

## UNIT 2

# Studying fiction and prose

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### What is a novel?

A novel is an extended work of fiction written in prose. The problem with this definition, of course, is that it merely states the obvious. It is difficult, however, to produce a more useful definition as individual novels vary so much; is there really any common ground between Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, or between Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*? There is the fact that each work, as with every novel, tells a story, but is there anything we can establish beyond that? Are there patterns, either thematic or structural, that appear in novel after novel; are there standard narrative conventions? If there are, an obvious point to make is that these patterns and conventions are less fixed than in poetry or drama. In both these genres, we can identify established forms – such as tragedy, epic, the sonnet – and recognize repeated features: in the case of poetry, metrical and stanza patterns; in the case of drama, a set sequence of exposition, complication and resolution. The novel has never had to accommodate itself within such received structures. Indeed, it can be argued that a large part of the drive behind the novel, why it began to establish itself in the eighteenth century, is because it was the genre that could best handle an idea of individual freedom, of breaking away from inherited structures. But it is the freedom of the novel, the fact that the genre is always genuinely 'novel', that makes it so difficult to define.

In order for criticism to function, however, there has to be a sense of the characteristics of a genre. Criticism cannot proceed on the basis of regarding each new work encountered as unique; to do so would deprive us of a framework of understanding. In other words, everyone studying a novel needs some sense of the rules that shape the genre in order to appreciate why the work under consideration is distinctive. To provide a simple example: most readers are aware that a lot of novels deal with individuals and the society in which they find themselves. Consequently, their enjoyment of a novel such as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* will tend to focus on how well the author presents the experiences of her heroine, Maggie Tulliver. It could be argued that it is George Eliot who encourages us to focus on Maggie, but in fact the reader's interest in, and understanding of, Maggie's dilemma also stem from a well-developed grasp of the repeated concerns of novels.

The individual in conflict with society is one of the most common patterns in fiction; what the rest of this essay consists of is an elaboration of this and other thematic, structural and linguistic patterns critics have noted in the novel genre. As such, the essay represents a simple codification of basic assumptions which provide a shared vocabulary for discussing novels. For the student of literature, what follows, therefore, is the necessary descriptive language of novel criticism. At this point, however, it is necessary to introduce a note of caution. I started by suggesting how difficult it is to define a novel; if the genre is elusive, there is something suspect about too confident a labelling of its principal characteristics. We have to ask ourselves, are the features described in this essay inherent in novels or are they essentially the creation of critics? And, if critics describe novels in a certain way, is this at the expense of other, possibly more provocative, ways of describing the genre? What should become apparent is that, although a traditional sense of the devices and effects of fiction is not only useful but indispensable, these traditional definitions can limit our sense of the possibilities of the novel.

### The rise of the novel

The novel as most people think of it today appeared in England in the early eighteenth century. In 1719 Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*. By the time Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760–7) had been published, the genre was not only well-established but its distinctive qualities were also apparent. The opening sentences of *Robinson Crusoe* illustrate a number of these central characteristics of novels:

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, tho' not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, call our selves and write our name, Crusoe, and so my companions always called me. (Defoe, [1719] 1965, p. 27)

The features in evidence here might not be typical of all novels, but can certainly be found in a great many.

For a start – and starting where any discussion of a novel should both begin and end, with the language of fiction – there is Defoe's plain prose style. Other novelists might adopt a different manner – Fielding, for example, exudes patrician authority – but the style of a novel always creates its content, and Defoe's businesslike style serves his purpose in conveying a world of commerce and middle-class life. This is significant: the novel, particularly in Europe, by and large reports upon the experiences of middle-class people who have to work for a living. Indeed, it can be argued that the novel emerged in the eighteenth century because a new kind of commercial society was taking shape at that time. The novel served as a mirror for



this audience, a mirror in which they could see the dilemmas of their own lives reflected.

Such novels tended to be realistic (a surprisingly complex term, which I will return to) and secular. Up to and including the seventeenth century, people organized their lives principally in relation to God. Defoe remains a devout Christian, but if we consider the name Kreutznaer – it means ‘the fool of the cross’ – the way in which the religious echo in the name disappears as he becomes Crusoe suggests a move towards secular experience, towards assessing the world, as Defoe does here, in terms of class, social mobility, family and possessions. In just a few words, the opening paragraph of *Robinson Crusoe* tells us an immense amount about the complex cross-currents at work in society in the early eighteenth century.

### Critical approaches to the novel

How does an awareness of points such as these help us as students of the novel? Essentially, it is useful to have some idea what to expect, even if this is as basic as seeing that many novels deal with individuals making their way in, or finding themselves at odds with, the social world. A novel, as is the case with *Robinson Crusoe*, will often start by establishing a sense of the conventional order of society; it is this that the hero or heroine will have to contend with. A conflict will develop; we can guess here that Crusoe will reject the comfortable and seemingly secure world of his father.

