



THE TEN CLASSIC BRITISH NOVELISTS

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ABSTRACT: These are the authors who gave birth to the masterpieces of British literature, writing lines still echoing in our heads, challenging beliefs and norms of society and imagining characters and stories that continue to fascinate new readers. The English novel is an important part of English literature. This article mainly concerns novels, written in English, by novelists who were born or have spent a significant part of their lives in England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland (or any part of Ireland before 1922). However, given the nature of the subject, this guideline has been applied with common sense, and reference is made to novels in other languages or novelists who are not primarily British, where appropriate.

KEYWORDS: classic, british, literature, novelists, society, readers

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the English novel has generally been seen as beginning with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722),^[1] though modern scholarship cites Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684) John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) as more likely contenders, while earlier works such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and even the "Prologue" to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have been suggested.^[2] Another important early novel is *Gulliver's Travels* (1726, amended 1735), by Irish writer and clergyman Jonathan Swift, which is both a satire of human nature, as well as a parody of travellers' tales like *Robinson Crusoe*.^[3] The rise of the novel as an important literary genre is generally associated with the growth of the middle class in England.

Other major 18th-century English novelists are Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), author of the epistolary novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48); Henry Fielding (1707–1754), who wrote *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749); Laurence Sterne (1713–1768), who published *Tristram Shandy* in parts between 1759 and 1767;^[4] Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774), author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); Tobias Smollett (1721–1771), a Scottish novelist best known for his comic picaresque novels, such as *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), who influenced Charles Dickens;^[5] and Fanny Burney (1752–1840), whose novels "were enjoyed and admired by Jane Austen," wrote *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796).^[6]

A noteworthy aspect of both the 18th- and 19th- century novel is the way the novelist directly addressed the reader. For example, the author might interrupt his or her narrative to pass judgment on a character, or pity or praise another, and inform or remind the reader of some other relevant issue^[1,2,3]

Jane Austen

In 1811, *Sense and Sensibility* was published anonymously 'By a Lady'. It was the first book written by Jane Austen, the first major woman novelist in the English language. Best known for describing the romantic lives of the middle class, Jane Austen is author of other novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, that are also considered some of the milestones in English literature. What makes her works outstanding is the wit and the cynicism she uses to portray – in evident contrast to the novels of her time – ordinary people and ordinary homely settings. Being one of the first authors to promote the idea that women should marry for love, and not for financial security, Jane Austen presents timeless stories that are still relevant in our century.

Charles Dickens

Through a poetic writing style matched with a strong comic touch, Charles Dickens portrays, with great awareness, the troubles and the sense of social injustice of the Victorian working class people. With the intent of revealing the disreputable side of the era, his works focus on the hypocrisy, the discrimination and the poverty of the British class system, diminishing ideas of civilisation and progress. Living in London, Dickens absorbed all the aspects of the capital that became the setting for many of his novels: streets, corners, inns...all aspects of the city are drawn in his books in a fascinating way that makes it a character in itself. To read novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great*



Expectations, is a journey in a world full of moving characters with astonishing outcomes that will stick with you long after you have closed the book.[5,7,8]

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is best known as the creator of the detective Sherlock Holmes, one of the most famous and enduring fictional characters of all the time. An excellent writer and storyteller, war journalist, medical doctor, keen patriot, and firm imperialist, Arthur Conan Doyle not only wrote detective stories but also historical and social romances. The famous detective first appeared in the novel *The Study in Scarlet*; although rejected three times by publishers, the novel became a Christmas giveaway for a magazine. Rude but likeable, the beloved detective continues to enchant generation after generation with several stage, TV and movie adaptations.

II. DISCUSSION

The phrase 'Romantic novel' has several possible meanings. Here it refers to novels written during the Romantic era in literary history, which runs from the late 18th century until the beginning of the Victorian era in 1837. But to complicate matters there are novels written in the romance tradition by novelists like Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Meredith.^[7] In addition the phrase today is mostly used to refer to the popular pulp-fiction genre that focusses on romantic love. The Romantic period is especially associated with the poets William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Byron, Percy Shelley and John Keats, though two major novelists, Jane Austen and Walter Scott, also published in the early 19th century.

Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, invented the Gothic fiction genre. The word gothic was originally used in the sense of medieval.^[8] This genre combines "the macabre, fantastic, and supernatural" and usually involves haunted castles, graveyards and various picturesque elements.^[9] Later novelist Ann Radcliffe introduced the brooding figure of the Gothic villain which developed into the Byronic hero. Her most popular and influential work, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), is frequently described as the archetypal Gothic novel. *Vathek* (1786), by William Beckford, and *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Lewis, were further notable early works in both the Gothic and horror genres.

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), as another important Gothic novel as well as being an early example of science fiction.^[10] The vampire genre fiction began with John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). This short story was inspired by the life of Lord Byron and his poem *The Giaour*. An important later work is *Varney the Vampire* (1845), where many standard vampire conventions originated: Varney has fangs, leaves two puncture wounds on the neck of his victims, and has hypnotic powers and superhuman strength. Varney was also the first example of the "sympathetic vampire", who loathes his condition but is a slave to it.^[11]

Among more minor novelists in this period Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) and Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866) are worthy of comment. Edgeworth's novel *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is "the first fully developed regional novel in English" as well as "the first true historical novel in English" and an important influence on Walter Scott.^[12] Peacock was primarily a satirist in novels such as *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829).

Jane Austen's (1775–1817) works critique the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century realism.^[13] Her plots, though fundamentally comic, highlight the dependence of women on marriage to secure social standing and economic security.^[14] Austen brings to light the hardships women faced, who usually did not inherit money, could not work and where their only chance in life depended on the man they married. She reveals not only the difficulties women faced in her day, but also what was expected of men and of the careers they had to follow. This she does with wit and humour and with endings where all characters, good or bad, receive exactly what they deserve. Her work brought her little personal fame and only a few positive reviews during her lifetime, but the publication in 1869 of her nephew's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* introduced her to a wider public, and by the 1940s she had become accepted as a major writer. The second half of the 20th century saw a proliferation of Austen scholarship and the emergence of a Janeite fan culture. Austen's works include *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* and *Emma*.^[9,10,11]

The other major novelist at the beginning of the early 19th century was Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), who was not only a highly successful British novelist but "the greatest single influence on fiction in the 19th century ... [and] a European figure".^[15] Scott established the genre of the historical novel with his series of *Waverley Novels*, including *Waverley* (1814), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818).^[16] However, Austen is today widely read and the source for films and television series, while Scott is less often read.



George Orwell

Novelist, poet, essayist and critic, George Orwell — pen name of Eric Arthur Blair — is known worldwide for his two novels *The Animal Farm* and *1984*. Orwell's deep dissonance with society and his pessimistic view of modern civilisation are key to the interpretation of his works. An allegorical anti-Soviet satire, presenting two pigs as main characters, *Animal Farm* is the author's first very successful novel. Orwell had to experience many obstacles before the book, based on the idea of undermining totalitarianism, was published. Influenced by totalitarian regimes of the time, such as Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, *1984* was published in 1949, describing three totalitarian states at war controlling the world. The book has been adapted for several TV shows and movies.

Virginia Woolf

Pioneer of Modernist literature, Virginia Woolf wrote in total nine novels, a volume of short stories, two biographies, five volumes of collected essays and reviews, two libertarian books, and a volume of selections from her diary. The idea that women needed to achieve economic and intellectual freedom to guarantee social equality, expressed in *A Room Of One's Own*, makes her the founder of modern feminist literary criticism. In her novel *Orlando*, she also raises issues about gender, suggesting that gender roles are an idea imposed by society. Rejecting the boundaries of the traditional narrative form, she employed a nonlinear prose style emphasising the psychological aspect of her characters, especially in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University and a brilliant philologist and linguist, mostly noted for his two tales, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings*. Despite the length of both books and the old, uncommon, and archaic words he uses, the timeless beauty of his novels lies in the fantasy world he successfully created. A world informed not only by myths and legends, but also by his Catholicism and his experience serving in World War I, his works are astonishingly profound. Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings* have been adapted into popular award-winning films for the big screen. Of course, in these blockbuster films, Tolkien's complex narrative gets lost. The true spirit of his work remains in his original texts.

