

Uses

Interpretation of life

Novels are not expected to be didactic, like tracts or morality plays; nevertheless, in varying degrees of implicitness, even the “purest” works of fictional art convey a philosophy of life. The novels of Jane Austen, designed primarily as superior entertainment, imply a desirable ordered existence, in which the comfortable decorum of an English rural family is disturbed only by a not-too-serious shortage of money, by love affairs that go temporarily wrong, and by the intrusion of self-centred stupidity. The good, if unrewarded for their goodness, suffer from no permanent injustice. Life is seen, not only in Jane Austen’s novels but in the whole current of bourgeois Anglo-American fiction, as fundamentally reasonable and decent. When wrong is committed, it is usually punished, thus fulfilling Miss Prism’s summation in Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), to the effect that in a novel the good characters end up happily and the bad characters unhappily: “that is why it is called fiction.”

That kind of fiction called realistic, which has its origins in 19th-century France, chose the other side of the coin, showing that there was no justice in life and that the evil and the stupid must prevail. In the novels of Thomas Hardy there is a pessimism that may be taken as a corrective of bourgeois Panglossianism—the philosophy that everything happens for the best, satirized in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759)—since the universe is presented as almost impossibly malevolent. This tradition is regarded as morbid, and it has been deliberately ignored by most popular novelists. The “Catholic” novelists—such as François Mauriac in France, Graham Greene in England, and others—see life as mysterious, full of wrong and evil and injustice inexplicable by human canons but necessarily acceptable in terms of the plans of an inscrutable God. Between the period of realistic pessimism, which had much to do with the agnosticism and determinism of 19th-century science, and the introduction of theological evil into the novel, writers such as H.G. Wells attempted to create a fiction based on optimistic liberalism. As a reaction, there was the depiction of “natural man” in the novels of D.H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway.

For the most part, the view of life common to American and European fiction since World War II posits the existence of evil—whether theological or of that brand discovered by the French Existentialists, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre—and assumes that man is imperfect and life possibly absurd. The fiction of the former Communist Europe was based on a very different assumption, one that seems naïve and old-fashioned in its collective optimism to readers in the disillusioned democracies. It is to be noted that in the erstwhile Soviet Union aesthetic evaluation of fiction was replaced by ideological judgment. Accordingly, the works of the popular British writer A.J. Cronin, since they seem to depict personal tragedy as an emanation of capitalistic infamy, were rated higher than those of Conrad, James, and their peers.

Entertainment or escape

In a period that takes for granted that the written word should be “committed”—to the exposure of social wrong or the propagation of progressive ideologies—novelists who seek merely to take the reader out of his dull or oppressive daily life are not highly regarded, except by that reading public that has never expected a book to be anything more than a diversion. Nevertheless, the provision of laughter and dreams has been for many centuries a legitimate literary occupation. It can be condemned by serious devotees of literature only if it falsifies life through oversimplification and tends to corrupt its readers into belief that reality is as the author presents it. The novelettes once beloved of mill girls and domestic servants, in which the beggar maid was elevated to queendom by a king of high finance, were a mere narcotic, a sort of enervating opium of the oppressed; the encouragement of such subliterate might well be one of the devices of social oppression. Adventure stories and spy novels may have a healthy enough astringency, and the very preposterousness of some adventures can be a safeguard against any impressionable young reader’s neglecting the claims of real life to dream of becoming a secret agent. The subject matter of some humorous novels—such as the effete British aristocracy created by P.G. Wodehouse, which is no longer in existence if it ever was—can never be identified with a real human society; the dream is accepted as a dream. The same may be said of Evelyn Waugh’s early novels—such as *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930)—but these are raised above mere entertainment by touching, almost incidentally, on real human issues (the relation of the innocent to a circumambient malevolence is a persistent theme in all Waugh’s writing).

Any reader of fiction has a right to an occasional escape from the dullness or misery of his existence, but he has the critical duty of finding the best modes of escape—in the most efficiently engineered detective or adventure stories, in humour that is more than sentimental buffoonery, in dreams of love that are not mere pornography. The fiction of entertainment and escape frequently sets itself higher literary standards than novels with a profound social or philosophical purpose. Books like John Buchan’s *Thirty-nine Steps* (1915), Graham Greene’s *Travels with My Aunt* (1969), Dashiell Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* (1930), and Raymond Chandler’s *Big Sleep* (1939) are distinguished pieces of writing that, while diverting and enthralling, keep a hold on the realities of human character. Ultimately, all good fiction is entertainment, and, if it instructs or enlightens, it does so best through enchanting the reader.

