

A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms, edited by Roger Fowler, School of English and American Studies, University of East Anglia, and Boston. 1973

historical novel A term which refers to novels set in a period of time recognizably 'historical' in relation to the time of writing. The past tense may be employed in the narration, the account may purport to have been written in that past time, or in some intervening time. The subject-matter of the historical novel tends to encompass both public and private events, and the protagonist may be either an actual figure from the past or an invented figure whose destiny is involved with actual events. The major practitioners of this, the 'classic' form of the historical novel in English and American literature, were Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper. The historical actions in Scott's 'Waverley' and Cooper's 'Leatherstocking' novels largely concerned social changes of great magnitude—the destruction of the Scottish clans, the impingement of the American settlers on the new land and their conflict with the Red man. The protagonist was often a man of mixed loyalties, and the diverse pressures which focused upon him mirrored in individual struggle the interplay of wider social forces.

In England, Thackeray carried forward the tradition of the genre, but reached back to connect it with the comic novels of Fielding and Smollett. Like Scott, Thackeray communicates a sense of momentous and irretrievable social change, but his dissatisfaction with that which prevailed in any given situation seems stronger than Scott's. On the Continent, the successors to Scott included Manzoni, Pushkin, Gogol, Hugo, Merimée, Stendhal, Balzac and Tolstoy. Gradually the interests and techniques of the historical novel began to be applied to contemporary events and the genre merged with, even as it helped create, the great realistic novels of the nineteenth century. A double movement occurred in which the treatment of 'history' in fiction became progressively more exotic and archaeologically accurate—as in Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862)—while treatment of the present became more 'naturalistic'.

The historical novel merges on one side with the realistic novel: on the other—as the historical substance generalizes—it merges with the national epic, and is perhaps the counter-phenomenon to Fielding's notion of the novel as a *comic* prose epic. The epic model is here Virgil's *Aeneid*, in so far as certain events can be seen as inaugurating and justifying (or failing to justify) the nation state.

The question of historical psychology—of the motives and feelings which can be attributed to people in the past—arises. Some historical novelists have attributed to characters in the past substantially the same inner lives as their contemporaries. This type of anachronism, which can be used to significant and to comic effect, is allied to other

'deteriorated' forms of the historical novel, including the 'historical romance', where only costume and not substance differentiates the period of the fiction from the present. See also ARCHAISM.

See Georg Lukács, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, *The Historical Novel* (1962).

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historicism Many branches of literary study involve the use of historical evidence: questions of textual transmission and authenticity, of archaic or obsolete language, of sources and literary borrowing, of relations between an author's life and work, are all in the strict sense 'historical'. But the term 'historicism' is usually reserved for that approach to literature which sets it in the context of the ideas, conventions and attitudes of the period in which it was written. Although good literature is 'not of an age, but for all time', the social and intellectual climate within which every writer has to work, and which his writing reflects in some degree, is subject to change. The uninformed modern reader is therefore likely to bring to the literature of the past assumptions and associations that may be quite alien to the frame of reference from which that literature derives its form and meaning. The aim of historicism is to make works of different periods more accessible to the modern reader by reconstructing the historically appropriate background as it affects an understanding and judgment of the work concerned.

The theory as well as the practice of historicism have not gone unchallenged. It has been argued, for instance, that a modern reconstruction of the cultural or ideological identity of a past age must still be essentially modern in its point of view. Historicism cannot transform a twentieth-century sensibility into that of a seventeenth- or nineteenth-century mind; it may only be transferring modern preconceptions from the critical to the historical plane of thought. Moreover, historicism must inevitably be selective and interpretative in treating what evidence there is concerning standards and habits of mind that differ from our own; it may tend to impose a falsifying uniformity and immobility upon its conception of a literary 'period', and its findings are themselves demonstrably subject to change from generation to generation. Much of the historicism of thirty years ago is now as obsolete as other kinds of literary interpretation which were merely of their age. In addition, there is a tendency in historicism to interpret and measure the work of great and original imagination by the commonplaces of its time, reducing the uniqueness and subtlety of genius to the lowest common denominator of a reconstructed idea of 'period'. If, for instance, a knowledge of Elizabethan ideas about kingship, or of their dramatic conventions, helps us to