

18th Century and the Rise of the English Novel

The novel today is considered one of the most important art forms in the English language. This is because it affects grand aspects of the language and is now considered an integral part of the art. However, the rise of the English novel occurred primarily in the 18th century; this does not mean that there was no form of a novel before this time. It only means that there was an increased release of novels and novelists during this period. The English novel is an integral part of English literature. It has evolved to date in varied modifications and genres. The novel is a prosaic work of art that deals with the imagination to explore the diverse experiences of humans through interwoven events of a select people and setting. Also, it is a genre of fiction that has been a medium of entertainment, information, or a blend of both. In this light, any fictive art piece that is long enough to be adapted as a book can be said to have achieved “novelhood.” Since the inception of the novel, it has grown to be adapted in forms of romance, thriller, science fiction , historical, picaresque, psychological, gothic, epistolary, the novel of manners, among others.

A Highlight of the 18th Century

The rise of the English novel occurred primarily in the 18th century; this does not mean that there was no form of novels before this time. It only means that there was an increased release of novels and novelists during this period. The 18th century was a period that lasted from 1685 – 1815.

Most often, the term is used to refer to the 1700s. This is the century between January 1, 1700, and December 31, 1799. This period witnessed a great revolution that shook the society structure of its time. The elements of enlightened thinking were at the fore of this revolution. This was experienced in the French, American, and Haitian revolutions.

On a larger scale, slave trading and human trafficking were at their peak. These revolutions were pivotal, so much so that they began to challenge the structure that threatened to asphyxiate its emergence from the monarchical system to the aristocratic privileges, especially the systems that nurtured to flame the slave trade.

In retrospect, a more profound sense of appreciation can be ascribed to this revolution that was seen as a threat but somehow waded through all the hurdles in its way. Without this revolution, a lot of privileges we partake in presently would not have been a thing to imagine, think, talk more of experience. Thanks to the revolution of the 18th century, we have and experience life with its modern perks.

This century was called the ‘century of Light’ or the ‘Century of Reason.’ By this, you can tell that several idiosyncrasies were changed from being accepted as the norm, ranging from European politics, philosophy, communications, and science experience a total upheaval throughout the termed “long 18th century” (1688-1815).

This Age of Reason, also called the Enlightenment bore cutting-edge schools of thought. From thinkers in Britain to France and even throughout Europe. These thinkers began to question the traditional normalcy they were born into and had adopted through their lives.

These thinkers tasted the efficacy of rational thinking, logic and knew that their lives and reality as a whole were never going to be the same. They discovered that their lives as humans and others’ lives, in all its vicissitude, can be enhanced through rational thinking.

In an essay called, ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ (1784), Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher summarized the era’s dominance succinctly, as the: ‘Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason!’ era. Not only Immanuel Kant’s essay came to thrive, but also an influx of other essays. This era saw the evolution of literature.

Also, it gave life to numerous essays, inventions, books, laws, scientific discoveries, revolutions, and wars. The major revolutions, the American and French Revolutions, were influenced by the 18th century.

Just like childbirth, a mother goes through all the birth pangs in lieu of the joy she gets to carry through life. The 18th century is symbolic of this because all the rationale behind the chaos finally gave birth to the 19th-century, called The Romantic Era or Romanticism.

History of the English novel

The 18th century marked the period where novels were distributed on a large scale, and a certain level of demand arose among English readers. This demand is also due to people's desire for reading about everyday events, events which went on to shape the lives and actions of fictional characters. Some of the earliest novels include Robinson Crusoe and Tom Jones which were respectively written by Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding.

