

Epistolary novels

Walter Allen opines that the first emergence of novel was with Richardson's 'Pamela' which ended thirty years later with Smollett's 'Humphrey Clinker'. Novel in its beginning took the epistolary form. 'Epistle' means letter and novels written through letters came to be known as epistolary novels. In such novels the whole story is told by means of letters. Samuel Richardson the father of English novel, became a novelist by chance. He was intended for church but due to some family reasons he was sent to London at the age of seventeen to be a printer's apprentice. He proved to be an industrious printer and became the printer of the journals of the 'House of Commons'. Once he was commissioned by two London book sellers to compile a volume of 'Familiar Letters'

which would guide the uneducated in correspondence. The volume was to contain a number to instruct girls who go out in 'service', how to behave and how to avoid the snares laid for their seduction. Richardson remembered a story told to him twenty five years ago of a landowner who tried to seduce his maid who resisted him by all innocent means. This ultimately ended in the landowner's decision to marry her. Out of this womb was born the first epistolary novel. Richardson put aside the 'familiar letters', retained the letter form and wrote his 'Pamela' or 'virtue rewarded'. The novel was an immediate success and many women always circled round him in adoration because they thought him to be "a sage, a prophet, and a law giver."

In this novel the novelist was tackling the situation of the age in the most intensely dramatic manner. The novel 'Clarissa' came out in 1748. This is the longest novel in English. Once again the entire novel is told in letters, sometimes of enormous length between Clarissa and her family, between Lovelace and his friends etc. In the preface to his novel he makes clear his purpose - (i) instantaneous descriptions and reflections (ii) writing in the light of a present distress "the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty than the dry narrative, unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted can be.

Richardson has followed a dramatic technique. The letters which the characters write to one another are equal

ivalent of dramatic speeches. While going through 'Clarissa' or 'Sir Charles Grandison' we experience the something as if watching a play or a film in continuous present, always with the characters in their present pleasure or distress. The letter form produces greater immediacy and intensity. The success of Richardson owes much to the great length at which he describes the events like a slow motion film. The characters scrutinise themselves as if they are their own subjects. Hazlitt calls Richardson's word as "artificial reality". Smollett's 'Humphrey Clinker' has also been told through letters but the aim is quite different from that of Richardson. There is no plot in the novel and the letters have been designed partly to present the characters

with their tastes, morals, manners etc. and partly to make us acquainted with the places they visit. Two more novels written in this manner are Frances Burney's 'Evelina and Cecilia'. It is true that she adopted the epistolary method of Richardson but rejected melodrama for comedy. Evelina narrates the adventures of a young girl on her entrance into the world. Her comic characters are life like and not mere caricatures like those of Smollett. She has less delicacy than Jane Austen but creates more humour and presents more animated scenes.

The end. //

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