

The Reddit Classics*

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What is a “classic” work of literature? What does Reddit think one is? When Reddit users talk about classic works of literature, which works are they talking about? I think it is worth pausing for a moment and trying to guess.

[THIS SPACE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK FOR QUIET REFLECTION, PREDICTION, AND PREREGISTRATION OF IDEAS ABOUT REDDIT AND THE MEANING OF “CLASSIC” WITH RESPECT TO LITERATURE.]

*<http://cforster.com/2026/09/reddit-classics>

If you never spend time on the `r/classicliterature` subreddit, I think that what Reddit calls a classic is a little surprising. It isn't completely shocking. The subreddit is full of discussions of well-known works of literature. But they are a sort of hodgepodge. `r/classicliterature`'s sense of a *classic* aligns imperfectly with academic notions of canonicity.

To investigate this, I counted all the works mentioned on `r/classicliterature`. In the course of examining them, I also considered the larger, and longer-lived, subreddit `r/literature`, to provide some point of contrast for what "classic" means. Of course, in so doing I realized that any serious consideration of the reading practices of Reddit and its economy of literary prestige would need to take into account subreddits like the massive `r/books`, and the smaller `r/TrueLit`. Indeed, once one starts looking, the whole matter balloons rather absurdly. A total survey would surely need to include `r/RomanceBooks` (more than twice the number of readers as `r/literature`) and `r/Romantasy` and `r/DarkRomance`, and perhaps even the smaller `r/HistoricalRomance`. What about `r/suggestmeabook`? If you perused these subreddits and were surprised by the absence of science fiction, that is probably because those discussions are collected in `r/sciencefiction`, `r/scifi`, and `r/printSF`. The subreddits `r/Fantasy` and `r/FantasyBooks` are likewise sizable. [This list](https://www.reddit.com/r/books/wiki/relatedsubreddits/)¹ from the `r/books` wiki is probably the most comprehensive list of book-related subreddits I've seen. It includes a wide range of literature-adjacent communities, including author-specific subreddits and subreddits on book binding. Ultimately, one realizes that a serious inquiry into what Reddit considers "literature" and "classic" would require tackling all of Reddit. What seems clear, though, is that a process of self-organization has already sifted and sorted the discussion of books on Reddit in such a way that `r/literature` and `r/classicliterature` are already in tension—not only with each other but with the wider discussion of "books" and related concepts of "genre" (many of which are not confined by a particular medium). And like any

¹<https://www.reddit.com/r/books/wiki/relatedsubreddits/>

online community, there have been conflicts and arguments and schisms. One detects a bit of antagonism in the very name of the `r/TrueLit` subreddit (which implicitly separates itself from those mere pretenders who illegitimately claim the name of *lit*).² But *classic* does seem to have an identity. People ask about one another's "favorite classic." They look for advice in getting into "the classics." So what particular works are mentioned when people on `r/classicliterature` talk about the classics? Let's count 'em!

Of course, counting all the named texts is a tricky matter in its own right. I used the wonderful [download tool](#)³ provided by [Arctic Shift](#)⁴. It allows one to download the archive of all posts and comments for particular subreddits on particular dates.⁵ I downloaded all of the posts and comments for both `r/literature` and `r/classicliterature` and used an LLM to extract every named author and work of literature. I may write a separate post about that process, and offer a brief comparison of conventional Named Entity Recognition tools with an LLM option. (Spoiler: the LLM was better.)

