

The Historical Novel

(Fictional and historical features)

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 19th c., the historical novel was largely popularized by various European novelists such as S.W. Scott (1771-1832), L. Henry Balzac (1799-1850), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), and the American novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851). The historical novel is known as a genre that differs from the previous types of novel writing.

Indeed, after the decline of the French Leader Napoleon, Waverly (1814) was written by Sir Walter Scott whose novels aroused interest in Scottish history .

This study tackles the nature of this genre; its qualities, significance, and how much it is related or differed from both history and historicism, novel, and some other genres as drama and epic.

Key words: The historical novel, national feeling, People's consciousness, sense of time and place.

The Objective: is to show the relation between the fictional and the historical elements, and the social and the political episodes in this genre.

الرواية التاريخية (السمات الخيالية والتاريخية)

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ملخص

بدأ فن الرواية التاريخية في بداية القرن التاسع عشر، وخاصة من قبل بعض الكتاب الأوربيين: ولتر سكوت الانكليزي وهنري بلزاك الفرنسي وليو تولستوي الروسي إضافة إلى ما كتبه الأميركي جيمس كوبر.

والرواية التاريخية كجنس أدبي يختلف عن نماذج الرواية التي سبقتة . فبعد هزيمة نابليون ،كتب ولتر سكوت رواية "وافرلي" ١٨١٤ والتي أثارت اهتماما كبيرا في التاريخ الاسكتلندي بالذات. وهذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على فن الرواية التاريخية من حيث أهم خصائصها، ومعانيها، وكما تتشابه او تختلف، لا مع التاريخ والتاريخية فحسب بل مع اجناس ادبية اخرى كالملمحة والدراما .

الكلمات الدالة : الرواية التاريخية، الشعور القومي، الوعي الشعبي، الاحساس بالمكان والزمان ..

الاهداف : هي توضيح العلاقة ما بين النص السردي والحدث التاريخي في هذا الجنس الأدبي من جهة، وما بين الأحداث الاجتماعية والسياسية من جهة ثانية..

1. Introduction

The novel is a book of long narrative in literary prose. The genre has historical roots both in the fields of the medieval and early modern romance and in the tradition of the novella. The novel forms 'narrative of events which occurs through a

suspension of time – sequence’ and one of its other elements is apparently 'plot' which is considered the backbone. ¹

This genre is generally a late growth compared with the story which is an old well – known distributed form of literature. It is obviously a form of story or prose narrative containing characters, actions and incidents.

Concerning the relation between the novel and story-telling, there are some differences in their own achievement. The novel is usually written in prose whereas story – telling is written either in prose or in verse though it is different from age to age. In Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, the tales have been written in developed story – telling and they are rather based on legend, myth or on romantic stories. For novelists, the plots in their writing are certainly different whether in characterization or treatment, whereas the plots of the classical and Renaissance epics are mainly based on past history or fable. Such traditionalism was then challenged by the new form of novel whose events were largely true to individual experience. But one important feature appeared in Britain through Gothic novel called the historical novel. This type of writing deals notably with historical events from the Middle Ages.²

The beginning of the English novel is connected with the basis of social order in England, and it was rather dominated by class distinction. In London, for example, people were working many hours, and a large number of books increased besides journalism which took its role in reading public. When the intermediate class appeared, such factors certainly affected the world of novel writing and reflected people's response towards its growing literary world.

The nineteenth century is actually considered one of the richest periods in English novel writing. The middle class, as it is mentioned, becomes closely in contact with reading novels, and this closeness between the novelist and reader is connected with reading – aloud habit, and with more monthly and weekly publications method. Such social changes introduced significant novelists like Jane Austen (1775 –1817) who created her artistic manner, especially in using dialogue style. For example, her novel Pride and Prejudice (1813) remains one of her distinguished successful production. In this period, Charles Darwin published his 'Origin of Species'(1859) to end the controversy between science and religion.

The novel remains a distinguished genre in individualizing its characters or in its detailed presentation, but

an amusing artistic type of writing began at that time to prevail. It was the historical novel whose best representatives in literature was the English novelist, Sir Walter Scott (1791-1832).

2. Definitions and Elements

The historical novel is generally defined as "a genre in which plot is set amid historical events," or when "the author uses real events, adds one or more fictional characters or events, or he changes, for example, the sequence of historical events."³ According to the social critic Lukas; the historical novelist researches his specific period, and strives for resimilitude. The past tense may be employed in narration, whereas the subject-matter of it tends to join both events; the public and the private. The writer here reconstructs incidents in his fictional narrative way, because both fictional and historical sides may appear in a historical novel. The social or a political episode is of much importance in developing and forming a certain literary movement. In his book The Historical Novel (1937), George Lukas argues that Scott is the first fiction writer, who saw history not as a convenient frame in which to stage a contemporary narrative, but as a distinct social and cultural setting. Moreover the historical fiction sometimes serves to encourage movement of romantic

nationalism. The French Revolution, for example, created a national feeling, and new national ideas against other social and cultural elements. ⁴

