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1 RISE OF THE NOVEL: IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

The rise of the novel

While the Great Tradition has us believe that the novel was a white male invention and the likes of F.R. Leavis (1963) will point to *Don Quixote* (1615) or *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as the first novel written, the candidate is more likely to be an 11th-century Japanese saga written by the female poet, Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji* (1021) is a magnificent work whose chapters were written onto folded leaves of paper. It chronicles a dizzying array of hundreds of characters over generations. It was written for the entertainment of the court and offers a vicarious glimpse into the lives of courtiers at that time.

Another contender for the first novel is also by a woman, Aphra Behn, whose *Oroonoko* (1688) is the story of an African man tricked into slavery.

Or we could go back to *One Thousand and One Nights – Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1300s), in which the female narrator, Scheherazade, tells story after story to keep herself alive and escape femicide. Homer's *The Odyssey* (c. 700–800 BCE) is also an early embryo of the novel, an epic poem chronicling the picaresque adventures of Odysseus while his wife, Penelope, fights off suitors at home. The story is as much a test of her endurance, faithfulness and persistence in the belief in herself and her sovereignty as it is about her husband's swashbuckling adventures on the high seas. Stories keep us alive.

A similar theme holds together Boccaccio's frame tale *The Decameron* (1353). Stories told in a remote sanctuary keep the Black Plague at bay. A long pilgrimage in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387) is enlivened by stories in which characters tussle to be heard, trying to trump each other with rhetoric, crude shock tactics, authority and experience. The disruption occurs early on. The Knight has barely finished his proper tale based on the authority of tradition when the drunken Miller interrupts and tells a bawdy tale that undermines the values of the Knight's lofty idealisation of patriarchy, marriage and sex. The Wife of Bath too attacks patriarchy in

a diatribe against her ex-husbands, arguing for women's need to 'have mastery' over men. Her tale is a reversal of the conventional quest myth. In 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', a knight has raped a woman, and in order to avoid execution in this land ruled by women, he embarks on a quest to find out what women truly desire.

It is from these frame tales that the word 'novel' originates. Today a novella is a short novel or a long short story. Put together a compilation of these *novelle* (*One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Decameron*, or *The Canterbury Tales*) and you get a 'novel'.

The earliest recorded literature in English (*Beowulf* (c. 700–1000) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1350–1400)) are epic poems that foreshadow the fantasy horror novel.

None of the authors would call these 'novels' and nor should we. The novel as we know it today came into being because of a number of confluences at a certain juncture of history, and the factors for its birth are crucial to understand what a novel is and what it does for writers.

Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (2000 (1957)), lists several factors (paraphrased here):

1. Invention of the printing press – A novel is to be read by the masses, not by an elite. The novel is democracy in practice. Anyone can write, anyone can read a novel. Authors become free agents in the marketplace, and success is determined by sales, not status.

2. Equality – Anyone can be a character. The novel moves away from the aristocracy and the court and into the bustling streets of life.

3. The act of reading becomes a private act, a conversation between individual author and individual reader, a vicarious anti-solipsism, egalitarian in all senses.

4. The rise of the individual – In Medieval Europe, individuality would seem like a freak thing; your identity was fixed, before birth, to a wheel, family, feudal fiefdom, job function, class and sex. The concept of fluidity was heresy, and making your own way in the world would be a nonsensical idea. So this radical notion of a free agent working out his or her own destiny is a crucial aspect of the novel's revolutionary trajectory.

5. Realism – the move from a Platonic world view where the 'real' world is actually an illusion, a bad copy of a heavenly realm, to an Aristotelian world view where we need to observe our surroundings accurately. Verisimilitude matters. Readers want to experience the physical world through the novel – how it tastes, feels, smells and looks.

In summary, a novel is 'new', disruptive, democratic, fresh, and teeming with possibilities. In a novel, a writer can be someone else and go where no one has gone before.

✏️ **'DISRUPTIVE HERO' EXERCISE**

A hero stands against society in some way. This is true even of popular heroes. Lee Child's Jack Reacher, for example, is a loner and an anarchist and fights against the mainstream. What novel can you think of that has a fluid mobile character liberated from his or her society? List the character traits of this hero. How is the novel 'disruptive'?