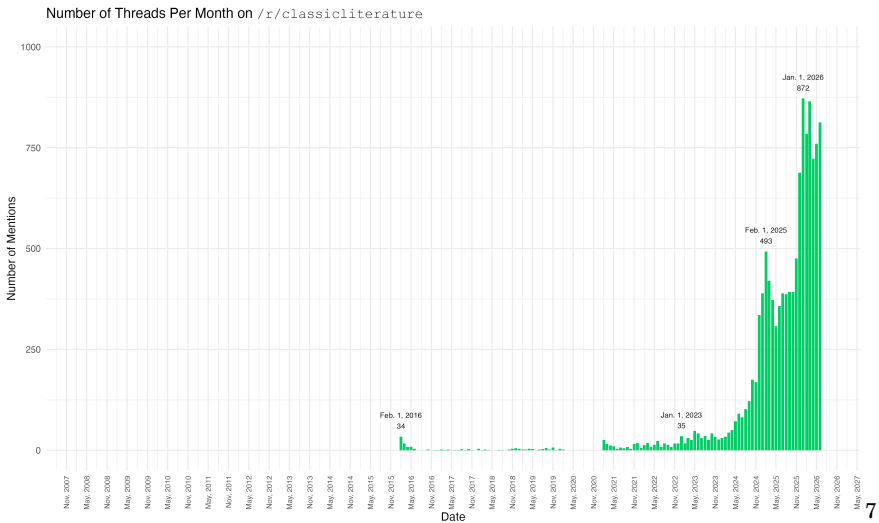
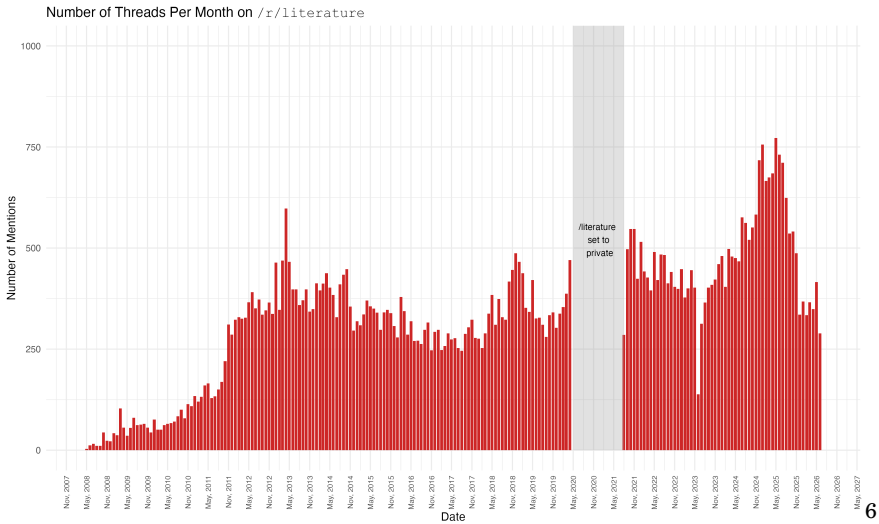
But let's look at the data as I have it. First, a quick overview of activity on these two subreddits.

²(I haven't examined `r/TrueLit` here—though now I wish I had!)

³<https://arctic-shift.photon-reddit.com/download-tool>

⁴https://github.com/ArthurHeitmann/arctic_shift

⁵Reddit itself, however, seems to not love its data being made so easily downloadable. One Reddit user [reports being asked to remove torrents of reddit data](#) (https://www.reddit.com/r/pushshift/comments/1v50ved/upon_reddits_request_i_am_taking_down_my_academic/); and another recent thread suggests that [links to Arctic Shift are being removed from the platform](#) (https://www.reddit.com/r/spezholedesign/comments/1vnvv7r/it_appears_reddit_is_now_retroactively_removing/).



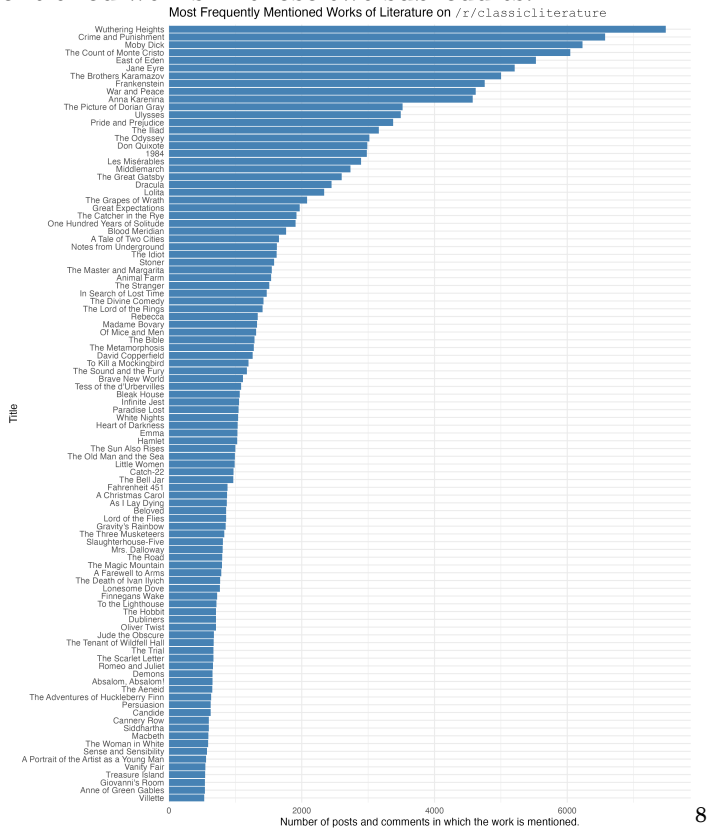
r/literature is the older of the subreddits, starting soon after Reddit was established as a platform. While r/classicliterature has its first posts in 2016, it doesn't really take off until around 2020. Interestingly, it grew during a period when r/literature went private (for reasons that seem