Napoleon's appearance (1769-1832) revealed an important motive for a great change which is considered 'a public experience'. People started to understand their own history in order to establish their own notable national independence as in France and Germany. Thus, a new scope of ambition of more social and economic changes started to dominate the European world. Indeed, this relation between the French Revolution (1789) and the development of the historical novel is so important that it 'altered the western man's sense of his place in time.' For example, the conflict of armies in Europe led to build new military institutions; quantity instead of quality.⁵

Previously, romance and epic were preoccupying the literary scene. That means, this kind of novel was not exactly found because authors could not understand history or they could not see history except in its historical time. Therefore, the historical fiction started to appear mainly and center : ⁶

-First on the historical and fictional characters. It is indeed an honest attempt, which is based on serious reading to tell a story set in historical past. Second, on history which holds

something that deeply affects their lives and concerns them. Third, on the conflict. The historical novel usually takes place between two forces: the oppressors and the oppressed or between people and a tyrant. The heroes can realize their targets in freedom and independence. Fourth, the successful novel is, therefore, eminent in its style or its perspective aspect to the past. That means people's thinking and conduct can traditionally be revealed in lofty style or presented in splendid manner.⁷ It sometimes serves to encourage movements of romantic nationalism.

In examining the works of Scott and J. F. Cooper, one can say, that they provide us with full details, and symbols of human nature. For instance, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace shows us Napoleon's defeat in terms of people's consciousness, and their popular spirit particularly in his novel public life with the public hero who transforms that life from past to present. They are portrayed in a historical manner including man's attempt in realizing democracy against individuality. Among the early English historical novelists to be mentioned is Maria Edge Worth work Castle Rackrent (1800) which was a distinctive example of a regional novel. The Last Days of Pompeii (1834) by Edmund B. Lytton. The

Castle of Otrano (1764) by Horace Walpole, besides Mathew Lewis's The Monk .⁷

Other prominent English and French novelists wrote successful works such as Charles Dickens (1812-1870), George Eliot (1819-80) Henry Balzac (1799- 1850), and Victor Hugo (1802-85). In the 20th century, some distinguished works appeared like William Golding Inheritors (1955) and J.G. Farrell's The Siege of Krishnapur (1973) which were good examples of this genre.⁸

The historical novel significantly continues to present the spirit, manners, and the social conditions of a certain age with realistic details. It may deal with actual historical personages, or it may contain a mixture of fictional and historical characters, but the focus is rather on a single historical event.

3. Historians and Novelists:

The word 'history' was early used by the Greek historian Herodotus (484 - 425 B.C.).The historians usually discover, collect, and present information about past events. Certain theories of history are presented by modern writers such as the German political scientist Oswald Spengler and the British

historian Arnold J. Toynbee. The historian certainly differs from the poet. The historian merely relates events as they are truly happen in reality whereas the poet depends on his imagination to create new, ever-lasting aesthetic words. ⁹

E.M. Forster, the English novelist, defines history as : a ' series of events.' ¹⁰ That is true, because the historian does not express his ideas and feeling as a poet or as a novelist, but as a man who imparts his views in narrative way. In this concern, the philosopher tries to find out new ideas of certain form. History is usually dominated by the notion of fatality, and it rather emphasizes on external causes. In this sense, critics may agree that there is an intimacy in the novel so long as the novelist knows everything about the character. Fiction thus seems to be ' truer than historian'. ¹¹

In this realm, the word 'historicism 'differs from history in meaning and aim, because it is reserved for the approach to literature. Historicism is to make works of different periods more accessible to the modern reader. In contemporary studies, different theories study history according to man's relation with economy or nature as we see in Marxism , or in Arnold Toynbee's analysis of new human development. George Lukas finds that Scott's works are interpreted in terms of historicism.

However, the novelist does not record or imitate the old events but he re - arranges his material around his characters in order to " reconstruct around them ideas and qualities." ¹² Events in history mostly happen when the author fills in his characters details of action and motivation that are not recorded in historical accounts. He makes reasonable inferences and imaginative events that historians cannot record. If the historians, according to Lukas, usually record events in certain times or in special places, the novelists have to recreate them in a place and time according to human nature. The aim in this way is also to make the story more convincing and more interesting to the reader.

It is important to mention that Eliot's view of dealing with 'the historical sense' differs from events of the historical novel. T. S. Eliot sees the past as "the present moment". ¹³ If both Eliot and the historical novelist insist on the value of the past, the clear difference remains between them: Eliot (the poet) procures the consciousness of the past through his career, while the novelist treats events in his aesthetic narrative manner.

In addition, the historical novelist makes time reflect the historical reality through characters in human energy and non – romantic aspect. He frequently chooses both the

historical and the fictional characters and develops them in well-structured techniques.

