

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

2001

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Michael R. (2001) "To Barchester and Beyond: Entering the World of a Novel Today," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol3/iss1/3>

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To Barchester and Beyond: Entering the World of a Novel Today

**To Barchester and Beyond:
Entering the World of a Novel Today**

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The novel has endured as a literary presence in the twentieth century, though it has been given new forms by various writers. Readers have embraced these different forms as fervently as their earlier counterparts embraced *Middlemarch* and *Barchester Towers*. Yet the reading of the traditional novel, like the reading of a series of related novels, seems largely to limit itself to students and scholars in academic settings; even a contemporary series of novels, like the one Margaret Drabble begins with *The Radiant Way*, is not readily available at even the largest of the upscale bookstores. Yet one cannot assume that readers today generally have no interest in the long narrative which George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens prolifically brought to the reading public of another century, for the novel contains the closest literary approximations of human life itself, appealing to the widely different habits of readers today.

Today's reader needs the novel as much as the Victorian reader did, despite the altered reading habits of the more recent century. The novel offers a unique, permanent place where one can enter a world outside the one he¹ knows. Only in the novel can the reader find a world into which he can enter for a long period of time. Poetry, drama, and short fiction offer only brief chances for immersion in another world, and even then, those forms are more tightly controlled by the author. The novel is a vast landscape that the author cannot completely control, and it contains more than just a few scenes to provide support to a moral position. The novel grows in a way that is strikingly close to real life, and yet retains a formal structure that offers a reader insight into human affairs that real life does not always provide.

Today, as in the nineteenth century, the reader of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, by Anthony Trollope, enters the world of Barsetshire with this line: " 'I can never bring myself to believe it, John,' said Mary Walker, the pretty daughter of John Walker..." (31). The reader must know his job before he can process this sentence, lest the novel become a difficult reading experience. Perhaps not all readers today know what they are supposed to be doing when they come across a line such as Trollope uses to start his novel. Of course, the reader must realize, or at

¹I use the masculine general pronoun because I am a male reader, and I recommend all writers use their own gender for the gender of the general pronoun.

least intuit, that he is entering into a silent compact with the author. The author is giving the reader information by writing the novel, and the reader must agree to receive the information as the author chooses to reveal it. Trollope gives his audience an "it" to deduce and a character to meet. Much of the trouble in not properly understanding the novel lies in the failure to "accept" this contract.

The unique position of novelist in relation to the reader cannot be found in any other arrangement in society. The novelist may, like Trollope, be dead. Even if living, he will probably never meet the reader in person. Still, the novelist is inviting each reader into his imaginary world by offering the novel. Trollope offers an extended series of novels set in his Barsetshire, so that the reader may join him as he explores the world which his novel reveals in detail. "I may not boast that any beside myself have so realized the place" (861), writes Trollope, who is somewhat of a tour guide into this imagined world. The reader must trust that the guide will take him through the world in an orderly fashion, and that all salient points will be addressed. If the reader doesn't trust the narrator, he will not understand why it is that he learns of "it" on the first page but does not know what it is until later in Chapter One, and why he does not learn what Rev. Josiah Crawley did until much, much later. The narrator presents the information in a way that real life experience cannot, in a fashion designed to pique the curiosity and to best illuminate the psychology of the characters and importance

of events. So we learn of "it" first so that the reader understands that "it" is of great importance and, by extension, is greatly anticipating what "it" might be. Real life does not allow for such revelation, but Trollope's narration can, if the reader respects the author's presentation of his world.

So the narrator of *The Last Chronicle* can tell us that "the letter did not reach Miss Crawley till after the magistrates' meeting on Thursday, but it will be better for our story that it should be given here" (76) and then proceed to show us the letter before the character reads it. And the narrator can also tell us that "what passed between them need not be repeated here word for word" (92) after he has given us the details of a previous interchange. Trollope can also let us know that Archdeacon Grantly's "feeling toward the girl had changed" (599) before Grantly has even started his talk with Grace Crawley—a sort of "giving away" the ending so that the reader may concentrate on and enjoy the novelist's art in building the scene. This annotated narration is foremost among the reasons the novel is a unique form that instructs as it delights.

