THESIS,
THE MISSION OF THE NOVEL,
FOR THE DEGREE OF
IN THE SCHOOL OF MODERN LANGUAGES,
BY
Grant Gregory,
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The Mission of the Novel.

The names which have grown into that great complexity to which to day we apply the name novel, must have developed with the power of expression and the imaginative faculty existing in man. Language must have meant, as it originated, in the groping minds and as it existed in the monosyllabic utterances of pre-historic man, the relating of the achievements and actions of men—because man, from the nature of the case, must always have been the dominant mainspring of human thought. Imagination, which in limited quantity is just as much a necessary component part of the intellect as reason, a fact that is proved by its abundant presence in little children and the savage tribes of
our own day, undoubtedly very soon changed the realistic tone of these primitive tales, formerly the mere repetition of facts, to grotesque, marvelous, or ideal creations. The art of telling stories came into existence with rational discourse; its growth has been parallel with man's growth; its growth has been parallel with man's growth; its mutable degree of elevation an index to man's civilization. This interesting fact might be shown more clearly by a comparative study of the ancient Persian tales, the romances of Heliodorus, Boccaccio, Cervantes, Richardson and contemporary novelists, and the civilization of the same times. But it is not essential to ascertaining the mission of the novel and would render the scope of these pages entirely too comprehensive,
I therefore content myself with this brief mention of centuries and centuries of development, and will deal hereafter with the modern novel, which is a distinct thing from former prose fiction. I will treat of that new department of literature, which, long a subaltern, has only recently stepped proudly forth into a prominent place among the divisions of literature.

Has the novel a mission? Should the inestimably valuable time, allotted to each of us, and called a life, be used in following the fortunes of individuals, who are the mere playthings, the offspring, vitality? Can a mere novelist—a relater of tales—sweeter than ineffably melancholy music of humanity; can he illumine, to any extent, the darkness that prevents man's discovering the divine purpose of his
existence: can he teach us a philosophy of life, or prove to us that happiness is not a mere-bone-wandering term, expressive of no idea, but that it is a possibility—ay an actual existence? The cultured voice of the century, uninfluenced by the austerity of defunct Puritanism, the sophistry of utilitarianism, or the indiscriminating powers of ignorant bigotry, answers, yes in the affirmative.

It is far from my intention, however, to become the victim of one idea. History and poetry are contemplated with unstinted admiration. On history's canvas is painted, as with the realism of Raphael's brush, the awful tragedies of the nations. In the foreground of each tableau may be seen the Thracian figure of Dion, who, if he be a Nestor,
or, was Abraham Lincoln, is the embodiment of the personal view of his environment. History is the fountain of wisdom from which all may drink freely; her archives are the Bible of the government: What history does for the mind, poetry does for the heart. Poetry is the veritable language of the soul, which reaches man far above the clouds that obscure his vision and show him the brightness of the purely ideal. But Rose Petition, the most modest of the three, the tenth muse, whose youth makes lovely, our new shall eulogize. Long have the floodgates been open to let in the stream of criticism on history and poetry, leaving no unsaid word, nothing for aught but transparent geniuses to add; but few have essayed to criticize the novel, and those that
nur, vary as much in their criticism as in their estimation of its future as novels and novelists differ among themselves.

The mission of the novel is not simple; it is complex. No single straight road can be pointed out to the novelist as the path from which he must not deviate, because in many directions may he do good, and with excellence in any one of diverse characteristics may he excel as an artist.