The early romances

The first popular novels were not great literary works. Yet they were disrupters in that they foreshadowed commercial fiction and the demand of the market. These early novels were 'sensational' fiction, pot boilers, pulp fiction, bodice rippers, trashy romances, horror stories. (So not much has changed!) But the exuberance of the new form is interesting to observe and freeing to read. Many of the first 'novels' were romances, and the words 'novel' and 'romance' were synonymous – the French called the new form a *roman*. In fact, most European languages use the word 'romance' instead of novel to describe an extended prose narrative.

The Romance (not to be confused with Romantic literature or the Romance genre) took the form of a Heroic or Chivalric narrative, filled with action and sword fighting and marvellous adventures of heroic knights errant on quests, often in pursuit of a lady's hand.

Originally written in poetic form, these romances began to be written in prose. An example of this heroic or chivalric romance novel is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1470s). But soon these romances 'degenerated' into the popular romances we may begin to recognise as best-sellers when the focus shifted from upright courtly behaviour (high romance) to the bedroom antics and passions of ordinary men and women. We need only look at one example: García Montalvo's *Amadís de Gaula* (1508 (1304)), popular in 16th-century Spain, although its first version, much revised before printing, was written at the beginning of the 14th century. *Amadís de Gaula* was a runaway best-seller and paved the way for Romance novels. This novel is packed full of secret trysts, illegitimate secret children,

abandoned babies who become princes and seek revenge, enchantresses and secret islands. For example, here's one plot line: the King of Gaul, already a sexually adventurous and amorous man, married to the King of Little Britain's voluptuous daughter, finds himself at a mysterious castle, belonging to the Count of Selandia. On his first night as guest, he awakes to find the Count's beautiful daughter at his bedside, in her revealing nightgown, offering her body to him. He resists her and she draws his sword, threatening to kill herself if he denies her pleasure. She holds the point of the sword to her throat and he knows she will carry out her threat of self-harm, so swiftly, passionately, he gathers her into his arms and they make love all night until dawn. The book is full of similar swooning secret passions, ecstasies of unbridled love and desire, and forbidden sexual union.

Gothic novels

Around 1800, the Romance novel began to look and feel very Gothic. Romances were often set in 'ruinous castles, gloomy churchyards, claustrophobic monasteries, and lonely mountain roads' (Richter, 1987, p. 151) and emphasised the supernatural. The name Gothic originates with Goths and later was associated with the 'ugliness' of Gothic (barbaric) architecture. Modern Gothic fashion, music and film are associated with this dark side, insanity and death. The Gothic was, and still is, a rebellion against the vanilla veneer of civilisation, exposing its ugly side. Gothic literature arose out of romance. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) are good examples of early Gothic fiction and, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) would follow.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) claims to be the very first Gothic novel. Its characteristics? Hyperbolic dramatic terror. And the style it is written in? Let's sample a slice:

> "Oh! my Lord, my Lord!" cried she; "we are all undone! it is come again! it is come again!"
> "What is come again?" cried Manfred amazed.
> "Oh! the hand! the Giant! the hand! – support me! I am terrified out of my senses," cried Bianca. "I will not sleep in the castle to-night. Where shall I go? my things may come after me tomorrow – would I had been content to wed Francesco! this comes of ambition!"
> "What has terrified thee thus, young woman?" said the Marquis.
> "Thou art safe here; be not alarmed" (Walpole, 2014 (1764)).

Today an editor would cut out all the exclamation marks and the hyperbolic histrionics of the characters. But this passage reveals how this genre functions.

Also worth reading is Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), a sensational and depraved tale of fornicating holy men, evil magic, dark secret passages, torture, madness and death. Again this would put some modern horror novels to shame.

What these early novels did well was melodrama. Writing teachers generally regard melodrama as a bad thing because it is a short cut, a cheat. Melodramatic writing exaggerates our emotions of dread and terror and sensation and relates sensational and thrilling action with four stock characters:

the Villain
the Hero
the Damsel in Distress
the Comic.

In the extract above, you can see the melodrama of these characters. Read the dialogue aloud and you'll see. You may find yourself flinging your arm across your forehead in an exaggerated pose.

Are we meant to avoid such melodramatic overwriting in our writing? 'Yes', the writing instructors will say. 'It's cliché. It's overwriting. It's telling the reader how to feel'.

But much of modern popular and sensational fiction is exactly that, and most Hollywood movies are staple melodrama and exaggerated sentiment.

