

The Rise of the English Novel: Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding's Contributions

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Abstract

This paper examines the early formation of the English novel in the eighteenth century by analyzing the significant roles played by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. These writers laid the groundwork for a new literary genre, shaping its narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and stylistic features. Defoe contributed a sense of realism rooted in everyday life and practical experience, Richardson deepened the novel's emotional and psychological dimensions through the epistolary style, and Fielding broadened its scope with his comic narrative voice and sharp social commentary. Collectively, their innovations marked a major transition in English literature from classical forms like the romance and epic to a more realistic, character-centered, and socially reflective type of prose. This study emphasizes the distinct approaches of each author and illustrates how their combined achievements helped establish the novel as a central form of literary expression. Novel as a literary genre enjoyed the highest level of glory in the 18th century. The authors namely Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne contributed significantly to the development of English novel. They influenced the writers who came after them. The 18th century coincided with the industrial revolution which significantly contributed to the rise of the novel (with the invention of printing machine). The chain effects of industrial revolution improved people's life and living standard. The rise of the educated middle-

class people further increased the reading public which correspondingly led to demand of novels for reading. Books such as ‘Don Quixote’, ‘Decameron’, ‘Morte d’ Arthur’ and ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ laid the foundations for the development of the novel. ‘Pamela’, ‘Joseph Andrew’s’, ‘Tristram Shandy’, and ‘Robinson Crusoe’ were some of the notable books that became famous in the 18th century. However, novels continued to evolve in the 19th and 20th century giving rise to different genres or classes of novel.

Keywords: Bunyan, Defoe, Epistolary novel, Fielding, Origin of the novel, Picaresque tradition, Rise of the middle class, Sterne.

Аннотация

Данная работа рассматривает раннее формирование английского романа в XVIII веке, анализируя значительный вклад Даниэля Дефо, Сэмюэла Ричардсона и Генри Филдинга. Эти писатели заложили основу нового литературного жанра, сформировав его повествовательные техники, тематическое содержание и стилистические особенности. Дефо привнёс реализм, основанный на повседневном опыте; Ричардсон углубил эмоциональные и психологические аспекты романа благодаря эпистолярной форме; Филдинг расширил границы жанра с помощью комического повествования и острой социальной критики. Совокупность их новаторских подходов ознаменовала серьёзный переход в английской литературе — от традиционных форм, таких как романтика и эпос, к более реалистичному, ориентированному на персонажей и социально значимому стилю прозы. В XVIII веке роман как литературный жанр достиг наивысшего расцвета. Авторы, такие как Дефо, Ричардсон, Филдинг и Стерн, внесли огромный вклад в развитие английского романа и повлияли на последующих писателей. Этот период совпал с промышленной революцией, которая значительно способствовала подъёму романа (особенно благодаря изобретению печатной машины). Цепная реакция индустриальных изменений улучшила качество жизни людей. Рост образованного среднего класса расширил круг читателей, что привело к более высокому спросу на романы. Такие книги, как

Дон Кихот, Декамерон, Смерть Артура и Путешествие Пилигрима, заложили фундамент развития романа. Памела, Джозеф Эндрюс, Тристрам Шенди и Робинзон Крузо стали наиболее известными произведениями XVIII века. Однако роман продолжал развиваться в XIX и XX веках, породив новые жанры и формы.

