

英国小说史
A Short History of
British Novel

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Preface

This book is based on the notes I used for lectures on the history of the British novel to the graduate students of the English Department, Henan University, from 1995 to 1998, with the general idea of providing the students with some basic information and critical method. In the course of lecturing, however, I found that most students had only a very vague idea of what the novel was, and a very limited knowledge of the background of the British novel. The students had little idea of how the British novel appeared and developed, and could hardly locate a novelist or a novel in their sociological environment or historical transformation. My original purpose was to strengthen the students' theoretical foundation and cultivate their critical insight, but as these must be based on the knowledge of basic facts, I had to spend much time presenting the life of a novelist and precis of his/her major works. The original plan was somewhat modified.

The publication of this book is motivated by the fact that there are so many people interested in the British novel, especially young people with a mind to learn the English language, while at the same time there is no book written by Chinese scholars to meet this need. In view of the fact that even graduate students studying English literature do not have sufficient knowledge of the British novel, I have attempted to provide biographical material and work precis as well as critical comments, to offer the

reader some fundamental knowledge about the British novel, to delineate the origins, changes and developments of the form and concept of the novel, to explore the psychological motivations of the novelist in writing a novel, to discuss the possible emotional impact a novel may have on readers of different times, and to analyze the aesthetic effect a certain fictional variety may produce in the mind of the reader.

Such a book is naturally introductory. I have in mind the reader who loves reading the British novel and desires to know more about its origins, changes, trends and developments, and to know more about its first-rate personages and masterpieces. The reader may hope to improve his/her English proficiency as well as to enrich his knowledge of the British novel, so this book has been written in fairly simple English. I have tried to avoid using words and terms unfamiliar to third-year college students majoring in English language, and have used synonyms and short phrases wherever possible to explain unavoidable rare words and terms.

As this is a course book of an introductory nature, I have followed, in most cases, the more commonly accepted opinions with regard to individual authors and works, avoiding controversial issues in their evaluation. This is not to say that I have suppressed subjectivity, but that I have made every endeavour to be objective to the best of my knowledge. Different ways of presenting one thing may produce the impression of presenting different things. Even in the seemingly easy matter of giving the precis of a novel, one person may summarize the novel in quite a different way from another, making it look like a different novel. I endeavour to offer the reader a simple and clear narration of the development of the British novel from its origins in the early 18th

century to the 1990s, a clear and concise illustration of the life and work of the writers who fall into this time span, and a general survey of the major genres and trends of the British novel in its 300-year history.

At the beginning of its compilation, this book was rather exclusive. Jonathan Swift was excluded, as most histories of the British novel did not consider him as a novelist. Because Katherine Mansfield only wrote short stories and this book chiefly discusses long fiction, she, too, was excluded. So were other writers, such as Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, and J. R. Tolkien. But later I changed my mind and admitted them, making this book relatively inclusive, for the simple reason that they are too important and popular to be left outside. Even so, for various reasons, I have left out quite a number of writers, such as A. M. Porter, J. G. Lockhart, G. K. Chesterton, Rebecca West, William Trevor, Edna O'Brien, Stanley Middleton, Fay Weldon, Samuel Beckett (winner of 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature), Nadine Gordimer (winner of 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature).

At the opening of this graduate-student course, my supervisor when I myself was a graduate student in the English Department of Henan University, Professor Shirley Wood, gave me invaluable advice and suggestions on what to be stressed and what to be ignored, on the general layout of the materials and the basic instructing method to be employed. In transforming these lecture notes into book form, she again exerted her expertise in the execution of this task, making this book more like a collaboration of two people than the effort of a single author. She gave me detailed instructions about what to be cut out and what to be added, read the whole draft meticulously, and in some cases even rephrased whole paragraphs. I am much obliged to her for con-

stant encouragement and ready help. Thanks are also due to Professors Miao Pujing and Xu Youzhi for their kind support and concern, to Miss Yue Erchen for providing an excellent index for this book. Henan University has generously granted a fund for the publication of this book.

In the course of compiling this book I have made extensive use of quite a few reference books, especially James Vinson ed., *Novelists & Prose Writers* (1979) and Margaret Drabble ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (fifth edition, 1985). In discussing 20th century British novel, I am heavily indebted to Malcolm Bradbury for *The Modern British Novel* (1994) and Allan Massie for *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970—1989* (1990). Other important books which I have made frequent use of in compiling this book are listed in the select bibliography at the end of this book. I am grateful to the authors of these books and to all who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this book, including the postgraduate students who have attended the course and discussed their opinions with me. As the first attempt at writing a history of the British novel, this book must have left much to be desired. Suggestions and criticisms from readers for its improvement are welcome.

Gao Jihai

April, 1999

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Chapter One Introduction

I . Definitions of the Novel

The telling of stories is the oldest of all the arts, but the novel is a recent appearance. The oldest form of literature was poetry, then there appeared drama, then prose, and finally came the novel. The most obvious things are often the most difficult to define, and no one can give a universally acceptable definition of the novel. The following are some definitions of the novel:

—A novel is a large, diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purpose of a uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual figure is subservient. But this plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability, or success, without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene, by virtue of his own importance. (Tobias Smollett, dedication to *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, 1753)

—The novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the time in which it is written... The novel gives a familiar relation of such things as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves, and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene in so easy and natural a manner and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion

(at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses of the persons in the story, as if they were our own. (Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance*, 1785)

—The novel is an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience usually through connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1993)

We believe Lionel Stevenson's definition of the novel in his *The English Novel* (1960) is more practical. He says, "The novel is a long, fictitious, prose narrative with a structural unity, individualized characters, and a pre-eminent illusion of reality." He points out that the novel must be long enough and that it must be written in prose form. He summarizes the following as basic characteristics of the novel: 1) It looks at people in society; 2) It tells a story; 3) It has a basic pattern; and 4) It is filled with a great amount of detail. This may serve as a working definition of the novel.

