

Evolution, Genre Characteristics, and Thematic Diversity of the 19th-Century English Novella

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Abstract:

The 19th-century English novella occupies a unique position within literary history, bridging the gap between the short story and the novel. This study examines the development of the English novella in the context of Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism, highlighting the influence of European literary traditions and socio-cultural changes in England. The novella's structure, psychological depth, and symbolic dimensions are analyzed, emphasizing its capacity to portray social realities, moral dilemmas, and individual consciousness. Special attention is given to the depiction of women and gender issues, revealing how novellas engaged with social constraints and intellectual pursuits. Overall, the research demonstrates that the 19th-century English novella functioned as both a compact narrative form and a medium for social and psychological insight, establishing a foundation for later modernist literature.

Keywords:

English novella, 19th century, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, gender

Introduction

The 19th century was a transformative period in English literature, characterized by profound social, economic, and cultural changes that reshaped both everyday life and literary expression. The Industrial Revolution, rapid urbanization, expanding middle classes, and evolving social hierarchies created new contexts for human experience, which literature increasingly sought to capture and examine. Literary production during this era not only reflected these societal transformations but also critically engaged with them, offering commentary on issues such as social inequality, gender roles, morality, and the tension between individual aspiration and collective norms. Prose emerged as the dominant medium for such explorations, providing writers with the flexibility and depth required to portray complex psychological states, ethical dilemmas, and social realities. Among the various prose forms, the novella established itself as a particularly distinctive genre, positioned between the short story and the full-length novel. By combining the narrative compression and immediacy of short fiction with the thematic richness and psychological intricacy of novels, the novella offered authors a concentrated yet sophisticated medium. It enabled the portrayal of nuanced character development, symbolic resonance, and moral inquiry, all within a framework that allowed for experimentation with narrative structure, perspective, and style.

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Consequently, the 19th-century English novella emerged as a dynamic and adaptable form, capable of engaging readers on both intellectual and emotional levels while contributing to broader literary innovation and social discourse.

Literary Currents: Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism

Romanticism (Early 19th Century). Romanticism, flourishing in the early 19th century, emphasized emotion, individual experience, and the imagination. English novellas of this period often explored the inner lives of characters through intense psychological and emotional situations, blending realism with elements of the supernatural or Gothic. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) illustrates the Romantic concern with human ambition, creativity, and the consequences of defying nature. Similarly, novellas by authors like Charles Maturin, such as *Melmoth the Wanderer*, reveal a fascination with the uncanny, moral dilemmas, and personal guilt. These works emphasize the subjective experience of characters, highlighting a literary interest in introspection, moral conflict, and the transcendence of ordinary life.

Realism (Mid-19th Century) By mid-century, Realism emerged as a response to the idealized visions of Romanticism, emphasizing everyday life, social observation, and moral responsibility. English novellas of this period, such as Dickens' *The Hunted Man* (1860) and Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* (1864), portray social hierarchies, economic inequality, and the struggles of ordinary people with moral and ethical questions. Novellas provided writers with a compact form capable of addressing complex social issues without the expansiveness of a full-length novel. Realist novellas often relied on detailed settings, intricate characterizations, and social critique, offering readers a mirror of contemporary society while encouraging reflection on personal and collective morality.

Naturalism (Late 19th Century) Late-century Naturalism, influenced by scientific thought and determinist philosophy, depicted human behavior as shaped by heredity, environment, and societal pressures. Novellas by Thomas Hardy, including *The Withered Arm* (1888), explore the interplay between fate, social expectation, and personal desire. These stories often present characters whose choices are constrained by circumstances beyond their control, reflecting the Naturalist preoccupation with the limits of human agency. The novella's conciseness allowed for focused, intense examinations of human suffering, moral complexity, and existential tension, making it an ideal medium for the narrative exploration of fate and determinism.

European Influence and Cross-Cultural Exchange The 19th-century English novella was significantly influenced by European literary traditions. French, German, and Italian writers contributed to the development of narrative techniques and thematic explorations that resonated within the English context.