It helps at the beginning of a novel, therefore, to try to get hold of the broad thematic pattern as quickly as possible: try to see what kind of world the novelist is establishing, and try to anticipate how characters might find themselves at odds with or stifled by this world. The vast majority of classic British, European and American novels – particularly those that are widely taught in schools – present the picture I am describing here of society and individuals. Typical examples are Jane Austen’s *Emma*, which deals with Emma’s social education; Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, in which Pip becomes a gentleman, but discovers that his new-found status is far from secure; Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in which a rebellious heroine learns to conform; and D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, in which the hero is at odds with both his father and society. A great part of the activity of novel criticism centres upon appreciating and describing how the novel under consideration presents this tension between society and the individual.

Having said that, however, it is necessary to start introducing qualifications. The pattern I have described is not inherent in the novel as a genre; novels do not have to present individuals at odds with society. That so many classic novels do is simply a historical fact, reflecting the post-1700 concerns of Western culture: the novel in England came into existence to dramatize the anxieties of the bourgeois hero or heroine, and, as a consequence, it is all too easy to think that this is the intrinsic subject matter of the genre. A critical approach that focuses on the life and trials of the central character is also likely to favour a certain kind of novel; the realistic novel is likely to receive the most attention, and there is bound to be praise for those

novels that offer an intricate sense of the psychological development of the principal characters.

In this respect, it is worth thinking about the critical reputation of Henry James, a novelist so difficult that he might be expected to remain a minority taste, but who, over the years, has received far more critical attention than widely-read novelists such as Anthony Trollope or H.G. Wells. Henry James is one of the novelists that the critic F.R. Leavis included in his 'Great Tradition'; the others are Jane Austen, George Eliot and Joseph Conrad. That is, realistic society and the individual novelists, all noted for their subtle characterization (Leavis, 1948). A great deal of criticism from the 1950s and 1960s reveals a shared preference for this kind of novel, including Ian Watt's classic account of eighteenth-century fiction, *The Rise of the Novel*, in which realism is the central concept (Watt, 1957).

This traditional preference for realism led, it is interesting to note, to the neglect – and, until recently, exclusion from the syllabus – of whole categories of fiction, such as the gothic novel and the sensation novel. A work such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, probably the best-known sensation novel, could be admired for its ingenious plotting and manipulation of suspense, but, to the critic bringing specific expectations to fiction, inevitably seemed shallow. The same could be said of responses to gothic novels, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. It is only recently, particularly with the development of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, that critics have found non-dismissive ways of discussing the 'other' novels in the history of the novel. (See Unit 9 for a further discussion of the rise of the novel.)

### A broader sense of the novel

There is a further problem with focusing too much on society and the individual. It is this: if we read novels with certain expectations, there is a chance that we will miss other levels of meaning and significance in these works. This should become apparent if we return to the opening of *Robinson Crusoe* which, so far, I have discussed in terms of society and the individual. I commented on the fact that the passage seems to turn its back on religion, but possibly it is dealing with a worrying drift away from religion. Indeed, the passage might possess levels of meaning which, although not immediately apparent to the modern reader, are just as important as the fate of the individual. We could say, for example, on the basis of how Defoe focuses on names, that he even displays a radical scepticism about the whole notion of identity, of the self-named subject. Rather than offering a mirror to middle-class life, it could be argued that the passage, as it manipulates names, questions the very concept of self that the novel as a genre seems to value so highly.

We might also consider how Defoe plays with the notion of patriarchy. Crusoe shapes his life in the shadow of, and in relation to, his father. It is a power relationship in which the child will need to assert himself. But, given the references to religion in the passage, we could say that Defoe is more broadly, and indeed fundamentally, concerned with the patriarchal structure of experience. The point I



am making is that if we come to a novel with different expectations, we are likely to construct a different sense of its central concerns. Traditionally criticism has focused on the fate of the individual in society, but if we adjust the angle of looking we might, as in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, find levels of religious significance, or that a novel is posing different questions about the self, or that it is engaged in a more fundamental examination of the structure of power in society.

Just as it is possible to broaden our sense of what we are likely to encounter in a novel, we can, if we adopt a less restrictive definition, extend our sense of the history of the genre. It is simply the novel as we generally think of the form that started with *Robinson Crusoe*. We could, however, use the term to embrace any long narrative written in prose, such as Philip Sidney's prose romance *Arcadia* (c. 1580), or picaresque fiction, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605–15). And there are numerous works from the seventeenth century, such as Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which qualify if we employ a less prescriptive definition. In a sense, however, this merely takes us back to our point of departure: the difficulty of defining the novel. Novels are not just realistic fictions about the individual and society, but it is difficult to establish an alternative definition of the shared characteristics of the genre.

## Narratology

Criticism tends to concentrate on either the content or form of a literary work. Part of the problem in this discussion so far is that the emphasis has been on content, on the thematic concerns that surface in novel after novel. As we have seen, this provides a good foundation for the discussion of many novels, but constitutes too limited a sense of what is possible in novels in general, and possibly even too limited a sense of what is happening in a novel such as *Robinson Crusoe*. An alternative strategy is to turn away from content, and start with a sense of the formal structure of novels. The name for this kind of discussion is narratology, which means the study of how narratives work. In its purest form, narratology ignores content; the narratologist is interested exclusively in the systematic formal construction of a work, the structural elements that are present and how they combine, and the way in which the narrative gets told.

