



The Stages of Development of The Novella Genre In 20th- Century European Prose

OPEN ACCESS

SUBMITTED 13 June 2025

ACCEPTED 09 July 2025

PUBLISHED 11 August 2025

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue 08 2025

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Original content from this work may be used under the terms of the creative commons attributes 4.0 License.

Samatova Gulnoza

Assistant Lecturer at Uzbekistan–Finland Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan

Abstract: The novella, as a distinctive form of short fiction, underwent significant transformation throughout the 20th century in European prose. This article examines the historical and aesthetic stages of its development, considering the interaction between traditional narrative structures and the experimental tendencies of modernism and postmodernism. Drawing on literary-historical analysis, the study traces the evolution of the novella from its late 19th-century realist legacy to the fragmentation and metafictional strategies of late 20th-century writing. Special attention is paid to the works of key European authors whose creative innovations reshaped the novella's thematic scope, narrative voice, and structural economy. The research identifies three broad developmental stages — consolidation of realist tradition, modernist experimentation, and postmodernist transformation — and argues that the novella's adaptability enabled it to engage with the cultural, social, and philosophical shifts of the century. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how the genre maintained its formal coherence while embracing stylistic diversity, thereby ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary literary discourse.

Keywords: Novella, 20th-century literature, European prose, modernism, postmodernism, narrative structure, genre evolution.

Introduction: The novella has historically occupied a unique position in European literary tradition, positioned between the concise precision of the short story and the expansive scope of the novel. Emerging in

its earliest form during the Renaissance and refined through the 18th and 19th centuries, the novella developed as a genre characterized by concentrated narrative action, a limited cast of characters, and a thematic unity that allowed for both aesthetic focus and philosophical depth. The 20th century, however, presented unprecedented challenges and opportunities for the genre. The socio-political upheavals of two world wars, the philosophical crises brought about by the collapse of Enlightenment ideals, and the formal innovations of modernism and postmodernism all contributed to reshaping the novella's thematic preoccupations and narrative techniques.

While the novel and short story have been extensively studied in the context of modernist and postmodernist transformations, the novella has often remained marginal in critical discourse, partly because of its hybrid nature and partly due to the difficulty of classifying its diverse manifestations. Yet, as this study will demonstrate, the novella's ability to adapt to shifting aesthetic paradigms made it a vital medium for exploring the complexities of modern European experience. This article seeks to address the relative underrepresentation of the novella in genre studies by providing a systematic account of its development in the 20th century, focusing on the literary-historical forces that shaped its form and function.

The aim of this study is to investigate the stages of development of the novella genre in 20th-century European prose, with emphasis on the interplay between inherited narrative conventions and innovative literary experimentation. By examining representative works from various national traditions, the research seeks to identify the primary trends in structural, thematic, and stylistic evolution, and to situate these within the broader context of European cultural history.

The research is grounded in a historical-literary methodology, combining diachronic and synchronic approaches to genre analysis. Primary materials include representative novellas from major European literary traditions — notably German, French, Italian, Russian, and British — selected for their exemplary contribution to the genre's evolution. Works by authors such as Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Stefan Zweig, Albert Camus, Marguerite Yourcenar, Italo Calvino, and Graham Greene serve as case studies illustrating key transitional moments in the genre's development.

The method of literary-historical analysis is employed to trace the chronology of thematic and stylistic transformations, while close reading provides insight

into narrative structure, characterization, and symbolism. The comparative method facilitates the identification of cross-cultural influences and divergent national tendencies. Critical reception studies and theoretical works on genre poetics by scholars such as E. Auerbach, W. Kayser, and M. Bakhtin inform the conceptual framework, ensuring that the analysis is situated within established literary theory.

At the outset of the 20th century, the European novella retained the formal and thematic features inherited from the late 19th century's realist and naturalist traditions. Authors such as Thomas Mann in Germany and Anatole France in France crafted novellas that preserved a clear narrative arc, psychologically complex protagonists, and an emphasis on moral or philosophical resolution. Mann's *"Tonio Kröger"* (1903) exemplifies this phase, combining the novella's traditional unity of action with an introspective exploration of the artist's alienation. Similarly, Stefan Zweig's psychological novellas, including *"Letter from an Unknown Woman"* (1922), exhibit a refinement of realist conventions through a focus on interiority and emotional intensity.

