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# Henry James and the Heightening of the Illusion of Reality in the Novel Form

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**Abstract**
The argument as to whether the serious idea of the novel appealed to no one among the English novelists before Henry James ventured into the novel form is a familiar one in the development of the novel as an art form. The received impression in a number of literary circles at the time James came into the scene was that the novelists before him were mere chroniclers who paid no attention to technical innovations that truly make a novel pass for a serious work of art. Indeed, the orthodox narrative was believed to be damagingly preoccupied with carefully developed illusion of sequentiality and formal characterization. In the light of this, James came to be widely believed to be the first English novelist who took the novel form seriously. This paper delves into this argument with a view to establishing its veracity or otherwise. It pays detailed attention to the innovations that James introduced to the novel form and juxtaposes them with what prevailed before him. The paper considers the difference between the ways the innovators represented by James told their story and how the earlier novelists like Daniel Defoe told theirs. However, while crediting James with a number of technical innovations that took the novel form to a new height, the paper recognizes at the same time that the novelists before James operated according to the dictates of the mode in their age and time and cannot therefore be dismissed as unskilled artists.
**Keywords:** Illusion, Reality, Innovation, Serious, Form, Unskilled

## Introduction

The novel form before Henry James received adverse criticism from literary critics. Such early novels have primarily been accused of being too preoccupied with just the story not the way it is told. The novelists have been packaged as unconscious artists who were negligent of form. To the critics, the concern of these novelists rested on the hackneyed question of illusion of sequentiality and formal characterization in story-telling. The charge against early novelistic form was their predictable and simplistic chronology.

With the coming, therefore, of Henry james, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, the prevailing mood in the literary climate at the time easily conferred on them the tag of 'innovators'. Henry James was the leader of this group. Influenced by his French background, especially by Gustave Flaubert, James took the English novel form by storm. He was disturbed by the feeling that earlier writers of the novel were negligent of form and that their artistry (if they had any), was third rate. The English novel, he further posited, was shapeless, flabby and wobbly. In alliance with Conrad and Ford therefore, James set out to experiment and to innovate. The mission was to elevate the art of the novel

The innovators were particularly worried by the way stories in the early novels were told. Such stories, they felt, were not taken very seriously. Thus, part of the concern of the innovators rested on the heightening of the illusion of reality. Its overall impact lies in the way it moves the author's narration out of the ordinary and the familiar by elevating the way the story is told.

To the innovators, authorial intrusion militates against reality. They felt that the story should tell itself. The author's voice should not be heard. They were poised to achieve direct communication with the audience as was the case in drama. It was innovations such as these that caught the attention of a number of literary

critics. Consequently, some of them came to the conclusion that James and the other innovators had achieved what no other English novelist before them was able to achieve.
The way this debate affects the perception of the English novel before and after Henry James is what this paper explores.

**Theoretical Framework**

The foregoing background to the study establishes one thing that is that the concern of the modern novelist is to deal with the novel as a serious art form. This quest lies heavily in infusing form into the novel. Form, as conceived by modern writers, elevates the way the story is told. To do justice to this study therefore, we will rely on those literary tools that point in the direction of form. What is adopted here, for purposes of elucidation, is the analytical tool known as Russian Formalism. Our overall objective in doing this is to explore what is specifically literary in the concept of the novel.

As a significant part of the modernist movement, Russian Formalism takes the modernist aesthetic and epistemology to heart and therefore rejects the limp spirituality of Romantic poetics in favour of a detailed and empirical approach to reading. Its concern is to analyse literature not by its natural or identifiable or representational content, but consistently by its form. It is interested in how a text is constructed and how it functions so as to have meaning in the first place. The emphasis on form as an approach to literary criticism aims at an understanding of the work's interior patterning. Formalism, in the broadest sense, views literature as a complex system of forms that may be analysed in relation to one another at different levels. Indeed, the formalists adopted a deliberately mechanistic view of poetry and other literary art as the products of craft.

The impulse of literary formalism can be seen most clearly in Viktor Shklovsky's emphasis on literary "device" (Davis & Schleifer 20). For him, what may appear as "content" needs to be

considered as "device" or any operation in language that promotes "defamiliarization". Shklovsky's argument is that since language is a medium of communication before it is used in art, its expressions and conventions inevitably will be overtly familiar to the reader and too feeble to have a fresh or significant impact in the text.

To be made new then, such language has to be "defamiliarized" and "made strange" through linguistic displacement, which means deploying language in an unusual context or effecting its presentation in a novel way. Rhyme, rhythm, metaphors, conceits and so on, Shklovsky noted, can be used to defamiliarise language and to awaken readers to the intricacy and texture of verbal structure. For Shklovsky then, literature is "the sum total of all stylistic devices employed in it" (Selden 8).

