

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
**Prof. Pramod K Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**University of Hyderabad**  
**The Historical Novel**

In this lesson, we will be discussing the fiction of the Romantic era. Our genre for this lesson is the historical novel. The one name that comes to mind when we think of the historical novel is Walter Scott. Walter Scott's fiction documented the transformations of the Scottish gentry, its agricultural practices, its landscape as in topography, class divide, and the Jacobite rebellions. He did all this with a degree of realism which made it extremely popular. In fact, one of the largest selling authors of the time was Walter Scott.

It is also important to understand that Walter Scott is used as a standard example of the historical novel and as a prototype of the genre by very distinguished critics of the genre such as George Lukacs. But was Walter Scott only writing historically realist novels? The realism in Scott was tinged with a fair amount of romanticization. After all, he is writing fiction not history. There was, for obvious reasons, an interest in history in terms of artifacts, settings, documents, books, material evidence... This was one kind of history.

But there was a second form of interest in history, one that emerged in the nostalgia and sentiments expressed by characters towards their past. So, while on the one hand, we see a very heavily documented, detailed account of artifacts, documents, books, places and material evidence, on the other hand, there is the nostalgic view of their pasts by characters in Scott. As a genre, Scott defined the historical novel, not just in his fiction, but also in the numerous prefaces he wrote to his novels, starting with *Waverley* in 1814 where he sought to define what he was trying to do.

It is a bit of programmatic criticism when an author defines a genre using the example that they have produced. That is, an author presents a theory of the novel using their own novel to demonstrate the theory. Thus, we are not very certain how to separate the theory from the novel. Where are his prefaces theoretical works, and where are his novels just novels? The novels and the theories actually interbreed.

The genre of the historical novel is often marked by social realism as we have already noted and may be linked to the great social realist texts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most notably Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett and Samuel Richardson. It is marked by a very close attention to detail especially in terms of the routine, the language, complete with idiomatic expressions and slang. It is set in specific places – Scotland is Walter Scott’s primary base, for example – and captures the everyday life of people. The characters may be real-life ones though there is a certain amount of fictionalizing or romanticizing around these characters. There is an attempt to show how the characters are the products of their age, thereby showing us how individuals emerged.

We will now explore the significant features of the genre. The historical novel, as we have just seen, made use of identifiable characters but portrayed them slightly differently. So, Scott, when he used men and women who had real names in the records of the times gone by, generalized the portraits so that they could still seem, on the whole, productions of fancy, though possessing some resemblance to real individuals. Scott said that he generalized the portrait so that “they should still seem, on the whole, productions of fancy though possessing some resemblance to real individuals”.

Scott rearranged facts, even the indisputable ones, in ways that would appeal to the reader. So there is a very complicated mix between the social realism and the romance in Scott’s writing which actually contributes to his popularity. So, the historical novel did deal with real life but this was often complicated by the problem that it was not always possible for a novelist to recreate the past with complete fidelity to the facts.

If, for instance, when Scott writes about Richard, the Lion heart, or the Crusades, to recreate these historical figures or events with exactitude is an almost impossible task. As the critic, Harold Orel notes, the problem was that if the novelist steeped himself or herself in the past, they ran the risk of losing their historical distance and perspective. As in, if they became so attached to the past in their attempt to recreate it, they would not be able to detach themselves from it enough to be able to write about it without just being nostalgic or steeped in sentiment. But if they did not attach themselves to the past, they ran the risk of having counter-interpretations of the events.

Historical writing assumes objectivity of events with respect to those who try to get to know them at a later point in time. But it also assumes that history in its various forms involves an engagement with past realities that are believed to have existed outside of latter day interpretations and representations of them. That is, history in its various forms involves an engagement with past realities that have existed outside our representations of them, realities which we cannot really know. There is no real transparent access to the past. Our access to the past is mediated in many ways.

This problem was summarized in a very pithy phrase by Alexander Manzoni in his work on the historical novel. He says that the historical novel “calls for a combination that is contrary to its subject matter and a division contrary to its form”. That is, the historical novel has to be true to history in a form given to fictionalizing. How can you do that? The historical narrative has a certain representational strategy or set of strategies different from the novel which as a form is given to fictionalizing.

How do you merge them? How can you be true to history *and* put it in a fictionally acceptable form? “Historical” implies a reference to the past as it actually was. The novel indicates the past as it is fabricated. Can you bring them together? Can you, in short, make a romance out of historical reality and still make people believe in it? The task of a historical novelist was to make readers believe in a historical past, but also to entertain readers with the historical past. Now, since we have all gone to social studies classes in school, we know that historical narratives when cast as textbook lessons can be quite boring. But they can be made interesting by narrating them in the form of a novel.

The problem is if the historical narratives are presented in a novel form, would you believe in it as history? Because the tendency is to say that a novel, by definition, is fiction and hence, fabricated. So, the historical novel is not about the real as defined in the historical sense. So, how is a historical novel to be written? The answer to this conundrum is this: the historical probability is kept intact up to a certain point after which it changes. Up to a point, the plot and characters are kept historically believable and then, because the novel must entertain in order to become popular, certain changes are made.

In Scott's *Waverley*, he writes a novel where the probability of the historical event is retained but it is delivered in a fashion where you believe that this ought to have happened. We make a distinction between the author recreating the past and the author recreating the past as it ought to be in terms of entertainment values.

We would assume that a historical narrative is analyzed at a referential level. What do we mean by this? If we come across Richard, the Lion Heart in a historical narrative, we need to be able to say the existence of such a person can be verified. As in, there is a referential level at which we can say such a character really did exist in history. A novel need not refer to a historically real character as the historical narrative must. So, we have two sorts of historical analyses here.

