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The Early English Novels

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Abstract

Through the example of three popular contenders for the first English novel, this document serves as an introduction to the novel genre and how it first came into being.

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1 Introduction

When it comes to literature, a common distinction is made between three major forms that are of great interest, namely poetry, prose and drama. By way of an introduction, we are going to take a look at the terminology below to help us set the stage for the upcoming discussion. What follows is a brief breakdown of a selection of books that changed the world of literature forever. Originally intended to serve as an introduction to an essay that explores past and future of Japanese Light Novels, the books mentioned here encouraged me to go a little more into depth about the authors responsible for the early English novels. This will prove important later when we embark on an adventure through the world of Light Novels in search of distinct characteristics and influences.

2 Terminology

Poetry is a literary genre characterized by rhythmical patterns of a language and usually employs meters, syllabifications, rhymes, alliterations or any combination of these elements. In contrast, any material that is not written in rhythmical patterns is considered prose. Many modern genres fall under this form, such as short stories, novellas or novels. Thirdly and for the sake of completeness, drama as we know it today is a play that often consists of three acts and a little disregard for Aristotelian rules involving verisimilitude. This is quite different from traditional Greek drama, as defined by Aristotle, in which a play consists of five acts and adheres to the three dramatic unities: unity of action, unity of time, and unity of place. But here we will concern ourselves primarily with novels and its various subgenres. In the broadest sense of the term, any extended fictional prose narrative focusing on a few primary characters that by times involves a score of secondary characters is generally thought of as a novel in the realms of English literature. In addition to this rough definition, some people like to set an arbitrarily count of 50,000 words or more in order to draw a line between short stories, novellas and novels (Wheeler).

Genre	Short Story	Novella	Novel
Word Count	< 7,500	20,000 <	50,000 <

Table 1: Commonly used word count for works of fiction

Keep in mind that these word counts are not set in stone and their only purpose is to create order in the chaos of vague definitions that are part of the very nature of literature theory. There are even more works of fiction such as flash stories and novelettes, but that is outside the scope of this discussion. Last but not least I want to point out that the word count is not the only defining characteristic, as will be shown later. In my private book collection, I have found at least three books that claim to be among the first English novels ever written. But different notions of the term novel further complicate the search for a definite answer. The following excerpts are taken directly from the back-cover text of my books, which are accompanied by a brief description of the author's accomplishments.

3 Oroonoko

Written by spy, traveler and groundbreaking woman writer Aphra Behn, this story of an African prince sold into slavery is considered one of the earliest English novels. (Behn)

While long prose fictional narratives are not an invention of the eighteenth century, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (which was first published in 1688) is a great example for this transitional period where the novel genre was about to come into its own. Although we don't know much about her early life, in part because she deliberately obscured details of her upbringing, it is safe to say that she is a founding figure for women's writing who had left behind an extensive literary legacy. After the discovery of the new world in 1492 it was only a matter of time before the trans-Atlantic slave trade would become one of the most profitable businesses in the world. With the decline of the native American population, the demand for manpower in the new colonies became increasingly strong. This chain of events gave rise to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and had a lasting impact on the literary landscape of Europe. It is not by accident that many authors of that time turned their attention to the world beyond. During this period, she allegedly composed *Oroonoko* "in a few hours ... for I never rested my pen a moment for thought." (Greenblatt 2178). Either by chance or design, Aphra Behn's novel sheds light on the double standards many cultivated, civilized Europeans employed, and their hideous character becomes apparent the moment they appear on stage. Oroonoko in particular voices his disdain for the foreign faith upon realizing that he had been betrayed by the captain he thought a friend:

Farewell, Sir! It is worth my suffering to gain so true a knowledge both of you and of your gods by whom you swear. [...] Come, my fellow-slaves, let us descend and see if we can meet with more honour and honesty in the next world we shall touch upon. (Behn 58)

Even though Oroonoko is born to a Coramantien king, Behn gives an unusual account of his character. Reminiscent of a refined western education that rivals that of European princes, he is purposefully made look like more European than African in order to appeal to a western readership. By the time he fell into captivity it was only thanks to his noble appearance that entitled him to a better treatment than the other slaves.

