

The changing pattern of fiction in modern literature

Based on my talk in Kashiyaatra – Book Conclave in IIT BHU on 19th Jan 2023

Literature is as old as humankind. Be it on the pillars in the megalith of Göbekli Tepe some 9500 BCE or in the heart of Indus Valley. The need to personify abstract concepts such as nations, emotions, and natural forces, such as seasons and weather in human form or characteristics, is amply found in ancient civilizations. Such inscriptions are perhaps the root of storytelling, art, and literature. However, literature, in particular English literature, has come a long way from that. The journey of English literature can be divided into eight periods.

1. **The Classical Period** - (1200 BCE-455 BCE)
2. **The Medieval Period** - (455 CE-1485 CE)
3. **The Renaissance and Reformation** - (1485-1660 CE)
4. **The Enlightenment (Neoclassical) Period** - (1660-1790 CE)
5. **The Romantic Period** - (1790-1830 CE)
6. **The Victorian Period and the 19th Century** - (1832-1901 CE)
7. **The Modern Period** - (1914-1945 CE)
8. **The Post-modern Period** - 1945 – onward

The modern Period in English Literature was from 1914 to 1945 CE. Yes, it is a harsh reality that on this very day, the modern is history. Well, that is what the timeless Time does; it slips away while we are not watching. Art forms have always reflected the sentiments and the reality of their contemporary time. The modern period was no different. Like any literary period, it evolved from the previous one, shattering some molds and creating a new one.

To understand the changing pattern of fiction in modern literature, we need to look back a bit at the Victorian era.

The Victorian era saw a shift from the previous period, the Romantic period when the writers urged the readers' hearts and seduced their minds to look inwards.

The Victorian era was the era of significant transformations in English literature. Society was getting restructured, and different authors captured the same in their unique styles.

The Golden Victorian period called attention to social issues. The underlying current of that era was "Hope." If Alfred Lord Tennyson's lyrical poems were dipping with sentiments, poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and novelists Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy reflected society. Elizabeth's celebrated poems on child labor, while Thomas Hardy's novels made one question religion and social structure. Charles Dickens enveloped the tragedy or the agony of the disparity of wealth in subtle humor. Not to forget, the Scottish novelist Thomas Carlyle called it the Mechanical Age. He saw the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial revolution. Writers like these appealed to the readers' minds for them to look around.

Rudyard Kipling's brought India to the living rooms. William Thackeray, in his satirical form, best seen in *Vanity Fair* or *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, painted a panoramic picture of society. The three Brontë sisters, novels soon became masterpieces of literature for their originality and the passion they invoked. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* became extensively read novels. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) took the readers to the countryside of England with her detailed depiction. Her work invoked a strong sense of belonging to a place and psychological insight. Robert Browning, with his satire *Gilbert, and Sullivan*, with his comic operas *Oscar Wilde* and *G. B Shaw*, with this historical allegory and contemporary satire, set the stage on fire.

The transition from the Victorian period to the Modern period was stark. It was the time when World War I (1914-1918) began and ended the year World War II (1939-1945) ended. This was the most turbulent time when humankind was gripped with political isolation and disillusionment. It created the first ism of modern literature, Dadaism. It was a movement to counter the senseless wars with political overtones. Hugo Ball's "Karawane" was seen as an attempt to use humor to stop wars.

War changed has changed the thought process. The kind souls could not make sense of the catastrophic devaluation of human lives. They were unable to comprehend the senselessness of the wars and violence. Their works mirrored back the despair and disillusionment that they felt. The American Writers of the so-called Lost Generation were among the first ones to rebel against conventional life and literary styles, like Ernest Hemingway in his novels **The Sun Also Rises** and **A Farewell to Arms**.

The authors had started questioning the traditional values, and the world was listening. The information and its dissemination have become more accessible. The state has started providing education to the lower strata of society, and publishers reprinted their published books at an affordable price. It brought the possibilities of newer thought processes into literature.

The growing popularity of cinema and radio widened the audience base. Listeners and viewers were no longer confined to one or two sections of society. Literature was cutting across the class division, which fueled the need for a newer approach to the literature, a realistic touch. Art was no longer for art's sake. It began to seek solace in the "dehumanization of art," where the theme revolved around the distorted relationship between humans, between humans and society, or nature and the inner conflict of a human being. It also looked critically at novels or poems as a structure created from smaller parts like a craft, not a spur-of-the-moment creative impulse or an internal process of creativity and originality. It often included invented words, foreign languages, or dense vocabulary. They were creating a new technique called formalism.

