

Writers Gone Wild

The Feuds, Frolics, and Follies
of Literature's Great Adventurers, Drunkards,
Lovers, Iconoclasts, and Misanthropes



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Dramatic Debuts

Iconoclastic, shocking, or just plain weird, these works inspired tsunamis of outrage.

Johann Goethe: Threat or Menace? (1774)

The next time you're told that rock music, graphic novels, and violent video games are corrupting our youth, remember that German novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe got there first. At age twenty-three, his tale of a doomed youth dying young, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, thrilled readers and outraged moralists.

Like a Teutonic Holden Caulfield, the sensitive romantic Werther is disgusted with society's hollow values. Passionately in love with Lotte, he prefers to die rather than see her marry the dull, plodding Albert and, in an ironic twist, shoots himself using her fiancé's pistols.

Goethe found inspiration for his story close at hand. As a newly minted lawyer in Wetzlar, he was befriended by Karl Jerusalem, who introduced him at a ball to Johann Kestner and his fiancée, Charlotte. Goethe fell deeply in love with the nineteen-year-old girl, but she preferred her stolid Johann. Distraught, Goethe fled Wetzlar but remained in touch with the couple and even attended their wedding.

Goethe wasn't the only man unhappily in love. When a married woman rejected Jerusalem, he borrowed two pistols from Kestner and shot himself. Goethe combined his misery with Jerusalem's tragedy and wrote his debut novel in only four weeks.

The Sorrows of Young Werther became *the* book to read in 1774. The official edition was translated into several languages, and pirated editions flooded the market. Writers jumped on the bandwagon with their *Werther*-like stories. Manufacturers cranked out fan memorabilia such as bread boxes decorated with scenes from the novel and porcelain statues of Werther and Lotte. Young men copied Werther's signature outfit of a blue frock coat with tin buttons, leather waistcoat, brown boots, and a round felt hat. Poor Jerusalem's grave became the site of candle-lit ceremonies.

But some countries banned the book when several men, and at least one woman, followed Werther's lead and committed suicide, forcing the publisher to add to later editions a warning from Werther to "be a man and do not follow after me."

Everyone was happy with *Werther's* success, it seems, except the Kestners. "The real Lotte would . . . be grieved if she were like the Lotte you have there painted," Herr Kestner wrote Goethe. As for Albert, he moaned, "Need you have made him such a blockhead?"

Goethe tried to make amends, but he couldn't help crowing a little. Tell Charlotte, he said, "to know that your name is uttered by a thousand hallowed lips with reverence, is surely an equivalent for anxieties which would scarcely . . . vex a person long in common life, where one is at the mercy of every tattler."

Perhaps. It could also be that—to a man rejected in love—success is the best revenge.

War

On the battlefield or behind the lines,
these soldiers and civilians revealed
hidden depths.

Beetle Bailey Coleridge (1793)

Beset by debts and an unhappy love affair, twenty-year-old Samuel Taylor Coleridge fled Cambridge University for the soldiering life. But the future author of “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” behaved less like the dashing Harry Flashman and more like Private Bailey.

Swearing his friends to secrecy, he enlisted in the King’s Light Dragoons under the name Silas Tomkyn Comberbache. Coleridge proved to be inept at spit-and-polish, although he could confess his shortcomings with eloquence. When a drill sergeant asked, “Whose dirty rifle is this?” Coleridge said, “Is it very, very dirty?” Yes. “Then it must be mine.”

He was equally incompetent at riding a horse, falling off a horse three times in one week. Worse, he developed saddle sores, which he described as “dreadfully troublesome eruptions, which so grimly constellated my Posteriors.”

For the sake of his posteriors and the king's horses, Coleridge was moved to guard duty, where he wrote letters for the illiterate soldiers who took care of his gear. According to Thomas de Quincey, his Cambridge education also drew attention from the officers:

Coleridge, as a private, mounted guard at the door of a room in which his officers happened to give a ball. Two of them had a dispute upon some Greek word or passage when close to Coleridge's station. He interposed his authentic decision of the case. The officers stared as though one of their own horses had sung "Rule Britannia."

Eventually, his family tracked him down, paid his debts, and negotiated his release. They couldn't find a substitute to take his place, but the army had had enough of Coleridge. They declared him insane and threw him out.

Mortified at the attention but grateful to be out of uniform, Coleridge returned to Cambridge. As punishment, he was confined for a month to the college and ordered to translate ninety pages of Greek into English. And for the rest of his life, we can assume, Coleridge never went near a horse if he could help it.

Winnie-the-Pooh Attacks Bertie Wooster (1941)

No good deed goes unpunished, as P. G. Wodehouse learned when a few innocuous radio broadcasts led to accusations of treason and exile from his beloved England.

Wodehouse and his wife were living in France in May 1940 when they were captured during the German invasion. After a stint in an internment camp, the sixty-year-old writer and his wife were moved

The Joy of Sex

Whether a woodland frolic or a back-alley knee-trembler, writers get it on for real.

Boswell Goes Slumming (1763)

There was one thing that James Boswell loved more than sucking up to Samuel Johnson and taking notes of the Great Cham's bons mots, and that was sampling the delights of London—particularly its women.

