

CONCLUSION: TRIUMPH OF THE NOVEL

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Part 1 – A flourishing of fictional works

The 18th century, pursuing a movement started in the second half of the 17th century, was truly the time when the novel developed and became a major genre. We mentioned and commented on some great books during this week of MOOC but we could name a whole crowd of major and minor authors who wrote works that still deserve to be read, and as long as we do the effort of getting used to the time distance, can still be read with much pleasure.

Almost randomly, one could mention *La Mouche* by Mouhy, prolific author who wrote all kinds of fictional work, *The Perverted Peasant* by Restif de La Bretonne, *Faublas* by Louvet de Couvray or the *Lettres neuchâteloises* by Isabelle de Charrière.

Part 2 – Hybridisation and genre interweaving

All these authors developed a genre-blending entertainment and depth, escapism and inner life analysis, fiction and truth, narration and reflection. Since the beginning of the century and even more after *the Persian Letters* or *The Life of Marianne*'s great successes, 18th-century novel is characterised by hybridisation and blending of genres. It was a decisive moment in literary history and 19th-century novels inherited this ambition to describe the true nature of a philosophy of passions and an analysis of human relationships in and by the adventure stories happening to fictional characters.

Part 3 – The novel and the Enlightenment debate

It must be emphasised that the novel is not in a literary bubble, isolated from the world. It received and restructured the debates that cross society and even more, it participated to them. It's *Marianne*, forcing the reader to think about what makes true nobility, birth or merit. It's *Cleveland*, interested, as many Prevost readers were, by the debates on atheistic materialism. It's the controversy of Newtonians and Cartesians at the Academy of Sciences, mocked in Diderot's *The Indiscreet Jewels*, the quarrel over French music evoked in a letter from Rousseau's *New Heloise*, it's the optimistic philosophy, the religious intolerance, slavery or war's misdeeds, reviewed in Voltaire's *Candide*. In short, all of the intellectual debates of the time could be found in novels, sometimes explicitly and sometimes evasively, or in an allegorical form, including certain debates concerning politics or religion that could not take place so directly outside of fiction.

In an absolute and all-Catholic monarchy, fictional literature had the capacity for freedom in indirect speech that serious writing could not always afford. It is no coincidence that Marivaux or Prevost, among the greatest novelists of the time, also wrote in newspapers. "Le Spectateur français" for Marivaux, "Le Pour et Contre" for Prevost, periodicals that echoed debates of the times, anecdotes and topics that were discussed. The novel had the same readers this periodical press did, interested in

the same subjects. More than in other forms of literature, more rigid or standardised, this genre without nobility, without place in the hierarchy and without codes was marked by the circulation of ideas.

We observe that many of the major or minor collaborators of the *Encyclopaedia* had also written novels. Besides the obvious Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire or Montesquieu, we can add forgotten authors like Marmontel or Toussaint. And one can think that the realisation of the novel's ability to transcribe real life has something to do with the attempt of some 18th-century authors like Diderot, Sedaine or Beaumarchais to reform theatre with what has been called "the bourgeois drama".

Part 4 – The novel and moral standards secularisation

It would be an error of perspective to imagine that novels only record and echo debates and thesis thought elsewhere. They fully participate and use the novel genre own resources. Historians of ideas have described the 18th century as a time of moral standards secularisation, which means that morality was no longer thought of solely by religious norms but by social norms. One could show that the novel largely contributed to this secularisation of moral debates.

Novelists forced the reader to live vicarious experiences and reflections that accompany them by telling stories that put them on stage and entrusting them to characters who live and contend with them. The libertine novel, for example, is not just an erotic literature for entertainment. It described scenes that directly conflict with religious moral norms and often accompanied them with dissertations seeking to found morals not on divine commandments but on the requirements of human nature. Thus, it broadly disseminated in a clandestine, but rather widely circulated, printed material a whole heterodox philosophy that was previously communicated in a much more confidential and handwritten form. It also helped articulating it effectively and staging it in the characters' adventures.

Let us say for example that *Therese the Philosopher* probably did much more for the diffusion of heterodox thought in 18th-century society than Diderot's complete work, and the novel as a whole contributed to the Enlightenment debate on a very different level than the *Encyclopaedia*, but no doubt, just as effectively.