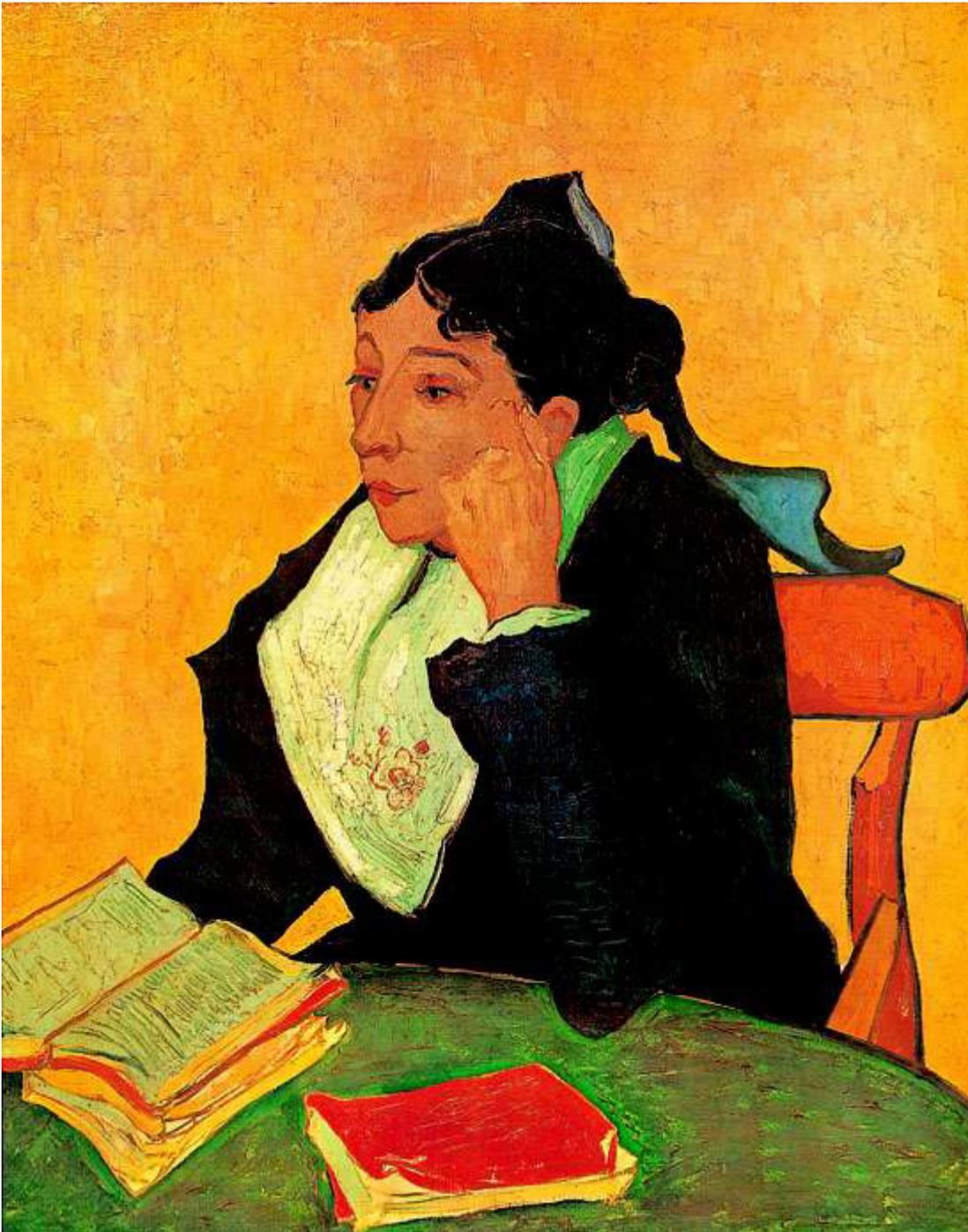


Why is Good Literature Disappearing?

by [Armando Simón](#) (August 2018)



L'Arlésienne: Madame Ginoux with Books, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

Something very, very odd is going on in our culture: the quality of literature appears to be fast declining. Whereas, before now, the United States could boast of a whole constellation of living first-rate writers, nowadays the number of excellent writers can be counted in the fingers of one's hand—and those writers are on their last legs. Nor can we take any consolation in thinking that the same phenomena may be at work that has been seen in the case of music and art, wherein geniuses have been overlooked, only to be discovered and appreciated later (e.g., Melville, Schubert, Van Gogh, Renoir). If anything, innovative, or controversial, writers, such as Joyce, were read and discussed while they lived and wrote.

