



An overview of History, Novel and Historical Novel in English Literature

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ABSTRACT

Many of people read fiction for joy, but a few of them float particularly to works about the past. People have enjoyed historical fiction since 800 BC, when Homer wrote about the Trojan War in the Iliad. The words to which historical fiction carries us may seem utterly different from our own - but they really existed. A deep understanding of the past can help us understand our own time and our own motivations better. And by blending history and fiction, a novel lets us do more than simply read history: it lets us participate in the hopes, fears, passions, mistakes and triumphs of the people who lived it. ("People read fiction for joy," 2015). History and literature have always found proximity with each other, until it got separated after Rankean positivist research methodology for history in 19th century. But after the coming of postmodernism by 1960s and its formal introduction by 1980s, history and literature have started working hand in hand again, with new development in the form of historical novels. Many of the postmodernist literature refer historical documents, re-reading the sources in order to develop theories and stories around the facts, giving birth to multiple theories to attract readers as well as to make subjectivity feasible in reading the text, unlike what was postulated by Ranke.

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Introduction

This article looks into what exactly is history, and how it's been asserted with different meanings separately by many writers such as the positivists Leopold Von Ranke, or the narrativist like Collingwood. It also looks into how literature and history were always seen together as one discipline before Ranke came up with his modern source-based research in history. To bring a connection to how the historical novel came up, the coming up of the novel, which is traced back to Industrial England will be discussed here. As per Brian McHale before the coming of the post-modernist, there were classicist novelists, who dealt with writing historical novels, but they had the tendency to stick to the principle of not distorting the facts or contradicting any official historical facts recorded in the past (McHale, 2003). In other words they could use only those incidents or events that might have happen that the documents did not record. But with the coming of the postmodernist, this changed drastically. Records were used and transgressed in order to weave fictions around it, making it more fictitious than ever (McHale, 2003). Thus while the classicist aimed to avoid anachronisms and contradictions, the postmodernist seek for this and publicly transgress and show that they distort the facts in order to produce a more aesthetic one.

Discussion

What exactly does "history" constitute has been a debate over the years, dating back to its etymological derivation from the Greek word ἱστορία, meaning inquiry of the past, or inquiry of any written account and narratives, based on scientific observation (Henry George Liddell, n.d.; Romm & Herodotus, 2014). History as propounded by Herodotus involves the methodological approach of studying the past chronologically and systematically (Romm & Herodotus, 2014; Strassler, 2009). With the onset of modernity and postulations by many positivists (Objectivist), narrativists (subjectivist), etc. different thoughts came up with what history constitutes. Leopold Von Ranke, who started the modern source-based research in history in the 19th

century, took a positivist stand and stated that history is considered as highly objective which can be written and understood only through scientific method. For Ranke, history is all about objective research, where importance is given to processing the data by understanding the inner coherence of the text and by being rhetorical in systematizing the thoughts and writings of the past, so that the facts does not get distorted. In contrast to Rankean positivism, E. H. Carr in his book, *What is History?*, brings out that history is subjective; that no absolute facts can be constructed without using theoretical perspectives, and that past can be enacted by using the relativity approach. This meant there is absoluteness in history apart from the facts, and that all existence are related through historians subjective construction (Carr, 2008; Ghosh, 2013, p. 26). His thoughts aligned with that of Croce, who declared that "all history is contemporary history" (Benedetto Croce, 1949, p. 19), meaning that, what happened in the past can be viewed through the eyes of the present. He influenced such narrativist historian Collingwood, who views history as stories that comes out from historian's thoughts, which has been re-constructed and re-enacted in their mind (Collingwood, 2014). His views were later shared by 21st century historian Michael Oakeshott who viewed the existence of „past and history“ as being made by historians themselves, since historians have the capacity to make history as they wish (Oakeshott, 2014). Their views on how history can be constructed by historians gave birth to post modernists stand on subjectivity, narratology and most importantly metafiction, as seen in the previous chapter, where history gets embroiled with fiction novels.

Usage of the term 'novel' is derived from the French word, 'Novella', meaning "new" (Britannica, n.d.). This in a way means that the new form of writing is a new literary development. Many however have questioned as to whether the new development of the late 18th century writings that started in England constitutes a new literary form (MacKay, 2010). This has been answered by historians of novels stating that the new

development was marked by the characteristic feature of 'narrative realism', which were not seen among the previous fiction writers. Early novelists before industrialism sets in can be traced to such prominent figures as Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) and Henry Fielding (1707–1754) (MacKay, 2010).

The most acceptable theory on when modern novel started to take readers, can be traced to Ian P. Watt's assertion that, it developed during the industrial revolution in 18th century in England (Watt, 2001). Technologies allowed print culture to become popular, since transmission became easier and portability nature of the printed book made. Rise in technology along with capitalism also gained more audience among readers in the form of middle class and women. The rise in individualism and capitalism led to the breakdown of the rigid rule of the church where reading and writing mostly pertained to the clergies till then (MacKay, 2010; Watt, 2001). This meant expansion of writing beyond the divinely sanctioned writings, and engaging in new secular thoughts that gained more audience (readers) than ever before. Important development among these audiences were women, who started to demand for longer stories as industrialization confined many of them off at home, and spare hours at home made them to engage in reading, making novels grow rapidly (MacKay, 2010; Watt, 2001). In fact, novels of the late 19th century had become so rampant, especially in Victorian England, that Anthony Trollope declared, "Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last appointed scullery maid. We have them in our library, our drawing-rooms, our bedrooms, our kitchens – and in our nurseries" (David, 2012, p. 1). This was the age when narrative realism contextualizing the social, political and economic conditions found favoritism in the work of Jane Austen (1775–1817), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), etc. that ultimately led to boom in novel production.

Fiction writings in 18th and 19th centuries also went hand in hand with the development of a different genre of writing, in the form of the historical novel. This was a genre where fiction stories are written against the backdrop of historical facts, or by contextualizing historical incidents. The Marxist literary theorist Georg Lukács argues that the origin of such writings, argues, can be attributed to the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), who was a Scottish playwright, poet and historical novelist (Lukács & Lukács, 1971). He was brought up in the border areas, which often made him to engage in writing stories and fights that happen in the border region. His novel *Waverly* (1814), which was produced in 1814, has been regarded as the first historical novel, followed by *Guy Mannering* (1815) and *The Antiquary* (1816) that covers the Scottish history of the 18th century (Groot, 2009; Scott, 1823, 1833, 1855). By 19th century, there were historical novelists like Charles Dickens, who best painted the condition of Industrial England in his famous novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837). He also showed the political and social turmoil of the 18th century France in his *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Although historical novel was consistent developed, it was a marginalized genre of writing until it was popularized after the two great Wars. It became more popular with the onset of postmodernist in 1980s (Groot, 2009). One such popularity is due to the fact that many trending subject matter could be written based on the devastating wars. With the audience finding delight and knowledge in fiction woven around historical facts (McGarry & White, 2012), many, mainly the post modernists started to branch out combining facts with fiction, known as metafiction, to different subject matter types like romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic,

postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, and children's books (Groot, 2009). Readers started to engage in reading the facts, while at the same time enjoying the stories in the historical novels. Thus, post modernists re-construct history more in the lines of Carl Becker said as „the facts of history do not exist for any historians, until history creates them” (Carl L. Becker, 1968, p. 12). They re-enact facts with fictions, and indulge themselves in myth making. The closeness between history and fiction is quite understandable, since before the rise of Ranke's scientific interpretation to follow the source based research in history, literature and history were of the same branch, helping each other in interpretation and providing guidance to people (McKeon, 2000). In fact, Ranke himself has turned to Scott's novels before he came up with his scientific research method (McGarry & White, 2012).

The importance of historical novel has made many universities and academia institute to increasingly study this genre. With such introduction, continued research and writings, many types of historical writings have come up within the numerous fictional locales, like "romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, children's books"(Groot, 2009, pp. 1898, 1899). Keeping these types of fiction making in purview, historical novel brings out subjectivism and narrativism, in congruence to the thoughts of narrativists like Collingwood or Hayden White, who advocated that history is what historians construct it as they can. Historical novelists, especially the postmodernists attract complexities in novel making, but attract hoards of dynamic audiences, and many have found their writings to be concerned with social issues and movements. Historical novelists have also been responsible for coming up with new ideologies like the deconstructivist policies to voice for the marginalized such as lesbians and gay, with many author rallying for the same to oppose against the forced heterosexuals (Groot, 2009).

Postmodernist novels engage in refashioning and remodeling the old feature these popular historical novels" genre. Sir Walter Scott and Leo Tolstoy's writing were among the important historical novelists, who marked the trend for historical novels before the postmodernist historical novels set in (Elias, 1995). The literary adaptation of historical materials is conventionally regarded as the province of the historical novel, ever since Sir Walter Scott endowed this genre with a clearly recognizable and widely imitated shape (Wesseling, 1991). Theoretically, post modernists historical novels refers to those writings that exudes the characteristic features of historiographic metafiction (Elias, 1995). Postmodernist historical novels bring out the boundaries between real and unreal, and facts and fictions of that many traditional historians seeks to cover up (Elias, 1995).

In the rising postmodernist historical novels, the feature was different from the historical novel. It took the form of creating spatialization in history, so as to interrogate the factual past by decentering the formal narratives of the historical novel genre (Elias, 1995). This spatialization shows as to how postmodernist historical novels reconstruct history, and how this trend "attack the notion that linear *narrative* is the mimetic counterpart to linear, progressive *history* (and hence attack the validity of traditional representation of history)" (Elias, 1995, p. 110).

The postmodernist historical novel challenges the historical record and subverts political myths. It displays history as an open case, where construction and reconstruction of the history can take place (Elias, 1995). This would mean problematizing the question of representing time and space in literary culture.

The very nature of this problematization owns it to textualization of history that allows the representation of the same (Elias, 1995). Such examples of textualization can be found in the work of Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* (Elias, 1995).

Conclusion

The question of what history is, and what history rise to novel and historical novel have also been reviewed here. The question of what is history has been synthesized with Rankean positivism and Collingwood's narrativism, while the rise of novel and historical novel has been traced to rise of industrialization and postmodernism respectively. With the studies of rise in historical novels, the different terminologies and approaches used to study them have also been analyzed here.

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