Steven Spielberg, for example, admits that:

> in my work, everything is melodrama. I don't think I've ever not made a melodrama. *E.T.* is melodramatic, and so is *The Sugarland Express*. I mean, there's melodrama in life and I love it. It's heightened drama, taking things to histrionic extremes and squeezing out the tears a bit (Spielberg, 2005, p. 1).

Another example of the melodramatic, full of what we would now call clichés, is Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830):

> It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness (Bulwer-Lytton, 2010 (1830), p. 1).

Writing teachers nowadays warn us never to begin a story or novel with the words 'It was a dark and stormy night'. It's clichéd. But what if yours were the first to begin a novel this way?

> 🖊 **MELODRAMA EXERCISE**
>
> Take the above extracts from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* and (1) identify what is melodramatic and clichéd about the style and content and (2) rewrite each extract, expunging the melodrama.

Early erotic and pornographic writing

If we are going to talk about counter-culture Gothic novels, the early novel also dabbled in other transgressive areas, such as the erotic and pornographic. *The Monk* is darkly erotic and transgressive, and soon a spate of writers poured out their own dark fantasies. Richard Head's *The English Rogue* (1665) is a hero's journey through various brothels, Aphra Behn created the *femme fatale*, and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) introduced readers to the world of prostitution. Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) reveals the debauchery of the aristocracy.

Here is a passage from *The Monk*: Ambrosio ('the ravisher') has drugged Antonia and locked her in a dungeon so that he can 'have his way with her'. Note the discreet language where body parts are not named and explicit sex is euphemised:

> He remained for some moments devouring those charms with his eyes which soon were to be subjected to his ill-regulated passions. Her mouth half-opened seem to solicit a kiss: he bent over her: he joined his lips to hers, and drew in the fragrance of her breath with rapture. This momentary pleasure increased his longing for still greater. His desires were raised to that frantic height by which brutes are agitated. He resolved not to delay for one instant longer the accomplishment of his wishes, and hastily proceeded to tear off those garments which impeded the gratification of his lust (Lewis, 1998 (1796), p. 260).

The sentimental novel

Although the sentimental novel had its heyday later in the 19th century, its beginnings lie in the early formation of the novel in the 17th century. Sentimental novels, as their name suggests, are reliant on manipulating emotion, much in the way of a melodrama. The novel aims to elicit and prioritise emotion and not just any emotion but 'refined feeling' and 'sensitivity'. This was considered to be a mark of good breeding. The Prioress in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* displays such characteristics:

> She was so charitable and solicitous
> That she would weep if she but saw a mouse
> Caught in a trap, whether it were dead or bled.
> She had some little dogs, that she fed
> On roasted flesh, or milk and fine white bread.
> But sorely she wept if one of them were dead,
> Or if men smote it with a stick to smart:
> Then pity ruled her, and her tender heart (Chaucer, 2005 (1387)).

Early examples of this genre of fiction are Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) (whose aim is set out in the title page, which is primarily 'to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of Both Sexes'), Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771). A later example is the immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), written by an abolitionist in order to elicit empathy for slaves in Confederate America. In her introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes that 'the poet, the painter, and the artist, now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favourable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood' (Stowe, 2014 (1852), p. 7).

Here is the tear-jerking passage that made every reader weep:

> "Dear papa," said the child, with a last effort, throwing her arms about his neck. In a moment they dropped again; and, as St. Clare raised his head, he saw a spasm of mortal agony pass over the face, – she struggled for breath, and threw up her little hands....
> "O, Eva, tell us what you see! What is it?" said her father.
> A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly, – "O! love, – joy, – peace!" gave one sigh, and passed from death unto life!

"Farewell, beloved child! the bright, eternal doors have closed after thee; we shall see thy sweet face no more. O, woe for them who watched thy entrance into heaven, when they shall wake and find only the cold gray sky of daily life, and thou gone forever!" (Stowe 2014, (1852), p. 328).

✏️ **TEAR-JERKING EXERCISE**

Analyse the Stowe passage. Look for devices that she uses to squeeze the sentimentality out of her reader. How is it melodramatic? What emotion is being conveyed? What narrative devices are used to create this effect? Now write a scene that uses these devices and creates the same effect.

