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Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of the Novel*

London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 188pps

Reviewed by

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Marjorie Boulton' *The Anatomy of the Novel* is divided into an introduction and ten chapters. In the introduction, the writer handles many aspects related to the novel she traces back its history. Also, there is a reference to some of the other interrelated genres like the epic, tales, and allegory. There is nothing definite about the first English novel. The writer includes causes of the appearance of the novel and its definition in different dictionaries.

In the first chapter, the writer discusses the concept of fiction. The novel is a branch of fiction that developed late in history. She says “we love stories mostly for two reasons: our readiness to comfort and entertain ourselves with fantasy, and

our curiosity and desire for insight about reality". She maintains that a novel is true in the sense that it gives a sincere, well observed, enlightening picture of a portion of human life.

Worthwhile fiction has at its best one great and splendid function: to strengthen our imaginative sympathies and insights and so make us wiser and better. It has, at many levels, the relatively trivial but genuinely useful function of providing comfort and amusement through fantasy; and these functions are seldom wholly separated. The chief form of printed fiction in Britain today is the novel.

The novel is last major literary form to have developed. There are many genres which had been developed long ago like the literature in China, the sumarian *Epic of Gilgamish*, and many other works. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is an allegorical, though with many touches of lifelike human observation. Some critics assume that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as the first English novel. Others would consider Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) as the first one.

No one can completely explain why the novel developed late and then flowed so copiously. Some of the causes may be: it is a form for solitary reading, so requires widespread literacy and leisure; it must have been helped by improved techniques of artificial lighting; it may have answered the new needs of a large middle class, of a society growing more specialized and complicated; it reflects an increasing conscious interest in psychology and sociology; the rise in the eighteenth century of commercial circulating libraries encouraged the professional novelist and today the public library system is still an important customer for new novels. There must be other factors.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary now defines novel as 'A fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity.' Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary takes a similar view: 'An invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals with human experience through a connected sequence of events.'

However, the writer assumes that 'Most critics today would probably insist that a true novel dealt above all with questions of character, characters in relationship and cause and effect in relation to character. A story of adventure with little interest in motives is a romance rather than a novel. Walter Allen *ip*. The English Novel (1954) sees the novel as 'a working model of life' as the novelist sees it.

Perhaps we may say that the mainstream novel is a realistic fiction, enlarging our experience of life, rather than a fantasy transporting us to a more colourful world; but there can be no clear-cut distinction, and what one reader finds vividly realistic may seem to another too improbable to be real.

Boulton gives her opinion concerning the idea of the importance of the existence of verisimilitude. Since the serious novel in some sense portrays real life, great effort goes into giving it verisimilitude, likeness to truth. We know the things did not happen, but must be made to feel that they could have happened. Since real life experience is not the same for us all, some people will find one novelist more convincingly true to life, others, another; and at any time anyone may have a new experience that will confirm or modify his opinion.

The novelist, like the conscientious historian, psychologist, sociologist or even scientist, tries to present at least some fragments of truth by applying

imagination, insight and organization to observation. Though we differentiate between the serious novel of character and motive, which keeps close to credible reality, and the romance with its less stern standards, we should remember that almost any fiction contains more reality than unreality, and we should remain fairly humble in our judgments on probability.

Life, as well as fiction, contains coincidences, grave results from trifling accidents, mistakes of identity, prodigious villainies and heroic loyalties, physical and mental endurances, injustices arising from misleading appearances or elaborate deceptions, obsessive and disproportionate passions, crippling remorse, incongruous mixtures of good and evil in one person, enormous absurdities, accumulations of disaster or good luck, strange secrets and astounding revelations.

Even in reading a contemporary novel, we may have to enter imaginatively into styles of life well outside what we ourselves take for granted. However, a novel cannot enlarge our sympathies unless the novelist does in most respects achieve verisimilitude. How is this done? Some novelists have given great attention to how the story came to be told. Richardson's *Pamela* is told in a series of letters, mostly from the heroine. He incorporates the letterwriting into the plot with care, treating of such problems as paper supplies, delivery and delays; but the device of telling the tale in letters has a negative as well as a positive effect: how did a young woman, first a hard-working servant, then in captivity, then a busy wife, ever write all those letters-and with a quill pen at that? *Clarissa* and Fanny Burney's *Evelina* are also told in letters. Nathaniel Hawthorne introduced his stark, concentrated *The Scarlet Letter* with a rather tedious forty-page prelude explaining how the story reached him.

Great literature is not only harder to write, but harder to read. The hero of an adventure story is usually up against either a well defined villain whom it is plainly meritorious to thwart, or some task or hazard. Very different demands are made on Dorothea Casaubon in *Middlemarch* or Maggie Ververs in *The Golden Bowl*. The literature that forces us to look into ourselves is harder to read than the stories that take us out of ourselves; but in the long run it gives greater rewards.