Propaganda

The desire to make the reader initiate certain acts—social, religious, or political—is the essence of all propaganda, and, though it does not always accord well with art, the propagandist purpose has often found its way into novels whose prime value is an aesthetic one. The *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) of Charles Dickens attacked the abuses of schools to some purpose, as his *Oliver Twist* (1838) drew attention to the horrors of poorhouses and his *Bleak House* (1853) to the abuses of the law of chancery. The weakness of propaganda in fiction is that it loses its value when the wrongs it exposes are righted, so that the more successful a propagandist novel is, the briefer the life it can be expected to enjoy. The genius of Dickens lay in his ability to transcend merely

topical issues through the vitality with which he presented them, so that his contemporary disclosures take on a timeless human validity—chiefly through the power of their drama, character, and rhetoric.

The pure propagandist novel—which Dickens was incapable of writing—quickly becomes dated. The “social” novels of H.G. Wells, which propounded a rational mode of life and even blueprinted utopias, were very quickly exploded by the conviction of man’s irredeemable irrationality that World War I initiated and World War II corroborated, a conviction the author himself came to share toward the end of his life. But the early scientific romances of Wells remain vital and are seen to have been prophetic. Most of the fiction of the former Soviet Union, which either glorified the regime or refrained from criticizing it, was dull and unreal, and the same can be said of Communist fiction elsewhere. Propaganda too frequently ignores man as a totality, concentrating on him aspectively—in terms of politics or sectarian religion. When a didactic attack on a system, as in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s attack on slavery in the United States in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), seems to go beyond mere propaganda, it is because the writer makes the reader aware of wrongs and injustices that are woven into the permanent human fabric. The reader’s response may be a modification of his own sensibility, not an immediate desire for action, and this is one of the legitimate effects of serious fiction. The propagandist Dickens calls for the immediate righting of wrongs, but the novelist Dickens says, mainly through implication, that all men—not just schoolmasters and state hirelings—should become more humane. If it is possible to speak of art as possessing a teaching purpose, this is perhaps its only lesson.

Reportage

The division in the novelist’s mind is between his view of his art as a contrivance, like a Fabergé watch, and his view of it as a record of real life. The versatile English writer Daniel Defoe, on the evidence of such novels as his *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), a recreation of the London plague of 1665, believed that art or contrivance had the lesser claim and proceeded to present his account of events of which he had had no direct experience in the form of plain journalistic reportage. This book, like his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), is more contrived and cunning than it appears, and the hurried, unshaped narrative is the product of careful preparation and selective ordering. His example, which could have been a very fruitful one, was not much followed until the 20th century, when the events of the real world became more terrifying and marvellous than anything the novelist could invent and seemed to ask for that full imaginative treatment that only the novelist’s craft can give.

In contemporary American literature, John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946), though it recorded the actual results of the nuclear attack on the Japanese city in 1945, did so in terms of human immediacies, not scientific or demographic abstractions, and this approach is essentially novelistic. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965) took the facts of a multiple murder in the Midwest of the United States and presented them with the force, reality, tone, and (occasionally) overintense writing that distinguish his

genuine fiction. Norman Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), recorded, in great personal detail but in a third-person narration, his part in a citizens' protest march on Washington, D.C. It would seem that Mailer's talent lies in his ability to merge the art of fiction and the craft of reportage, and his *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), which deals with the American lunar project, reads like an episode in an emergent roman-fleuve of which Mailer is the central character.

The presentation of factual material as art is the purpose of such thinly disguised biographies as Somerset Maugham's *Moon and Sixpence* (1919), undisguised biographies fleshed out with supposition and imagination like Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard* (1933), and many autobiographies served up—out of fear of libel or of dullness—as novels. Conversely, invented material may take on the lineaments of journalistic actuality through the employment of a Defoe technique of flat understatement. This is the way of such science fiction as Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain* (1969), which uses sketch maps, computer projections, and simulated typewritten reports.

Agent of change in language and thought

Novelists, being neither poets nor philosophers, rarely originate modes of thinking and expression. Poets such as Chaucer and Shakespeare have had much to do with the making of the English language, and Byron was responsible for the articulation of the new romantic sensibility in it in the early 19th century. Books like the Bible, Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* may underlie permanent or transient cultures, but it is hard to find, except in the early Romantic period, a novelist capable of arousing new attitudes to life (as opposed to aspects of the social order) and forging the vocabulary of such attitudes.

With the 18th-century precursors of Romanticism—notably Richardson, Sterne, and Rousseau—the notion of sentiment entered the European consciousness. Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* fired a new attitude toward love—more highly emotional than ever before—as his *Émile* (1762) changed educated views on how to bring up children. The romantic wave in Germany, with Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and the works of Jean-Paul Richter a generation later, similarly aroused modes of feeling that rejected the rational constraints of the 18th century. Nor can the influence of Sir Walter Scott's novels be neglected, both on Europe and on the American South (where Mark Twain thought it had had a deplorable effect). With Scott came new forms of regional sentiment, based on a romantic reading of history.