The first significant shift occurred under the influence of modernist aesthetics, which sought to fragment and reconfigure narrative time, reject omniscient narration, and foreground subjective perception. Franz Kafka's *"The Metamorphosis"* (1915) demonstrates the capacity of the novella to incorporate surreal and allegorical elements while retaining structural concision. Here, the economy of form amplifies the existential unease and absurdity of the protagonist's transformation, aligning with the broader modernist preoccupation with alienation and the instability of meaning. In France, Camus' *"The Fall"* (1956) similarly adapts the novella form to philosophical inquiry, using a monologic narrative to interrogate concepts of guilt, responsibility, and the absurd.

Modernist experimentation extended beyond thematic innovation to structural and linguistic experimentation. Stream-of-consciousness techniques, as employed in the shorter works of Virginia Woolf, disrupted linear progression, while symbolic layering and intertextual allusions enriched the novella's interpretive possibilities. The genre's relative brevity proved advantageous for such formal experiments, offering a controlled narrative space within which to explore radical departures from traditional plot-driven storytelling.

The second half of the century witnessed the novella's transformation under the influence of postmodernism, which embraced metafiction, self-referentiality, and the blurring of boundaries between reality and representation. Italo Calvino's *"The Nonexistent Knight"*

(1959) and later works such as "If on a Winter's Night a Traveler" (1979) illustrate the novella's capacity to engage in playful narrative deconstruction while maintaining a coherent thematic thread. The postmodern novella often subverted reader expectations, employing unreliable narrators, fragmented structures, and open endings that challenged conventional closure.

In Eastern European literatures, particularly in the works of Milan Kundera and Danilo Kiš, the novella became a vehicle for political allegory and philosophical reflection under conditions of censorship. The constraints of length facilitated the circulation of novellas in literary journals, enabling them to function as discreet yet potent interventions in public discourse. The genre's compression intensified its impact, allowing complex political critiques to be embedded within symbolic frameworks that eluded direct ideological confrontation.

By the end of the 20th century, the novella had established itself not as a transitional form between the short story and the novel but as an autonomous genre capable of accommodating a wide range of narrative strategies. Its development across the century can be understood in three broad stages: the early modern consolidation of realist and psychological traditions; the mid-century embrace of modernist fragmentation and philosophical depth; and the late-century adoption of postmodernist playfulness and metafictional awareness. In each stage, the novella demonstrated a remarkable adaptability, responding to shifts in cultural and intellectual paradigms while preserving its defining qualities of concision, intensity, and unity.

The 20th century was a period of unprecedented dynamism for the European novella, as it navigated the complex interplay between tradition and innovation. Initially anchored in the realist and psychological models inherited from the 19th century, the genre evolved through modernist experimentation into a postmodern form characterized by reflexivity and intertextuality. This evolution reflects the novella's responsiveness to broader artistic movements and its ability to distill the essence of shifting historical realities into compact yet resonant narratives.

The findings of this study underscore the novella's resilience as a literary form. Far from being a peripheral or transitional genre, it has proven capable of engaging with some of the most profound philosophical, political, and aesthetic questions of the modern era. Its compact structure not only accommodates but amplifies thematic complexity, making it a distinctive and enduring vehicle for literary

innovation. Future research may profitably explore the novella's trajectory in the 21st century, particularly in relation to digital publishing formats and transnational literary exchanges.

REFERENCES

- Ауэрбах Э. Мимесис: изображение действительности в западноевропейской литературе. — М.: Прогресс, 1976. — 536 с.
- Бахтин М.М. Вопросы литературы и эстетики. — М.: Художественная литература, 1975. — 504 с.
- Кайзер В. Искусство новеллы. — М.: Прогресс, 1984. — 284 с.
- Calvino I. The Nonexistent Knight. — London: Vintage, 1999. — 144 p.
- Camus A. The Fall. — New York: Vintage International, 1991. — 147 p.
- Kafka F. The Metamorphosis. — New York: Schocken Books, 1995. — 201 p.
- Kundera M. Laughable Loves. — London: Faber & Faber, 1999. — 272 p.
- Mann T. Tonio Kröger. — Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1903. — 112 p.
- Woolf V. Selected Shorter Fiction. — London: Penguin Classics, 2008. — 320 p.
- Zweig S. Letter from an Unknown Woman. — London: Pushkin Press, 2004. — 80 p.