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■ **Part One** The novel

1.1 Popularity

A best-seller

Harry Potter is news: shops open at midnight on publication day; there are special covers for adults who don't like being seen reading children's books; there are books explaining the 'meaning' of Harry's deeds, and the films are 'big box-office'. And people talk about them.

The *Harry Potter* phenomenon tells us three things:

- We are still a nation of readers.
- We discuss what we read.
- Stories allure us.

The popularity of novels

People still read, and they read novels.

The novel is the literary form in which many of us encounter stories.

Novels are abundantly available; they can be bought in both bookshops and supermarkets. They are news. Each year, the winner of the Booker prize is discussed on radio and television. Novels are even peak-time popular entertainment, as when the final of *The Nation's Favourite Read* was broadcast on a Saturday night. Radio and television regard the serialization of a 'classic' as high-class entertainment. People still recall the BBC adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in 1995, and in 2005 the novel was made into a film starring Keira Knightley.

Talking about novels

We enjoy discussing what we have read; we want to understand what a book is about, and why it did or did not engage our interest. For example, people have debated whether the Harry Potter novels are original. The school story, they point out, is not new. Ever since Thomas Hughes wrote *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (published in 1857), we have been accustomed to the genre (type or kind) of the school story. Jennings and Mallory Towers are part of many people's childhoods.

We have also (again, often as children) read stories of ghosts and goblins, dragons and demons. C. S. Lewis used those figures in the Narnia books, and Alan Garner often used a plot in which, as in C. S. Lewis, an ordinary present becomes entwined with a mythical realm. In that sense, J. K. Rowling is not original; she draws on the genres of the school tale and the folk story. In keeping with the school story, Harry has a friend – Ron Weasley – and an enemy – Draco Malfoy. What *is* original, however, is her combination of the two genres: *Harry Potter* is a school story about wizards. Consequently, she invents (and does so entertainingly) a series of wizard equivalents to the conventions of the school tale. Hence the game of Quidditch and the entertaining idea of a corridor that leads to somewhere different on a Friday (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 1997).

Summary

We are a nation that reads, and we discuss what we read. When we talk about novels we are drawn into a debate about originality and genre.

1.2 Human identity

We sometimes ask what it is that makes human beings what they are. There are many answers to this big question, one of which is:

We are story-tellers.

If we are asked about what has happened to us today, we reply in terms of little narratives. These narratives have settings, dialogue, are delivered from a particular viewpoint and have a form: introduction, climax and close. Stories allure us, because we see our lives as stories. We do this in two ways.

Stories in our lives

Thomas Hardy called Chapter 8 of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) 'The Malthouse – The Chat – News'. He shows how

Story-telling establishes our identities.

Gabriel Oak, a man with ambitions, has lost his flock of sheep because of an accident and has been forced to seek employment on a farm in Weatherbury. He goes as a stranger to the Malthouse, where he is welcomed by the little group of rustics (country dwellers). The rustics have gathered to tell stories, one of which is about a bashful man, much given to blushing, called Joseph Poorgrass. Jan Coggan, in spite of a protest from Joseph himself, tells a story about how Joseph 'lost his way as he was coming home-along Yalbury Wood':

‘– And so ‘a lost himself quite,’ continued Mr. Coggan, with an impassive face, implying that a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course and would respect no man. ‘And as he was coming along in the middle of the night, much

afear'd, and not able to find his way out of the trees nohow, 'a cried out, "Man-a-lost, man-a-lost!" A owl in a tree happened to be crying "Whoo-who-who!" as owls do, you know, shepherd' (Gabriel nodded), 'and Joseph, all in a tremble, said, "Joseph Poorgrass, of Weatherbury, sir!"'

This wonderfully comic yet affectionate tale shows how this little community works. People are given identities through the stories people tell about them. In turn, these stories define the community.

Stories also give our lives meanings.

Our lives in our stories

Beyond individual and communal narratives there are larger, over-arching stories, that give meaning and a context to our lives.

We tell national stories about how our nation came into being and received its character.

This is one purpose of Epics (see Chapter 22). In *The Aeneid* (written between 29BC and 19BC), Virgil told of the foundation of Rome by relating how Aeneas fled from the destruction of Troy. The impulse to define the nature, and therefore the significance, of a nation appears in later works. Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of New England, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), explores the identity of America by presenting the early days of its Puritan settlers.

Bigger than national stories are the stories religions tell. These are stories that people live by.

Religious stories give a picture of our history and how we stand in relation to God, so they form our ideas strongly of who we are and how we should live.

The Bible presents stories ranging from the beginning of the world to the end of time. It has given Western literature plots, characters and themes that still arouse us (see Chapter 29, Sections 29.2–29.5).

Summary

We are story-tellers. The tales we tell establish our individual identities, the identity of our nation and, in religious stories, a sense of our place in the world.

