# Archetypal Genre

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## Abstract

This essay follows the development of the novel as it goes through its many different stages in an attempt to redefine itself. By tracing the progress of this medium through archetypal manifestations that best represent it, the essay takes us from the origins of the realist novel, to the scientific innovations that raised the need for the emergence of modernism and its three-dimensional view of reality, and to the postmodern experiment. It will be seen that Science Fiction was selected as the literary genre that best represents our current reality because of its philosophical quest for the search of what is human combined with the technological progress that characterizes modernity. By analyzing key exponents of each literary movement, the essay will try to show the connection of culture, science, and worldviews that exists behind every literary genre.

**Keywords:** Literary Theory, Philosophy, Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Science Fiction

## Essay

The novel became the dominant genre of fiction from the eighteenth century onwards, adopting a chosen literary genre to best represent itself and the society for which it was a mirror. The history of the novel is an unofficial history of humanity's developments in the sciences, psychology, and sociology. It is a mirror through which we can study the depth of history from a perspective beyond the blunt chronology of dates and linear events. This essay aims to show how the predominant literary genre of a period reflects the scientific innovations of the time, as well as the dominant system of thought concerning how we perceive reality, time, and the self. Since the beginning of the novel, the question of "how to translate knowing into telling" (White 1990, 5) was an issue of monumental importance whose solutions reflect each writer's philosophy and style.

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As "the novel is the only developing genre" (Bakhtin, cited in McKeon, 324), the process of reflecting and capturing "reality itself in the process of unfolding" (ibid) was more accessible to it than to any other written mediums. From the Renaissance onwards there was a need to redefine reality through individual experience, and to let go of the collective mentality of the Middle Ages. This redefinition was congruent with the philosophical advancements of the eighteenth century. Key philosophical texts like those of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* laid the basis for the formulation of the individual and the self. As a result, characters in a novel "can only be individualized if they are set in a background of particularized time and space" (Watt 2015, 2). The novel became the experimenting ground to define what the individual was and how best to describe them three-dimensionally.

During its rise, the novel adopted "'Realism' as the literary mode of choice" (Watt 1999, 8); Realism lies in the way reality is presented using our senses. It has close connections with the writing of Locke, Descartes' determination "to accept nothing on trust" (ibid, 12), and Defoe's "primacy of the individual experience in the novel" (ibid, 12). Starting with Realism we see literature go towards the 'low mimetic' mode of representation as presented by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*. The hero is a normal human being like any of us, just "one step more heroic than the ironic" (Frye 2020, 125). It is important to remember that the word 'realistic' is used to illustrate a tendency in the novel and fiction in general, and it would be erroneous to use it as an adjective.

Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* is a perfect example of Realism in a novel that illustrates some of the conventions mentioned above. We read a story placed in a certain time, in a set place, developed through the memories of its characters, as is common with the development of the Realist novel. Differently from previous stories in which the setting was mostly left unspecified, Bennett gives a detailed description of the setting for the start of the story:

> The Park rose in terraces from the railway station to a street of small villas almost on
> the ridge of the hill. From its gilded gate, to its smallest geranium-slips it was brand
> new, and most of it was red. The keeper's house, the bandstand, the kiosks, the
> balustrades, the shelters – all these assailed the eye with a uniform redness of the

> brick and tile which nullified the pallid greens of the turf and the frail trees. The
> immense crowd, in order to circulate, moved along the tight processions, inspecting
> one after the other the various features of which they had read full descriptions in the
> "Staffordshire Signal" (Bennet 2009, 11).

Here we notice a "'particularity of description' or 'realistic particularity'" (Watt 1999, 16) that is characteristic of the Realist novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This Particularity, according to Ian Watt, is one of the innovatory aspects of the novel that "reflects the philosophical shift" (ibid) of the period. Another important feature that comes out from this passage is highlighted in the extract's characteristic of being a description of a description that the people read in the newspaper, the "Staffordshire Signal". From this, we can deduce the increasing importance that the printing press had on writing, and the new dimensions that the novel was addressing "simultaneously represented and representing" (Bakhtin, cited in McKeon, 332).