It happened that this century was replete with literature in all its forms – poetry, drama, satire, and novels especially. This period saw the development of the modern novel as a major literary genre. Many novelists who revolutionized the sphere of this literature genre can be dated back to this century. Novelists like:

1. Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* also known as *Le Morte Darthur*
2. William Baldwin, who authored *Beware the Cat*
3. Margaret Cavendish – *The Description of a New World*, also called *The Blazing-World*
4. John Lyly, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), and *Euphues and his England* (1580)
5. Jonathan Swift – *Gulliver's Travels*
6. Philip Sidney -*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (a.k.a. *Arcadia*) (1581)
7. Jonathan Swift – *A Tale of a Tub* published in 1704
8. William Caxton's translation of Geoffroy de la Tour Landry – *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, originally in French and was published in 1483
9. Daniel Defoe -*The Consolidator* in 1705
10. John Bunyan's – *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*, published in 1678
11. Aphra Behn's – *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* was published in 1688.
12. Anonymous, *Vertue Rewarded* 1693

13. These are some of the earliest novels, including *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tom Jones*, written by Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, respectively. Also, the theater as an art form was not available to every member of the population.
14. The novel was popular because it could reach a larger audience, even those who could not afford a ticket into a theater. It is also important to note that during this period, drama had begun to decline in England. The growth of the novel can also be attributed to the need of individuals to create something new, something different.
15. The social and intellectual circle longed for something completely new yet individualized. The people wanted stories that mirrored their own lives, stories that had a recognizable nature, and this need birthed the novel.
16. Furthermore, the rise of the middle class in the 18th century have a direct effect on the rise of novels. David Daiches, a historian said, the novel “was in a large measure the product of the middle class, appealing to middle-class ideals and sensibilities, a patterning of imagined events set against a clearly realized social background and taking its view of what was significant in human behavior from agreed public attitudes.”
17. Another factor responsible is the popularity of newspapers in the 17th century, and the growth of periodicals. For example, the novel, Pamela by Samuel Richardson was originally intended as a series of letters, but instead, it was made into a novel. The newspapers helped the reading culture among the lower class.
18. The democratic movement that gripped England after the Glorious Revolution of 1689 could also be regarded as one factor that gave rise to the novel in the 18th century. This is because the democratic system emphasized commoners’ stories, who were the subjects in many of the novels written during this period. Also, the novels by Richardson, Sterne, Smollet, and Fielding center around commoners’ lives, rather than that of the ruling class.
19. Conclusively, the rise of realism in the 18th century also affected the growth of the novel. Factors such as reason, intellect, and satirical spirit were all adopted into the novel form and were principal subjects in the realist movement.
20. The rise of the English novel was affected by a number of factors; one of the most significant is the medieval romance, and the courtly tales of Italy and France. Translations from classical Greek materials also gave to the rise of the English novel.
21. The Rise of the Middle Class

22. One thing that stood out for the audience of the 18th-century was how these authors were the regular everyday people. Since the theater as an art form was not available to every member of the population, the novel became succor.
23. The people who made up the novels' audience were the middle class and those considered to be at the lowest rung of society's strata. The combination of these classes of people was en masse larger than the upper echelon. This made these novels reach a larger audience, even those who could not afford a ticket into a theater.
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Of all the books that took precedence in the 18th century, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, published in 1719, was one phenomenal event.

Robinson Crusoe's tale is a story narrated in the first person, which makes it very personal and authentic. It is told as a flashback of events experienced by a young Englishman who was very adventurous and set to sail against his parents' wishes.

Daniel Defoe's novel is strongly inspired by contemporary travel narratives and tales of real-life stories of a person or people who were cast adrift or ashore, like the Alexander Selkirk story.

On *Crusoe's* travels, he is found shipwrecked at different times. One intriguing thing about him was that he never gave up on his quests. Instead, they somehow spurred him

on to set sail again. This resolve to set out again one day puts him in danger. This dangerous journey to obtain the slaves stuck in Africa puts Crusoe in a precarious situation.

After the shipwreck on an island after South America's coast, Crusoe is the only surviving human, apart from the dog and two cats who were the animal survivors. Although grateful to have survived, he rescues some provisions from the ship before it sunk completely. This was one thing that stood out for a lot of readers. How amidst the life-threatening event that just took place in his life, Crusoe was proactive about his survival at the moment.

