Level: 1st Year (All groups)

Module: Literary Studies

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Course 3: THE RISE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

The novel may be the last form of literature to establish itself, but it is historically linked with other forms such as the epic and drama which reach back the beginning of the literary consciousness of the western world; drama was the form that fiction took, but was a fiction of similar kind that was found later in the novel. Therefore, the novel was lately introduced in the English literature, and as posited in Ian Milligan’s The English Novel (1984: 29) it “emerged once more in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century in the form of fictional imitation of the diaries, autobiographies, travellers’ tales and biographies of criminals which were common forms of prose literature”. Although the novel as it is known today has drawn its methods of storytelling from different sources, its modern origin may be traced back to the Spanish great writer –Miguel de Cervantes- who wrote a famous fictitious prose partly as a parody of impossible adventures depicted in the romances of that time. Don Quixote was a challenge of that accepted and previously established conventions of imaginative fiction thus, an appeal to the practical consequences of human action. In this way, Cervantes mapped out part of the territory of the modern novel.

In fact, the nature of the novel demands a certain degree of realism and fidelity to the fact of an ordinary world as one commonly see.Every novelist gives his/her idiosyncratic vision of the world. This vision is acted out by images of men and women. Hence, s/he must deal with men in a specific place at a specific time.

A true novel is a long narrative story organized towards a significant conclusion, with convincing, though imagined, people in their relation with one another. The novel ideally, must be artistically constructed with a connected plot whose incidents belong to ordinary life. The English novel sprang into full flower in the eighteenth century with writings of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Laurence Stern. Conditions at that time were favourable for this new form of literature, namely the printing press, the spread of education among the middle class characterized by its curiosity and inquisitiveness.

Major 18th Century Novelists:

During the early years of the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe (1659/1661-1731) produced Robinson Crusoe (1719), and that was quite different from previous works. This book is about the adventures of a common man, not those of a king, a knight or an extraordinary hero.

Yet, the real break from the previous tradition was made by Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) in Pamela (1740) and Clarissa (1748), when he introduced the narrative combined with the epistolary form. He added a “dramatic presentation of events through a series of letters, and the analysis of human emotions and motivation in prose story form” (Smith & co 1974: 172-3), as well as sentimentality influenced all the coming novelists. He was considered as sexual moralist and for women he was a prophet of emotion.

Henry Fielding (1707-1754) introduced irony and satire (the comic form) and used many characters to represent all social classes. He wrote Shamela (1741); a total imitation of Pamela in which he ridicules Richardson’s simplistic reduction of virtue to female virginity and it was a failure. Then, he wrote Joseph Andrews (1742), The History of Tom Jones (1749), and many others. Fielding wanted to reform manners whereas Richardson worked to improve them.

Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy (1759) a comic novel on morals in which he introduced sentimentality, and Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) a moralist and satirist who used comedy to talk about what disgusted him in society as in The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748).