
UNIT 1: THE NOVEL IN BRITAIN: AN INTRODUCTION

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Far from the Madding Crowd is the fourth novel written by Thomas Hardy, a 19th century British novelist belonging to the Victorian Age. This was published in 1874. It appeared originally as a monthly serial and as it gained wide readership, it was later published as a full-length novel. The novel has been made into a film quite a few times, with the first attempt in 1967. The film based on Hardy's novel was a bold attempt to centre stage a single young woman who takes up the daunting task of managing her late uncle's farm at a time when the patriarchal community was strong and dominant. It was also an indictment of the moral code of conduct that privileged the male over the female who was subjected to harsh treatment for any perceivable violation of the Victorian moral code.

After you finish reading the novel, watch the 1967 film production, starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates. You can also view subsequent film productions of the novel. This will give you an idea of how the literary medium and the film medium parallel each other to create the atmosphere of the novel that has truly captured and rendered the rural life of the Victorian age in the latter half of the 19th Century.

1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After going through the Unit, you will be able to discuss the following:

- *What is a Novel?

*A Brief History of the English Novel from the 18th century to the present time and the causes for the rise of the Novel in the 18th century.

1.2 WHAT IS A NOVEL?

Before we take up Hardy's novel for a detailed study in Units 3 and 4, we must get to know what a novel is and follow it up with a brief history of the English novel. This will help you to place Hardy's work among the novels written during the second half of the 19th century.

The novel has many forms and any attempt to seek a single definition that is applicable to all the forms is like trying to catch a leviathan (a monster) in a fly net. No definition is likely to be adequate to cover all of them. Novels are generally classified into two broad categories- the literary novel and popular fiction. In this Unit, though our focus is on the first one, namely the literary novel, we need to distinguish it from popular fiction. Fiction has to be first and foremost entertaining i.e., hold the interest of the reader. The primary difference between the literary novel and popular fiction is in its range of appeal, as the interest of readers vary. Popular fiction is sometimes pejoratively referred to as the airport novel, novels that you pick up at the airport or in a bus or railway station for reading while waiting or travelling to your destination and cast them aside once you finish reading. Unlike the literary novels that we love to go back for a re-read and for another re-read, popular fiction does not leave us with any residual interest. Literary fiction aims to hold up a mirror to the human condition while popular fiction aims to entertain and provide excitement. Popular fiction is associated with straightforward narration to keep the interest of the reader. This genre of story writing is popular among a majority of readers. As popular fiction provides light entertainment, it gets sold in large numbers. Literary novels are complex both in characterization and content.

Some critics consider popular fiction as the opposite of literature. For example, they concede *Mills and Boon* and Harry Potter novels are popular, but they are different from classics written by novelists like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Leo Tolstoy, and George Eliot. The two categories cater to two different tastes and it is not correct to privilege one over the other. The aim of a literary novel is the self expression of the author while the focus of popular fiction is the reader. "Popular culture is the television we watch, the movies we see, the fast food, or slow food, we eat, the clothes we wear, the music we sing and hear, the things we spend our money on, our attitude toward life. It is the whole society we live in, that which may or may not be distributed by the mass media. It is virtually our whole world"¹. In the literary novel, the character takes centre stage while popular fiction is driven by the plot.

Activity 1:

What types of fiction do you read? Do you automatically think literary means quality? Do you think popular fiction leaves a lasting impact?

Activity 2:

Analyze any one popular novel you have read in the light of your views on its lasting impact.

However let us attempt a simple definition of a novel that can be applicable to a majority of fiction written either as literary fiction or popular fiction. The novel is a **genre of fiction writing** distinct from the other forms of storytelling like a short story or novella or drama. The novel has much in common with these other forms of fiction writing, but has certain formal traits especially with reference to its length.

One defining trait of the novel is the use of prose, which uses natural speech unlike poetry which is generally marked by a rhythmic structure and often rhyming words. Prose is the best medium to tell a story as the story is narrated through dialogues between characters, though we now have graphic novels—novels using either a comic, or an artistic format where graphics substitute for words.

In simple terms, the novel can be defined as an extended narrative in prose, longer than a short story and longer than a novella and consisting of a plot (or multiple plots), characters caught in the turmoil of problems arising out of the plot, development of the characters shaped by life experience and the resolution at the end.

