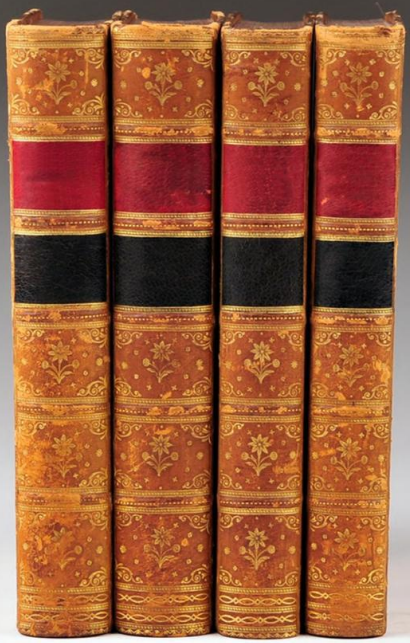
The 50 most influential Books of all Time



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THE 50 MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS OF ALL TIME

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Contents

"foundation texts of the English working-class movement". Part of its uniquely English quality is a robust and engaging sense of humour that has cemented its appeal to generations of readers.

The Pilgrim's Progress is the ultimate English classic, a book that has been continuously in print, from its first publication to the present day, in an extraordinary number of editions. There›s no book in English, apart from the Bible, to equal Bunyan›s masterpiece for the range of its readership, or its influence on writers as diverse as William Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, Mark Twain, CS Lewis, John Steinbeck and even Enid Blyton.

Huckleberry Finn speaks for many readers when, recalling his Mississippi education, he says: "There was some books too... One was 'Pilgrim's Progress', about a man that left his family it didn't say why. I read considerable in it now and then. The statements was interesting, but tough."

The story of a man in search of the truth is the plot of many kinds of fiction, from *Portnoy›s Complaint* to *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. Like many of the writers in the list that follows, Bunyan had a wonderful ear for the rhythms of colloquial speech and his allegorical characters come to life in dialogue that never fails to advance the narrative. Story is one thing. The simple clarity and beauty of Bunyan's prose is something else. Braided together, style and content unite to make a timeless English classic.

Note on the text:

The Pilgrim's Progress, from this world, to that which is to come was first published in Holborn, London by Nathaniel Ponder, a non-conformist, at the beginning of 1678 in an edition of 191 pages. It was an immediate success. A second edition appeared before the end of 1678, with many new passages, a third in 1679, and several subsequent editions before Bunyan's death in August 1688. The Second Part of The Pilgrim's Progress was published in 1684, with a second edition in 1686. Eventually, the English text comprised some 108,260 words. It has never been out of print, and has been translated into more than 200 languages.

Literary connections

Rachel Joyce's Booker-longlisted novel 2012 novel, The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry, was a modern reworking of Pilgrim's Progress, with her everyman hero Harold walking the length of England in yachting shoes to reach a dying friend.

http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/23/100-best-novels-pilgrims-progress

2

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, and spent the first nine years of his life living in the coastal regions of Kent, a county in southeast England. Dickens's father, John, was a kind and likable man, but he was incompetent with money and piled up tremendous debts throughout his life. When Dickens was nine, his family moved to London. When he was twelve, his father was arrested and taken to debtors' prison. Dickens's mother moved his seven brothers and sisters into prison with their father, but she arranged for the young Charles to live alone outside the prison and work with other children pasting labels on bottles in a blacking warehouse (blacking was a type of manufactured soot used to make a black pigment for products such as matches or fertilizer). Dickens found the three months he spent apart from his family highly traumatic. Not only was the job itself miserable, but he considered himself too good for it, earning the contempt of the other children. After his father was released from prison, Dickens returned to school. He eventually became a law clerk, then a court reporter, and finally a novelist. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers,* became a huge popular success when Dickens was only twenty-five. He published extensively and was considered a literary celebrity until his death in 1870.

Many of the events from Dickens's early life are mirrored in *Great Expectations,*which, apart from *David Copperfield,* is his most autobiographical novel. Pip, the novel's protagonist, lives in the marsh country, works at a job he hates, considers himself too good for his surroundings, and experiences material success in London at a very early age, exactly as Dickens himself did. In addition, one of the novel's most appealing characters, Wemmick, is a law clerk, and the law, justice, and the courts are all important components of the story.

Great Expectations is set in early Victorian England, a time when great social changes were sweeping the nation. The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had transformed the social landscape, enabling capitalists and manufacturers to amass huge fortunes. Although social class was no longer entirely dependent on the circumstances of one's birth, the divisions between rich and poor remained nearly as wide as ever. London, a teeming mass of humanity, lit by gas lamps at night and darkened by black clouds from smokestacks during the day, formed a sharp contrast with the nation's sparsely populated rural areas. More and more people moved from the country to the city in search of greater economic opportunity. Throughout England, the manners of the upper class were very strict and conservative: gentlemen and ladies were expected to have thorough classical educations and to behave appropriately in innumerable social situations.

These conditions defined Dickens's time, and they make themselves felt in almost every facet of *Great Expectations.* Pip's sudden rise from country laborer to city gentleman

forces him to move from one social extreme to another while dealing with the strict rules and expectations that governed Victorian England. Ironically, this novel about the desire for wealth and social advancement was written partially out of economic necessity. Dickens's magazine, *All the Year Round,* had become extremely popular based on the success of works it had published in serial, such as his own *A Tale of Two Cities* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White.* But it had experienced a decline in popularity after publishing a dull serial by Charles Lever called *A Day's Ride.* Dickens conceived of *Great Expectations* as a means of restoring his publication's fortunes. The book is still immensely popular a century and a half later.

