

# 5 Unpopular 19th Century Novels that Became Classics

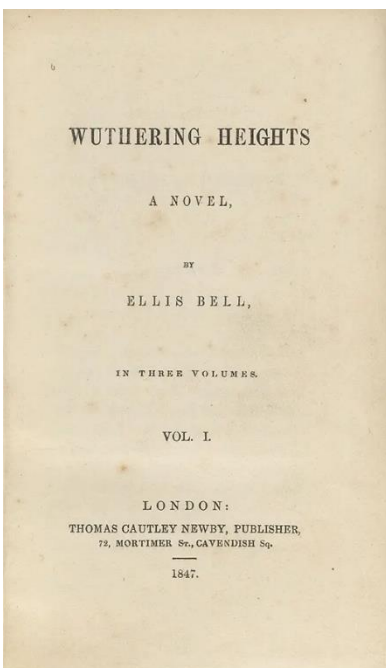


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Just because a book is praised today, doesn't mean this was always so. Many beloved classic novels were ignored or criticised when they were initially released.

I've found five works of fiction from the 19th century that struggled to find an audience when first published but are now considered to be classics. Each of these novels challenged the conventions and sensibilities of the time and was poorly received. Yet, as the years passed, readers and critics began to recognise their groundbreaking themes, innovative structures and lasting impact, elevating each one to its rightful place as a masterpiece. What do you think of these titles?

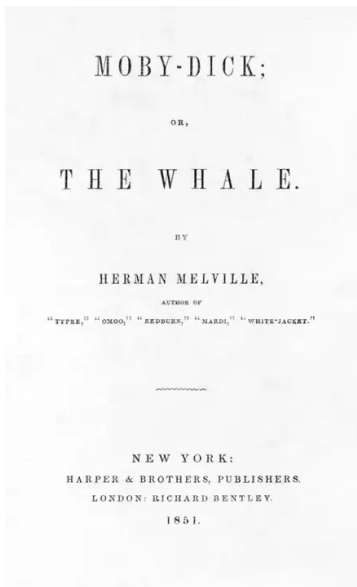


## ***Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë (1847)**

Published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, was met with mixed reviews and modest sales of only about 2,000 copies in its first year.

*Wuthering Heights*' dark atmosphere, complex structure, and exploration of destructive relationships confused many Victorian readers who were used to more moralistic literature. Consequently, the novel did not achieve significant commercial success, and Emily Brontë passed away unaware of its future impact. It was only years after her death that *Wuthering Heights* was recognised as a pioneering classic of English literature.

[\*Wuthering Heights\* by Emily Brontë](#)  
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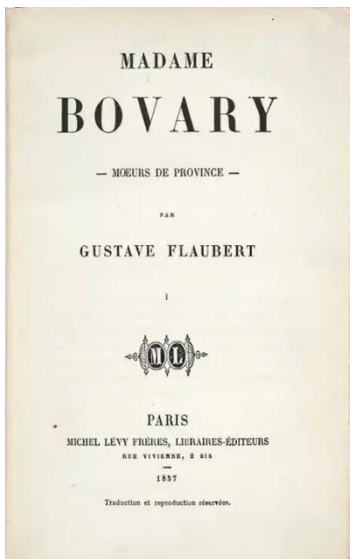
### ***Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville (1851)**

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, now hailed as a masterpiece of American literature, was a commercial failure when it was first published, selling only a few thousand copies during Melville's lifetime.