French literature, particularly the works of Honoré de Balzac and Guy de Maupassant, introduced English writers to detailed character studies and social commentary. Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* offered a comprehensive portrayal of French society, inspiring English authors to adopt a more systematic approach to character development and social critique. Maupassant's mastery of the

short story form, with its emphasis on irony and surprise endings, influenced English novella writers to experiment with narrative structure and thematic depth.

German Romanticism, with figures like E.T.A. Hoffmann and Heinrich von Gagern, introduced elements of the supernatural and psychological complexity to English literature. Hoffmann's tales, characterized by their blending of the fantastical and the real, encouraged English writers to explore the boundaries between reality and imagination. Gagern's focus on individual consciousness and inner conflict resonated with English authors seeking to delve into the psychological dimensions of their characters.

Italian literature, especially the works of Giovanni Verga and Luigi Pirandello, provided English writers with models for depicting the lives of ordinary people and the impact of social conditions on individual destinies. Verga's *Verismo* movement, emphasizing the harsh realities of life for the lower classes, inspired English novella writers to portray the struggles of the working class with greater authenticity and empathy.

Genre Characteristics and Comparative Analysis

The English novella is defined by several distinctive features that differentiate it from both the short story and the full-length novel:

- **Structural Compactness:** Novellas are tightly structured, centering on a pivotal incident or idea. Unlike novels, which may span years and include numerous subplots, novellas maintain a streamlined narrative that enhances thematic clarity and emotional impact. For example, Hardy's *The Withered Arm* compresses multiple thematic concerns—jealousy, social expectation, and personal tragedy—into a focused storyline that unfolds over a brief time span.
- **Psychological Intensity:** Novellas allow for in-depth psychological exploration due to their limited cast of characters. This enables authors to delve into internal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and emotional subtleties. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) exemplifies this feature, portraying the ambiguity of perception and the interplay between reality and imagination.
- **Symbolic Coherence:** Objects, events, and settings in novellas often carry layered symbolic meanings. In Dickens' *The Hunted Man*, the titular figure embodies the human struggle with memory, guilt, and forgiveness, while the ghostly motif symbolizes unresolved moral tensions.
- **Temporal and Spatial Concentration:** Novellas generally unfold within a restricted temporal and spatial framework. This concentration intensifies narrative tension and heightens readers' engagement with the characters' psychological and ethical journeys.
- **Moral and Philosophical Focus:** Novellas frequently explore moral questions or intellectual reflection, challenging readers to consider ethical dilemmas or philosophical themes. The moral consequences of individual actions within social frameworks are a recurring motif in the 19th-century English novella.

By synthesizing narrative economy with psychological and thematic depth, novellas became a platform for literary experimentation, bridging the gap between popular fiction and high literary artistry.

Thematic and Artistic Characteristics of 19th-Century English Novellas

Social and Moral Concerns: The 19th century's industrialization, urbanization, and social stratification transformed daily life, introducing moral and societal challenges that authors explored through the novella. Dickens' *The Haunted Man* addresses personal conscience alongside social injustice, while Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* juxtaposes rural and urban life, highlighting economic disparities and social tensions. Hardy's *The Withered Arm* examines jealousy, societal pressure, and fate, demonstrating how individual psychology interacts with collective moral and social norms. Novellas, through concentrated plots and focused characterization, effectively conveyed these social and moral issues.

Psychological Depth and Narrative Techniques: Psychological insight is central to the 19th-century novella. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* exemplifies the integration of consciousness, subjectivity, and ambiguity, offering readers a layered interpretive experience. Hardy's narratives intertwine psychological realism with symbolic elements, creating stories that resonate on both emotional and intellectual levels. The use of unreliable narrators, stream-of-consciousness techniques, and shifting perspectives in these novellas reflects the era's growing interest in exploring the complexities of the human psyche.

Gender, Female Subjectivity, and Women Writers: The portrayal of women and gender issues constitutes a central thematic concern in 19th-century English novellas. During this period, societal norms and patriarchal structures heavily dictated women's roles, limiting their access to education, professional opportunities, and public life. Within this context, the novella emerged as a particularly effective medium for exploring female consciousness and subjectivity, allowing writers to depict women's inner lives and ethical dilemmas with precision and depth.