Traditional novels—in particular of the 18th and the 19th centuries, offer a strong plot that pose a problem or set of problems to the characters in the narrative, some of which are resolved in the action of the novel. On the contrary, modern novels of the 20th Century break with tradition and in place of conventional plot structure, have multiple plots and multiple stories and have a greater focus on characters. Considering this type of flexibility in the genre, we can see that there is a great deal of variety allowed by the novel form. There are innumerable forms of novel - adventure novel, picaresque novel, fantasy novel, epistolary novel, the Gothic novel, the graphic novel, historical novel, dystopian novel, sentimental novel, science fiction novel, and Utopian novel— just to name a few.

Activity 3:

Refer to the Glossary (1.6) to learn about the different forms of novel and attempt to find examples of each one of them other than those given in the section.

From the above analysis, we can conclude that

- *The Novel is a prose narrative normally of 40000 -50,000 words or even more.
- *It deals with characters like you and me -characters we can easily identify with and
- *It presents events involving the characters that again are realistic and easy for us to connect to.

This is a broad definition. "People in significant action is one way of describing it"². The narrative line shows the development of characters in their growth and discovery of themselves and fellow characters through their life experience.

1.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

This section will give you a brief history of the English novel from the 18th century to the post modern period which spans the second half of the 20th century till date. So this brief history

covers more than two hundred years starting from the 18th century to the present times. You may wonder why we have chosen the history of English novel from the 18th century and not before that. The novel as a literary genre became popular only in the 18th century, though there were a few novels earlier in the 17th century.

For all purposes, the novel as a literary genre came into existence in 18th century England. If you read the History of English Literature, you will find the reference to the 18th century, as the *Age of Prose and Reason*. Before the 18th century, the dominant forms of writing were poetry and drama. Not that there were no prose writings prior to the 18th century. But prose literature was not as prolific as poetry and drama during the period from the 14th century to the 17th century. Examples of quality prose written in that period include Francis Bacon's *Essays*, Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, John Milton's *Aeropagatica*, and Tyndale's translation of The King James Bible, from Greek and Latin languages. But the novel as a literary genre did not get prominence, though notable mentions can be made of Francis Bacon's Utopian novel, *New Atlantis*, Francis Godwin's *Imaginary Voyage to the Moon*, the earliest science fiction in English literature and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*, an allegorical narrative. Aphra Behn, the female writer who wrote *Oroonoko* in 1688, is considered the first professional novelist and the first female novelist in English. It was only in the 18th century, that the novel became popular and had a wider readership than in the past. Before we take up the development of the novel in the next two centuries leading to our present times, let us list out the reasons behind the rise of the novel in the 18th century.

1.3.1 The Reasons for the Rise of the Novel in the 18th century

There are many reasons for the rise of the novel in the 18th century. This period in English Literature is known by multiple names- the Augustan Age, Age of Prose and Reason, the Neo-classical Age, and the Age of the Periodical Essay. The main reason for the development of the novel is the development of prose in this period. Prose, as we have shown, is the medium of the novel.

The development of prose can be traced back to the interest the writers had in the classical writings of the ancient times. That is why this period is known as the Augustan Age. The Augustan Age has been one of the most illustrious periods in Latin literary history, from approximately 43 BC to 18 AD. It is known as the Golden Age of Latin literature. Emperor Augustus was the ruler when great Roman writers like Horace, Ovid and Virgil were at their creative best and that period has been known as the Classical Age. When we use the term 'classical literature', it refers to writings that affirm order, harmony, restraint, balance, rationality and the importance of unity in literature. When we read 18th-century literature in England, we recognize how it was characterized by realism, reason, correctness, intellect and satirical spirit similar to the writings of the Augustan period. Many of the writers looked back to the ancient Roman geniuses and hence this period was rightfully called the Augustan Age.

It was also known as the neoclassical age i.e., a return to classical age. The birth of a new literary movement, Neoclassicism was facilitated by the rational and scientific thinkers of that period like the English philosopher and thinker, John Locke and the great astronomer and physicist Isaac Newton. They were influential thinkers of the 18th century. Science became the new

authority and Reason was given a higher status than imagination and feeling to enable man to act and behave in a civilized manner. So the writings that come under the rubric of Neoclassicism endorsed the use of correct language, high degree of objectivity and rationality that we associate with scientific spirit and temperament. Literature of this period sought to express universal truths that had stood the test of time. This means, the writers discarded subjectivity as they expounded truths that were timeless and universal.

There was yet another reason why prose flourished in the 18th century. The Royal Society of London, the oldest scientific institution in the world, was formed in 1660 to improve natural knowledge and promote Science. It stands to reason that scientific concepts needed prose as they cannot be expounded and explained in the medium of poetry. Scientific theories had necessarily to use prose to express with clarity and un-ambiguity.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that ensured England would have a Constitutional monarchy in which Parliament would enjoy the majority of power, the political system in England changed. With the balance of power moving away from monarchy in favour of Parliament, two principal parties emerged- the Tories and the Whigs. The Parliamentary system demanded political debate and political manifestoes from the two contending parties and this in turn demanded once again clear, unambiguous and straightforward prose.

