

Laura Alishauskas

Dr. Joiner

English 342.01

December 9, 2020

The History of the Novel

What is the novel, and how has it changed throughout history? Novels such as *Oroonoko*, by Aphra Behn, is considered one of the first British novels, dating back to 1688. Other authors such as Emily Bronte, William Faulkner, and Alice Walker have since worked with this literary technique to create works of fiction, playing with various literary components that have further encouraged change and development of the novel. The novel itself is a work of fictional literary prose that works to develop individualistic characters while working with various forms, structures, content, and intended purposes to create a story.

The novel's form is crucial in understanding what the novel is as it helps differentiate the novel from other literary forms. Moreover, when authors start to shape their story, it is also essential to work within the form to develop characters that stand out. Literary critic, Nancy Armstrong argues that subjects should be "proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in [authors, readers, other novels, British culture, and others forms of writing] that took the individual as their most basic unit" (3). Armstrong believes that novels are working towards "rhetorical figures" so they can survive through history. One way authors can do this is by working with the form of the novel.

The slave narrative, *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn, for example, was written in the late seventeenth century. Even though it is a novel, it is framed in a memoir-like form, it claims that the story's events are real. However, Josephine Donovan argues that "while having interesting

touches of realism, [*Oroonoko*] remains a romantic work; its principle characters and the plot are stereotypical of the romance" (91). Oroonoko's heroic depiction seems to follow the form of a short story or even a tragic myth. There were multiple incidences within the story where the main character seems to overcome all odds despite the stacked circumstances. For instance, the scene where Oroonoko was "feebly wounded" after he provoked the lion into attacking him is unrealistic (Behn 44). Perhaps a person who is training with a sword might be able to defend themselves against the attack; however, through his blazing arrogance and luck, it seems impossible to walk away without a scratch. Even Oroonoko, at the end of the novel, remained romantic, "smoking a pipe while he's being dismembered" (Behn 65). These episodes within the novel struggle to support Behn's claims and individual character development. Not moving past the short story form made it difficult for Behn to create realistic characters while still provoking empathy in above-normal circumstances.

Moreover, when looking at Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, one can see how the novel's form has changed from a memoir-like recount and short story to an epistolary form of writing a novel. Almost three hundred years separate the novels as they both contrast in form. Alice Walker's choice of an epistolary form encourages "reorganization of [gender and racial] hierarchy... [where] oral expression is no longer subjugated by written expression" (Babb 107). Oral storytelling connects back to many cultures. However, writing this content down allows African American writers to create a physical copy of these stories. Celie does this by writing her story down despite her stepfather warning her not to "tell nobody but God" (Walker 1), eventually preserving and intimately voicing her abuse. Eventually, Celie finds redemption from the hierarchal powers that controlled her once before. The form itself is redemptive as it translates oral prayer to written words.

Furthermore, by using this fictional form, "African American novels have served as narratives of identity... allowing African American authors to confront the racial annihilation and cultural invisibility imposed by hegemonic institutions" (Donalson 274). Faith is an essential element in many cultures. Celie addresses God in her letters to endure and redeem herself against the oppression that she faces through the novel. Relying on her religion and spirituality remains a common theme within the text. Religion and spirituality also become identifying factors in Celie's story as a way of guidance and comfort. By further using the epistolary form, addressing her letters to God, and eventually to her sister, the form strikes out against institutions that have hindered Celie's individual development and identity. The novel's form in *The Color Purple* seems to signify a way for oppressed people to redeem and individuate themselves, unlike Behn's work.

Changing the form emphasizes the need for individual characters within a novel. Working and playing with the form of the novel continues to enhance the character's individuality. When comparing both novels, there is a growing shift to depict more realistic characters that provoke readers' empathy. The epistolary form allows the reader to know Celie, hear her voice, and learn more about her past than if the story was written in a different form. Behn's use of form fails to fully develop a "rhetorical figure" while *The Color Purple* offers a stronger, personal perspective. Understanding the form allows a more in-depth look understanding of whether the work allows for strong character development. Working within the form can further develop rhetorical figures who stand out within the novel.

Secondly, the structuring of the novel also may help in creating the individual. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte structures her novel into chapters and volumes as she presents the story in an unchronological, dual narration of events at Thrushcross Granger and Wuthering Heights.

Whereas Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* restructures the novel to work for other purposes.

