



# Why Popular Novels Are Popular

By HENRY SEIDEL CANBY



YOU might suppose that popular literature was a modern invention. Cultivated shoulders shrug at the mention of "best sellers" with that air of "the world is going to the devil" which just now is annoyingly familiar. Serious-minded people write of "The Saturday Evening Post" as if it represented some new fanaticism destined to wreck civilization. The excessive popularity of many modern novels is felt to be a mystery.

Of course there are new elements in literary popularity. The wave of interest used to move more slowly. Now thousands, and sometimes millions, read the popular story almost simultaneously, and see it a little later on the films. Millions of the class that never used to read at all are accessible to print, and have the movies to help them.

But popularity has not changed its fundamental characteristics. The sweep of one man's idea or fancy through other minds, kindling them to interest, has been typical since communication began. The Greek romances of Heliodorus may be analyzed for their popular elements quite as readily as "If Winter Comes." "Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Thousand and One Nights" could serve as models for success, and the query, What makes popularity in fiction? be answered from them with close, if not complete, reference to 1922. However, the results of an inquiry into popularity will be surer

if we stick to modern literature, not forgetting its historical background. Human nature, which changes its essence slowly through the centuries, nevertheless shows rapid changes of phase. The question I propose, therefore, is, What makes a novel popular in our time?

I do not ask it for sordid reasons. "What makes a novel sell a hundred thousand copies, or a short story bring a thousand dollars?" may seem the same query; but it does not get the same answer, or, apparently, any answer valuable for criticism. A cloud descends upon the eyes of those who try to teach how to make money out of literature, and blinds them. Their books go wrong from the start, and most of them are nearly worthless. They purpose to teach the sources of popularity, yet instead of dealing with those fundamental qualities of emotion and idea that, as I hope to show, make popularity, their tale is all of emphasis, suspense, beginnings, and endings, the relativity of characters, dialogue, setting; useful points for the artisan, but not the secret of popularity, or, it may be added, greatness in literature. Technic is well enough,—in fact some technic is indispensable for a book that is to be popular,—but it is the workaday factor in literature. Of itself it accomplishes nothing.

But technic can be taught. That is the explanation of the hundred books upon it, and their justification. You

cannot teach a perception of the heart, or observation, or sympathy, or the background of knowledge which makes possible the interpretation and selection of experience—not at least in a lesson a week for nine months. Hence literary advisers who must teach something and teach it quickly are drawn, sometimes against their better judgment, to write books on technic by which criticism profits little. Technical perfection becomes their equivalent for excellence and for popularity. It is not an equivalent. More than a mason is required for the making of a statue.

I disclaim any attempt to teach how to be popular in this essay, although deductions may be made. I am interested in popularity as a problem for criticism. I am interested in appraising the pleasure to be got from such popular novels as "The Age of Innocence," "Miss Lulu Bett," "If Winter Comes," or "The Turmoil," and the not infrequent disappointments from others equally popular. I am especially interested in the attempt to estimate real excellence—an attempt which requires that the momentarily popular shall be separated from the permanently good; which requires that a distinction be made between what must have some excellence because so many people like it, and what is good in a book whether many people like it or not. Such discrimination may not help the young novelist to make money, but it can at least refine judgment and deepen appreciation.

## § 2

As for popularity and its meaning, there need be no quarrel over that term. Let us rule out such accidents as when a weak book becomes widely known because it is supposed to be

indecent, or because its hero is identified with an important figure of real life, or for any other casual reason. If a novel, because of the intrinsic interest of its story or on account of the contagion of the idea it contains, is widely read by many kinds of readers, and if these readers on their own initiative recommend the book they have read to others, that is popularity, and a sufficient definition.

Perfection of form is not enough to make a book popular. A story has to move, or few will read it; but it is doubtful whether a greater technical achievement than this is required for popularity. "Samson Agonistes" is technically perfect, but was never popular, while, to pass from the sublime to its opposite, "This Side of Paradise" was most crudely put together, and yet was deservedly popular. The best-built short stories of the last decade have not been the most popular, have not even been the best. No popular writer but could have been, so I profoundly believe, more popular if he had written better. But good writing is not a specific for unpopularity. The excellent writing of Howells could not give him Mark Twain's audience. The weak and tedious construction of Shakspeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," the flat style of Harold Bell Wright's narratives, have not prevented them from being liked. Form is only a first step toward popularity.