Once the reader tacitly accepts the narrator's conditions for reading the novel, he can fully enjoy the benefit of the narrator's commentary. In real life, one cannot read a letter before it has been received, nor can he spend more time on an important conversation than on an unimportant one. It is common for one to spend a half-hour trying

to order a book from a complete stranger and only ten minutes on the phone with a best friend, though the time used is in inverse proportion to that time's importance in the whole life. In the pages of the novel, the scene's importance rather than its actual duration can determine how many words it gets in the narration. Because of that, the reader can find insight into human conduct in a novel far more readily than it is often found in real life, which omits details and leaves little time for contemplation. The novel is greatly enriched through the act of revelation. The reader, though, must trust the narrator to reveal what is embedded in the story before he can reap the narrative benefits of that revelation.

What common ground exists in the "agreement" between the writer who tries to create human feeling in an imaginary world and the reader who turns to the imaginary world for wisdom and meaning? The answer that readily suggests itself is the ubiquitous "personal experience." By "personal experience," I mean the everyday events and changes that people live through in the course of their lives—the collected information from interaction with other people. Both writer and reader bring this to their exchange of the imaginary, and each uses it as a tool in his own special way. The writer is in some degree bound by what he has lived directly, and cannot create a world that does not bear some resemblance to his own. Yet the writer of fiction cannot simply write autobiography; in order to fashion his world, he must use his experience to

inform his creative vision. As Nathaniel Hawthorne states in the "Custom House" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, his narration is built on a true life that "lies like a dream behind me" (50). There is personal experience that allows Hawthorne great insight into the world of Puritan New England, but that is limited by looking at it as though reflected in a mirror, with the details not being so pronounced that they bind the author's ability to create characters and places.

There is, of course, more that the writer must bring to the narrative, but I shall return to that later. Reading, not writing, the novel is of utmost concern to this essay, so here I consider the reader's identification with character and his placement of self in the narrative. My sister says she reads novels to be a "voyeur" in the world of the characters. This desire for clandestine involvement in the affairs of other people undoubtedly leads more than one reader to the pages of the novel, while this desire also leaves the reader confused because he can never know what the narrator knows about the novel's world. In all likelihood, the reader is not really a voyeur. Why read at all if the act of reading is simply the act of observing and not participating in the novel's world? Surely the novel is not simply a fantastic escape from the real world. Or is it?

I contend that, through reading the novel, the reader becomes a shadow character himself. He is not a voyeur, and if he were, he would not be truly reading the the novel. Reading implies that the reader is consciously

in receipt of information that he must arrange to make sense of the novel. Whether the narrator addresses the reader as “you” or identifies himself as “I,” like Anthony Trollope, or does neither, that narrator is necessarily in a dialogue with the reader. The reader must become the shadow character by agreeing to a conversation of sorts with the narrator. In this way, the reading is as meaningful an act as talking to a neighbor. Yet the reader as character must understand that his conversation is with a fixed set of words from the narrator. Without the reader’s responses—spoken, written, or simply thought—the conversation does not occur, and neither the narrator/novelist nor the character/reader has accrued any benefit from the experience.

Granted, the reader can also find a role in the novel by living through another character, or by identifying strongly with a character. The tendency to attach love or significance to a particular character must give the novelist happiness, for it is then that the fictional character he created becomes the object of feelings normally directed at human beings. In such a case the reader might engage in a sort of dialogue with a character. The information exchange is not in place, as with the reader and narrator (unless the narration is in the first person), but it is similar: the character’s life in the story is addressed to the reader who in turn addresses feelings of admiration or concern to the character. This can happen when the character and the reader “share” a common experience. An example is

offered by the Rev. Mr. Crawley in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, with whom I, as a reader, empathize.

