

# The Novel

*Edited by*

DOROTHY J. HALE

*An Anthology of Criticism and  
Theory 1900–2000*



**Blackwell**  
Publishing



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the novel

For Jeffrey and Madeline

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
General Introduction	1
<b>Part I: Form and Function</b>	<b>17</b>
1 <i>Víktor Shklovsky</i> , “Sterne’s <i>Tristram Shandy</i> ”	31
2 <i>Vladímir Propp</i> , from <i>Morphology of the Folktale</i>	54
3 <i>Henry James</i> , Prefaces to the New York Edition Preface to <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> Preface to <i>The Ambassadors</i>	65
4 <i>Percy Lubbock</i> , from <i>The Craft of Fiction</i>	86
5 <i>Northrop Frye</i> , from <i>Anatomy of Criticism</i> “Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres”	97



<b>Part II: The Chicago School</b>	<b>107</b>
6 R. S. Crane, from "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of <i>Tom Jones</i> "	119
7 Ralph W. Rader, "Richardson to Austen"	140
8 Wayne C. Booth, from <i>The Rhetoric of Fiction</i>	154
<b>Part III: Structuralism, Narratology, Deconstruction</b>	<b>185</b>
9 Tzvetan Todorov, from <i>The Poetics of Prose</i> "Language and Literature" "The Grammar of Narrative"	205
10 Seymour Chatman, from <i>Story and Discourse</i> "Discourse: Covert versus Overt Narrators"	219
11 Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect"	229
12 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text"	235
13 J. Hillis Miller, from <i>Reading Narrative</i> "Indirect Discourses and Irony"	242
14 Barbara Johnson, from <i>A World of Difference</i> "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> "	257
<b>Part IV: Psychoanalytic Approaches</b>	<b>271</b>
15 René Girard, from <i>Deceit, Desire, and the Novel</i> "‘Triangular’ Desire"	294
16 Shoshana Felman, from "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" "The Turns of the Story’s Frame: A Theory of Narrative"	315
17 Peter Brooks, "Freud’s Masterplot"	329
<b>Part V: Marxist Approaches</b>	<b>343</b>
18 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"	361
19 György Lukács, from <i>Studies in European Realism</i>	379
20 György Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism"	394



**Part VI: The Novel as Social Discourse 435**

- 22 Ian Watt, from *The Rise of the Novel* 462  
 “Realism and the Novel Form”
- 23 M. M. Bakhtin, from “Discourse in the Novel” 481
- 24 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., from *The Signifying Monkey* 511  
 “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text”
- 25 Jane Tompkins, from *Sensational Designs* 535  
 “Introduction: The Cultural Work of American Fiction”
- 26 D. A. Miller, from *The Novel and the Police* 541

**Part VII: Gender, Sexuality, and the Novel 559**

- 27 Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction” 579
- 28 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, from *Between Men* 586
- 29 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity:  
 Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” 605
- 30 Nancy Armstrong, from *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 621  
 “Introduction: The Politics of Domesticating Culture,  
 Then and Now”
- 31 Catherine Gallagher, from *Nobody’s Story* 644

**Part VIII: Post-Colonialism and the Novel 653**

- 32 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and  
 a Critique of Imperialism” 674
- 33 Edward W. Said, from *Culture and Imperialism* 691  
 “Consolidated Vision”

34	<i>Homi K. Bhabha</i> , from <i>The Location of Culture</i> “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”	716
35	<i>Franco Moretti</i> , from <i>Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900</i> “The Novel, the Nation-State”	734
<b>Part IX: Novel Readers</b>		<b>747</b>
36	<i>Wolfgang Iser</i> , from <i>The Implied Reader</i> “The Reader as a Component Part of the Realistic Novel”	763
37	<i>Nina Baym</i> , from <i>Novels, Readers, and Reviewers</i> “The Triumph of the Novel”	779
38	<i>Garrett Stewart</i> , from <i>Dear Reader</i> “In the Absence of Audience: Of Reading and Dread in Mary Shelley”	792
Index		803



