UNIT 3: NOVELS

Contents

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Aims

When you have completed this unit you will have:

- planned your own novel
- explored theme, plot, characters and viewpoint
- examined published novels to see how other writers achieve effective writing.

Introduction

I believe that we can learn more about the mysteries of human relationships, of love, hatred, jealousy, sacrifice, meanness and generosity, of the endlessly fascinating and ambiguous nature of man's aspirations and compromises, of the devices of the heart and the spirit's hunger, from reading fiction than from most other kinds of writing.

(from *How To Enjoy Novels* by Vernon Scannel)

…literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have… The novel is arguably man's most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time.

(from *Consciousness and the Novel* by David Lodge)

Read before, during and after writing

The most constructive advice for any writer is to read. If it's a novel you want to write, you need to read novels of all kinds with a critical eye. You can still enjoy them, but while it is tempting to immerse yourself completely in the story, if you are to learn useful lessons for your own writing you must read in a more analytical way. In particular, learn to look at how the writer has treated:

- theme
- plot
- character
- conflict (or tension)
- viewpoint.

We will be looking at each of these features of novel writing in this unit, and you will be encouraged to develop your own critical reading abilities.

This may mean that you never read a novel in the same way again! When you have had the experience of writing you are much more critical of the writing of others. Try to become aware of how you are responding to material as you read it. If your response changes, for example, from boredom to excitement, or amusement to sadness, pause and ask yourself why. What feature of the writing has changed to produce this effect?

Gradually your critical faculties will sharpen and you will become aware of the reasons for these gear changes as they occur.

Now let's look at the first of the features listed above: theme.

Theme

The theme is what the novel is about, for example, 'unrequited love' or 'growing up'. It is the pivot around which plot and characters revolve.

Activity 1

Try and think of some themes that you could use in planning a novel of your own. Make a short list before reading on. If this seems tricky so early in the unit, don't worry, read on. Often the ideas that come to mind first, and which you may be tempted to dismiss, can prove the most fruitful.

Here is one student's list:

- friendship
- revenge
- loneliness
- search for identity
- power.

Yours may include some of these, or be completely different. Keep your list for referring to later in the unit.

The next point on the list was: plot.

Plot

The plot of the novel is the action of the story – the way in which the theme develops.

Let's look at a specific example. Taking friendship as a theme, we can build a framework that we can use as we work through the unit. You'll see that the framework below also contains 'characters' – the third feature in the list.

Theme: friendship

Plot: Old friends lose contact and meet up again at an interview for the same job.

Characters: Ann and Tara. Ann already works there – Tara is an outside applicant.

We will come back to this framework later. But for now, let's look at character in more detail.

Character

'Finding' characters

Many writers say that their characters become more real to them than friends and colleagues. But don't be tempted to try to minutely describe the lives of people you know. However, you will often find that your characters are amalgams of people you have known, or take real people as their starting point.

Flesh and blood: not cardboard

When you create characters in your novel you hope they will be real enough for your reader to believe in. If you want to avoid cardboard characters you need to beware of making them:

- too good
- too bad
- too predictable
- unchanged by their experiences
- use stilted dialogue.

In other words, your characters are human beings – not stereotypes. This means allowing for their goodness, badness and changes of mood. And where you use dialogue be sure to allow them to express themselves in their own words.

Activity 2

Choose two characters from the following list: a teenager; an insomniac; a poet; a homeless person; a businesswoman; a painter; a child; a politician. Write an exchange between the two characters. Imagine one telling the other about their day. Is the person listening bored by, jealous of, in love with or frightened of the speaker? Choose one, and see how the dialogue turns out. Write about 300 words.

Writing dialogue can help you to plan what happens in your prose. When characters speak, we begin to understand them. Dialogue allows the reader to experience a character directly. It helps create characters that the reader cares about. It also gives them a break from the author's voice! In longer writing, readers need variety and a change of dynamic – dialogue helps pace a novel and keep the reader's interest.

Activity 3

Using the framework provided at earlier, suggest backgrounds for Ann and for Tara:

- invent a physical description
- give a brief resume of their former friendship
- imagine what has happened to both of them in the intervening years.

Take your time and enjoy this. You may choose to spend an hour or two in one session or you may prefer to make notes and then push the ideas around while you are doing other things and make further notes as your initial ideas develop.

Keep your notes to hand as you will need to do further work on them later in the unit.

Now look at the next point on the list: conflict.

Conflict

Another word for this in this context is tension. You can use a source of tension as the basic idea that sets the plot in motion. In the simple plot structure we are using as a model, an element of tension is introduced by making two people apply for one job. Obviously, one will be successful and the other will not!

Activity 4

How do you think you might treat this tension in the plot?

Make brief notes before reading on.

One student said that if Ann, who already works there, gets the job there will be less conflict than if Tara, coming in from outside, is successful.

So, for the purpose of this particular plot, we are going to give Tara the job, and put Ann in the position of having to come to terms with this. This will introduce a degree of potential conflict: will their friendship survive this situation?