Pathos

Aristotle outlines three effective ways of persuading an audience: logos, pathos and ethos. Pathos is emotional persuasion, using rhetoric to move us emotionally to feel what the speaker wants us to feel. Advertising campaigns exploit this method, bypassing logic at times to get us to buy a product on impulse. Nowadays, however, writers are wary of sentimentalism: sentimentality is akin to false emotion. How often have you cried at the end of a movie or at some trivial plot line, engineered by swelling violin music, stock shots of teary faces, and so on and thought afterwards, why was I crying about that?

Is there room for sentimentality in writing novels today? Even Romance novelists try to steer clear of clichéd sentimentality. Of course, some popular novels (for example, the *Twilight* series) thrive on sentimental tropes to drive the plot along. Even at the time, writers took exception and countered what they saw as emotional exploitation of the reader. Henry Fielding wrote *Shamela* (1741) as a critique of Richardson's sentimentalist *Pamela*. Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) partly in reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to expose what he saw as manipulative sentimentalism. Here, he parodies the sentimental artwork of Emmeline Grangerford, the deceased daughter of a host family Huck is staying with:

They was different from any pictures I ever see before – blacker, mostly, than is common.... There was one where a young lady was at a window looking up at the moon, and tears running

> down her cheeks; and she had an open letter in one hand with black sealing wax showing on one edge of it, and she was mashing a locket with a chain to it against her mouth, and underneath the picture it said "And Art Thou Gone Yes Thou Art Gone Alas." These was all nice pictures, I reckon, but I didn't somehow seem to take to them, because if ever I was down a little they always give me the fan-tods (Twain, 2018 (1884), p. 106).

Sentimental novels have had a bad rap until recently because they have been relegated by male critics and a male literary establishment as 'women's fiction' (meaning inferior to 'real' male fiction). Maybe there has been a bias against emotion and sensitivity and maybe now is the time to re-examine 'sentimental' novels and redeem their reputation. There is no question that nostalgic sentimental novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992) sell in the millions. Perhaps we like to escape into syrupy sweet, melodramatic tear-jerkers or maybe this conveys something fundamental about the human condition.

I have wrestled with this in my own writing. Here is an example from my novel *Soldier Blue* (2008) where I tackled a very emotional scene. The protagonist finds out that the childhood sweetheart he loves is engaged to someone else. The first time I wrote this, it was sickly sentimental:

> The trees echoed my feelings of despair. I was drowning in love. And she was the only one who could save me. I love you, I love you, every cell in my body shouted out to her. But the cruel ring on her finger was a knife cutting through my heart. She looked hesitant.
> "I'm so glad you're here. I have something to tell you."
> "You want to see me?" I spun dizzily, hungry for any morsel of her affection.
> "I want your advice." She looked even more nervous now. "Promise you'll still be my friend?"
> "I'll always be your friend, no matter what. You know that. Cross my heart and hope to die."
> "I want you to be the first to know."
> The birds in the tree above us were squawking so loudly and she was speaking so softly that I had to incline my head towards her and lip read. Her breath was warm on my face. I could hardly stand still, giddily swooning towards her. I wanted to hold her, touch her, kiss those sweet lips.

"I'm engaged."

I felt as if I had been sent to hell. Demons pulled me down into the depths of despair.

"Didn't you notice the ring?" She displayed the sparkling diamond set in the centre of blue amethysts as a sword, that same sparkling knife whose shafts of reflected light pierced me to the heart and left me bleeding and gutted on the ground.

Then I rewrote it, taking out all the devices, and it read much better – it still made me cringe but less so. Taking out all the emotion actually helped create a more emotionally laden scene.

Outside, in the cool of the trees, she twirled a ring around her finger, bit her lip.

"I'm so glad you're here. I have something to tell you."
"I'm all ears."

"I want your advice." Her left eyelid was fluttering. "Promise you'll still be my friend?"
"Cross my heart and hope to die."
"I also want you to be the first to know."

The birds in the tree above us were squawking so loudly and she was speaking so softly that I had to incline my head towards her and lip-read.

"I'm engaged."

A poem we had learned by heart in English the year before suddenly played in my head: a poem about the dead in hell listening to the smooth, silvery, sweet voice of an angel.

"Didn't you notice the ring?" She displayed the sparkling diamond set in the centre of blue amethysts as a sword, a knife whose shafts of reflected light glittered at me (Williams, 2008, pp. 273–274).

✎ 'ELIMINATING EMOTION' EXERCISE

Rewrite the sentimental scene from the previous exercise, eliminating all the tear-jerking devices you used.