In form, *Great Expectations* fits a pattern popular in nineteenth-century European fiction: the bildungsroman, or novel depicting growth and personal development, generally a transition from boyhood to manhood such as that experienced by Pip. The genre was popularized by Goethe with his book *Wilhelm Meister* (1794–1796) and became prevalent in England with such books as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* and Dickens's own *David Copperfield.* Each of these works, like *Great Expectations,* depicts a process of maturation and self-discovery through experience as a protagonist moves from childhood to adulthood.

http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/greatex/context.html

Saleem later encounters the Indira Gandhi-proclaimed State of Emergency and her son Sanjay's "cleansing" of the slums as Government forces attack the ghetto and Parvati is killed. Along with all the other remaining Children of Midnight Saleem is held as a political prisoner during the Emergency and is sterilised to prevent reproduction. This is narrated during passages which contain scathing criticisms of the Emergency regime.

Returning to Bombay, Saleem smells chutney and is reminded of his childhood. Tracing the factory where it is made he finds it is run by Mary Pereira, his old nanny. Finally settling here Saleem begins his own pickling process, chronicling the tumultuous history of a life entwined with the birth of a nation.

http://www.bookdrum.com/books/midnights-children/9780099578512/summary.html

4

Don Quixote

Miguel de Cervantes

Don Quixote and Fame

Don Quixote is one of the world's most famous and beloved literary creations. Most people have heard of him even if only through the adventure of the windmills (Part I, chapter 8) or as the protagonist following his impossible dream in the musical ***Man of la Mancha***. Some may also recognise that the adjective "*quixotic*" and the expression "*tilting at windmills*" have their origins in the actions of Don Quixote. And yet, how many people realise that his fame is paradoxically predicated on failure?

We know that after reading so many romances of chivalry, a certain "*hidalgo*" (i.e. low-born noble) from La Mancha took it into his head to become a knight-errant so that he could achieve eternal renown and fame ("*cobraseeternonombre y fama*" Part I, 1). By imitating those knights-errant who embodied the noble virtues of chivalry, Don Quixote (as the "*hidalgo*" called himself) would redress wrongs, protect damsels, widows, orphans and the needy and revive the past glories of chivalry etc. (Part I, e.g. chapters 1, 9, 11). Implicit in this, of course, is Don Quixote's wish to become --himself-- a hero, a model for others to imitate.

Of all the knights Don Quixote admired and wanted to imitate, the greatest and most famous was Amadís of Gaul. Don Quixote makes this clear to Sancho while they are in the Sierra Morena (Part I, 25), where Don Quixote has withdrawn to do penance à la Amadis: *"I want you to know, Sancho, that the famous Amadís de Gaula was one of the greatest of knights-errant. No, I'm wrong in saying 'one of,' he was the only one, the best, he was unique … He was the guiding light, the star of all brave and enamoured knights, and all of us who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him … I want to imitate Amadís."*

However, Don Quixote forgets or doesn't realise that the world ofknight-errantry is an exaggerated and distorted creation in which heroes are superhuman. They are youthful, high-born adventurers from some vague time in the past who travel and fight in distant, exotic places. So how, in 1600, could Don Quixote, a roughly 50 years-old, low-born noble of modest means from some nameless village in the arid wilds of La Mancha ever hope to compete with the feats of these youthful knights? They simply did not behave like ordinary people, and yet Don Quixote believes that they are "*like us*," as he points in Part I, 10. After telling Sancho that knights-errant could go for a month without eating or ate whatever they could find on their travels, he admits that in the all the many romances of chivalry he has read he has never come across knights eating (except in sumptuous banquets) nor satisfying other natural needs. Nevertheless, he concludes, they are *"hombres comonosotros"* (*"men like us"*). The fact is that knights-errant were not like Don Quixote.

It's ironic that if Don Quixote had been successful in imitating Amadís, then he would be no more than another in the long list of forgotten knights-errant. Who, apart from academics, has heard of Amadís, let alone the hundreds of other knights wandering the dusty pages of romances of chivalry? Don Quixote is famous precisely because he failed in his attempt to be a knight-errant!

Nevertheless, the fame that Don Quixote now enjoys is not the same as the fame he achieved in Spain and other European countries during the 17th century and most of the 18th. During that time, his fame was based not on his noble ideals and heroic steadfastness but on his comical misadventures. We can see the kind of things that appealed to the novel's earliest readers in chapter 3 of Part II (published 1615). Don Quixote has just been informed that a book (i.e. Part I, 1605) has just been published about him. Just like his chivalric heroes, his exploits have appeared in print. What more could he ask for? "*Which deeds of mine are most talked about*?" he asks eagerly. The reply is hardly comforting, because there is nothing heroic about the "deeds" referred to (they come from chapters 8, 9, 18, 19, 20 and 22 of Part I); they are all burlesque episodes in which Don Quixote is ridiculed in some form or other.

In other words, Don Quixote is famous for all the wrong reasons, as far as he is concerned. (Interestingly, Don Quixote never reads Part I nor asks to see a copy!)

Don Quixote did achieve the kind of immortality he craved although ironically not for his chivalric deeds but as a failed knight-errant. It was only in the 19th century, under the

influence of Romanticism, that Don Quixote --the hero of indomitable courage, faithful to his noble ideals-- came to the fore. Since then, he has passed into myth, his fame reflected in books, film, theatre, opera, ballet, musical compositions, painting, sculpture, radio, cartoons, television, even computer games. In 2002, the Norwegian Book Club (an affiliate of the Nobel Institute) organised a survey in which it asked 100 authors from around the world to list the 10 greatest works of literature ever written. **Don Quixote** gained 50% more votes than any other book, beating out works by Shakespeare, Homer, Goethe, Tolstoy and others!

http://www.spainthenandnow.com/spanish-literature/don-quixote-and-fame/default_95.aspx

I suspect the movie version with Gregory Peck (screenplay by Ray Bradbury) provides the experience many people would expect in the book. I haven't seen the movie, but plan to, just to compare.

