

The Greek Novel

Fiction, Erotic Education and
Fidelity

Have you ever read a “novel”?

What is a “novel”?

“A fictional prose narrative of considerable length, typically having a plot that is unfolded by the actions, speech, and thoughts of the characters”.

NOTE:

- Narrative (there is a story involved)
- Prose (this is the medium, there is no poetry)
- Fictional (this means that the narrative not true, but is invented by the author)

Greek Novel: the traditional “corpus”

- Chariton, *Callirhoe* (I century AD)
 - Xenophon of Ephesus, *The Ephesian Story* (I-II AD)
 - Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* (II AD)
 - Longus, *Daphni and Chloe* (II-III AD)
 - Heliodorus, *The Aethiopian Story* (III-IV AD)
- >> These are late works. As Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, they all belong to the Imperial Era. The novel is certainly the latest genre of the Greek literature.

Greek Novel: main features

- Combination of love and adventure
- Plot: the protagonists, two young men, meet by chance, fall in love at the beginning of the novel and they decide to get married. Then, after or before the wedding, they are forced to separate one from the other.

But the protagonists keep their mutual fidelity and at the end of the novel they achieve reunion

>> HAPPY END!

Greek Novel: our expectations

- Since the novel is such an important genre in our contemporary society, the Greeks are great, they created the novel and they gave it to us!
- Romantic stories like these were certainly very popular: all the Greeks were certainly enthusiast about it! We can imagine Greek crowds reading these ancient texts and enjoying them!

These expectations, however, are not true: the novel in Greece was a “neglected” genre

- The word “novel” does not exist in Greece.
- The Greek novels were not popular in Greece.

WHY?

Let us discover this together!

How? Reading ancient sources!

Greek Novel: a “neglected” genre

“Stories serve two purposes: either to bestow pleasure on the ear or to encourage the reader to virtue as well. The ear is delighted [...] by **realistic narratives full of the fictitious adventures of lovers** in which Petronius Arbiter so freely indulged and with which Apuleius, astonishingly, sometimes **amused** himself. This whole category of stories, that promise only to gratify the ear, expels a philosophical treatise from its holy shrine and relegates it to the children’s nurseries”.

Macrobius, *Commentary of the Scipio’s Dream*, V AD

Why is Macrobius' source interesting?

- It gives us one of the few definitions of the novels in antiquity >>
 - a) realistic narratives full of the **fictitious** adventures of lovers
 - b) **amusing** stories (different from children's fables)
- Macrobius also suggests us that the Greek novel was seen as a sort of impious genre, which telling **fictitious** and **amusing** stories is far from the truth ("it expels a philosophical treatise from its holy shrine"!).

Greek Novel: a “neglected” genre

“Every one should look for stories which have been composed to tell us about **facts really happened**. Conversely, we must reject **all the fictions** composed by writers of the past in the form of history, **narratives of love** and all that sort of stuff”.

Julian the Emperor, *Epistles*, IV AD

Why is Julian' source interesting?

- It gives us another of the few definitions of the novels in antiquity >>
narratives of love
- Julian makes a strong attack to the Greek novel, even stronger than Macrobius' one: "we must reject". What is the reason for this?

Let us answer together!

“Every one should look for stories which have been composed to tell us about **facts really happened**. Conversely, we must reject **all the fictions** composed by writers of the past in the form of history, **narratives of love** and all that sort of stuff”.

Julian the Emperor, *Epistles*, IV AD

A genre to “banish”

- The Greek novel is not telling us stories really happened, but invented.

Even more than Macrobius, Julian states that this genre should be forgotten, because **it is not true**.

What does this attack suggest us about the value the Greek gave to writing stories?

The adherence to reality should be the foundation of writing stories.

If you are not persuaded, let us read together the prologue of Thucydides' *Stories*, which you know very well, and an observation by Polybius, another Greek historian.

Let us read with attention!

“To hear this history rehearsed, since no fables are inserted in it, shall be perhaps **not delightful**. But who desires to look **into the truth of things done** and which [...] may be done again, [...] he shall find enough in my work to make him think it **profitable**. And it is compiled rather for an **everlasting possession** than to be rehearsed for a prize”.

Thucydides, *Stories*, 1.22, V BC

Profitable and immortal

- Thucydides makes a very important opposition between profitable and delightful.
- The only profitable work is the one which focuses on the truth of things. This kind of work can last forever!

Thucydides, *Stories*, 1.22, V BC

Let us read with attention!

- “Timaeus says that the greatest fault in history is lack of truth.”
- “If you take truth from history what is left is but an idle tale.”

Polybius, *Stories*, 12.12, II BC

Let us summarise!

- In antiquity, the Greek novel is criticised because it is considered a false kind of history.
- Since it does not focus on real facts, it cannot be profitable.

How does this criticism appear to us, modern readers?

When you read a novel, for example a fantasy novel, do you think that what is told is true?

If not, are you scandalised by the fact that the author is not telling you a true story?

Why? Because, whenever we read a novel, we **willingly suspend our disbelief**.

We do not read it to try to identify all that is not real.
We don't care about this.

This is fiction!

This suspension lies at the core of modern concept of
fiction:

a story invented to entertain and not to tell the truth.

There is a silent agreement between the author
and the readers that the former is not going to
deceive the latter.

In Greece, conversely, the concept of fiction was absent.

When Greeks wrote **texts in prose**, they did so ONLY to speak about true facts or elements of the reality.

Prose was born to speak about reality (since the first tablets discovered in Mycene!)

and this value did not change in the ancient people's mind.