Epistolary

Dear Francesca,

I hope this finds you well. I don't know when you'll receive it. Sometime after I'm gone. I'm sixty-five now, and it's been thirteen years ago today that we met when I came up your lane looking for directions. I'm gambling that this package won't upset your life in any way. I just couldn't bear to think of the cameras sitting in a second-hand case in a camera store or in some stranger's hands. They'll be in pretty rough shape by the time you get them. But, I have no one else to leave them to, and I apologize for putting you at risk by sending them to you.

.... All the philosophic rationalizations I can conjure up do not keep me from wanting you, every day, every moment, the merciless wail of time, of time I can never spend with you, deep within my head.

I love you, profoundly and completely. And I always will.

The last cowboy,

Robert.   (Waller, 2014, p. 1)

Thus begins one of the sentimental best-sellers of the late 20th century… and it's epistolary. On her mother's death, a daughter finds secret letters which reveal an extramarital affair her mother had with a passing photographer.

One of the earliest narrative techniques to create verisimilitude in the novel was letter writing, or epistolary writing. The letter vouches for the authenticity of the document just as archived historical documents are deemed more authentic and to be trusted. Therefore, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) opens with a letter vouching for Gulliver's character, followed by a terse disclaimer from Gulliver himself claiming that the facts had been falsified and exaggerated.

But epistolary writing is not only letter writing. It can be diary entries, newspaper clippings, emails, tweets, voice mail, grocery receipts, recipes, posters, reviews, footnotes, advertisements, road signs, or PowerPoint slides – anything to simulate veracity and journalistic truth.

In epistolary novels, the reader is a voyeur, eavesdropping on someone's conversation. It enables a simulation of honesty, a baring of the soul, intimacy, honesty, and confession. The first novel to exploit the form in a complex way was Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684, 1685, 1687). Other early examples of epistolary novels in the 18th and

19th centuries are Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

Talking to yourself: diaries and journals

I have a whole shelf of exercise books in my office, crammed with my own writing. No one will ever see these books (I hope) because they are personal and written for no one else but me. Maybe not even for me. I have been writing journals since I was 16. In these journals are my thoughts, my frustrations, my anger, my attempts at style, my favourite quotes, my poems, my daily thoughts, my freewriting. I look back and can see the intellectual and emotional progress of my life, a parallel life in writing. It's a habit I took to easily, a compulsion. I had to express myself, talk out my problems and triumphs and work them out on paper.

A diary is similar – but is less internal and introspective – more an account of daily things done. I blend the two in my journals.

A blog is similar in form, but it is by nature public and meant to be shared.

Imagine if I had some secrets I wrote in my journals, and imagine if you broke into my office while I was away and read them. You would be a voyeur, an outsider with a window into someone's personal private life. The words are not meant for you, but you would find in them an honesty, perhaps, an unaffected style, rawness, because they were never meant for a market or public consumption.

So it is not surprising that the early forms of the novel imitated this voyeuristic practice of reading other people's diaries. Here is Stoker's *Dracula*:

> Jonathan Harker's Journal (Kept in shorthand) 3 May. Bistritz –Left Munich at 8:35 P.M., on 1st May, arriving at Vienna early next morning; should have arrived at 6:46, but train was an hour late. Buda-Pesth seems a wonderful place, from the glimpse which I got of it from the train and the little I could walk through the streets. I feared to go very far from the station, as we had arrived late and would start as near the correct time as possible (Stoker, 2003 (1897)).

And more contemporary, here is Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996):

> January: An Exceptionally Bad Start
>
> Sunday 1 January

Noon. London: my flat. Ugh. The last thing on earth I feel physically, emotionally or mentally equipped to do is drive to Una and Geoffrey Alconbury's New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet in Grafton Underwood. Geoffrey and Una Alconbury are my parents' best friends and, as Uncle Geoffrey never tires of reminding me, have known me since I was running round the lawn with no clothes on. My mother rang up at 8:30 in the morning last August Bank Holiday and forced me to promise to go. She approached it via a cunningly circuitous route (Fielding 1996).

Or here is Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾* (1982):

Wednesday January 14th

None of the teachers at school have noticed that I am an intellectual. They will be sorry when I am famous. There is a new girl in our class. She sits next to me in Geography. She is all right. Her name is Pandora, but she likes being called 'Box'. Don't ask me why. I might fall in love with her. It's time I fell in love, after all I am 13 3/4 years old (Townsend, 1982).