I diligently read every page, resisting the urge to skim and skip, exploring if I could resisting the temptations of my attention. And in so doing I learned how much wider the idea of a novel is than I'd thought it could be. He successfully (at least in terms of posthumous readership, the book didn't sell that well in his lifetime) manages to twist the concept of a novel into various odd shapes, with strange and unwieldy corners – it made me rethink the notion of what a book, fiction or non-fiction, can be like. As a writer I'm glad I read the whole thing.

The best possible take on the book is that Melville desired to give the reader a similiar obsession about the white whale to the one Ahab has. The longer the book went on, the stronger the sense of craving, and then obsession, I had for the core narrative to continue. As Ahab hunts the whale, so does the reader hunt the story of Ahab and the whale in the book. A minority of the non-narrative chapters are exceptional essays (The Hyena (49), The Monkey Rope (72), Fast-Fish & Loose Fish, and the chapter on the concept of white) that I marked well and might reread. A dozen or so passages in the book, often about Ahab or philosophy, are exceptional. But for a book of this length I had a fairly low number of passages marked to return to and reread.

My edition (Wordsworth 2001) included a 15 page introduction by David Herd that bordered on worship. Thankfully I read it

after I finished the book, as it would have ruined the reading. He grants every possible benefit of the doubt to Melville, often without much real evidence of Melville's intentions. Apparently Melville had reservations, stating "It will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you might get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree".

And I'm compelled to say for no particular reason, Melville's Bartleyby the Scribner remains one of my favorite short stories. It's quite the opposite reading experience from reading Moby Dick.

http://scottberkun.com/2010/book-review-moby-dick/

6

Madame Bovary

Gustave Flaubert

Madame Bovary is the story of a woman caught between two worlds--one of the dull and stultifying country life that she leads with her husband, and the world of high romance and love: a fantasy.

Written with a detached irony and beautiful wit, and playing on the audience's affection for its central character as well as showing up her desires and hopes to be fantastical, Gustave Flaubert's great work has gone down in the history of European literature. Full of hope and full of despair, the story of Emma Bovary's life is one that shocked the readers of its own day (resulting in a notorious literary trial) as well as resonating deeply with readers down to the present day.

Overview: *Madame Bovary*

The book begins in the school room of Charles Bovary, a boy of few talents and little charisma who grows up to be a man of the same temperament. Charles becomes a doctor and, after marrying once and being made a widower, falls in love with a country girl, Emma. The new Madame Bovary is a very beautiful--but flighty--girl who was brought up in a convent and truly believed that love and marriage would bring fulfillment

to a life that hitherto had not lived up to expectations. Despite all her hopes, marriage to Charles proves dull and restless. Country-life becomes a slow trudge with no end in sight.

Emma finds a fellow romantic in the form of a young clerk, Leon, who is as bored and restless with the pace of country life as she is. She considers the possibility of an affair, but draws away from Leon, who leaves town to seek a future in Paris. Bereft at his leaving, Emma falls into the arms of Rodolphe, with whom she starts a passionate affair.

The more her husband manifests his bumbling, useless personality--the more she throws herself into her tryst, getting more and more in debt (to buy tokens for her lover). She tries to convince Rodolphe to run away with her, but Rodolphe leaves her. Soon afterwards, Emma meets Leon again when she and Charles go the opera. She is now more world-weary after her affair with Rodolphe, and she embarks on a love affair with the clerk.

Emma can't find the romantic, free life she craves--even in Leon's arms. Leon becomes merely another appendage--like her husband. Finally, she determines to commit suicide by taking arsenic. Far from being the beautiful farewell from the world she envisioned, Emma dies in the most horrible and painful way possible. Charles is left to grow old by himself--as he attempts to reconcile his idealized vision of his wife with the knowledge of her adultery and frivolity.

Illusion and Reality

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* negotiates between the world as it is and the world as Emma would wish it to be. This French novel is brilliant in its realistic portrayal of the ennui that was endemic in the French countryside of the time.*Madame Bovary* is forward looking, revolutionary, and controversial for its time. The novel was influential in the shaping of future work of realism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Madame Bovary got to the very center of the romanticism of the previous century and exploded the myths that lay at its foundations, especially by stressing romanticism›s incompatibility with the modern world. Flaubert treats sex in a straightforward and modern way, admitting that sexual pleasure is not merely the preserve of the men, but that willful, irresponsible desire can be as much the property of women.

Powerful but understated, Flaubert's writing is at its best when it deals with the minutiae of everyday life and delving into the depths of a character's psychology. Strong, unflinching in its desire to reach the truth of humanity, *Madame Bovary* treads a fine line between the desire for a more romantic life and understanding the inevitability of its eventual frustration.

http://classiclit.about.com/od/madamebovary/fr/aa_madbovary.htm

do not necessarily need to, fight in: a war that can be made into peace, in a life that can be made meaningful only when we try to do it together. William Chafe, a professor at Duke University, summarized it quite well two years ago on Duke Reads, "I think the basic lesson here is that we all have to make a decision whether to respond to this universal experience of life in a manner which affirms our common humanity. But that is our choice to make and that is ultimately what allows us to say "We tried to do something."

http://beautiful-absurdity.com/2013/01/09/the-plague-by-albert-camus/

8

A Bend in the River

VS Naipaul

Book Of A Lifetime: A Bend in the River, By VS Naipaul
BY NEEL MUKHERJEE

'A Bend in the River' was published when Naipaul was nearly 50. One of the greatest novels about the process of "becoming" (as opposed to "being") a nation, especially after the colonising powers have departed, it is tense with a taut hyper-awareness and knowledge of every nuance, subtext, context and history of the various mix of peoples in the unnamed Central African country where the book is located. Indwellers; assimilated and semi-assimilated Arab traders; erstwhile slave classes now racially intermingled with the Arabs who used to own them; the bush or village Africans; Europeans; the diasporic peoples of the Indian Ocean (to which our first-person narrator, Salim, belongs); visitors; expatriates... 'White Teeth' wasn't quite the first multicultural novel.