Female authors such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell played a pivotal role in articulating the complexities of women's experiences. Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), while often categorized as a novel, exhibits novella-like conciseness in certain narrative threads, offering intense psychological insights into her female characters. Through Dorothea Brooke and other women, Eliot explores intellectual ambition, moral responsibility, and emotional fulfillment, emphasizing how societal expectations constrain personal growth. The depiction of Dorothea's ethical struggles, her pursuit of knowledge, and her negotiation of marriage and social position underscores the tension between individual desires and societal pressures, revealing the nuanced interplay between gender and agency.

Similarly, Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* presents a detailed portrayal of a young woman's intellectual awakening and moral development within the constraints of a socially conservative environment. Through Phillis' interactions with family, society, and romantic interests, Gaskell illustrates the

challenges women face in reconciling personal aspiration with conventional domestic expectations. By focusing on the minutiae of everyday life, social etiquette, and family dynamics, Gaskell emphasizes the structural limitations imposed on women and highlights their resilience, adaptability, and moral discernment.

These works collectively foreground female subjectivity, portraying women not merely as passive recipients of social norms but as active interpreters of their environment and negotiators of their own moral and intellectual paths. The novella's brevity and narrative focus allow authors to concentrate on key moments of personal insight, ethical choice, and psychological development, creating an intimate connection between character and reader. Moreover, the representation of women in these novellas engages with broader discourses on social reform, education, and the expansion of women's roles in public and intellectual life, situating individual narratives within a larger socio-cultural framework.

In addition to Eliot and Gaskell, other female writers of the period, such as Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, contributed to the exploration of gendered experience, often blending Gothic elements, Romantic sensibilities, and moral inquiry to interrogate societal constraints on women. Brontë's narrative techniques, including the use of first-person perspective and interior monologue, further illuminate the subjective experience of female protagonists, highlighting their emotional intensity, moral deliberation, and intellectual engagement.

Ultimately, the novella form enabled 19th-century female authors to present concentrated, psychologically rich narratives that challenge conventional gender expectations and foreground women's moral, intellectual, and emotional agency. By doing so, these works not only enrich the literary landscape of the period but also contribute enduring insights into the intersections of gender, society, and literary form, influencing subsequent generations of writers and shaping modern conceptions of female subjectivity.

Moral and Philosophical Inquiry

Novellas frequently engage with moral questions and philosophical themes, reflecting the era's concerns with ethics, responsibility, and human nature. Hardy's *The Withered Arm* presents a moral dilemma involving jealousy and retribution, questioning the boundaries between justice and vengeance. James' *The Turn of the Screw* explores the nature of evil and the reliability of perception, challenging readers to consider the complexities of moral judgment.

These narratives often present characters facing ethical choices that have profound consequences, prompting readers to reflect on their own values and beliefs. The compact nature of the novella allows for concentrated examinations of moral and philosophical issues, making it an effective medium for exploring the intricacies of human behavior and societal norms.

Serialization and the Popular Reception of Novellas

Reader Engagement: Serialization fostered a sense of anticipation and communal discussion among readers, making novellas culturally and socially impactful. Readers followed stories over weeks or months, which influenced authors to focus on narrative tension, memorable characters, and moral dilemmas.

Commercial Considerations: While serialization increased readership and financial gain, it also placed constraints on narrative length and complexity. Novellas, being concise yet substantial, suited serialized publication perfectly. Dickens, Gaskell, and other writers skillfully balanced literary ambition with popular appeal, ensuring both critical and commercial success.

Symbolism and Literary Devices

Symbolism and literary techniques played a central role in the 19th-century English novella, enhancing its psychological and thematic depth:

- **Objects and Settings:** Everyday objects, landscapes, or architectural details often carry symbolic significance. Hardy's rural landscapes in *The Withered Arm* reflect social hierarchies and character psychology. Similarly, Dickens' haunted house in *The Hanted Man* symbolizes memory, guilt, and redemption.
- **Gothic and Supernatural Elements:** Romantic and Gothic influences persist in novellas, blending realism with supernatural motifs to explore fear, morality, and the subconscious. Shelley and Maturin use these devices to probe human ambition, guilt, and ethical boundaries.
- **Narrative Perspective:** Techniques such as first-person narrative, unreliable narrators, and free indirect discourse enhance psychological realism. Henry James' use of ambiguous perspective in *The Turn of the Screw* exemplifies this, leaving readers uncertain about the reality of events and encouraging interpretive engagement.
- **Foreshadowing and Irony:** Novellas often employ foreshadowing and irony to create thematic cohesion and narrative tension. Maupassant's influence is visible in English novellas where endings often carry moral or ironic weight, leaving readers to reflect on human behavior and societal norms.

