The Great American Novel Never Will Come

By James Huneker

James Huneker, the Famous Critic, Discussing Certain Phases of Modern Fiction, Says There May Be Thousands but Not One.
gence, and culture; its cannibal manners, canned music—preferably pseudo-African—canned art, canned food, canned literature; its devotion to the mediocre—what a field for our aspiring young secretaries to society."

Cheap prophylactics, political and religious—for religion is fast being butchered to make the sensational evangelists' holiday—are in vogue. They affect our fiction mongers, who burn to avenge wrongs, write novels about the "down-trodden masses," and sermons on social evils—evils that have always existed, always will exist. Like the knife grinders, story they have none to tell. Why write fiction, or what they are pleased to call fiction? Why not join the brave brigade of agitators and pamphleteers? The lay-lecturer are carrying off the sweetstakes. For them Mr. Howells is a superannuated writer. World there were made like him in continuity of speech, wholesomeness of judgment, nobility of ideals, and in the shrewd perception of character.

Fiction, too, is a fine art, though this potent fact has escaped! the juvenile Paul Prye, who are mainly endeavoring to arouse class against mass. It's an old dodge, this equality theory, as old as Belzebub, Lord of Flies. When all fruit fails, welcome envy and malicious slander. When you have nothing else to write about, attack your neighbor, especially if he bath a much coveted vineyard. Max Stirner, least understood of social philosophers, wrote: "Mind your own business," and he forged on the arvil of experience a mighty leading motive for the conduct of life. But our busy little penny don't see in his golden wooto a sufficient sentimental appeal. It doesn't flatter the "masses." Mr. Bryan a few years ago told us that we were all middle class. What is middle class? In Carlyle's day it was a "gigman"; in ours it is the owner of a "flivver!"

This twaddle about "democratic art" is the bane of our literature. There is only good art. Whether it deals with such "democratic" subjects as "L'Assoire" or "Germinie Lacerteux," or such "aristocratic" themes as those of D'Annunzio and Paul Bourget, it is the art thereof that determines the product. I hold no brief for the sterile fiction that is enrolled under the banner of "Art for Art." I go so far as to believe that a novelist with a beautiful style often allows that style to get in the way of human nature. Stained-glass windows have their use, but they falsify the day-light. A decorative style may suit pseudo-mediaeval romances, but for twentieth century realism it is sadly amiss. Nor is the introspective school of psychological analysis to be welcomed recommended. It has been well-nigh done to death by Stendhal, Meredith, James, and Bourget; and it is as cold as a star. Flaubert urged as an objection to writing a novel proving something that the other fellow can prove precisely the opposite. In either case selection plays the rôle.

The chief argument against the novel "with a purpose"—as the jargon goes—is its lack of validity either as a document or as art. A novel may be anything, but it must not be polemic. Zola has been, still is, the evil genius of many talented chaps who "ling ink," not to make a genuine book, but to create a sensation. Such writers lack patience, art, and direction. They always keep one eye on the box office. Indeed, the young men and women of the day, who are squandering upon paper their golden genius, painfully resemble in their productions the dime novels once published by the

Imanted Beadle or the Incubations in the Saturday weeklies of long ago. But in those publications there was more virility. The heroes then were not well-dressed namby-pambies; the villains were villainous; the detectives detected real crimes, and were not weavers of metaphysical abstractions like your latter-day miracle workers of an impossible Scotland Yard; and the girls were girls, neither neurasthenic, nor did they outgrow all creation. Other days, other plays. The "new" novelists still deal with the same raw material of melodrama. Their handling of love episodes has much of the blaring brass quality of old-fashioned Italian opera. And they loudly twang the stringy of sloppy sentiment, which evoke not music, but mush and moonshine. And these are our "motion-masters" today.

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There can be no objection to literature and life coming to grips. Letters should touch reality. Many a sturdy blow has been struck at abuses by penniless masquerading behind fiction. No need to summon examples. As for realism—I deny there are commonplace people. Only those writers are commonplace that believe in the phrase. It is one of the paradoxes of art that the commonplace folk of Thackeray, Flaubert, or Anthony Trollope who delight us between covers would in life greatly bore us. The ennui is artistically suggested, though not experienced by the reader. It is the magic of the novelist, his style and philosophy, that make his creations vital.

Dostoievsky says there are no ugly women—to be sure he puts the expression in the mouth of the old sensualist Karazov—and as a corollary I maintain that nothing is uninteresting if painted by a master hand, from carrots to Chopin. And as for the historical novel, there is "Sentimental Education" as a model, if you desire something epical in scale and charged with the modern ironic spirit. A Flaubertian masterpiece, this book, with its daylight atmosphere; the inimitable sound, shape, gait, and varied prose rhythm of its sentences, its marvelous gallery of portraits executed in the Dutch manner of Hals and Vermeer, its nearness to its environment, and its fidelity to the pattern of life. It is a true "historical" novel, for it is real—to employ the admirable simile of Mr. Howells.

No need to transpose the tragic glow of Artzibashof to America; we are an optimistic peoples, thanks to our air and sky, political conditions, and the immigration of sturdy peasant folk. Yet we, too, have our own peculiar gloom and misery and social problems to solve. We are far from being the "Shadow land" of fiction, as a certain English critic said. When last year I praised in these columns the dissontantal art of Michael Artzibashof it was not with the idea that either his style or his pessimism should be aped. That way originality lies. But I do contend that in the practice of his art, its sincerity, its profundity, he might be profitably patterned after by the younger generation. Art should elevate as well as amuse. Must fiction always be silly and shallow? It need be neither sordid nor didactic.

William James put the matter in a nutshell when he wrote that "the whole atmosphere of present-day Utopian literature tastes mawkish and diswatery to people who still keep a sense of life's more bitter flavors." And on this fundamentally sound note I must end my little sermon—for I find that I have been practicing the very preaching against which I warned embryo novelists. But, then, isn't every critic a lay-preacher?