"After all, we make ourselves according to the ideas we have of our possibilities," remarks Salim. Each time I come to 'A Bend in the River', I seem to read a new book. At times, it is a book about the tension between being and becoming, played out on the bass and treble clefs of the individual and the global; at

others, about the silent, patient rage of history; about how free, if at all, one can be of history and its burdens.

It is, ultimately, a meditation about the genre that subsumes all others, history, of which we are subjects and to which we are subjected (to paraphrase Foucault). It is wholly in accord with the book that the two great historians of empire, Gibbon and Mommsen, should merit multiple references. The prose is pared down, unobtrusive, and the deceptively simple sentences can wield a surgical knife at the flick of a comma.

The structure of the book – moving from the peripheries to the centre, geographically and metaphorically – reminds me of Cocteau's words, "Un hommeprofond ne monte pas, ils'enfonce" ("a profound person does not rise, he goes deeper"). The profundity of the novel lies exactly in this depth of enquiry into the biggest question: what is one's place in the world and how does one fit into it? Any other novel asking these questions would likely spin them into "around-the-house-and-in-the-yard" tales of love and redemption. Naipaul uses them to achieve nothing short of an archaeology of the destiny of nations and peoples.

No one has parsed with such nuance and ferocious clarity the implosion of a nation, the complex web of causes behind it and the groups of peoples caught up in that seismic unravelling. He has shown us harsh, intractable truths, which have not agreed with the ideologies of the liberal-relativists and the politically correct police force of the post-colonial industry. Their fashionable rage against him is, to paraphrase another writer, the rage of Caliban looking at his face in the mirror. History

has proved Naipaul right so far. He taught two generations of writers not just how to write – that any careful craftsman can teach you – but also, more crucially and rarely, how to look unflinchingly at things and not turn one's gaze away.

Neel Mukherjee is the author of 'A Life Apart' (Corsair) and a judge for this year's Independent Foreign Fiction Prize

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/book-of-a-lifetime-a-bend-in-the-river-by-vs-naipaul-2267764.html

9

Ulysses

James Joyce

"Ulysses, Order, and Myth"

T.S. Eliot

Mr. Joyce's book has been out long enough for no more general expression of praise, or expostulation with its detractors, to be necessary; and it has not been out long enough for any attempt at a complete measurement of its place and significance to be possible. All that one can usefully do at this time, and it is a great deal to do, for such a book, is to elucidate any aspect of the book — and the number of aspects is indefinite — which has not yet been fixed. I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape. These are postulates for anything that I have to say about it, and I have no wish to waste the reader's time by elaborating my eulogies; it has given me all the surprise, delight, and terror that I can require, and I will leave it at that.

Among all the criticisms I have seen of the book, I have seen nothing — unless we except, in its way, M. Valery Larbaud's valuable paper which is rather an Introduction than a criticism which seemed to me to appreciate the significance of the method employed —the parallel to the Odyssey, and the use of

some nasty things in this connection, if it were worth while (Mr. Aldington is not one of them). Or one can be classical in tendency by doing the best one can with the material at hand. The confusion springs from the fact that the term is applied to literature and to the whole complex of interests and modes of behaviour and society of which literature is a part; and it has not the same bearing in both applications. It is much easier to be a classicist in literary criticism than in creative art — because in criticism you are responsible only for what you want, and in creation you are responsible for what you can do with material which you must simply accept. And in this material I include the emotions and feelings of the writer himself, which, for that writer, are simply material which he must accept — not virtues to be enlarged or vices to be diminished. The question, then, about Mr. Joyce, is: how much living material does he deal with, and how does he deal with it: deal with, not as a legislator or exhorter, but as an artist?

It is here that Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the Odyssey has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary. I am not begging the question in calling Ulysses a 'novel'; and if you call it an epic it will not matter. If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter. Mr. Joyce has written one novel — the Portrait; Mr. Wyndham Lewis has written one novel Tarr. I do not suppose that either of them will ever write another 'novel'. The novel ended with Flaubert and with James. It is, I think, because

Mr. Joyce and Mr. Lewis, being 'in advance' of their time, felt a conscious or probably unconscious dissatisfaction with the form, that their novels are more formless than those of a dozen clever writers who are unaware of its obsolescence.

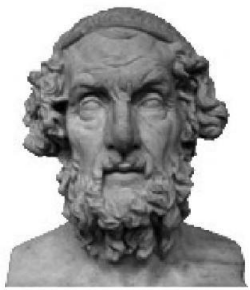
In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires. And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance.

http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/eliotulysses.htm

10

The Iliad/The Odyssey

Homer



The writer who took centuries

For a guy who may not have existed, the Greek poet Homer has had an awesome influence over the past three thousand years.

When we speak of "Homer", we're referring of course to the author of the ancient epic poems about the Trojan War and one warrior's journey home from the war, respectively *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which every schoolchild has studied—or at least has seen depicted in movies and on television. They're the most enduring legends known to the Western world, rivalled only by the stories of the Bible.

If such an individual as Homer did exist, he probably lived in a Greek colony on Asia Minor (Turkey today) around the ninth or early eighth century BCE, though some think he can be placed as far back as 1200 BCE, shortly after the Trojan war of which he sings.

