction to recent critical positions which have had a major impact on the study of the novel, such as feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. It is important that a book such as this be a synthesis of established positions, and, within the bounds of accessibility, as up to date as it can be. As a consequence, it has been necessary to venture into some, at times, quite challenging conceptual territory. This is particularly the case in the second half of Chapter 1, where I elaborate a critical vocabulary that has emerged from the movements known as structuralism and poststructuralism, New

Historicism and cultural materialism; and in the second half of Chapter 2, where I consider debates about the origins of the novel which have been conditioned by these movements.

In the light of this, a word about how to read this book: if during the more abstract discussions the reader should happen to find the going tough, move on to the more detailed case-study readings in individual chapters, which I generally cite after making a conceptual point, and which amount to illustrations of the general conceptual point I am making. It could be helpful to move around the book, taking advantage of the sections and the cross-referencing. Then re-read the challenging section. Feel free to make choices: if the reader's immediate need is to find out how narrative in the novel works in principle and detail, turn to the beginning of Chapter 2 (where I use *Emma* as an exemplary novel narrative).

Literary study without concepts is not an option. Wherever possible I have provided definitions of more specialised concepts, such as point of view, rhetoric, discourse, intertextuality, the implied reader, and free indirect speech, to name but a few. However, it is worth stressing that definitions in themselves are of limited use: my definitions are always located in the context of an interlocking argument, and this is as important as the definitions.

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Introduction: straightforward discourse and novel transactions

1.1 Literature and non-literature?

This book is an introduction to the novel and prose narrative as elements of literature. 'Literature' is a complex term. It can be used to describe a range of linguistic techniques and strategies which generate, for instance, a resonant image, or a sense of irony, or purposeful ambiguity, the effects of which would lead us to describe the writing which embodied it as 'literary'. 'Literature' is most often used to signify a valued tradition of writings, which is implicitly how it functions when we speak of 'English literature'. When I use the term in this work, I by no means reject that meaning: many of the works I use to illustrate this study are major contributions to English literature which have their status confirmed in the regularity with which they are taught in schools, colleges and universities. However, this implies that 'English literature' is inseparable from processes of selection, which are embedded in structures of power and prestige. So I shall also take note of this position, and, consequently, argue against a view of 'literature' which assumes that it is a knowable and immutable thing for all times and all people. Consequently, novels and prose narratives will have more than one relation to different meanings of 'literature'.

Reading the novel, and to a lesser extent the short story, in their relations to different meanings of 'literature' will be my principal focus. But I shall also explore the novel in relation to the biography and the autobiography: prose narratives which are classified as non-fictional, factual and often 'non-literary', and, yet, which can invite complex responses from readers. If the boundaries of 'literature' are, from an historical point of view, never quite settled, then 'non-literature' becomes a category which we cannot ignore. We will need a rather different kind of critical approach to draw out the full

consequences of this point, which will be the overall aim of this introductory chapter. To begin with, we should address the problem of prose which is, on the face of it, language which is rather less than 'literary'.

1.2 Prose

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines prose as 'straightforward discourse' or 'the ordinary form of written or spoken language'. The ordinariness of prose makes it different from poetic language, which, at its most characteristic, is recognisable from the presence of rhyme or metre. This ordinariness is a strength from the perspective of communicative efficiency and flexibility. Prose is the medium I am writing in now, and it could equally be used to introduce readers to the use of computer software: 'This introductory section of the *Microsoft Windows User's Guide* provides a guide to the documentation – so you know where to find information about working with Windows.'¹ But this rather militates against the literary credentials of prose, a point recognised by the journalist Andrew Marr when reviewing *The New Oxford Book of English Prose* (1998): 'prose is such a general commodity that a real anthology of English prose is unthinkable. It would spread too widely, from computer manuals to *Sun* editorials, and would be unreadable.'² Marr's comment raises two questions that will concern us. The first relates to his sense of prose as a 'general commodity': if prose is so ubiquitous, why are certain forms of prose adjudged distinctive? The second question raised by Marr is that of readability: if an anthology of the totality of English prose would be so inclusive as to be unthinkable, what is it that makes some forms of prose more pleasurably readable and thus selectable than the variety found in computer manuals? One answer to that question must be: narrative.

1.3 Narrative

In fact, the majority of anthologised pieces in *The New Oxford Book of English Prose* are from either novels or short stories, forms cast in narrative. In 1752, the poet and critic Samuel Johnson reflected on why narrative is so captivating:

No Stile of Conversation is more extensively acceptable than the Narrative. He who has stored his Memory with slight Anecdotes, private Incidents, and personal Particularities, seldom fails to find his Audience favourable. Almost

every Man listens with Eagerness to contemporary History; perhaps almost every Man has some real or imaginary Connection with a celebrated Character, some desire to advance, or oppose a rising Name ... He that is a Hearer in one Place, qualifies himself to become a Speaker in another; for though he cannot comprehend a Series of Argument, or transport the volatile Spirit of Wit without Evaporation, yet he thinks himself able to treasure up the various Incidents of a Story, and pleases his Hopes with the Information which he shall give to some inferior Society.³

Skilfully told stories give pleasure to their listeners. As Johnson indicates, narrative consists of 'Incidents' or events arranged into a story. These events are related by a 'Speaker', or narrator, and they are addressed to a 'Hearer'. The popular and non-specialised nature of narrative is evident from the way in which 'Hearers' can themselves become 'Speakers' or narrators in turn. We will all, at some points in our conversational lives, be narrators in ways that will not lead us all to be poets. Johnson reflects on the ordinary, everyday status of narrative as a conversational genre – a genre is a regular (conventional) way of speaking or writing – which highlights similarities between this mode of communication and prose.

This book will explore the workings of written prose narratives which relate 'History' in the form of 'private Incidents' acted out in the 'personal Peculiarities' of 'Characters' either 'real or imaginary'. For whilst Johnson is reflecting on oral narrative, his terms account for the defining characteristics of written narrative genres such as biography and autobiography which narrate the lives of 'real' individuals. They also account for the 'imaginary' representation of characters and their histories in the novel, a narrative form which was rising to prominence in England when Johnson was writing in the mid eighteenth century (see sections 2.11–14).

It would be wrong to infer from this that all narrative is popular, conversational and prosaic: epic poetry of grand subject matter and sophisticated diction such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is woven in the 'volatile Spirit of Wit', but is still a narrative. At the same time, narrative does not require Milton's epic grandeur to endow it with artistic status. By the end of the nineteenth century certain English novels had come to use prose in remarkably sophisticated – indeed poetic – ways which made the ordinary and prosaic the basis for distinctive literary art, a theme which will be pursued particularly in Chapter 4. The general argument of this book is that it is important to see such developments in cultural and historical contexts: in sections 4.4–5 I explore the narrative sophistication of Henry James's fiction