

Josh Fleishman

Dr. Jennie Joiner

English 342

8 Tuesday 2020

Deconstructing the Novel: the Original Human Medium

Of all the assorted plights greater society is encumbered with, there is perhaps none more unobserved than the quiet decline of the novel. As new forms of entertainment like television and the internet have inserted themselves into our society, leisurely reading has fallen off in terms of popularity and social value. The reasoning for this decline is simple, and has little to do with the novels themselves, as it isn't as if all novels have suddenly deteriorated in quality over the past few decades. The novel has simply become somewhat passé in modern times, for the same reason that many people no longer have landlines or radios. After all, why would one spend hours reading a book when whatever information one wants can be accessed with a few clicks online? Of course, this isn't to say the novel is completely and utterly dead, as it's far from it: great authors will continue to create great works for the foreseeable future. It remains hard to argue, though, that the novel is nowhere near as popular as it used to be. This is an unfortunate outcome, as it means future generations may miss out on the powerful experiences that novels can provide. There's a simple reason novels once maintained such a stranglehold on society's attention: they entertain and invigorate us. Novels, at their core, are a moral lesson to be learned. To be a novel, the characters in the work must encounter a moral conflict that they must overcome, with the reader hopefully inserting themselves as proxies for the main characters. It's a simple formula, but it's effective, as great authors are able to tell stories that move, inspire, and educate us, with the best stories being the ones we feel the most connected to. Authors aim to

appeal to the reader's full range of emotions, as they seek to invoke empathy as much as they seek to invoke guilt or shame. Oftentimes, the readers are invited to look beyond the margins of the story, into a deeper issue at hand, and as society progresses and diversifies, so do the issues these tales bring light to. Novels, at their best, expose issues that make readers uncomfortable, issues that expose the ugly blemishes within society that make us squirm and sweat. They make us feel something within ourselves, and they aim to connect an individual both to the novel, and to the greater human existence. This is why society needs novels so.

The issues novels encapsulate mirror the issues affecting society at the time. As one of the most predominant issues in society from roughly the 1600s until roughly the late 1800s was slavery, its apropos that many novels from this time drew attention to and remarked upon said issue. In fact, so heavy was slavery upon the moral concious that the work many consider to be one of the first English novels in history, Aphra Behn's Oroonoko (1688), centered around it, as the main conflict of the novel begins when the protagonist, Prince Oroonoko, is tricked into slavery and seperated from his lover. The use of slavery as a plot component continued throughout the following decades, particularly within the United States, where slavery, though controversial and not universally endorsed, was the economic backbone of society. Detractors of slavery, seeking to reach the largest audience possible, included slavery in their works, often attaching to it a moral lesson. Such works include Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), and William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936). Within these stories, the enslaved characters play a role much akin to the one they play in actual society: they are never the main character, but rather, as critic Thadious Davis describes, "an abstract force confounding...life both past and present even while, paradoxically, stimulating much of that life and art." Much like in society, the institution of slavery in American

literature was rarely the main focus, but more an abstraction that formed much of the structure needed for the story to take place, a concept best summarized in Absalom, Absalom!, where enslaved characters are merely a facet of American society, with main character Thomas Sutpen saying “It was not the n*gger anymore than it had been the n*gger that his father had helped to whip that night. The n*gger was just another balloon face slick and distended with that mellow loud and terrible laughing so that he did not dare to burst it” (Faulkner 189). Slaves in these novels were a constant background presence, and they never seemed to steal the limelight, but were hard to ignore. The light that these novels brought to the plight of the African-American proved the power of the medium. Though the reader cannot live in the shoes of these characters, they can be instilled with empathy and awareness. American literature is shocking and oftentimes dark because it is merely a reflection of the issues within society, something critic Leslie A. Fielder noted when he argued that American literature “is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in the land of light and affirmation”. Additionally, this representation is not limited to the black community, as Native American literature, though a relative newcomer to the literary world, has brought much attention to the poor living conditions faced by the Native American community, through books such as Tommy Orange’s There There (2018). Authors use novels to write on issues such as racial injustice because they capture our curiosity, and they illuminate uncomfortable truths, in an attempt to create positive change.

Though the issue of race is certainly an apt example, the issues novels take on range wildly, and cover just about every member of society. Ultimately, though the specific situations in each novel are different, and will affect different readers more so than others, all novels boil down to the same concept - achieving self-actualization. Novels take issues that we ourselves

face, and they offer us a means through which to resolve them, something critic Nancy Armstrong describes as “they (novels) put what was once outside and constitutive of individuals--namely, a collectively disavowed wish--on the inside, where it can be filtered through the sublimating apparatus of modern culture and converted into socially acceptable behavior”. The realization of female sovereignty has been a reoccurring theme in recent decades, as women finding their place in society matches the progressive rise of women in literature. Society has progressed from the weak, easily seduced women presented in Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791), in which the titular Charlotte is presented as naive and weak-willed, at which the very sight of her husband she is able to banish “from her countenance the air of discontent which ever appeared when he was absent” and meet him “with a smile of joy” (Rowson 71), to the headstrong, independent characters of young Catherine from Wuthering Heights (1847) and Shug from The Color Purple (1982), both of whom fight back against male characters and do not hesitate to practice outspoken independence. Religion is another common vehicle within novels, as characters seem to better themselves with aid from God. Religion plays a large role in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), in which the protagonist, following a grave sickness, finds inspiration to continue after dedicating himself to God, with Crusoe stating “as soon as I saw but a prospect of living and that I should not starve and perish for hunger, all the sense of my affliction wore off, and I began to be very easy”, (Defoe 91). Religion also plays a central role in the life of Celie, the protagonist of The Color Purple, who, in writing daily letters to God detailing the abuse she receives at the hands of the various men in her life, uses religion and her faith in God to create what critic Melvin Dolanson refers to as a “spiritual space for endurance, salvation, and redemption”. Celie, despite all the abuse she suffers, never wavers from her faith in God, even drawing power from him, as she tells her sister that “I’ll take care of

you. With God help”, (Walker). Novels, though they vary in material, all share a common goal: to provide insight into a situation, and to provide the solution to a problem.

The novel’s significance is not something society should be willing to give up so easily. The history of the novel reads about the same as the history of our society, and with good reason. Novels, in a metaphysical sense, serve as a guide to understanding ourselves. They bring light to problems we have no choice but to face, and they hopefully leave us with new perspectives, and new outlooks on situations we possibly hadn’t seen before. A novel should move us, question us, and challenge us, and the boundaries and material within novels should grow alongside society. Society needs novels because they are a medium for humans to connect to fellow humans, in concepts and emotions that are universal.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Nancy. *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900*.

Columbia University Press, 2006.

Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. Dover Publications, Inc., 2017.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Penguin Books, 2003.

Davis, Thadious. "The Signifying Abstraction: Reading 'the Negro' in Absalom, Absalom!"

William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook, edited by Fred Hobson. Oxford

University Press, Inc., 2003.

Defoe, Daniel, et al. *Robinson Crusoe*. Signet Classics, 2008.

Donalson, Melvin. "African American Traditions and the American Novel."

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* Vintage International, 1990.

Fielder, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

Orange, Tommy. *There There*. Random House USA, 2019.

Rowson, Susanna. *Charlotte Temple*. Oxford University Press, Inc., 1986.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Penguin Group USA, Inc., 2019.