The Rise and Evolution of the British Novel

The 18th C novel was, to a large degree, an evolution of the non-fictional prose-writing of the period. Prose fictional works of previous centuries, based on old legends, ancient battles and chivalrous medieval adventures, had little appeal for the new middle-class readers who wished to read about themselves and the world they lived in. Five towering literary figures, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne - molded fictional prose into a literary form that appealed to the 18th C reader. In doing so they created the dominant literary genre of the next three centuries: The modern novel.

Daniel Defoe: started his literary carrier in journalism. He wrote several periodicals and started his own newspaper, The Review, before turning to novel-writing at the age of sixty.

His first novel, Robinson Crusoe (1719), was loosely based on the real-life experience of a shipwrecked sailor, Alexander Selkirk, and was presented as a true story in a diary form told by the hero himself. The fact that it was published as a true story made it more acceptable to middle-class readers, who regarded fiction with suspicion. The hero of the story, Robinson, also had a strong appeal for the new readership as he was a perfect example of the Puritan ideal of a self-made man: an ordinary man who, through hard work and faith in God, overcomes adversity.

Robinson Crusoe is generally regarded as the first novel in English language. Defoe went on to write five more novels, Captain Singleton, Moll Flanders, Colonel Jack, Roxana, Memories of a Cavalier and a pseudo-factual account of London during the great plague entitled A Journal of the Plague Year.

Samuel Richardson: while Defoe showed a little interest in the feelings and thoughts of his characters, Richardson’s contribution to the development of the novel lies in the attention he paid to his characters’ psychological profile.

His most successful novel, Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded (1740), tells the story of a young servant girl who, having resisted the amorous advances of her master, wins his heart and eventually marries him. The novel is composed of letters, mostly written by Pamela, and her personal diary of events. The epistolary novel was already popular in France but Richardson raised it to new heights.
**Henry Fielding:** was the first writer to consciously explore and define the new literary genre. Unlike his predecessors, he made no attempt to disguise his work as fact in the form of memories or letters. He considered the novel to be a ‘comic epic in prose’, dealing not with the heroic actions of the classical epic poems but with the unimportant and preferably humorous events of daily life.

In 1749, he published what many consider to be his masterpiece, *The History of Tom Jones, A Founding*. The novel tells the story of an orphan, Tom Jones, who after many adventures discovers his true identity and marries the lady he loves.

Fielding was the first English novelist to create a well-structured complex plot involving many characters drawn from different social classes. His work is innovative and original and he is generally considered to be the father of the English comic novel.

**Many types of novel flourished since the Romantic period on:**

The picaresque, the epistolary novel, the sentimental novel, the pastoral, novel the historical novel, the gothic novel, the psychological novel, stream of consciousness novel, realistic novel, naturalist novel, impressionist novel, expressionist novel, apprenticeship novel, anti-novel, the novel of manners, regional novel, novel of character, novel of incident, the colonial novel, detective novel, allegorical novel, erotic novel, satirical novel, science fiction novel, best seller novel and structuralist novel…

**Sir Walter Scott:** is generally regarded as the inventor of the historical novel. Like many Romantic writers, Scott stepped back into the past and set his novels in more passionate times. He frequently used well-known historical figures, and gave a complete panorama of the political and social context in which they lived. With *Ivanhoe*, for example Scott went back to the Middle Ages, while his novel *Kenilworth* is set in the Elizabethan England. The two major Romantic elements in Scott’s work are the descriptions of nature and the lives of ordinary people. The historical novel has never lost its popularity.

**Picaresque:** is one of the earliest forms of the novel, generally a chronical, usually autobiographical, presenting of the life story of the adventures of a rascal of a low degree, who makes a living more by his wits than by his industry. E.g. Defoe’s
Moll Flanders, Fielding’s Jonathan Wild the Great and Tom Jones and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn...

**Gothic novel:** the public taste for gothic novel appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century and continued throughout the Romantic period. Gothic novels were based on tales of the fantastic and the supernatural. They were usually set in haunted castles, graveyards, ruins and picturesque landscapes. This type of novel satisfied the Romantic appetite for wild nature settings, the Middle Ages, and unfettered imagination. The greatest Gothic novel of the Romantic period is Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein. The influence of this genre can be seen in the popularity of horror fiction and films.

**The novel of manners:** it was developed by the great Romantic writer Jane Austen. Its major concern is to present the customs, conventions, manners, and habits of a definite social class at a particular time and place. Characterization and plot are very important. Works by Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, and Evelyn Waugh exemplify this type of novel.

**Works Cited:**