Literary critic, J. Hillis Miller believes that novels can present readers with "abundant material inviting interpretation," which can further their understanding of the novel. Lockwood's definition of "wuthering" is significant when going to his neighbors because the name suggests an "atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather" (4). Interpreting Lockwood's definition could foreshadow dark themes and events presented further in the text. The novel's structure allows for this foreshadowing to correctly depict the metaphorical darkness that lures around Wuthering Heights. As Nelly and Lockwood's dual narrate, the readers can interpret the darkness that engulfs the estate, Heathcliff and the two families, as Heathcliff carries out his revenge. Structuring the story with a dual narrative allows the reader to learn with Lockwood of the past and current events that have taken place at both estates. Lockwood and the readers enter as outsiders, only given the past information from Nelly. Even when Hindley says to Isabella that "[t]reachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends; they wound those who resort to them worse than their enemies." (176), the darkness that circles Wuthering Heights still is present. Only when younger Catherine and Hareton form a bond, the darkness subsides as both characters overcome Heathcliff's evilness. Having a dual narrative provides a different way of interpreting the novel's structure and plays on the interpretation of the story itself. Readers can fully understand and uncover the story as both Lockwood and Nelly's narrative, who is trustworthy, and why this darkness seems to surround the estate. By Catherine and Hareton overcoming Heathcliff's vengeance, readers could interpret this as breaking the cycle, turning away from the violence that has plagued the generations before at Wuthering Heights.

However, when William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* appears less than one hundred years later, the structure of the novel fragments even within the chapters itself. Faulkner loosely

structures the novel without a chronological flow of events that can be the scene in *Wuthering Heights* or other novels. Critic Michael Millgate stated that *Absalom, Absalom!* is attempting to "disentangle facts from bias," giving different viewpoints as the characters tell the story.

Quentin, throughout the novel, is trying to understand Thomas Sutpen and the South. Sutpen is described as a "demon" (Faulkner 6) by Mrs. Coldfield to being considered a man that "given the occasion and the need... can and will do anything (Faulkner 34-35). Sutpen's development as a character changes within the novel's structure as more and more information is revealed through the different recounts of the story. Quentin digs through, listening to others about Sutpen and their interpretation of him. It is not until chapter seven that Sutpen's past is revealed, showing the driving forces behind Sutpen's finding of "the innocence" which led him to chase after success within the South (Faulkner 183).

The story's fractured structure encourages the reader and Quentin to dig through the numerous stories that depict Sutpen. Eventually, Sutpen can become an individual as more information is uncovered about his past, making him stand out more than other characters with as a complicated and driving factor in the novel itself. Breaking regular structures for novels and using a stream of consciousness to build the novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* is structured differently from *Wuthering Heights* and other novels. Taking apart the structure and framing it in a way that Quentin might think allows Faulkner to explore how stories told by others may uncover hidden facts that may not be known about the individual before. Rearranging structure and uncovering the facts and bias gives the reader a new perspective on defining rhetorical figures. By doing so, it breaks down traditional structures of the novel while giving a new perspective of the novel.

Moreover, the novel's content can further explore the individual and has shifted to allow for other perspectives. *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe delves into finding individuality within

his main character. Upon finding the single footprint, Crusoe could not see another "impression but that one" (155). Homer Obed Brown states that the "footprint appears to be tangible proof of an other, but it is also so like his own," which in turn questions Crusoe's individuality and solidarity on the island. Another person on the island is conflicting with Crusoe's views of self. The footprint can be "an indication of otherness, but it is also a reflection of self," creating this split self within Crusoe (Brown). The content within the novel is similar to a colonialist narrative. Accepting that "an other" has visited the island competes with Crusoe's individuality as he does not have exclusive access to this island or that the island is limited to him alone.

The footprint challenges Crusoe's belief that he is not alone on this island. Arguably, Defoe's footprint in the sand may shed light on the fact that other people can make similar impressions when it comes to the novella. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is yet another footprint, as the act of writing propels the main character to write down her story despite the stepfather's warning. Nettie even reminds Celie that she once said that her "life made [her] feel so ashamed [she] could not even talk about it to God, [she] had to write about it, bad as [Celie] thought [her] writing was" (Walker 129). Babb's point that writing allows for this "reorganization of this hierarchy" (107), where white men no longer dominate, and black women can put their own footprint in the sand. Overall, the content of Walker's novel spotlights black women's perspectives, unlike novels before.

In both novels, there is a shift in the content in the novel. In comparison, writers in the early development of the novels were mainly white men. However, the shift starts to move towards being more inclusive to other narrations. *Robinson Crusoe* centers on this white male narrative. His depictions of others, especially on Friday, only are given in Crusoe's perspective. Whereas in Walker's novel, Celie's perspective shifts this focus, allowing African Americans and

