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The Story



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E.M. Forster

☛ Look for these expressions and guess their meaning from the context

atavistic shock-heads ingenious

We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect, but we shall voice our assent in different tones, and it is on the precise tone of voice we employ now that our subsequent conclusions will depend.

Let us listen to three voices. If you ask one type of man, 'What does a novel do?' he will reply placidly, 'Well—I don't know—it seems a funny sort of question to ask—a novel's a novel—well, I don't know—I suppose it kind of tells a story, so to speak'. He is quite good tempered and vague, and probably driving a motor-bus at the same time and paying no more attention to literature than it merits. Another man, whom I visualise as on a golf-course, will be aggressive and brisk. He will reply, 'What does a novel do? Why, tell a story of course and I've no use for it if it didn't. I like a story. Very bad taste, on my part, no doubt, but I like a story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story, mind, and my wife's the same.' And a third man, he says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, 'Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story.' I respect and admire the first speaker. I detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of truth, not this low atavistic form.

For, the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind) the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less shall we find to admire. It runs like a backbone—or may I say a tape-worm—for its beginning and end are arbitrary. It is immensely old—goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps to Palaeolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on and, as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. We can estimate the dangers incurred when we think of the career of Scheherazade in somewhat later times. Scheherazade avoided her fate because she knew how to wield the weapon of suspense—the only literary tool that has any effect on tyrants and savages. Great novelist though she was—exquisite in her descriptions, tolerant in her judgements, ingenious in her incidents, advanced in her morality, vivid in her delineations of character, expert in her knowledge of three Oriental capitals—it was yet on none of these gifts that she relied when trying to save her life from her intolerable husband. They were but incidental. She only survived because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next. Each time she saw the sun rising she stopped in the middle of a sentence, and left him gaping. ‘At this moment Scheherazade saw the morning appearing and, discreet, was silent.’ This uninteresting little phrase is the backbone of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the tape-worm by which they are tied together and by which the life of a most accomplished princess was preserved.

We are like Scheherazade’s husband in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else—there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity and, consequently, our other literary judgements are ludicrous. And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—

dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday coming after Monday, decay after death, and so on. *Qua* story, it can only have one merit; that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And, conversely, it can have only one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. These are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.

When we isolate the story like this from the nobler aspects through which it moves, and hold it out on forceps—wriggling and interminable, the naked worm of time—it presents an appearance that is both unlovely and dull. But we have much to learn from it. Let us begin by considering it in connection with daily life.

Daily life is also full of the time sense. We think one event occurs after or before another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds from that assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called 'value', something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few pinnacles and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart. Neither memory nor anticipation is much interested in Father Time, and all dreamers, artists and lovers are partially delivered from his tyranny; he can kill them but he cannot secure their attention and, at the very moment of doom when the clock collected in the tower its strength and struck, they may be looking the other way. So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values—and our conduct reveals a double allegiance. 'I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it.' There you have both allegiances in a single sentence. And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well; using devices hereafter to be examined. It,

also, pays a double allegiance. But in it, the novel, the allegiance to time is imperative: no novel could be written without it. Whereas, in daily life, the allegiance may not be necessary; we do not know, and the experience of certain mystics suggests, indeed, that it is not necessary, and that we are quite mistaken in supposing that Monday is followed by Tuesday, or death by decay. It is always possible for you or me in daily life to deny that time exists and act accordingly even if we become unintelligible and are sent by our fellow citizens to what they choose to call a lunatic asylum. But it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling, however lightly, to the thread of his story, he must touch the interminable tape-worm otherwise he becomes unintelligible, which, in his case, is a blunder.

I am trying not to be philosophic about time for it is (experts assure us) a most dangerous hobby for an outsider, far more fatal than place; and quite eminent metaphysicians have been dethroned through referring to it improperly. I am only trying to explain that as I lecture now I hear the clock ticking, I retain or lose the time sense; whereas, in a novel, there is always a clock. The author may dislike the clock. Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights* tried to hide hers. Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*, turned it upside down. Marcel Proust, still more ingenious, kept altering the hands so that his hero was at the same time entertaining a mistress to supper and playing ball with his nurse in the park. All these devices are legitimate but none of them contravene our thesis: the basis of a novel is a story and a story is a narrative of events in time sequence.

From *Aspects of the Novel* : A Note

These are some lectures (the Clark Lectures) which were delivered under the auspices of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the spring of 1927. They were informal, indeed talkative, in their tone and it seemed safer when presenting them in book form not to mitigate the talk, in case nothing should be left at all. Words such as 'I', 'you' 'one', 'we', 'curiously enough', 'so to speak', 'only imagine' and 'of course' will consequently occur on every page and will rightly distress

the sensitive reader; but he is asked to remember that if these words were removed, others, perhaps more distinguished, might escape through the orifices they left and that since the novel is itself often colloquial it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism and may reveal them to backwaters and shallows.

The 1001 Arabian Nights

The 1001 Arabian Nights is a collection of stories loosely linked together, narrated by a young girl Scheherazade. She was the daughter of the vizier, or minister, who had to serve a peculiar king. The king married on a daily basis: his wife was always beheaded after the wedding night.

Scheherazade tells her father that she wished to marry the king. He reluctantly agrees. She tells the king an interesting story on their wedding night, and makes sure to stop at an interesting point at the crack of dawn. The king is unwilling to execute her because he wants to hear the end of the story. This scheme was extremely risky, but Scheherazade is successful in continually linking stories over many nights until, finally, the king accepts her as his queen and stops the horrible practice of executing his wife.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Forster (1879–1970), a noted English author and critic, wrote a number of short stories, novels and essays. His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, was published in 1905. This was followed by *Howard's End* and *A Passage to India* and other well-known works. *The Hill of Devi*, a portrait of India with a commentary, appeared in 1953. The essay presented here is an excerpt from chapter two of *Aspects of the Novel*.



UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. What do you understand of the three voices in response to the question 'What does a novel do'?

2. What would you say are 'the finer growths' that the story supports in a novel?
3. How does Forster trace the human interest in the story to primitive times?
4. Discuss the importance of time in the narration of a story.

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Discuss in pairs or in small groups

1. What does a novel do?
2. 'Our daily life reflects a double allegiance to 'the life in time' and 'the life by values'.
3. The description of novels as organisms.

APPRECIATION

1. How does Forster use the analogy of Scheherazade to establish his point?
2. Taking off from Forster's references to Emily Bronte, Sterne and Proust, discuss the treatment of time in some of the novels you have read.

LANGUAGE WORK

1. '*Qua* story': what does the word mean? Find other expressions using the word *qua*.
2. Study the Note to *Aspects of the Novel* given at the end. Discuss the features that mark the piece as a talk as distinguished from a critical essay.
3. Try rewriting the lecture as a formal essay and examine Forster's statement: '...since the novel is itself often colloquial, it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism'.

SUGGESTED READING

1. *The Craft of Fiction* by Percy Lubbock
2. *The Sense of an Ending* by Frank Kermode.