

The Novel and Life.

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We are constantly hearing something about the novel and the influence which it has had upon people. At the present time we might say that the novel is the most universally read of all forms of literature, for it is read by all classes of people, both the educated and the uneducated. Many condemn all novels, and say their influence is evil; others condemn only a part, thinking that some are very beneficial to the reader.

We will try to find the true relation which has always existed between the novel and the people.

As all know, the novel is a comparatively new form of writing, but since its introduction into the arena of literature, it has made marvelous advances. It made its first appearance towards the beginning of the eighteenth century. In its beginning it attempted to help people as well as to depict life. Richardson was asked to write a series of articles teaching people how to behave: these he wrote in a number of letters having a connected plot running through them which gave him the story "Pamela" - our first novel. Richardson was the first who put forth his whole strength in this style of composition. He pictured virtue and vice very strongly, even exaggerating them. At that time, his book had a great influence upon the people. Fielding began his work with the design of ridiculing Richardson: his was a dramatic novel: his work showed his

close study of people, as to their utterances and actions. His story was connected and led from one incident to another with some system. Fielding, within the range of his mind, approached nearest to perfection. Smollett, without possessing Fielding's depth or geniality of nature, or Richardson's intense sentiment and hold upon the passions, still exhibited so large a knowledge of the world, that his works are placed along with Fielding's and Richardson's, as founders of the influential school of novelists. His work though was not harmful, for it calculated to inspire disgust.

Then came Sterne, Goldsmith, Chas. Johnston, Fanny Burney, Walpole, Clara Reece, Robert Bage, Mr. Kenyon, and Mrs. Radcliffe. The works of many of these authors have what we would call, a vulgar tone, but they are said to portray the people of their times. Until 1778 when Miss Burney began to write, decency was not thought to be a necessary part of romance. The plots of some of these novels were very good: to us, the diction used seems rather peculiar and of old style. The influence of these works upon people of the present time might not be the best, but in their time they certainly injured no one, and marked the beginning of a great work.

There was a class, "the dunces", who adopted with some additions, the vulgarities of their betters, and

added large quantities of stupidity from their own minds. The influence of such novels would be very questionable.

About the beginning of this century a new style of fiction was introduced. Novelists tried the experiment of discarding indelicacy and substituting another extreme, sentimentality; and "the dynasty of rakes was succeeded by the dynasty of flats." Their field of action was just the soul-trying period of courtship. "Considered as a mirror of actual life, this school was inferior to the worst specimens of that which it supplanted; for the race deserves the compliment to its intelligence, that there are more rogues than sentimentalists." This style of novel for a long time was read by far the largest portion of the reading public. It is chiefly due to this class of novels that we hear fond, watchful, mothers make such strong objections to their daughters reading works of fiction.

When Scott appeared with his work, the sentimental novel fled "like mist before the sun." Scott's novels did not so much represent the times, but his was a history of the past in the form of a novel. In his field he may be acknowledged to be master. His novels have been a very important factor in intellectual life. His diction is called rather defective, but his style has a charm, which makes a pleasant

study of history for its readers. "From being the weak companion of the laziest hours of the laziest people, the novel, under the impulse it received from Scott, became the illustrator of history, the mirror and satirist of manners, the vehicle of controverted opinions in philosophy, politics, and religion."

There were also many people who had some cause to criticise or defend, who wrote it up in a novel; for an idea strongly presented in a good novel, is sure to have an influence upon its readers, and there are many who read novels who would not read other literature. In this field we have our sociological novel.

Among the various classes of fiction, the one which gained most prominence and influence next to Scott's, was the school of Bulwer Lytton, or the novel of fashionable life. Lord Lytton is criticised as taking many of his incidents and ideas from other authors. His works are called immoral and he tries to paint his immorality so that it will appear well. He had many imitators and for a time the fashionable novel reigned supreme. It is wondered how such a class of novels was commanded so large a number of readers. "The leading merit of these authors consisted in their complete knowledge of clothes: their leading defect in forgetting to put men and women in them."

After this Dickens was hailed with delight, partly owing to the disgust for those preceding him. His novels are largely of the city life of the poorer classes in London and vicinity. His works show him to be a close observer of the people, their lives, and habits. In *Nicholas Nickleby* he called the attention of the public to the workings and abuses of the private schools. By this work he created so strong a sentiment against the schools of the time, and especially the Squeers type of school-master, that a reform in school matters was immediately begun, and within a few years this style of school and school-master was a thing of the past. The debtor-prison life was strongly shown in *David Copperfield* and other works.