Consider this: how can form achieve itself without content? And if we suspend consideration of the context of the content, shall we be able to represent the whole purpose of the work itself?

**Literature Review**

In order to situate this study properly, it is important to carry out a survey of some of the critical perspectives offered by scholars on the novel form. Through this exercise, we will better be able to situate the efforts of the innovators in elevating the art form.

Like Poetry and Drama before it, the advent of Fiction as a literary genre was heralded by diverse perspectives by literary artists and critics. Whereas poetry is, more or less, a speaking picture which conjures images that the reader can readily connect with, drama speaks even more directly to its audiences with its practical demonstrability. However, fiction differs radically from these earlier genres. It is an art form that relies heavily on illusion and imagination.

One of the earliest authorities who espoused on fiction is Percy Lubbock. According to him, a novel opens a new world to the imagination and it is a world which creates an illusion. He holds that "the criticism of fiction is founded upon its object." (Lubbock 5). For him as well, criticism of fiction demands that we bring into the reading of a book certain imaginative faculties- faculties that enable us to complete in our minds the people and scenes the novelist describes so as to give those dimensions, see round them and make them real. These faculties have to be combined with a trained taste and a sense of quality for criticism of fiction to succeed. (Lubbock 9).

If the novel is a picture of life and if we use our taste to judge whether it is true, vivid and convincing, like life in fact, why is this of interest since formalist criticism does not aspire to refer to that life whether imagined or real? A good novel, Lubbock posits, is a picture, and portrait and form. Design and composition are to be sought in it as in any other work of art.

For him as well, shape is ascribable to a book, whether good or bad. The form of a book shows what it is. He says: "If the form is to the eye imperfect, it means that the subject is somehow and somewhere imperfectly expressed, it means that the story has suffered."(Lubbock 24). The best form for him is that which makes the most of its subject. The well-made book, he says, is one "in which the subject and the form coincide and are indistinguishable- the book in which the matter is all used up in the form, in which the form expresses all the matter." (Lubbock 40). The form depends on the subject. If the subject is not known, then nothing can be said about form. It is subject that gives shape to a novel. Is this not where formalist criticism falters? If the subject is in fact what the novel is all about, why is it not proper to look at the historicity of the text and why pretend that the author is not part of that historicity?.

Another critic who made significant contributions to the development of the novel form is Edward Morgan Forster. In his book, *Aspects of the Novel,* Forster delves into the various elements that constitute the novel. These include story, plot, character and characterization, pattern and the rhythm of the narration, among others. His aim is to clarify the complexities of the novel form. He also discusses the nuances that define a successful story telling.

For Forster, the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story telling without which the novel could not exist. He defines story as a narrative of events arranged in time sequence (Forster 44).
He makes a distinction between story and plot. Like story, he also sees plot as a narrative of events, only that its emphasis is on causality. In plot as well, time sequence is preserved but the sense of causality overshadows it (Forster 130). Whereas story may form the basis of plot, plot itself is an organism of a higher type. The story, he says, transforms us from readers to listeners. As he put it, "the story is primitive, it reaches back to the origins of literature, before reading was discovered, and it appeals to what is primitive in us" (Forster 66).

Forster itemizes the role played by each of the aspects in the formation of the novel. Story appeals to our curiosity; plot to our intelligence; while pattern appeals to our aesthetic sense. Pattern, he further says, causes us to see the book as a whole (Forster 215).
Another element which Forster believes should be found in a novel is what he calls rhythm. He sees rhythm as a modernist enrichment of a linear plot. Forster identifies two types of rhythm: there is this one you can hear and beat to it like a drum. The other you can hear but cannot beat to it as in the first. Forster sayings, can be found in some novels. Where it is found, the novel acquires beauty.

He sees rhythm further as a kind of internal stitching which makes a book hang together. It can develop and have a life of its own.

There are times when rhythm means everything to the reader. At other times, it means nothing to him and is forgotten. Forster sees this as the function of rhythm in fiction. It does not have to be there all the time like pattern. Instead, it by "its lovely waxing and waning" (Forster 154), fills us with "surprise and freshness and hope" (Forster 155).

W.B. Yeats identifies pattern and rhythm as the road to open symbolism. Thus, beyond the espousals of Lubbock and Forster on the novel form, the symbolist movement made useful contributions to the idea of the novel. It started in France in 1850 and flowered up to 1920. It is a new art form brought about by the temper of modernism. The modern age introduces a great divide between the past and the present; between art now and art before. According to Yeats, "The arts have already become full of pattern and rhythm. Subject pictures no longer interest us, while pictures with patterns and rhythms of colour … interest us extremely" (Yeats 283).

