

Novel, an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific [setting](#). Within its broad framework, the [genre](#) of the novel has [encompassed](#) an extensive range of types and styles: [picaresque](#), [epistolary](#), [Gothic](#), [romantic](#), realist, [historical](#)—to name only some of the more important ones

The term novel is a truncation of the Italian word *novella* (from the plural of Latin *novellus*, a late variant of *novus*, meaning “new”), so that what is now, in most languages, a diminutive denotes historically the parent form. The *novella* was a kind of enlarged anecdote like those to be found in the 14th-century Italian classic [Boccaccio’s *Decameron*](#), each of which exemplifies the etymology well enough. The stories are little new things, novelties, freshly minted diversions, toys; they are not reworkings of known fables or [myths](#), and they are lacking in weight and [moral](#) earnestness. It is to be noted that, despite the high example of novelists of the most profound seriousness, such as [Tolstoy](#), [Henry James](#), and [Virginia Woolf](#), the term novel still, in some quarters, carries overtones of lightness and frivolity. And it is possible to descry a tendency to triviality in the form itself. The ode or symphony seems to possess an inner mechanism that protects it from [aesthetic](#) or moral corruption, but the novel can descend to shameful commercial depths of sentimentality or [pornography](#).

Elements

[Plot](#)

The novel is propelled through its hundred or thousand pages by a device known as the story or plot. This is frequently conceived by the novelist in very simple terms, a mere nucleus, a jotting on an old envelope: for example, [Charles Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*](#) (1843) might have been conceived as “a [misanthrope](#) is reformed through certain magical visitations on Christmas Eve,” or [Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*](#) (1813) as “a young couple destined to be married have first to overcome the barriers of pride and prejudice,” or [Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*](#) (1866) as “a young man commits a crime and is slowly pursued in the direction of his punishment.” The detailed working out of the nuclear idea requires much ingenuity, since the plot of one novel is expected to be somewhat different

from that of another, and there are very few basic human situations for the novelist to draw upon. The dramatist may take his plot ready-made from fiction or biography—a form of theft sanctioned by Shakespeare—but the novelist has to produce what look like novelties.

The example of Shakespeare is a reminder that the ability to create an interesting plot, or even any plot at all, is not a prerequisite of the imaginative writer's craft. At the lowest level of fiction, plot need be no more than a string of stock devices for arousing stock responses of concern and excitement in the reader. The reader's interest may be captured at the outset by the promise of conflicts or mysteries or frustrations that will eventually be resolved, and he will gladly—so strong is his desire to be moved or entertained—suspend [criticism](#) of even the most trite modes of resolution. In the least sophisticated fiction, the knots to be untied are stringently physical, and the [denouement](#) often comes in a sort of triumphant violence. Serious fiction prefers its plots to be based on psychological situations, and its climaxes come in new states of awareness—chiefly self-knowledge—on the parts of the major characters.

Melodramatic plots, plots dependent on coincidence or improbability, are sometimes found in even the most elevated fiction; E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) is an example of a classic British novel with such a plot. But the novelist is always faced with the problem of whether it is more important to represent the formlessness of real life (in which there are no beginnings and no ends and very few simple motives for action) or to construct an [artifact](#) as well balanced and economical as a table or chair; since he is an artist, the claims of art, or [artifice](#), frequently prevail.

There are, however, ways of constructing novels in which plot may play a [desultory](#) part or no part at all. The traditional [picaresque novel](#)—a novel with a rogue as its central character—like Alain Lesage's *Gil Blas* (1715) or [Henry Fielding's](#) *Tom Jones* (1749), depends for movement on a succession of chance incidents. In the works of [Virginia Woolf](#), the [consciousness](#) of the characters, bounded by some poetic or symbolic device, sometimes provides all the fictional material. [Marcel Proust's](#) great *roman-fleuve*, [À la recherche du temps perdu](#) (1913–27; *Remembrance of Things Past*), has a [metaphysical](#) framework derived from the time theories of the philosopher [Henri Bergson](#), and it moves toward a moment of truth that is intended to be literally a revelation of the nature of reality. Strictly, any scheme will do to hold a novel together—raw action, the hidden syllogism of the [mystery story](#), prolonged solipsist contemplation—so long as the actualities or potentialities of human life are credibly expressed, with a consequent sense of illumination, or some lesser mode of artistic satisfaction, on the part of the reader.

Listen to article 9 minutes

[Character](#)

The [inferior](#) novelist tends to be preoccupied with plot; to the superior novelist the convolutions of the human personality, under the stress of artfully selected experience, are the chief fascination. Without character it was once accepted that there could be no [fiction](#). In the period since [World War II](#), the creators of what has come to be called the French *nouveau roman* (i.e., new novel) have deliberately demoted the human element, claiming the right of objects and processes to the writer's and reader's prior attention. Thus, in books termed [chosiste](#) (literally "thing-ist"), they make the furniture of a room more important than its human incumbents. This may be seen as a transitory protest against the long predominance of character in the novel, but, even on the popular level, there have been indications that readers can be held by things as much as by characters. [Henry James](#) could be vague in [The Ambassadors](#) (1903) about the [provenance](#) of his chief character's wealth; if he wrote today he would have to give his readers a tour around the factory or estate. The popularity of much undistinguished but popular fiction has nothing to do with its wooden characters; it is machines, procedures, organizations that draw the reader. The success of [Ian Fleming's](#) British spy stories in the 1960s had much to do with their [hero](#), [James Bond's](#) car, gun, and preferred way of mixing a martini.