Another development that propelled the rebellion of the authors from the Victorian period was Psychoanalytic criticism. A method advocated by Freud explaining that literary works, like dreams, were a manifestation of authors' unconscious fear, anxieties, and desires. So, one started questioning, "Why aren't there any positive mother figures in Brontë novels?" or "Why are women with better intellect plain Jane in Austen's work?"

Modern literature was influenced by dramatic events of historic proportions, like wars, corruption, and the industrial revolution; it paved the foundation for another social movement for equality and justice for all. Harlem Renaissance started during this time. It was considered a Golden age for African American artists, taking pride in their work and highlighting the diverse culture and distinct voice of the

minority who, till now, were voiceless. It set the stage for the civil rights movement. Some key authors are Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Countee Cullen.

So strong was the need of the authors of this time to break the mold of the world that they broke the so-called literary rules. And justifiably so; the Sun had started setting on British Empire, and religious values were being questioned. Churches were not beyond reproach. The traditional values no longer applied as the Universal law. Life was no longer ordered or driven by the creative impulse; it was somewhat controlled, scheduled, and cut off from the organization, history, or past; it had the frustrations of the war and corruption in its heart. Life had moved from good and evil, from hero and villain, and from black and white, to all the colors available in the palette. The illusion of absolute truth was broken. Everything was relative. The good and the bad swapped their roles as their point of view changed from one character or person to another.

The authors in the modern period changed the rules of the game. They experimented. They flirted with forms, structures, and syntaxes. Some techniques that got popular or were invented were blended themes and imagery, in which authors used modern language and themes with images from the past to create a collage of styles. Absurdism in the narrative came into play. It is a genre that uses non-linear, non-chronological storytelling, surrealism, and comedy to explore existentialism and the human condition. Some of the best examples are:

Sadeq Hedayat's ***The Blind Owl*** is a Persian masterpiece where an unnamed pen case painter addresses his confessions that did not follow any order to a shadow resembling an owl. Instead, his confessions were depicted as layers, unfolding in a non-linear manner attributed to the open-ended interpretation of the story.

Ford Madox Ford's ***The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion*** used a series of non-linear flashbacks to tell the story of a couple whose marriage was dissolving and not perfect as it seemed, the death of three other friends, and the unreliable narrator who was losing his mind, who gradually reveals the events were different from what the readers originally believed.

Let us look at a few changes it brought to the world of poetry. It deviated from the lyrical or rhythmic pattern to free and blank verse, using metaphors and irony. Romantic notions were discarded, along with the advocacy of religious faith. Realism did limit the writer's imagination, but the complexity achieved by interlacing or positioning contrasting stories or narratives was defined to perfection in this period.

The novels, too, diverged from idealism toward realism. They embraced scientific discoveries and new technologies in the depiction. The novels of this period show the psychological development of the characters. They attribute many of the character's actions and motives as a reflection of subconscious dreams, desires, or fears. Multiple perspectives of individuals and Individualism rather than society gained importance. Authors portrayed individuals' needs, beliefs, journeys, and accomplishments over society. ***The Great Gatsby*** by F. Scott Fitzgerald comes to mind for its first-person narrator Nick Carraway's interactions. The interactions were focused on an individual, a mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his obsession to be reunited with his former lover, Daisy Buchanan.

This period of literature saw an increase in the use of literary devices in writing. It was the time when the stream of consciousness and isms came into play. Stream of consciousness is a narrative method

used with punctuation, at times incomplete sentences, with varying degrees of coherent and incoherent thoughts to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feeling that cross the mind of the narrators or the characters. It is like a thought process, evolving, devolving, and forms a special form of inner dialogue like Virginia Woolf's **Mrs. Dalloway** (1925) and **To The Lighthouse**.

Modern literature is credited with the invention and popularity of isms. Surrealism brought real and impossible imaginary situations, characters, or pieces together, contradicting any control or logic. Franz Kafka's **The Metamorphosis** is the most celebrated work in this 'ism' when an ordinary man one morning is transformed into an insect.

