

## SIR WALTER SCOTT AS A POPULAR NOVELIST

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**ABSTRACT:** *Walter Allen says hinting to Forster's 'Aspects of the Novel':*

*"But all that is irrelevant to Scott's present stature as a novelist; his continued greatness rests on quite other grounds. Without being in the strict sense an historian, he revolutionized the writing of history." Our purpose of study here is to explore these 'other grounds' leading to Scott's continued popularity and analyse the various qualities present in Scott's genius which are generally overlooked when he is branded as an historical novelist.*

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### INTRODUCTION

"Scott is a novelist over whom we shall violently divide", says E.M. Foster in 'Aspects of the Novel'. He doesn't consider Scott a great writer and says: "He cannot construct. He has neither artistic detachment nor passion, and how can a writer who is devoid of both, create characters who will move us deeply...and think how all Scott's laborious mountains and scooped-out glens and carefully ruined abbeys call out for passion, passion, and how it is never there! If he had passion he would be a great writer- he has only a temperate heart and gentlemanly feelings, and an intelligent affection for the countryside; and this is not basis enough for great novels..."

These blatant views on Scott by Forster didn't cause any blemish to Scott's greatness or his popularity in the succeeding centuries.

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Our purpose of study here is to explore these 'other grounds' leading to Scott's continued popularity and analyse the various qualities present in Scott's genius which are generally overlooked when he is branded as an historical novelist.

Allen says: "what his greatness consisted in, we shall not see if we think of him as primarily an historical novelist." This may appear a paradox.

## DISCUSSION

If we see Scott first and foremost as the writer of historical romance we may be in danger of confusing him with his later disciples Ainsworth and Lytton with whose novels his seem to be limited to the schoolroom.

V.S. Pritchett, seems to reveal Scott's greatness in 'The Living Novel', says:  
"the historical passion was the engine of his impulse; what is important is where the engine took him."

Allen follows:

"it took him to the portrayal of man in his public and social aspects; man, that is to say, as he is conditioned by factors outside himself, by his place and function in society, his relation to an historic past."

This description suits exactly as of the character of the villainous Brian-de-Bois-Guilbert's true concealed love for the Jewess Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, which he has to hide from everyone and suppress because their union was not possible as his social status of being a Knight Templar and the tradition of hatred towards Jews in those times did not allow any social relations between Jews and Christians though the aristocracy deemed it their right to ask for their economic support and get it.

Allen rightly says that, "Scott's characters are embedded in a context of tradition. Historic and social processes crystallize out in his *dramatis personae*." It is in that sense that he made history live, through his characters.

"Perfection, however, which is what the pure novelist is after, demands the recognition of severe limits."

Jane Austen's greatness lies in her recognition of the limits; Dickens's greatness lies in his recognition of no limits at all; if perfection is what makes a pure novel then it is good that for Scott this concept meant nothing. His art seems to delight though it may be devoid of perfection.

Scott grasped, as no other English novelist has done, the organic relationships between man and man, man and place, man and society and man and his past. He was able to do this partly because he was writing of the past, he is dealing with life as a finished thing, a completed process; and this was the source of much of his strength, judged as a weakness by the established highest standards like those by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*.

At his greatest he was writing epic, and when one considers certain specific passages- 'those great scenes of action such as, the account of the ambush in *Rob Roy*, the pitched battles of *Old Mortality*, the storming of the tollbooth in *The Heart of Midlothian*, or the elegant heroism of the Disinherited Knight in The Tournament in *Ivanhoe*'; one sees immediately what novelists like Tolstoy and Stendhal owed to him.

Looking back on Scott's novels specially the Scottish ones, which are his best, we tend to see them as one vast work, so that it is not always easy to remember the precise events of single novels; and characters like old Deans, Oldbuck, Cedric, seem to exist side by side bound in the one frame.

In Allen's words: "it is a sign that a world has been created and populated. It is also a sign that the author has been much more interested in creating characters than in composing a formal work", which in modern view is said to be only half the novelist's job done. Scott is said to be a great writer of fiction who was never a good novelist.

Use of outdated eighteenth century methods such as- plotting a young hero and his love interest, are the weakness of his plot. His mechanicality in solving the riddles after the first half or the third quarter causes disinterest and disappointment to readers.

He knew this himself and defends it in his introduction to 'The Fortunes of Nigel' quoting Dryden's remark:

"What the devil does the plot signify, except to bring in fine things?"

