

*The Development
of the English Novel.*

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One of the most interesting portions of the history of English literature is that which treats of the growth of the novel. We are accustomed to speak of that growth as a most rapid one, and, indeed, if we go back no farther than the time of Richardson to find the origin of the English novel, we cannot but admit that the rapidity of its development has been truly phenomenal.

However, we should bear in mind the thought that for centuries the way had been preparing for this great work of fiction. Away back in Anglo-Saxon England, seated at the feast in long halls whose walls were hung with trophies of the chase and with armor which glittered and flashed in the firelight, stern-bearded warriors were wont to listen with delight to the long tales of the gleemen - tales of mighty heroes, of fierce battles, of superhuman deeds - chanted in monotonous tone to the accompaniment of the harp. Softer, smoother than these were the Norman minstrel songs which later came to replace them. Sung first at the court of William, they soon caught the English fancy and were echoed far and wide. Instinct as these later songs were with the spirit of chivalry and romance, they mark the dawn of the emotional

element in story-telling. Still later came Geoffrey Chaucer, king of story-tellers, in whose skillful hands the metrical romance reached its climax. Nor was he master of verse alone. His characters were real men and women, such as had never before been painted, such as were not again painted until the days of Shakespeare.

After the death of Chaucer, the popularity of the metrical romance waned. There was no one capable of carrying on the work he had laid down. The older tales seemed dull and spiritless. Through Chaucer's influence they had fallen in to disfavor. The reign of the metrical romance in fiction was over, and when, after a long period of inactivity, romance was again revived it was in a form entirely new to England; that of prose.

It was, doubtless, owing to continental influence that Sir Thomas Malory was moved to write the Arthurian legends in prose form, for prose romances were not uncommon on the continent when this volume was published. Malory was but the first of a long line of writers of prose fiction. His work was followed by a number of prose romances whose excuse for being lay, not in any merit of the story, which, indeed, was

considered a thing of the slightest importance, but rather in the desire to satisfy the restless craving for the new, the strange, the romantic, and for a time at least, these fantastic creations seem to have fulfilled the purpose for which they were intended. Later in the century a few writers departed a trifle from this highly artificial manner, and, in imitation of the Spanish picaresco, produced some half-realistic novels.

Immediately following this romantic Elizabethan era there was a dearth of English prose fiction. France, meanwhile, was busily engaged in writing the long heroic romances so much in vogue there in the seventeenth century. Later England, too, attempted this kind of romance, but little was accomplished before Cervantes with his satirical *Don Quixote* was laughing them out of existence.

But though the seventeenth century was a barren one, the eighteenth was quite the reverse. It is marked by striking advancement in the line of fiction. Early in the century Sir Roger de Coverley made his appearance before the reading public, and so firm and unerring was the hand which sketched this genial country gentleman, that it has not yet been outdone in character delineation.

Following close upon the Cavalier Papers came the wonderfully realistic works of Defoe and the sharp satire of Swift. Some one has aptly called Robinson Crusoe the connecting link between ideal romance and modern realism. Certainly Defoe knew as did no one else of his time, how to give to the utterly impossible an air of reality truly startling in effect. Nor can we wonder at this when we observe the untiring energy of the man in his study of the arrangement of details.

In the works of Defoe we have realism but it is that of incident only; in those of succeeding writers we find a constant striving after realism of character as well. Hitherto, Addison alone, of all English prose writers had attempted this. Henceforward it was to be one of the characteristic marks of the novel.

The change was inaugurated by the publication of "Pamela" in 1740, and following close upon this work of Richardson's, came those of Fielding, Smollet, and Sterne. This first novel of Richardson's was in the form of correspondence wherein the heroine, "Pamela," is made to relate her own story. Fielding advanced a step farther, introducing the third person in narration.

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The purpose of Richardson's novel as he has told us in the preface, is "To inculcate religion and morality in an easy and agreeable manner, and to make vice odious." But his anxiety to carry out his purpose is too plainly manifest.

Fielding laughed at his moralizing tendency and at the stiff formality of his characters, and began his first novel as a satire on that of Richardson. Fielding and Smollet were men of different stamp from Richardson. Their novels, like those of the latter, represent real life, but they deal particularly with low life, hence their realism is essentially coarse, and this coarseness has called forth much adverse criticism. Of the three, Fielding is generally accounted the greatest artist. He takes a broad view of life. He writes with a bold hand. He groups his incidents with dramatic skill. Nor are he and Smollet less thoughtful of moral teaching than is Richardson. The difference is that they sought to inculcate virtue, not by preaching against vice as did Richardson, but rather by painting it in all its deformity. In their work and in that of Sterne as well, the influence of Cervantes is apparent. In the minuteness of his character analysis Sterne has been compared to Richardson.