Now people use the words *novel* and *fiction* interchangeably, but actually there is a great difference between them. The essential quality for an acceptable novel is the illusion of reality. The 18th century novelists claimed they were writing about nothing but real life, were recording true experience of real persons. So the word *novel* has the connotation of true-to-life. The word *fiction* has a much wider meaning, requiring only two conditions: it is written in prose form, and it has a story. This word has the connotation of making-up, of fabricating by imagination. Although the title of this book chiefly concerns the discussion of novels, we have used the word *novel* in its wider sense to include

many other fictional forms.

II . Elements of the Novel

1. Plot. A novel is propelled through its hundred or thousand pages by a device known as the plot, a nuclear idea that is usually conceived by the novelist in very simple terms. For example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) might have been conceived as "a young couple destined to be married have first to overcome the barriers of pride on the part of the hero and prejudice on the part of the heroine". The detailed working out of the nuclear idea, however, requires much ingenuity, since the plot of one novel is expected to be somewhat different from that of another. Serious novelists prefer to base their plots on psychological situations, and the climaxes result in new states of awareness on the part of the major characters. Plot plays a desultory or irregular part in the traditional picaresque novel, which depends for movement on a succession of chance incidents. Plot plays a very important part in the Gothic novel and detective novel, and in the 19th century realistic novel. Plot plays almost no part at all in some works of modernist novelists, in which the consciousness of the characters provides all the fictional material.

2. Character. A novel is peopled with characters who develop the plot. Novelists are usually concerned with the human personality under the stress of artfully selected experience. It was once accepted that character was such an indispensable element of the novel that there could be no novel without character. In the period since World War II, however, writers of the French "new novel" have deliberately reduced the human element in the

novel, making things in a room more important than human beings. This may be seen as a transitory protest against the long predominance of character in the novel. Most novelists remain creators of characters — prehuman, such as those in William Golding's *Inheritors* (1955), animal, as in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903), caricatures, as in many works of Charles Dickens.

3. Setting. The entire action of a novel is frequently determined by the locale in which it is set. The makeup and behaviour of fictional characters depend on their environment quite as much as on the personal dynamic or force. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) could hardly have been placed in Paris, because the tragic life and death of the heroine have a great deal to do with the narrowness of her provincial environment. Wessex is a giant brooding presence in the novels of Thomas Hardy, whose human characters would probably behave much differently if they were set in some big city of England. The setting of a novel is not always drawn from a real life locale. Tolkien in his *Lord of the Rings* (1954 — 1955) created an alternative world that appeals greatly to many who are dissatisfied with the existing one. Many of the properties in the future envisaged by H. G. Wells' novels or by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932) come true in today's real life. Whatever the locale of his work, the novelist is concerned with making a credible environment for his characters.

4. Narrative pattern and point of view. There is a basic narrative pattern for most traditional novels. Such a novel usually begins with a description of a place or a character. The setting is likely to impress us either as attractive or not. A character introduced at the beginning of a novel will usually come into conflict with society. The opening chapters will expand the picture of the

characters and the society they live in. The novel will then progress by taking the characters through a sequence of events extending over a certain time span. Finally characters who are at odds with their family or society will either die or reconcile with the family or society, as they grow more experienced in life.

The point of view is the outlook of the narrator who tells the story in a novel. It was Henry James, who, in his studies of the art of the novel, first drew people's attention to the point of view in a novel. A story can be told in the first person or in the third person, with rare exception in the second person. In the first person narrative the main character relates the events, as is the case in Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850). This allows us a very direct insight into the character's mind. The disadvantage of this narrative method is that the narrator's knowledge is limited, and that he can not be omniscient. In the third person narrative, the narrator or narrators are principally observers of the events. They tell the story in an objective, impartial, or reliable way. The disadvantage of this narrative method is the difficulty to explore the character's mind convincingly.

5. Different types of narrator. In *omniscient narration*, a narrator who knows everything, sees everything, relates the story. The omniscient narrator can be *unintrusive*, that is, we are not really aware of a person telling the story because the action is presented without explicit comments or judgments. Such an impersonal method is common in modern realistic novels, such as the works of Graham Greene. Earlier realistic novelists, such as Austen and Eliot, used an *intrusive narrator* who comments on the events and characters. Such narrators frequently point out the significance of what they are presenting, often providing a moral interpretation of events and characters. Emily Brontë's

Wuthering Heights (1847) is told by two main narrators, Nelly Dean and Mr Lockwood, who are characters involved in the story but incapable of appreciating its significance. In Conrad's works, a character called Marlow is often the narrator. He is an intelligent man, but his understanding of what happens is limited, simply because, like anyone, he interprets events according to his own beliefs and values. Such narrators are often called *unreliable narrators*.

III. Types of the Novel

1. The Bildungsroman, or novel about upbringing and education, had its beginning in Goethe's work, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796), which is about the processes by which a sensitive person discovers his identity and place in the big world. This kind of novel often starts with the main character as a child, and then presents the child's growth and development towards adulthood. This rebellious character goes through a sequence of tests and finally comes to a better understanding of himself and the world. This type of novel is often autobiographical, such as Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). It frequently uses first person narration.

2. Comic novels are novels primarily intended to make us laugh. The comic novelist writes from a detached position in which he surveys the whole fictional picture in an amused way. Characters are seen as types acting out roles in familiar stories. Comic novels always contain satire and irony. The difference between *satire* and *irony* is not easy to tell, but satire usually implies a value orientation, the satirist often criticizes, mocks and