Unlike what most humans expected to do – brood, wallow in self-pity or give up entirely. For all that it is worth, this was an island that seemed lifeless with no infrastructure for human existence on there. All his survival instincts strengthened through previous voyages came to the fore on this island.

Crusoe's journal almost seemed like a character on its own as he referred to it a lot. Not only did the journal serve as an escape for Robinson Crusoe, but it also was a mirror used by readers to understand him better and read his thoughts.

This personal journal is adapted into Crusoe's daily routine. He describes his daily activities, fears, concerns, challenges acquiring food, and his revival with Christianity. This journal was something to look forward to as a reader. Two years later, on the same island, Robinson Crusoe's life as a sole sojourner has metamorphosed into core beliefs no one thought possible.

One would have imagined that by the strong sense of survival he exhibited, he will be coming up with discoveries that should be leading him closer to home. Instead, Crusoe was seen accepting his present state. He challenged the societal norms of the world he used to live in and the inherent vices compared to the peaceful island void of those vices. This was a novel that remains a classic to date.

Factors That Aided the Rise of the English Novel

The etymology of the word ‘novel’ comes from the French word ‘*nouvelle*,’ which in Italian is *novella*, that means “*new*.” Due to the novelty of what this term represented, the word ‘*Novel*’ was coined to refer to it. It is an elongated form of fictional narrative written in a prose format.

Until the 18th century, the word referred only to shorter fictional forms used to depict love and life in its rawest forms than romance, which was mostly about stories with adventure, laughter, and joy.

The birth of the novel in the 18th century garnered features of old romance and became one of the most preferred literary genres. This dominant genre in English literature became one of the bedrock of budding imaginative writing.

The rise of the novel has been daunting – with being about 250 years old in English, the fight for its survival has been prominent. After the challenges faced by the novel to make its mark, it later became a primary source of entertainment in the 19th century.

As stated earlier, Robinson Crusoe is one novel that spun the evolution of the English novel to a greater dimension. In line with this, other novels sprouted more confidently, exploring creativity, genres, and themes. Here we will take a look at some of the factors that further grew the spread of the English novel. Some of these factors are:

1. Novelty

Firstly, apart from the novel being a break from the norm, its novelty attracted a lot of traction. People’s curiosity was peaked; not only that, it delivered a satisfaction of a craving that was hitherto non-existent.

2. The Print Press

A second factor responsible is the Print Press. The teeming popularity of newspapers in the 18th century and the growth of periodicals and bulletins gave people something tangible to look forward to. These reads held reforms that were rational even though not yet implemented. By this, there was something new to learn, a cause to propagate, or some pioneer movement to look forward to.

One of the repercussions of the Print Press is the novel *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson, which was created to be a collection of letters. Still, somehow matured into the novel, it became eventually.

The print press also reduced the price of ink, paper, bookbinding, etc. All these became more affordable as book production became more commercialized. This continuous increase in literacy rates brought about a demand for more written text.

Through this, the growth of the reading audience allowed authors to write more novels, and readers better able to read them. This factor significantly led to the English novel's rise and by this posterity thanks its bequeather. The newspapers and the varied print media helped the reading culture among the lower class and prepared the soil for the seeds of what the novel brought to the existing society then.

3. The Glorious Revolution

In addition, the democratic movement that gripped England after the Glorious Revolution of 1689 could also be regarded as one of the factors that gave rise to the novel in the 18th century.

The Glorious Revolution of November 1688 or Revolution of 1688, is the term mostly used for the events that surrounded the deposition of James II and VII, king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the replacement by his daughter Mary II and her Dutch husband, William III of Orange. John Hampden first used this name in late 1689.

The Glorious Revolution is a factor that aided the growth of the English novel because the democratic system emphasized the stories of commoners, who were the subjects in many of the novels written during this period. This brought it so close to home and spiked the emotions of the people.

