

# Novel: the Best Representation of Life

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## Abstract

*The debate, whether literature (art) can represent reality and life well has not been concluded, coming to no universal validity, since the time of Plato. The critics and the connoisseurs of art vary in their arguments for and against, some argue that literature represents reality and life and others deny it. They value and judge literature according to their own taste and subjective impression, it is claimed not only to be realistic but also fantastic, the frenzy of human imagination. Despite all the assertions against it, most of the literary critics have accepted that literature is a representation of life, though Plato has expelled the poets from his well run republic. Modern criticism of English literature takes its major impetus from Henry James for he is the first critic who speaks about representation of reality and life in literature, in novel. He has given prominent status to novel with an argument that it represents life better and more faithfully than any other genre of literature. For the discussion of the representation of reality in literature, Henry James' Art of Fiction has been taken into account and MLA VIII has been used for citing the works.*

**Keywords:** *imitation, life, novel, observation, reality, representation*

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## Introduction

According to Plato all the artists are imitator of imitation and the painters' work is three times removed from the essential nature of a thing (reality). He regards every artistic creations of an inferior part of the souls and it harms by nourishing the passions instead of reason; what he admits is only the hymns to the gods and praises of famous men only. But, his successors, even the Platonists, have defined his rejection of poets arguing that the poet no longer languishes in the world appearances but has direct access to the world of intelligible forms. Art becomes for them, an expression of the essential form of the good and the beautiful.

Aristotle is the first critic to rebuttal the platonic idealistic idea about literature. Imitation for Plato always carries a negative connotation but for Aristotle, is a basic human faculty which expresses itself in a wide range of arts and says, “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this that he is the most imitative creature in the world and learns at first by imitation” (26). To imitate according to him is not to produce a copy or mirror reflection of something, but involves a complex mediation of reality (Selden 40). He also says that art (literature) must correspond to life and achieve a certain structural order. For him, the poet is concerned with the probable, not merely the possible. “A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility” (Aristotle 85). The writer doesn’t merely imitate particular objects or events but reveals the logical coherence underlying events in human life. Highlighting the imitative art of the poets, he says: “The poet, being an imitator ... he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were, or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been or as they ought to be” (Aristotle 91).

Philip Sidney too believes that an artist imitates nature by which he represents an imaginative reconstruction of life. He takes literature as a speaking picture. He also puts his argument forth that literature presents a better world and it is the reader who tries to imitate the better world presented by the artist (qtd. in Selden 14). Dryden, the father of English criticism, takes literature to be a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors and the changes of fortunes to which it is a subject. He seems to imply literature to imitate human actions. He is not a favor of exact servile imitation of life but he wants it to be ‘just’ and ‘lively’ preferably drama (qtd. in Selden 17).

The neo-classical critics, led by Pope too preferred representation of life in literature, in the form of ‘nature’ Pope has suggested in his famous essay “An essay on Criticism” to represent reality rather than to frame any judgment of their own (7). He also emphasizes that all the sources of art is life itself, the force of life and beauty which for Keats’s truth, ‘truth beauty and beauty truth’ Dr. Johnson praises the artists for their imitating nature, the wide and proper sense of the word ‘life’ in all its circumstances. He, in his essay “Preface to Shakespeare” (1765) announces that Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern (of his time) writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life (12).

Not only the Elizabethans and the eighteenth century critics, the romanticists also have strengthened the idea of representation of life in literature, though in different form.

According to Wordsworth, the objective of poetry is truth not individual and local but general and operative. Poetry, for him is the image of man and nature (Selden 81). He prefers the rustic existence which embodies, according to him, 'the essential passion of the heart', with the 'very language of man' (84). He loves general people, their manners of life with language spoken by them, because they are much nearer to reality.

Regarding the relation of literature with life, Selden comments that much of the best English criticism from Sidney to F. R. Leavis has concerned itself with the subtle connection between literature and life (490). Mathew Arnold emphasizes 'the law of light, seeing things as they are' in literary works. Arnold, in his essay "Preface to Wordsworth's poems" (1879) writes, ". . . poetry is, at bottom a criticism of life, that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: How to live" (143).

The decadent (fin-de-siècle) critics who are taken to be nearer to 'aestheticism' or 'impersonality' and 'formalistic' type of modern criticism, consider that major literature does not work by directly expressing ideas or attitudes but by embodying an experience of life in a form and diction necessary to convey the experience (Selden 490). They take reality of life as it is felt and experienced by people. There can be no reality, for them, beyond the experience of life; experience, for them, is the greatest and nearest reality. It is, disinterested and without any purpose to others, nothing is to be done for one's benefit but to live life as it goes, as it is.