Let this idea develop at the back of your mind for a while. At this point, look at the next feature on the list: viewpoint.

Viewpoint

In any story, you need to decide *whose* story it is going to be. Whose viewpoint will you present to the reader?

Activity 5

In terms of a viewpoint, what options are open to you? Think carefully about this and make brief notes before reading on.

Your list might include:

- the first person narrative, using 'I', as you would when writing a diary
- the third person ('he' or 'she') as the main narrator
- the third person, but from the viewpoint of several characters.

Look at each of these in turn.

First person narrative

The main disadvantage of first-person narrative is that it restricts you to relate only what is known to the 'I' of the story. Nothing can be seen or known apart from what is experienced by the 'I' character unless indirectly, when someone else informs him or her about it. But there are also advantages in writing from this perspective.

Activity 6

What do you think are the advantages of using the first person? Before continuing make notes of any you can think of.

Your list may include:

- it can give immediacy and authenticity to the story
- it can allow the reader to identify with the story teller: the reader can step into the shoes of the character. Some of the most powerful narratives are told in the first person

Here is a well known example:

> *My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.*
>
> *I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister – Mrs Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,' I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine – who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle – I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers- pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.*
>
> *Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat*

wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!'

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

'O! Don't cut my throat, sir,' I pleaded in terror. 'Pray don't do it, sir.'

'Tell us your name!' said the man. 'Quickly.'

'Pip, sir.'

'Once more,' said the man, staring at me. 'Give it mouth!'

'Pip. Pip, sir.'

(from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, Penguin)

To make a first person narrative in the story you have been developing, you could adopt the persona of Ann or Tara and tell the story from that perspective. For example, 'I first met Ann/Tara when …'

Third person narrative

Here you have a choice. You can describe the experience of just one character or that of several. The second is the greater challenge, since you may be describing how the same event appears to different people, the characters are presented as 'he' or 'she' but three or four characters are selected as 'viewpoint' figures. The author can allow himself/herself to get inside the minds of these characters and see/show/tell what they are thinking and feeling as well as reporting their actions.

Here is an example of third-person narrative, taken from *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French. This is the opening of Chapter 1:

Myra was hiding in the ladies' room. She called it that, even though someone had scratched out the word 'ladies' in the sign on the door, and written 'women' underneath. She called it that out of thirty-eight years of habit, and until she saw the cross out on the door, had never thought about it. 'Ladies Room' was an euphemism, she supposed, and she disliked euphemisms on principle.

> *She was perched, fully clothed, on the edge of the open toilet seat, feeling stupid and helpless, and constantly looking at her watch. It would all have been redeemed, even translated into excitement, had there been some grim-faced Walter Matthau in a trench coat, his hand in a gun-swollen pocket, or some wild-eyed Anthony Perkins in a turtle neck, his itching stranglers hands clenching and unclenching – someone glamorous and terrifying at any rate – waiting for her outside in the hall, if she had been sitting in a panic searching for another way out.*

This is obviously going to be told from Myra's viewpoint.

However, a few pages on a surprise awaits the reader:

> *Perhaps you find Myra a little ridiculous. I do myself. But I also have some sympathy for her, more than you, probably.*

The viewpoint has changed. The character now telling the story continues:

> *I spend a lot of time alone here, walking along the beach in any weather, and I think over and over about Myra and the others, Val, Isolde, Kyla, Clarissa, Grete, back at Harvard in 1968.*

Later on, you may want to experiment with changes of this sort in your own writing. For the moment though, concentrate on describing a single viewpoint well.

Third person narrative told from a single viewpoint

With this convention you can't have anything happen in your story, or at least that section of the narrative, that is not witnessed or reported by your key character.

Here is a description of how a character experiences his house after his wife has left it, and him.

> *After his wife left him, Macon had thought the house would seem larger. Instead, he felt more crowded. The windows shrank. The ceilings lowered. There was something insistent about the furniture, as if it were pressing in on him.*
>
> *Of course Sarah's personal belongings were gone, the little things like clothes and jewelry. But it emerged that some of the big things were more personal than he'd imagined. There was the drop-leaf desk in the living room, its pigeonholes stuffed with her clutter of torn envelopes and unanswered letters. There was the radio in the kitchen, set to play 98 Rock. (She liked to keep in touch with her students, she used to say in the old days, as she hummed and jittered her way around the breakfast table.) There was the chaise out back where she had sunbathed, planted in the only spot that got any sun at all. He looked at the flowered cushions and marveled at how an empty space could be so full of a person – her faint scent of coconut oil that always made him wish for a pina colada; her wide, gleaming face inscrutable behind dark*

glasses; her compact body in the skirted swimsuit she had tearfully insisted buying after her fortieth birthday. Threads of her exuberant hair showed up at the bottom of the sink. Her shelf in the medicine cabinet, stripped, was splashed with drops of liquid rouge in a particular plummy shade that bought her instantly to Macon's mind. He had always disapproved of her messiness but now those spills seemed touching, like colorful toys left on the floor after a child has gone to bed.