⁶http://cforster.com/images/literature_posts.png

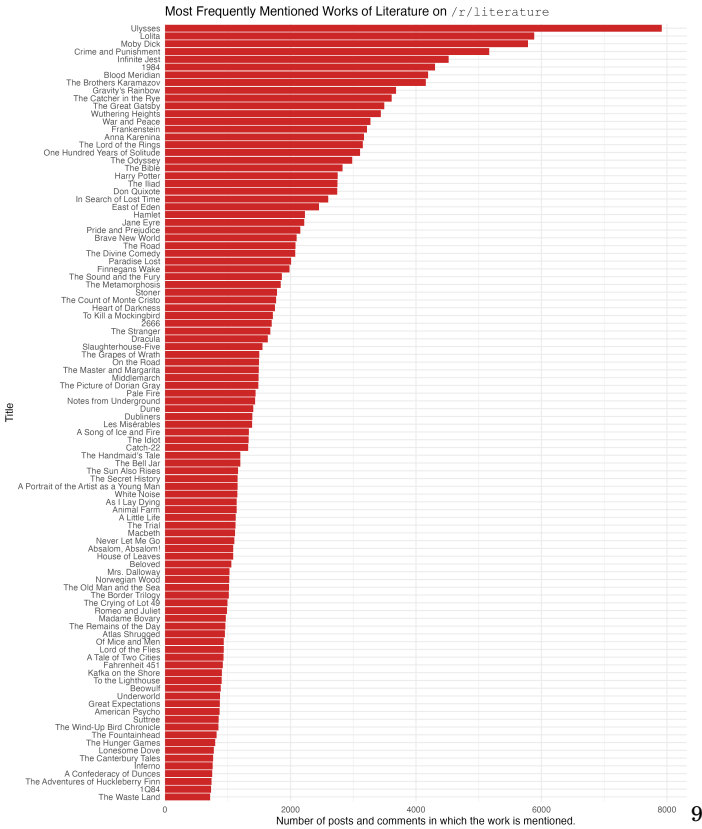
⁷http://cforster.com/images/classicliterature_posts.png

to involve a disagreement among the subreddit's moderators). Since 2024, r/classicliterature has grown rapidly and in recent months has seen more activity than r/literature.

Let's look at the particular works of literature that are discussed in these fora, starting with the top 100 most frequently mentioned works in these two subreddits.



⁸http://cforster.com/images/top_classic_v2.png



These lists resonate with Melanie Walsh and Maria Antoniak’s excellent essay “The Goodreads ‘Classics’: A Computational Study of Readers, Amazon, and Crowdsourced Amateur Criticism.”¹⁰ Walsh and Antoniak collected works on Goodreads that were tagged classic and analyzed the associated reviews to examine how the “classics” are imagined on that platform. Walsh and Antoniak’s data provides a useful point of comparison for these two subreddits. For additional points of comparison, we can also highlight works that appeared in the Modern Library’s (infamous?) top 100 novels of the 20th century list¹¹, as well

⁹http://cforster.com/images/top_literature_v2.png

¹⁰<https://culturalanalytics.org/article/id/1261/>

¹¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Library%27s_100_Best_Novels

as works that Harold Bloom identified as part of the “Western Canon” in the appendix to [the \(infamous!\) book of that title](#)¹². These points of comparison help characterize what Reddit considers a classic. I’ll highlight a few things.