He was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied; the most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot. His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen, and very piercing; the white of them being like snow, as were his teeth. His nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. (18)

As the story progresses, it becomes evident that he is at odds with his status as a privileged slave. He still associates the elements of European civilization

with deceit and dishonesty which in the end led to his capture, but he doesn't seem to condemn slavery in and of itself. It was only when his wife became pregnant that it struck him that he could no longer bear the emotional toll of being enslaved for the sake of his unborn child. Adding to the fact that Oroonoko did not suffer nearly as much as his fellow-slaves under his master Tefry and was never put to work, it is no small irony that he would later go on to deceive the other slaves himself for his own selfish reasons in a passionate speech about honor and freedom:

And why, said he, my dear friends and fellow-sufferers, should we be slaves to an unknown people? Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves? This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul. No, but we are bought and sold like apes or monkeys, to be the sport of women, fools and cowards, and the support of rogues, runagades that have abandoned their own countries for raping, murders, theft and villainies. Do you not hear every day how they upbraid each other with infamy of life, below the wildest savages? And shall we render obedience to such a degenerate race, who have no one human virtue left to distinguish them from the wildest creatures? Will you, I say, suffer the lash from such hands? They all replied with one accord, No, no, no; Caesar has spoke like a great captain, like a great king. (89-90)

Perhaps it was because of his loss of his royal identity that Oroonoko was bound to revolt sooner or later. Considering his noble heritage and reputation, his sudden change of mind does not come as a surprise; yet Oroonoko was first and foremost only concerned about the fate of his own family. His last stance of passive valor is a clever nod to the fact that aspiring generals of his tribe proved their worth by contemptuously cutting off parts of their bodies until one or the other resigned or died (86).

He had learned to take tobacco, and when he was assured he should die, he desired they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted which they did, and the executioner came and first cut off his members and threw them into the fire. After that, with an ill-favoured knife, they cut his ears and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost without a groan or a reproach. (111)

Many literary historians contest the proclaimed biographical nature of *Oroonoko* stressed in Behn's Epistle Dedicatory, but the circumstantial details of the story suggest that she combined three older forms of literary narration techniques. While she presents *Oroonoko* as a personal account of what she had heard and seen, the book also contains a travel narrative in three parts encapsulated in a biography (Greenblatt 2179). As opposed to Daniel Defoe who, a few decades later, would establish a range of concerns central to the domestic themes of the English novel, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* belongs in the tradition of Imperial Romance (John Peck 139). Hence, depending on how the novel genre is defined,

some people might argue that she shouldn't be regarded as the first English novelist. Nevertheless, the notion of scientific rigor is a dangerous path to tread in literature theory.

4 The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come

The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come is a 1678 Christian allegory written by John Bunyan. It is regarded as one of the most significant works of religious English literature, has been translated into more than 200 languages, and has never been out of print. It has also been cited as the first novel written in English. Bunyan began his work while in the Bedfordshire county prison for violations of the Conventicle Act, which prohibited the holding of religious services outside the auspices of the established church of England. Early Bunyan scholars such as John Brown believed The Pilgrim's Progress was begun in Bunyan's second, shorter imprisonment for six months in 1675, but more recent scholars such as Roger Sharrock believe that it was begun during Bunyan's initial, more lengthy imprisonment from 1660 to 1672 right after he had written his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. The English text comprises 108,260 words and is divided into two parts, each reading as a continuous narrative with no chapter divisions. The first part was completed in 1677 and entered into the Stationer's Register on 22 December 1677. It was licensed and entered in the "Term Catalogue" on 18 February 1678, which is looked upon as the date of first publication. After the first edition of the first part in 1678, an expanded edition, with additions written after Bunyan was freed, appeared in 1679. The second part appeared in 1684. There were eleven editions of the first part in John Bunyan's lifetime, published in successive years from 1678 to 1685 and in 1688, and there were two editions of the second part, published in 1684 and 1686. (Bunyan)