Reverend Crawley is accused of stealing a check for twenty pounds, and knows only that he did cash the check. He cannot tell anyone from where he received the check, and the progress of his difficulties—though later resolved—occupies much of Trollope’s novel. Crawley says that: “ ‘It is because I cannot tell you where [the check] came from that I ought to be—either in Bedlam, as a madman, or in the county gaol as a thief’ ” (212). While his statement suggests self-pity, it also accents how even Crawley cannot accept the gray area between innocence and guilt that the author has given him. Yet this sort of gray area is encountered all the time in everyday life. I admire Reverend Crawley for enduring so much speculation on his true nature because others cannot be made to see the gray area the novelist and reader can see. Of course the reader may wish, unless he already has done so, to avoid having to see a character’s hardship so sympathetically because of personal history, either the character’s or the reader’s. The novel provides such a reader the room to consider situations without having to live them.

In order to consider the purpose of literature to aid in the individual’s desire to step outside of his own life, the words of Anna Akhmatova are instructive:

It’s impossible to get here
By either rowboat or cart.
The water stands deep

On the rotten snow,
Besieging the estate
On all sides. . . (250)

These lines serve as a good metaphor for a way of reading the novel in order to learn of those areas of human experience in which the reader has not found himself. How many people have found themselves in the position of Stephen Cox, the writer Margaret Drabble sends to Cambodia in *The Gates of Ivory*? Most readers of this novel likely will never travel to Cambodia, and I doubt any will wish to find themselves dying in the jungle in order to learn that social identity is reliant on being socially identified. But most readers will no doubt find the scene of Stephen Cox's death enlightening: "It was not very interesting, there would be no revelation, no confrontation, no lights from heaven would flash, neither God nor Pol Pot would speak from the burning bush" (355). Drabble certainly has never died in Cambodia, but her character has, and so she knows intimately the circumstance. She is able to convey to the reader a powerful message about a person's construction of self and the human desire for personal identification. The interested reader is suited to learn from this instance. Both do not have to go to Cambodia or die to make the parable meaningful.

Stephen's path coincides with that of the protagonist of Huxley's *Island*: "Will Farnaby was neither here nor now" (7) upon reaching the supposed elysium of Pala. Both Cox and Farnaby have returned to the wilderness in

an attempt to find the essences of their identities, and both find that identity is a concept of civilization's making. In the wild, they "die." The reader can consider better the role of identity in his own life by reading such stories, and the novel provides him the means to make such connections outside his realm of experience. Taking the reader outside his own plausible realm of experience is one of the strongest ways in which a novel can move a reader to a personal catharsis, and is why, for example, dystopian novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* inspired political action against Communist governments in Eastern Europe.

The novel as a literary force makes its own case for its purpose in its endurance. The novel reminds its reader of its continued availability in that it will not leave the reader as long as a copy of it is found on the shelf or even in the reader's memory. Both the reader and the writer accept this as they enter the novel's world. As it is, the very concept of the novel ensures that the novel exists permanently—not permanently in its precise definition, but in a usage relative to recorded history. The novel is not necessarily created with the readers of the next century in mind, and probably should not be. Trollope creates Barsetshire as a city of its time, commenting on contemporary writers (Messrs. Sentiment and Anticant in *The Warden*), religion, and politics. It is not the topical matters the author considers, but rather his exploration of universal human values, that ensures the series continued life. A novel like Trollope's *The Last Chronicle* is permanent

physically so long as a copy of it exists, and, more importantly, permanent in its content as well when its author illuminates existence in a way that has enduring relevance. So the reader always can access the wisdom of Trollope's world, because the novel is a written document that presents its author's findings to the world. Whether Trollope thought that anyone in even 1900 would still read his work is irrelevant; the work is a lasting volume that can be read in 2001 as well as 1867 with most of its essence still accessible.

By serving the reader on a continuing basis, the novel provides scenes that can be combed again and again for their perspective on human affairs. No one can stop in the middle of life and examine a scene, but the reader can bookmark page 611 and return to it for clarification. The novel is designed to document the wisdom and imagination of its creator, and thus allows for the agreement between the reader and the novelist to remain in effect years after the novelist dies.

