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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

The Modern Novel

With all the students enrolled in English 411 classes this Quarter reading and studying a modern novel, the idea strikes me that this might be a good place to say something about that form of literature. The study of the novel in that English course during the last couple years has been quite interesting. On one occasion *THE FARM* by Louis Bromfield was read, and because it is a story of Richland County in general and of Mansfield, Ohio, in particular, the book drew great favor with the students. Last Autumn Quarter one of the Engineering English classes read *OF HUMAN BONDAGE* by W. Somerset Maugham, and although it is an entirely different kind of story than *THE FARM* it proved of no less value.

To enjoy reading the modern novel it is not necessary to have a complete background of literature ranging all the way from Chaucer to twentieth century writing. It is often helpful to know something of many nineteenth century novels; but for the average person, no doubt, it is better to have his interest stimulated by some modern novel and then return to read an older classic. The novel is one of the most enjoyable forms of literature; there is no limit to its scope; and the plots, although fictitious, so often parallel our own lives that readers are able to identify themselves with characters of the books. No doubt it is that personal identification element that gives them their wide appeal; for when we read Joseph Conrad's novels we picture ourselves on the high seas. Surely the reading of a good novel will furnish many delightful hours of splendid recreation and profitable leisure.

The novel is generally an imaginary narrative written in prose, in which the author tries to excite interest, by means of arousing emotion, by portraying social customs, by delineating character or by telling singular incidents. Incidents in a novel can, and often are, based upon historical facts, but the author has the privilege of introducing some fictitious characters. The action in *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY* centered about historical events, and the characters were taken from life; yet many of the less important incidents were figments from the author's imagination. The novel may depict many characters as those found in Thackeray's *VANITY FAIR*, or the author may restrict them to four or five characters as in the case of Hawthorne's *SCARLET LETTER*. It frequently concerns itself with incidents that cover a long period

of time, or it may deal with those that take place in a year or month or week, or even less than a day. The story is generally told by the author himself in the third person, although frequently it is related in the first person. Sometimes, it is told by one of the minor characters as is the case in Edith Wharton's *ETHAN FROME*.

The history of the modern novel is indeed interesting, for comparatively, it is one of the newer forms of literature. Written in letter form, the first so-called novels appeared in England about the middle of the eighteenth century; and the early nineteenth century saw the publication of the Sir Walter Scott novels, followed closely by those of Charles Dickens and William M. Thackeray.

In America this form of writing was quick to gain admirers in the literary field. While the seeds of the novel were being sown in England, the American colonists were busy carving a nation out of a forest, with the result that the novel, as such, did not spring into life on this side of the Atlantic until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Soon, however, native American writers turned their attention to it as a new literary medium, and books of varying degrees by lesser writers were punctuated by the appearance of the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.

Later in the nineteenth century, America can boast of Mark Twain, Henry James, E. W. Howe, Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and others. It is safe to say that over a period of time, English and American novelists have been influenced by French writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo, and by Russians such as Anton Chekov, Fiodor Dostoievski and Count Leo Tolstoi.

To say that a novel is good, one must realize that it should possess certain chief elements which are essential. First of all there must be a plot built around interesting characters. These characters must be placed in intriguing situations and their dialogue must be firm, natural and lifelike. Sentiment and emotion are sometimes necessary, although it must be admitted that restrained writing and presentation of character are effect-gaining elements at times, and very popular with some modern writers. Often the novel is used as a means of disseminating propaganda and thus it becomes a social force. This was true in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*, and the novels of Upton Sinclair.

Structurally, the novel more than any other form of literature can be divided into several different classes. First of all, the novel of action is one of the most important of the classifications. It is the most simple form of prose fiction with the story recorded in a succession of events. As a rule, the story itself is one that appeals to a large number of people and generally has a happy ending. Neither the hero nor the heroine ever dies or is killed. Such meeds of justice may be dealt out to one or two minor characters as is found in *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY*, or in Robert Louis Stevenson's *TREASURE ISLAND*, but never to the main characters. The novel of character is a second important division of prose fiction. Novels of character, as a rule, show a group of personalities, clashing under certain conditions, but in the end remaining steadfast and uniform. Often they are scheming individuals, showing only the side of their character that the author wishes them to show. Such was the case of Becky Sharp in Thackeray's *VANITY FAIR*, and George Babbitt in Sinclair Lewis' novel, *BABBITT*.

The novel of dramatic incident is still a third type in which prose fiction can be divided. It generally builds up a series of events culminating in a dramatic climax, possessing an intensive plot that generally moves along rapidly. Herman Melville's *MOBY DICK* is a first rate novel of dramatic incidents, as is Edith Wharton's *THE OLD MAID*.

Still a fourth classification of prose fiction can be made; it is the saga novel. The saga novel deals with long sweeps of family history, taking the characters through several or more generations. This form more than any other contains bits of action, characterization and drama. John Galsworthy's *FORSYTE SAGA* is a good example of this form, as are Arnold Bennett's Clayhanger family and Mazo de la Roche's Jalna family.

Other classifications of prose fiction could be named but the four just mentioned are enough to cover the novel field. Of course, it can be easily seen that there are very few novels that fit exclusively in any one group. Most novels fit partly into two or more of these grooves.

These patterns show that the plan followed by a novelist in writing his book is quite deliberate. The whole is mapped out before he starts, and the result, if he has followed certain lines and has not deviated from the path of his story, nor allowed his characters to run away with him, is a well-made novel.

Although many novels since 1900 have been romantic in form, the majority of publications have been realistic. Among the theorists of realism, de Maupassant, a French novelist and short story writer, has given a good account of how the realistic ideal has affected the organization of matter in a novel.