Ключевые слова: Беньян, Дефо, эпистолярный роман, Филдинг, происхождение романа, плутовской роман, рост среднего класса, Стерн.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola XVIII asrda ingliz romanining shakllanishini ko'rib chiqadi va Daniel Defo, Samuel Richardson hamda Genri Fieldingning muhim hissalarini tahlil qiladi. Bu yozuvchilar yangi adabiy janrning asoslarini yaratib, uning hikoya qilish uslublarini, mavzularini va stilistik xususiyatlarini shakllantirdilar. Defo kundalik hayotga asoslangan realizmni, Richardson esa epistoliar uslub orqali romaning hissiy va psixologik chuqurligini rivojlantirdi; Fielding esa komik realizm va keskin ijtimoiy tanqid orqali janr doirasini kengaytirdi. Ularning umumiy yangiliklari ingliz adabiyotida katta o'zgarishlarga sabab bo'lib, epik va ritsarlik an'analaridan ko'ra realistik, xarakterga asoslangan va jamiyatni aks ettiruvchi proza turining rivojlanishiga yo'l ochdi. XVIII asrda roman eng yuqori darajada ravnaq topgan janrga aylandi. Defo, Richardson, Fielding va Sterne kabi yozuvchilar ingliz romanining shakllanishiga katta ta'sir ko'rsatdi va keyingi avlod yozuvchilari uchun asos yaratdi. Bu davr sanoat inqilobi bilan bir vaqtga to'g'ri kelib, roman janrining ommalashishiga (ayniqsa matbaa mashinasining ixtirosi tufayli) katta hissa qo'shdi. Sanoat rivojlanishining zanjirsimon ta'siri odamlarning hayot darajasini yaxshiladi. O'qimishli o'rta sinfning ko'payishi kitobxonlar sonining oshishiga olib keldi, natijada romanlarga talab ortdi. Don Kixot, Dekameron, Morte d'Artur va Hajning Manzili kabi asarlar roman janrining shakllanishiga asos soldi. Pamela, Jozef Endryus, Tristram Shendi va Robinzon Kruzo XVIII asrning eng mashhur asarlaridan edi. XIX va XX asrlarda roman yanada rivojlanib, turli yo'nalishlar va janrlarni yuzaga chiqardi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Bunyen, Defo, epistolary roman, Fielding, roman kelib chiqishi, pikaresk an’ana, o‘rta sinfnig o‘sishi, Sterne.

Introduction

This paper is intended for undergraduate learners—especially those specializing in English language and literature—who are required to explore the historical evolution of the novel as a literary form. Its purpose is to present a clear overview of how the novel emerged as a distinct genre and gradually gained recognition and popularity. To build a solid background, the discussion begins with early narrative traditions that preceded the novel, establishing the cultural and literary circumstances that contributed to its rise. The origins of the novel are traced back to ancient world literature, beginning with the oldest epics and progressing through medieval romances, which eventually paved the way for the development of the modern novel. The paper also outlines major early novelistic forms, such as the picaresque and epistolary novel, both of which played essential roles in shaping the structure and direction of the genre. The final part of this section briefly reviews the various types of novels that emerged after the eighteenth century. As one of the most influential genres within English literature, the novel has long engaged readers through its realistic subject matter and lifelike portrayals of characters and their personal experiences. For centuries, the English novel has remained a central component of literary culture, with major contributors including Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith, Tobias Smollett, and Charles Dickens. Widely recognized as one of the earliest examples of the English novel and a foundational work of realistic fiction.¹ The novel as a recognized genre is widely considered to have taken shape in the early eighteenth century with pioneering works such as *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. The Industrial Revolution and the growth of the middle class created a new readership eager for literature that reflected their everyday realities, a demand clearly visible in the themes of eighteenth-century English novels. These early works exemplify the shift toward realism—one of the defining

¹ Defoe, Daniel (1719). *Robinson Crusoe*.

characteristics of the genre—which allowed authors to portray the genuine struggles, ambitions, and values of ordinary people. A significant novel that highlights themes of morality, survival, and social mobility in 18th-century England.² Both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists frequently addressed their readers directly, a stylistic feature that strengthened the connection between author and audience. The rise of the English novel is closely associated with Daniel Defoe, whose substantial contributions to narrative prose earned him the title “the father of the English novel.” A pioneering epistolary novel that introduced psychological depth and intimate character perspective.³

The antecedents of the novel

Although the English novel became a recognized literary form in the eighteenth century, its origins reach far back in history — even to 612 BC, when the world’s earliest known literary work, The Epic of Gilgamesh, was composed. One of the first major literary figures was Homer (around 700–800 BC), who created the famous Greek epics The Iliad and The Odyssey. These works established the foundation of the epic tradition, defining its structure and thematic concerns. Considered one of the longest and most influential novels in English literature, exploring moral conflict and emotional complexity.⁴

Later, around 900 BC, the Roman poet Virgil wrote the epic poems Beowulf and The Aeneid. The latter served as an important model for John Milton (1608–1674) in composing his masterpiece Paradise Lost. Epics typically were long narrative poems recounting heroic battles, encounters with mythical creatures, and the extraordinary

² Defoe, Daniel (1722). Moll Flanders.