The most significant works in the history of narratology are Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* ([1928] 1968), A.J. Greimas's *Sémantique structurale* (1970), Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* ([1972] 1980) and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1978). The attraction of narratology is obvious: if we are offered a sense of a standard narrative pattern, we are well placed to see how an individual work adapts and develops that pattern. But, almost inevitably, the issue is not as simple as that: it is possible to take issue with the impulse behind narratology, to argue that the patterns are imposed rather than intrinsic in fiction. And, even if the existence of the patterns is granted, it has to be recognized that the discovery of one pattern is likely to operate at the expense of other patterns that might be overlooked or simply missed (see Unit 18, pp. 532–8).

## The journey

As you can see, we return to the same problem that exists with a thematic approach: the novel is an elusive form, and any attempt to pin it down is unavoidably flawed. Criticism, however, would never get anywhere if we spent all our time questioning the validity of our approaches, and narratology, for all its shortcomings, does provide us with a solid foundation for studying individual texts. What follows here, though, is something far less complex than a comprehensive taxonomy of fiction. I simply want to draw attention to some of the recurrent structural features of novels. We can start by returning again to *Robinson Crusoe*: Crusoe, as everybody knows, goes on a sea journey, gets shipwrecked and lands on an island. In *Tom Jones*, Tom is expelled from the house of his protector, Mr Allworthy, and travels towards London with a schoolmaster, Partridge, experiencing a variety of adventures along the way. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, Huck, a schoolboy, and his friend Jim, an adult slave, travel down the Mississippi on a raft. On their journey they encounter rogues, mobs and even murderers. What links these three narratives is the structure of a journey, and this is, in fact, the most common narrative pattern in literature.

In each work there is also a breaking away from the father (in the case of *Tom Jones*, a father figure) at the outset, and this is also a familiar structure in fiction. Indeed, it has been said that the novel as a genre came into existence at that point in history when God the father ceased to be central in people's experience, and that all novels search for an order to take the place of the security of the original patriarchal order. The concept of the journey obviously exists before the novel came into existence; it is the narrative device at the heart of romance (for example, Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene*), and the work that is sometimes regarded as the first novel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, parodies romance in a significant way. The Don, as with the heroes of romance, is on a quest, a symbolic journey through life, but it is the essence of picaresque fiction that the hero does not arrive at his goal, that he is endlessly waylaid. If we extend this idea, it could be argued that novels in general are always torn between the overall design of the onward progression of the journey/story, and local interruptions which impede progress. If we consider Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the most significant original prose work in English before *Robinson Crusoe*, it is a religious allegory of the Christian hero's journey through life, but what makes the work interesting – and what makes it resemble a novel – are the variety and complexity of the distractions that the hero encounters along the way, and the complex nature of his response to these temptations.

When we look at realistic fiction, the local distractions of life are overwhelming, and the structure of a journey is often obscured. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for example, the Preface compares the heroine, Dorothea Brooke, to Saint Theresa on a spiritual journey, but in reading the work this informing structure is almost forgotten; what we notice are the demands of daily life. The heroine is, none the less, still caught between a sense of some larger meaning to her life and the mundane realities of ordinary life. It is a tension that is particularly prominent in Thomas Hardy's novels,



where the overall structure is often that of tragedy – a literary form that imposes a significant structure upon life – but the page-by-page texture is that of realism. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels by and large obscure the overall structure, often overwhelming us with the density of their social worlds, but late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novels frequently re-emphasize the idea of a symbolic journey: for example, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, and the odyssey that runs through James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In American fiction, however, the sense of a symbolic journey has always been more prominent; indeed, it has been a feature of some criticism in the past to regard works such as *Huckleberry Finn* too exclusively as romances, and to overlook the extent to which such works were engaged in the political realities of nineteenth-century American life. The journey of Huck and Jim is not some kind of Walt Disney escapade, but a disturbing exploration of issues of race, class, gender, language and national identity.

## Plot

The simple sequence of events in a novel is a story, but the moment we start to take account of motivation and causation the story becomes a plot. The most famous definition of plot was given by E.M. Forster: “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story,’ he explained, but “‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot’ (Forster, [1927] 1963, p. 93). Plot suggests all the decisions the novelist has had to make in terms of presenting the work in a certain order and duration; in a picaresque novel, like *Don Quixote*, the plot could be called loose and episodic, whereas, at the other extreme, a twentieth-century novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* has a complex and intricate plot. Generally, however, we should be able to see the characters in the plot of a novel are caught up in a developing conflict which is normally resolved at the end.