We live in a century of novel readers, and I might add of novel writers. A hundred years ago one might have read all the novels that had ever been written; to-day, one would find it difficult to become acquainted with the mere titles and authors of the flood of novels that deluges the reading public annually. Poets, historians, essayists, humorists,
philanthropists, social and political reformers, Christians, and agnostics, all take advantage of the greed of the reading public for the novel to disseminate their views, or, under the guise of a novel, compel their important, though poorly clad style of thought, to supply them with the "staff of life." And this literary trickery is not resented, because readers, who have not the courage to follow the arguments of an undisguised dissertation, or dry essay—who would hesitate before wading through the facts and dates of history, pursue the same with avidity when they are the accompanying harmony of some sweet note of love—in fact, they rather enjoy deluding them selves into the belief that they are making wonderful strides in knowledge, while following the ups and downs of their pet heroes.
and heroine. If this were done to an extent that threatened the
assumption of the field of the novelist by those whose whose
purpose differed greatly from that of the novelist, it might
tend to deteriorate the art of novel writing. But, as this is
not the case, the novel is an expedient method of disseminating
culture. On the other hand, the novelist proper must be just,
humorous, philanthropic, all in one, or he will fall short of
greatness. Unless he can gain the human heart by moisten-
ing the eyes of tenderness, or wreathing pleasure's face with
smiles, and, if love for humanity as a whole does not give him
incentive to work, he can scarcely attain to mediocrity.

Man possesses, in connection with the power to know and
to will, the ability to feel—that is sensibility. Under the battle
is included the power to admire—the aesthetic faculty. This
mere existence of this faculty implies the legitimacy of its health-
ful, temperate action on objects which are capable of its action—
hence the worthiness of the objects themselves. The creator
of these objects is either that incomprehensible something we
call nature, or art. We pause before some grand, awe-inspiring
scene in the Alps, and with the half-uttered word “nature”
lingering on the lips, the soul loses itself in the bliss of
contemplation, simulates happiness, or rather is negatively
happy, in its forgetfulness of the ego and its discontents.
This is grand! But the scene changes in size, and as it
grows smaller we notice that a heavy gilt frame surrounds it.
It is a picture hanging in a gallery—no longer an actual
landscape lying beneath the blue canopy of heaven, but an
invitation in oil. How is it now? Why, nearly the same admiration is aroused in us before the painted picture, as before the actual scene! This is art! This also is praiseworthy! Thus it remains, whether it be painting, sculpture, music or literature, as art it pleases and benefits mankind.

This drama is perhaps one of the progenitors of the modern novel, and is that form of art nearest akin to it.

Lathrop says that: "The novel is portable drama, requiring no stage, no actors, no lights or scenery, and no fixed time of enactment." But in every respect we believe the novel to have the advantage of the drama, as to possibilities of effectiveness. The plot of the drama necessarily hastens, so that deep sympathy
are not suited, but that, of the novel longer, enabling us to go deep into the actualizing sentiments of the characters.

The novel also replaces the chief artificiality of the stage with the unlimited beauties and vividness of word pictures. Since the departure of the chorus from the dramatic stage, explanations of the unseen plot must be introduced into the conversations, but the novelist acts as his own chorus, and if the author does not detract from the interest of his plot by too much personality, as was noticeably the case with Victor Hugo, this will prove a great privilege. Thackeray introduced his own personality into his novels in a truly delightful manner. Do dramatic effects add to the novel art? If done with the master's hand and not too cheaply.
sensational; they do. Man ruled by a passion when in contact
with man is the source of effect in fiction. Hugo and
Dickens valued it and gained thereby their unprecedented
popularity. A host of inferior writers, Wilkie Collins especially,
have used it with greater or less success. Dramatic scenes
and effects succeed as nothing else in gaining interest, and
if, as some story-tellers have claimed, the sole mission of the
novel is to be art, to please and take the thoughts of readers
from the humdrum monotony of existence, these would
be the most important factors of the novel.

It is not, however, merely as an art that the novel
holds its present exalted position! It is not merely as an
art that it is read as eagerly by the profound philosopher.
as by the listless idler. Aesthetics is not one of the noble passions of the soul. No, it is the power of the novel to do good — it is the fact that its art is the channel for the dissemination of knowledge concerning that most marvellous result of God's mortandishness, man.

