



THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL FROM DEFOE TO DICKENS

Jurabaeva Sevara Muzaffar qizi

Student of Chirchik State Pedagogical University

Scientific adviser: Khamitov Eldorbek Erkinovich

Doctor of Philosophy in Philological Sciences (PhD), act.assoc.prof.,

Head of the English theory and practice department

Chirchik State Pedagogical University

@eldorbek_erkinovich

ABSTRACT: *The English novel, as a literary form, has seen remarkable evolution, growing from its early experimental origins to a well-defined genre with lasting impact on culture and society. This article explores the development of the English novel from its roots in the early 18th century with writers like Daniel Defoe to the mature works of Charles Dickens in the 19th century. By examining thematic shifts, narrative techniques, and social critiques embedded in the works of these authors, we see how the English novel responded to, and helped shape its historical context.*

Keywords: *literature and society, narrative techniques, novelists, critique social issues, evolution, English novel, realism, immediacy and authenticity, satirical tone, morality to complex.*

Introduction

The English novel, developed in the 18th century, played a significant role in shaping both literature and society. Early novelists like Daniel Defoe introduced narrative techniques that would define the form, while later authors like Charles Dickens expanded the scope of the novel to critique social issues. This article traces the



development of the English novel over more than a century, examining key authors and works that shows its evolution.

Literature analysis and Methodology

Defoe and Realism. Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), often credited as one of the pioneers of the English novel, broke ground with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Defoe's narrative style emphasized realism, using first-person perspective and detailed accounts that gave readers a sense of immediacy and authenticity. *Robinson Crusoe* is considered the first "realistic" English novel, presenting a believable narrative centered on the protagonist's individual experiences. Defoe's later novels, such as *Moll Flanders* (1722), continued this trend, exploring themes of survival, morality, and personal agency among society.

Epistolary and Picaresque Forms. Following Defoe, Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) introduced the handwritten form in his works like *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). By using letters as the narrative structure, Richardson allowed for a nearest exploration of his characters' internal worlds. His novels delved into personal moral struggles, contrasting with Defoe's adventure-centered plots. On the other hand, Henry Fielding (1707–1754) approached the novel with a more satirical tone. His work *Tom Jones* (1749) used the impostrous form, a genre marked by a wicked yet appealing protagonist navigating a corrupt society. Fielding's narrative style was more playful and experimental, addressing social hypocrisies and embracing a broader, more dynamic view of society compared to the dedicated style of Richardson.

The Gothic Influence: Walpole, Radcliffe, and the Supernatural

The late 18th century saw the rise of the Gothic novel, a genre that introduced supernatural elements, psychological horror, and medieval settings. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is often considered the first Gothic novel. Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823) expanded on this foundation with novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*



(1794), where atmosphere and suspense played central roles. Gothic novels tapped into fears of the unknown and challenged the rationalism that had dominated earlier literature. This genre provided an imaginative and emotional counterpoint to the realistic and moral-driven novels of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding.

Jane Austen and the Rise of the Domestic Novel (Realism)

As the 19th century began, Jane Austen (1775–1817) introduced a new style that focused on domestic settings, social class, and personal relationships. Novels like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1815) examined the social dynamics of marriage, morality, and family within the context of the English gentry. Austen's novels demonstrated a mastery of irony, wit, and subtle social critique, using realism and precision to portray the manners and morals of her time. Austen's work also elevated the novel as a medium for both entertainment and thoughtful examination of human nature.

The Social Novel: Dickens and Victorian Society

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) brought the English novel to new heights during the Victorian era. Dickens' novels, such as *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Bleak House* (1853), addressed the social injustices and differences of 19th-century England. Dickens used his novels to critique issues like poverty, child labor, and the plight of the working class, combining memorable characters, vivid descriptions, and intricate plots. Dickens expanded the English novel by introducing serialized publication, which allowed for a broad readership and a sense of ongoing engagement with his characters. His works also often blended humor with pathos, providing a complex emotional experience for readers and establishing the novel as a form capable of social comments.

Narrative Techniques and Thematic Shifts

Throughout this period, English novelists experimented with narrative techniques that allowed for a richer exploration of character and society. Defoe's early focus on



realism evolved through Richardson's intimate epistolary style, Fielding's all-knowing satire, and Austen's polished irony. By the time of Dickens, the novel had become a powerful medium for addressing social issues, evolving from individual stories of adventure or morality to complex, multi-layered critiques of society.

Conclusion

The evolution of the English novel from Defoe to Dickens reflects the genre's responsiveness to changing social, political, and cultural landscapes. From realism to social criticism, each stage in the development of the novel brought new techniques, themes, and insights into the human experience. This legacy of innovation laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of novelists, solidifying the novel as a foundational literary form that continues to resonate with readers today.

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