

# The Novel: Genres, Concepts Introduction and Appreciation

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## Abstract

*Among the three genres of literature, prose is the newest and the most popular. Prior to the eighteenth century, poetry and drama were the only genres of literature. The two had their origin in the classical era. Prose came into existence much later in late eighteenth century and till today; it has remained the most prominent. Prose has as its genre, the novel which many people see it as synonyms mainly because of its popularity. It is a business for the literate unlike the other genres that can be performed and appreciated by both the literates and the illiterates alike. Despite the limitation, novel remains the most cherished because it is entertaining and educating. In this paper, the researcher in addition to demystifying the concept novel, chronicles as well as analyses what are required in introducing a novel to ensure full appreciation.*

**Keywords:** novel, prose fiction, genre, literature, narratives, picaresque.

## The Novel: Concept and Origin

Novel is one of the subgenres of literature which became prominent in the nineteenth century. The term *novel* denotes a long narrative usually an imaginative work of art in form of a prose. According to Kennedy, Gioia and Bauerlein (2009), novel is an extended work of fictional prose narrative. They go further to vivify that *novel* implies a book-length composition with abundant characters, varied scenes and a broader coverage of time than a shorter work provides (108). Nnyagu (2015) maintains that novel is a type of extended prose fiction, that makes use of characters, plot, theme and setting to pass across its message. Similarly, in the view of Baldick (2004), novels are “nearly always extended fictional prose narrative.”

Essentially, novels tell stories and they are written in prose form with the language well chosen to delight the reader. Today, whenever the term literature is mentioned, mind goes to novels; some unwary ones tend to nurse the illusion that any work on literature is a novel. Today, we hear people even students of English refer to plays and anthology of poems as novel. They nurse the impression that any work of literature read for entertainment and for education is a novel.

There are three genres of literature: Poetry, Drama and Prose. Among the genres of literature, poetry and drama

had been in existence as they originated in the Greek Classical Period. Prose which has novel as its appendage came into existence much later. Despite the fact that it is the newest genre, prose fiction which many see as a synonym for *novel* is the most popular. This is why Kennedy *et al* say that as the most popular literary genre from the late eighteenth century to our own time, the novel has evoked from scholars and critics lengthy commentary. According to them, the novel is the most pliant and indefinable of contemporary literary genres.

Although novel is a late eighteenth and nineteenth century innovation, scholars believe that it did not just spring out in the nineteenth century. Its development was a gradual process. Thrall and Hibbard have this to say about the emergence of the novel

More recent in its development than the other great literary type-forms, the English novel may be thought of as essentially an eighteenth-century product. This does not mean, however that it came into full bloom with any one writer or any one book in any one year; literary types are not created in this way. Without the richness of literary activity which had preceded the eighteenth century, the novel could not have matured (280).

They go further to disclose that the narrative interest developed in the stories of Charlemagne and Arthur, the various romantic cycles, the *fabliaux*; the descriptive values and appreciation of nature found in the pastorals; the historical interest of diaries and journals; the enthusiasm for character portrayal developed in sketches and biographies; the use of suspense in tales and medieval romances – all these had to be familiar and understood before writers could evolve the novel, a form which draws certain elements from many of the literary types which preceded it (281). Kennedy *et al* confirmed that that before the eighteenth century, there had been evidence of the existence of the novel. According to them, literary historians have traced its origins back to the medieval prose romance and the Italian *novella* of the fourteenth century, the picaresque, and medieval legends (especially those chronicling the lives of Christian saints) (108). To Abrams (2005), long narrative romances in prose were written by Greek writers as early as the second and

third centuries A. D. He affirms too that picaresque narrative existed in the sixteenth century, evidence that novel had predated the late nineteenth century (198).

### **Parsing the Novel**

Novels are an indispensable aspect of literature not basically because it entertains the reader but because it informs. As had earlier pointed out, novel tells a story about people and society. Though the story of the novel is usually imaginary, real episodes that actually transpired inspire the writer. What this means is that prose fiction (Novel) is based on a people and a society. That is why it is said that literature (novel) is a mirror of the author's society. No author writes in a vacuum; what happens around him or her constitutes the source of his work. What the writer does is just to present the idea using imaginary people known as characters and imaginary society known as setting to tell the story in a pleasing and convincing manner. In doing this, the writer must know that the onus is on him or her to present the imagined fact in a coherent manner so that the story would be credible and plausible.

