

Eighteenth Century Novelists.

The English novel which has of late become the most prolific and popular of all English literary forms, first fully emerged in the Eighteenth century. It was in large measure a product of the rising middle class, its ideals and sensibilities, social and financial status. The class consciousness which is an important feature of the novel, attests its middle class origin and determines its urban character. Many currents came together to produce the English novel. The Elizabethan prose romances, European picaresque novels like Don Quixote are in a sense ancestors of the modern novel. The periodicals like The Tatler and The Spectator also contributed greatly to the growth of the English fiction. Aphra Behn (1640-89), the first professional woman writer in England, wrote the famous Oroonoko or The History of the Royal Slave which was published in 1688. This is a premier English novel and a powerful work rich in sex, violence and sentiment. It deals with an African prince held in American slavery and shows human dignity and the redemptive power of love. The young William Congreve published a novel of intrigue Incognita in 1691 and in its preface Congreve notes categorically that while romance can feature Mortals of the first Rank, novel should deal with matters 'more familiar'.

The first Eighteenth century novel in English is The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe. It is a tale of the adventure of Crusoe who, with the help of few stores and utensils saved from the wreck, built himself a house, domesticated goats and made a boat. Crusoe is rescued from the

cannibals by an indigenous native he later names Friday. The story describes his return journey to England. Robinson Crusoe has a great influence on life and literature and Ian Watt in his The Rise of the Novel (1957) relates Robinson Crusoe's predicament to the rise of bourgeois individualism, division of labour, and social and spiritual alienation.

Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), Henry Fielding (1707-54), Tobias Smollett (1721-71) and Laurence Sterne (1731-1768) are the four most important and widely discussed novelists of the mid Eighteenth century. Richardson's book Pamela or Virtue Rewarded is an epistolary novel, and consensually the author's masterpiece. The novel unfolds through a series of letters and in a familiar style of correspondence, the story of the trials, tribulations, and final happy marriage of a virtuous servant girl Pamela. It has many threads of colours reflected through the characters, sentiments and psychology. Richardson's second most important novel in the epistolary form is Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady, published in 1748 in eight volumes. The novel describes the story of a middle class virtuous girl who refuses to be treated as a property of her parents and to be married as they think fit and profitable. Richardson deals with this heroine with great emotional care and sympathy. Richardson is a sentimental moralist with a deliberate purpose of teaching his readers how to learn and inculcate virtue and good deportment. While Defoe depicted his characters with economy of words, Richardson developed characters through their speeches, behaviour and situations. His success lies more in the presentation of feminine characters than the

masculine ones.

Henry Fielding was inspired by the popularity of Pamela and Clarissa. He comes into limelight by countering Richardson in The Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend, Mr. Abraham Adams in 1742. He rejected both the epistolary mode and the sentimental subject of Richardson. As Andrew Sanders observes, "His narrator is talkative, clubbable, knowing and manipulative; he speaks urbanely, sharing jokes and educated allusions with the reader, shifting us into a world of sophisticated gentlemanly discourse quite alien to Richardson" [The Short Oxford History of English Literature]. Joseph Andrews is a parody of Pamela. It is a novel on false sentimentality. Joseph Andrews, Pamela's brother is exposed to temptations which he wins over but instead of being rewarded for his virtue, he is unceremoniously turned out of favour by his mistress. Fielding shows the hypocrisy of the human world through this novel, and as such Joseph Andrews is a pioneer modern novel. Two other great novels of Fielding are The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great (1743) and The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling (1749). In Tom Jones Fielding deals with the question of innate goodness and greatness through the character of the picaresque hero. Tom Jones is moral book hovering round the aristocratic principle of the nobility of 'good nature'. It is a novel of epic length and sweep and has a symmetrical structure.

Smollett's famous novel is The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748). This novel makes clear the distinction between romance and fiction. It is

the story of a wellborn, educated Scot exposed to the 'selfishness, envy, malice and fiction base indifference of mankind' in England and the wider world. Peregrine Pickle and The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker are two other important novels of Smollett. Humphrey Clinker is a novel ~~is~~ narrativizing a family journey from Wales through western England to London and then finally to Smollett's native land Scotland. It is told in a series of 82 letters.

A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy (1766) and The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman published between 1759-1767 in 9 volumes are two remarkable and popular novels of Laurence Sterne. These two novels opened up new vistas in English prose fiction. A Sentimental Journey is a travel book and it does not deliberately live up to its full title. Tristram Shandy is regarded as a progenitor of the Twentieth century stream of consciousness novel.

The Eighteenth century novelists are resourceful ancestors of the nineteenth and twentieth century writers of English fiction, whether social, moral or psychological. They anticipate the moderns by virtue of their variety and abundance of fictive themes and stylistic subtleties. This indicates their immense importance in the history of English literature.

Matthew Arnold describes the eighteenth century as an age of Prose and Reason. This has provoked a lot of criticism. For one thing, the eighteenth century is not merely an age of prose and reason. It saw the birth of powerful and competent dramatists like Congreve, Wycherley; Poets like Pope and the great precursors of Romantic poetry like Burns, Gray, Collins, Goldsmith and Blake and so on. In fact, drama and poetry flourished quite to wonderful degree in the age. Even so, the description of Arnold stands almost unchallenged. The point is that when Arnold described the eighteenth century as an age of prose and reason, he viewed the general and prevailing character and temper of the leading luminaries of the time. The eighteenth century poets, if we of course keep aside the 'Precursors of Romanticism' are largely poets with intellectual bent and rational attitude. They are more inclined towards prose or at least prosaic treatment of things than to purely emotional experiences. Society instead of man with his individual self happens to be a major subject of their literary pursuits. Incidentally, the eighteenth century enjoyed the full impact of Renaissance development which surged upon England and Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This coincided with the fast progress of industry and trade and commerce. It is practically justified then that the writers of this age should exercise their brains over real problems of life for the expression of which prose is unquestionably the most effective medium.