The problem is, between these dates the eastern Mediterranean world was in somewhat of a dark age. The people of that era looked back at the time depicted in the epics as a golden era (which was actually the Late Bronze Age, according to archeologists), as a period of great political and social organization, of economic and military might. It was also said to be a time when gods had walked among people, many of whom were semi-divine themselves. As the Greek world recovered from ruin and started rebuilding its culture—and power—people were heartened by fables of their former glory. The Homeric tales were shaped to this end during the recovering centuries.

Oral history

We don't know if the originator of *Iliad* was the same person who first composed *The Odyssey.* Or if either poem was even created by a single person. Both works may have been created, revised and expanded by many hands. Some scholars argue each of the two major poems must have been brought together from numerous existing poems by a single poet, shaping it into the epic, probably around 775 BCE. The evidence for this lies in the consistency of each work's poetic expression.

But it is generally doubted that Homer, or anyone else, wrote either of the epic poems down from the beginning. The people who became the Greeks had been literate in the golden age but they'd lost that facility in the dark years. In the oral tradition of the intervening time, these historical poems, which recalled that earlier time, would have been committed to memory and recited (chanted or sung, actually) at gatherings by storytellers, with additions made over several centuries. Among the evidence for this is the fact that the poems contain a number of gross anachronisms, with devices and practices from the dark ages inserted into the story that supposedly took place centuries earlier.

The recovery of literacy by the Greeks in the eighth century BCE coincides with the period in which, it is speculated, one man—"Homer"—wrote down the *Iliad* with a singular poetic vision. Even after the story had been committed to writing, however, it continued to be presented orally for two or three hundred years, with many revisions undoubtedly creeping in. Our knowledge of the written text comes from a surviving later version, after more oral presentation shaped it further, rather than directly from what had been put down by the presumed Homer.

Whether after the *Iliad* the same man went on to write *The Odyssey* is a matter of additional conjecture. Some scholars point to differences in the epics regarding attitudes towards the gods and to differences of style to argue for distinct authors. *The Odyssey* seems to them more likely to be the work of a slightly later poet who put the Ulysses stories together with knowledge of the *Iliad* as written by Homer.

Try to imagine what it would have been like in an age without television, movies or even books, to hear these stories in person as they rolled out in thunderous and portentous phrases. Imagine yourself huddling with others in the dark, listening to the voice beside the fire but following with your imagination the exciting tales of men fighting for their honour and for their lives against each other, against the elements, against barbarism, against the gods, against monsters within and without.

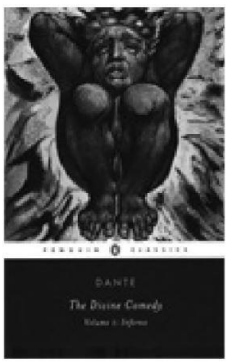
11

THE DIVINE COMEDY

Dante Alighieri

(La Divina Commedia)

INTRODUCTION



If one test of a work's greatness is that it can speak to readers in any historical moment yet still be firmly rooted in its own time, Dante's *Divine Comedy* has few peers. Dante began writing the *Comedy* (Divine was added to the title two centuries later) around 1306 after being exiled from his native Florence in 1302 on a specious charge of political corruption. Formal features of the poem were revolutionary. Writing in Italian rather than Latin, the language of literature for Dante's predecessors and contemporaries, Dante cast the poem in tertiary rhyme (terzarima), a rhyme scheme he invented to give poetic form to the narrative movement of the Comedy. The middle line of each three-line stanza rhymes with the first and third lines of the following stanza. The poem is full of references to Florentine politics, medieval Catholic theology, and the cultural life of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florence. In part a tribute to BicePortinari

(called Beatrice in the Comedy), the girl with whom Dante fell in love when both were nine years old and to whom he remained emotionally devoted all his life, the Comedy is also intensely autobiographical, an examination of the poet's soul at middle age. Infused with the specifics of Dante's own life and the world in which he lived, the Comedy is nonetheless a profound exploration of questions that transcend Dante's time and place: What is the nature of sin? Is perfect justice possible, in either this world or another? How can happiness be attained?

Dante chose to call his poem a comedy (commedia in Italian) because it ends happily. The poem follows a pilgrim who journeys through the afterlife to salvation and a vision of God under the guidance of the souls of the Roman poet Virgil, Dante's literary model, and his beloved Beatrice. Before the *Paradiso* and its triumphant ending, the pilgrim must make his way through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the first two parts of the poem. If Inferno, rather than Purgatorio or Paradiso, retains the strongest grip on our collective imagination, the best explanation for this is probably the simplest—the sinners of literature tend to be far more memorable than the saints. To take only two examples of Dante's remarkably vivid creations, we meet in Inferno Francesca, whose sly story of her affair with Paolo is so moving to the pilgrim that he faints out of pity, and Count Ugolino, whose punishment for the sin of betrayal consists of gnawing eternally at the skull of a fellow sinner.

Among the poem's most memorable characters is the pilgrim himself—in part a stand in for Dante, but also for the

reader. By leaving the speaker of the poem nameless, Dante encourages the reader to identify with him. Before the pilgrim emerges as the subject of the poem in the first tercet (three-line stanza) of Canto I, which introduces both Inferno and the Comedy as a whole, he establishes his commonality with the poem's readers: "Midway along the journey of our life/ I woke to find myself in a dark wood,/ for I had wandered off from the straight path" (p. 67). Moving from the generalization of "our life" in the first line to the specificity of the first person in the second line suggests that the pilgrim's experience is meant to be understood not only as that of the character we follow through the poem, but as that of everyone. The trajectory of the pilgrim's journey, from sin to salvation, and to self-discovery, is both literal, taking place in an afterlife given physical reality in the poem, and figurative, representing the ideal trajectory of every Christian life. Throughout the poem, Dante holds these two aspects of the pilgrim in tension with one another—on the one hand, his status as an individual with a particular past and a unique consciousness, and, on the other, his status as a kind of Everyman.