Symbolism has come to be a major criterion for literary value in the sense developed by modern writers. It was for this reason that Ursula Brumm remarks that "we live in the age of symbolism in literature" (Brumm 354).

In the view of Robert Scholes, symbolism is the use in fictional design of an object to acquire metaphorical value that points in the direction of meaning. When this is the case, the object becomes a symbol (Scholes 39).

For Lynn Alternbernd, symbolic fiction may deal with "unusual, improbable, or even impossible events and appearances" (Alternbernd 75). It represents abstract ideas. Yet, William York Tindall sees it as "the outward sign of an inward state" (Tindall 337). It is an exact reference to something indefinite. It carries with it some elements of residual mystery that escape our intellects.

**Henry James's Innovations**

The foregoing was the climate of idea in which Henry James set out to write. To achieve his avowed objective, James devices a form of narration in which the story is told from the point of view of the main character. This device is the unshifting single point of view (Lubbock 251). The character here is regarded as main because we see the events and characters in the story through his eyes. The way the events affect the other characters is seen through him. The point of view therefore does not shift.

In adopting this form of narration, what James has done is that he establishes a middle ground between the third and first person narrations. The third person narration makes a lot of room for authorial intrusion. In it, the author's point of view is paramount. The first person narration, on its part, is highly subjective. In it, the point of view is that of the protagonist, and this, James believes, leads to the rank fluidity of the story. It is in this bid to avoid the lapses of both forms of narration that James establishes a situation where the story is annotated by the third person. Here, the author is reduced to just a mere recorder. His thoughts and feelings are hidden. The focus, instead, rests on the sensibility and thoughts of the main character. This main character is the lucid reflector. Through him, the events and other characters in the novel are reflected as on the mirror. His reflections are clear and do not colour things.

Another technical innovation of James is the device known as the Central Intelligence (Ziegler 229). The Central Intelligence is the main issue of the story. It is the main motivator of the action to which everybody reacts. It is the touchstone of the characters' sensibilities. In this device, the events and characters in a novel are not just there for their own sake. They are there for the sake of their own values and these values rest on the way they are used to portrary the sensibility of the main character or the lucid reflector. In this device, the illusion of reality is heightened since attention is

concentrated on the main character and the way he sees things. Other characters are just there to illuminate the main character.

The use of the Central Intelligence technique is amply demonstrated in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew.* In this novel, Maisie is the lucid reflector. Her mother is involved in a series of unsuccessful marriages. The characters of these men in her mother's life and the way they affect Maisie's character and sensibility constitute the Central Intelligence. The way they affect her mother is only important in the way they affect Maisie.

On the technique of the lucid reflector, it is best illustrated by the character of Strether in James's *The Ambassadors.* Here, everything comes alive through Strether's consciousness. In James's scheme therefore, there is the belief that the story moves from external action to internal action. In James' art, the physical action is said to be unimportant. What is important is the mental. The claim was therefore made for Henry James that with him, the novel moved from the outward action to the inward. In James's scheme, the mind of the lucid reflector functions both as the subject of the story and as the object. But can the mind reflect on things that do not happen in the subject? And is the subject not existing in a physical place whether imagined or real? And do all these not constitute the reality of the subject and not only a mental reality? James's concern is with effects and impressions.

The dramatic method of story-telling is another of James's technical innovations (Lubbock 45). This, again, is exemplified by Strether in *The Ambassadors.* In the novel, the mind of Strether is dramatized, reflecting the life to which it is opposed, but at the same time performing its own peculiar and private life. Neither the author nor Strether tells the story of Strether's mind. The author makes it tell itself. Is Strether different from his mind? If so to what extent?. He is a luminous painter of the world in which he moves. This dramatic method of storytelling is very important in

understanding point of view which, with James, turned out to be one of the most important aspects of the novel.

To understand James is to know the point of view of his novel. As we noted earlier in *The Ambassadors,* for instance, the author stands aside and lets Strether's thought tell its own story. The point of view established becomes that of the reader, not that of the author or story teller. Everything must be seen from the reader's point of view. This throws open the world of silent thought. With the device, the reader is not told what happens. What the novelist does is that he uses the look and behaviour of thought as the vehicle by which the story is rendered.

Percy Lubbock points to yet another technical innovation brought by Henry James to the English novel form. This is the use of picture and drama by James in discussing his novels. According to Lubbock, James's novels, especially the last ones, are composed in a regular alternation of dramatic dialogue and pictorial description (Lubbock 43). This, he says, brings about relationship between the reader and the author. In one case, the reader faces the story teller and listens to him. In another, he turns towards the story and watches it. The author here, Lubbock says, is an omniscient author and the point of view is his. The author has a universal knowledge of the story and the people in it.