Thackeray's novels were mostly satires upon the society of his times. He took the aristocracy as his subjects of ridicule. Especially does *Vanity Fair* bring out the follies and deceptions of society. His one character, Becky Sharp, seems to be an embodiment of trickery, scheming, and deceit, all very nicely concealed from the public; her one aim seems to be to obtain money and move in high society. Thackeray's works have had a powerful effect upon his readers; his influence cannot be overestimated.

Dickens and Thackeray at the present are the lords of the novel, and the favorites of each are about

equally divided. Their influence has been felt by all people.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was very popular in its time. It was the great factor which solidified and intensified the slavery sentiment and hastened the great Civil War. But like all novels written with a special object in view, it has had its day.

Since the introduction of the first novel, there has always been a class of worthless and even vulgar works: such novels have been written to satisfy the demands of a portion of our reading public, who either wish for light reading by which to pass the time away, or who crave for a vulgar, sensational type, which as all know, intensify the careless and wild nature of their readers.

There are a large number of modern writers too numerous to mention, who have contributed to the novelist's field, their share of good and ill.

We might now speak of the influence which people have had over novel writing, and novelists over their readers. By virtue of their sway over the realms of thought and emotion, novelists have exercised a great influence over human affairs. On the other hand a writer is often compelled to write a certain class of literature in order to please the people of the times; so often very good men morally have felt themselves

compelled to write indecently bad books: and many who have led indecently bad lives, have written good books. Literary men must live as well as other people, thus the society which demands a poor class of literature is largely to blame for the class we often have. There is a class of authors who are not governed in this way, but who write good moral books in spite of what the public demands: but it must be confessed that this class is small and does not include many whose works stand the test of time.

Publishers often limit the range of novels in their style, because they say that certain kinds will not sell and of course it is to the publishers interest to reject such as he feels will not sell readily.

"Against good novels, that is against vivid representations of idealizations of life, character, and manners, in this or in any past age, there would seem to be no valid objection; but this department of literature has unfortunately become a domain on which the whole hosts of folly, stupidity, and immorality have encamped."

"Of all printed books that ever vexed the wise and charmed the foolish, a bad novel is probably that which best displays how far the mind can descend in the sliding scale of sense and nature. In the art of embodying imbecility of thought and pettiness of sentiment in a style correspondingly mean and

gauzy, all other men and women have been fairly distanced by certain novelists, not altogether unblessed now with popularity and influence."

The novel is one of the best and most perfect means by which men with great minds can communicate with the world, comprising as it can, a complete philosophy of life. A good novelist should be most thoroughly educated in all lines of thought, and thus a great store of knowledge may be included in the novel. It is evident that the ideal novelist has never existed, for we often find a lack of accurate knowledge in otherwise good novels. In many of our novels written by the greatest minds, we have expressed only one sided views of life: that is - the author expresses just his own sentiments and views, ignoring those of others. Perhaps Scott, of all novelists approaches nearest to the ideal in this.

With the novel of the present time, we should all be more or less familiar. The novels of to-day might be said to be of all the types which have been spoken of before, but now a larger part are written with a view to instruct people and mould public opinion. More attention is now paid to diction than in former times. Science, which is playing so important a part in all things, has also entered into the life of the novel. It is destroying many of the little ideal fictions of the novel. As is the general

tendency of our present time, the novelist shows an almost scientific jealousy for truth and fact, thus resulting in a tendency to resort to the realistic novel as the only one representing the truth; yet the truth does not necessarily need to be disagreeable as some seem to think.

There are those who believe that there is no happiness in anything, and that as we advance in material matters, the happiness is not increased. Such novelists, though they may represent the spirit of the time, are not comforting or satisfying. Some think that the vague desire to get away from our present troubles, has brought about the revival of interest in our older novelists. Howells's theory is — "The novel of the future will be a perfect biography, in which the influence of heredity and environment will be shown with a rigid scientific accuracy."

Some believe that the novels of a while past have not truly represented the life of their times, for the writers have been so influenced by conservative criticism, which teaches us to sneer at our modern writers, that they are afraid to write as they feel, but think they must imitate older writers. A writer should write for his own times, not for the future. The facts of the future will be embodied in the fiction of the future.

Our present novel is not always cheerful, but it is generally true to its surroundings, and is usually thought provoking.

The American novelist's greatest aim now seems to be to represent his own time and place, to give his work its local color, and to write independent of any fixed model: the results are novels more original, more national, and more to be truly a record of the world's progress.

Our novels, we conclude, have always been our social histories, for they were all written to supply the demand of certain classes of people, and with the disappearance of those people, novels of corresponding type are obliterated. When our people are of such moral and intellectual nature as to demand only the best works, all objectionable forms will be banished, and future generations will gladly read our life's histories, receiving from them helpful information; and none will call the novel an objectionable form of literature.