African American women to use the novel as a platform to voice their own experiences. The characters' individuality allows for white males and those oppressed by the hierarchy to eventually claim their own identity through this every shifting literary stage. The inclusion of content in the novel exposes readers to differing perspectives, allowing authors to make characters with their own identity, individually, and experiences reflective of the world.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the novel has also continued to shift throughout the history of the novel. *Charlotte Temple*, by Susanna Rowson, explores identity within the novel. However, Temple "is really a victim, a passive object, whose subjective decisions, or opinions count for little...for example, [she] is almost entirely at the mercy of others' wills..." (Donovan). With little narrative from Charlotte in the novel, it fails to create a character that stands up in the novel; however, it reflects that women were sometimes seen as objects. Rowson's point was to warn her own readers, as Charlotte is others determine her own image. Even Charlotte herself views her character as a "fallen" woman (Rowson 65) while others view Charlotte's character as "treacherous" (Rowson 83) woman throughout the book only to call her "lovely" at the end (Rowson 118). Charlotte's character is not an individual as she is often "a passive object" within the story. However, maybe for Rowson, "should [she] save one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent" then Rowson can prevent other girls from following the same fate as Charlotte (Rowson 6). Making Charlotte an individual would not fully serve the purpose of the story as it can be more of a warning of the obstacles other young women might face in their lives. Rowson's purpose is to provide information and guide her readers when making decisions in their own lives.

Rowson's and Orange's novels allow for different purposes for individuality to appear within the novels. Rowson's purpose of warning and guiding young women transcends other

novels such as Behn's *Oroonoko*. Orange's Native American narrative further explores the purpose of the novel to explore his characters' identity and individuality within a collective identity. Native American's have been seen collectively through a stereotyped lens. Tony Loneman says that "everyone has been staring at him his whole life," referring to the drome and perceptions of him in the eyes of other people (Orange 234). Beth Piatote argues that "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of other" (5) or also considered "double-consciousness" coined by W.E.D. DuBois is how these characters are being seen through the eyes of other people to create this perception of identity. Tony garments for the powwow, he is seen on the outside as what he is wearing through others' eyes. At the end of Tony's life, he realizes that his self and the drome were only "masks" he wore when he was alive (Orange 288). Tony's character eventually individuates and understands himself without the double-consciousness. Orange's purpose was to find identity and individuation for Native American communities. Tony's death scene may be an attempt to draw attention away from the eyes of others that seem to have dictated Tony's identity and individuality.

Ultimately, the novel's overall purpose continues to shift and struggle with ways to create identity and individuality within the characters. Even though Charlotte views herself as a passive object, the story's weight has carried a real enough experience that a woman might have gone through to create a real grave commemorating her struggle to break from other characters' ties playing a hand in controlling her fate. The individual does not fully develop because there is never a chance for Charlotte to claim it herself before she dies. However, the story itself seems to take up the role of individuality that stands out among previous works as well as establish itself in many critics' perspectives as one of the "First American Novels." In time, the story *There, There*, continues to struggle with ideas of developing identity and individuality of the characters

among a group who already struggle with their identity. Nevertheless, during Tony's death, he throws off the masks he has worn to uncover his true self and attempt to make him a rhetorical figure.

Playing around with form, structure, content, and purpose shapes the novel. Throughout its history, multiple authors have worked within these four literary components trying to create individualistic characters. The novel itself is a work of fictional literary prose that works to develop individualistic characters while working with various forms, structures, content, and intended purposes to create a story. It is shifting to become more inclusive to different forms, structure, content, and purposes. Other authors can now understand other perspectives that are important for developing a sense of identity in other cultures and restructuring hierarchies that have once dominated various groups. By developing the novel with the four literary components, characters can develop as "rhetorical figures" that can stand the test of time.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Nancy. *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900*. New York: Columbia Press, 2005. Print.
- Babb, Valerie. "The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done." *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 47, no. 2, 1986, pp. 107–116.
- Behn, Aphra, 1688. *Oroonoko*. Dover Publication, Inc. 2017. Print.
- Brontë, Emily, 1846. *Wuthering Heights*. Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Brown, Homer Obed. "The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe." *Institutions of the English Novel from Defoe to Scott*, U of Pennsylvania P, 1997, pp. 51-81.
- Defoe, Daniel, 1719. *Robinson Crusoe*. Signet Classics, 2008. Print.
- Donalson, Melvin. "African American Traditions and the American Novel." (2012). *A Companion to the American Novel, 2012*, (pp. 274 – 290).
- Donovan, Josephine. *In Women and the Rise of the Novel 1405-1726*. Palgrave Macmillan, (1999). Print.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* Vintage Books, 1972. Print.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Repetition and the 'Uncanny.'" Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Millgate, Michael. *The Achievements of William Faulkner*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- Orange, Tommy. *There, There*. Vintage Books, 2008. Print.
- Piatote, Beth. "Theories and Methodologies: No Spoiler Alerts." PMLA, May 2020.
- Rowson, Susanna, 1794. *Charlotte Temple*. Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Penguin Books, 1982. Print.