The realist novel was not called as such only because it was realistic. If it merely "saw life from the seamy side, it would be an inverted romance" (Watt 1999, 10). The novel in its emergent form has some common elements that form its basic canons: attention to backgrounds and a plot established through the memories of the characters like mentioned previously, followed by the increased importance of the "individual mind under the impact of temporal flux…[or] the development of its characters in the course of time" (ibid, 21), the central role of this newly defined character not only in his/her life but in the bigger picture of events, hence leading to new importance attributed to categories of "space" and "time". Another key component of the novel is expressed through "an authentic account of the actual experiences of the individual" (ibid, 26) given in language, as can be seen in the following passage from *Anna of the Five Towns*. These particularities form the cornerstone of this new developing genre:

> 'There's nobbut one point, Mr Mynors,' Tellwright said bluntly, 'and that's the
> interest on th' capital, as must be deduced before reckoning profits. Us must have six
> per cent.'
>
> 'But I thought we had settled it at five,' said Mynors with sudden firmness.
>
> 'We'n settled as you shall have five on your fifteen hundred,' the miser replied with
> imperturbable audacity, 'but us mun have our six.' (Bennett 2016, 65)

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In this passage, we can distinguish clearly between the persons speaking by their accent. This characterization and attention to detail are particular to the novel. Tellwright's accent shows a lack of proper education, his place of origin, and through it, we can construct a mental image of him more easily and accurately than if this detail had just been described to us. Here we can also see the importance attributed to names. "The problem of individual identity is closely related to the epistemological status of proper names; for, in the words of Hobbes: 'proper names bring to mind only one thing; universals bring to mind one of many'" (Watt 1999, 17). In *Anna of the Five Towns* we see various examples of names which have a secondary connotation or implied meaning added to them. Tellwright can be "tell it right" or he who thinks he is often right (Bennett 2016). Mynors is a name that a villain would typically have; hence it is supposedly difficult to sympathize with him. The trend of naming characters who are heroes with local English names, and characters who are antagonists with formal Latin or Greek names has been part of the literary tradition of the novel that reflects the distinction between the group and the "other". We see the same trend continuing up to modern works of fiction such as J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter (1997-2007), where the villains have Latin names such as Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Voldemort, etc.

All these characteristics distinguish the realist novel from previous fiction, reflecting the changes that were happening in the way of thinking due to the change of philosophical and scientific thinking of the time. However, as Bakhtin says, "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is yet uncompleted" (cited in McKeon, 321); hence it was only natural that as the world changed, the novel would change with it. What characterized Realism would soon be not enough to constitute an authentic portrayal of the individual's apprehension of reality. On the contrary, the characteristic traits of Realism seem simplistic and incomplete because as Virginia Woolf stated, "they are not concerned with the spirit but with the body" (2002, 83).

The changes in how the individual perceives reality and his surroundings become more obvious when we notice how the concept of time has changed from Arnold Bennett to Virginia Woolf. In Bennett, characters are placed in a linear temporal dimension, while for Woolf that was not enough to capture the complexity of human nature. The descriptive style, particular to details of Realism lacked 'spirit'. In *To the Lighthouse,* and in Modernist writing in general, we see the introduction of the 'stream of consciousness' or of the ability to be simultaneously in the present,

in the past, and inside the mind of the character. One specific passage in *To the Lighthouse* quintessentially describes the complexity of Modernist writing:

> At the far end was her husband, sitting down, all in a heap, frowning. What at? She did not know. She did not mind. She could not understand how she had felt any emotion or any affection for him. She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy – there – and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it…Lily Briscoe watched her dripping into that strange no-man's land where to follow people is impossible and yet their goings inflict such a chill on those who watch them that they try at least to follow them with their eyes as one follows a fading ship until the sails have sunk behind the horizon (Woolf 2006, 72).

In less than a page, we get a vivid picture of Mrs. Ramsey's outer/physical world versus her inner/spiritual one. The description of Mrs. Ramsey helping with the soup around the table is given simultaneously with her inner world by allowing a glimpse into her thoughts as she performs this. The narrative perspective then shifts to a similar dualistic portrayal from her to Lily. This concept of "simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present" (Anderson, cited in McKeon 2000, 422) is closely connected to the development of science and especially to the emergence of the novel and the newspaper. News travelled faster; people started reading in the newspapers about places they had never been. The perception of reality shifted. The concept of time itself changed due to Einstein's advancements in physics. Throughout the novel, Woolf herself adopts the juxtaposition of events to get a grasp of the passage of time. *To the Lighthouse* can be simplistically reduced to juxtaposing the holiday house when Mrs. Ramsey was alive to the same setting ten years later after her death. What is left is that "Time Passes" (Woolf 2008, 103-117), or as Proust called it, "pure time" (Frank, cited in McKeon 2000, 795).

In Modernism, we see a need for a break with the mimetic tradition of the past. The plot, the characters, and the settings matter, but they are viewed differently. Describing what someone sees or how somebody sees him/her is not enough to compose a realistic, believable character. Woolf was greatly affected by the writing of Freud and Einstein; hence the complexity of their new worldview was mirrored in her writings. The artistic movements of the time also influenced

Woolf's style. In her books we see the "Cubist presentation of all sides of an object 'simultaneously'" (Kelly, cited in Soloman and Sherman 2007, 120) being applied to literature.