1.3 Thinking about stories

Most television programmes are stories. Some have distinct beginnings, middles and ends, while others (the soap operas) might continue indefinitely. Even the news might be said to be a set of tales. Journalists often talk about 'news stories'.

Those who enjoy novels find a number of things in them – interesting characters, convincing atmospheres and a picture of what human life is like. These emerge in and through stories.

Fiction

The word ‘fiction’ has been in the language since the late Middle Ages. It has acquired a number of meanings. Here are two definitions from The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*:

Fictitious composition. Now usually prose novels and stories collectively, or the composition of such works.

Feigning, deceit, dissimulation, pretence.

These definitions date from 1599 and 1609, respectively. From very early on, therefore, ‘fiction’ was a slippery word. For much of its history, it has hovered between a technical literary meaning and a negative moral one.

Fictions and lies

The fact that the word denotes both a literary work and a lie indicates that people have long held ambivalent views about art. In Ancient Greece, Plato conducted a moral debate about the status of art. He wanted to banish poets from his ideal Republic. His reason is strictly philosophical. Because what we see is a shadow of what is real, art is less real because it is a shadow of a shadow.

This debate has left its mark on our language. Take the word ‘design’. We use it to discuss the organization of a work of art, but when applied to human actions, it indicates something morally questionable. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Mr Wickham, intent on seducing Darcy’s sister, travelled to where she was staying ‘undoubtedly by design’ (Chapter 35).

The ambiguity of the word points to one of the puzzles of literature. We know that literary works are made up and yet we treat them as real. The characters are invented and yet we take a moral and emotional interest in their lives. This is the mystery of art – what is made up matters to us.

Written and read

We sometimes assume that works of art (of which novels are an example) are windows on the world, unmediated slices of life. But

Fiction is *art*. Art means whatever has been made.

Other words used for the making of art are: created, fashioned or produced. There are many terms for the process of making art: constructed, crafted, designed, edited, moulded, selected, shaped and trimmed. And someone did the making. Novels have been *written*.

A novel is how it is because someone made it that way.

When we ask whether someone has read, say, Jane Austen, we are recognizing that a novel has been written – put together in a particular way – by a writer.

It follows from this that the characters of any novel are as they are because the author has made them that way. All too often, students write about characters as if they can be met at the bus stop. Characters only exist in the pages of a book.

Readers have a part to play in knowing and understanding characters. A novel is written by an author and read by a reader. We could not know any character in a book unless we read what the author had written. There are therefore three elements in the understanding of a novel:

- The characters and events of the book.
- The author who made the book in a particular way.
- The reader who responds.

To put it altogether:

The reader reads the words that the author has written.

Writing about novels

At this point, a hint about how to write about novels is necessary. Teachers often sit down to mark well-organized and fluently written essays that could be about the boy next door rather than a character in a book, but those essays don't get highly rewarded. Poor essays rarely mention the author or the reader.

So, when you write, make sure that you show how events and characters are what they are because of the way they have been made by the author and read by the reader.

For example, if you are writing about the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre* (1847), you might say that Charlotte Brontë leads the reader to sympathize with Jane by showing how her relatives treat her badly.

The elements of novels

Because novels are varied, precise definitions are very difficult. (In any case, what would we *do* with a definition?) We can, however, point to the following elements:

- It is a composition, usually in prose, concerned with the acts and speech of imagined characters.
- A story is told; there is a teller of the tale.
- It is a story in which the events are related to the reader in a particular order and for a particular reason.
- The events are imagined as taking place in specific places.
- The characters and events form a fictional world, which may be close to or remote from our everyday world.

- The totality of characters and events adds up to something. We can find meanings in the work.

Consider these points in relation to Jan Coggan's tale about Joseph Poorgrass lost in Yalbury Wood, discussed above:

- It is a tale of characters, action and conversation, although the conversation is with an owl!
- The story is told by Jan Coggan and told with the purpose of showing what kind of a person Joseph Poorgrass is.
- The order of events is selected to show why Joseph was lost: he had been working late and had been drinking.
- The story takes place in a wood, which, as in so many tales, is a place where travellers lose their way.
- The story creates a world of rustic labour in which people travel to relatively distant places for a day's work.
- The story is about timidity and an innocence that perhaps is only possible in the countryside.

Literary study

When we talk about how an author prompts a reader to respond to and think about what he or she has written, and when we see how an author has made a work, we are doing what is traditionally called Literary Criticism. Mastering a novel (or mastering any literature) starts when we see that it is something that has been made. Once we see that we can think about how the making has been done, and then ponder what the effects of this making are. It seems obvious to a lot of readers that a good place to start this thinking is with the characters.

Summary

Fictions are stories that have been made up. There is always a writer and reader, or teller and hearer. The events of the story occur in particular places and together they form a special world. Moreover, this world adds up to something – it has a meaning.



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