A Classic is Not a Poem

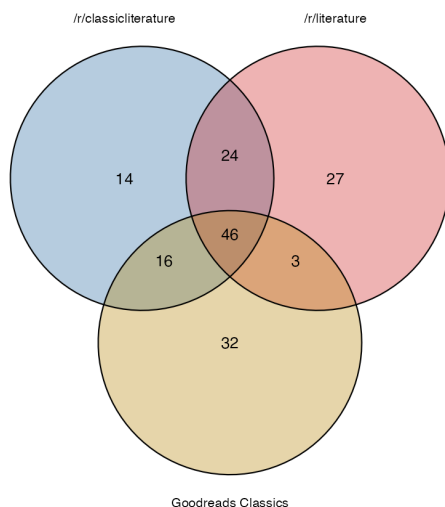
The top works on these subreddits are completely dominated by *narrative* forms, and are almost exclusively (~90% by my hand count) novels. No lyric poetry appears at all; what poetry does appear is epic narrative (Homer, the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*). Whatever classic literature is, it isn’t lyric poetry. The absence of lyric poetry is just one of the ways that Reddit’s definition of literature has been narrowed so that literature becomes largely *novels*. I don’t think this means interest in poetry has necessarily waned. There is a rather vibrant r/poetry subreddit, comparable in size to r/classicliterature and r/literature. But the language of the “classic,” to judge from these subreddits, has attached to narrative fiction. (And this, I think, is mostly true of Walsh and Antoniak’s Goodreads data as well.)

A Classic is (Probably) Russian or Victorian

I think we can get some additional insight into these categories by comparing the works that are distinctive of each of these communities: /r/classicliterature/, r/literature, and the works tagged “classic” on Goodreads, and comparing what works appear in the top 100 of each.

¹²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Western_Canon

Top 100 Works: /r/classicliterature, /r/literature, and the Goodreads Classics list



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Works distinctive of /r/classicliterature are mostly nineteenth-century fiction. /r/classicliterature's top 100 contains lots of Victorian novels: Dickens's *Bleak House*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. But there is also a significant helping of Russian lit: Dostoyevsky's long short story "White Nights" and *Demons* and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The other works unique to /r/classicliterature's top 100 are Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, as well as Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*.

By contrast, the works in the top 100 of /r/literature that don't appear at the top of either /r/classicliterature or Goodreads tend towards the twentieth century. They include a few popular book series: *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Dune*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but also some works that are frequently discussed

¹³http://cforster.com/images/venn3_top100.png

¹⁴If you want the titles, [the diagram is a little crowded](http://cforster.com/images/venn3_titles.png) (http://cforster.com/images/venn3_titles.png).

on Reddit (Ellis's *American Psycho*, Bolaño's *2666*, Tartt's *The Secret History*, Yanagihara's *A Little Life*) as well as a smattering of twentieth-century novels like *Pale Fire*, *On the Road*, *The Crying of Lot 49*.¹⁵

Thirty-two works are unique to Goodreads classics.¹⁶ Walsh and Antoniak describe a “clear influence of school systems on Goodreads users’ conceptions of the classics” (270). And certain of the Goodreads-specific texts indeed seem to reflect US public school curricula. *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Crucible*, *The Giver*, and *The Outsiders* are all unique to Goodreads, and savor distinctly of middle school English class. Reddit’s discussions seem less yoked to school readings. I’m not sure why. Perhaps discussion on Reddit is more aspirational, for finding books people want to read in the future, while readers are using Goodreads to record all the books they’ve read.