*Moby-Dick*'s complex narrative, philosophical depth, and unconventional structure confused many early readers who were expecting a simpler adventure story. Its exploration of obsession, fate, and the human condition was not widely appreciated at the time and the novel's initial reception was lukewarm, with some critics finding it overly complex. It wasn't until decades after Herman Melville's death that *Moby-Dick* was acknowledged for its great literary significance to become one of the greatest novels in English literature

[\*Moby-Dick\* by Herman Melville](#)

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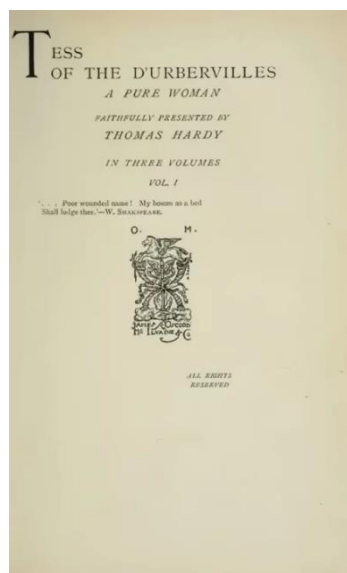
### ***Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert (1857)**

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, published in 1857, initially faced significant controversy and criticism, selling only around 6,000 copies in its first year.

The novel's unflinching portrayal of adultery, bourgeois dissatisfaction, and the moral decay of its protagonist, Emma Bovary, shocked the conservative French society of the time. Flaubert's realistic depiction of Emma's life, devoid of the romantic idealism prevalent in literature then, was seen as scandalous and immoral by many readers and critics. The exploration of a woman's sexual desires and disillusionment with provincial life was seen as an attack on the social and moral values of the era, leading to a highly publicised obscenity trial against Flaubert, which, despite his acquittal, further fuelled the book's notoriety. It was only later, as literary tastes evolved, that *Madame Bovary* was recognized for its groundbreaking realism psychological insight, securing its place as one of the greatest novels ever written.

[\*Madame Bovary\* by Gustave Flaubert](#)

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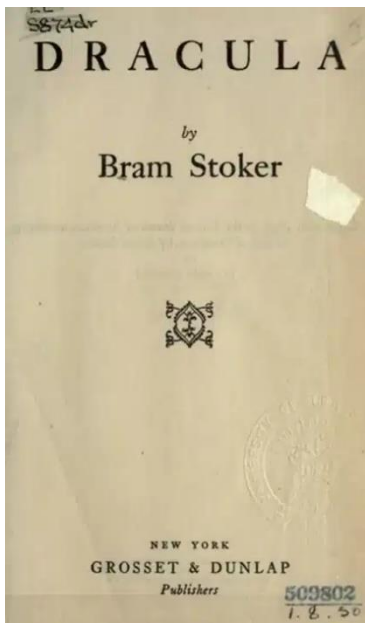
### ***Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy (1891)**

When Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, was first published it faced considerable controversy and a poor reception. In its initial year it only sold about 1,000 copies.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* faced significant criticism for its frank exploration of sexuality and critique of Victorian moral standards. Its depiction of a tragic heroine and social injustices shocked many contemporary readers, leading to its limited commercial success and mixed reception during Hardy's lifetime. It wasn't until later that the novel was recognised as a groundbreaking critique of its era and an important literary work.

[\*Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman\* by Thomas Hardy](#)

[\*Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman\* by Thomas Hardy](#)



### ***Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897)**

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897, initially sold only about 3,000 copies. It struggled to find commercial success during Stoker's lifetime, with its true influence and legacy only becoming apparent years later.

Although *Dracula* introduced the iconic Count Dracula and set the standard for vampire fiction, its epistolary format and themes of sexuality, immigration, and fear were controversial in its time. The novel received mixed reviews and sold modestly, overshadowed by other Gothic literature. Stoker did not live to see its impact, which only became evident in the 20th century with film adaptations and a growing fascination with the vampire myth, solidifying *Dracula* as a cornerstone of horror literature.

[\*Dracula\* by Bram Stoker](#)

[\*Dracula\* by Bram Stoker](#)

Have you read these books? Why do you think they were unpopular?

### **Further Reading**

[Susannah Fullerton: Video Talk – \*Tess of the D'Urbervilles\* by Thomas Hardy](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: \*Madame Bovary\* Reader's Guide](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Movie Adaptations of Novels](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite TV Adaptations of Novels](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Short Stories](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Family Sagas](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Favourite Christmas Scenes](#)

[Susannah Fullerton: 5 Remarkable 20th Century Books Penned Behind Bars](#)

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