The reader of the novel must bear it in mind that the novel is a fictional representation of a particular society. It is not just read for the mere entertainment, good novel does more than just that. Laurence (1978) says that "But, unless fiction gives more than pleasure, it hardly justifies itself as a subject of college study" (3). Novel is read for many reasons. Entertainment is one of the reasons but more importantly, it is read for the education that it offers. This is why Laurence further says that unless it expands or refines our minds or quickens our sense of life, its value is not appreciably greater than that of a miniature golf, bridge, or ping-pong. To have a compelling claim on our attention, it must yield not only enjoyment but understanding. To him, the experience of humankind through the ages is that literature may furnish such understanding and do so effectively – that the depiction of imagined experience can provide authentic insights (3). It is only when the reader has this at the back of his or her mind that he or she would be able to appreciate the work as well as understand the message that the author aims to pass across.

### **Introducing the Novel**

Appreciating the novel denotes liking the novel. One determines whether one likes a novel or detests it only when one has begun to read. Appreciation thus comes with comprehension. It is therefore, not possible for one to appreciate what one does not understand. To introduce a novel and ensure proper appreciation by the student, the following facts have to be put into consideration.

#### **1. Who is the author of the novel?**

To appreciate a novel, the first thing one does is to find out who the author is. While introducing a novel, state clearly, the name of the author and make it vivid who the author is. Ascertaining the background of the author helps to determine whose story he tells. If the author of a novel is an Igbo, it is obvious that his novel would be chronicling the way of life of the Igbo as he observes it. This is why it is said that literature is a mirror of the society. A good reader knows that he starts reading a novel right from the author's name.

#### **2. What is the title of the book?**

This is very important. Some novels have such titles that immediately reveal the subject of the novel. Explain vividly the relationship between the title of the novel and the story if there is any. Political novels are sometimes known by their titles. If the author has any reason for choosing the caption of the novel, endeavour to talk about it as such will to a great extent, help the reader appreciate the novel. Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born* for instance, has a lot of connotation from the caption. When the students are made to understand that the title is symbolical and denotes that the morally pure ones to lead Ghana out of squalor had not emerged, they will then read the novel with high degree of appreciation. On the other hand, if nothing is said about the title, one may nurse the impression that the novel is about romantic affair and he or she would read it as such and would record low comprehension and appreciation.

#### **3. The central idea:**

Lostracco and Wilkerson (1996), describe central idea as the implied comment on the subject of the story. They believe that central idea is synonymous with theme. This is what the story reveals about some aspect of existence – as perceived by the author. Carpenter and Neumeyer (1974), say that theme is the controlling idea that informs a literary work. They made it clear that theme is not the moral but that it is similar to meaning. As the central idea of a novel, theme is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied by the story. For the audience to understand and appreciate a novel, there is the need that he or she who introduces the novel says something about the theme. He or she needs to tell the learner what the central idea of the novel is as that would make the reader to be focused. In addition, depending on the authors' style, some novelists make the themes of their novels implied and not obvious. For the audience to appreciate the work therefore, he needs to be informed if the theme is obvious or implied.

#### 4. *Who are the characters?*

Characters are the imaginary figures created by the author to advance the plot of the novel. Kennedy et al describe character as a person represented in a narrative or drama and by convention, characters have moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities sufficiently developed to make them recognizable individuals (21). It has to be emphasized here that though characters are credible people in a work of art, as long as the work of art is fiction, characters are not equivalent to real persons. They only appear real and credible and they bear plausible traits, and their speech and actions are very close to those of human beings in real life so that through them, we can understand ourselves. To appreciate a novel, the audience needs to know who the characters are and who they represent in real life. Adichie's Eugene Achike in *Purple Hibiscus* represents a conservative and fastidious Roman Catholic faithful ubiquitous in our contemporary society. The reader equally needs to be told who the minor characters are as well as the responsibilities they play for the advancement of the plot.

The method of presenting the characters known as characterization needs to be talked about. The reader should be made to understand if the author has used the direct method or whether he or she has used the indirect exposition. The knowledge of these would go a long way in helping the reader understand and appreciate the novel.

#### 5. *What is the setting of the author's novel?*

Setting is one of the important elements of prose fiction. The way the author handles setting determines the credibility or otherwise of the novel. Setting is where and when the events of the story happen. It includes the condition, the total environment – psychological, emotional, physical, social, political and economic aspects of the society. Setting agrees with the characters and the diction to boost the quality of the novel and enhance appreciation. Diction is the author's choice and use of words.

If the author's environment is a rural area in an Igbo environment, the characters must reason, behave and speak like people from that part of the society. That is called decorum and propriety in literature. Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* speaks and behaves in a way that coheres with the environment he comes from. These need to be explained to an average reader of the novel so that he or she reads with a degree of appreciation.

