

Introduction

The school story is one of the most enduring of all literary genres. Still popular today (witness the success of Harry Potter), it has existed as a distinct category of children's fiction since 1749, when Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or, Little Female Academy*, generally acknowledged to have been the very first school story (although, as will be seen, this is slightly erroneous), was first published. Most studies of boys' school stories start with the premise that the first was *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, which was originally published in 1857. This was actually far from being the case, as numerous boys' school stories – full-length novels and short stories – had been appearing from the 1760s onwards.

However, the origins of the school story go back far beyond 1749. Some analysts of children's literature have identified the *Colloquy* of Aelfric as being the first fictional representation of English school life. Aelfric was a monk and teacher at Cerne Abbas in Dorset, and his *Colloquy*, written around AD 1000, was a dialogue between a master and his pupils, written as a teaching aid designed to give pupils a grounding in conversational Latin. This was followed by a series of *Colloquies* written by Aelfric Bata, one of Aelfric's pupils, who again set his work inside a monastic school. These *Colloquies* provide a vivid and undeniably authentic picture of school life at that time, with the added bonus of elements of entertainment and comedy, the author recognising that this would make learning more enjoyable. In addition, they also suggest the beginnings of performance, with pupils acting the roles of the dialogues' characters in the classroom.

These dialogues were, in fact, a continuation of a technique adopted by teachers as far back as at least 2000 BC, in schools in Sumeria (now part of Iraq), where the school was the setting for simple phrases, sentences and dialogues designed to teach spelling, grammar and vocabulary. Many more examples are found in texts from schools in ancient Egypt,

Greece and Rome. The format was later used in schools in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in particular, by educationalists such as Erasmus, Claudius Hollyband and John Brinsley the Elder. Again, they provide striking pictures of school life – the curriculum, school food, punishments, schoolboy friendships and leisure activities. Some of these dialogues were very short, but others were much longer, and again it has been assumed that that they were acted in the classroom, and can be seen as another early example of staged drama.

In the meantime, Geoffrey Chaucer had featured a schoolboy in a shocking story in *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and schools and education, in particular, in terms of arguments for and against schooling, featured in several sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century dramas, some of which were also notable for their satirical and mocking portraits of schoolmasters and tutors.

The very first school novel, *Dobsons Drie Bobbes*, a comic tale set in and around Durham Cathedral School, appeared as early as 1607, exactly 250 years before *Tom Brown*, and has hitherto been completely overlooked in studies of school stories or the history of children's literature. Just over 100 years later, Daniel Defoe, in *The Quarrel of the Schoolboys at Athens*, used a school as a setting to satirise the Parliament of King George I, showing that life at school reflected life outside school (or, of course, in some cases vice versa).

Schools, schoolmasters and tutors played a superficial but important part in several eighteenth-century novels, in particular, the picaresque adventures of Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, who showed how their heroes' characters were forged by their youthful experiences. In addition, three notable eighteenth-century novels, Rousseau's *Émile*, Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* and Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton*, portrayed education outside school, while at the same time establishing some of the themes that were taken up by later writers of school stories.

Finally, the school story as a distinct literary genre, principally but by no means exclusively aimed at children, began to emerge in the middle of the eighteenth century. *The Governess*, while set in a girls' boarding school, was less of a novel and more of a series of tales, some with a strong moral lesson, and this spawned a variety of imitators – books of loosely-connected stories, dialogues and letters – aimed at imparting lessons in behaviour, morals, religion and, occasionally, academic subjects such as natural history and geography. School stories for boys soon followed, and by 1785, the cut-off point for this study, the school story as it was to become recognised had fully emerged.

This book explores all these early texts, showing how snapshots of school life and education developed from simple sentences to complex dialogues, many with multiple participants, which can easily be seen as precursors to longer dramatic works and then to longer works of fiction. It examines the pictures of school life painted in early stage plays, which were often negative and showed schools as places of cruelty and drudgery, or showed schoolmasters as figures of fun and contempt – pompous, ignorant and scheming.

It goes on to show how school life and education began to feature more and more in longer works of fiction, with schools again often shown as being barbaric places and schoolmasters and tutors as malevolent tyrants, with some authors offering the role of a private tutor as a benevolent and more civilising way of teaching young boys. Finally, it charts the origins of the school story as we know it today, which emerged as a series of moral and educational tales into short and then longer narratives of school life, exploring some of the themes that were to become integral to the genre, creating a template that led to Tom Brown and his numerous successors.