

Modernist Fiction from Sin to Art

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Abstract

The article highlights the influence of the novelists and philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the emerging and development of the modern novel as a free and outstanding form of literature, and what is more – as a form of art. The paper points out the impact of such names as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett and Malcolm Bradbury, personalities that sought to change the status of the novel through their works. Due to these authors there appeared and flourished the tradition that we now name the “modern” novel. By the turn of the century, the novel was shifting to art; it was becoming a more interesting and more influential form of literature; it was aspiring to become a far more complex, various, open and self-conscious form, one which, in a new way, sought to be taken seriously as “art”.

Key words: modern novel, art, fiction, self-consciousness, stream of consciousness

Many novelists of the turn of the twentieth century attempted to give a perfect definition for the ‘modern’ novel. Some of these novelists are mentioned in the present paper: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and others. The most convincing and influential in his attempt was the ‘literary master’, Henry James. He was concerned not only with the process of writing the novel, but also with its niche in literature. For Henry James, the novel was an art form, which in the skilful hands of the artist could enhance the perception of human experience: “the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms” (James, 1998: xlvii).

The changes that influenced and transformed the novel are thoroughly presented by Bayard Tuckerman in *A History of English Prose Fiction* (1894), by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1970) and by Michael McKeon in *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (2002).

In the 17th century, as stated by Bayard Tuckerman, to puritans, fiction was an invention of the Evil One. The prose of the time was chiefly polemical; it instructed and guided; it provided spiritual insight, but its aim, by no means, was to entertain. Further, as stated in *Prentice Hall Literature: The American Experience* (1994), the puritans produced neither fiction nor drama, since they considered both sinful. They valued a plain style of writing, as they considered clear statement to be the highest goal (Tuckerman, 1894).

Later, in the 18th century, the English Literature gained the perfection of prose forms of the highest importance and beauty due to such notable writers as Swift, Defoe, Addison, Bolingbroke, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Hume. At the end of the 18th century, the novel had become established as a popular form of

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literature, as stated by Tuckerman: "In the hands of Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Goldsmith, it reached a high position as a work of art" (1894).

The works of fiction of the 19th century have achieved a rank of dignity which seems to remain incomparable owing to such writers as Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Kingsley, Anthony Trollope, and very many others (Tuckerman, 1894).

The English author and academic, Malcolm Bradbury, was also concerned with the condition of the modern novel. In his work *The Modern British Novel* (1994), Bradbury claims that the essential secret of the modern novel is that it "came, but the Victorian novel did not completely go away" (5). "The powerful tradition of Victorian fiction – moral, realistic, popular – began to die, and something different and more complex came to emerge: the tradition of what we now name the "modern" novel" (Bradbury: 1). "The novel was aspiring to become a far more complex, various, open and self-conscious form, one which, in a new way, sought to be taken seriously as "art"" (Bradbury, 1994: 2). Henry James wrote his essay *The Future of the Novel* in 1899, where he concluded that the novel was at last coming to "self-consciousness", and becoming a complex, speculative and modern art (Bradbury 6). When Virginia Woolf wrote her audacious essay "*Modern Fiction*" in 1919, she believed that the modern novel was ready to claim freedom from old convention that was just like a political revolution" (Bradbury 2).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the novelists transformed the act of writing fiction into "an overflow of story-telling gift". Novelists like Henry James, raised fiction to the art form "by casting a glance at "the mystery of storytelling"". The standards established by James's theory of the novel, and specifically his view on narrative perspective "played a considerable part in the definition of the new conventions of the modernist novel" (Dobrinescu 2003: 203).

Paul Polplawski (2012) considers that Henry James is an important key transitional figure for long-term literary innovation as he played an important role in the development of 19th and 20th century English literature. Although American by birth, he settled in England in 1876. His novels, "with their broad social realism and their detailed depiction of the mores and manners of polite society" (2012: 551) depict the peculiarities of the both the New World and the Old World. James embodied in his work the traits and specific features of the 19th century novel as well as the 20th century one. Moreover, his novels mirror cultures and traditions of both American and English societies.

Henry James is obviously a pioneer of modern fiction as he was highly concerned "with style and form" and the point of view, and also due to his "experiments with narration, his interest in psychology, his fascination with the involved complexities with consciousness, perception and interpretation" (Polplawski 2012: 551).

