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## **A STUDY ON BRITISH FICTION**

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# A Study on British Fiction

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**Abstract – The British fiction is an important part of English literature. This article focuses on novels, written in English, by novelists who were born or have spent a significant part of their lives in England, or Scotland, or Wales, or Northern Ireland (or Ireland before 1922)]. However, given the nature of the subject, this guideline has been applied with common sense, and reference is made to novels in other languages or novelists who are not primarily British where appropriate.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The phrase Romantic novel has several possible meanings. Here it refers to novels written during the Romantic era in literary history, which runs from the late 18th century until the beginning of the Victorian era in 1837. But to complicate matters there are novels written in the romance tradition by novelists like Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Meredith.<sup>[7]</sup> In addition the phrase today is mostly used to refer to the popular pulp-fiction genre that focusses on romantic love. The Romantic period is especially associated with the poets William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Byron, Percy Shelley and John Keats, though two major novelists, Jane Austen and Walter Scott, also published in the early 19th century.

Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, invented the Gothic fiction genre. The word gothic was originally used in the sense of medieval.<sup>[8]</sup> This genre combines "the macabre, fantastic, and supernatural" and usually involves haunted castles, graveyards and various picturesque elements.<sup>[9]</sup> Later novelist Ann Radcliffe introduced the brooding figure of the Gothic villain which developed into the Byronic hero. Her most popular and influential work, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), is frequently described as the archetypal Gothic novel. *Vathek* (1786), by William Beckford, and *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Lewis, were further notable early works in both the Gothic and horror genres.

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), as another important Gothic novel as well as being an early example of science fiction.<sup>[10]</sup> The vampire genre fiction began with John William Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819). This short story was inspired by the life of Lord Byron and his poem *The Giaour*. An important later work is *Varney the Vampire* (1845), where many standard vampire conventions originated: Varney has fangs, leaves two puncture wounds on the neck of his victims, and has hypnotic powers and superhuman strength. Varney was also the first

example of the "sympathetic vampire", who loathes his condition but is a slave to it.

Among more minor novelists in this period Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) and Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) are worthy of comment. Edgeworth's novel *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is "the first fully developed regional novel in English" as well as "the first true historical novel in English" and an important influence on Walter Scott.<sup>[12]</sup> Peacock was primarily a satirist in novels such as *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829).

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Jane Austen's (1775-1817) works critique the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century realism.<sup>[13]</sup> Her plots, though fundamentally comic, highlight the dependence of women on marriage to secure social standing and economic security.<sup>[14]</sup> Austen brings to light the hardships women faced, who usually did not inherit money, could not work and where their only chance in life depended on the man they married. She reveals not only the difficulties women faced in her day, but also what was expected of men and of the careers they had to follow. This she does with wit and humour and with endings where all characters, good or bad, receive exactly what they deserve. Her work brought her little personal fame and only a few positive reviews during her lifetime, but the publication in 1869 of her nephew's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* introduced her to a wider public, and by the 1940s she had become accepted as a major writer. The second half of the 20th century saw a proliferation of Austen scholarship and the emergence of a Janeite fan culture. Austen's works include *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* and *Emma*. The other major novelist at the beginning of the early 19th century was Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), who was not only a highly successful British novelist but "the greatest single influence on fiction in the 19th century ... [and] a European figure".<sup>[15]</sup> Scott

established the genre of the historical novel with his series of Waverley Novels, including *Waverley* (1814), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818).<sup>[16]</sup> However, Austen is today widely read and the source for films and television series, while Scott is neglected.

## VICTORIAN NOVEL

It was in the Victorian era (1837–1901) that the novel became the leading literary genre in English. Another important fact is the number of women novelists who were successful in the 19th century, even though they often had to use a masculine pseudonym. The majority of readers were of course women. At the beginning of the 19th century most novels were published in three volumes. However, monthly serialization was revived with the publication of Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* in twenty parts between April 1836 and November 1837. Demand was high for each episode to introduce some new element, whether it was a plot twist or a new character, so as to maintain the readers' interest. Both Dickens and Thackeray frequently published this way.<sup>[17]</sup>

The 1830s and 1840s saw the rise of social novel, also known as social problem novel, that "arose out of the social and political upheavals which followed the Reform Act of 1832".<sup>[18]</sup> This was in many ways a reaction to rapid industrialization, and the social, political and economic issues associated with it, and was a means of commenting on abuses of government and industry and the suffering of the poor, who were not profiting from England's economic prosperity.<sup>[19]</sup> Stories of the working class poor were directed toward middle class to help create sympathy and promote change. An early example is Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-8).