Regarded as one of the most famous of world classics and translated into more than a hundred languages and dialects, *The Pilgrim's Progress* claim to fame is grounded in its intensely sincere presentation of a Christian's journey to the Celestial City. Almost half a century after the release of the *King James Bible*, John Bunyan's distinctive style draws heavily from the language of the reissued bible that is widely believed to be a masterpiece of English literature (Fletcher 70). The story of *The Pilgrim's Progress* therefore easily gives away the author's preference for the protagonist, which takes a toll on the suspense of the narration. Predominated by his Puritan conscience, Bunyan repeatedly emphasizes that this story is a dream brought into being by his triumphant and loving joy in his religion. That also explains the absence of genuine individuals and secondary actions in his book, which are completely replaced by type characters and a linear narrative that is perfectly intelligible to any child. While it is the case that Bunyan's allegory puts more emphasis on his abundance of faith and love than avoiding technical faults in his narration, it was perhaps only for that reason

that enabled him to attain a poetic beauty and eloquence that is on par with trained literary artists (80). Even for people of other faiths there is a lesson to be learnt from reading his works, for all men experience struggle throughout their life. There is a phrase that captures the importance of friendship quite well: “You are the company you keep”, and if it had not been for Hope’s assurance, Christian’s journey could have taken a turn for the worse on more than one occasion:

{289} HOPE. My brother, said he, rememberest thou not how valiant thou hast been heretofore? Apollyon could not crush thee, nor could all that thou didst hear, or see, or feel, in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. What hardship, terror, and amazement hast thou already gone through! (Bunyan 64)

For all intents and purposes, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a story of maintaining hope in view of seemingly insurmountable difficulties that life throws at you, but also a zealous attempt to spread the word of God that goes back to the roots of Christianity:

CHR. Yes, that is a good heart that hath good thoughts, and that is a good life that is according to God’s commandments; but it is one thing, indeed, to have these, and another thing only to think so. (81)

In contemplation of world treasures and pleasures, Ignorance fails to understand that accumulating wealth goes against the teachings of his very own belief and is thus further foreshadowing his fate by refusing to accept the good counsel presented to him by Christ and Hope. This is also becoming more prominent in modern times where constant exposure to other people’s best snapshot in life through social media gives an account of what we as a society seem to value the most. Then again, the philosophy of human nature is much more complex than the type characters portrayed in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, but this does nothing to alter the fact that Bunyan’s work was ahead of his time. Almost two centuries later, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* bears testimony to the influence John Bunyan held over the fellowship of the cross for years to come.

Go then, my little Book, and show to all
That entertain, and bid thee welcome shall,
What thou dost keep close shut up in thy breast;
And wish what thou dost show them choose to be blest
To them for good, may make them choose to be
Pilgrim’s better, by far, than thee or me,
Tell them of Mercy; she is one
Who early hath her pilgrimage begun.
Yea, let young damsels learn of her to prize
The world which is to come, and so be wise;
For little tripping maids may follow God
Along the ways which saintly feet have trod.
(Alcott Preface)

This book unfolds the story of four young girls growing up in a small community behind the events of the American Civil War. Brought up in poverty, the

March girls learned that complaining about one's dissatisfaction can be both, a force that promotes and hinders personal growth. In many ways, each and everyone of us carries a burden in some form or another, and to overcome our little imperfections sometimes means to fail over and over again before we finally succeed. But this is just part of the journey and highlights the importance of personal experience from which we draw the courage to carry on. While *Little Women* is a book that is primarily meant to guide and entertain young children, there is something beautiful to discover for adults in a world where materialism has eclipsed religion. After all, life is best enjoyed in moderation even if it feels at times impossible to find content in everyday life.

Mrs. March broke the silence that followed Jo's words, by saying in her cherry voice, "Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrim's Progress when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more than have me tie you hats and sticks, and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the house-top, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City."

"What fun it was, especially going by the lions, fighting Apollyon, and passing through the Valley where the hobgoblins were!" said Jo.

"I liked the place where the bundles fell off and tumbled downstairs," said Meg.

"My favorite part was when we came out on the flat roof where our flowers and arbors, and pretty things were, and all stood and sung for joy up there in the sunshine," said Beth, smiling, as if that pleasant moment had come back to her.

"I don't remember much about it, except that I was afraid of the cellar and the dark entry, and always liked the cake and milk we had up at the top. If I wasn't too old for such things, I'd rather like to play it over again," said Amy, who began to talk of renouncing childish things at the mature age of twelve. (14)

Looking back, we grew up in a short passage of time, but being an adult doesn't turn you into a know-it-all overnight. On the same note, becoming more mature doesn't mean you have to cast away your imagination. By taking turns at being children it becomes easier to pass on experiences and create an environment where we feel secure to learn from each other. Although many famous authors are dead by now, their stories live on for anyone who reads beyond the first page.

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