In seeking a new psychological dimension of realism in the depiction of the workings of consciousness, Henry James pushed fictional realism to a limit at

which no further development was really possible without moving into a sort of experimentation associated with later novelists such as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (Poplawski 2012: 552).

Henry James's essay "*The Art of Fiction*", published in 1884 in Longman's Magazine, can be considered one of the most significant statements on the theory of the novel. Previously, the novel was regarded as a minor literary form, unworthy of serious critical analysis. James's theoretical approach to fiction marks a departure from the earlier nineteenth century fictional theories. He surely anticipates the condition of the twentieth century theory of fiction.

An attentive perusal of Henry James's essays on the theory of the novel reveals his predictions on the condition of the novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to James, a novel has to be artistic, and, first of all, it has to be interesting. There is only one classification of the novel that he can accept: that based on the reader's interest in the novel. It is about liking or not liking a novel, as he points out:

Some people, for excellent reasons, don't like to read about carpenters; others, for reasons even better, don't like to read about courtesans. Many object to Americans. Others won't look at Italians. Some readers don't like quiet subjects; others don't like bustling ones. Some enjoy a complete illusion; others revel in a complete deception. [...] So that it comes back very quickly, as I have said, to the liking (1984: 58).

James argues that a good novel derives from the fact that the writer has to possess "the sense of reality", and considering that "reality has a myriad of forms", it is the experience of the narrator that makes the difference. Experience, "the very atmosphere of the mind" – is the one that helps to see the unseen and to "judge the whole piece by the pattern" (1984: 52).

He, finely, defines the novel as a "work of art", a "free and serious branch of literature" (1984: 48). He insists that the literary work reflects the "quality of the mind of the producer" and that "no good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind". James claims that the novel represents life itself, therefore he blames Trollope for depriving the novelist of his honour to narrate, as a historian does, the events that really happened. According to James "the novel is history" (1984: 45). While to James the novel is history, to Frank Norris, the novel is not just history; it is the instrument of the novelist as "it expresses modern life better than architecture, better than painting, better than poetry, better than music" (Norris 1903).

It is as necessary to the civilization of the twentieth century as the violin is necessary to Kubelik, as the piano is necessary to Paderewski, as the plane is necessary to the carpenter, the sledge to the blacksmith, the chisel to the mason. It is an instrument, a tool, a weapon, a vehicle. It is that thing which, in the hand of man, makes him civilized and no longer savage, because it gives him a power of durable, permanent expression (Norris 1903).

Frank Norris conveyed the same beliefs regarding the modern novel in his essay "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" (1903). He claims that truth in fiction is of paramount importance, as:

The People have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is not right that they be exploited and deceived with false views of life, false characters, false sentiment, false morality, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism, false notions of self-sacrifice, false views of religion, of duty, of conduct and of manners (Norris 1903).

Henry James "pleads in favour of fiction being autonomous, thus entitled to exist in its own rights and by its own rules, and not as an offspring of reality" (Dobrinescu 2014: 68). Dobrinescu notices that "half a century later, Virginia Woolf expressed ideas similar to James's in her essay also entitled 'The Art of Fiction'. For modernist Woolf "theory and theorizing upon the novel" seems to be of paramount importance too. If James only appreciates whole-heartedly the artistic performance of novelists like Charles Dickens and Makepeace Thackeray, "Woolf is more explicit in her establishing the relationship between the modern and the old art of the word" (Dobrinescu 2014: 93).

With their simple tools and primitive materials [...] Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! [...] We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle (Woolf 1925).

In another essay, written by Henry James "*The Future of the Novel*" (1899), the novel earns the name of "prose picture". To this extent, James again makes reference to art while speaking of the novel. He compares the process of creating a novel, with that of creating a picture, only the novel is rated much higher, for the reason that it has a great advantage: it "is the most comprehensive and the most elastic "picture". It will stretch anywhere" (James 1988: 106). What the craftsman – or the novelist has to do, according to James, is to feed the reader's general hunger for a "picture" – or the novel. The reader, in his/her turn, is somewhat a sly person, even an artful consumer of the content of the novel.