Since the Civil War the novel in the United States has divided, generally speaking, into the Romantic School and the Realistic School. Roughly, there were four different sets of writers in the Romantic School. One group dealt with sentimentalism and was headed by Harriet Beecher Stowe with *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* and followed by Kate Douglas Wiggin with *MRS. WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH* and by Eleanor H. Porter with *POLLYANNA*. This wave of sentimentalism changed its vogue to the thrill-seeking type of prose fiction after the World War, and in the thriller group might be mentioned the detective yarn, the horror story as exemplified by the American satellites of Edgar Wallace, and the adventure stories with which the name of Edgar Rice Burroughs is always associated.

A second group of Romanticists following the Civil war wrote historical and exotic tales. These included Richard Harding Davis, S. Weir Mitchell, George Barr McCutcheon with his Graustark novels, and Lew Wallace. Theirs was a sentimental and often fantastic school, but in it are probably found the roots of such writers in the twentieth century as Edna Ferber, Fanny Hurst and Irving S. Cobb, and such novelists as those of the wild west, Rex Beach, Zane Grey and James Oliver Curwood.

A third group of Romanticists in the nineteenth century wrote novels involving political and democratic tendencies. This group no doubt was headed by William Allen White, who had as his followers such writers as Meredith Nicholson, and Booth Tarkington.

A still later group of Romanticists were the local colorists with Helen Hunt Jackson's *RAMONA*, George Washington Cable and Thomas Nelson Page writing about the South and Mary Wilkins Freeman writing about New England. They were followed with our only serious present day Romanticists, Donn Byrne and James Branch Cabell.

Realists in America, however, have had a wider field and many more followers than the Romanticists. The Realistic School had its start with Henry James and his "Well-made" novel, and with William Dean Howells and his limited ideas of realism. Theirs was realism of the genteel type. Out of that "well-made" novel school, however, we have today Joseph Hergesheimer and Edith Wharton, with Willa S. Cather and Mazo de la Roche probably rating the paradoxical title of romantic realists.

The novel is definitely related to the short story, and although its canvas is larger than that of the short story, surely many a short story is nothing more than the concentrated ending of a longer piece of fiction. If for no other reason, a person interested in reading short stories would find equal and probably greater interest in the novel.

The British Say "No!"

I regret that I did not get to see, a number of weeks ago, the troupe of players who appeared at the Hartman theatre with George Kaufman's and Moss Hart's production of *YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU*. But of course I have read it, and reviewed it for these pages. I have talked with a number of students who did see the production and most naturally they were highly pleased. The very fact that the play has been running in New York for fourteen months, and that it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for 1937 speaks well of it.

Shortly before the Christmas season a British company opened with the play in London, and sorry to relate, it closed at the end of one week. There appears to be quite a difference between what the English demand in the line of humor and what the Americans want.

Writing about the opening performance in London, a dramatic critic of *THE TIMES* of that city, has the following to say of the play under the date line of December 23:

"This is, presumably, the end. Mad families and incoherent dialogue have had their day. Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Moss Hart have carried them to an extreme of dismal incoherence, have mixed with their extravagance a little sob-stuff about the rich employer's son and the gallant typist, and have converted the stage into a madhouse of irrelevant bad manners unseasoned by wit. With the best will in the world, one can find little to commend in the play except its brevity, which the clock surprisingly proves."

A Price for Peace

What has happened, I ask, to the theatrical producers in New York? In the *New York Times* for Sunday, January 23, I saw an advertisement apparently run by a dramatist who has written a play about war. He was seeking a man to stage his play, a man who might have the price in pocket to pay a director and to buy the necessary stage sets for production.

Just because it was one of the most unusual ads I have ever seen, I think it is worth re-printing. Here it is:

HOW MUCH WOULD YOU PAY TO STOP THE NEXT WAR?

Or even to postpone the next war? If you could do it for TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS, wouldn't you consider that it was a sound investment? In fact, wouldn't you consider it a sound investment at any price?

Briefly, this is the quest of a good play for a good production. A quest by the play itself because the average producer hesitates over a play like this. For one thing, it uncovers tomorrow's

road to war in these United States with unswerving candor. And yet if freedom of speech is to remain in the American theatre, Why not have it before the next war—rather than after?

This is the work of an established American dramatist with substantial success to his credit both in this country and abroad. It serves no special class nor any political party. It is simply a good play on a "dangerous theme."

Yes, the theme is "dangerous." Make no mistake about that. But so is war. And while you are reading this advertisement, an enterprising Congressional committee will be figuring out ways and means to finance those two nice new battle-ships.

What price peace? What price war?

Prof: "What is an armature?"

Musically Inclined Electrical Student: "It's a guy who sings for Major Bowes."

Judge: "Well, Sam, I see you're back for fighting with your wife. Liquor again?"

Sam: "No sah, jedge, she licked me dis time."

He: "I suppose you dance?"

She: "Oh, yes, I love to."

He: "Great, that's better than dancing anyway."

Pastor: "What are the sins of omission?"

Voice in the Back: "Please, sir, they're sins we ought to have committed and haven't."

"What do you think would go well with my purple and grey sox?"

"Hip boots."

"What is the outstanding contribution that chemistry has given to the world?"

"Blondes."

Mary had a little lamp,
She filled it with benzine;
She went to light her little lamp,
And hasn't since benzine.

Finals, finals everywhere,
With drops and drops of ink,
And never a prof who'll leave the room
And allow a guy to think.

Cinderella: "Godmother, do I have to be in by midnight tonight?"

Godmother: "If you don't stop swearing you won't go out at all."