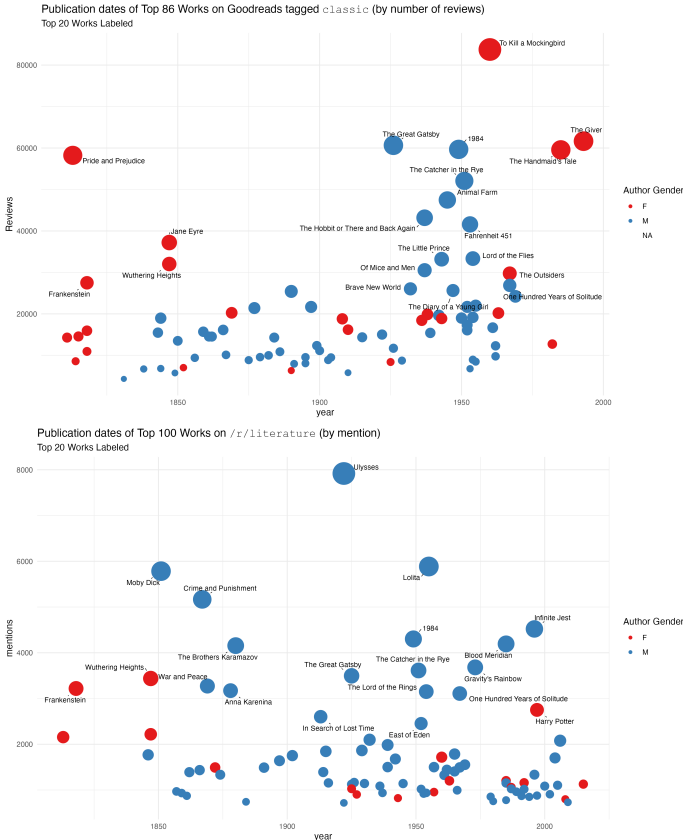
A Classic is Old

We can also get a sense of the relative historical orientation of each of these communities with a nice visualization Walsh and Antoniak offer. They plot popularity (as measured in number of Goodreads ratings) by publication year, to get a sense of how the Goodreads classics are distributed over history. I’ve reproduced their visualization, along with similar plots for `r/classicliterature` and `r/literature`. One note: because so

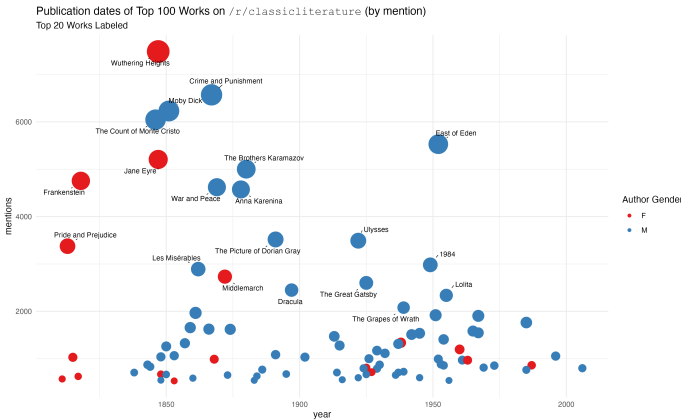
¹⁵For this analysis, I condensed all books in a series—say, *Harry Potter* or *Dune*—to a single title; that may overrepresent them, but it seemed the best compromise for my purposes.

¹⁶They are: “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass” “Call of the Wild” “Charlotte’s Web” “The Chronicles of Narnia” “A Clockwork Orange” “The Color Purple” “The Crucible” “The Diary of a Young Girl” “The Giver” “Gone with the Wind” “Gulliver’s Travels” “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” “The Importance of Being Earnest” “The Little Prince” “A Little Princess” “Mansfield Park” “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” “Much Ado About Nothing” “Northanger Abbey” “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” “Othello” “The Outsiders” “Peter Pan” “The Phantom of the Opera” “Robinson Crusoe” “The Secret Garden” “Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde” “The Time Machine” “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz”.

few works in the dataset are published before 1800, I've limited the plot to works published after 1800.¹⁷



¹⁷For `r/classicliterature` there are eleven excluded works: the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Aeneid*, *Candide*, *Macbeth* and the Bible; `r/literature` has those eleven, plus *Beowulf* in its top 100—so `r/literature` has slightly more pre-1800 works, just fewer nineteenth-century works.



A Reddit classic is *old*. Among these three communities, r/classicliterature skews to the left, with the oldest works; Goodreads “classics” are the newest works, with r/literature in the middle.

A Classic is Canonical(ish)

Walsh and Antoniak note that “classic” is the category users rely on far more than the academic-sounding term “canon” (270), a word which, they note, hardly appears at all in Goodreads users’ reviews.¹⁸ If we take the list of texts from Bloom’s *Western Canon* as one measure of what constitutes the “canonical,” we can measure the canonicity of these communities by simply seeing how many works in their top 100 appear in Bloom’s list.¹⁹ If Lisa Nakamura is right to note that on Goodreads “reader tastes reflect the traditional literary canon more closely than one might expect” (240; qtd. in Walsh and Antoniak 254), Goodreads nevertheless has the least overlap with Bloom’s list of these three communities.

¹⁸Walsh and Antoniak write, “more than 15,000 Goodreads reviews explicitly mentioned the words ‘classic’ or ‘classics,’ while just under 400 reviews mentioned the words ‘canon’ or ‘canonical.’ This simple metric reveals a clear fault line in literary critical discourse between scholars and readers” (Walsh and Antoniak 270).

¹⁹This is a somewhat silly measure; Bloom’s list is very long. It contains more than 1,500 works, and reflects Bloom’s idiosyncratic choices: e.g., Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* is included, but not *Beloved*.