Allen replies:

"but it brought in things that were not so fine, things Scott knew nothing about and cared less", and made him set at the centre of his fictions- the fated colourless romantic hero and heroine, as in *Ivanhoe*- the Disinherited Knight and Lady Rowena are respectively the subdued romantic hero and heroine.

Physical love seems to be missing from his novels. We see him as a great romantic writer compared with Byron but was not romantic in Byron's way; passion was alien to him; he writes as a 'hard headed, common sense professional man'; he accepts the world like Fielding and Austen and faces life squarely and without illusions; he willingly bounds himself by the restrictions and limitations society imposes upon the individual.

One might say, if the romantic is construed only in terms of sexual emotion, then he was the great anti-romantic. Piety towards past was his only guide-post. He refined the supernatural properties of Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic novels in actuality.

This made possible by two things- his conservatism and the fact that he was a Scot. He is not to sneer or laugh at the presence of the past in his narrations but he was content with detailed statement of the past before which he valued his own beliefs as unimportant. This is his habitual attitude towards the ritual and ceremony of the Catholic Church and his acceptance of a form of religion which he himself did not share came in the end to have a revolutionary force. The modes of worship that earlier seemed alien and monstrous were made to appear natural by his unheated acceptance of them in his novels.

Similarly gothic supernatural is refined into folklore and superstition. It is here that the fact of his being a Scot is so important. He tapped the nationally cherished and operative superstition in his novels, for instance, the trial of Jewess Rebecca for heresy and unearthly practices by the Clergy in *Ivanhoe* can be considered having traditionally romantic and gothic properties. The derivation is enhanced by Scott's use of the vernacular that generally bring his characters alive.

He gave such reality to supernatural that it never possessed in the Gothic novel. He has taken into his fiction a living national experience.

Scott's "Scots-speaking-Scots" characters especially women characters are equally popular. Diana Vernon is alive for being a woman of action possessing masculine intelligence.

Scott's peasant women are always admirable. Jeanie Deans in 'The Heart of Midlothian' is superb in her simplicity, her native dignity and moral courage similar to the bold and multi-skilled Jewess Rebecca, are one of the great heroines of fiction. Rebecca, though in the novel, is considered second to Lady Rowena by the critics; but in my opinion due to her strength in character and boldness in moral nature Rebecca seems to be superior to Rowena.

Scott's mind was naturally conventional but it was not genteel, nor were his character's except when it was the need to speak aristocratic English. Scott's attitude towards his characters, like his acceptance of the world in which he lived, is very much akin to Chaucer's. He has an ease in conveying a feeling of being at home that is rare in English fiction.

The cream of Scott's work lies in the fiction inspired by the life and history of his own country Scotland: *Guy Mannering*, *Rob Roy*, *The Antiquary*, *Old Mortality*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *St. Ronan's Well* and *The Bride of Lammermoor*; *Ivanhoe* was plotted outside Scotland in England.

Scott's gallery of most popular characters 'shaped by an historic living past, moulded by the forces of religion and religious strife' include the likes of: King Richard- The Lion Heart, Locksley the archer as the popular Robin-hood, the loyal swineherd of *Ivanhoe* and the clown Wamba known for his realistic humour and courage, are some of the gems of characters created by him. Through his characters the past of his country comes to life and is presented epically and humorously by turns.

## **IMPLICATION**

Allen says: "Scott is one of the great imperfect novelists, and his imperfections are exactly those most offensive to present-day taste. His weaknesses were more easily copied by his successors than his virtues. He hardened writers like Dickens in the English preference for the arbitrary, complicated plot that Fielding took over from the theatre, and helped to establish unreal romantic heroes and heroines as a convention."

The novel in Victorian England may owe to him to pay the price for becoming the popular literary art but it is significant that the great European novelists did not follow him in this and looking at the achievements of Balzac and Tolstoy, one may say that they understood his real contribution to the growth of the novel, not merely as a historical novelist but a popular novelist who did not hesitate to make his weakness his strength in using the vernacular language and plots of his ethnicity to reach out to the larger common section of society appealing to their senses and delighting one and all.

## CONCLUSION

Scott catered to the need of the hour, the demand of the common folk for passion, love for their nation, and morality. He presented the problems of the contemporary society like corruption in the clergy, religious hatred for Jews, immorality in the actions of the knights and misuse of power by the kings and nobles, representing them brilliantly in his novels filling the minds of readers with universal hope that good ultimately triumphs leading to the evergreen popularity and relevance of his works to both the readers and scholars of literature even today.

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