### **Representation of Reality and Life in Literature with Henry James**

One of Henry James' aims is to speak in favor of the novels, not least his own, the seriousness of attention which had previously been largely reserved for the long-standing literary forms-poetry and drama. As Stephen Hazell says, in this context, "the shadow of these older forms still fall across novel criticism as witnessed by the continuing call for a 'poetics' or 'rhetoric of fiction' but from James onwards there is at least no lack of voices claiming a high status for the novel" (14-15). Thus novel has been established as strong a genre as any other in terms of representation of life and entertaining the readers at the same time.

James has written a great bulk of criticism among which many are practical and a few, including some of his prefaces and the essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884) are taken to be doctrinal (theoretical), in which he has been able to establish his own doctrine, about the modern literature, novel. Five of the Volumes of criticism are: *French Poets and Novelists* (1878), *Howthorne* (1879), *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essay in London and Elsewhere* (1893), and *Notes on Novelists* (1914), and his reviews collected are: *Views and review* (1908), *Notes*

and Review (1921, posthumously), and other posthumous collections: *The Future of the Novels* (1956), *American Essay* (1956), and *Literary Reviews and Essays* (1957).

What have attained the high status for him as a critique are his essay “The Art of Fiction (1884) and the prefaces written to his novels for New York edition, though the prefaces are not given much value from the vantage point of doctrinal criticism. He, as his critical works show, is inevitably concerned to insist that the novelists’ art is as serious as any other art, and the main subject of his critical theory is life-- representation of life and its reality. According to him as Leavis notes, a critic who would be intelligent about the novel must be intelligent about life, no discussion of the novel by other kind of critic is worth attention (17). James is well aware of the fact that a piece of art, especially novel, must be able to have a great deal of appeal to life. For him the creativity of art is the creativity of life--that the creative impulsion is life and could be nothing else (Leavis 18). James seeks always for the concrete and palpable art (literature) and wants it to be handled directly and freely. Regarding the connection of critic with life, James asserts:

That of the critic, in literature, is connected doubly, for he deals with life at second hand as well as at first, that is he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own. ... He has to make them as vivid and as free as the novelist makes his puppets, and yet he has, as the phrase is to take them as they come. (qtd. in Shapira 171) that means the novelist creates wisdom on the basis of someone's experience and disseminates it to the readers.

Basically, the famous essay of Henry James, “The Art of Fiction” has made him famous and leading critic in the field of criticism of fiction in which he has discussed much about novel to be the greater form of literature by some of its special virtues. He also declares that novel is only the form of art which can represent life the best. This essay aims to cajole and to tug the leading men of letters along with him into a new arena of discussion for he sees that the opportunity might then exist to get beyond the dominant Victorian morality and sentiment stifling as they were of both life and art. He has worked to stretch attitudes into greater openness, especially to the complexity (ies) and paradoxes of what the novelist has to do by way of art in the very effort to capture life and concern for getting his interconnection right stands at the center of major tradition of novel criticism.

### **The Art of Fiction: A Study of Life**

James, in this essay, starts opposing Walter Besant’s idea as Aristotle had done in his *Poetics*

opposing his teacher Plato. Besant is his contemporary critic (theorist) about the art of fiction, on the mystery of storytelling. Before James, the novel was taken very easily that a novel was a novel, as a pudding was a pudding and that only business with it could be to swallow it as a delicious food laid on the table for a glutton without having any comment and feeling about its structure, characteristics, ingredients etc. as such but now that is the condition no longer because discussions on its different aspects have already been started. James believes that novel also is a form of art and art lives upon discussion, upon experiment upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of stand points (James, *The Art of Fiction* (609). According to him discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere (609). He highlights both the ‘delightful spectacle’ and ‘theory of art’ one without the other are not likely to exist.

As he is always serious on the question of how a novel can be made to be taken seriously, he thinks that ‘it must take itself seriously for the public to take it so’ (610). He is also anxious enough of the bitter fact that many novels have not attained their required seriousness and even the most jocular novel feels in same degree the weight of the proscription that was formerly directed against literary levity (610). He doesn’t want the novelists their production to be only a *make believe* which shall be apologetic and the pretension of attempting really to represent life (610) because the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. He says, “It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven, and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is . . . complete” (610), that becomes more convincing.