✏ **'DEAR DIARY' EXERCISE**

Write the beginning of a story (300 words) that is told using a diary or journal or blog format.

Talking to others: monologic, dialogic, polylogic epistolary writing

St. Petersburgh, Dec. 11th, 17 – TO Mrs. Saville, England

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday, and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking (Shelley, 2003 (1823)).

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley employs the letter form to write her novel. I have often done this in real life – compiled emails from an old friend

into a document that reads like an unfolding story. It could be mono-logic (just the emails written to me or the ones I wrote to her or him) or dialogic (alternate emails from me to her and her to me) or even polylogic (including emails from a third party or even a fourth party). Emails crucially leave out information and assume knowledge. That is, they have no overseeing guiding narrator to help the reader connect to the characters or email participants. Here, the characters speak for themselves, and the reader is left to construct the narrative between the gaps.

Here is an extract from one of the earliest English novels, written dialogically:

> LETTER I MISS ANNA HOWE, TO MISS CLARISSA HARLOWE JAN 10.
> I am extremely concerned, my dearest friend, for the distur-bance that has happened in your family. I know how it must hurt you to become the subject of the public talk: and yet, upon an occasion so generally known, it is impossible but that whatever relates to a young lady, whose distinguished merits have made her the public care, should engage every body's attention. I long to have the particulars from yourself; and of the usage I am told you receive upon an accident you could not help; and in which, as far as I can learn, the sufferer was the aggressor. Mr. Diggs, the surgeon, whom I sent for at the first hearing of the encounter, to inquire, for your sake, how your brother was, told me, that there was no danger from the wound, if there were none from the fever; which it seems has been increased by the perturbation of his spirits.
>
> LETTER II MISS CLARISSA HARLOWE, TO MISS HOWE HARLOWE-PLACE, JAN. 13.
> How you oppress me, my dearest friend, with your polite-ness! I cannot doubt your sincerity; but you should take care, that you give me not reason from your kind partiality to call in question your judgment. You do not distinguish that I take many admirable hints from you, and have the art to pass them upon you for my own: for in all you do, in all you say, nay, in your very looks (so animated!) you give lessons to one who loves you and observes you as I love you and observe you, without knowing that you do – So pray, my dear, be more sparing of your praise for the future, lest after this confession

> we should suspect that you secretly intend to praise yourself,
> while you would be thought only to commend another
> (Richardson, 2004 (1748)).

Many lament the lost art of letter writing as electronic correspondence such as email, instant messaging, or texting is transient and can be deleted forever whereas letters can be preserved. I still have letters I have kept from childhood and teenage years.

The epistolary form enables what we call 'discrepant awareness' – the ability to read between the lines, to see what characters themselves do not see, and for authors to play with dramatic irony and unreliable narration. For example, we (hopefully) get the allusion to Pandora's box in the above example, but Adrian Mole does not. And here, for example, is Celia in *The Color Purple* (1982) (a polylogic, epistolary novel), an illiterate young woman who writes to God as she dare not tell anyone else her life story:

> Dear God
> I am fourteen years old. ~~I am.~~ I have always been a good girl.
> Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me (Walker, 1982, p. 1).

Other forms of epistolary writing can include newspaper articles (Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) comprises narrative, news articles, journal articles and graffiti), PowerPoint slides (Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) includes a chapter using PowerPoint slides and one in textspeak), 'to do' lists and text messaging (Meg Cabot's *Boy Meets Girl* (2004)).

✎ EPISTOLARY EXERCISE

1. **Write the beginning of a novel (300 words) that uses three epistolary devices (letters, emails, newspaper clippings, PowerPoint or a shopping list) and addresses the reader (narratee) directly without need for a mediating narrator.**

2. **Use monologic, dialogic or polylogic forms.**

3. **Use dramatic irony (discrepant awareness) to create effect.**

Conclusion

The early novel played with strands that would later become genre fiction – romance, adventure, horror, erotica, and so on. The novel invented itself out of the struggle of the emerging individual, and popular novels tended to be sensationalist, melodramatic and sentimental. But because the form was still fluid, early novelists freely experimented with epistolary devices, sentimentalism, and the Gothic, and the phenomenon we now call the 'novel' began to take shape.

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