Percy Lubbock actually lent credence to James's claim when he (Lubbock) posited that James was the first writer of fiction "to use all the possibilities of method with intention and thoroughness" (Lubbock 172). To him therefore, James has opened for latter novelists the way to handle an instrument whose capacity has been tested. Lubbock believes that the wide scope of the novel was so little explored before James. But with James, he says, the novel "may now be starting upon a fresh life" (Lubbock 173).

**The Art of the Early Novelists**

From our discussion so far, it must be granted that James actually brought a lot of innovations into the novel form. But will it be correct to assert that before him the serious idea of the novel as an art form appealed to no one among the English novelists? An attempt at answering this question will be our focus for the rest of this essay.

One of the charges levelled against the orthodox novelists upon which James's claim is founded is that the novelists were unconscious artists. By this, it is meant that they were simply propelled along by the sheer force of their story and had nothing at the back of their minds. Will this be true of all the novelists before the arrival of Henry James?

Let us recall that one of the demands that is made of a novelist, any novelist, is the achievement of verisimilitude. Verisimilitude demands that you fictionalize and at the same time make events and characters appear life-like. This can hardly be achieved by accident. It can only be the result of conscious artistry. Let us illustrate with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In writing this novel, Defoe took into consideration the puritan sensibility of his immediate environment. In the novel, Defoe strives towards verisimilitude. He adopts a form of writing that would be acceptable to his immediate audience. This is the autobiographical method. Here, he adopts the first person narration where the main character tells the story while he, the author, merely stands as the editor. The aim is to show that the main character is actually the actor involved in the experiences he is talking about, for if he is not involved, the puritans would recoil in disgust and banish the story as fiction.

By employing the autobiographical method, Defoe was essentially trying to satisfy the social expectations of his time. By the time Defoe wrote, empiricism as a philosophical mode of thinking was

the vogue. As a philosophical outlook, empiricism is interested in the practical demonstrability of things. If anything is demonstrable, it is factual and therefore true. If otherwise, it is false and therefore a sin. This religious outlook was an 18th Century re-enactment of Rene Descartes's "Cogito ego sum" (I think, therefore I am). Defoe wrote to satisfy this prevailing social temperament.

One of the ways through which Defoe realized his aim therefore was to make the experience of Crusoe a personal one. This brings about intimacy and authenticity. It also makes for vividness of details. Crusoe is made to take diaries of events, he talks of how he made fire, and also 'lectures' the reader on navigation and all that appertains to it. This is the origin of realistic detail in the novel. Through this approach, Defoe strips his story of all bits of fictionality, making it look real and true-to-life. In this way, Defoe satisfied not only the puritan spirit, but also the scientific mind. If the novel is seen as a religious allegory in which Crusoe the prodigal suffered for his sins and then repented, we shall be singing a tuneful lullaby for the puritans. And if the novel is seen as a quest for self-realization for economic fulfilment, then the economic man, the mercantilist and the scientific mind are satisfied. The novel is reducible to either or both of these strands. In it, Defoe has united matter and form, and this is very important in literature. The artistic sleight of hand here is obvious, and it is the result of conscious artistry. The artistic achievement of this double effect is remarkable.

We can also use Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* to debunk Henry James's claim. Fielding has an aim in this novel. He is also conscious of his art in it. He is aware that he is doing something new and great. He clearly stated this in the "Preface" to the novel. According to him, he is undertaking a species of writing "hitherto unattempted in our language" (Fielding vii).

In the novel, Fielding parodies Richardson's *Pamela.* Richardson had, in his novel, presented us with a little Pamela Andrews whose avowed aim in his series of letters to her parents was to inculcate religion and morality in so easy and agreeable a manner as shall render them equally delightful and profitable. She is a virtuous girl who rebuffed her mistress's son's love overtures. He marries her eventually and this is seen as the reward for her virtues.

In the "Preface" to the novel, Fielding sees affectation as the only source of the ridiculous. He identifies this affectation not only in *Pamela***,** but also in the excessive way in which people praised it. This arouses his sense of the ridiculous which then finds a vent in burlesque. The beginning of *Joseph Andrews* is therefore a parody of Richardson. In the novel, Joseph Andrews is presented as a caricature of his sister, Pamela Andrews. Fielding however does not go the whole hog in the realization of this aim. He chooses instead, as he stated in the title page of the novel, to present us with "The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his friend Mr. Abraham Adams, written in imitation of the manner of Cervantes, author of Don Quixote".
To realize this set objective, Fielding adopts a style that is in no way ordinary. Because part of his aim was to present the history of the adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of his friend, Mr Abraham Adams, he matches this adventurous tendency with a form of writing that is suited to it. This is the epic form. In the novel, Joseph and Adams are always in trouble, fighting most of the time. Most of the scuffles they engage in are made by Fielding to assume epic dimensions. Fielding is aware of the fact that no work of art can really pass for an epic if there is no battle in it. This explains why he injects a reasonable dose of battles into his story.