The novel allows the reader to make that agreement as often in the present as he likes. *The Last Chronicle of Barset* concludes:

. . . to me Barset has been a real county, and its city a real city, and the spires and towers have been before my eyes and the voices of the people are known to my ears, and the pavement of the city ways

are familiar to my footsteps. To
them all I now say farewell. . . this
shall be the last chronicle of Barsest.

(861-2)

So Trollope closes his history of Barsest. But he knows that he can continue to visit Barsest in his mind as often as he likes. This is the end of the actively written Barsest chronicle, which is only one of six novels on that place that exist. Trollope's chronicle continues, as does the reader's reading of the written word. The world is permanent for the figurative reader as long as there is a reader to be found. Each reader may interpret the textual Barsestshire differently, and so the author's world continues to be modified even after he dies. Trollope is being ironic as regards this being the "last chronicle"—even the reader can, upon finishing the last novel of the series, return to page one of *The Warden* and revisit the world to meet once more a Trollope who has yet to follow his world to its conclusion, a Warden named Reverend Harding, and a living, fiery Mrs. Proudie (whom the reader meets in *Barchester Towers*).

Trollope, the narrator in written word, is permanent, as are his comments and asides. George Eliot similarly plays with the reader at the start of *Adam Bede*: "With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader" (5). So Eliot reaches into the past when the reader

reads because she has already finished the story in her mind and on paper, for the book is published. Also, she knows that this promise to her reader can be made as many times as the reader chooses to read *Adam Bede*. Trollope and Eliot realize that the permanence of the novel and its contents might lead both reader and the author to come “back” to the world again.

It is the ready availability of the novel that gives it a large role in modern life. Poetry similarly endures, but does not capture more than glimpses of larger worlds. Whether poetics are graceful or brutal, they constrain the poet, preventing the expression of details that wonderfully coalesce in an eight-hundred-page novel. Only the novel gives the reader an extended world in which to be for more than a few minutes. Humans need to escape to imagination, to study themselves in a context apart from real life. A human being can best be enriched as a person by carefully considering as many experiences and emotions as possible, and the world of the novel is the perfect place for that study. Pages upon pages of words, written down and set in print, offer a solid environment into which a person may enter. The reader need not fret about the laws and ways in which this world is cognitively established—the author has agreed to be tour guide and builder in the novel’s world, so that the reader can enter into pure experience. There are no worries about bills, taxes, yard work, or consequences—because the reader is a quiet player in the world, one who observes so that he may learn more

about the condition into which he has been born. That only the novel offers this safe place for the study of the human species; only the novel gives it an important role in workaday human life.

Modern readers ought to want to read novels more than they currently do, for each novel is another world of experience to visit, and each novel offers another chance for the reader to grow as a human being. Perhaps the postmodern age is not the easiest time to convince readers that the novel should be read so that the reader may learn more about universal human values. Yet this is a better time than any for the novel to be relevant to life. In an age where the value of human existence is assumed to be relative to one's values and experiences, a novel with as vast a scope as *The Last Chronicle of Barset* will offer every reader something to illuminate or inform his individual life.

The novel strives to be a legend for readers to check while navigating life. Of all forms of literature only the novel does this. Only in reading the novel can one find an enduring world within the world, a place where human complexities are sorted out in print so as to ease the burden of having to deal with them in the reader's own life. The novel puts the reader in a unique relationship with a writer who can entertain, provoke and illuminate life, both fictional and real, even across centuries. No other form reveals as much about the human condition and that enduring revelatory power is why readers still find the novel

worth reading today. Styles and reasons for the reading of novels may vary from reader to reader; each approach to reading is mediated by different circumstances. Essentially, though, each reader can approach the novel on its own terms while creating and discovering connections with the inhabitants of the novel's world. Anthony Burgess writes, "Only through the exploration of language can the personality be coaxed into yielding a few more of its secrets" (156). These connections with the novel reflect an exploration of the reader's self. When made through the pages of a novel, that exploration can yield all the more valuable discoveries to the reader.

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