A close look to some of the leading prose writers of the time will substantiate the eighteenth century marks the culminating point of English prose.

While Abraham Cowley is regarded as the initial pioneer of the new attitude in English prose, John Dryden (1631-1700) is an acknowledged master whose Essay on Dramatic Poesy, a brilliant analysis on dramatic principles, is often described as a model of new prose. It went a long way in building up the English essay of the eighteenth century and in directing the path of the great essayists like Daniel Defoe (1659-1731), Jonathan Swift (1657-1745), Richard Steele (1672-1729), Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and the others.

Daniel Defoe is mainly known as the writer of the famous Robinson Crusoe and the few other tales of low life. He had a chequered career - a merchant, a manufacturer, a satirist, a public official and an editor, and his prose writings are of considerable bulk and variety. Defoe wrote a mass of poetical tracts and pamphlets and worked both for the Whigs and the Tories. He edited the journal The Review which can be described as the forerunner of the other two great journals The Tatler and The Spectator. The prose of Defoe, or better speaking, the literary propaganda of Defoe is characterized by a unique force and vigour, irony and invective.

Jonathan Swift longed to excel as a poet and wrote a considerable amount of verse. But it is as a prose writer of calibre that Swift attains astonishing level of excellence with almost one leap. The Battle of Books, published in 1701, is a dispute between the ancient and the modern writers. Its theme is a hackneyed one, but Swift's treatment of it is new and unconventional. The half allegorical, mock heroic setting of the book is particularly noteworthy. The

work shows the brilliance of wit and sarcasm and it is steeped in humour. A Tale of a Tub also published in 1704, considered to be Swift's best prose work (excepting of course his great narrative Gulliver's Travels) was possibly inspired by Bunyan, on three men — Peter, Jack and Martin.

The dominance of prose and reason in eighteenth century is most excellently reflected in the works of Swift and the fullest expression of it is found in Gulliver's Travels. It is a satire in the form of a narrative of travel on the meanness and pettiness of mankind. Here the human beings are conceived as ~~a~~ diminutive daily goods. The English political parties and religious dissensions are satirized in the description of the war of high heels and low heels and of the controversy on the question whether eggs should be broken big and small end. In the second part of the narrative Gulliver is accidentally left ashore on Brobdingnag where the inhabitants are as tall as steeples. In this part, Swift scathingly criticizes the manners, government and education style of Europe as most precious. In the third part which narrates Gulliver's visits to the flying island Laputa and its neighbour continent Lagado, the satire is directed against the man of science, philosophers, historians and projectors. And the fourth part describes the country of the Houyhnhnms who are horses endowed with reason living in clean and simple society. This is contrasted with the society of the Yahoos who are beasts in human shape and live a filthy life. At the end, Gulliver is alienated both

from his species and family which he leaves in disgust. Gulliver's Travels is an immensely successful prose satire and it is read by all, in words of Pope and Gray, "from the cabinet council to the nursery". It is often described as a dark howl of rage against mankind, and readers like Leslie Stephen found it painful and repulsive. Other great works of Swift are The Battle of Books and A Tale of Tub. The theme of the first one is the dispute between ancient and modern authors, and latter is a satire on the Dissenters, the Papists, and even the Church of England.

Richard Steele is writer of remarkable genius. Inspired by Defoe's The Review he founded The Tatler in April, 1709. In the preface of this famous paper he categorically wrote that the purpose of the journal was 'to ruthlessly expose the false arts of life, to pull off the disguises of cunning vanity and affections, and to recommend general simplicity of our dress, our discourse, and our behaviour'. Steele gives sharp accounts of almost everything of the contemporary life and society — pleasure and entertainment, poetry, learning, domestic as well as foreign news. Steele's papers have sincerity, frankness and genuine autobiographical flavour. They are specimens of good prose in English.

Joseph Addison, the editor of the celebrated The Spectator, is ~~now~~ recognised as one of the greatest prose writers of English of all times. He was a sensible critic of social life and his criticism did bring about a revolution in the contemporary taste and culture. The essays published in The Spectator which Addison fondly called papers are remarkable for the lucidity and

felicity of English prose. Addison places himself at the heart of the society and observes the game of life through the dispassionate lens of an onlooker and then depicts the life and manners with the passion of a consummate painter. His task was to reform the society and recover it from the desperate state of folly and vice and spread education among all. It is rightly said of him that Addison brought philosophy 'out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea tables and in coffee houses'. Both Addison and Steele are powerful prose writers, craftsmen and artists with unique individual style. Their contribution to the English prose is simply undeniable.

The development of English prose and periodicals in the 18th century in the hands of the four great masters marked the historic beginning of what is otherwise known as 'social prose' that 'holds a mirror up to nature' and records the picture of the time and familiarizes the readers with social, political, moral and psychological conditions of life as a whole. It anticipates the modern prose literature and as such its importance admits of no contest.