An interest in rural matters and the changing social and economic situation of the countryside is seen in the novels of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). A Victorian realist, in the tradition of George Eliot, he was also influenced both in his novels and poetry by Romanticism, especially by William Wordsworth.<sup>[21]</sup> Charles Darwin is another important influence on Thomas Hardy.<sup>[22]</sup> Like Charles Dickens he was also highly critical of much in Victorian society, though Hardy focussed more on a declining rural society. While Hardy wrote poetry throughout his life, and regarded himself primarily as a poet, his first collection was not published until 1898, so that initially he gained fame as the author of such novels as, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). He ceased writing novels following adverse criticism of this last novel. In novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy attempts to create modern works in the genre of tragedy, that are modelled on the Greek drama, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles, though in prose, not poetry, a novel not drama, and with characters of low social standing, not nobility.<sup>[23]</sup>

Another significant late 19th century novelist is George Gissing (1857-1903) who published 23 novels between 1880 and 1903. His best known novel is *New Grub Street* (1891).<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Important developments occurred in genre fiction in this era. Although pre-dated by John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* in 1841, the history of the modern fantasy genre is generally said to begin with George MacDonald, the influential author of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *Phantastes* (1858). William Morris was a popular English poet who also wrote several fantasy novels during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Wilkie Collins' epistolary novel *The Moonstone* (1868), is generally considered the first detective novel in the English language, while *The Woman in White* is regarded as one of the finest sensation novels. H. G. Wells's (1866-1946) writing career began in the 1890s with science fiction novels like *The Time Machine* (1895), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) which describes an invasion of late Victorian England by Martians, and Wells is seen, along with Frenchman Jules Verne (1828-1905), as a major figure in the development of the science fiction genre. He also wrote realistic fiction about the lower middle class in novels like *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910).

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Thomas Hardy stopped writing fiction after *Jude the Obscure* (1895) was severely criticized, so that the major novelists writing in Britain at the start of the 20th century were an Irishman James Joyce (1882-1941) and two immigrants, American Henry James (1843-1916) and Pole Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). The modernist tradition in the novel, with its emphasis "towards the ever more minute and analytic exposition of mental life", begins with James and Conrad, in novels such as *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1907) and *Lord Jim* (1900).<sup>[24]</sup> Other important early modernists were Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), whose novel *Pointed Roof* (1915), is one of the earliest example of the stream of consciousness technique and D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), who wrote with understanding about the social life of the lower and middle classes, and the personal life of those who could not adapt to the social norms of his time. *Sons and Lovers* (1913), is widely regarded as his earliest masterpiece. There followed *The Rainbow* (1915), though it was immediately seized by the police, and its sequel *Women in Love* published in 1920.<sup>[25]</sup> Lawrence attempted to explore human emotions more deeply than his contemporaries and challenged the boundaries of the acceptable treatment of sexual issues, most notably in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was privately published in Florence in 1928. However, the unexpurgated version of this novel was not published until 1959.<sup>[26]</sup> Then in 1922 Irishman James Joyce's important modernist novel *Ulysses* appeared. *Ulysses* has been called "a demonstration and summation of the entire movement".<sup>[27]</sup> Set during one

day in Dublin in June 1904, in it Joyce creates parallels with Homer's epic poem the Odyssey.<sup>[28]</sup>

Another significant modernist in the 1920s was Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), who was an influential feminist and a major stylistic innovator associated with the stream-of-consciousness technique. Her novels include *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). Her essay collection *A Room of One's Own* (1929) contains her famous dictum; "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"

But while modernism was to become an important literary movement in the early decades of the new century, there were also many fine novelists who were not modernists. This include E.M. Forster ((1879-1970), John Galsworthy ((1867-1933) (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1932), whose novels include *The Forsyte Saga*, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) author of *The Old Wives' Tale*, and H. G. Wells (1866-1946). Though Forster's work is "frequently regarded as containing both modernist and Victorian elements".<sup>[30]</sup> E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), reflected challenges to imperialism, while his earlier works such as *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Howards End* (1910), examined the restrictions and hypocrisy of Edwardian society in England. The most popular British writer of the early years of the 20th century was arguably Rudyard Kipling ((1865-1936), a highly versatile writer of novels, short stories and poems and to date the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1907).

A significant English writer in the 1930s and 1940s was George Orwell (1903–50), who is especially remembered for his satires of totalitarianism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945). Evelyn Waugh (1903–66) satirised the "bright young things" of the 1920s and 1930s, notably in *A Handful of Dust* (1934), and *Decline and Fall* (1928), while *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) has a theological basis, setting out to examine the effect of divine grace on its main characters.<sup>[31]</sup> Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) published his famous dystopia *Brave New World* in 1932, the same year as John Cowper Powys's (1872-1963) *A Glastonbury Romance*. Samuel Beckett (1906–89) published his first major work, the novel *Murphy* in 1938. This same year Graham Greene's (1904–91) first major novel *Brighton Rock* was published. Then in 1939 James Joyce's published *Finnegans Wake*. In this work Joyce creates a special language to express the consciousness of a character who is dreaming.<sup>[32]</sup>

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