Far more important is an appeal to the emotions, which good technic can only make stronger. But what is an appeal to the emotions? "Uncle Tom's Cabin" appealed to the emotions, and so does "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford." To what emotions does the popular book appeal? What makes "Treasure Island" popular? Why did

“Main Street” have such an unexpected and still reverberating success?

“Treasure Island” is popular because it stirs and satisfies two instinctive cravings of mankind, the love of romantic adventure and the desire for sudden wealth. This is not true, or, rather, it is not the whole, or even the important, truth in “Main Street.” There the chief appeal is to an idea, not an instinct. We left the war nationally self-conscious as perhaps never before, acutely aware of the contrasts between our habits, our thinking, our pleasures, our beliefs, and those of Europe. When the soldiers oversea talked generalities at all, it was usually of such topics. The millions that never went abroad were plucked from their Main Streets, and herded through greater cities to the mingled companionship of the camps. “Main Street,” when it came to be written, found an awakened consciousness of provincialism, and a detached view of the home town such as had never before been shared by many. Seeing home from without was so general as to constitute not a mere experience, but a mass emotion. And upon this new conception, this prejudice against every man’s Main Street, the book grasped, and thrived. In like manner “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” grew great upon its conception of slavery. “Robert Elsmere” swept the country because of its exploitation of freedom in religious thought. No one of these books could have been written, or would have been popular if they had been written, before their precise era; no one is likely long to survive it except as a social document which scholars will read and historians quote.

Roughly, then, the emotional appeal which makes for popularity is either to

the instinctive emotions permanent in all humanity, though changing shape with circumstances, or to the fixed ideas of the period, which may often and justly be called prejudice. A book may gain its popularity in either way, but the results of the first are more likely to be enduring. “Paradise Lost,” the least popular of popular poems, still stirs the instinctive craving for heroic revolt, and lives for that quite as much as for the splendors of its verse. Dryden’s “Hind and the Panther,” which exploited the prejudices of its times and was popular then, is almost dead.

### § 3

What are these instinctive cravings that seek satisfaction in fiction and, finding it, make both great and little books popular? Let me list a few without attempting to be complete.

First in importance is probably the desire to escape from reality into a more interesting life. This is a foundation, of course, of all romantic stories, and is part of the definition of the romantic; but it applies to much in literature that is not usually regarded as romance. A more interesting life than yours or mine does not mean one we should wish actually to live, otherwise it would be difficult to account for the taste in detective stories of many sedentary bank presidents; nor does it mean necessarily a beautiful, a wild, a romantic life. No, we wish to escape to any imagined life that will satisfy desires suppressed by circumstance or incapable of development in any attainable reality.

The desire to escape is eternal; the variety differs with the individual man and still more with the period. While youthful love, or romantic adventure,

as in "Treasure Island," has been an acceptable mode for literature at least as far back as the papyrus tales of the Egyptians, more precise means of delivery from the intolerable weight of real life appear and disappear in popular books. In the early eighteen hundreds men and women longed to be blighted in love, to be in lonely revolt against the prosaic well-being of a world of little men. Byron was popular. In the Augustan age of England classic antiquity was a refuge for the dreaming spirit; in Shakspeare's day, Italy; in the fifteenth century, Arthurian romance. Just at present, and in America, the popularity of a series of novels like "The Beautiful and Damned," "Erik Dorn," and "Cytherea" seems to indicate that many middle-aged readers wish to experience vicariously the alcoholic irresponsibility of a society of "flappers," young graduates, and country-club rakes who threw the pilot overboard as soon as they left the war zone, and have been cruising wildly ever since. We remember that for a brief period in the England of Charles II, James II, and William and Mary, rakishness in the plays of Wycherley and Congreve had a glamour of romance upon it and was popular. Indeed, the novel or drama that gives to a generation the escape it desires will always be popular. Test Harold Bell Wright or Zane Grey, Rudyard Kipling or Walter Scott, by this maxim, and it will further define itself, and ring true.

Another human craving is the desire to satisfy the impulses of sex. This is much more difficult to define than the first, because it spreads in one phase or another through all cravings. Romance, of course, has its large sex element, and so have the other attri-

butes to be spoken of later. However, there is a direct and concentrated interest in the relations between the sexes which, in its finer manifestations, is forever asking for a vivid contrast of personalities in love, in its cruder forms demands passion in the raw, in its pathological state craves the indecent. A thousand popular novels illustrate the first phase; many more, of which the cave-man story, the desert-island romance, "The Sheik," and its companions are examples, represent the second; the ever-surging undercurrent of pornography flows to meet the third.