The term ‘plot’ has to be included in this unit, as it has always been an important concept in literary criticism. Traditional novel criticism, for example, focused on theme, plot and character, with perhaps some discussion of the angle of narration and the language of a text. But the word ‘plot’ appears a lot less in criticism these days. The problem is that the concept of plot rather suggests a grand design, an overall unity and coherence within the text, as if everything slots together to make a grand statement. We can connect this with the impulse in traditional criticism to get at ‘the meaning’ of the text; such criticism is often referred to as expressive criticism, meaning that it contrives to get at the meaning the author is expressing. To offer an example: Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* is the story of David's life, his relationship with his mother, his friendships, and his emotional attachments. The critic Gwendolyn B. Needham, in an essay that is typical of its time, suggests that at the heart of the novel is the idea of emotional growth, that David learns how to control his undisciplined heart (Needham, [1954] 1990). It is a plausible reading, but critics by and large no longer favour this kind of criticism that seeks to extrapolate a main point from the text. Criticism has swung towards an idea of the openness of texts. In the case of *David Copperfield*, critics are far more likely to stress the

unresolved tensions at the heart of Victorian life, and to praise Dickens's ability to suggest the subtle and deep nature of these tensions, than to draw attention to any supposed solution Dickens might be said to have for the problems of his age. It is a novel's ability to suggest the complexity of issues, and not the quality of a novel's answers, that is central in criticism today.

## Closure

This change in critical direction is clearly illustrated in the emergence of the term closure and the large number of discussions of problems of closure. Quite simply, closure refers to the fact that novels end, and that the neatness of the closing pages is often at odds with the complexity of the work as a whole. At the end of *Tom Jones*, for example, Tom is revealed to be a relative of Mr Allworthy; Tom might have appeared a rogue, but we discover that he is really a gentleman. It is as if Fielding, a conservative thinker, reasserts the fundamental soundness of the social order, turning his back on the socially (and sexually) disturbing questions his novel has asked along the way. The issue of closure is discussed brilliantly in D.A. Miller's *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Miller, 1981). Concentrating on Jane Austen and George Eliot, he deals with the tension between suspense and closure in fiction; how there is a 'narratable disequilibrium' and set against this a state of 'non-narratable quiescence'. That is to say, a novel can only be interesting and continue when there is conflict and suspense; the moment social order is restored there is no story to narrate.

## Character

The thread that has run through this unit is that we undervalue the novel as a genre if we attempt to pin it down too much. Thematically, if we say that all novels are about the conflict between individuals and society, we are likely to overlook other, less manageable, levels of meaning in a work. Formally, if we stress unity of plot we reduce a novel to a simple pattern, and that tends to imply that the novel is making a simple statement. There are similar dangers involved in relying too much upon the concept of character. At first sight, character can appear to be the wild card in a text; if the structure of a plot is almost inevitably deterministic, character might seem to be the force that resists, that can pull against the tide. In practice, however, character is often latched on to as a glibly reassuring concept in a text.

I have already referred to a traditional critical view of *David Copperfield*. *David Copperfield* is a *Bildungsroman*, an education novel dealing with the growth to maturity of the central character; for a critic like Needham (referred to earlier), it is a novel about the growth of the liberal hero. But a critic less intent on extrapolating a positive overall meaning from the text might prefer to focus on the way in which David has acquired much of the hardness of his hated step-father, the ways in which David's conduct towards women is consistently suspect, and the ways in which there



are numerous parallels between David and the two villains of the book, Steerforth and Uriah Heep.

The point is that traditional criticism usually accepted the overt pattern of the text: that the hero or heroine stood for individual integrity in a corrupt world. But the moment the critical impulse is reversed, the moment the critic focuses on the incoherence of the text, the frailty of the concept of the individual becomes apparent. David Copperfield is a self-constructed subject; more interesting than the equanimity he achieves at the end of the novel are the neuroses, confused desires, and worries about class and status that bedevil his life. We can apply a similar approach to *Jane Eyre*: traditional criticism focused on how Jane grows up, how she becomes a responsible person, leaving behind the instability of her younger years. More recent criticism, however, often focuses on the process rather than the product of the text, looking at Jane's instability, and even seeing something positive in it, specifically a protest against the male order that is dominant in society. The trend in criticism in recent years has, therefore, been not to abandon an interest in character, but, rather than seizing upon character as a reassuring presence, to see character as a precarious identity that is constructed in order to cope with the world. It is a split and disturbing interiority rather than a positive sense of the self that we could be said to encounter most commonly, particularly in the nineteenth-century novel.

## Realism

Many of the concerns of this unit are reflected in changing attitudes towards realistic fiction. As I have stated, traditional criticism favoured the realistic novel, but, starting in the 1960s, critical taste began, albeit temporarily, to turn against the realistic novel. For example, Colin MacCabe, in a book on James Joyce, mocked the 'classic realist text', specifically *Middlemarch*, as a kind of deception, a work which affects to offer us a comprehensive picture of experience, but one in which the narrator is, in fact, very much in control: controlling the plot, controlling the characters, and controlling the meanings available to the reader (MacCabe, 1978). This phase of dismissing George Eliot has now passed. The emphasis of a great deal of recent criticism is that *Middlemarch* is not the coherent and unified package that traditional critics seemed to want. It only appears like this if we impose concepts of theme, plot, character and the narrator's voice in too rigid a way. When we loosen that kind of critical control we can see that it is a work that is disturbingly open on questions of sexuality, gender, class, power, empire, marriage, society, the self – indeed, every vital aspect of Victorian life. In a similar way, when we start to relax our critical commitment to unity and coherence, we begin to acquire a critical vocabulary for appreciating the disturbing effects of, say, Dickens, and gothic novelists, and sensation novelists.