III. RESULTS

It was in the Victorian era (1837–1901) that the novel became the leading literary genre in English. A number of women novelists were successful in the 19th century, although they often had to use a masculine pseudonym. At the beginning of the 19th century most novels were published in three volumes. However, monthly serialization was revived with the publication of Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* in twenty parts between April 1836 and November 1837. Demand was high for each episode to introduce some new element, whether it was a plot twist or a new character, so as to maintain the readers' interest. Both Dickens and Thackeray frequently published this way.^[17]

In the 1830s and '40s, novelists began to show the influence of social critics on their work, especially Thomas Carlyle, who raised the "Condition-of-England Question" to describe "the social and political upheavals which followed the Reform Act of 1832".^[19] In response, novelists wrote "Condition of England novels", which were in many ways a reaction to rapid industrialization, and the social, political and economic issues associated with it, and were a means of commenting on abuses of government and industry and the suffering of the poor, who were not profiting from England's economic prosperity.^[20] Stories of the working-class poor were directed toward the middle class to help create sympathy and promote change. An early example is Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837–38).^[12,13,15]

Charles Dickens emerged on the literary scene in the 1830s with the two novels already mentioned. Dickens wrote vividly about London life and struggles of the poor, but in a good-humoured fashion, accessible to readers of all classes. One of his most popular works to this day is *A Christmas Carol* (1843). In more recent years Dickens has been most admired for his later novels, such as *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), *Great Expectations* (1860–61), *Bleak House* (1852–53) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). An early rival to Dickens was William Makepeace Thackeray, who during the Victorian period ranked second only to him, but he is now much less read and is known almost exclusively for *Vanity Fair* (1847). In that novel he satirizes whole swaths of humanity while retaining a light touch. It features his most memorable character, the engagingly roguish Becky Sharp.

The Brontë sisters were other significant novelists in the 1840s and 1850s. Their novels caused a sensation when they were first published but were subsequently accepted as classics. They had written compulsively from early childhood and were first published, at their own expense in 1846 as poets under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. The



sisters returned to prose, producing a novel each the following year: Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey*. Later, Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Charlotte's *Villette* (1853) were published. Elizabeth Gaskell was also a successful writer and first novel, *Mary Barton*, was published anonymously in 1848. Gaskell's *North and South* contrasts the lifestyle in the industrial north of England with the wealthier south. Even though her writing conforms to Victorian conventions, Gaskell usually frames her stories as critiques of contemporary attitudes: her early works focused on factory work in the Midlands. She always emphasised the role of women, with complex narratives and dynamic female characters.^[21]

Anthony Trollope (1815–82) was one of the most successful, prolific and respected English novelists of the Victorian era. Some of his best-loved works are set in the imaginary county of Barchester, including *The Warden* (1855) and *Barchester Towers* (1857). He also wrote perceptive novels on political, social, and gender issues, and on other topical matters, including *The Way with Live Now* (1875). Trollope's novels portrayed the lives of the landowning and professional classes of early Victorian England.

George Eliot's (Mary Ann Evans (1819–80) first novel *Adam Bede* was published in 1859. Her works, especially *Middlemarch* (1871–72), are important examples of literary realism, and are admired for their combination of high Victorian literary detail combined with an intellectual breadth that removes them from the narrow geographic confines they often depict.

An interest in rural matters and the changing social and economic situation of the countryside is seen in the novels of Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). A Victorian realist, in the tradition of George Eliot, he was also influenced both in his novels and poetry by Romanticism, especially by William Wordsworth.^[22] Charles Darwin is another important influence on Thomas Hardy.^[23] Like Charles Dickens he was also highly critical of much in Victorian society, though Hardy focussed more on a declining rural society. While Hardy wrote poetry throughout his life, and regarded himself primarily as a poet, his first collection was not published until 1898, so that initially he gained fame as the author of such novels as, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). He ceased writing novels following adverse criticism of this last novel. In novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy attempts to create modern works in the genre of tragedy, that are modelled on the Greek drama, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles, though in prose, not poetry, a novel not drama, and with characters of low social standing, not nobility.^[24] Another significant late 19th-century novelist is George Gissing (1857–1903) who published 23 novels between 1880 and 1903. His best known novel is *New Grub Street* (1891).