... man combines with his eternal desire for more experience an infinite cunning as to getting his experience as cheaply as possible. He will steal it whenever he can. He likes to live the life of others, yet is well aware of the points at which it may too intolerably resemble his own. The vivid fable, more than anything else, gives him this satisfaction on easy terms, gives him knowledge abundant yet vicarious. It enables him to select, to take and to leave ; so that to feel he can afford to neglect it he must have a rare faculty, or great opportunities, for the extension of experience – by thought, by emotion, by energy – at first hand (James 1984: 102).

Another advantage of the novel lies in its strength, on the grounds that it "can do simply everything". James makes his predictions on the future of the novel based on his opinion that the future of the fiction is tightly connected with the future of the society that "produces and consumes it". So, the quantity supplied depends on

the quantity demanded, as there is no such a literary work, that “any human being is under the smallest positive obligation to like” (1984: 104). Apparently, the novelist, in order to succeed, should have a huge experience of life, the experience that will be the source of the imagination for his work.

Joseph Conrad also conceives literature as a piece of art. He argues that “acquaintance with Mr. Henry James’s work brings a sense of happiness into one’s artistic existence” (1905). Moreover, Conrad appreciates James’s writings and compares them “to a majestic river” in his essay “Henry James - An Appreciation”:

The artistic faculty, of which each of us has a minute grain, may find its voice in some individual of that last group, gifted with a power of expression and courageous enough to interpret the ultimate experience of mankind in terms of his temperament, in terms of art. [...] The artist in his calling of interpreter creates (the clearest form of demonstration) because he must (Conrad 1905).

Conrad asserts that James’s novels spring from “the stream of inspiration” that “flows brimful in a predetermined direction” (Conrad, 1905).

On the whole, Henry James had a great impact on the modernists to come, and, so did his brother, William James, who was a psychologist, and, who, in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), coined the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’, which will signify the modernist narrative technique.

“William James was the first American thinker to argue that while ideology, or something very much like it, colours the whole of our conceptual life as human beings, it does not, or at least need not, determine all the ways we can reflect on this process” (Gunn 1995: 144).

The liaison between the novelist (Henry James) and the psychologist (William James) grew thereafter into the creation of the James literary and psychological heritage. William James had a great influence on his brother. This is obvious due to their tight family relationship and their correspondence. More than that, the beliefs and concepts discussed by William James in his *Principles of Psychology Vol. 1-2* (1890) are further taken up by his brother in his novels, essays, and also in the prefaces to his novels. For instance, William’s empiricist view of life is discernible in Henry’s preface to his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. Henry James argues that the novelist should write from his own “impression or perception of life” in order to give the literary work the plentiful validity, genuineness, and sincerity:

There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the ‘moral’ sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist’s prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to ‘grow’ with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience. [...] Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary

form – its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould (Henry James 1995: 7-8).

In his work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), specifically in his chapter on Imagination, which is definitely indispensable to the process of fiction writing, William James is completely sure that sensations and perceptions once experienced are likely to produce the same emotions and feelings even if generated by copies of them.

Sensations, once experienced, modify the nervous organism, so that copies of them arise again in the mind after the original outward stimulus is gone. No mental copy, however, can arise in the mind, of any kind of sensation which has never been directly excited from without (William James 1890).

If to William James the sensations are the source of experience, to Henry experience is the key to writing, as long as “one must write from experience” (James, 1888). Henry James reverses it so that impressions are the experience that brings an immense sensibility which, in its turn, leads to imagination and therefore to revelations.

As reported by Giles Gunn, William James “differentiated his own position from that of many contemporary ideological critics who take their cues from an Althusser or a Macherey – Bercovich among them – by insisting that our needs do not thereby inevitably imprison us within our notions” (1995: 145). Gunn argues that “James reasoned that even if we cannot determine whether these inventions or interpretations of ours, these ideological “Others” or “Thats,” possess any absolute or real structure – or if they have any, whether that “structure resembles any of our predicated *whats*” – we can assisted by their critical imagination, determine the difference it makes to think so, or the alterations in experience that would be necessary if we thought otherwise” (Gunn 1995: 145).

On the whole, regarded as sinful by the puritans in the 17th century, fiction, had undergone profound changes in the 18th and 19th centuries, and was elevated into an art form in the early 20th century through the influential works of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett and others. Modernist fiction was placed on the same level with philosophy, history, painting and music. In a period when old traditions and values in literature were disappearing, new approaches and knowledge were gaining ground. By the turn of the 20th century, the novel was shifting to art; it was becoming a more interesting and a more influential form of literature.

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