## Narration

D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* deals with a young man with artistic leanings who is at odds with his family, particularly his father, and this young man's first sexual

experiences. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* deals with a young man with artistic leanings who is at odds with his family, particularly his father, and this young man's first sexual experiences. There are, of course, all kinds of ways in which these works do not echo each other, but basic structures are repeated in novels as it is through a handful of situations – often involving sexual encounters – that people can be put to the test and gain a sense of who they are. The twists and turns of a novelist's plot, the characters he or she creates, and the physical setting in which the events of the novel take place all contribute to the distinctive feel of a novel, but what possibly more than anything else makes a novel distinctive is the manner of the narration. There is a voice narrating the events that are taking place, and this voice is invested with power and authority. As readers of a novel, we are not free to judge characters and actions as we might in real life: there is always a narrator directing our judgements.

Essentially, there are only two forms of narration, first-person narrative and third-person narrative. We can also refer to each of these as the point of view from which the events are narrated. In a first-person narrative, the narrator is a participant in the story, very often the central character. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is a first-person narrative. It begins:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap ... (Salinger, [1951] 1958, p. 5)

*David Copperfield* is, as you might realize from this, also a first-person narrative.

Third-person narrative relies upon a narrator who is outside the story proper. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* begins:

A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes. (Hawthorne, [1850] 1992, p. 65)

This sentence provides a clear illustration of how a narrator is always shaping meanings and directing the reader. This is a group of people gathered at a prison door; we are unlikely to form the impression that they are liberal-minded citizens protesting at the punishment that is to be inflicted upon someone. On the contrary, we know they are unforgiving. The narrator does not, of course, state this directly; instead, he lets the references to their 'sad-coloured garments' and 'steeple-crowned hats' make the point. 'Steeple-crowned' associates their hardness with a religious hardness, just as the 'iron spikes' in the door tell us all we need to know about the prison regime. When we look at a narrative voice we are, before anything else, looking at ways such as this in which the narrator creates and controls the meanings of a work.

### Third-person narrative

The narrator who exercises the greatest degree of control over a novel is an omniscient narrator: this is a narrator who presumes to know everything, to be able



to read every motive. In this example from *Middlemarch*, look at how we are told how the character feels: 'In his inmost soul Will was conscious of wishing to tell Dorothea what was new even in his own construction of things ...' (George Eliot, [1871–2], 1994, p. 366). George Eliot does not just tell us what Will is thinking, but claims to convey his deepest thoughts, ideas that have barely formulated themselves even in his own mind. This kind of omniscience is most common in nineteenth-century realistic novels. The narrator seems to control the world and to have a discourse available for making sense of the whole of experience; as one might expect, it is a middle-class discourse. The world is being read from the perspective of those who possess political and economic power in society. The views offered by such a narrator strike us as sound and reasonable, but this is inevitable, for ideology serves the needs of the dominant class by encouraging everyone in society to believe that they share the same interests as this class.

There are two qualifications that should be entered here: one is that, if we simply generalize about George Eliot's narrator speaking in the dominant voice of society, we are likely to overlook the subtlety and complexity of that controlling voice. This is the qualification traditional critics would express. The other qualification, which I will expand upon later in this unit, is that George Eliot's narrative position is possibly not as confident as it might initially appear, that, if we shift our angle of evaluation, we might start to see the narrative voice as uncertain (one aspect of this is that George Eliot is a woman writing in the voice of a patriarchal society). At first sight, however, the narrative voice in *Middlemarch* seems confident, and particularly when we compare George Eliot with Thomas Hardy. Omniscience begins to break down towards the end of the nineteenth century. Look, for example, at this description of Henchard, the eponymous hero of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: 'That laugh was not encouraging to strangers ... . Many theories might have been built upon it. It fell in well with conjectures of a temperament which would have no pity for weakness ...' (Hardy, [1886] 1974, p. 64).

The interesting thing about this is that Hardy has it both ways. He expresses a direct judgement on the character, but at the same time his comment is beset with qualifications: that all kinds of theories could be constructed about Henchard's laugh, that the view offered is conjecture. How do we explain this gradual retreat from omniscience? The answer would seem to lie in changes in society and thinking towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new sense that there is not one universal truth, only a series of relative perspectives. Hardy's method indicates that things can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

### First-person narration

This impression of a retreat from omniscience is confirmed if we look at the manner of narration in modernist fiction. Omniscience becomes less and less common, and more authors use dramatized, often fallible, narrators. Conrad in a number of his works, including *Heart of Darkness*, uses a character called Marlow as his narrator: this is one person, struggling to make sense of experience, and aware that life is

more complex than his grasp of the world. It is quite often the case, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, that the dramatized narrator, in this instance Nick Carraway, is a middle-class character judging the world with certain values and a specific language; the events presented stretch beyond the comprehension of such a character. It is a way of indicating that we cannot read the world completely, that we can only offer relative perspectives.