37 of the works in Goodreads top 100 are on Bloom's list, compared with 55 of r/literature and 66 of r/classicliterature. A Reddit classic is surprisingly well aligned to at least Bloom's notion of canonicity.

The Classics are a Little Weird

All of which fails to account for the puzzled feeling I had reading the ranking above. Particular works often surprised. *Wuthering Heights* is great. But is it really number 1? And, weirder still: what is up with *The Count of Monte Cristo*? *The Count of Monte Cristo* ranks 36th on r/literature and 18th on Goodreads's top 100 classics, but it is 4th on r/classicliterature. Have I simply missed this novel's centrality to literary history? And, if I missed it, I am not the only one. It is absent from Bloom's *The Western Canon*. The YouTube channel "Man Carrying Thing" [recently highlighted](#)²⁰ the weird, and indeed recent, emergence of *The Count of Monte Cristo* as what he calls "gen z's new favorite book" and the "gateway drug into classic literature for tons of people."

One reason for the high ranking of these two works appears to be film and television adaptations.

As the chart above suggests, *Wuthering Heights* was widely discussed on r/classicliterature before the film's release; but there is a clear spike in the month of the adaptation's release. Indeed, the film was [announced in July 2024](#)²¹, making the rise in posts on r/classicliterature essentially coextensive with the anticipation for Fennell's adaptation. It is not impossible that the film alone shaped Reddit's notion of what "classic literature" is.

The situation is somewhat similar with *The Count of Monte Cristo*. While the spike is more diffuse and less well-defined, it seems that a 2024 French film adaptation, and then a British TV series (broadcast in the US in March 2026), helped support the

²⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsjmQaoc4pk>

²¹<https://deadline.com/2024/07/emerald-fennell-to-direct-wuthering-heights-adaptation-1236008681/>

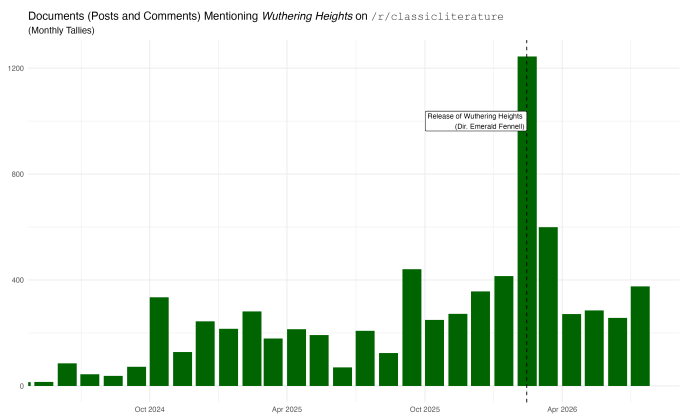


Figure 1: A Bar Plot Showing the Number of Mentions of *Wuthering Heights* over time, spiking around February 2026, when the film adaptation was released.

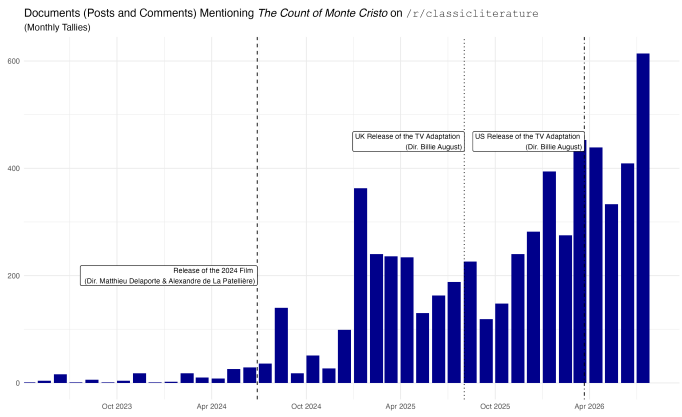


Figure 2: A Bar Plot Showing the Number of Mentions of *The Count of Monte Cristo* over time, with dates of film and TV adaptations marked.

increased discussion of Dumas's novel. I wonder what was going on in discussions of literature on TikTok? Was TikTok getting excited about Dumas's novel at just this moment?