Many sex stories are popular simply because they satisfy curiosity, but curiosity in a broader sense is a human craving which deserves a separate category. Popular novels seldom depend upon it entirely, but they profit by it, sometimes hugely. A novel like Dos Passos's "Three Soldiers," Mrs. Wharton's "Age of Innocence," or Mrs. Atherton's "Sleeping Fires" makes its first, though not usually its strongest, appeal to our curiosity as to how others live or were living.

Curiosity is a changeable factor, a sure play for immediate popularity, but not to be depended upon for long life. It waxes and wanes and changes its object. Just now we are curious about Russia, the South Sea Islanders, and night life on Broadway; to-morrow it may be New Zealand and Australia, the Argentine millionaire, and quite certainly the Chinese and China. Books appealing to the craving for escape have a longer life, for a story that takes a generation out of itself into fairy-land keeps some of its power for the next. Nevertheless, the writer who guesses where curious minds are reaching and gives them what they want puts money into his purse.

A fourth craving, which is as general as fingers and toes, is for revenge. We laugh now at the plays of revenge before "Hamlet" where the stage ran blood, and even the movie audience no longer enjoys a story the single motive of which is physical revenge. Blood for blood means to us either crime or rowdyism; and yet revenge is just as popular in literature now as in the sixteenth century. However, its aspect has changed. Our fathers are not butchered in feuds, our sons are not sold into slavery, and except in war or in street robberies we are not insulted by brute physical force. Nevertheless, we are cheated by scoundrels, oppressed by financial tyranny, wounded by injustice, suppressed by self-sufficiency, rasped by harsh tempers, annoyed by snobbery, and often ruined by unconscious selfishness. We long to strike back at the human traits which have wronged us, and the satiric depiction of hateful characters whose seeming virtues are turned upside down to expose their impossible hearts feeds our craving for vicarious revenge. We dote upon vinegarish old maids, self-righteous men, and canting women when they are exposed by narrative art, and especially when poetic justice wrecks them. The books that contain them bid high for popularity.

It happens that the last twelve months have seen three novels in which this element of popular success was strong: Miss Sinclair's "Mr. Waddington of Wyck," "Vera," by the author of "Elizabeth" in her German garden, and Mr. Hutchinson's "If Winter Comes." The first two books focus upon this quality, and their admirable unity gives them superior force; but it is noteworthy that "If Winter Comes," which adds other

popular elements in large measure to its release of hate, has been financially the most successful of the three.

To these deep cravings of the heart must be added another of major importance. I mean aspiration, the deep desire of humanity to be better, nobler, finer, truer. Stories of daring in the face of unconquerable odds, stories of devotion, above all stories of self-sacrifice, are made to gratify this emotion. They are purges for the restless soul. Some critic of our short story discovered not long ago that the bulk of the narratives chosen for reprinting had self-sacrifice as theme. This is precisely what one would expect of comfortable, ease-loving peoples, like the Germans before the empire and the Americans of our generation. When no real sacrifice of goods, of energy, of love, or of life is necessary, then the craving for stories of men who give up all and women who efface themselves is particularly active. The hard, individualistic stories of selfish characters—Ben Hecht's for example, and Scott Fitzgerald's—have been written after a war period of enforced self-sacrifice and by young men who had actually suffered for a cause. But most American readers of our generation live easily and have always lived easily, and that undoubtedly accounts for the extraordinary popularity here of aspiring books. The fictitious hero of our kind who suffers for others, when applied to our imagination, is a tonic for our conscience, and, like massage, takes the place of exercise. By a twist in the same argument it may be seen that the cheerful optimist in fiction who, Pollyanna-wise, believes all is for the best, satisfies the craving to justify our well being. I do not, however, mean to disparage this element of popularity. It

is, after all, the essential quality of tragedy, where the soul rises above misfortune. It is a factor in noble literature as well as in popular success.

#### § 4

So much for some of the typical and instinctive cravings which cry for satisfaction and are the causes of popularity. To them may be added others; of course, notably the desire for sudden wealth, which is a factor in "Treasure Island," as in all treasure stories, and the prime cause of success in the most popular of all plots, the tale of *Cinderella*, which, after passing through feudal societies with a prince's hand as reward, changed its sloven sister for a shop-girl, and King Cophetua into a millionaire, and swept the American stage. To this may also be added simpler stimulants of instinctive emotion, humor stirring to pleasant laughter, pathos that exercises sympathy, the happy ending that makes for joy. Stories which succeed because they stir and satisfy these, or any of the emotions which I have described, are like opera in a foreign tongue, which moves us even when we do not fully understand the reason for our emotion. They differ from another kind of popular story, in which a popular idea rather than an instinctive emotion is crystallized, and which now must be considered.