Then there was the rise of the middle class which was getting educated. They needed something to read which they could understand and enjoy. They did not want heavy reading but something light, interesting, educative and entertaining. This gave rise to the emergence of periodical essays. Periodical essays typically appeared in affordable publications that came out regularly, usually two or three times a week, and were only one or two pages in length-short, witty, elegant and entertaining. “Unlike other publications of the time that consisted of a medley of information and news, essay periodicals were comprised of a single essay on a specific topic or theme, usually having to do with the conduct or manners. They were often narrated by a persona or a group personas, commonly referred to as a ‘club’.”³

Notable periodical essayists of the 18th century include Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Samuel Johnson, and Oliver Goldsmith. Again the periodical essay demanded simple prose of easy comprehension. Hence Addison and Steele who started a daily publication called *The Spectator* wrote that their objective was “to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality”. The journal was meant for the vast middleclass majority which was to be “something that every middle-class household with aspirations to looking like its members took literature seriously, would want to have.”⁴ The two pioneers of the Periodical essay said their aim was to bring “philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools, and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses”⁵.

“The Periodical essay dealt with society and fictitious characters who exemplified the values of an old country gentleman, portrayed as lovable but somewhat ridiculous (rather beloved than esteemed) making his Tory politics seem harmless but silly”⁶. This was a major step towards the development of characters that became a feature of the novel in the 18th century. Thus, the rise of the middle class was one more reason for the rise and popularity of the novel in the 18th century.

1.3.2 The Novel in the 18th century

Daniel Defoe who wrote three novels - *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* is often considered the father of the English novel. These were the early novels and were published in 1730. They were in the form of connected episodes centred on a single character. His novels were in the nature of fictional autobiographies, which the 19th century novelist Charlotte Bronte followed in her novel *Jane Eyre*. The other early novelists included Samuel Richardson who pioneered the epistolary novel.

The epistolary novel is a distinct form where the story line is developed through letters exchanged between different characters. The entire novel is written as a series of documents either in the form of letters, or diary entries, newspaper clippings and other documents. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* is written in the form of letters and this is considered to be the first real English novel. His characters are from the middle class and the novel stresses on a moral code of conduct. Since the 18th century, there have been many examples of epistolary novels. Popular among them are: *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley; *Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins; *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker; *Diary of a Young Girl* (1952) by Anne Frank, and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker.

Henry Fielding introduced the picaresque novel in *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones* and *Jonathan Wild*. You must have read in your school days the abridged version of *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. This is a satirical novel which satirizes not only British society and imperialism, but also satirizes the human race in general for its destructive and selfish characteristics. Yet another great writer of the 18th century was Lawrence Sterne who wrote a masterpiece *Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman*. This is in the autobiographical form with Tristram as the narrator. It is made up of multiple stories, stories within stories and is a highly experimental novel.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* (1722) are considered to be among the early English novels although his characters were not fully realized enough to be considered full-fledged novels. Much later in the 19th century, Jane Austen, the author of the well known classic novels-chief among them being *Pride and Prejudice* (1812), and *Emma* (1816)-was considered the greatest of early English novelists who wrote a distinct kind of novel, the 'Novel of Manners'. Jane Austen's novels are perhaps the most recognizable works in this genre. Because of Austen's works, the Novel of Manners is mostly associated with the early 19th century. The special features of the Novel of Manners are given below.

It is a sub-genre of the realist novel i.e., novel that presents events that could have actually occurred to you or me or anyone in a believable setting. Thus the stories depict real life situations and fictional characters within these stories react similarly to real people. It is about a particular class of people in society at a particular time of history. For example, Jane Austen writes about the 18th century middleclass trying to follow the genteel or the upper class. It examines the customs and manners, behaviour and language of a specific cultural group, here the middle class. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "The *Novel of manners* is a work of fiction that re-creates a social world, conveying with finely detailed observation the customs, values, and mores of a highly developed and complex society."⁷The famous novelists of this genre from the 19th to

the end of the 20th Century were Jane Austen, Henry James, Evelyn Waugh, Edith Wharton, and John Marquand.

