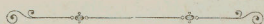


The Novel With A Purpose.



OF course all novels have some purpose, yet in many cases this purpose may be neither lofty nor artistic, but merely mercenary or menial. The "novel with a purpose," however, is one whose purpose is moral or ethical.

More than at any other time has the novel of recent generations aimed to influence people's actions. In this attempt considerable success has been achieved. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was written with the sole intent of exposing the hardships of slavery in the United States. No other book, with the single exception of the Bible, has been so widely read, and no novel ever exercised such an irresistible influence. As a literary creation, however, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is insignificant, while to-day it is interesting merely as history.

That oblivion of moral endeavor is not a necessary adjunct in the novel, is indisputably proved by Dickens. In "Nicholas Nickleby" he sought to abolish schools like Dotheboys Hall, and in other novels he endeavored to arouse the feelings of his readers against unjust conditions of workhouses and against unfair laws. Dickens was no less successful in the attainment of his ethical object than he was in winning the highest literary distinction.

Yet when the prime object of the novel is to influence its readers to perform some desired act, almost inevitably its literary value is impaired to a certain extent. The novel is distinct from the oration, the pamphlet, and the sermon, and any attempt to inculcate the essence of one of these into the vitality of the novel cannot but reduce its vigor. Fiction is indeed a fine art, and fine art has no practical end. Why is it then that the novelist "with a purpose" has often written better novels than the novelist who sought "art for art's sake"? Although the task of the former has certainly been more exacting, their success has been all the more pronounced. The reason for this apparent anomaly is I feel that the men who strived to better conditions by their writings possessed a richer imagination and a warmer sympathy for human nature than most of those who

wrote with some other design. The author who has felt that he had a mission to perform frequently was fired with the zeal and fervor of the missionary.

In spite of this advantage, the difficulties to be overcome in writing novels that will influence people's conduct and feelings are tremendous. The perception of the writer must indeed be sensitive to warn him when he overdoes his effect and approaches the sphere of the sermon or pamphlet. Instead of preaching or arguing, he must accomplish his purpose subtly by the most delicate touches. Otherwise, although he may write a book that may win momentary popularity, he will not erect a lasting literary monument. The very fact that the problems of yesterday are insignificant to-day, means that the novel depends for its existence primarily on its interest as fiction.

While the main object of the novel is that by dealing with truth it serves instead of experience, as long as novels are written, some no doubt will be "novels with a purpose." If the author is successful in influencing a reasonable number of people, this aim is achieved. Only rarely, however, will he create anything of permanent artistic merit, for the genius of a Dickens is required to make the elements of art and reform accomplices.

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