But the true novelists remain creators of characters—prehuman, such as those in [William Golding's](#) *Inheritors* (1955); animal, as in [Henry Williamson's](#) *Tarka the Otter* (1927) or [Jack London's](#) *Call of the Wild* (1903); [caricatures](#), as in much of Dickens; or complex and unpredictable entities, as in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, or Henry James. The reader may be prepared to tolerate the most wanton-seeming stylistic tricks and formal difficulties because of the intense interest of the central characters in novels as [diverse](#) as [James Joyce's](#) *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and [Laurence Sterne's](#) *Tristram Shandy* (1760–67).

It is the task of literary critics to create a value [hierarchy](#) of fictional character, placing the complexity of the Shakespearean view of man—as found in the novels of Tolstoy and Joseph Conrad—above creations that may be no more than simple personifications of some single characteristic, like some of those by Dickens. It frequently happens, however, that the common reader prefers surface simplicity—easily memorable cartoon figures like Dickens' never-despairing Mr. Micawber and [devious](#) Uriah Heep—to that wider view of personality, in which character seems to engulf the reader, subscribed to by the great novelists of France and Russia. The whole nature of human identity remains in doubt, and writers who voice that doubt—like the French exponents of the *nouveau roman* [Alain Robbe-Grillet](#) and [Nathalie Sarraute](#), as well as many others—are in effect rejecting a purely [romantic](#) view of character. This view imposed the [author's](#) image of himself—the only human image he properly possessed—on the rest of the human world. For the unsophisticated reader of fiction, any created personage with a firm position in time-space and the most superficial parcel of behavioral (or even sartorial) attributes will be taken for a character. Though the critics may regard it as heretical, this tendency to accept a character is in conformity with the usages of real life. The average person has at least a suspicion of his own complexity and inconsistency of makeup, but he sees the rest of the world as composed of much simpler [entities](#). The result is that novels whose characters are created

out of the author's own introspection are frequently rejected as not "true to life." But both the higher and the lower orders of novel readers might agree in condemning a lack of memorability in the personages of a work of fiction, a failure on the part of the author to seem to add to the reader's stock of remembered friends and acquaintances. Characters that seem, on recollection, to have a life outside the bounds of the books that contain them are usually the ones that earn their creators the most regard. Depth of psychological penetration, the ability to make a character real as oneself, seems to be no primary [criterion](#) of fictional talent.

Scene, or [setting](#)

The makeup and behaviour of fictional characters depend on their [environment](#) quite as much as on the personal [dynamic](#) with which their author endows them: indeed, in [Émile Zola](#), environment is of overriding importance, since he believed it determined character. The entire action of a novel is frequently determined by the locale in which it is set. Thus, [Gustave Flaubert](#)'s *Madame Bovary* (1857) could hardly have been placed in Paris, because the tragic life and death of the heroine have a great deal to do with the circumscriptions of her provincial [milieu](#). But it sometimes happens that the main locale of a novel assumes an importance in the reader's [imagination](#) comparable to that of the characters and yet somehow separable from them. Wessex is a giant brooding presence in [Thomas Hardy](#)'s novels, whose human characters would probably not behave much differently if they were set in some other rural locality of England. The popularity of [Sir Walter Scott](#)'s "Waverley" novels is due in part to their evocation of a romantic Scotland. Setting may be the prime consideration of some readers, who can be drawn to Conrad because he depicts life at sea or in the East Indies; they may be less interested in the complexity of human relationships that he presents.

The regional novel is a recognized species. The sequence of four novels that [Hugh Walpole](#) began with *Rogue Herries* (1930) was the result of his desire to do homage to the part of Cumberland, in England, where he had elected to live. The great [Yoknapatawpha cycle](#) of [William Faulkner](#), a classic of 20th-century [American literature](#) set in an imaginary county in Mississippi, belongs to the category as much as the once-popular confections about Sussex that were written about the same time by the English novelist [Sheila Kaye-Smith](#). Many novelists, however, gain a creative [impetus](#) from avoiding the same setting in book after book and deliberately seeking new locales. The English novelist [Graham Greene](#) apparently needed to visit a fresh scene in order to write a fresh novel. His ability to [encapsulate](#) the essence of an exotic setting in a single book is exemplified in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948); his contemporary [Evelyn Waugh](#) stated that the [West Africa](#) of that book replaced the true remembered West Africa of his own experience. Such power is not uncommon: the Yorkshire moors have been romanticized because [Emily Brontë](#) wrote of them in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and literary tourists have visited Stoke-on-Trent, in northern England, because it [comprises](#) the "Five Towns" of [Arnold Bennett](#)'s novels of the early 20th century. Others go to the Monterey, California, of [John Steinbeck](#)'s novels in the expectation of experiencing a *frisson* added to the locality by an act of creative imagination.

James Joyce, who remained inexhaustibly stimulated by Dublin, has exalted that city in a manner that even the guidebooks recognize.

The setting of a novel is not always drawn from a real-life locale. The literary artist sometimes prides himself on his ability to create the [totality](#) of his fiction—the setting as well as the characters and their actions. In the Russian expatriate [Vladimir Nabokov](#)'s *Ada* (1969) there is an entirely new [space–time continuum](#), and the English scholar [J.R.R. Tolkien](#) in his *Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) created an “alternative world” that appeals greatly to many who are dissatisfied with the existing one. The world of interplanetary travel was imaginatively created long before the first moon landing. The properties of the future [envisaged](#) by H.G. Wells's novels or by [Aldous Huxley](#) in *Brave New World* (1932) are still recognized in an age that those authors did not live to see. The [composition](#) of place can be a magical fictional gift.

Whatever the locale of his work, every true novelist is concerned with making a credible environment for his characters, and this really means a close attention to sense data—the immediacies of food and drink and colour—far more than abstractions like “nature” and “city.” The London of [Charles Dickens](#) is as much incarnated in the smell of wood in lawyers' chambers as in the skyline and vistas of streets.