Each generation has its fixed ideas. A few are inherited intact by the generation that follows, a few are passed on with slight transformation, but most crumble or change into different versions of the old half-truths. Among the most enduring of prejudices is the fallacy of the good old times. Upon that formula nine tenths of the successful historical romances are built. That

American wives suffer from foreign husbands, that capital is ruthless, that youth is right and age wrong, that energy wins over intellect, that virtue is always rewarded, are American conceptions that have given short, but lofty, flights to thousands of stories.

More important, however, in the history of fiction are those wide and slow-moving currents of opinion, for which prejudice is perhaps too narrow a name, that flow so imperceptibly through the minds of a generation or a whole century that there is little realization of their novelty in comparison with the thought of past ages. Such a slow-moving current was the humanitarianism which found vigorous expression in Dickens, the belief in industrial democracy which is being picked up as a theme by novelist after novelist to-day, or the sense of the value of personality and human experience that intensely characterizes the literature of the early Renaissance.

If a novel draws up into itself one of these ideas, filling it with emotion, it gains, perhaps, its greatest assurance of immediate popularity. If the idea is of vast social importance, this popularity may continue. But if it is born of immediate circumstance, like the hatred of slavery in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," or if it is still more transient, the novelty of a new invention, like the airplane or wireless, then the book grows stale with its theme. The like is true of a story that teaches a lesson a generation is willing to be taught; it lives as long as the lesson. What has become of Charles Kingsley's novels, of the apologues of Maria Edgeworth? "Main Street" is such a story; so was "Mr. Britling Sees It Through," so, probably, "A Doll's House." Decay is already at their hearts.

Perhaps it is already clear that most popular novels combine many elements of popularity, although usually one is dominant. Among those stories, for instance, which I have mentioned most frequently, "Main Street" depends upon a popular idea, but makes uses also of the revenge motive. It does not contain, as many hasty critics said, an appeal to curiosity. We know our Main Streets well enough already. And therefore in England, which also was not curious about Main Streets, and where the popular idea which Sinclair Lewis seized upon was not prevalent, the book has had only a moderate success. "If Winter Comes" combines the revenge motive with aspiration. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel made its strong appeal to curiosity. We had heard of the wild younger generation and were curious. His second book depends largely upon the craving for sex experience, in which it resembles Mr. Hergesheimer's "Cytherea," but also plays heavily upon the motive of escape and upon sheer curiosity. "Miss Lulu Bett" was a story of revenge. Booth Tarkington's "Alice Adams," to bring in a new title, is a good illustration of a story where for once a popular novelist slurred over the popular elements in order to concentrate upon a study of character. His book received, it is true, a tardy popular recognition, but it disappointed his less discriminating admirers.

The popular story, then, the financially successful, the immediately notorious story, should appeal to the instinctive emotions, and may be built upon popular prejudice. What is the moral for the writer? Is he to lay out the possible fields of emotion as a surveyor prepares for his blue print? By no means. Unless he follows his own

instinct in the plan, or narrates because of his own excited thinking, he will produce a thinly clad formula rather than a successful story. There is no moral for the writer; only some rays of light thrown upon the nature of his achievement. The way to accomplish popularity, if that is what you want, is to write for the people, and let formula, once it is understood, take care of itself. As an editor wise in popularity once said to me, "Oppenheim and the rest are popular because they think like the people, not for them."

### § 5

What is the moral of this discussion for the critical reader? A great one, for if he does not wish to be tricked constantly by his own emotions into supposing that what is timely is therefore fine, and what moves him is therefore great, he must distinguish between the elements of popularity and the essence of greatness. It is evident, I think, from the argument that every element of popularity described above may be made effective upon our weak human nature with only an approximation to truth. The craving for escape may be, and usually is, answered by sentimental romance, where every emotion from patriotism to amorousness is mawkish and unreal. Every craving may be played upon in the same fashion just because it is a craving, and the book that does it may often be more popular for the exaggeration. Also it is notorious that a prejudice—or a popular idea, if you prefer the term—that is seized upon for fiction is almost inevitably strained beyond logic and beyond truth, so much so that in rapid years, like those from 1916 to 1920, which swept us into propaganda and out again, the emphatic falsity of a

book's central thesis may be recognized before the first editions are exhausted.