1.3.3 The Novel in the 19th Century

English literature has seen alternate periods of Classicism and Romanticism, propelled by political and social ideas and developments. Classicism laid emphasis on reason, logic and objectivity while romanticism gave free rein to expression of emotions, feelings, imagination and subjectivity. While objectivity is based on observable phenomena, uninfluenced by emotions and personal prejudices, subjectivity is based on individual personal impressions, feelings and opinions rather than external facts. So 18th century writers following classical norms wrote objectively about society, manners, the follies and foibles of mankind, while the first half of the 19th century, influenced by the call of the French Revolution (Liberty, Equality and Fraternity) allowed personal feelings and imagination to replace objective reasoning and logic.

The first half of the 19th century came under the influence of Romanticism and the focus was on Nature and imagination that extended to supernaturalism. This gave rise to the Gothic novel with its emphasis on mystery and the supernatural. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* by her sister Emily Bronte, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville are fine examples of this kind.

The second half of the 19th century is known as the Victorian Age. It denotes the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837-1901. The novel was the dominant literary form during her reign. This was also the time of Industrial revolution in England and there was a perceptible shift from the rural agrarian England to the industrial towns and cities. Thus Victorian era had two parallel and contrary characteristics- it was the era of expansion, great technology, communication and colonial empire on the one hand and in contrast the era of urban poverty, injustices, and starvation experienced by a vast majority of the middle class and the working class. Victorian novelists portrayed the middle class with its strict morals and values. These morals included sexual restraint, low tolerance of crime and strict adherence to the social code of conduct. The Victorian values prioritized respect for the Christian Church, morals, hard work and personal success. Notable Victorian authors include Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Antony Trollope.

These novelists, in particular, Charles Dickens portrayed characters caught in the swirl of industrialization. They were neither wholly good nor bad, and his writings eschewed all the idealism and romanticism of the early 19th century. Realism and Naturalism were the main characteristics of the novels of this period. The great realism of the first half of the 19th century was followed by a period of relative mediocrity after 1848 and Victorian imperialism gave rise to new realism which was a humanist revolt against imperialism. Anatole France, Romain Rolland, Bernard Shaw, and Thomas Mann reflect this humanist revolt leading to a new form of bourgeois realism.

1.3.4 The Modern Novel (The first half of the 20th century)

Modernism can be seen as two phases of literature-modernist literature(1900-1945) and contemporary literature (1945 to the present), also referred to as postmodern literature. Modernism marks a radical shift from the previous centuries in form and content, in the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities in art(painting), architecture, music, sculpture and literature. The new world order that came into existence, questioned the Victorian world view of a stable, meaningful and fairly comprehensible world, based on reason and logic inherent in the scientific and Industrial revolutions of that period. The catch phrase of the modern period was ‘to make it new’. Modernism thus marks a distinct break with Victorian bourgeois morality(what Bernard Shaw caustically refers to as ‘middle class morality’), its optimism, its cultural robustness and in its place brought in a pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. When cultural roots do not provide the strength needed to live a life of hope and cheer it results in cultural despair giving rise to moral relativism and moral apathy. Relativism is the new view of the 20th century, that says there is no absolute truth or value and everything is relative. The characters in modern and contemporary novels questioned the existence of God, the supremacy of the human reason, and the nature of reality.

George Lukacs, the Hungarian writer and philosopher detects three strands of modern literature: (1) Experimental, where works are unorthodox and experimental. (2) Social realism presented mainly in the writings of the Communist Eastern Europe, that promised a utopia, a perfect world without conflicts, hunger and unhappiness. But in trying to depict an imaginary society of perfect order, the writers did not factor in the everyday problems, conflicts and contradictions. (3) Critical realism, best represented by Thomas Mann, Bernard Shaw and Conrad which is a return to realism away from the above mentioned experimental and social realistic strands.

The 20th century novel was very different from the novels of the earlier two centuries. It had the following characteristics:

- *No linear flow of narrative, i.e., a beginning leading to them iddle and the end as though on a straight line.
- *No unity of plot or character, and therefore no cause and effect in the development of the novel.
- *No single moral or philosophical meaning as a result of the use of irony and ambiguous juxtapositions of multiple views. Thus the concept of relativism is brought in with no absolute truths of good and evil presented in black and white.
- *Talks not about progress but the decline of civilization. The earlier optimism is replaced by despondency and pessimism.
- *No more of dialogue and relationship with others, but more about loneliness as a result of the machine age. The idea conveyed is ‘people herd together, but the crowd is no company.’
- *Novels often written in first person and use of *stream of consciousness* technique that gives the feeling that the plot is going nowhere, also called “internal monologue,” as the style incorporates the natural chaos of thoughts and feelings that occur in any of our minds at any given time.