Nor, again, can we take comfort in the attitude that has prevailed in Western society within the past three or four decades that, "there is nothing good, nor bad, only opinion" (with its corollary, "there is no right, or wrong, only opinion"), which has been an excuse for the proliferation of truly abysmal "art" by self-important, neurotic, talentless, mediocrities.

This invisible crisis in literature becomes self-evident if we list all of the great fiction writers in fifty year increments (and, it is important to note, the writers wrote on a multitude of topics, so it cannot be said that specific events served as literary catalysts). I will do so in this essay. The reader may take issue with the presence or absence of two or three names, but the pattern remains; by the same token, some of the writers continued to publish a few works past the demarcation dates, but they are placed at the time that they peaked. For the sake of simplicity, novelists and poets were

the data; playwrights and essayists and philosophers were excluded, though their inclusion would also support the premise of this essay.

In fact, the evidence practically shouts out at you. *The pattern that emerges is surprisingly that of a bell shaped curve!*

1800-1850

Washington Irving, Fenimore James Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

1851-1900

Edward Hale, Harriet B. Stowe, Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Joel Harris, Mark Twain, Mary Dodge, Louisa Alcott, Bret Harte, Henry James, Horatio Alger, William D. Howells, Kate Chopin, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville.

1901-1950

Upton Sinclair, Booth Tarkington, Owen Wister, Sarah O. Jewett, Edith Wharton, O. Henry, T. S. Eliot, Zora Hurston, Richard Wright, Christopher Isherwood, B. Traven, Margaret Mitchell, John Steinbeck, Walter Clark, Walter Edmons, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Ambrose Bierce,

Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Thornton Wilder, Sinclair Lewis, Cronell Woolrich, John Marquand, William Saroyan, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, Sara Teasdale, John Dos Passos, Clarence Day, Thorne Smith, Pearl Buck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, Robert Penn Warren, H. P. Lovecraft, Jack Schaefer, Marjorie K. Rawlings.

1951-2000

Anais Nin, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Robert Frost, Mario Puzo, Shirley Jackson, Charles Jackson, James Thurber, James McCain, Leon Uris, Robert Ruark, James Michener, Ayn Rand, Joyce Carol Oats, John Toole, Robert Heinlein, Saul Bellow, Isaac Asimov, Raymond Chandler, Taylor Caldwell, Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor, Tom Wolfe.

2001-2018

*no entry

What is most alarming is that there is no new generation of high quality writers in sight to take up the torch. All of the writers that came into prominence in the last period are already dead, or like I said, have one foot in the grave. Some of the writers that publish their fiction are widely hailed in magazines and television as the new literary genius/talent to burst into the scene—only for no one to remember their name, or their book, six months later. Good literature is flatlining.

Wherefore this decline in great writers? It may very well be that the ravenous film and television industries have absorbed them. It has to be admitted that many television series and specials, and the cinema, have been superb (just as most others have also been mediocre, as in literature and art) and one cannot wonder if those same screenwriters would not have written excellent fiction. Additionally, it speaks volumes of the dismal state of American theater (as defined by Broadway) that the normal process has been reversed. Hitherto, if a play was good or passable, it was turned into a film; nowadays, previous films are being turned into stage plays (and some audiences actually go to see them).

Then, perhaps again, it may be that the rumored stranglehold on the publishing business by the Politically Correct zealots may not be a rumor, but fact. Certainly many of today's novels, short stories and films have a strong Politically Correct flavor, and their outcomes are predictable from the first paragraph. My experience with these individuals is that if even one sentence, one innocuous word, is ideologically jarring to them their reaction is hysterically hostile.