This tension between the specific and the exemplary is even more pronounced in the sinners the pilgrim encounters. Each of them is associated with a specific sin and therefore plays a symbolic role, yet each is based on a real historical figure. As the pilgrim moves through the successive circles of Hell, each circle inhabited by more offensive sinners than the previous one, his reactions to the sinners and their stories evolve. Again, Francesca and Ugolino are telling examples. In Canto V, Francesca tells the pilgrim how reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere caused her and Paolo to submit to

their desire for one another. Beholding the lovers now bound forever at each other's side, Paolo weeping continuously, the pilgrim is overcome by pity for them and faints. Francesca has told her story so as to elicit his sympathy, and she succeeds. The pilgrim sees her not as one of countless souls guilty of lust and deserving of their places in Hell, but as an individual whose present suffering is more affecting than the knowledge of her past sin. So too might the reader react to Francesca. In Canto XXXIII, however, the pilgrim displays a much different attitude toward the sinners. Count Ugolino tells the story of being imprisoned along with his children for betraying his political allies; all of them die of starvation. Before they die, however, his children offer Ugolino their flesh as food. Whether he takes up their offer before he dies himself is not entirely clear, but his punishment is to gnaw at the skull of Archbishop Ruggieri, the ally who in turn betrayed him. Like Paolo in Canto V, Ruggieri never speaks. Instead of sympathy for Ugolino, the pilgrim expresses outrage at the horrible death of Ugolino's innocent children.

By the end of Inferno, the pilgrim's attitude toward the sinners is more analytical. He seems less focused on the personal details of the stories they tell than on the sin itself. This could be due, in part, to the fact that the gravity of the sins increases as he descends; but it could also be because he has come to see their punishments as just. Yet the power with which Dante renders the stories and suffering of the souls in Hell seems contrary to persuading the reader that the absence of mercy with respect to these souls should not be questioned. The change in the pilgrim's reactions to the souls he encounters suggests that his emotions are eventually stirred, not by the suffering of the

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On the Road

Jack Kerouac

MODERN CLASSIC BOOK REVIEW:
ON THE ROAD BY JACK KEROUAC

Posted on: February 6th, 2011 *by*HannahRiggott

WARNING- This book will make you want to travel. It will make you want to get in the car and drive dizzyingly fast, not stopping until the wheels fall off, night and day, through sleepy towns to bustling cities. It will make you want to have adventures, and when you finish it, and come back to your life again, everything will seem stale, and you might spend a sleepless night or two wondering why you lack the courage to be a little less like everyone else.

For the last seven years I've carried around this weird fallacy in my head, put there by a university tutor, that it took Jack Kerouac three weeks to write *On The Road*. Yes, he sat in front of the typewriter for three weeks and banged it out, but there were years of frustration and false starts and missteps before then. The elegant, stream of consciousness prose that eventually poured out of him during those three weeks were his reward for those years of literary struggle, and*On The Road* was the novel that Kerouac always knew he had to write. *On The Road* is strongly

autobiographical, and my edition had an excellent introduction that explained who all the characters were meant to be. If, like me, you have but limited knowledge of the Beat movement, this won't mean much to you, but I found it useful later on when I wiled away a few hours at work looking everyone up on Wikipedia.

Our main protagonist, Sal Paradise, is completely in the thrall of Dean Moriarty. In the novel's four main parts, Sal bounces from one coast of America to the other, eventually making it as far down as Mexico, failing to settle anywhere or at anything. Meanwhile, Dean grows madder, and steadily accumulates more wives and children. Dean, based on Kerouac's friend, Neal Cassady, is the novel's hero, and with his ceaseless energy, free spirited nature, and his refusal to settle down he embodies the ideals of the Beat movement. However, as the book progresses, Dean begins to fall apart. Torn between a wife in San Francisco and a pregnant lover in New York, his friends start to see him as more of a fool than a hero, and his avoidance of his responsibilities begins to look embarrassing.

I read a recent interview with Carolyn Cassady, Neal's second wife and Camille in the novel, and she said that it took her a long time before she could read *On The Road*, because she found it too painful to discover how much fun they had all been having, while she was abandoned with the children. Which got me to thinking, maybe that is really, deep down, what the Beat movement was all about, how much wild crazy fun you can possibly have in a lifetime, and how long you can avoid the responsibilities that society has laid out for you. It was a perfectly understandable reaction to the austere post-war years, and a defining ideal for a generation. It is also an

essentially selfish and, if you consider that both Kerouac and Cassady died in their forties as a result of their excesses, short-lived lifestyle choice. As *On The Road* progresses, Sal Paradise grows disillusioned with his lifestyle, and his travels become less fulfilling. His final trip with Dean, a drug fuelled journey through Mexico, ends rather appropriately, in dysentery. While Sal lies delirious, Dean abandons him, leaving Sal to muse 'when I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes.' Sal returns to New York, where he meets a girl with sad eyes, exactly like he had been searching for.