In the chapter about the point of view, the writer presents the major methods of narration in novels. She says "Stories do not tell themselves; whoever is telling a story has to be somewhere in relation to the story, in order to tell it. We do not mind where the novelist stands, but he has to stand somewhere, either in the scene or outside it. He may also change his point of view; but at any particular moment he must have one."

There are as many points of view as there are novels, but the novelist has three basic methods for taking up a position, together with a rare fourth method, if for the present we leave out some of the more extreme experimental techniques. He can tell the story essentially from the point of view of one person, either by impersonating that person and writing as 'I' or by following the person through his adventures and writing of 'He'. He can tell the story as an omniscient narrator, choosing to recount what he thinks of interest, but implying that he knows a great deal more about all the characters and incidents, more than anyone could know in real life, for he knows the motives of any number of characters, and in real life we have a rather poor grasp of even our own! He can tell the story from several points of view, either by impersonating a number of people in succession, or by following several of them in succession. Rarely, he may pretend not to be there at all, presenting the reader with what purports to be objective evidence" such as a file of documents, without comment.

In *Amelia* (1751) Fielding uses multiple points of view: the story is begun by an unidentified narrator, who brings together, in prison, Miss Matthews and Mr. Booth; Miss Matthews tells her story and then Mr. Booth his; some straight narrative follows, until Mrs. Bennet tells her sad story to Amelia; then Fielding resumes his straight narrative.

Another important component of the novel is plot. The plot is important to a novel much as the skeleton is important to a human body; it is simple compared with some other systems, but it gives the organism its structure and holds it together. A plot is a story, a selection of events arranged in time, and one reason why we go on reading a novel is to see what happens next. A true plot, however, is rather more; it has causality; one thing leads to another; and another reason why we go on reading a novel is that we are interested in why things happen. A plot has a beginning which leads through a middle to an end; it makes some kind of pattern; the probability must appear not only in events, but in their sequence; a plot contains motives, consequences, relationships.

Besides carrying us forward by keeping us in suspense, a plot lets us follow the workings of causality; we may go forwards and see what leads to what, or backwards and find out why. We watch how consequences follow acts; how people learn by experience; how there are rewards, punishments, vengeance, forgiveness, reconciliation, misunderstanding and clarification, reactions of people to events, creating of events by people, fresh reactions and further events. Another function of a plot is simply to provide pegs or shelving where the author can put things that he wishes to display. His chief interest may be in character and motive; but characters reveal themselves in action. He may want to explore a moral problem: how far may we manipulate other people, even with good intentions.

Boulton mentions the effect of publishing the novels in series or volumes in the Victorian age on the plot and the suspense carried throughout the events. Moreover, she gives an account of the modern novelists' intention while writing their novels to be appropriate for filming. She explains that 'An influence on plot in the twentieth century has been the possibility of film rights, which are quite valuable. It is widely believed that many sensational modern novels have been written with one eye on the film rights. This will induce the author to seek episodes suitable for visual presentation, perhaps something spectacular on the screen: a train crash, a large fire, a cavalry charge, a splendid ball, a massacre, a procession, an earthquake, a flood. On the other hand, a film made from a major novel is often disappointing; much that matters cannot be filmed. Attempts have been made to film *Wuthering Heights*; but that novel makes its impact by emotional sympathy, not by visual images. I once saw a film of the lesser novel *Lorna Doone* which seemed utterly commonplace; the novel is certainly better than commonplace. How could anyone make a film of *Middlemarch* or *The Egoist* or *The Ambassadors* or *To the Lighthouse* that was not a travesty?'

The creation of character is probably the most remarkable achievement of most great novelists. Few people can recite the plot of a novel in detail shortly after reading it; most readers of novels can remember numerous characters; we make allusions to literary characters in ordinary talk: Mr Micawber, Uriah Heep, Mr Rochester, Becky Sharp, Mr. Darcy, Tess Durbeyfield, even Molly Bloom.

Character is less important in allegorical, satirical or highly experimental novels; but most major British novelists have been great creators of character: Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, the Brontës, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Charles Reade, Thomas Hardy,

Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells (at his best), D. H. Lawrence, Joyce Cary; any reader of good novels can find some more names.

Another topic tackled in *The Anatomy of the Novel* is the issue of the character revealing. Also, conversation is discussed since it is an important component of this literary work. She argues:

Since novels are largely about human relationships, which depend largely on communication, which takes place chiefly through speech, conversation naturally plays a major part in the mainstream novel. There are exceptions: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, though using the word said, represents thoughts, not talk; the people in *Rasselas* speak, but not in the style of ordinary conversation. Conversely, the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett consist almost entirely of stylized dialogue; but most mainstream novels alternate passages of description, narrative or explanation with passages of conversation. (102).

This book is worthy to be studied by English literature students since it involves many of the most important ideas about the novel: its history, components, examples from different eras and the causes behind its appearance.