³ Richardson, Samuel (1740). Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded.

⁴ Richardson, Samuel (1748). Clarissa.

deeds of legendary figures. The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling. A comic-epic novel that expanded narrative structure and offered sharp social commentary.⁵

Following the era of epics emerged a new literary form known as the romance, which originated in France during the twelfth century. Often referred to as chivalric or medieval romance, it flourished in the Middle Ages (1000–1450 AD). Unlike traditional epics, romances focused on themes such as bravery, honor, adventure, and courtly love. They also introduced magical elements—spells, enchantments, and supernatural events—to captivate and intrigue readers. Joseph Andrews. A satirical novel that responded to Richardson’s Pamela and introduced Fielding’s comic narrative style.⁶

As Abrams (1995) notes, “Romances were first written in verse, but later in prose as well” (p. 22). A prominent English example is Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur (ca. 1470), a prose narrative recounting the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The Rise of the Novel. A landmark critical study examining the origins and development of the eighteenth-century English novel.⁷

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400) employed both verse and prose in The Canterbury Tales (Crompton-Rickett, 1995). Among the twenty-four tales, two — “The Tale of Meli bee” and “The Parson’s Tale” — were written in prose, and the collection also includes a romance, “The Knight’s Tale.” However, it was Chaucer’s long poem Troilus and Criseyde (written around 1380) that introduced innovative narrative features, particularly the use of structured plot development and vivid conversational exchanges.

Daniel Defoe’s Contribution to English Literature

Daniel Defoe led a remarkably active and influential life. Born to James Foe, a candle maker, he later modified his surname by adding the prefix “De,” a change often interpreted as a reflection of his aspiration for higher social status. Living as a member

⁵ Fielding, Henry (1749).

⁶ Fielding, Henry (1741)

⁷ Watt, Ian (1957).

of the emerging eighteenth-century British middle class, Defoe wrote from the perspective of this social group, addressing themes and issues relevant to middle-class readers of his era.

Before gaining recognition as a novelist, Defoe established himself as a highly successful journalist and author of pamphlets, producing works on a wide variety of subjects, from political affairs to ethical questions. He was extraordinarily prolific, having written over 550 books, periodicals, and pamphlets. Defoe's most significant contribution to English literature is the development of the novel, and he is widely regarded as the first English novelist. Many scholars consider him the earliest realist because of the innovative narrative techniques he employed in his fiction.

In his works, Defoe drew upon forms such as the rogue biography, spiritual autobiography, and Christian allegory. He incorporated real historical events and addressed contemporary social problems in his narratives. His writing introduced key novelistic techniques, including the use of dialogue, detailed settings, complex characterization, symbolism, and irony. A defining feature of his style was his meticulous attention to small descriptive details. His use of plain, everyday language made his works easily accessible to the middle-class audience he sought to reach. The Origins of the English Novel. Provides an in-depth analysis of the social, cultural, and literary forces that shaped the novel.⁸

Through his novels, Defoe explored significant eighteenth-century issues such as sexuality, crime, morality, adultery, social order, and the contested roles of women. Moll Flanders stands as a clear example of Defoe's realism, revealing the stark truths beneath the superficial elegance of the period. According to Watt (1957) in The Rise of the Novel, Defoe's fiction is the first to portray individual life both as part of a broader historical process and in the intimate, moment-to-moment experiences of ordinary thoughts and actions. The English Novel: An Introduction. Offers a modern overview of the evolution of the English novel from its early stages to the contemporary

⁸ McKeon, Michael (1987)

period.⁹ The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel. A scholarly collection that discusses the works of Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and their literary significance.¹⁰

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study relies on a qualitative research approach based on textual, historical, and comparative literary analysis. Primary sources include selected works by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, particularly Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, and Tom Jones. Secondary materials—such as scholarly articles, literary histories, and critical interpretations—are used to contextualize the development of the English novel during the eighteenth century. The research involves close reading, thematic examination, and comparison of narrative techniques to identify how each author contributed to the emerging genre. Historical documents and literary criticism are also consulted to understand the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions that shaped the rise of the English novel. This methodological framework allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the stylistic innovations, thematic diversity, and cultural influences present in the works of the three novelists.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis reveals that each of the three authors introduced distinct innovations that collectively shaped the evolution of the English novel.