If we generate Dunning Log Likelihood scores on the text of the posts associated with each of the top works in r/classicliterature we can identify terms most distinctive of each work.²²

Here are the top 100 terms distinctive of posts/comments mentioning *Wuthering Heights*:

heathcliff bronte wh cathy catherine jane eyre nelly emily romance heathcliff's linton hareton hindley lockwood isabella earnshaw romani edgar **movie** dark gothic romantic she moors abuse yorkshire race heathcliffe characters tenant gypsy pp sisters black white brontes irish austen charlotte brontë's **elordi** wildfell toxic cathy's revenge skinned hall love prejudice her **fennell** catherine's frankenstein **casting adaptation** liverpool grange pride obsession ethnicity linton's lascar ambiguous generational trauma dialect **emerald film jacob** asian skin arden described **robbie** nelly's story racially **adaptations** unlikeable thrushcross people racial withering healthcliff vocab roma **mar-got** joseph's emily's indian hair darker earnshaw's relationship critics rebecca je toxicity heathcliffs

Many of the terms are character names (Heathcliff, Cathy, Nelly, Hareton, Hindley); others are key themes (romance/obsession). There are discussions of Heathcliff's ambiguous racial identity ("romani," "dark," "skinned," "ethnicity," "ambiguous," "irish," and "indian"), and many seem to come from comparisons in posts about *Wuthering Heights* to other works (Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*).²³ But the bolded terms, I assume, must come from discussions of the film adaptation.

²²Ted Underwood's post "[Identifying diction that characterizes an author or genre](https://tedunderwood.com/2011/11/09/identifying-the-terms-that-characterize-an-author-or-genre-why-dunnings-may-not-be-the-best-method/)" (<https://tedunderwood.com/2011/11/09/identifying-the-terms-that-characterize-an-author-or-genre-why-dunnings-may-not-be-the-best-method/>) introduced me to the range of methods for identifying characteristic diction.

²³And, of course, typos: healthcliff, heathecliff, withering.

I think we see a similar, though less pronounced, trend in the top 100 terms distinctive of *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

dumas revenge dantes edmond musketeers christo alexandre montecristo tcomc les mercedes comc bce adventure miserables abridged peace buss haydee unabridged danglars three robin pages war mis quixote prison villefort faria fernand long brothers lonesome east don punishment eden karamazov crime dove d'if critics rome areadingofmontecristo french morrel karenina vengeance hippo tulip serialized chateau hugo version century fun count's length plot **leo** chocolate valentine **anna miniseries** abbe mc counte turner finished action comte vampa tcmc r page th benedetto paced imprisonment augustine **badel** nishapur classics next cheng'en edmond's arabian blanc albert kempis **claffin** anycount size exeter treasure escape le slow attar

Again, there are abbreviations (*CoMC*, *TCMC*), key themes (revenge), references to editions (the Robin Buss translation; abridged vs. unabridged). The number of terms here that come from other titles (*Les Miserables*, *The Three Musketeers*, *East of Eden*, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Brothers Karamazov*) makes me wonder how many of these posts are simply lists ("Top 10 Classics," etc). But we also see discussion of the **miniseries** and actors like Sam **Claffin** and Alan **Badel** (from the earlier, 1964 adaptation). **Anna** may be Ana Girardot, who plays Mercédès, and Leo may be "Leo Harris" who plays Villefort, both from the recent TV adaptation. There are fewer words here related to adaptations than in discussions of *Wuthering Heights*, but I'm still willing to suggest that the reception and discussion of *classics* is often shaped by adaptations.

I don't think all of the sense of miscellany I find looking at r/classicliterature's top 100 can be explained by adaptations. But they definitely play a part. It reshapes readers' interests and sense of what is important, and so elevates some works in ways that are surprising. There are, no doubt, other forces shaping reader interest. Perhaps they can help explain how and why Dostoevsky has emerged as the subreddit's most mentioned author.

A Classic is Not a Social Media Post

Walsh and Antoniak conclude,

So what is a ‘classic’ in the twenty-first century? Based on our analysis of 144 Goodreads classics and 120,000 accompanying reviews, there are at least a few clear answers. For Goodreads and Amazon, a classic is a prominent advertising target value, a marketing tool, and a source of lucrative adaptation material. For Goodreads users, a classic is a book read in high school, a book that inspired a TV show, or a book that other Goodreads users have tagged as a classic. (Walsh and Antoniak 276)

The works of *r/classicliterature* have a lot in common with this description of Goodreads classics. They are influenced by adaptation in a similar way. They appear less indebted to high school curricula. They are, if anything, more canonical than those of Goodreads; and they definitely tend to be *older*. But any appeal to the classic is an attempt to claim the cultural capital invested in the idea of literature and literary reading. Online, at this moment, such a claim occurs at a moment when literature’s value and prestige are called into question.

