

Lecture 3: Social and Historical Background

The Modern Novel

The Novel: A Definition

According to M.H. Abrams:

“The term novel is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of fiction written in prose. [...] Its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character and motives than do the shorter, more concentrated modes.”

The emergence of the novel

The emergence of the novel was made possible by many factors.

The most important are:

1. The development of the printing press: which enables mass production of reading material.
2. The emergence of a middle class (“middle station”) with the leisure to read.

Popular Taste

When the novel appeared in the 18th century, it was not considered a literary genre. ❖

Daniel Defoe was a literary merchant and he took advantage of an emerging market and an emerging reading public ❖

Defoe was more concerned with pleasing the tastes of the public (the average reader). He was not concerned with pleasing the tastes of the critics. ❖

He referred to his audience as “honest meaning ignorant persons.” ❖

Language and Popular Taste

Defoe did not write his first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, until he was 59. Until then, he was a journalist and a political pamphleteer, and his style was influenced by journalism. ❖

Other factors that influenced language at the time: ❖

The desire to keep language close to the speech of artisans and merchants because they were the new economic and financial agents of England. ❖

Socio-Historical Background

Worldwide travels, the establishment of colonies in the Americas, the international slave trade, industrialization ❖

Europe, especially England, is now in control of international trade routes and owns the bulk of the international trade. ❖

The new economic realities produce a middle class in England, people who used to be serfs working the lands of aristocrats can now be entrepreneurs, slave traders, adventurers, colonists in America. Their children can now be educated. ❖

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The new markets also demand a new type of worker: skilled and literate. The establishment of grammar schools.. ❖

The Development of Prose Fiction

In the 17th and 18th centuries, prose was still not recognized as a literary form. Only Greek and Latin and English verse were considered "high culture." English prose was what lower or middle class people read and wrote. ❖

The economic wealth created in the 18th century a middle class that has a good income and leisure time. They cannot read Greek or Latin and formal literature, but they can read simple stories in prose. ❖

The first novels were published as serial stories in newspapers. Travel stories published in episodes telling the English public of adventures in far away lands. ❖

The establishment of colonies, worldwide travel and international trade made people in England curious about the new lands they were traveling to. This is how stories began to be published in newspapers in prose about travel adventures in exotic and far away lands. ❖

These stories were a success and people began to buy and read them. ❖

The popularity of these travel stories made publishers realize that there was a market and this is how novels in book format began to be published. ❖

The Impact of Printing on Literature

Printing affected the way literature produced and the way it circulated. ❖

Literature was no more a public act, a performance where a poet delivers his poetry ❖ directly to the public or a play performed in front of an audience. Literature is now a book that is read by a reader in the comfort of his/her home.

Still, bookshops, coffeehouses, salons and reading rooms provided new gathering ❖ places where people discussed literature.