And later:

Some places, the walls gave off a kind of echo. Still, Macon noticed he had a tendency to hold his arms close to his body, to walk past furniture sideways, as if he imagined the house could barely accommodate him. He felt too tall. His long, clumsy feet seemed unusually distant. He ducked his head in doorways.

(from *The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler)

Activity 7

Look back to the plot and characters for the story that you have been planning. Think about how the choice of viewpoint of Ann on the one hand, or Tara on the other, might affect the tone of the writing? Make brief notes before reading on.

If you treat the situation in the most obvious way, then if Ann is telling the story the tone might be rather negative, whereas Tara might adopt a more positive tone. If you were to use both story-telling positions then the tone would vary according to who was telling the story at that point. However, as you know, people are complicated and there would probably be tension in the thinking of both women. It is likely that Tara would feel torn between her new job and her old friend and the tone of her narrative would reflect her guilt at causing her friend discomfort. And Ann might feel that getting to know her old friend again was worth more than the new job?

Looking at published novels

Now look at some extracts from published novels that illustrate the ideas we have been considering. As you work through, make notes of ideas that you may want to explore further.

Read the following extract, from the beginning of Joan Barfoot's novel *Gaining Ground*:

My name is Abra.

My name is Abra.

I had almost forgotten that; the naming of things lost its importance here, with no one to hear them named.

And so, until just now – you see I am remembering time as well – 'Abra' has gone. Now she is here again, as are so many other things, memories, and I do not know any longer. I thought the struggling time was over. I had forgotten it. I had forgotten so many things.

Abra. An odd name. Today I have said it over and over, making the sounds, making it disintegrate into nonsense. The harsh 'A' at the beginning, sliding away into softness. Abra. That is my name; it is what other people have called me. It loses its meaning with repetition. My name. Abra.

Activity 8

- What do you think the theme of this story will be?
- Who is the narrator – the person telling the story?
- Is there any suggestion of a conflict in the making?
- What questions does this short opening extract raise in your mind?

Make brief notes before reading on.

Joan Barfoot sets up the expectation that the theme of the novel will be solitude. You may have suggested 'loneliness' or 'the search for self'. The story is written in the first person. There is a hint of potential conflict as the Abra of now looks back to Abra as she was then.

The writing is powerful – the reader immediately wants to know:

- Who is Abra?
- Who was the Abra who has 'gone'?
- What has happened?
- What is going to happen?

Now read these two short extracts from *Free Fall* by William Golding:

Extract 1

I have walked by stalls in the market-place where books, dog-eared and faded from their purple, have burst with a white hosanna. I have seen people crowned with a double crown, holding in either hand the crook and flail, the power and the glory. I have understood how the scar becomes a star, I have felt the flake of fire fall, miraculous and pentecostal. My yesterdays walk with me. They keep step, they are grey faces that peer over my shoulder. I live on Paradise Hill, ten minutes from the station, thirty seconds from the shops and the local. Yet I am a burning amateur, torn by the irrational and incoherent, violently searching and self-condemned.

Extract 2

I never knew my father and I think my mother never knew him either. I cannot be sure, of course, but I incline to believe she never knew him – not socially at any rate unless we restrict the word out of all useful meaning. Half my immediate ancestry is so inscrutable that I seldom find it worth bothering about. I exist. These tobacco-stained fingers poised over the typewriter, this weight in the chair assures me that two people met; and one of them was Ma.

(from *Free Fall* by William Golding, Faber)

Activity 9

Using the same set of questions that you used to assess *Gaining Ground*, make a note of your immediate reactions to these extracts.

One student's immediate reaction was that the writing style in this extract is very complex, and found the language exciting and challenging.

'My yesterday's walk with me' suggests again that self-discovery may be the theme and the central character seems to be looking to the past to make sense of the present.

Now read the next extract.

They were all very kind at Oxford', I assured her, for she had seemed to think they were not. 'No one shunned me or ripped my stockings or took my bicycle on "loan".'

'So,' said the Sister nodding as she slid the enormous bundle of silver keys into her pocket. 'So. That was good.'

She smiled and waited for me to go on. She was German, I thought. Her voice moved up and down so, and her 'R's were so rich and long in her throat.

'So.' It seemed the right occasion that first day, to go on. 'So you see, I could not have been unhappy there. In fact I had no enemies at all. The other students were all very friendly and pleasant, and used to wave as they passed and cry: "How goes it?" or "Press on regardless".'

Most encouraging. But in fact I never needed any encouragement. My favourite hymn had always been 'Glad that I live am I', to which Mother could add an excellent little alto part.

'Really. Is that so?' the Sister nodded again, folding her starched apron carefully up in front of her and sitting down on the wireworks of the bed. I had not had time to make it up yet. 'May I? May I make myself at home? So. That was good.'

(from *The Ha-Ha* by Jennifer Dawson, Virago)