When a novelist uses a dramatized narrator it is a form of first-person point of view, but as used by twentieth-century novelists it differs from the kind of autobiographical first-person mode that we encounter in novels such as *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*. In both these Victorian novels, a mature narrator reflects upon his/her younger self; it is a fairly stable method of narration, the reader being encouraged to share the mature narrator's judgement on his/her youthful naivety. It could be said (although recent criticism might take issue with this view) that this form of first-person narration, just as much as omniscient narration, endorses a middle-class ideological reading of experience. By contrast, the use of a dramatized narrator in works such as those of Conrad and Fitzgerald indicates the limitations of a middle-class perspective. (See Unit 18, pp. 532–8, for a discussion of narrators and narrative method.)

### Stream of consciousness/interior monologue

Modernist fiction takes its experiments with narration furthest in the use of stream of consciousness and interior monologue, as encountered, for example, in the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Implicit in the presence of an omniscient narrator is the idea that there is a language and set of values that all reasonable people share. At the opposite extreme from this idea of a public and normative discourse is stream of consciousness, which purports to present the flow of a character's mental processes; sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, with memories, and with random associations. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with interior monologue, but generally the distinction that is drawn is that stream of consciousness can include the intervention of a narrator whereas interior monologue presents the vagaries of the mental process far more directly, for example ignoring any requirement for grammatical sentences or a logical order.

### Experiments in narrative technique

Such experiments in narrative technique are, as in the works of Conrad, Woolf and William Faulkner (most successfully in *The Sound and the Fury*), often accompanied by disruption of the usual time sequence of a novel. Events might be narrated out of sequence, to the extent that we have to piece together the story rather than being guided through it. Such disruption again challenges the conventional structures that we rely upon to shape experience; a common-sense, ordered way of organising life is exposed as an arbitrary, but reassuring, way of making sense of the world.



All such effects are most brilliantly handled in Joyce's *Ulysses*. The story in *Ulysses* is simple: Stephen Dedalus meets up with a substitute father figure, Leopold Bloom. The manner of the narration, however, is extraordinary, for each chapter of the novel is narrated in a different style, or several different styles. It is an approach that alerts us to the way in which literature processes and orders experience through received or conventional discourses; by becoming self-conscious about style, Joyce challenges the notion of a univocal reading of experience, and draws attention to the different ways in which meaning can be imposed upon experience in a literary text.

The overall history of narrative control in the novel is, therefore, a move from omniscience towards rejection of the very idea of omniscience. At this point, however, as is so often the case in elaborating neat theories about the novel, we need to hesitate. Was the Victorian novel really as univocal as might appear to be the case? Or is it that, if we look for omniscience we are likely to be struck by omniscience, and, consequently, miss other things that are happening in a novel? I have already referred to the fact that a traditional critical vocabulary encourages us to view fiction in a certain way. That is again the case here. The traditional stress on point of view and omniscience promotes an expressive view of literature: attention is drawn to what the author says and his or her success in saying it. Even with modernist texts, where there seems to be a rejection of the narrator's conventional authority, the use of terms such as interior monologue in fact supports the idea that the author is very much in control of the possible meanings of the text. Criticism in recent years, however, has become much more interested in how a text challenges authorial control. (See Unit 16 for a detailed discussion of stream of consciousness and narrative experiment.)

### The polyphonic novel

One of the critics who has contributed most to new thinking about novels is Mikhail Bakhtin. We can see the impact of his work in changing views of *Middlemarch*. As I have suggested, traditional critics liked *Middlemarch*; they admired the subtlety of George Eliot's moral discriminations, and what they saw as the novel's timeless truthfulness to human experience. But when critical fashion turned, albeit briefly, against George Eliot her omniscience was dismissed as a narrowly middle-class view of life. The debate soon, however, moved on in a new direction: in an important article, David Lodge took a fresh look at *Middlemarch*, arguing that the narration is a good deal more complex than has often been assumed (Lodge, 1981). In formulating his case, Lodge calls upon the thinking of Bakhtin, in particular the proposition that, rather than there being one voice in a text, a novel is polyphonic. In *Middlemarch*, as soon as we begin to look at it in this light, we are no longer aware of just one omniscient voice but a host of different and competing voices representing different positions and perspectives. When we begin to consider an argument such as this, *Middlemarch* becomes a novel that fails to amount to a larger unity; there are always unresolvable differences, problems in the novel that the narrator cannot rhetorically control.

The broader significance of this change in critical thinking (it is, it must be pointed out, not just Bakhtin but the whole weight of poststructuralist theory that has changed our ideas) is that there is no longer the interest there used to be in looking for the large statement a text might be felt to be making. There is, on the contrary, an interest in the text as a site of struggle, articulating differences and divisions within the society of its day. One consequence of this change in critical thinking is a radical shift in the image of the author: the author is no longer regarded as a sage, offering words of wisdom to his or her contemporaries. On the contrary, the author is as confused as anyone else, articulating the problems of his or her day but not getting on top of them. In order for such a change in critical assumptions to take place, however, there had to be a move away from some of the central concepts of traditional criticism. If we talk about theme, plot, character and point of view, we build a coherent sense of what is going on in a novel and what the novel is trying to say. If, however, we focus more closely on the language of a text, we shift from a sense of broad controlling elements towards an awareness of local difficulties, of instabilities within each sentence. And the more we look at the language of a novel the more we are likely to notice the anxieties and strains in the discourse of a period.