>> The Greeks focused on the notion of TRUE PROSE AND TRUE NARRATIVE!

Consequence:

when someone was trying to use prose to tell invented stories, he was immediately seen as a **liar** and as a **deceiver**.

SUMMARY

CONTEMPORARY WORLD

NARRATIVE:

- 1) True >> history
- 2) Untrue:
 - a) Fiction (entertaining narrative with willing suspension of disbelief)
 - b) Lie (there are lies also in our world, unfortunately!)

ANCIENT WORLD

NARRATIVE:

- 1) True >> history
- 2) Untrue = Lie

What was the only exception?

POETRY, which clearly was clearly speaking about myth and not about reality.

Why was it accepted?

1. In the Archaic Era, myth was considered the reality, something true. Think of Herodotus, who identifies in the Trojan war the origin of the Persians war.

2. With the advent of tragedy, myth was no longer considered true. Thucydides excludes it from his work. However, poetry is not rejected: since it does not use the everyday language as the prose does, the Greeks were feeling that they were dealing with a human creation: so, they accepted it.

The Novel, only the novel was under attack: because it is a prose not true!

It is definitely a special genre, which was challenging the Greek mentality.

Interestingly, the novelists were aware that they were writing something new and under attack.

Thus, they decided in order to survive to introduce some expedients.

- They decided to present their works as historical works: see the titles (“The Ephesian Story” and “The Aethiopian Story”) and the setting, which is often the Classical time.
- They speak about a realistic world: fantasy is generally not admitted.
- They pretend that their work is not original, but the imitation of an authentic document. This is what we called pseudo-documentarism.

The Trojan War. The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete. A fictitious late account of the Trojan war...

Dictys, a native of Crete from the city of Cnossos ... knew the Phoenician language and alphabet. He accompanied the leaders Idomeneus and Meriones with the army that went against Troy. ... They chose him to write down a history of this campaign. Accordingly, writing on linden tablets and using the Phoenician alphabet, he composed nine volumes³ about the whole war.

The Trojan War. The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete

Time passed. In the thirteenth year of Nero's reign an earthquake struck at Cnossos and, in the course of its devastation, laid open the tomb of Dictys in such a way that people, as they passed, could see the little box. But when they opened it and found the linden tablets inscribed with characters unknown to them, they took this find to their master Rufus.

The Trojan War. The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete

Since Rufus, when the books had been presented to him, thought they contained certain mysteries, he ... carried them to Nero.^{[4](#)} Nero, having received the tablets and having noticed that they were written in Phoenician, ordered his Phoenician philologists to come and decipher whatever was written. When this had been done,... he had them translated into Greek; thus a more accurate text of the Trojan War was made known to all.

LONGUS' *DAPHNIS AND CHLOE*

LONGUS, in the PROLOGUS of his novel, gives us a spectacular example of this pseudo-documentarism. We will work on this until the end of the class.

LONGUS' PROLOGUS

I was hunting on the island of Lesbos when I saw the most beautiful sight I have ever seen in the grove of the Nymphs: an image depicted, a story of love.

The grove was a beautiful place, abounding in trees and flowers. Streams of water gushed down, flowing from the same spring that nourished the trees and flowers. But I found more pleasure in the painting, instilled as it was with unparalleled artistry and the fortunes of Eros. Many strangers, hearing about it, came to worship the Nymphs and gaze upon its images.

LONGUS' PROLOGUS

It showed women giving birth, others wrapping the newborn in swaddling clothes, exposed infants, flocks of sheep suckling the babies, shepherds picking them up, and young people arranging marriages. There was a pirate raid and an invasion by the enemy. Many other things relating to Eros were there.

I watched, and as I watched and stood amazed, and a longing seized me to rival the depiction in words. I searched out someone to interpret the images, and I completed four books.

LONGUS' PROLOGUS

I offer them to Eros and the Nymphs and Pan as well as to all my fellows to be their delight and possession.

It will heal whoever is ailing, console and comfort whoever is mourning, evoke memories for whoever has felt Eros, and educate whoever has yet to feel Eros.

No one has escaped Eros or will escape Eros as long as there is beauty, and eyes see.

May the gods grant me self-restraint in depicting what others have done.

Let us answer the questions

a) What is the origin of this novel, its source of inspiration?

“A painting, an image depicted”.

b) What are the main scenes of the novel?

“Women giving birth, [...] exposed infants, flocks of sheep suckling the babies, shepherds picking them up, and young people arranging marriages [...]”

c) What is the main topic of the novel?

Love, Eros!

Let us answer the questions

d) How long will the novel be?

Four books.

e) What is the aim of Longus in writing the novel?

Healing and educating the people to love.

f) How does this prologue relate with the Greeks' ignorance of fiction?

With the expedient of the painting Longus proves that his work has a realistic origin: he presents it as a sort of historical account.

Thus, it cannot be accused.

However, there is a subtle difference from history, since he uses the word "interpret".

Let us answer the questions

g) How does this prologue interact with Thucydides' prologue? Look especially at the third paragraph of Longus' prologue!

Longus suggests that his work is like Thucydides' work,
a possession for ever.

However, his novel will also be a delight:

UNDER THE APPEARANCE OF TRUE HISTORY, THE NOVEL IS A NEW
KIND OF STORY, FOCUSED ON ENTERTAINMENT AND EDUCATION TO
LOVE.

THIS IS THE NOVELTY OF THE GENRE AND
IT IS GREAT TO DISCOVER THIS NOT ON MODERN BOOKS, BUT
THROUGH THE VOICE OF ONE OF HIS EXPONENTS!