Important developments occurred in genre fiction in this era. Although pre-dated by John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* in 1841, the history of the modern fantasy genre is generally said to begin with George MacDonald, the influential author of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *Phantastes* (1858). William Morris was a popular English poet who also wrote several fantasy novels during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Wilkie Collins' epistolary novel *The Moonstone* (1868), is generally considered the first detective novel in the English language, while *The Woman in White* is regarded as one of the finest sensation novels. H. G. Wells's (1866–1946) writing career began in the 1890s with science fiction novels like *The Time Machine* (1895), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) which describes an invasion of late Victorian England by Martians, and Wells is seen, along with Frenchman Jules Verne (1828–1905), as a major figure in the development of the science fiction genre. He also wrote realistic fiction about the lower middle class in novels such as *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910).^[17,18,19]

George Eliot

Known by the name of George Eliot, the English novelist Mary Ann Evans used a male pen name in a not easy time for female writers. Born in 1819, George Eliot wrote some of the most famous works of English literature, including *Silas Marner*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede*. In her novels she attempts to analyze the shades of the human mind, rather than just create plots. George Eliot presents a massive range of characters, and gets into the head of every major player in the novel. Showing that everyone thinks in their own way, it will make you impossible to judge anyone.

Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley was a British author best known for her horror novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, one of the first Gothic novels that has since inspired several films, TV programs and video games. The influence of her work in pop culture is so great, that she's considered by many as the mother of modern science fiction. After having experienced the loss of her mother and of her half-sister, Mary married – after a controversial relationship – the poet Percy Shelley. On a cold rainy night in June 1816, the couple gathered in a villa located in Lake Geneva, in Switzerland, hosted by the poet Lord Byron. At Byron's suggestion, they each agreed to write a horror story and that's



how Mary Shelley composed, at the age of 19, *Frankenstein*, a manifestation of Mary's own sense of alienation and isolation.[20,21,22]

Charlotte Brontë

One of the most famous Victorian writers, Charlotte Brontë is noted mainly for her novel *Jane Eyre*. As an ambitious woman who decided not to follow the norms of the society of her time, in *Jane Eyre* she introduces a thinking woman who is able to follow her feelings and maintain her independence, and through the narrative creates a strong intimacy with the reader. Although *Jane Eyre*'s story can be considered a happy one, it reflects the social difficulties a woman had to face in her upbringing during her time.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Martin Amis (1949 to 2019) was one of the most prominent of contemporary British novelists. His best-known novels are *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989). Pat Barker (born 1943) has won many awards for her fiction.

Novelist and screenwriter Ian McEwan (born 1948) is another of contemporary Britain's most highly regarded writers. His works include *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *Enduring Love* (1997), which was made into a film. In 1998 McEwan won the Booker Prize with *Amsterdam*, while *Atonement* (2001) was made into an Oscar-winning film. McEwan was awarded the Jerusalem Prize in 2011.

Zadie Smith's (born 1975) Whitbread Book Award winning novel *White Teeth* (2000), mixes pathos and humour, focusing on the later lives of two war time friends in London. Julian Barnes (born 1946) is another successful living novelist, who won the 2011 Man Booker Prize for his book *The Sense of an Ending*, while three of his earlier books had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize[23,25]

Thomas Hardy

One of the most renowned poets and novelists in English literary history, Thomas Hardy wrote poetry and novels, though the first part of his career was devoted mostly to novels. Published as a magazine serial in 1895, *Jude The Obscure* is Hardy's most pessimistic novel which roused condemnation by critics and clergy with its sexual content and scathing critiques of Christianity and marriage. Copies of the book were burnt publicly, and several libraries pulled the novel from their shelves. His books depict people fighting against the cruelty of life, injustice and laws that obstruct the social growth.[25]

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