The novel ends with Sal and his new girl planning on moving to San Francisco, and Dean appearing to help with the move. Everything falls through however, and Dean disappears for a final time, leaving Sal to reminisce about their adventures, seeming strangely bereft. It is easy to imagine how Dean's (Neal's) downward spiral will turn out, and perhaps it is only Sal's (or rather Jack's) literary aspirations that keep him relatively grounded in comparison. When *On The Road* was published, it received mixed reviews. In *The New York Times* it was praised as 'a major novel', but Truman Capote scoffed at Kerouac's methods, grandly declaring 'that's not writing, it's typing.' Well Truman, much as I love you, I have to say you're wrong. In short, it is impossible to underestimate how influfencial *On The Road* has been on modern culture, you only have to think how ubiqutious the American road-trip movie is to us now.

http://www.theoohtray.com/2011/02/06/modern-classic-book-review-on-the-road-by-jack-kerouac/

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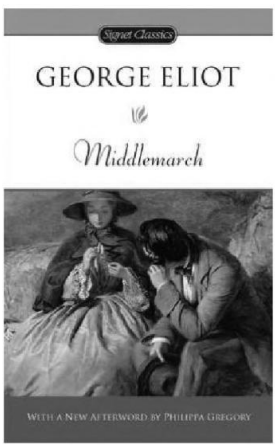
MIDDLEMARCH

George Eliot

Posted on December 2, 2011by TBM



The last novel I completed for the Victorian Reading Challenge was *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. This was the second book by Eliot that I read for this challenge. The first was *Silas Marner.* I mentioned in my review of *Silas Marner* that I never had the intention to read any of Eliot's novels. *Silas*changed my mind about her works. And*Middlemarch* has made me a fan of her forever. If you would like to read some background information on Eliot, please see my review of *Silas Marner.*

I am thankful that I got over my unwillingness to read her novels. I wrongly assumed that I would find them boring and a chore to read. *Middlemarch* is a mammoth of a book at 799 pages. From the onset of her writing career she experienced success. Her first novel *Adam Bede* was a bestseller when it first appeared in 1859. *Middlemarch* appeared in 1874 and it was an instant hit among the reading public and the

critics. V. S. Pritchett said, "No Victorian novel approaches *Middlemarch* in its width or reference, its intellectual power, or the imperturbable spaciousness of its narrative." One of the aspects that I truly appreciate about George Eliot's writing is her insight into the human mind. Her characters are people who are wonderfully flawed. Some are tragic. Some think they are perfect. There are villains, the down on their luck, and the ordinary. She makes them interesting by showing their innermost thoughts and desires and how they interact with each other. Virginia Woolf said that Eliot "was one of the first English novelists to discover that men and women think as well as feel, and the discovery was of great artistic moment. Briefly, it meant that the novel ceased to be solely a love story, an autobiography, or a story of adventure. It became, as it had already become with the Russians, of much wider scope."

The novel is set in an imaginary Midlands town called Middlemarch during 1830-1832. It would be hard to introduce all of the main characters and storylines in this review. There is a vast array of character whose stories are intertwined with everyone else's. At the center of the action is Dorothea Brook, an idealistic young woman who wants to help improve the lives of those around her. However, the society she lives in does not readily accept her notions. Eliot raises awareness of several issues during her day, including marriage, the role of women, religion, political reform, education, and hypocrisy. Dorothea's character highlights many of these issues. In the opening pages you learn that she doesn't want to settle down and marry Sir James Chettam and have a comfortable, easy life. Instead she marries Edward Casaubon, an older gentlemen who Dorothea believes is pursuing a noble work, *The Key to All Mythologies.*

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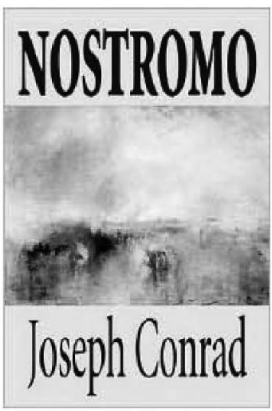
NOSTROMO

Joseph Conrad

Jan 13th, 2011 by mary

"Costaguana will always be run by butchers and tyrants."



Often regarded as Conrad's masterwork,**Nostromo,** written in 1904, is also Conrad's darkest novel, filled with betrayals at all levels and offering little hope for man's redemption. A novel of huge scope and political intrigue, it is also a novel in which no character actually wins. All must accept the ironies which fate has dealt them.

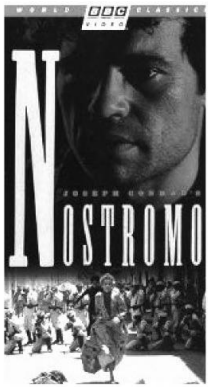
Setting the novel in the imaginary South American country of Costaguana, the story centers around a silver mine in the mountains outside of the capital, Sulaco, vividly depicting its allure and the price each character pays for its success.

When Charles Gould, returns from England to claim and reopen the rich silver mine he has inherited from his father, he has good intentions– to provide jobs for the peasants and contribute to the economy of the town at the same time that he

also profits. Soon, however, he becomes obsessed with wealth and power, and as the political climate gets hotter, he must pay off government officials, bandits, the church, and various armed revolutionaries to be able to work.

Each of these groups is vividly depicted as working for its own ends and not for the good of the people, and with their goals focused on the real world, these characters have no self-awareness, nor do they develop it during the novel.

In contrast to these "unrealized" humans, Conrad presents several characters who develop some self-awareness through their experiences. Nostromo, a local legend, is a man of principle who has always kept his word. Martin Decoud, a newspaper man, is a nihilist who has editorialized against the revolution, though he has yet to test himself. Dr.Monygham, captured during a past revolution, broke under torture, and is now seeking absolution by fighting against this revolution. And the good and long-suffering wife of Charles Gould, Dona Emilia, who has lost her husband to his silver mine, now devotes her life to helping others.



When Nostromo agrees to protect a load of silver from revolutionaries by taking it out to sea, he takes Decoud with him, leaving him on an island with the silver when they almost sink. Decoud'sreaction to his isolation, and Nostromo's reaction to the treasure that is suddenly "his," provide a dark commentary on idealism and human nature.