He further draws analogy between novel and history and says, as the picture is reality, so the novel is history. History also, for him, is allowed to represent life and says, “The subject matter of fiction . . . it must speak with assurance with the tone of the historian” (610). He suggests the novelist to bring tears to the eyes of the readers who take their fiction seriously, ‘the betrayal of the sacred office’ is a ‘terrible crime’ (611). He regards the job of a novelist as that of a spiritual guru because he handles the sacred job of representation of life.

James, on the one hand, following puritan opinion, suggests literature to be either instructive or amusing (611), pragmatically good for the people, one the other hand, does not agree fully to the argument that a good novel (literature) means only to represent virtuous and aspiring characters, happy ending, with prizes and rewards. It is at once as free and as serious a branch of literature as any other (612). About the existence of good and bad novels, he opines that there is as much differences as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one, the bad

is swept with all the daubed canvases and spoiled marble into some unvisited limbo, or infinite rubbish-yard beneath the back windows of the world and the good subsists and emits its light and stimulates our desire for perfection (612). He wants, in this way, literature to be free as Milton in his *Areopagitica*. He is always in favor of the freedom of art.

He also pleads for the variety of novels because they can vary from person to person, “. . . as various as the temperament of man” (612). He also says that the novels are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind different from others. A novel in its broadest definition, for him, is a personal, a direct impression of life which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression (613). He gives the responsibilities of success and failure of a novel to the author himself because the author paints his picture in a manner best known to himself.

He compares indeed, the artistic works with sciences as T.S. Kuhn has declared the scientific innovations to be the product of individual impression in the mind, and declares that “if there are exact sciences, there are also exact arts” (613), a revolutionary declaration in favor of art in the scientific age. But he cannot insist that the laws of fiction can be laid down and taught with precision and exactness. “They are suggestive, they are even inspiring but they are not exact . . .” (614) because the novelists cannot follow the same formula and formula does not create the best piece of art.

Reality can be represented by the novel he says that the characters, the situation which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix because humanity is immense and reality has a myriad forms, the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have odor of it, and others have not (614). He suggests the novelists to write from ‘experience’ and experience is never limited and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility (614). He comes to assert that an imaginative mind can convert its impressions into reality or truth that is life like. Here he puts himself in a theoretical impasse but he escapes saying ‘impressions’ are experiences, just as they are the very air we breathe (615). He says that he does not intend to minimize the importance of exactness-- of truth, of detail what he says the ‘air of reality’ (solidity of specification), which is for him the supreme virtue of a novel. What counts much in novel as reality is indeed ‘the illusion of life’ the novelist competes with life- to catch the color, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle (615).

Though it is not a living thing with flesh and blood, James takes novel to be a ‘living organism’, a living thing, all one and continuous like any other organism having a each of

the parts something of each other of the parts because as he thinks “what is character but the determination of incident?” (616) where one cannot exist in absence of the other. The only classification of the novel, according to him, is into that which has life and what which has it not (617). A novel should strike the note of life. He is quite hopeful that as people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it (619). It is fiction which offers us life without rearrangement and we do feel that we are touching the truth (619). For him, art is the revelation of impressions and experiences, artist has to have perception before revelation, the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision (619) and all experience.

The story is the inevitable organ, integrated part of the living organism, so the story and the novel, the idea and the form are the needle and thread as there is no use of thread without needle and vice-versa but the subject of the story should speak to the reader though all the aspects of life can be the subject of novel.

He does not like to urge the novelists to write with any conscious moral purpose because a picture is neither moral nor immoral, the purpose of novel is better to be a ‘perfect workman’ rather than to be a ‘preacher of morality’. And again, he suggests the novelists not to think too much about optimism or pessimism but to try catch the color of life itself (623).

In the preface to *The Portrait of Lady* (1881), he sees the perfect dependence of the moral sense of a work of art on the amount of life concerned in producing it (631). He considers the amount of life represented depending on the degree of the artists’ ‘prime sensibility’ (631) regarding the artists’ prime sensibility as the soil out of which his subject springs and the quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to growth with the freshness and straightness any vision of life represent strongly or weakly the projected reality (631). He takes novel to represent life at its utmost among the forms of literature and says, “... we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form ... all the verities of outlook on life ... that are never the same from man to man ...” (631). Representation of life in literature is veritable as life is heterogeneous experience in itself.