#### 6. *The point of view:*

Every story must be told from some point of view. The novelist chooses from which vintage point he

or she would tell his or her story. It is difficult if not completely impossible for the reader to understand the author's work when he or she does not know from which point of view the story is being told. Kennedy et al see point of view as the perspective from which a story is told. They disclose that there are many points of view but among them, the most commonly used are first person point of view and third person point of view.

In introducing the novel, there is the need to indicate the point of view through which the novelist's story is told. The first person point of view makes use of the first person personal pronoun *I* and the good way to understand the power of first person narrative according to Wilbur (2001), is by thinking about how we use it in everyday life. The third person narrative on the other hand, makes use of the third person pronoun *he* or *she* as the case may be and it is usually referred to omniscient or all-knowing narrative.

#### 7. *Style of the author:*

Style is what distinguishes one person from the other. It is a specific way of doing something peculiar to a particular person. To Wilbur, defining why we like a novel or a particular writer has a lot in common with the kind of judgments we make about people. When people you know have style, then more often than not, they have something about them that sets them apart from others. Abrams say that it has to do with " – as *how* speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say. In the view of Charters (1983), style has to do with the language the author uses in his narration. It is made up of various topics, including the writer's *tone*, or the way he uses words to convey unstated attitudes (15). One's style determines whether his novel would be liked or disliked by the reader. Some readers like authors whose language is simple. That is part of style. Chinua Achebe's novels are well appraised because of his simplicity of language punctuated with apt proverbs. In introducing the novel, one has to comment on the stylistics of the author especially as it concerns the language use. If there are strange words used by the author, talking about it especially the author's reason for the choice of words enhances understanding.

#### 8. *How has the plot helped in understanding the novel?*

Plot is the sequential arrangement of the story in a work of art indicating what happened, when, where, how and why it happened as well as the outcome. Thrall and Hibbard describe it as a planned series of interrelated actions progressing, because of the interplay of one force upon another, through a struggle of opposing forces to a climax and a *denouement* (315).

Every good novel has plot and it is arranged to have beginning, middle and end.

At the beginning, the initial conflict of the novel is introduced. The student needs to know at what point the conflict of the novel comes in. Conflict is the central struggle between two or more forces in a literary work. Conflict becomes obvious when some person or forces try to stop the protagonist from achieving his or her expected goal.

The conflict continues to intensify and the plot gets to the climax which is the point when the story would no longer progress. At this point, there is a *discovery* which leads to the denouement. This is the point when the novel comes to an end.

Critics believe that plot of the novel is the most crucial element of literature. This is so because the plausibility and credibility of the novel are seriously negatively affected if the plot of the novel is faulty. How deep the plot is, determines the length of the novel. It is also not the convention that the plot of a novel must be shaped to have beginning, middle and an end, plot may start from the middle of the story and with the aid of flashback, the writer is made abreast of what had transpired. This method is said to be *in medias res*.

#### 9. What type of novel is that?

There are numerous types of novel, each depending on the form, subject and technique. Among the different types of novel are *Picaresque*, *Historical*, *Social*, *Sentimental*, *Gothic*, *Psychological*, *Epistolary*, and *Anti-novel*.

#### **Picaresque Novel:**

The picaresque novel emerged in the sixteenth century. According to Abrams (2005), the most popular instance of this type of novel *Gil Blas* was written in 1715 by the Frenchman Le Sage. The term "Picaro", according to him, is Spanish for "Rogue," and a typical story concerns the escapades of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alteration of character through a long succession of adventures (198). Picaresque novel therefore, is the type of novel with a picaroon (a rogue) as its hero or heroine. It is realistic, centered on low life descriptions but with episodic structure. Baldick (2002), observed that the term is equally applied to narratives that do not have a picaroon as their central character, but are loosely structured as a sequence of episodes united only by the presence of the central character, who is often involved in a long journey. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is an example of this type of novel.

#### **Historical Novel:**

Kennedy *etal* say that in this type of novel, the author's narrative is set in another time and place, with marked attention to historical accuracy. Here the author attempts to recreate a true and real picture of the period, letting it serve as the backdrop for the local action. The characters, setting and the action of this type of novel are drawn from the records of a locality, a nation or a people. The writer of this novel presents a historical reality of certain episodes that transpired in the time past using invented characters. Sometimes however, the central characters of the novel are real and not invented so the reader reads the novel to get abreast of what happened in the past. To write this type of novel, the author who probably was not yet born in the period he or she writes about makes research to be able to give a true picture of the age. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for instance, gives a true account of the historical Biafra war written many decades after the war. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* chronicles the historical colonization of the Igbo. The reader of the novel tends to have a true picture of the experiences of the Igbo in the time past during the colonization.