- *Exposure of bourgeois rationality and hypocrisy through the adoption of a tone of self-mockery;
- *Replacement of objective and rational discourse by subjective and inward consciousness and
- *Rejection of the 19th century bourgeoisie social world⁸

1.3.5 The Postmodern Novel (from the second half of the 20th century till date)

Realism and naturalism paved the way for postmodern novels. The postmodern novel includes magic realism, metafiction, and the graphic novel. Some of the postmodern novels include: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker; *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capot; *Roots* by Alex Haley; *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *Midnight's Children* and *Satanic Verse* sby Salman Rushdie.

1.4 SUMMING UP

In this Unit we focused on the novel as a literary genre and discussed the differences between the literary novel and popular fiction. We also discussed briefly the history of the novel in English from the eighteenth century till the present. The different forms of the novel were also introduced. After this introductory unit on the novel as a genre, in the next three units of this block, we will proceed to study the novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*, by Thomas Hardy.

1.5 UNIT END QUESTIONS:

1. What are the typical characteristics of the novel?
2. What are the different forms of the novel?
3. List out the reasons for the rise of the English novel in the 18th century.
4. What are the characteristics of the 18th century English novel?
5. What are the characteristics of the 19th century English novel?
6. How does Modernism differ from the artistic and literary sensibilities of the previous ages?
7. What are the characteristics of the 20th century novel?

1.6 REFERENCES

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1.7 READING LIST

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1.8 GLOSSARY

Novella: a short narrative tale, especially a popular story having a moral or satirical point. A novella is considerably longer than a short story, but shorter than a novel. Example: Boccaccio's *Decameron*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*.

Adventure novel: The adventure genre of fiction is fast-paced and usually centers on a protagonist in a dangerous or risky situation. Science fiction novels always contain elements of adventure. Examples: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Henry Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Picaresque novel: a genre of fiction that depicts the adventures of a roguish, but "appealing hero", of low social class, who lives by his wits in a corrupt society. Examples: Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Fantasy novel: a type of fiction that ideologically and aesthetically subordinates reality to imagination by depicting a world of marvels that is contrasted to everyday reality and to accepted views of what is credible. Examples: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *His Dark Materials* (which begins with *The Golden Compass*)

Epistolary novel: a novel written as a series of documents. The usual form is letters, although diary entries, newspaper clippings and other documents are sometimes used.

Gothic novel: is characterized by elements of fear, horror, death, and gloom, as well as romantic elements, such as nature, individuality, and very strong emotions which include fear and suspense.

Graphic novel: uses the interplay of text and illustrations in a comic-strip format to tell a story.

Historical novel: a literary genre in which the plot takes place in a setting located in the past, in historical times. Sometimes it borrows true characteristics of the time period in which it is set. Historical fiction is a fictional story that is written around, and includes historical events, usually from the past. Sir Walter Scott is the father of the English historical novel. His *Ivanhoe* is a classic example of historical fiction.

Dystopian novel: Dystopian is the opposite of Utopian. Dystopian novels describe an imaginary society that is as dehumanizing and as unpleasant as possible. Famous dystopian authors include

Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and Ray Bradbury who wrote *Brave New World*, *The Time Machine*, *Animal Farm* and *Fahrenheit 451*.

Utopian Novel: works of fiction depicting ideal societies, where the citizens are bearers of a perfect moral code, or at the least, every violator of the moral code is harshly punished. A utopian society is one where all social evils have been cured. Examples: *News from Nowhere* by William Morris, *A Modern Utopia* by H. G. Wells

Sentimental novel: exalts feeling above reason and raises the analysis of emotion to a fine art. Examples: Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*.

Science Fiction novel: a genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about science and technology of the future. It is important to note that science fiction has a relationship with the principles of science—these stories involve partially true, partially fictitious laws or theories of science. Examples: *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Ubik* by Philip Dick.

Allegorical Narrative: A complete narrative that involves characters and events that stand for an abstract idea or event. It presents straightforward embodiments of aspects of human nature and abstract concepts, through such characters as Knowledge, Beauty, Strength, and Death. Examples; John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* and the Morality play *Everyman*.

Romanticism: a movement in the arts and literature that originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual.

Classicism: the following of ancient Greek or Roman principles and style in art and literature, generally associated with harmony, restraint, and adherence to recognized standards of form and craftsmanship, especially from the Renaissance to the 18th century.

Bourgeois Realism: an artistic style characterized by simple scenes of peasant life with a moral message.

Relativism: the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute.

Stream of Consciousness: a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust are among its notable early exponents.

Magic realism: an approach to literature that weaves fantasy and myth into everyday life.

Metafiction: fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques.