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FOUR WHEELS OF THE CHARIOT: THE ENGLISH NOVEL FROM RICHARDSON TO
LAURENCE STERNE

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ABSTRACT

The 18th century in English literature is an age of prose, not because the poetry is lackluster, but because prose predominates. Some outstanding socio-economic conditions helped to give prose this dominating position. The importance of prose becomes clear enough when we recollect that it includes among many other things possibly the best novel in the language (Richardson's *Pamela*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Smollett's *Roderick Random*, and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*). The simplest prose is found chiefly in the works of these novelists. Apart from all this, the novelist's art is a great one, touching life everywhere, and using not only description, but the novelist's gift of dialogue. It is the form in literature which has explored most fully the life of the ordinary man, and found it worthy of portrayal. The paper intends to study the varied aspects of the English novel in the Eighteenth century and its relevance.

Keywords: Eighteenth Century, Novel, Tom Jones, Pamela, Sterne, Samuel Richardson

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Introduction

English writers of the Eighteenth century, then, had a background the whole experience of continental Europe. The classical literature of Greece and Rome, the cycles of romance, pastoral literature, the picaresque tale of adventure, the interest in human character portrayed through the ana, all these elements and others held in solution the material which was eventually to crystallize suite the English novel. In addition to these beginnings from Europe, the English novelists had native parallels of their own - the Arthurian materials, the *Euphues* of Lyly (1579), the *Arcadia* of Sir Philip Sidney, the narrative interest in Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590), the extended narrative of moral significance in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-1684) and so on. Nevertheless, the first full-fledged English novel appeared as late as 1740, close upon in course of events. To some extent, the puritan spirit, hostile to the theatre, had indirectly helped in creating public taste for novels. Notwithstanding, eighteenth century experienced a sudden blossom of novel in the works of the so called 'four wheels' of English prose fiction: Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), Henry Fielding (1707-1754), Tobias Smollett (1721-1771), and Laurence Sterne (1713-1768).

Since the 18th century the success of the novel is alarming. In the "Circulating Libraries" it is the most media of Literature. "Apart from all this," says Sir Ifor Evans in his *Short History of English Literature*, "the

novelist's art is a great one, touching life everywhere, and using not only description but the dramatist's gift of dialogue. It is the form of literature which has explored most fully the life of the common man, and found it worthy of portrayal. It may be noted that the true novel is a story wrought round human passions, in varied aspects, to a tragic or joyous conclusions. With these narrative qualities then already rooted in various types of English and European writing, with the actual novel flourishing in France, the ground was fertile, tilled, and of course seeded when Samuel Richardson, (1689-1761) issued his *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* in 1740, the first officially avowed English novelist, was a book-seller and printer of fifty, sometimes referred to as the 'Father of English Novel'. His novels have been affected on account of their self-satisfied and calculating middle class morality.

Richardson initiated his career as a novelist with the publication of *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) which is considered as, "a new species of writing". The book, which takes the form of a series of letters, deals with the destiny of Pamela, a penniless and pious maid, who undergoes, then at last married and afterwards rectified her venomous master. However, *Pamela* is the first example of what may be called the modern English novel of character. Richardson's following book was *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-48) which settled him on apex of honour and nobility. This is a veritable tragedy, with a heroine of more homage and culture than Pamela. In *Clarissa Harlowe*, the story is told also by means of letters. Unlike *Pamela*, the letters here are written by others as well as by the heroine Clarissa, young lady of good family. Hence, she flings herself desperately on the seductive Lovelace. Richardson's third and last novel, also in letter-form, was *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54), another epistolary novel, conducting mainly with persons still higher in the social world. Richardson's works are largely the reflection of the man himself, and, in spite of their faults and limitations, are of immense importance in the development of the novel. The strength of Richardson lay "in the knowledge of the human heart, in the delineation of the shades of sentiment, as they shift and change, and the cross-purposes which trouble the mind moved by emotion.

Henry Fielding (1707-1754) is regarded as one of the greatest artists among English novelists of the eighteenth century and was instrumental in the emergence of the novel as a respected literary form. He was, basically, noted for his five chef D'oeuvre novel: *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *A Journey from this World to the Next* (1743), *Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743) *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Amelia* (1751). *Jonathan Wild* is the biography of the renowned thief and 'thief-taker' who was hanged at Newgate. The story is one long ironical comment upon human action. His another chef D'oeuvre *Tom Jones* (1749), accomplishes and resolves his contribution and proved extremely daring in its defiance of conventional moralities. Indisputably, one of the greatest picaresque novels in English literary history. In *Amelia*, his last novel, there is a touching account of a virtuous woman's attempt to save her misdirected husband. This is much more compact novel, much more tightly woven than Tom Jones.

It may be noted that Fielding had a brilliance for plangent the emotions of the human heart. In his novels Fielding deals with illimitable extent of life that comprises lofty appreciation of the complexities of social life and human ambitions. Doubtlessly, Fielding is the real father of the English novel. His works proclaim all the indispensable features of successful novel.

Of the major 18th century novelists and satirists, the British author and physician Tobias George Smollett (1721-1771) is most clearly identified with the picaresque tradition of novel writing. He is regarded as the third of the 'four wheels' of the eighteenth century English novel. He was a scotch doctor, has to his homage five significant novels: *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), *The Adventures of Ferdinand, Count Fathom* (1753), *The Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762) and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). Smollett's first novel *Roderick Random*, published in 1748, is regarded his first-rate work. This portrays the indisciplined, reckless life of a Scot of a high birth. In this novel Smollett seems to follow the outlines of his own life, and from this angle the novel has an autobiographical rapport. *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), admittedly, is less impressive than the earlier novel. The hero is a retired naval officer who thinks, feels, talks and behaves wholly in terms of his own profession. He is also a miscreant, conducting a boisterous life. He, however, ultimately settles to a quiet, orderly life after his marriage with a virtuous lady. However, as a picaresque novel it has a rush of action, and vigour of description, but characters are hardly well-developed.

Smollett's lattermost novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771) is in the form of a letters. The novel narrates a tour of England and Scotland by five persons, and their letters, written from different angles and with different attitudes and manners. However, Smollett's works are individualized as picaresque novels and his novels draws up a queer world of sensational adventures and passionate people and his novels bear the tradition of the conventional and lurid fiction.

The eighteenth century was a period when the modern novel emerged through the work of writers such as Lawrence Sterne (1713-1768), Richardson, Defoe, Fielding and Johnson. However, the writing of Sterne is recognised as influencing modern writing from Joyce and Woolf onwards more than any of the other eighteenth century novelists. His novels are bit different from the other conventional novels of the age and sufficiently reveal his originality and singularity as a novelist. His chef D'oeuvre includes *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, published in nine volumes between 1759 and 1767, is a massive and commemorative work. It struts a new notion of the form of fiction. His second novel, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), is also a well-read work. It also breathes the originality of his art of story-telling. Sterne, as exposed, supposes somewhat different from other novelists. His plot is rather unfastened and compound, and not organic or compact, like Richardson's or Fielding's.

Conclusion

To sum up, there were attempts to write novel but those attempts were not as much successful perhaps due to the elements of the work and the style of the work but Defoe and other novelists with the help of reading public, the rise of the middle-class, printing as well as travelling made the emergence of the novel successful. No doubt, the rise of the novel has developed because of the existence of the romance and picaresque novels. Summing up the contribution of the four wheels of the novel, Rickett states: "Richardson has given sentimentality, Fielding humour and, Smollett liveliness."

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