We have always known, of course, that a novel can be highly popular without being truly excellent. Nevertheless, it is a valuable discipline to specify the reasons. And it is good discipline also in estimating the intrinsic value of a novel to eliminate as far as is possible the temporal and the accidental, and in particular the especial appeal it may have to your own private craving; for each of us has his soft spot where the pen can pierce. On the contrary, if the highly speculative business of guessing the probable circulation of a novel ever becomes yours, then you must doubly emphasize the importance of these very qualities, search for them, analyze them out of the narrative, and equate them with the tendencies of the times, the new emotions stirring, the new interests, new thoughts abroad.

Yet in eliminating the accidental in the search for real excellence it would be disastrous to eliminate all causes of popularity with it. That would be to assume that the good story cannot be popular, which is nonsense. The best books are nearly always popular, if not in a year, certainly in a decade or a century. Often they spread more slowly than less solid achievements for the same reason that dear things sell less rapidly than cheap. The best books cost more to read because they contain more, and to get much out, the reader must always put much in. Nevertheless, the good novel will always contain one or more of the elements of popularity in great intensity. I make only one exception, and that for those creations of the sheer intellect, like the delicate analyses of

Henry James, where the appeal is to the subtle mind, and the emotion arouses an intellectual emotion. Such novels are on the heights, but they are never at the summit of literary art. They are limited by the partiality of their appeal, just as they are exalted by the perfection of their accomplishment. They cannot be popular, and are not.

The "best seller," therefore, may be great, but does not need to be. It is usually a weak book, no matter how readable, because ordinarily it has only the elements of popularity to go on, and succeeds by their number and timeliness instead of by fineness and truth. A second-rate man can compound a best seller if his sense for the popular is first-rate. In his books the instinctive emotions are excited over a broad area, but rapidly sink again. No better examples can be found than in the sword-and-buckler romance of our nineties, which set us all for a while thinking feudal thoughts and talking shallow gallantry. Now it is dead, stone dead; not even the movies can revive it. The emotions it aroused went flat over night. Much the same is true of books that trade in prejudice, like the white-slave stories of a decade ago.

Thus the profitable ship popularity can be kept upright for a little voyage with a light ballast of prejudice or sentiment, and this, prevailing, is all her cargo. But the wise writer, if he is able, as Scott and Dickens and Clemens were able, freights her more deeply. As for the good reader, he will go below to inspect before the voyage begins; or, if in mid-career he likes not his carrier, take off in his mental airplane and seek another book.



# Masaryk's Fight for God

*Its Expression in the New State of Czecho-Slovakia*

By NANCY M. SCHOONMAKER

Woodcut by RUDOLPH RUZICKA



FOLLOWING one of those ancient, narrow streets that lead down from the Hradčany, the many-towered acropolis of Prague, the traveler sees the city spread out before him, a colorful picture of all that mingled racial life which has flowed through it. The winding path is steep. Underfoot sprigs of untrodden grass break through between the cobbles; on each side are high old walls that have outlasted their builders by many a generation. Behind these bordering walls rise turrets, gray and green, roofs of mottled tile, and narrow windows through which, surely, if a face looked forth, it must be that of some strange being far removed from the matter-of-fact days of our present generation. One feels that any sort of strange life might go on behind those walls, any sort of god and man might be found there, worshiped and worshiper.

At intervals the gray old masonry gives way to doors, high, dark, heavy, and tightly closed. They are not easy channels through which the life within and without can flow and mingle.

Yet it was one of these doors I had pointed out to me as the arch through which the pupils of Thomas Masaryk, back in 1882, used to pass when they went to meet the new professor who had just been called from Vienna to a chair in the University of Prague.

That institution, one of the oldest on the Continent, following the rift which had grown deeper and deeper between the Czechs and the oppressing Germans, had at that time been divided into two sections, Czech and German, and it was to the Czech section that Thomas Masaryk was called.

Unless the main facts in the history of the relation between these two people is kept in mind, it is difficult to appreciate the significance of this event. Back in 1031 Moravia and Slovakia fell under the yoke of Hungary and remained subject to her for 887 years. In 1526 the Bohemians elected a Hapsburg to the throne, an act the consequence of which can hardly be overestimated. For this was the beginning of a foreign domination that lasted almost four hundred years, which, as time went on, became ever harsher and more bitter, and which at last succeeded in absorbing and bringing under the domination of the Central empires not only Bohemia, but also the adjacent states, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia, now combined to form the new state of Czecho-Slovakia. The elected Hapsburg king had brought his kingdom and crown back to the mother country. Frequent attempts were made by the Bohemians and the Slovenes to rid themselves of their oppressing monarchs and the foreign