

Lecture 6: The Development of the Modern Novel

The Anti-Novel Campaign

In the 1850s it was still common to find people who forbid their families from reading novels ❖

To tell stories, especially fiction, was still considered by some to be a sin. This only made people more curious and desiring to read narratives and stories. ❖

By the 1880s, the prohibition was softened. As Anthony Trollope records in his *Autobiography* (1883): “Novels are read right and left, above stairs and below, in town houses and in country parsonages, by young countesses and by farmers’ daughters, by old lawyers and by young students.” ❖

Why did the novel become such a dominant literary form in the Victorian period?

The audience for the novel grew enormously during the nineteenth century. In part, this was due to economic factors: ❖

The growth of cities, which provided bigger markets ✓

The development of overseas readership in the colonies ✓

Cheaper production costs both for paper and for print processes ✓

Better distribution networks ✓

The advertising and promotion work ✓

Add to that, the spread of literacy, the increase in wealth, the development of a middle class with leisure time, etc...

“A novel is a splendid thing after a hard day’s work”

“A novel is a splendid thing after a hard day’s work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world”

This is how one of the characters in Mary Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) described the novel. Reading fiction is a way of relaxing or winding down after a day of hard work for both men (working outside) and for women (doing housework).

Novel Writers

Novel writers were told in the *Saturday Review* 1887 that the average reader of novels is not a critical person, that he/she cares little for art for art's sake, and has no fixed ideas about the duties and responsibilities of an author: "all he asks is that he may be amused and interested without taxing his own brains."

Eventually, a distinction developed between novels that were intellectually, psychologically and aesthetically demanding and ones that served primarily as a means of escapism and entertainment.

In the final decades of the Victorian era, a firm division was established between the artist or serious novelist and the masses of readers.

Happy Endings

Until the end of the 19th century, there were palpable demands on novel writers to ❖
make their novels have a happy ending.

Dickens is known to have changed the ending of some of his novels to please the ❖
reader with a happy ending.

George Eliot is known to have opposed the idea. She demanded that the readers ❖
should curb their desire for fiction to provide the exceptional and romantic (fairy tales) and learn rather of the importance of the ordinary, the everyday, the commonplace

Novels and Romance

The issue of happy endings was essentially a question about the place of romance in ❖
the novel. Romances have a history of providing escapism. John Ruskin writes:

"The best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of a life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act." (*Sesame and Lilies*, 1865)

Sources

For more information, see

Kate Flint, "The Victorian Novel and Its Readers," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Deirdre David ed., (Cambridge University Press, 2001): pp. 17-35.