# General Introduction

**T**his volume has emerged from a course called “The Novel in Theory” that I have taught at Berkeley over the past ten years. I have devised this seminar to be a genuine introduction, a starting point for undergraduates and graduates who have had no prior instruction in literary theory. My classroom experience has taught me that many students are intimidated by literary theory. They regard it almost as a foreign language, riddled with ugly jargon and originating from esoteric philosophical homelands to which they feel they have been given no intellectual passport. Students sign up for the course almost as an inoculation: I’ll get my theory here, and build up resistance to future infections. But my seminar has also proven to me that students are disarmed when they learn that the study of literary theory need not be a move away from the kind of close reading that inspired them to become literature majors in the first place. Students are excited to learn that they can work through theoretical texts as they would any difficult piece of literature, relying on their training as readers to determine what is significant, what is confusing, what makes sense and what doesn’t. Students will be intimidated and alienated by theory as long as they view it as a meta-discourse, mastered by the high priests of the discipline and disseminated from on high to the uninitiated. But if students can instead be taught to read theoretical texts as they would literary texts – as both paradigmatic and problematic, limpidly clear in some paragraphs and excruciatingly opaque in other passages, redundant about some issues and silent about others – then students are truly beginning to “do” theory: they are becoming imaginative and creative readers of imaginative and creative texts that also happen to be analytic and argumentative texts.



My own immersion in the field of novel theory has also taught me to do theory this way – precisely because the field itself has been made and remade over the course of the twentieth century, emerging as a rich problematic rather than a monolithic idea. Positioning novel theory in relation to larger theoretical movements, studying the novel “in” theory, allows us to understand how the study of the novel develops in answer to philosophical problems at the heart of twentieth-century literary theory more generally. Formalism, structuralism, narratology, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, social discourse, gender and sexuality, post-colonialism, reader response – the section headings of this volume might be found in any introduction to literary theory. But when we pose the novel as a question, when we ask why the novel has been so important to the theoretical work of each school, we discover not only a new basis of connection among these schools but also something about the novel’s importance to literary theory that is itself theorizable only through an examination of the field as a whole.

One of the first things a reader of this volume might notice is how few of the anthologized essays in fact use the term “novel theory.” The Hungarian György Lukács, who published *The Theory of the Novel* (*Die Theorie des Romans*) in 1920, might be credited for putting the term into general circulation. But in a powerful example of how the field gets made and remade, Lukács repudiates in his famous 1962 preface the argument advanced by that early work. In particular, he critiques the Hegelian philosophical premises that led him to undertake a theory of the novel. Throwing off the “abstract synthesis” that for him defines theory as theory, Lukács champions instead the “concrete” historical analysis he has subsequently come to value.<sup>1</sup>

What the example of Lukács suggests, and what this volume more generally seeks to show, is that the theory of the novel can be practiced under other names. The theory of the novel develops as a problematic precisely through its vexed relation to theory narrowly understood – whether that understanding comes from Hegel or from other intellectual antecedents. Lukács’ preface to *The Theory of the Novel* makes it seem as if the new work he does, the work of concrete historical analysis, is the opposite of theory, theory free, as it were. But in fact his historiography is underwritten by a different kind of theory: Marxist social theory. And although his later titles subtly mark this shift (*The Historical Novel* [first published in 1937]; *Studies in European Realism* [first published in 1948]; *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* [first published in 1958]), they notably name an object of literary study rather than a theoretical approach. It is by following out the actual arguments that Lukács puts forward in these books that we can discover what counts as Marxist inquiry for him. And as we work to identify the ideas he directly imports from Marxist social theory, we also will appreciate the ways that Lukács advances the field of Marxist literary study through his own conceptual innovations, particularly through his new account of the novel. Such analysis will no doubt return us to the 1962 preface with at least one new insight: the account Lukács gives there of his career, the narrative of personal development achieved through self-critique, and more particularly the narrative of Marxist revelation arrived at through Hegelianism, is itself scripted by Marxist theory. We find that Lukács’ account of his development through and beyond novel theory is as theoretical as it is personal. We could even go so far as to say that what counts as personal experience – just as what counts as the novel – is a product of the interpretative paradigm brought to bear on it.