On the characters in the novel, Fielding states that "everything is copied from the book of Nature"(Fielding 8), and that all the characters are taken from his own observations and experience. Fielding is therefore reputed to have founded a new species of

writing that is original. A contemporary of his, it is said, stated that before this new series of writing appeared, the world was pestered with Romances and Tales filled with the wildest imagination. Fielding has, in fact, made a conscious attempt to add colour to the novel form. In the face of this remarkable landmark, it will be misleading for anyone to argue that none before James took the novel form seriously.

There is another case that is made against the early novelists upon which James's claim is partly founded. This borders on the plot of the novel. Conscious plotting is said to achieve cause-effect relationship. The argument is that the early novelists did not achieve this. In making this case against them, we should not lose sight of the fact that these novelists operated within the ambits of the available mode in their age and time.

By the time Defoe and Fielding wrote, for instance, the Picaresque motif was the vogue in the novel form. This explains the episodic nature of the plots of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Joseph Andrews.* In them, a series of incidents are loosely strung together. This is so because the main characters in the novels travel from one place to another. In a situation like this, one incident can hardly be an effect or the cause of another. This notwithstanding, it must be granted that there is plot in the novels. At least, each of the series of episodes in either of the aforementioned novels can stand on its own. What brings the incidents together is the ubiquitous presence of Crusoe and Joseph in the series of episodes.

We should also notice that the characters in the two novels are realistically portrayed. They reveal themselves in action and cannot pass for stereotypes. Lady Booby in *Joseph Andrews* is a case in point. She is quite human and we see her with all her frailties and limitations. This is an aspect of realism and if the early novelists achieved it, it is then unfair to accuse them of unserious artistry.

We have been able to establish that *Robinson Crusoe* and *Joseph Andrews* have form and that there is conscious artistry both in their modes of narration and in characterization. We can stretch this further by also using Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* as another case in point. Let us state from the outset that there is form in the novel. This form lies in the various processes of Pip's growth from childhood to adulthood. The form here is both internal and external. The characters are deliberately paired to achieve this effect. No character in the novel is important in his or her own right. They are important only in the way they affect Pip's growth. And we see them through Pip's eyes.

Even the development of the sensibility of a main character as a form of growth is ascribable to Jane Austen. This technique of Henry James makes it possible for the novel to move from outward to inward action. Jane Austen made use of this technique long before James wrote. She is fond of exploring the sensibility of her main character but the method of exploration differs radically. However, Austen does not go deep enough in the exploration of her main characters' sensibility. James deepened it and is being credited for that innovation. But it only makes sense to say that James improved upon a tradition that was laid by Austen.

In *Great Expectations,* there is an inner conflict in the novel that is set in the mind of Pip. It is a test of his moral sense and it underlies his growth process. The starting point of this process is external. The novel started on a note of material expectation and social fulfilment. But as Pip develops both physically and mentally, emphasis is shifted. We end up with a Pip who is morally developed. The development of the story has pattern and this gives it shape. The character tells his own story and this brings about authenticity and verisimilitude. All these bring symmetry and aesthetic beauty which all meet in Pip. The form of the novel lies

here. What could, perhaps, be said is that the process of achieving this form of narration is not very rigorous.

Part of the technical innovations which is ascribed to James is that he is in the habit of writing Prefaces to his novels. But is this new or original to James? We can at least say for sure that Fielding did it before him.

**Conclusion**

What can be said in the final analysis is that Henry James actually brought a lot of technical innovations to bear on the novel form. We have been able to establish some of them. We have also been able to underline the fact that as far as some of those innovations are concerned, James merely improved upon what some of his predecessors had done. It is also clear from the essay that the charge of formlessness and unconscious artistry levelled against the novelists before James is not sustainable. What could be granted is that their level of consciousness and artistry was not as developed as we have it from the time of Henry James onwards. Essentially, both James and the novelists that came before him were masters in their own right. Perhaps what differentiates one from the other is the degree of formal patterning. Henry James, from what we have seen, infused a higher artistic consciousness into the novel form. In all, we can say that there is a case for and against the early novelists before Henry James.

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