Daniel Defoe contributed realism grounded in everyday experience, creating narratives that reflected the practical concerns of middle-class life. His use of detailed description, autobiographical form, and journalistic precision established a foundation for realistic fiction.

Samuel Richardson expanded the emotional and psychological depth of the novel through the epistolary form. His focus on inner conflict and moral dilemmas

⁹ Eagleton, Terry (2005)

¹⁰ Richetti, John (1999).

shifted the genre toward introspective storytelling, emphasizing character development over external action.

Henry Fielding, in contrast, adopted a comic-epic approach, blending satire, moral commentary, and a wide social panorama. His narrative structure and omniscient narration broadened the novel's scope and emphasized social criticism.

The results clearly indicate that the combined contributions of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding transformed the English novel from a simple narrative form into a sophisticated literary genre with rich psychological, moral, and social dimensions.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the rise of the English novel cannot be attributed to a single writer but rather to the collective innovation of these three key figures. Defoe's realism laid the groundwork for the representation of ordinary life, making the novel relatable to an expanding middle-class audience. Richardson, by focusing on emotional and moral complexity, demonstrated the novel's potential to explore inner human experience. Fielding, through irony, humor, and narrative control, illustrated that the novel could function as a tool for social observation and critique.

Together, these novelists established the narrative flexibility and thematic diversity that later authors—such as Sterne, Goldsmith, Austen, and Dickens—would further develop. The discussion highlights that the novel's rise in the eighteenth century was strongly influenced not only by literary innovation but also by historical factors: the emergence of the middle class, expanding literacy, and technological progress in printing.

Ultimately, the development of the English novel during this period reflects both artistic creativity and changing social realities, confirming the genre's central role in the evolution of English literature.

Conclusion

The emergence of the English novel in the eighteenth century represents a pivotal moment in the history of literature, marking the transition from traditional narrative forms—such as epics, romances, and allegorical tales—to a mode of storytelling firmly grounded in realism, psychological depth, and social relevance. This study demonstrates that Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding each played indispensable and complementary roles in shaping this new genre. Their innovations were not isolated literary achievements but responses to broader cultural changes, including the rise of the middle class, the growth of literacy, and the expanding influence of print culture in eighteenth-century England.

Daniel Defoe's contribution lies primarily in his commitment to realistic detail and his ability to transform ordinary life into a compelling narrative. Through works such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, he established a new narrative voice that mirrored the concerns, struggles, and ambitions of the growing middle class. His journalistic background enabled him to craft stories that felt authentic and immediate, thereby laying the foundations for realism in English fiction.

Samuel Richardson advanced the novel by exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of human experience. His epistolary works provided unprecedented access to characters' inner thoughts, moral dilemmas, and personal relationships. In doing so, Richardson proved that the novel could serve as a powerful medium for moral reflection and psychological analysis. His focus on subjectivity and internal conflict influenced generations of writers and expanded the expressive possibilities of the genre.

Henry Fielding, meanwhile, brought breadth, humor, and structural sophistication to the novel. His comic-epic style, omniscient narration, and sharp social commentary exposed the complexities and contradictions of contemporary society. Fielding's works—especially *Tom Jones*—demonstrated that the novel could simultaneously entertain and critique, offering a panoramic view of English life while

addressing broader moral and social issues. His contribution showed that the novel could combine realism with wit, satire, and narrative experimentation.

Collectively, the achievements of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding established the English novel as a dominant literary form capable of representing the full spectrum of human experience. Their diverse approaches—realistic, psychological, and comic-epic—laid the groundwork for subsequent literary developments and influenced later novelists such as Sterne, Austen, Dickens, and Hardy. The eighteenth century thus stands as the formative era in which the novel evolved into a rich and versatile genre, reflecting both the artistic imagination of its authors and the dynamic social transformations of the time.

Ultimately, the rise of the English novel illustrates the power of literature to adapt, innovate, and respond to changing cultural conditions. The combined contributions of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding not only shaped the direction of English fiction but also helped define the novel as one of the most influential and enduring forms of literary expression.

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