Legacy and Influence on Modernism

The 19th-century English novella profoundly influenced 20th-century modernist literature:

- **Narrative Experimentation:** Techniques like psychological realism, ambiguity, and symbolic layering became central to modernist writing. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Katherine Mansfield adopted and extended these strategies, exploring consciousness and subjective experience in their short fiction.
- **Focus on Individual Consciousness:** Novellas' intensive character exploration laid the groundwork for stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue techniques, central to modernist literature. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Mansfield's short stories demonstrate the novella's legacy in exploring inner lives and ethical dilemmas.

- Gender and Social Commentary: 19th-century novellas' engagement with women's experiences influenced modernist explorations of female subjectivity, autonomy, and social constraints. These early novellas provided frameworks for interrogating gender norms and social expectations in more experimental forms.

Conclusion:

The 19th-century English novella represents a crucial literary form that occupies a unique position between the short story and the full-length novel. It successfully merges narrative conciseness with thematic and psychological complexity, making it an ideal medium for exploring the multifaceted realities of human experience. Across the century, the novella evolved in response to socio-cultural, economic, and intellectual developments, reflecting transformations in English society brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and changing social hierarchies. By examining the works of key authors such as Dickens, Gaskell, Hardy, and James, it becomes evident that the novella functioned as a lens through which writers could interrogate social inequalities, ethical dilemmas, and human consciousness, all while maintaining a compact and aesthetically sophisticated narrative structure.

- The novella's narrative techniques—including psychological depth, symbolic coherence, temporal and spatial concentration, and moral focus—enabled authors to convey complex ideas with precision and intensity. Romantic and Gothic influences contributed to its psychological and imaginative richness, while Realism and Naturalism grounded it in social and environmental realities, illustrating the interplay between individual agency and societal constraints. These developments illustrate how the novella served not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for intellectual, moral, and philosophical inquiry, providing readers with concentrated reflections on the human condition.
- Furthermore, the 19th-century novella played a significant role in advancing representations of women and gender issues. Authors such as Eliot and Gaskell explored female consciousness, intellectual agency, and social limitations, setting a precedent for modernist and contemporary explorations of gender and subjectivity. By foregrounding women's inner lives, ethical struggles, and social positioning, the novella contributed to broader debates on gender roles, morality, and social reform in Victorian England.
- Serialization and popular readership further shaped the form, compelling writers to develop narrative techniques that balanced accessibility, suspense, and literary ambition. The engagement between writers and readers in serialized contexts encouraged innovations in pacing, characterization, and narrative perspective, reinforcing the novella's adaptability and relevance in a rapidly evolving literary market.
- Finally, the legacy of the 19th-century English novella extends well into the 20th century. Its focus on psychological realism, ethical complexity, symbolic layering, and narrative experimentation paved the way for modernist literature, influencing writers such as Woolf, Joyce, and Mansfield. By condensing social critique, moral reflection, and psychological insight into a brief yet impactful form, the novella not only reflects the cultural and intellectual currents of its

era but also anticipates future literary experimentation, demonstrating the enduring significance of the form in the history of English literature.

- In conclusion, the 19th-century English novella represents both a product and a reflection of its time—bridging literary traditions, social commentary, and aesthetic innovation. Its ability to integrate social, psychological, and philosophical dimensions within a compact narrative framework underscores its versatility, artistic sophistication, and cultural relevance. The study of these novellas reveals a dynamic literary landscape where authors negotiated societal constraints, explored human consciousness, and refined narrative techniques, establishing a foundation for subsequent literary movements. As such, the English novella remains a vital site for scholarly inquiry, offering rich insights into the interplay between form, content, and cultural context.

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