After the Second World War, Modernism became unable to convey the changes that the two World Wars had brought, and it started to represent "the stagnant orthodoxies of 'high culture'" (Widdowson 20045, 258). In the pre-World War societies, the world was more clearly stratified; it was easier to distinguish literary genres and their specificities, as well as to adhere to a genre. In comparison with Realism and Modernism, the novel started to move even further down Norton Frye's five modes of mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, and finally ending in the *ironic* mode with heroes "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye 2020, 123).

The postmodernist writer John Barth renders the complexities of Postmodernism as follows:

> After which she resumed her labor and the radio the next musical selection until the next race. This music affected Ambrose strongly: it was not at all of a stripe with what they played on Fitch Bandwagon or National Barn Dance; this between races was classical music, as you should say: the sort upper-graders had to listen in class. Up through the floor of his bedroom came the rumble of tympani and a brooding figure in low strings. Ambrose paused in his dressing to listen and thinking on his late disgrace frowned: the figure stirred a dark companion in his soul. No man at all! His family, shaken past tears, was in attendance at his grave site. (Barth 1978, 38).

Not only do we have to read Barth by reflexive reference and by continuously merging fragments of texts with previous allusions until the final picture is clear, but even then, the image that comes out is closer to a parody or irony. Moreover, it may not always necessarily connect clearly and uniformly with what was before. The passage between reality and fantasy is so subtle that if it is not read carefully, the reader could lose sight of where one ends and the other begins. Hutcheon argues that "it is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past" (Hutcheon, cited in McKeon 2000, 831) and that this confrontation is in itself "contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy" (ibid). Hence the result is a pastiche: a by-product of our

mass-media and capitalist society where nothing is clear cut anymore but a mixture of the "plurality and recognition of difference" (ibid, 838).

Postmodernism contests the previous genres by claiming it is impossible to "know reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language" (ibid, 834). Similarly to Barth's extract on postmodernity in this new genre, as soon as a semblance of order is established through writing, the author 'destroys' it. "Subjectivity, intersexuality, reference, [and] ideology" (ibid) become problematic grounds for the postmodern doubts about approaching reality, and the parody becomes parodied. All these uncertainties mirror a society that is evolving at an incredible pace, and where there are no longer any givens.

In the last twenty years, there has been no great technological or philosophical breakthrough. Science is at a standstill; we live at the time of the "literature of exhaustion" (Barth 1982, 64); philosophy or psychology is not showing any new paths. How we think of ourselves is still an evolving concept but different from what it used to be in Realism, Modernism, or Postmodernism. But even in this literary standstill, humanity will always search for answers. Our current reality and worries can be concretely seen in Philip K. Dick's novel *Ubik* (2017) where the individual remains the centre of the search for truth or for how to approach reality, but the conditions of this search have changed.

A "felt ultimacy from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society" (Barth 1982, 70) is present in most writings today, or alternately "a coherent alternative to this world complete in every respect" (ibid). We pass beyond science taking all the scientific and philosophical developments and hypothetically advancing them through Science Fiction, or otherwise finding an out-of-reality or supernatural means to experiment in what is possible through Fantasy. As one of the representatives of literature today, Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (2017) does an excellent job of summarizing our collective worries. A new world described in the smallest particularities becomes our test field for a new way to approach problems and opportunities not restricted by the laws that govern our world. New worlds like *Ubik's* grant the liberty of mixing genres, of experimenting with concepts, and merging theories or ideas that are difficult to put together otherwise.

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The history of the development of the novel shows how each period in history has a classification that best represents the complex mix of scientific, social, and cultural changes that our society goes through. By going through all the stages of the growth of the novel we see a tendency of the particularities of an era manifesting in an archetypal form in the novel. In Realism the plot, characters, and setting gained a depth never had before. Time started playing a major role in the novel and the search of the individual to comprehend reality. Modernism advanced the research on time, hence giving a quasi-four-dimensional essence to the characters. Postmodernism recognized the immense complexity of the world and believed the only thing left was to parody life. Today the novel is trying to go beyond the physical boundaries of this world in search of a truth not conditioned by ever-changing scientific rules. Literature is the continuous search of the individual of ways how best to represent reality; it is an ever-changing art that mirrors the society's constancy - or inconstancy. John Barth cites John James E. Irby's quotation, "all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators, and annotators of pre-existing archetypes" (Barth 1982, 277), and claims that all writers are therefore also the historians of the subterranean collective history of humanity.

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