

The Room on the Roof as A Novella: A Genre-Based Re-Evaluation

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Abstract

Review Article

Ruskin Bond's fictional work *The Room on the Roof* is not a full-length novel; rather, it falls into the genre of the novella. Whether a fictional work qualifies as a novel or a novella depends on various characteristics such as length, narrative focus, character development, setting, and time span. This article analyzes *The Room on the Roof* by applying these criteria. The findings reveal that the work is relatively short, with a limited narrative focus, a concise setting, and a brief time span. In summary, the work fits more appropriately into the category of a novella. This article also defines both the novel and the novella, highlighting their subtle differences and illustrating the defining characteristics of each genre. In terms of word count, subject matter, and plot complexity, *The Room on the Roof* aligns more closely with the novella form. In contrast, a novel typically features a greater word count, more pages, a more complex plot, and a broader narrative scope.

Keywords: full length, narrative focus, concise, differences, complexity.

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INTRODUCTION

"What is a novel?" is an important question. We recognize works such as *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding, *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, *Emma* by Jane Austen, and *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence as novels. On the other hand, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway are widely considered examples of novellas. To determine whether *The Room on the Roof* is a novel or a novella, it is essential to analyze it through the lens of these criteria: word count, plot complexity, number of conflicts or themes, narrative focus, number of characters, psychological and emotional depth, nature of the setting, the presence of a cohesive theme, and the role of the narrator.

Ruskin Bond's debut work *The Room on the Roof* narrates the rebellion of a sixteen-year-old Anglo-Indian boy living under an authoritarian guardian Mr. Harrison. Written in 1956 when the writer was just seventeen years old, this semi-autobiographical work is also known as an exemplar of Bildungsroman meaning coming of the age fiction.

"The term 'novel' is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the

attribute of being extended works of fiction written in prose...its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character and motives than do the shorter, more concentrated modes." (Abrams 190).

On the other hand, a novella as a short tale in prose. The sections below discuss the characteristics of a novella found in *The Room on the Roof*.

1. Word Count/length

A novel typically includes multiple subplots, varied themes, and numerous characters, as it aims to provide an immersive and expansive experience for readers. Therefore, it usually does not follow strict word limits or page constraints. For example, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* spans four volumes, 361 chapters, and over 1,400 pages. In contrast, a novella generally ranges from 20,000 to 40,000 words and comprises about 60 to 150 pages. It is a compressed narrative—longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. *The Room on the Roof* is not divided into chapters, and the Penguin 2017 edition contains 208 pages, placing it at the upper edge of the novella range.

2. Complexity of Plot

A novel typically includes multiple subplots and a wide range of characters. For example, Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* features over twenty characters, while D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* weaves together several subplots, including a troubled marriage, Paul's relationship with his father, his complex bond with his mother Gertrude, and his romantic involvements. These subplots not only enrich the narrative but also allow for the development of both major and minor characters, making the story multifaceted. Through such subplots, authors create conflict, suspense, and variety, which contribute to a deeper and more immersive reading experience.

In contrast, *The Room on the Roof* has a single, straightforward plot: a sixteen-year-old Anglo-Indian orphan named Rusty, living in Dehradun, becomes disillusioned with his authoritarian guardian, Mr. Harrison. He leaves home, befriends local boys like Somi, Suri, and Ranbir, and begins to experience friendship, freedom, and adventure. The narrative does not include identifiable subplots, nor does it offer much scope for the development of secondary characters or complex themes. The narrative purpose is limited—primarily focusing on Rusty's emotional and social awakening—without diverging into multiple threads. The concise plot does not allow for the complexity typically associated with novels. Rusty's rebellion is central to the narrative, and there are no significant diversions or layers that might dilute the focus or broaden the thematic scope. As a result, the story is less complex and aligns more closely with the structure of a novella.

Although novels often exceed 200 pages, a shorter work may still be classified as a novel if it exhibits novelistic features such as narrative depth, structural complexity, and thematic cohesion. For instance, V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* has fewer than 200 pages but is considered a novel due to its unifying narrator, recurring characters, and cohesive themes. *The Room on the Roof* lacks these defining characteristics, reinforcing its classification as a novella.

3. Fewer Conflict or Themes

The central conflict in a story arises when the protagonist, while pursuing a goal, encounters significant resistance—either from internal struggles or external obstacles. This conflict drives the narrative forward and determines the pacing of the plot, propelling the story toward its resolution. In novels, multiple conflicts often coexist, expanding the scope of all essential elements of prose fiction, such as character development, thematic depth, and plot complexity.

In contrast, a novella typically focuses on a single central conflict. The advantage of this focused approach is that it increases the pacing of the narrative, allowing for a tighter, more streamlined story. In *The*

Room on the Roof, the central conflict revolves around Rusty's rebellion against an authoritarian guardian and his quest for freedom and self-identity. The narrative moves steadily toward a clear resolution without the diversion of subplots that might slow down its pace. Due to spatial constraints, a novella cannot accommodate multiple conflicts, which reinforces its concise and focused storytelling style.

“The story also highlights the cultural differences and social norms prevalent in India during the 1950s. This novel depicts the story of Rusty, a sixteen-year-old Anglo-Indian boy who rebels against his guardian's strict rules and finds solace in the company of local Indian boys.” (Shruthi S.R. and Shanmugasundaram 492)

4. Less Focus

Structurally, the narrative of a novel allows for the development of multiple themes, conflicts, and a wide range of characters, which often creates greater length and complexity. As a result, the narrative focus in a novel may become distributed across various elements rather than concentrated on a single aspect. However, this broader focus does not weaken the structure of a novel; instead, it enhances its depth and richness.