In the case of historical narrative, we will have a referential level of analysis where we see if what is narrated is historically real by checking to see if it is historically verifiable. In the case of a novel, one cannot say that it must be historically verifiable. By definition, it is a work of fiction. Recall the popular disclaimer: this is a work of fiction, any resemblance to people real or alive is purely incidental. You cannot ask: Are there really Harry Potters? Does Harry Potter really exist? Show me a Harry Potter. You cannot say that because it is a work of fiction.

On the other hand, you can check the veracity of a Winston Churchill, or an Alexander the Great. Because they are a part of historical narrative, we seek, claim and demand a referential level of analysis. This is the tension between the historical and the fictional. As people like Hayden White have argued throughout their work, even historical writings take recourse to aesthetic and moral codes of narration. That is, critics like White have noted that whether you are writing a historical chronicle or narrative, or whether you are writing fiction, both forms require representation. Both require specific modes of language use.

Toby Litt writes of the historical novel: "The first word is the element of facticity, what was of the world; the second element is transcendence, what might have been of the world. To yoke the two words together is to create an oxymoron".

There is no such thing as a historical novel. Historical fiction is neither historical nor fiction.

The problem also involves questions of language and representation. Historical representation is dependent on the practice of representability of events not on their reality. What do we mean by this? That is, for you to be able to historically represent something has to do with the language of representation that you are employing not on whether Alexander the Great existed or not. In other words, it is not the reality or falsehood of Alexander existing as a person that matters. The question concerns the language in which representation is made. We need to be aware of the fact that we are looking primarily at questions of language.

In one of the most sustained studies of the genre, George Lukacs attributed Scott with discovering the true nature of the historical novel. As Lukacs put it in his famous definition, “the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of the age”. Lukacs argued that modern historical writing began with a struggle against absolutism.

Enlightenment thinkers endeavored to portray the unreasonableness of absolutist rule. He says, “The history writing of the Enlightenment was, in its main trend, an ideological preparation for the French Revolution. The often superb historical construction with its discovery of numerous new facts and connections, serves to demonstrate the necessity for transforming the ‘unreasonable’ society of feudal absolutism; and the lessons of history provide the principles with whose help a ‘reasonable’ society, a ‘reasonable state’, may be created.”

Before Walter Scott, George Lukacs argued, historical novels contained no true historical consciousness. It was merely the projection of contemporary attitudes back in time. History, as he puts it, was mere costumery. In his famous text, *The Historical Novel*, he says that “the true historical novel emerges with the work of Sir Walter Scott, whose novels of the Scottish clans portray the disintegration of archaic social forms in the face of capitalist transformation. Scott went beyond dressing modern characters in kilts, and instead drew his characters in such a fashion that the various details of their personalities were linked with the basic conditions of their existence. The varied experiences of the protagonist across the social landscape in Scott creates a portrait of social forces. Then, by the time major figures such as kings and the like appear, it is clear that their importance arises not from their extraordinary personal characterization in abstract, but from the

way they represent the important forces of the day. He uses mediocre heroes because they serve as ‘a perfect instrument to presenting the totality of certain transitional stages of history’”.

These definitions from George Lukacs alert us to two further points. The relation to this past (history is distinct from memory) and the empirical reality of the events on which the narratives are based. Scott himself would say that romance is part of history writing. In the postscript to *Waverley*, one of his most successful novels, Scott would say, “The most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact”. What Scott is saying is that it is always possible to find a disjunction between the relevance of historical facts and the presentability of these facts. That is the distinction made by Ann Rigney in her work on the historical romance and what is now called Romantic Historicism.

In texts like *Waverley* and *Guy Mannering*, Scott mapped the slow collapse of Scottish gentry, their ways of life with the advent of modernization and industrial culture. Traditional values were eroding as a result. James Chandler, the distinguished critic who articulated the idea of a Romantic Historicism in his book, *England 1819*, has argued that in *Waverley*, Scott raises the “‘derivation’ of the eponymous hero as a passage of an uncharactered character – a kind of cipher – through various forms of inscription: romance, highland oral song, newspaper report, courtroom argument where each is associated with a specific socio-historical manner of representation”.

Scholars such as James Chandler have argued, along with Ann Rigney, that in the Romantic era, the authors saw themselves as participating in history. Thus, the poetic text (and Chandler is reading Percy Shelley here) not only situates itself as a part of history but also commemorates its larger identity *as history*. Thus, the novel *is history*. The poetic text *is history*. This is the Romantic Historicism which critics like James Chandler read in Walter Scott. So, the individual novel or text is a case, a sort of documentary indicator of abstract principles but the case then seeks to explicate causes.

So, much of the literature of England in 1819, writes Chandler, is concerned with its place *in England in 1819*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you can think of Hilary Mantel’s work as marking a revival of the genre.

What do we take away at the end of this particular session on the historical novel? What you need to understand is that all questions of history and fiction are actually questions of representation and representability. So, it is not a question of whether a fact reported in novel is a fact in real life. The question is how does the fact get reported? What are the representational strategies by which facts are reported? Hayden White emphasizes the use of narrativity in the representation of history. He tells us that ultimately these are exercises in language.

### **Works Cited**

Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago UP, 1998.

Lukacs, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Merlin, 1989.

Orel, Harold. *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatani: Changing Attitudes toward a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*. Palgrave, 1995.

Rigney, Ann. *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism*. Cornell UP, 2001.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1980, pp. 5-27.