

Theodor Storm on the Genre of the Novella (1881)

Abstract

In this reply to a disparaging newspaper commentary on the novella, Theodor Storm (1817–1888) defends the genre against charges that it is a superficial and inferior art form. Himself a renowned author of novellas (e.g., *Der Schimmelreiter*, 1888), Storm describes them as epic counterparts to German dramas, which, he claims, were undistinguished and becoming increasingly inaccessible to the general public.

Source

According to a newspaper report, one of our most widely read novelists, in prefacing a shorter work he described as a “novella,” recently referred to the novella as something that an author of three-volume novels could certainly undertake in the evening as a kind of relaxation, but that it could not be expected to satisfy any serious demands.^[1]

I cannot say whether it was necessary for this work to be introduced in a way that so disparaged its genre. Allow me to say, however—just as I did in my *Hausbuch aus deutschen Dichtern*^[2]—a few words of my own about writing novellas, the very literary genre that has accompanied me throughout the latter portion of my life.

The novella—in the way it has developed recently, particularly during the past decades, and can now be seen in some works in more or less accomplished form—is suitable for even the most profound subject matter. Ultimately, achieving the highest level of poetic art will depend on the writer. This form is no longer, as it was in the past, “a depiction of an occurrence that captivates through its unusual content and offers a surprise turning point.” Today’s novella is the counterpart—a sister, so to speak—to drama and the most rigorous form of prose writing. Just like drama, it deals with the most profound problems of human existence; just like drama, it requires for its full realization a central conflict around which the whole work is organized. Thus, the novella needs to have the most closely-knit structure and to shed anything insignificant; it does not just tolerate but makes the highest demands on the art of writing.

The fact that epic prose writing has culminated [in the novella] in this way and, at the same time, has virtually assumed the role of drama is not exactly difficult to explain. The fraction of the national population able to benefit from stage performances grows smaller each and every day, while the growing literary need increasingly exceeds actual satisfaction. What’s more, artistically valuable new dramas are exactly the ones that seldom reach the stage or that disappear again after the first attempt, whether this is due to the inadequacy of our German actors or perhaps because—and this is connected—the writers lack a certain practical understanding of how the plays can be performed on stage. As a result, other people have taken control of the stage, and one is content with things that do not even equal the best of the Iffland-Kotzebue period. What has been thus extracted from drama, however, is of benefit to its epic sister, i.e., the novella.

Besides, writing novellas is quite similar to lyric poetry: everyone believes he is capable of doing it, but only a few experience success: and even they only succeed in those rare fortuitous moments. [...]

NOTES

^[1] According to Bucher, Hal, Jäger, and Wittmann, eds. (see source citation), Storm is referring to Georg Ebers, *Eine Frage*.

[2] An anthology of German writers—trans.

Source: Theodor Storm, “Eine zurückgezogene Vorrede aus dem Jahre 1881,” in Theodor Storm, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Albert Köstner. Leipzig, 1920, vol. 8, pp. 122–23; reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880*, 2 vols. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 368–69.

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