In contrast, a novella maintains a tighter narrative focus due to its limitations in word count, setting, number of characters, and conflicts. In *The Room on the Roof*, the story is centered entirely on Rusty's experience—his rebellion against authority and his encounter with the outside world, which offers both freedom and challenges. The narrative revolves around a single core theme, without the inclusion of side plots that might dilute its focus. As a result, the story follows a linear progression, advancing chronologically without shifts in time or perspective. This structural simplicity is a defining feature of the novella form.

5. Limited Number of Characters

A novel is a longer narrative and therefore has ample space to explore multiple subplots. With more subplots, the number of characters also tends to increase, which in turn leads to multiple conflicts within the story. Conversely, a novella typically features a limited number of characters. In *The Room on the Roof*, some of the key characters include Rusty, Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, Somi, Suri, Ranbir, Kishen, Meena, and Mr. Kapoor. While a typical novel usually has one main character along with several secondary characters, a novella's shorter length restricts the development of multiple subplots.

6. Psychological and Emotional Depth

In a novel, the writer has ample space to develop characters in depth, allowing them to fully express their goals, aspirations, moral conflicts, internal contradictions, and external struggles. For example, James Joyce explores the psychological and emotional conflict of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, in his 1916

novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In contrast, *The Room on the Roof* does not delve deeply into the psychological and emotional complexities of its characters, due to its more limited literary structure and narrative constraints. The novella focuses primarily on the development of a single protagonist, Rusty. Secondary characters serve mainly to support or oppose the main character rather than undergo significant psychological or emotional growth. For instance, characters like Somi, Suri, and Ranbir do not exhibit notable psychological or emotional development throughout the narrative.

7. Limited Setting

In fiction, the setting refers to the location, time, and atmosphere where the story takes place. The setting plays a crucial role in determining whether a work is classified as a short story, novella, or novel. It also influences the tone, scope, and depth of the narrative. When a story spans multiple locations and a broad time frame, its focus and scope naturally expand, making it more akin to a novel. For example, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* covers two generations of the Earnshaw and Linton families, resulting in an extensive temporal and spatial setting. In *The Room on the Roof*, the major events take place primarily in Dehradun, a small town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. The story covers a relatively short time span, unfolding, developing, and concluding within a few months. Much of the narrative focuses on Rusty's experiences in places such as the bazaar, Somi and Kishen's homes, and the outskirts of Dehradun. The title itself highlights Rusty's stay in the "room on the roof," underscoring the limited and intimate nature of the setting. Consequently, this restricted setting contributes to *The Room on the Roof* being classified as a novella rather than a novel.

"This new room not only gave Rusty shelter but also a feeling of selfhood. It was a room where he could explore his true essence, where he could give wings to his dreams and desires, a room of his own from where his journey to become a writer will begin." (Agrawal 187)

8. Lack of Cohesive Theme

A cohesive theme is a defining element of a novel. One can distinguish between the two genres—novel and novella—based on the presence and development of a unifying theme. A novel invariably possesses a cohesive theme that binds together various elements such as characters, setting, tone, and plot. *The Room on the Roof* depicts several key episodes in Rusty's life: leaving home, serving as Kishen's tutor, falling in love with Meena, and coping with the trauma of her death. While Ruskin Bond portrays these stages chronologically, from a novelistic perspective, they appear as scattered and underdeveloped episodes due to the concise format of the novella. These events lack strong thematic connectivity and seem more like loosely connected incidents rather than parts of a unified whole.

As a result, the thematic focus of the work is weakened, reinforcing its classification as a novella rather than a novel.

9. Lack of Unifying Narrator

Who tells the story can also help readers determine whether a fictional work is a novel or a novella. Novels often feature multiple narrative layers. Some novels use first-person narration, employing pronouns like "I" and "we," which allows the author to explore the character's psychological depth. Most novels, however, have an all-knowing, or omniscient, third-person narrator who thoroughly understands the characters, including their past, present, and future. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a classic example of a novel employing an omniscient third-person narrator.

In contrast, a novella generally lacks a strong, central narrator. *The Room on the Roof* employs limited third-person narration, frequently using pronouns such as "he," "his," and "him" to refer to the protagonist, Rusty. In this way, Ruskin Bond tells the story largely through Rusty's perspective. This limited narrative scope can restrict the thematic progression of the story, as the novella primarily explores the experiences and development of a single character.

"His use of first-person narration allows readers to connect closely with the protagonist's inner world, as seen in *The Room on the Roof* and *The Night Train at Deoli*. This technique creates an intimate, confessional tone that enhances the realism of his narratives." (Malve, 19)

CONCLUSION

This research article identified and discussed nine key characteristics of a novella. This genre is marked by a concise structure, typically ranging from 20,000 to 40,000 words. The present work does not provide sufficient space to develop multiple subplots, and its compressed nature often relies on a single central conflict. The narrative is tightly focused, as it cannot afford to divert attention toward developing numerous characters or exploring multiple thematic elements. The story features one protagonist, with only a few secondary characters. The limited length restricts the exploration of the characters' inner lives. Additionally, the work lacks a cohesive theme and a unifying narrator, and it employs a limited setting. In summary, Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* fits the characteristics of a novella rather than those of a novel.

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