

19th Century Novels Endure

by Barb Howe

A recent study from the University of Florida found that reading as a pastime has declined by more than forty percent in the US over the last 20 years. In a sample of over 200,000 adults, the researchers found the number of adults reporting that they read for pleasure decreased at a rate of about three percent per year. What is lost when a society stops reading? To find out, we could look at one of the most literate periods in human history: the 19th century.

In an age where screens are everywhere, it's refreshing to sit down with a product of an era where most of the time a book was literally the only diversion accessible, even to privileged people. Aside from the fact that universal education was not yet a thing, if you were lucky enough to know how to read in the 19th century what else would you do for entertainment other than read? Stare out the window and watch the undulations of the wind-swept fields? Go fishing? Watch the flickering flames of a hearth fire dance and play upon the coals? Sure, live music sometimes happened, and roving bands of minstrels might promise an evening's diversion, and you might hear some poetry and hymn-singing at church on Sundays, but other than those things, a book was the only vehicle for exercising the imagination and unlocking whole universes of ideas for those lucky enough to have access to them.

Given such a captive audience, authors of 19th century novels had time to explore complex ideas in depth to an extent not possible in any other medium. Nineteenth century novels often require the reader to hold multiple and sometimes contradictory thoughts in their head at the same time. They might make the reader wait for pages for an argument to be fully fleshed out. Holding onto the same thought for minutes on end and digging into all its nuances is very different from the endless mental flitting from one social media video or meme to the next. It's hard to overstate how differently a mind raised on books is from a mind raised on social media, although both may technically involve (at least some) reading.

As an example of how much a 19th-century novel requires you to think, examine the following passage in which one character is trying to persuade someone to let by-gones be by-gones.

"Nothing was wanted, then, but for dear Tom, who always had that pleasant smile . . . To turn completely around, say the opposite of what he had always said before, and declare that he, for his part, was delighted that all the old grievances should be healed . . ."

But to minds strongly marked by the positive and negative qualities that create severity—strength of will, conscious rectitude of purpose, narrowness of imagination and intellect, great power of self-control, and a disposition to exert control over others—prejudices come as the natural food of tendencies which can get no sustenance out of that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth. Let a prejudice be bequeathed, carried in the air, adopted by hearsay, caught in through the eye—however it may come, these minds will give it a habitation: it is something to assert strongly and bravely, something to fill up the void of spontaneous ideas, something to impose on others with the authority of conscious right: it is at once a staff and a baton. Every prejudice that will answer these purposes is self-evident. Our good upright Tom Tulliver's mind was of this class."

There's a lot going on in the second paragraph which is composed of only four sentences. This paragraph:

- lists the qualities that make a person "severe," or prone to prejudice;
- notes that some of these things are positive as well as negative;

- makes a statement about the nature of truth (that it is complex, fragmentary, and doubt-provoking);
- asserts that people who can't tolerate such complexity often rely on prejudices instead;
- lists all the arbitrary ways prejudices can be obtained (including being inherited from one's parents as well as picked up from one's friends);
- describes how prejudices make up for a lack of original ideas and shows why empathy requires imagination.

There's a lot to think about in one paragraph!

The author of this fine piece of writing is George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Anne Evans, who knew how harsh



Mary Anne Evans aka "George Eliot" also wrote *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, *the Radical*, and *Middlemarch*.



Emily Brontë originally used the pen name Ellis Bell to disguise her gender when she published *Wuthering Heights* in 1847.

(Note: Image above is the only undisputed image of Emily Bronte.)

19th century literary critics were on women writers. Eliot is great at creating complex characters that are the opposite of comic-book villains. Her novels are filled with people who mean well (or at least don't mean ill) but nevertheless end up causing great harm to others. The character the passage above refers to is a prime example. Tom Tulliver is not a bad fellow. He is the dearly beloved brother of the heroine of Eliot's 1860 novel, *The Mill on*

the Floss. Tom has good reason for despising the man who bought his family's mill after his father became bankrupt, and the hope is that he will come to accept that his sister Maggie has fallen in love with the man's son. No such luck for reasons explained above.

Seeking revenge is a common theme in literature. You might remember that Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* spends the entire novel seeking revenge on people who rejected him as a child. Being brought into a family where it is not wanted is certainly a traumatic event for any child. The acts of revenge Heathcliff undertakes are successful in the sense that they do hurt the people they are intended to hurt. But great literature is great literature because it examines all the complex consequences of human actions and this is a very relevant topic for most of us still today. I don't know anyone who hasn't either tried to inflict revenge upon someone or been the victim of someone trying to inflict revenge upon them.

If *Wuthering Heights* is a story of passionate rage and revenge against an understandable injustice, *The Mill on the Floss* is a story about "unimpassioned revenge," as the author puts it. A character named Wakem has no particular "inveterate hatred" towards a certain Mr. Tulliver but he ruins his life anyway because the opportunity arises. In both novels, the effect of the act(s) of revenge ripples down through succeeding generations.

Whether served hot or cold, these two 19th-century novels remind us that revenge is a dish best not served at all. Besides the presumptuous arrogance of taking justice into one's own hands, it often simply doesn't work. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff spends his whole life trying to hurt not only the people who were cruel to him as a child, but also their children and family members. Towards the end of the novel, one character observes that revenge is a sword on both ends: it wounds the one who wields it as much as those it's targeted at.

That's what novels can do: give us the long-term view, and 19th-century novels are particularly good at this sort of thing. The thing that seems so important to us now often turns out to be not so important in the long run. Years later, no one can remember the original offense that started it all, but the effects of the vengeful action linger and ricochet through the generations.

These are just some of the things 19th-century novels can do for us. I'm not sure where we will get such thoughtfulness in a future where most people no longer read. Will we still be able to think complex thoughts? Will we lose the ability to focus on anything for more than fifteen seconds? How will people learn empathy for others without the ability to get absorbed for days or weeks within the pages of a book? Whatever happens in such a future the great novels of the 19th-century will still be there, waiting with their ineffable wisdom about human nature for anyone who desires and dares to put down their phones and pick up a book.



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