In that environment, the *pastness* and even *out of stepness* that are ascribed to the “classics” by *r/classicliterature* is essential. In reimaging a collection of texts as “classics,” the subreddit establishes a “selective tradition,” defined implicitly against a dominant culture. Raymond Williams’s description of the resistant power of residual meanings and values is reflected in the attempt to establish “the classic” as something at odds with the dominant media environment.

at certain points the dominant culture cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk. It is in the incorporation of the actively residual—by reinterpretation, dilution,

projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion—that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident. This is very notable in the case of versions of ‘the literary tradition’, passing through selective versions of the character of literature to connecting and incorporated definitions of what literature now is and should be. This is one among several crucial areas, since it is in some alternative or even oppositional versions of what literature is (has been) and what literary experience (and in one common derivation, other significant experience) is and must be, that, against the pressures of incorporation, actively residual meanings and values are sustained. (Williams 123)

r/classicliterature is a selective version of the literary tradition. To a literary historian the absence of lyric poetry from its account of the “classics” is surprising; as, I think, are the particular works it elevates. But if we understand the classics as a reaction formation to social media it may be less so. A classic is something from a time *before* and, most crucially, a time before social media, and short-form social media (like TikTok, Reels, and Twitter) in particular. Without being flip, I think *The Count of Monte Cristo* ends up as one of the key “classics” because *it is so long*, and that signals that it is not TikTok or Twitter.

The Reddit *classic* is just one interpretation of the place of literature in the media environment of the present. Different, less antagonistic ways of imagining the relationship between social media and literature exist. After all, lyric poetry—so notably absent from Reddit’s classics—is short-form media *avant la lettre*. It certainly appears like the literary form best suited to the era of TikTok and Instagram reels. And, in some ways, it thrives there. “Instapoetry” too is a “selective version” of literature. In that version, however, poetry is not in antagonistic relationship to social media. Appeals to the idea of the “classic” are far less present there. Instead, in Rupi Kaur (only the clearest example

of a reconciliation of poetry and social media), value manifests not as “classic” but as something like emotional earnestness.²⁴

r/classicliterature expresses a vision of literature and literary value, I am suggesting, that is meaningfully opposed to the dominant media ecology. It is opposed to social media in a way that Instapoetry cannot be. But in so valorizing the old, it risks thoughtlessly importing a very conservative vision of what literature is. Walsh and Antoniak note that “the Goodreads classics are considerably less diverse in terms of race and ethnicity of their authors” (254). The top 100 of r/classicliterature is even less ethnically diverse and, despite Emily Brontë taking the top spot, it is pretty male (as evident in the mentions vs. publication date plots above, which are color-coded by author gender).

So a final, possible definition. A Reddit classic is a work in antagonistic relationship to the media ecology of the present. That antagonism is not absolute (one signals one’s devotion to the classic on social media after all), but the idea of the classic as *old* and *long* reshapes ideas of canonicity to stress a difference from contemporary social media. The Reddit classic is an instance, in Williams’s words, of imagining “alternative or even oppositional versions of what literature is.” Here, I am suggesting, that opposition is implicitly to the wider media ecology where the values we conventionally associate with literature are receding into the past. Under such a definition, a book, like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, that may not be traditionally *canonical*, emerges as a classic. But this reshaping and reimagining of what literature is, while alternative and oppositional in some regards, is not without problems of its own.

Notes If you’re interested in the data behind these plots, I’ve made a digest of the works mentioned [available in a zip](#)²⁵.

²⁴Other experiments with Twitter literature (including those by Teju Cole and Jennifer Egan) would offer another fusion of literature and social media outside the logic of the classic, and in very different terms Egan.

²⁵http://cforster.com/share/reddit_lit-mentions.zip

Per my habit recently, LLMs were used for data extraction and for generating the code behind some of the plots. The prose, however, is all mine.

Sept. 7 Update: After publishing the first version of this post, I noticed an error. Works that have a number in their title were sometimes undercounted by not merging different versions of the titles. Thus, redditors would refer to both *1984* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *100 Years of Solitude* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I used LLMs to find all such instances and merge them. The only affect in the top 100 rankings were on those two titles already mentioned. The new versions are above.

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