

English 35: The Rise of the Novel
September 29, 2017 group discussion
McKeon and *Shamela*

1. With your group, talk through an overview of McKeon's argument. **Can you create a diagram of McKeon's theory? Can you create a diagram of Watt's for comparison?** (Use the notes below for guidance if you like.)
2. How does McKeon's approach, or guiding theory, seem different from Watt's?
3. How does McKeon conceptualize the relation between the novel and the world? (As compared to Watt? As compared to Armstrong?)
4. What does McKeon mean, at the end of this essay, when he says:

The constant recurrence of parallels (sometimes self-conscious) between the distinct questions of truth and questions of virtue "means that epistemological choices come to have ideological significance, and a given account of the nature of social reality implies a certain formal commitment and procedure. Moreover we may conceive these correlations of truth and virtue also in terms of narrative form and content, so that the way the story is told, and what is told, are implicitly understood to bear an integral relation to each other." (397)

"This insight – the deep and fruitful analogy between questions of truth and questions of virtue – is the enabling foundation of the novel." (397)

McKeon overview

McKeon is basically a more complicated version of Watt, which theorizes the transition between Watt's two terms, and posits the existence of a critique of his second term in order to do so.

McKeon's big thing is genre, and the idea that genres or forms have meaning or content. (This is implicit in Watt's formal realism – capitalism, individualism and middle-class thing.)

McKeon more specifically:

Eighteenth-century instability of generic and social categories which have traditionally been central to the Watt account of the novel's rise.

1a. Two central problems with Watt's account of the rise of the novel: absence of romance (literary genre) and the aristocracy (social class); necessity of a more complicated understanding of how conceptual categories exist at moments of social change (383)

1. "The instability of generic categories registers an epistemological crisis, a major cultural transition in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative." 383

questions of truth

2. "The instability of social categories registers a cultural crisis in attitudes toward how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members." 383

questions of virtue

"Questions of truth and virtue both pose problems of signification: What kind of authority or evidence is required of narrative to permit it to signify truth to its readers? What kind of social existence or behavior signifies an individual's virtue to others?" 384

"Romance comes to stand for a species of deceit that indiscriminately includes lying and fictionalizing, and the category to which it is most often opposed is not "the novel" but "true history." 385 (**Is this true? See book titles for examples.**)

The obligation of extreme skepticism to elaborate its own formula for "telling the truth in narrative" and the problems of this. (388)

Pamela and *Shamela* as the paradigmatic case of "two competing versions of how to tell the truth in narrative" (389); McKeon's argument is that it is the dialectical relation between them that produces the novel form of writing

McKeon now moves from "questions of truth" to "questions of virtue":

"In the realm of social change, the idea of "personal virtue" occupies the place that "true history" does in epistemology." (391)

Bringing "questions of truth" and "questions of virtue" together:

"Why should narrative, in particular, be suitable for the representation of progressive and conservative ideologues?" (392)

395, "Whatever their differences, progressive plots have in common the aim to explain the meaning of the current crisis of status inconsistency, and, in the symbolic realm, to overcome it. How do conservative plots manage this explanation so as to subvert progressive ideology itself?"

"In the final character of Gulliver (or in that of Shamela) we see the industrious virtue of the progressive protagonist pushed to its limit, so that it breaks open to reveal an ugly core of hypocritical opportunism. **This technique of paradic impersonation is typical both of conservative ideology, and of its epistemological counterpart, extreme skepticism.**"

Summary (395): and the overall dialectical move of both "double reversals": "For as we have seen over and over again, the origins of the English novel entail the positing of a "new" generic category as a dialectical negation of a "traditional" dominance – the romance, the aristocracy – whose character still saturates, as an antithetical but constitutive force, the texture of the category by which it is in the process of being replaced."

The constant recurrence of parallels (sometimes self-conscious) between the distinct questions of truth and questions of virtue "means that epistemological choices come to have ideological significance, and a given account of the nature of social reality implies a certain formal commitment and procedure. Moreover we may conceive these correlations of truth and virtue also in terms of narrative form and content, so that the way the story is told, and what is told, are implicitly understood to bear an integral relation to each other." (397)

"This insight – the deep and fruitful analogy between questions of truth and questions of virtue – is the enabling foundation of the novel." (397)