His work is pervaded by a humor having in it much more of lightness than that of Fielding and Smollet.

In 1766 a novel of a type differing entirely from any heretofore produced appeared. This was Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield," the forerunner of novels of domestic life. This novel is faulty in many respects but in it is much that is commendable. It is especially characterized by a pleasantly humorous tone, and, unlike the majority of novels of that day, is wholly free from coarseness and indecency.

In the latter part of this same century there was manifest a strong tendency to combine with the realistic element in fiction one either of sentiment or of romance. This was probably due to the influence of the German romantic school. Mackenzie's "Man of Feeling" is an example of the novel of sentiment. Of the romantic, or, more properly speaking, the ultra-romantic novel, Walpole's "Castle of Otranto" and Mrs. Radcliffe's "Mysteries of Udolpho" are the best examples. In both of these supernaturalism and romance are blended in such manner as to produce an almost uncanny effect.

The period marking the close of the

eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth was one of great activity for women in the field of fiction. Miss Burney was writing her stories of fashionable life; Miss Edgeworth, her admirable Irish tales. Miss Porter produced her "Thaddeus of Warsaw" and "Scottish Chiefs", romances having in them a suggestion of the historical element. Greater, however, than any of these writers was Jane Austen whose work bears the stamp of the moralizing tendency manifest in that of a number of novelists of the period. She was entirely out of sympathy with the ultra-romantic writers, satirizing them most effectually in her "Northanger Abbey", and in all her works dealing with a phase of life quiet in the extreme, yet her skill in its delineation, her quiet humor and occasional satirical touches never allow the interest to flag.

But the romantic spirit was still strong in England, and to Sir Walter Scott is due the honor of giving it proper expression. In his hands the scope of both romance and novel was broadened. Hitherto these had remained separate branches of fiction, despite the efforts of previous authors to unite them. Scott more than any other novelist succeeded in bringing them into union. He was a most versatile writer, his range of

subjects being wide and all handled with equal ease. His dramatic skill is evidenced in the striking effects he produces, in the vivid presentation of character and scenes in his historical romances. In America, too, the romantic school had its representatives, chief of whom were James Fenimore Cooper, sometimes called the "American Scott," and a little later, Nathaniel Hawthorne whose works were of a somewhat different character from those of Scott and Cooper.

Passing on from this romantic period, we find the novel reaching its highest level through the efforts of the three great novelists Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot. In the work of these three the novel of purpose reached its zenith. In that of George Eliot the philosophical element is particularly noticeable.

Of the three Dickens stands first in point of time and doubtless in popularity as well. Like Smollet before him, he has often been criticised for his lack of plan and for his method of delineating character by some peculiarity of manner instead of by any underlying qualities of mind. He lacked the artistic skill of Thackeray and the subtle penetration of George Eliot, yet he was not without skill in painting character. His gen-

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ial humor is one of the most pleasant characteristics of his works. He was ever a warm friend of the poor and suffering, and there is the life he chose oftener to depict.

Though a year older than Dickens, Thackeray did not begin his work at so early a date as did he. When he did appear, it was as the satirist of the world of fashion. Thackeray, with his clear perception and his ready pen, was well fitted for this. His satire is never sharp and bitter as was Swift's, but is characterized by its gentleness. Cynicism was entirely absent from his nature, and no one was more prompt than he to appreciate and to acknowledge real worth of character in any one. Thackeray is often compared with Fielding, of whom he was ever a strong admirer. His work, however, is altogether different in tone from that of Fielding.

George Eliot's works have in them far more of introspection than those of Thackeray and Dickens. Her knowledge of human nature is everywhere evident. Her characters are distinguished by the strong resemblance they bear to real men and women.

Following these three whose names stand so high among English novelists, we might name

a great number of minor writers, but none in England or elsewhere, so great as they. Since their time there has been a growing tendency towards realism. In Russia, France, and Norway this has culminated in the work of Count Léof Tolstoi, Emile Zola, and Henrik Ibsen. These are the great leaders in modern realism and their influence in England and America has been strong. Realism as they use the term means the strictest conformity to truth. They strive to paint life exactly as it appears to them. Unfortunately many of them have chosen to paint only its darkest side and as a result their works have been not only gloomy but in many instances coarse and revolting also. In America the realists, of whom Mr. Howells and Mr. James are chief representatives, do not go to great extremes as do these northern realists. In England, too, the aspect of the novel has changed somewhat and become brighter through the work of such writers as Robert Louis Stevenson, and we have reason to hope that the change will continue, and that the novel of the future will be bright, pure and wholesome.

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