Lastly, another possibility is that, nowadays, the number of gatekeepers (agents, editors, committees) seem to have increased and they all seem to think and talk alike to the point of giving one the impression of their being clones. Many of them feel that their sole reason for existence—certainly as far as their jobs are concerned—is to make the right remark in meetings (usually of a negative nature), whereupon their position in the bureaucracy has been justified.

But, then, it could be that there may be a more sinister—as yet unidentified—force at work. I will mention three, scary, separate manifestations that parallel this problem.

One. The Roman Empire saw a similar decline in literary output that followed the decline in political and social affairs of that civilization. The literary genre of those times were history and poetry and we, indeed, see the decline in history from a Tacitus to a Suetonius to a void and in poetry from a Virgil to an Ausonius to a void. Yet, this decline was somewhat arrested by Emperor Hadrian, an enthusiastic advocate and promoter of Greek culture (such enthusiasm possibly fueled by his reputed bisexuality), which lasted past his reign. Greek literature, which had been dormant for centuries, experienced a rebirth. During his rule, we see a resurgence of historical works written in Greek (Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* was written with the explicit purpose of putting forth the idea that Greek politicians and generals were just as good and competent as Roman generals and politicians). The Greek language comes to, once again, be as important as Latin (the increasing influence of the Greeks ultimately comes to a pinnacle with the Byzantine Empire when the original Roman Empire breaks up). But, again, Latin literary output continues its decline as to frequency and quality as the Greek literary output enjoys a rebirth.

Two. In modern times, *scientific innovations* of a technological nature has surprisingly followed *an identical bell curve pattern* (telegraph, radio, television, cars, tanks, machine guns, rubber, steam engine, refrigerators, nuclear reactors, light bulbs, trains, cameras, rockets, airplanes, computers, etc.). All subsequent innovations in our time have simply been constant refinements on those crucial, nascent, inventions.

Three. The literature of many western European countries (e.g., Germany, Italy, France) appear to be going through a similar process of development from, first, a trickle, then an increase, a peak, followed by a steady decline to the present state of affairs. For example, let us use the same procedure for Great Britain (and, again, the presence or absence of three or four writers can be debated without the central principle being disturbed):

1650-1700

John Milton, Daniel Defoe, John Dryden

1701-1750

Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope

1751-1800

Laurence Sterne, Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, Robert Burns

1801-1850

William Thackeray, Sir Walter Scott, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, William Wordsworth, Robert Blake, John Keats, Anne Brontë, S. T. Coleridge, De Quincey.

1851-1900

Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Lord Tennyson, Robert L. Stevenson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Browning, J. M. Barrie, R. M. Ballantyne, George du Maurier, Ouida, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Samuel Butler, Algernon Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Lewis Carroll.

1901-1950

P. C. Wren, H. G. Wells, H. R. Haggard, Anthony Hope, Saki, G. K. Chesterton, E. Hornung, Lord Dunsany, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, E. Forster, George Orwell, James Joyce, James Hilton, Agatha Christie, Joseph Conrad, P. G. Wodehouse, Somerset Maugham, Rafael Sabatini, R. Kipling, C. S. Forester, J. Tolkien, Daphne du Maurier, Arthur Koestler, W. H. Hudson.

1951-2000

Rebecca West, Roald Dahl, C. S. Lewis, C. P. Snow, Muriel Spark, Anthony Burgess, William Golding, John Fowles, Nevil Shute, Graham Greene, Douglas Adams, Kingsley Amis.

2001-2018

J. K. Rowling

In summary, a decline in literature is definitely apparent, not only in America, but in Great Britain as well. Note that this has occurred even though there has been a steady increase in population. I do not claim to know with any certainty the cause for this development of a bell curve in literature, but the phenomenon is definitely present. My job here has simply been to point to this overlooked phenomenon.

And if the reader has any doubts as to this state of affairs, then ask yourself this question: how many truly excellent writers in their thirties or forties (or even twenties!) can you think of?

As I stated before, at one time we used to have a literary constellation; now all we have is . . . a black hole.

Armando Simón is a retired college professor and forensic psychologist who is the author of *Orlando Stories*, *The U*, *A Cuban From Kansas*, *Wichita Women*, and *The Cult of Suicide and Other Science-Fiction Stories*. Not that you'll read any of them.

Follow NER on Twitter