Victorian narratives of emotions and decorative words were replaced by exact words or the creation of physical experiences to project an image of an object to the readers. A collection of poems, **Tender Buttons** by Gertrude Stein is famous for its imagism for using fragmented phrases to depict a picture. Poet Ezra Pound was one of the first writers to use imagism in her works like **In a Station of the Metro**, **The Seafarer**, and **The Return**. She championed the use of free verse and allusion.

William Faulkner is known for Southern Gothic stories with cubism. In **As I Lay Dying** or **The Sound and the Fury**, he takes the reader on a journey of the mind through visual images or from an assortment of perspectives.

Expressionism started, which attempted to give new expressions infused with subjectivity with symbols and exaggeration to represent emotions instead of physical reality. It emphasized the use of the inner working of the human mind or spirit and extreme emotion to seek a spiritual or psychological reality like T. S. Eliot's introspective of human nature, **The Wastlands**, or Katherine Mansfield's well known epiphanies and revelations in her work like **Daughters of the Late Colonel** and **The Garden Party**.

A comparative sampling of novels from the Victorian and Modern Ages reveals interesting changes in literature. Text analytics show that the sentences became shorter, from 18 words per sentence to 14. The novels became less voluminous. Maybe, it became a reflection of people getting busier. The number of sentences in novels has decreased by ~27%, while the number of words came down by 51% from avg of ~117K words to 57.9K. One eventual outcome was an increase in the neutrality of tone and a reduction of emotions or sentiments. Simpler sentences became a trend, and descriptions and complexities in a sentence were avoided for a direct and factual tone.

Literature came down from an idealistic and imaginary world to the real world where art was just not art. Instead, it reflected craft and life. Born in the womb of cynicism, hopelessness, frustrations, and suspicion, it radically broke away from the traditional forms. It propelled many literary tools which are popular to date—the Stream of Consciousness, realism, multiple perspective, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and imagism. It looked at creative work more as a craft than creativity, breaking free from traditional forms to experiment with newer forms of expression and structures. The voices changed from an imaginary feel-good world or looking inwards and from the changes in society to the degradation of human values and ethics, challenging universally held truths while focusing on individuals' journey of self-discovery.

As its era ended and literature moved into the post-modern era when authors showed a return to earlier styles. The Modern period in English literature will always be known as a rebel period that broke the rules and established new ones. It changed the way we look at literature forever.

Sentiment Analytics on Novels

From the Victorian Age to the Modern Age

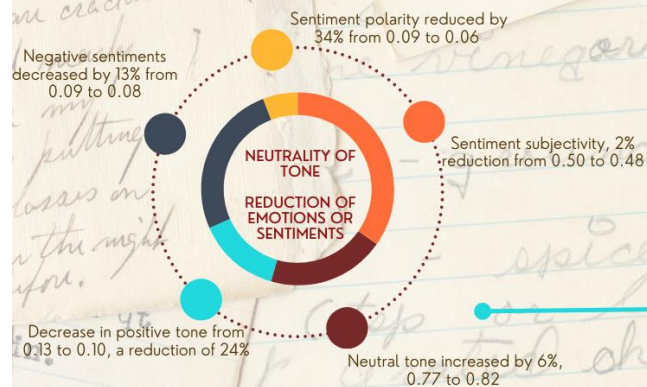
Sentences Analytics



DECREASE IN THE LENGTH OF NOVELS

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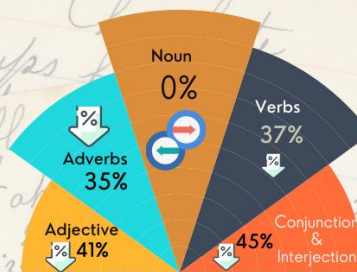
Novels became less voluminous with smaller simpler sentences



Writing had moved towards neutral tones with a slight reduction in sentiments. Writing became more direct and less descriptive

RESULT

MORE OF FACTS, LESSER SENTIMENTS, EASIER TO READ DIRECT AND SIMPLER SENTENCES



The usage of Nouns remained the same. Sentences became simpler when words describing the action or the subjects were reduced. It also reduced sentences' complexity, reducing the need for conjunctions and interjections.