Humanity to-day, as a whole, stands somewhere between the extreme savage state and possible perfection. Historically we are certain that it has sprung from the former, and from the pages of history (assuming the position of the optimist) we again deduce the conclusion, that it is moving toward the latter. The perfection of human society is an ideal state in which the personal happiness of each individual is secured. Happiness, if it mean anything, is the subject
result to the individual of his exact fulfillment, physically, mentally and morally, of his duty. The ascertaining of the full meaning of man's duty is one of the knottiest problems of life that it is especially the mission of the moralist to solve. Humanity is a mighty ocean; the movement of which atom, each individual drop of which has some effect, though small, on the whole mass. Their effect is either good or bad. How shall their effect be controlled for the better? How shall individuals be taught that beyond their obligations to religion or their hope of a future existence, they owe to their fellow men the force of a good example — that this obligation is no less binding because the effect of the individual is inappreciable. Innumerable forces combine...
might move the universe. The difficulty of directing multitudes
renders the necessity of self-control by individuals so much
the more important. But who shall teach these truths
to the individuals, not in the technical language and arguments
of moral philosophy, but with the eloquence of examples?
That again is as much the mission of the novel as of the
pulpit. No other writer, more than any other writers, deal with
character, and it is their duty - may their privilege, tend to
satisfy the cry of humanity for truth. Charles Dickens
though open to much criticism, was an artist in the highest
sense of the word. The original, pure humor, the tender
pathos and the brilliant dramatic painting of his novels
make them the favorites of hundreds of thousands. But
do we borrow any the less, since whether it be his attack on the endless processes of the chancery court, the inhumanity of the debtor's prison or Squeers' model school, he always seeks to ameliorate the condition of struggling humanity.

Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, our most illustrious country woman, wrote a novel which, if coldly criticized according to the laws of art, would be found lacking; but in that same book she pictures, as they had never been pictured before, the horrors of human slavery. Beecher, Phillips, Sumner did no more toward precipitating our second war of freedom than Mrs. Stowe, because many who would distrust all abolitionists as 'fanatics, shrink with anguish at the fearful gashes made on Uncle Tom's back.
by the blacksnake of that insatiable fiend, Legris, and
are convinced by the eloquence of their emotion! It is
the marvellous soul for humanity written on every page of
"Uncle Tom's Cabin" that permits many nationalities to read
it in their own tongue.

Dickens aimed the shaft of his keen sarcasm at
the selfish, proud, superficial drawing-rooms of England. Could
such genius as his fail to do good?

We presume, however, that marking in the aggregate
owes far more to the realistic school of novelists than

to any other. The four greatest of these, Turgeneff,
Balzac, Hawthorn & Eliot, have developed in the four-
most prominent nations of the earth; but still have many
similar characteristics. By realist we do not mean literalist. The literalist copies the mere externals of actual life, while the realist delights to analyze books under the surface of character and points out the pearl hidden amongst the rubbish. The realist delights to analyze apparently uninteresting and commonplace characters, and discovering there beauties and harmonies of the rarest value, takes pleasure in showing them to readers, who are for the most part also commonplace. George Eliot carries analysis of character further than any other author has ever done. She has been criticized much for this. Her critics have claimed that she injures her art in devoting herself to mere scientific analysis of character, as if it
were an object to be dissected with knife and forceps
and by going into profundities of philosophical reason-
ing. We are willing to acknowledge that there is
in a large class of novel readers— the listless and thought-
less— that she would fail to reach, and it is presumpt-
ous that all Methodists are not George Eliots. But what
a wealth of character has she showered upon mankind?
Plain in face, the victim of bad health, yet possessed
of surpassing sweetness of temper, an agnostic, in the faint-
sense of the word, and possessed of all the profundity of
intellectuality that makes the philosopher—probably
no one—has ever been able to reprove to humanity
that mystic science, the philosophy of life more
accurately or forcibly.

The novel today is the greatest source of culture that is. It teaches us nothing else and the amenities of life.
Its mission is certainly grand. History gives us the imperfect creature, man: the novel places before us a far nobler model, man's highest ideal of man.

Finis!