The novels of Richardson, Sterne, Smollet, and Fielding center around the life of commoners, rather than that of the ruling class, and very well became a constant among the people.

4. The Middle Class

Next, the rise of the middle class. The rise of the middle class as a factor that aided the rise of the English novel can be seen through the growth of the lower class. The middle class was made up of numerous merchants and manufacturers who amassed great fortunes and were able to enlarge their political influence and consequentially increase their social influence. This made a lot of trades more lucrative and dignified.

These further gave rise to the middle class. Also, the middle class of the 18th century became quite liberated in their thoughts and began to challenge certain laws that existed.

All these changes and supposed chaos gave thought-leaders more to write about. Through these, writers were encouraged to put out information out there, be it biased or unbiased. As a result, the common man whose opinions were regarded highly easily became one of prominence in the society, where he was a part of the upper strata or not.

Now that everyone at this level could read and their status quo was vehemently being challenged, the middle class never remained the same.

5. Literacy

Then there was an increase in education. The only way novels became a thing was if people could read them and talk about them. This is not to say people of that age never showed any literacy. There is a difference between just saying things out loud, talking about them, and being able to read or write about them.

Very evident is the Canterbury Tales, which was not only penned down but was mostly spread through folklore. Although a written book could appear to be longer and with a more complex plot, the oral stories tend to be shorter because it was passed on through word of mouth and can not be put down to be read or listened to later.

On the other hand, the novel could be put down to be read later without losing the storyline. Those who could not read made sure they learned how to, and so did generations after them. This was no longer a luxury a select few could afford. It became a necessity – a way of life, and no one was to be left out.

6. Leisure

To buttress, a factor that aided the growth of the English novel came from the leisure a lot of folks then started to experience. The industrialization that gave rise to the middle class's economic and financial status also afforded them options.

More time meant more leisure cum rest. Life became a lot easier for them. There was an increase in the number of people who had a little or more time to rest and experience some leisure. The middle class could now afford certain luxuries like candles and oil lamps which could be used to read at night after the day's work.

Conclusively, the rise of realism in the 18th century also affected the growth of the novel. Factors such as reason, intellect, and satirical spirit were all adopted into the novel form and were principal subjects in the realist movement.

Characteristic of the English Novel

1. The eighteenth-century English novel's main characteristics are the relatable characters from different walks of life, different social strata, settings, and complexity of plots that illustrate how complex life in itself can be. They are usually centered around real-life issues.
2. Unlike the romance novels, the English novels of the 18th century depicted a lot of reason, logical projection of thoughts, and facts. Whatever that propagated idealism was not welcomed or patronized.

Just as the people began to question the societal norms, it became evident in their writing. Some novels seek to enlighten, others inform, a generous amount seems to entertain, and there were also those English novels which were a blend of them – just like 'infotainment.'

3. The English novels illustrated the rise of the middle class. Therefore, its theme, subject matter, style, characters, and setting took these into consideration. Unlike romance, the characters were not kings, queens, knights, or nobles. Instead, they are created using characters that are the typical everyday middle-class people of many different professions. It was no wonder that readers found the strengths, weaknesses, and travails of these characters quite relatable.

The setting and plot of novels also reflect this new focus of realism. The setting became the conventional realistic world we live in, rather than an imaginative kingdom or place.

This was a magical aspect of the English novel – every reader at different times, in different places, experiencing a certain reality felt like they mattered. Their voice was being heard, and that they were not alone in their plight. This was how much the readers could see their own times and places in English novels.

The middle class further experienced some power that was never experienced before. This was wielded by the power of the pen that was discovered at that time. Whatever that was put on paper was brought to light and could be easily tackled or did cover willingly out of their list of issues just because it was brought to the open. The latter was mostly the case.

4. Although the English novel tried to present its ideas logically, one thing that stood out for it was its choice of words and writing style. It was unique in its simplicity; nothing grandiose or exaggerated, just a play on words to better express one's logical reasoning regarding the topic in question.