4. Epic and the historical Novel :

The main features of both genres are different whether in dealing with character, conflict or meaning.

Epic is a long narrative poem about certain deeds of warriors and heroes. It usually reveals the national feeling. It is an old form as in the Iraqi Gilgamesh (3000 B.C.), the mythical Sumerian epic, where the relation between the individual and the aspiration of his nation is well interrelated. The epic is rather based on national sources. Heroes like Hector and Achill in the Homeric Greek Iliad (8000B.C.) express significantly their national enthusiasm, whereas the individual in the historical novel, is usually a representative of his class, grade and position. Here, the hero never acts progressively in his society. The hero in epic structure is obviously considered the basic character whereas in the historical novel, the hero is subordinate.

Moreover, epic is rather based on supernatural power. Scott's characters, for example, seem to be creatures that move and hold human qualities. They may seem to be strong or weak, good or evil. However, the historical novel portrays certain social worlds of certain historical crises in more

distinguished form than that of an epic. Therefore, the novelist tries to harmonize between the historical power and the features of his heroes who are achieved in balanced and well- treated form, and also behave according to human traits.

In addition, the relation between the historical novel and the historical play can be easily seen. The relation is effectively recognized in spite of some differences between them in form and treatment. A contemporary crises in social life forms the character's function particularly, when he attempts to reform or criticize an attitude or a situation, whereas the historical novel unfolds a national subject which the character immensely holds. In most historical works, both the novel and drama depend chiefly on social and historical development of history itself.¹⁴

The historical characters significantly remain in contact with their ages to reflect either certain atmospheres of a period; qualities of a leader or a king, or to embody the aspiration of a nation and a class. On the contrary, the hero in non-historical novels represents mostly a portrait of psychological, and social life which moves along a series of actions without fatality.

In dealing with 'time' the novelist's characters follow certain sequences of time; present or future, whereas time in

the historical novel focuses on what a novelist chooses of events and characters from one particular period. Some other significant points can be added :

First, the historical settings may not coincide with the knowledge of later historians who played a distinct role in the rise of the European interest in the history of middle Ages. Victor Hugo's Hunchback (1831), for example, led the French to keep their historic preservation .

Second, some authors try to distance themselves from their own time and place as we see in Pharaoh, the historical novel by the Polish novelist Boleslaw Prus. to gain perspective on society, or to escape the depredations of the censor .

Contemporarily, there are other types of Meta fictional... querying the discourses of the past. The dynamism of fictional approaches to history during 1985, and 1990 once again demonstrates the potentiality of the historical fiction as form. The Colombian Garcia Marquez's novel One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) is a good example, because Marquez's novel is obsessed with ghostliness and with the idea of the past inhabiting the present .¹⁵

It is important to mention that Scott's Minstrely of the Scottish Border and Waverly (1814) opened background for his scene with landscape and nature descriptions and all the

picturesque details of past days. He did not penetrate into the hidden places of his characters' minds but their conduct and emotions are generally simple motives.¹⁶ Concerning his technique, the German thinker Hegel (1717- 1831) says "Scott did not allude to certain contemporary events as much as he brings the past into moral and social spirit".¹⁷ According to E. M. Forster, "Scott has neither artistic detachment nor passion."¹⁸ His influence was profound for he established the form of historical novel and he inspired writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot and W. Thackeray .

S. W. Scott immensely inspired the American novelists like J. F. Cooper who wrote many historical novels such as Leather Stocking Tales, and The Last of the Mohicans which is a prominent example of such writing:

In his works, the American novelist J.F. Cooper uses representative or typical characters to dramatize the major social conflicts and historical transformations. He develops first many characters of The Leather Stocking Tales, and the untouched wilderness around Lake Georgia. In his novel, for example The Last of the Mohicans, he explores second the relation between characters of both nations, the Whites and the Red Indians. Cooper investigates successfully the tragic situation of the Red Indians through paradoxical aspects in

thinking and behaviour of both nations. His clear technique is meaningful when he tries to present personification of life in a primitive society. A significant notion is reflected which is a clash between savagery and civilization, besides his philosophy of wilderness that represents a protest against the rush of industrialism. The conflict ends when American natives have been really deceived and tragically eradicated under the title of civilization. Cooper's technique makes the reader's experience effectively of landscape together with the believable characters, and both the fictional and the historical elements are successfully connected in his novel. 19

Finally, the two terms, history, historical are differently used from each other. The historical novelist, for example, does not imitate the old events as much as he reconstructs ideas and qualities around them. The best representative of this genre undoubtedly is S.W. Scott besides others as J. F. Cooper, who was inspired by him, and wrote his adventurous prominent work The Leather Stocking Tales depending on the history of America . What is to be said in this field: in escaping successfully from the past through the events to the present , it depends on how much a novelist can evoke the spirit of that period in his characters. ²⁰

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