

Standards Focus: The Novel—A Brief History

The long history of the novel actually starts in medieval times, when stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were told. These stories were called *romances* because they were often about chivalric love and knightly actions. Writers such as Chaucer, Cervantes, and Machiavelli transformed these romances into what is thought of today as the early novel format. During this time, the format of the novel was debated for many years because guidelines varied between cultures. The novel was eventually defined as a story that included any number of exciting or surprising events. *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, is considered by many to be the first true European novel.

In the early 19th century, the novel found its first home in England, where the surge of fiction writing made novels a popular genre of literature. In 1719, Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, which opened the door to wider interpretations of the novel that would be more fully explored in early 19th century England. Increased literacy rates and the ability to mass produce literature in the 19th century allowed wider audiences access to novels. It was at this time that *The Scarlet Letter* was published in the United States. Hawthorne's international contemporaries included Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

The Gothic and Romantic Novel

After the novel became an accepted genre, a certain level of expectation fell upon someone who considered his or her piece of work a novel. Those who considered themselves novelists adhered to a set of guidelines that would eventually define the genre today. According to Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature*, a novel is defined as a *fictional prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals with human experience through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting*. However, in no way did this mean that the novel finally adopted a uniform style/genre. For example, a novel such as *The Scarlet Letter* falls somewhere between two styles of novel writing, gothic and romantic, because Hawthorne used elements of both styles in his novel.

A traditional gothic novel, also known as the European Romantic novel, was expected to include dark and tempestuous settings full of ghosts, superstition, revenge, and madness. The gothic novel was often set in primitive medieval buildings with hidden passages and an underlying tone of terror and mystery.

On the other hand, a romantic novel was based on the ideals of chivalric love and heroic knights. Although it too evolved over time, the major components of a romantic novel include a focus on the beauty of nature, the growth of an individual's physical and emotional strength, elements of relationships and love; and the idea that insight and experience are more important than logic and science.

Comprehension Check: Novel History and Elements of the Novel

Directions: On a separate piece of paper, complete the following in complete sentences.

1. What two major factors contributed to the rise of the modern novel?
2. Why was the first form of a novel called a romance?
3. How did the definition of a novel change throughout history?
4. Do some research and find at least 2 other novels that fall into the gothic style and 2 novels that are in the romantic style.
5. From your own reading experience, choose an example for each of the novel elements on page 8. Be sure to give the story or novel's title and fully explain why this particular story or novel is a good example for the element.