In the *The Princess Casamassima*, following Shakespeare’s notion of representation of life, he has maintained:

I think, no story is possible without its fools-as most of the fine painters of life ... have abundantly felt. It is as mirrored in the consciousness that the gross fools, the fatal fools play their part for us--they have much to show us in themselves. The persons capable of feeling life serve in the highest degree to record it-- dramatically and objectively is the only sort of person on whom we can count not to betray to cheapen ... the value and

beauty of the thing. (635)

It means he talks more on the vividness and liveliness of life that can be represented better in the works of art having some fools rather than only sensitive and serious people.

There are many modern novelists and critics who have followed James's footsteps, if not, his ideas in the realms of both criticism and craft of fiction. D. H. Lawrence, in his essay "Why the Novel Matters" (1936) regards novelists to be great masters of different bits of man alive and declares novel to be the bright book of life. (qtd. in Selden 535). In his other essay "Morality and the Novel" Lawrence has highlighted the human relationship and reality of life that novel represents. The business of art, according to him, is to reveal the relations between man and his universe is life itself for mankind which is beyond life or death (508). F.R. Leavis also has declared that literature is focus of our total expression of life. In his essay "Reality and Sincerity" (1952) he underlines much the idea of 'reality', 'experience' and 'vividness' in poem or literature as a whole (251), so that the readers could learn from liter.

Percy Lubbock, in his book *The Craft of Fiction* says that a novel is a picture of life, and life is well known to us, let us first of all 'realize' it and then using our taste, let us judge whether it is true, vivid, convincing like life in fact. A novel is a picture, a portrait and we do not forget that there is more in a portrait than the likeness ( qtd. in Stephen 9). Arnold Kettle, another critic of novels in his book *An Introduction to the English Novel* pronounces that literature is a part of life and can be judged only its relevance to life (qtd. in Stephen 12). Speaking about the novel, he says, "... the good novel does not simply convey life, it says something about life. It reveals some kind of pattern of life" (13). Lionel Trilling too falls in the line of critics who takes literature as the 'representation of life'. In his famous critical essay "A Gathering of Fugitives" (qtd. in Stephen 57) he states that judgment of literature is overtly and explicitly a moral and intellectual judgment. Along with morality he wants literature represent truth as against its own purely aesthetic elements. Literature musters the reminders of the practical of mundane, the dirty, the ugly, the painful, the moral life too. He also says that in his another essay "Beyond culture" (1905), if a work of literature has any true artistic existence, it has value as a criticism of life in whatever complex way it has chosen to speak, it is making a declaration about the qualities that life should have, about the qualities life doesn't have but should have.

Emile Zola, the naturalist novelist, has claimed for novelist who represents the concrete and the individual. He, in his essay "The Experimental Novel" (1880) has said that the novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions (qtd. in Selden 52). As Selden has

quoted, he also claims the novel to contain ‘proven facts’ over which science is mistress. Erich Auerbach, in his *An Epilogue to Mimesis*, as pointed by Selden, says that only in the modern novel does the writer present mundane reality in its historical particularity and with full seriousness (qtd. in Sheridan 48). He sees novel to be much truer taking the characters from every class of society and incidents from daily life.

As Marxist criticism believes literature to be a superstructure based on social economy, it is not odd for it a link literature with reality. George Lukacs, the modern Marxist critic, believe that the writer does not simply register individual objects or events, but gives us the full process of life. Art is a special way of reflecting reality, not to be confused with reality itself (qtd. in Selden 42). He also suggests artists (novelists) that they should reflect correctly and in proper proportion all important factors objectively determining the area of life that literature represents by which he doesn’t mean to declare that every work of art must strive to reflect the objective, extensive totality of life.

### **Conclusion**

Not only the critics and literacy figures cited and discussed above have spoken about the real representation of life in literature but there are many who support the quality of literature representing life. The contemporary critics of us have come up even to say that the novels of the novelists like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf represent modern reality of life, either calling it ‘inner reality of human experience’ or ultimate predicament of modern human civilization, or ‘psychological reality’ or ‘reality’ that is really ‘absurd’, absurdly disoriented.

James, in this way, is the critic who has given novel the prominent status among the form of literature. James is the first critic to give novel the highest importance and the critic who has tried to prove novel to represent life and its reality. Coming out of the nineteenth century Victorian ethos and his own fin-de-siècle revolt against it, he has spoken about the reality of modern kind. He is the pioneer of modern era in the field of novel writing and criticizing it even though he is not confident in himself in his own theory of fiction.

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