In the conclusion, which includes a love story that feels tacked on, Conrad's darkest self is revealed, offering little hope of change and even less hope for man's redemption. Rich in atmosphere, vibrant in description, filled with characters representing all walks of life and philosophy, and set in a country where revolution is a way of life, the novel is full of dark portents and bleak political outcomes.

Notes: A very good BBC production of this novel is available.

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Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe

A Vigorous, Quiet Revolt

A review by Howard W. French

When it was published fifty years ago, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* caused a stir for its revelation of something hitherto strange and unfamiliar in the world of literature: genuine African voices. Achebe was not the first African novelist, as he has sometimes wrongly been called, but his use of standard English to produce believable characters who inhabited a complex and authentic world marked two existing traditions of writing about Africa as evolutionary dead ends.

Before Achebe's breakthrough, there had been folklore-based African narratives, more entertainments than novels, written in English vernaculars that sought to reproduce the aural texture of African pidgins. The most famous of these, The Palm Wine Drinkard and my Life in the Bush of Ghosts, was written by another Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, and published six years before *Things Fall Apart* was released by Heinemann. Today it is hard not to hear a condescending ring in Dylan Thomas's praise of Tutuola's book for what he called its "young English."

Earlier still, there had been yet another tradition of European writers ventriloquizing what they imagined to be an African voice. The classic example is a novel published in 1939 called Mister Johnson, by Joyce Cary, a former British colonial officer in Nigeria. It is an ostensible tragedy written in a comical style with a central African character, the titular Johnson, whom Cary described as someone who "swims gaily on the surface of life." Two decades ago, an essay about Cary in The *New York Review of Books* described the book's lightheaded eponymous figure in terms that un-self-consciously echoed one of the oldest and ugliest stereotypes of Africans -- their inability to master the concept of time: "A fragrant breeze, a blazing tropical sunrise, a pretty girl -- such things so overwhelm him that past and future alike momentarily disappear."

In interviews Achebe has suggested that his book, which has been translated into some fifty languages, was written partly in reaction to the patronizing caricature of Johnson. *Things Fall Apart*, however, unlike *Mister Johnson*, is tragedy pure and simple, both deeply personal -- in the case of its main character, the excessively proud Okonkwo, whose Sophoclean fall is foretold by any number of omens -- and collective, as Okonkwo's society is sundered and then subjugated by the British empire's one-two combination of missionaries and colonialists.

However remarkable on this score, Achebe's first novel achieved far more than revealing genuine African voices. *Things Fall Apart*was the first novel in English to depict Africans who exist in an intricate moral universe; one that resonates with indigenous thought and values and concedes nothing, even in

"We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy," the commissioner says, adding a moment later as he announces their punishment: "I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship. That must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world."

For the self-righteous outsider, the entire encounter is about justice. For the natives, it is little more than a lesson in deceit and power. There are echoes here of the old lament often attributed to Native Americans: when the white man came, he had the Bible and we had the land. Now we have the Bible and he has the land.

In the words of the late FelaAnikulapoKuti, Nigeria's great musician of protest and one of Achebe's legion of spiritual descendants, these modern institutions the white man has brought, from the statehouse to the courthouse, all ostensibly in the name of progress, but really as a means of imposing and extending their control, were but new "instruments of magic," ill-fitting, alien ones that African leaders have eagerly appropriated nonetheless to "turn green into red" and "blue into white." Indeed, the apprenticeship of the arbitrary and unjust begins in the wake of the tribunal's judgment of Okonkwo, when the commissioner's African messengers go to his village to demand payment of the imposed fine, secretly fattening the penalty by fifty bags of cowry shells to pocket the difference themselves.

What is most refreshing here is how deftly Achebe avoids the siren calls of neat moral conclusions that so often make literature of victimization unsatisfying. Tragedy and blame flow in two directions in his rare universe. "Does the white man understand our custom about land?" Okonkwo asks late in the novel. "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" comes the answer from a friend.

But he says our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that hold us together and we have fallen apart.

Howard W. French, a former foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*, teaches at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and is the author of A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa.

http://www.powells.com/review/2009_05_26.html

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Slaughterhouse Five

Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut reviewed by Harlan Ellison, 1969

October 18, 2009 | 10:30 am

"I'm lucky," Vonnegut told David L. Ulin in 1997, "that I'm free to do art, and presumably to keep my soul growing, by finding something else to do. Participation in the arts -- drawing, dancing, and all that -- makes the soul grow. That's why you engage in it. That's how you grow a soul."

When Vonnegut's masterpiece "Slaughterhouse-Five" was published in 1969, it was reviewed for the L.A. Times by Harlan Ellison. Here's his review:

For those who have never slipped down any of the special rabbit holes Kurt Vonnegut has been boring into the decaying flesh of the American Novel, dropping hints about the plot of his new novel only serves to confuse. This is Vonnegut's attempt to describe his feelings about the Allied fire bombing of Dresden, a singular act of senseless brutality in which 135,000 men, women and children were incinerated. (An act of war now generally considered to have been of *no* strategic value. Dresden, at the time, was an "open" city. One wonders who, inevitably, will be asked to support the guilt for such a deranged deed.)

Though Vonnegut himself was a prisoner of war of the Germans, and was saved from cremation during the raid by a quirk of chance that put him in a deep cellar beneath the Dresden stockyards while the fire bombs fell, and though he has spent 20 years working himself up to the re-creation of the event, he is once again eminently Vonnegutesque in that Dresden barely gets mentioned. It is a novel about war and what men do to each other in the name of holy causes.

Which is not to say it is anywhere near "The Naked and the Dead" or "From Here to Eternity." Vonnegut fights his wars with feathers rather than with jackhammers. "Slaughterhouse-Five" is funny, satirical, compelling, outrageous, fanciful, mordant, fecund and at the bottom-line, simply stoned-out-of-its-mind.