#### **Social Novel:**

This type of novel is a work of art which is about prevailing social issues such as race, gender or class distinction. The novel centres on a society and the characters act in line with the activities of the society. Certain social issues constitute the central object of the novel. Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* is all about the importance of child in marriage in Africa in general and Igbo in particular. It is a known fact that in our society, a man marries a wife purposely to have children and when children are not forthcoming, the marriage is termed not a successful one. The woman in such a marriage faces humiliation not only from her immediate marital home but also from people from the community in general. Uche Nnyagu's *Silent Voices*, *Return of an Enslaved*, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* are all examples of social novel as they are about one social ill or the order.

#### **Sentimental Novel:**

This is also called novel of sensibility or novel of sentiment. It became popular in Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This type of novel exploits the reader's capacity for tenderness, sympathy or compassion to uneven degree by presenting an unrealistic issue about a character greatly subjected to a serious plight. The writer exaggerates the problems meted to the protagonist in such a way that the reader must experience be purgation of emotion. According to Thrall and Hibbard, Richardson's *Pamela*, or *Virtue Rewarded* (1740) was the beginning of the vogue. The

sentimental novel exalted feeling above reason. Therefore, it is not a realistic novel; it is not about credible events or realistic actions of a character but about emotions. Things not possible in real life can feature in this type of novel as long as such can intensify feeling.

#### **Gothic Novel:**

This is also known as gothic romance and it is a form of novel whose characteristics involve magic, mystery and chivalry. Kennedy *et al* describes it as a genre whose dominant mood is terror and suspense, whose setting is an isolated castle, mansion, or monastery, and whose characters include an ingenuous hero or heroine surrounded by mysterious or threatening individuals. The term *gothicis* applied to medieval architecture and in the eighteenth century, it is associated to superstitions. Ghosts feature in the novel usually to cause horror as this type of novel chiefly is horrifying. Certain places that constitute the setting of the novel domicile phantoms who terrify both the characters and the reader. Occasionally, strange things like strange footsteps, knocking on the door at the odd hours of the day and head swelling occur. Thrall and Hibbard disclosed that Horace Walpole was the real originator as his famous *Castle of Otranto* (1753) was the first known example of gothic novel. Rems Umeasiegbu's *Abandoned Ghost Babies* featured elements of this type of literature.

#### **Psychological Novel:**

A school of thought sees psychological novel as an interpretation of "the invisible life." The phrase was first importantly applied to a group of novelists in the middle of the nineteenth century, a group of which Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot and George Meredith happened to be the major writers. It is a prose fiction which places more than the usual amount of emphasis on characterization, and on the motives, circumstances, and internal actions which motivate the external action. Psychological novel is a realistic fiction not basically interested in what happen but in why it happens. It is a realistic novel because every action that transpired had a credible underlying reason why it happened. Characters and characterization are very important and they seem realistic as what propels certain actions of the characters is logical.

#### **Epistolary Novel:**

The term *epistolary* is derived from the word *epistle* and it denotes letter. Epistolary novel therefore, is the type of novel whose story is told in the way of letters written by mainly, the major characters in the novel. We read the stories and get to know about the characters, their inner beings and their thoughts through series of letter written by the characters. It is a realistic

novel and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* is said to be an earliest example. This form of novel was made popular in the eighteenth century by Richardson. In Africa, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is a good example of recent novel in that manner.

#### **Anti-novel:**

Although there is an evidence that the term anti-roman (anti-novel) had been in existence as it was used in 1933 by Charles Sorel to describe the parodic nature of his prose fiction *Le Berger*, the French philosopher and critic, Jean-Peter Sartre introduced the term into the modern literary discourse in his introduction to Nathalie Sarraute's *Portrait d'un inconnu* published in 1948. As its name implies, antinovel opposes everything about the normal novel and has its own convention. It is an experimental fiction that distorts the conventions of the normal novel like plot, characterization and other such elements of novel. According to Baldick, it is a form of experimental fiction that dispenses with certain traditional elements of novel writing like the analysis of characters' state of mind or the unfolding of a sequential plot (13).

#### **Summary**

In this paper, the researcher has assiduously discussed the concept *novel*, tracing its origin to the late eighteenth century. He vivifies that prior to the eighteenth century, there has been evidence of the existence of novel likemedieval romance and the picaresque novel which had existed in the sixteenth century. The authors aim in the paper was to make novel easily appreciated and so, he has listed and discussed crucial points that the reader ought to put into consideration to appreciate the novel. Again, he has classified the novels according to genres with examples of each. It is hoped that the paper will go a long way in helping the learner appreciate as well as differentiate among various types of novels.

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