### Discourse analysis

Bakhtin looks at the competing voices, the competing discourses within a novel. In any society, however, there will be a dominant discourse, the language of those in power. Feminist criticism has influenced general thinking here, for at the heart of much feminist writing is a dissection of how men have held on to power through controlling language. What a great deal of recent criticism is interested in is the nature of the dominant discourse in texts and also challenges to that discourse. *Jane Eyre* provides a clear example. Traditionally, *Jane Eyre* has been read as a text about a wayward heroine who needs to mature. This is, indeed, the overt thrust of the book: by the end of the novel Jane has acquired a new kind of balance. But recent criticism often reads against the grain of the overt pattern of the text, finding material at odds with the dominant pattern. Look, for example, at this brief extract from Jane's marriage ceremony:

'The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment.'

The clergyman looked up and stood mute; the clerk did the same; Mr Rochester moved slightly, as if an earthquake had rolled under his feet ... (Brontë, [1847] 1994, p. 287)

There is a public language – formal, elaborate, legalistic – which is the language of the marriage service. It is a discourse that, combining religion and the law, declares where power resides in society.

Jane has to negotiate a position for herself, including a language for herself, within this order. Consequently, as against the public language, there is a private language from Jane that expresses her feelings; as in the reference to an earthquake, she makes use of metaphors from nature to express states of feeling which possibly have no existence in the conventional discourse of society. What is also significant here is that, the moment the usual order is challenged, the clergyman



and the clerk lose the power of speech: they can only operate within the conventional order, and have no language available for handling a state of affairs outside that usual order. What we see in this scene is true throughout the novel, that Jane speaks for herself within a dominant discourse. What gives the book such force is that Jane's discourse is one of rage and anger, as she fights against the roles that are assigned to her. In order to get at this sense of the novel, however, we have to focus on its language.

There is, in fact, another level of complication in *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë is a member of the society of her day, and has absorbed its values and vocabulary in all kinds of ways. Consequently, in looking closely at the language of *Jane Eyre*, we are likely to find various ways in which Brontë, alongside her sympathy for Jane, reveals her commitment to the dominant ideological values of the period. There is, for example, Jane's pride in her middle-class status, her love of respectability and cleanliness, and, perhaps most interestingly, a colonialist vein of thinking: the novel consistently sets the civilized standards of Europe against the uncivilized standards of India and the West Indies. The fact is that Brontë is subversive in the society of her day, but also a member of that society; she challenges but also shares the assumptions that are built into its everyday speech. It might be felt that such a contradiction at the heart of a novel must be a shortcoming, but only if we expect a novel to make a coherent statement. If we abandon a desire for unity, and work outwards from the language of a novel – looking at how the novelist both relates to and dissents from a dominant discourse, and looking at how a novel contains meanings that the novelist is unconscious of – we are likely to arrive at a sense of how a novel expresses the deepest contradictions of the period of its production. It is not a pointless incoherence, but an incoherence that indicates the complexity of a novel's involvement with the political, cultural and social issues of its time. (Bakhtin's theories are dealt with in Unit 21.)

## The changing syllabus

Over the years an English Literature syllabus changes. Traditional criticism favoured steady novels expressing central truths about human experience. Recent criticism, as I have indicated, has been busily engaged in showing that these steady novels are not as coherent as might appear to be the case. At the same time, texts which for too long have been on the fringes of the syllabus have been given a more prominent role. This applies to the gothic novel, the sensation novel, a great many novels by women authors, and texts from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.

*Frankenstein* provides a good example of a novel that has only recently found widespread acceptance on the English Literature syllabus. It tells the story of Victor Frankenstein who constructs a monster and endows it with life. The monster is benevolent, but is regarded with loathing and fear; consequently, its benevolence turns to hatred as it destroys its creator and his bride. Until recently, there was little criticism of *Frankenstein*. Such as there was focused more on the author, Mary Shelley, than the novel. It was sometimes discussed in relation to Romantic poetry,

particularly in the context of the work of Mary's husband, Percy Shelley, and sometimes critics considered the story's hold upon the popular imagination. What is clear is that critics could not find a substantial or serious text to discuss in *Frankenstein*. Such a view begins to change, however, if we become less concerned with steady truths about human experience and redirect our attention to dissident and disturbing voices within a culture. In relation to *Frankenstein*, one possible approach is to argue that there are two realms in the novel: one, the public realm, is dominated by language and law, the other, the private realm, is secret, even incommunicable. This is the realm of Frankenstein and his monster. It is a world that exists outside society and language, containing only the monster and his creator. Victor has some connection with the public realm – his command of the discourse of society enables him to pursue his studies at a university – but the association with the monster points to an exploration of the dark places of his unconscious (see Unit 10, pp. 245–8).