It is rarely, however, that a novelist makes a profound mark on a national language, as opposed to a regional dialect (to which, by using it for a literary end, he may impart a fresh dignity). It is conceivable that Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1825–27; *The Betrothed*), often called the greatest modern Italian novel, gave 19th-century Italian intellectuals some notion of a viable modern prose style in an Italian that might be termed “national,” but even this is a large claim. Günter Grass, in post-Hitler Germany, sought to revivify a language that had been corrupted by the Nazis; he

threw whole dictionaries at his readers in the hope that new freedom, fantasy, and exactness in the use of words might influence the publicists, politicians, and teachers in the direction of a new liberalism of thought and expression.

It is difficult to say whether the French Existentialists, such as Sartre and Albert Camus, have influenced their age primarily through their fiction or their philosophical writings. Certainly, Sartre's early novel *Nausea* (1938) established unforgettable images of the key terms of his philosophy, which has haunted a whole generation, as Camus's novel *The Stranger* (1942) created for all time the lineaments of "Existential man." In the same way, the English writer George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) incarnated brilliantly the nature of the political choices that are open to 20th-century humanity, and, with terms like "Big Brother" (i.e., the leader of an authoritarian state) and "doublethink" (belief in contradictory ideas simultaneously), modified the political vocabulary. But no novelist's influence can compare to that of the poet's, who can give a language a soul and define, as Shakespeare and Dante did, the scope of a culture.

Expression of the spirit of its age

The novelist, like the poet, can make the inchoate thoughts and feelings of a society come to articulation through the exact and imaginative use of language and symbol. In this sense, his work seems to precede the diffusion of new ideas and attitudes and to be the agent of change. But it is hard to draw a line between this function and that of expressing an existing climate of sensibility. Usually the nature of a historical period—that spirit known in German as the *Zeitgeist*—can be understood only in long retrospect, and it is then that the novelist can provide its best summation. The sickness of the Germany that produced Hitler had to wait some time for fictional diagnosis in such works as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947) and, later, Günter Grass's *Tin Drum* (1959). Evelyn Waugh waited several years before beginning, in the trilogy *Sword of Honour*, to depict that moral decline of English society that started to manifest itself in World War II, the conduct of which was both a cause and a symptom of the decay of traditional notions of honour and justice.

The novel can certainly be used as a tool for the better understanding of a departed age. The period following World War I had been caught forever in Hemingway's *Sun Also Rises* (1926; called *Fiesta* in England), F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels and short stories about the so-called Jazz Age, the *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) of Aldous Huxley, and D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* (1922) and *Kangaroo* (1923). The spirit of the English 18th century, during which social, political, and religious ideas associated with rising middle classes conflicted with the old Anglican Tory rigidities, is better understood through reading Smollett and Fielding than by taking the cerebral elegance of Pope and his followers as the typical expression of the period.

Similarly, the unrest and bewilderment of the young in the period after World War II still speak in novels like J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Kingsley Amis'

Lucky Jim (1954). It is notable that with novels like these—and the beat-generation books of Jack Kerouac; the American-Jewish novels of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth; and the black novels of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin—it is a segmented spirit that is expressed, the spirit of an age group, social group, or racial group, and not the spirit of an entire society in a particular phase of history. But probably a *Zeitgeist* has always been the emanation of a minority, the majority being generally silent. The 20th century seems, from this point of view, to be richer in vocal minorities than any other period in history.

Creator of life-style and arbiter of taste

Novels have been known to influence, though perhaps not very greatly, modes of social behaviour and even, among the very impressionable, conceptions of personal identity. But more young men have seen themselves as Hamlet or Childe Harold than as Julien Sorel, the protagonist of Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* (1830), or the sorrowing Werther. Richardson's novel may popularize Pamela, or Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* (1906–22) Jon, as a baptismal name, but it rarely makes a deeper impression on the mode of life of literate families. On the other hand, the capacity of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) to influence young men in the direction of sybaritic amorality, or of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) to engender a freer attitude to sex, has never been assessed adequately. With the lower middle class reading public, the effect of devouring *The Forsyte Saga* was to engender genteelisms—cucumber sandwiches for tea, supper renamed dinner—rather than to learn that book's sombre lesson about the decline of the old class structure. Similarly, the ladies who read Scott in the early 19th century were led to barbarous ornaments and tastefully arranged folk songs.

Fiction has to be translated into one of the dramatic media—stage, film, or television—before it can begin to exert a large influence. *Tom Jones* as a film in 1963 modified table manners and coiffures and gave American visitors to Great Britain a new (and probably false) set of expectations. The stoic heroes of Hemingway, given to drink, fights, boats, and monosyllables, became influential only when they were transferred to the screen. They engendered other, lesser heroes—incorruptible private detectives, partisans brave under interrogation—who in their turn have influenced the impressionable young when seeking an identity. Ian Fleming's James Bond led to a small revolution in martini ordering. But all these influences are a matter of minor poses, and such poses are most readily available in fiction easily adapted to the mass media—which means lesser fiction. Proust, though he recorded French patrician society with painful fidelity, had little influence on it, and it is hard to think of Henry James disturbing the universe even fractionally. Films and television programs dictate taste and behaviour more than the novel ever could.