A full elaboration of this line of argument would require consideration of the work of Jacques Lacan, in particular his idea of the Symbolic Order of society as opposed to the Imaginary Order of the pre-Oedipal stage; Victor has clearly not really adjusted to the Symbolic Order of society. Rather than pursue such an argument here, however, it is probably more useful to point out how this kind of reading of *Frankenstein*, and the same would be true of many current readings of this and other novels, focuses on language, and specifically interests itself in those who are excluded from or in a problematic relationship with the dominant discourse of a society. There is often a feminist dimension to such thinking: in the case of *Frankenstein*, for example, Mary Shelley's anxieties about her own role as someone creating and living by language, yet conscious that language, along with literary creation, is usually regarded as a masculine preserve.

## Non-fictional prose

The implication of much of what I have been saying is that if you alter the position from which criticism operates then you gain a different sense of what is involved in any particular text. A critical approach in which the key terms are theme, plot, character and point of view has little to say about *Frankenstein*, but a critical approach which places language at the centre of the discussion has a lot to say. This is true in relation to novels, but even more true in relation to the discussion of non-fictional prose. Non-fictional prose – works such as history books, works of philosophy, occasional essays, and even key scientific documents such as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* – have always had a rather awkward role in a literature syllabus. It is clear that these works are important, but what to say about them has often been less clear. The tendency used to be to regard them as background texts, indicating the kind of cultural climate in which authors worked, and sometimes, as in the case of Thomas Carlyle, having a direct influence on the thinking of novelists. In so far as students read writers like Carlyle, they focused on their ideas; by and large, such texts were not subjected to the kind of critical analysis applied to novels, poems and plays.



There is, of course, nothing wrong with this; it might even be said that there is a great deal of sense in reading a philosophical or historical work for its content rather than from the point of view of form. In recent years, however, and again largely as a result of the current tendency to focus upon language, much more attention has been paid to non-fictional texts as works that respond well to critical discussion. One of the best examples of such critical analysis is Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots*, in which she looks at the evolutionary thought of Charles Darwin and its impact upon George Eliot and other nineteenth-century novelists. Darwin propounds a scientific theory, but Beer is alert to the problems Darwin faced in precipitating his theory as language:

He was telling a new story, against the grain of the language available to tell it in. And as it was told, the story itself proved not to be single or simple. It was, rather, capable of being extended or reclaimed into a number of conflicting systems. (Beer, 1983, p. 5)

Can you see how Darwin's theory is treated as a narrative, a kind of story? Writing at a time of retreating religious faith, and, indeed, helping to accelerate that retreat, Darwin is involved in creating a new story to replace an old story. The difficulty and delicacy of the task is to a large extent reflected in the metaphoric language Darwin employs to achieve his ends. What Beer does, then, is read *The Origin of Species* as a literary text. The procedures she employs are now widely diffused in considerations of non-fictional prose: rather than just focusing on ideas, critics look at how the writer constructs a narrative, and how language functions in that narrative.

### The novel today

If we focus on the language of a text we tend to become absorbed with how an author confirms or challenges the discourse of his or her day. It is the problem every writer has to return to: not what to write, but how to write. Three brief examples from current fiction might make this clear. One of the most celebrated novels of recent years has been Graham Swift's *Waterland*. The title refers to the fens of East Anglia, where nothing is firm. The narrator of *Waterland* tries to build a structure on these unstable foundations; what he does is tell stories, specifically the story of his family and the story of his own life. Stories are, as we see in the novel, not just important but vital; we cannot live without the comfort and coherence of narratives. But what is also of note in *Waterland* is that it is narrated by a history teacher on the verge of retirement. He is declared redundant; the world has moved on and defies his understanding, but he continues to tell stories in his polite, educated, English voice. The proposition at the heart of *Waterland* seems to apply to a great deal of current British fiction: there is the world as it exists today, and the polite voice of the English author. How can such an author escape from the past, escape from the voice he has inherited, escape from set ways of thinking and speaking? We see novelists such as Martin Amis and Will Self trying to alter the accent of British fiction (although, perhaps we should say English fiction, for other voices can be heard in other parts of the United Kingdom), but it seems impossible for the English writer to break free from inherited ways of speaking.

At an opposite extreme is the work of Alice Walker, an African-American woman novelist. In *The Color Purple* we see her assuming, almost effortlessly, a voice that bears no resemblance to any of the traditional voices of literary culture. As such, Walker challenges the dominant discourse of her society. Or, at least, does so up to a point: there are critics who point out that, even though Walker's language breaks the mould, in other ways she accepts the ideological imperatives of white American society. For example, the heroine of *The Color Purple* achieves success as a self-employed businesswoman. Such a contradiction is, however, not a weakness in the text. The ways in which Walker's novel both resists and shows its commitment to the dominant values of US society indicate the confusing complexity of the issues at the heart of the novel. For a more extreme form of resistance we would have to consider the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who, after completing *Petals of Blood* in 1977, stopped writing in English, arguing that while the bullet of the colonizer was the means of physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation. The reality for every novelist, however, is an equally fraught and complicated engagement with language.

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