On one particular night, to celebrate King George III's birth, he dressed down in his "second-mourning suit, dirty buckskin breeches, black stockings, and a little round hat with tarnished silver lace belonging to a disbanded officer of the Royal Volunteers," and toddled off to his favorite hunting grounds, St. James Park.

Nowadays, St. James is a finely manicured lawn haunted by tourists and white pelicans that gather on the lake, but in his time, Boswell called it "a long dirty field, intersected by a wide dirty ditch." It was also incredibly fetid. If the smell of the rank grass and rotten lime trees didn't knock you out, the garbage dumped by the city's residents would.

But Boswell was made of sterner stuff, or of a weaker nose. In St. James, he wrote, he “picked up a low brimstone, agreed with her for sixpence, went to the bottom of the Park and dipped my machine in the Canal and performed most manfully.”

Next, “roaring along” the street, he stopped at Ashley’s Punch-house and got drunk. Then he walked to The Strand, where another negotiation turned unexpectedly risky:

“I picked up a little profligate and gave her 6 pence. She allowed me entrance. But the miscreant refused me performance. I was much stronger than her, and *volens nolens* [willy-nilly] pushed her up against the way. She however gave a sudden spring from me; and screaming out, a parcel of more whores and soldiers came to her relief.

Thinking quickly, Boswell called out, “Brother soldiers, should not a half-pay officer roger for sixpence? And here has she used me so and so.” That won over the crowd, and “abused her in blackguard style” and toddled off.

He returned home at two in the morning, intoxicated with his sport and gratified that “notwithstanding my dress, I was always taken for a gentleman in disguise.”

Boswell cut a wide swath through the female half of London society. According to his diaries, by the time he was twenty-nine, he had tried to seduce a dozen high-born ladies, acquired a nearly equal number of mistresses, and had sex with over sixty prostitutes. He also contracted gonorrhoea seventeen times.

Alcohol and Drugs

For inspiration or intoxication, they
risked a high price for getting high.

Writer's Blockage (1804)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's lifelong addiction to opium took a horrific toll on his health. Not only did it cause insomnia, nightmares, and frightening visions, but it caused colon paralysis leading to constipation that was treated with enemas.

Normally, Coleridge enjoyed a good enema. But during a voyage from England to Malta, complications set in that caused a "day of Horror."

As Coleridge would recount, he began with a milder treatment in which he sat over a bowl of hot water: "After two long frightful, fruitless struggles, the face convulsed, & sweat streaming from me like Rain, the Capt'n. Proposed to send for the Commadore's Surgeon. . . . The Surgeon instantly came, went back for Pipe & Syringe & returned & with extreme difficulty & the exertion of his utmost strength injected the latter."

But instead of the enema causing the blockage to soften, "Good God! What a sensation when the obstruction suddenly *shot*

up!—I remained still three-quarters of an hour with hot water in a bottle to my belly . . . with pain & Sore uneasiness, & indescribable desires.”

But there was worse to come as Coleridge “*picked out* the hardened matter & after *awhile* was completely relieved. The poor mate who stood by me all this while had the tears running down his face.”

Coleridge’s addiction to opium took the form of laudanum, a liquid tincture popularly sold as a nostrum for many illnesses. While it might have inspired many of his great early works such as the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*, repeated abuse killed his talent and left him near the end of his life a frail skeleton.

O’Neill Meets the Green Fairy (1907)

Eugene O’Neill spent only one year at Princeton University, but he left an indelible impression.

At eighteen, he presented a startling sight: thin to the point of tubercular, broad-shouldered and wearing the traditional freshman’s black beanie. He kept to himself, ignored his studies, and spent his time reading deeply into Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Lord Byron, Kipling, and the romantic poets.

He had also had seen more of the world than most freshman. He drank hard liquor, shocking the students used to beer and light wine. He proclaimed that he didn’t believe in God and that women were whores, saying, “There is not such a thing as a virgin after the age of fourteen.” He bragged about accompanying his brother on visits to the bordellos in New York’s Tenderloin district and proved it by taking classmates on a tour of his favorite spots.

The End

The Grim Reaper harvests one last story.

John Milton Rises from the Grave (1790)

It started with the best of intentions. The church of St. Giles in London was undergoing renovations, and planned to erect a memorial over the grave of John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, who had died 126 years before. To make sure it was properly situated, workmen removed the church floor, uncovered a coffin that they suspected housed his remains, then called it a day.

But, while drinking at a nearby pub, someone asked how they knew Milton was inside. After all, there was no plaque on the coffin, and church records were notoriously inaccurate. They probably drank on that thought for a while, until someone said something like, “Perhaps we should find out.”

The next day, an apprentice coffin maker climbed into the grave and pried back the casket’s corroded lead top. Ripping open the coarse-linen shroud revealed a skeleton, gender unknown, but

with long hair, similar to the poet's, that had been carefully combed and tied.

Then temptation reared its head. The workmen fell upon the bones for souvenirs. One man took a stone to Milton's upper teeth, while another considered the leg bones and lower jaw before settling for the hair.

After they left, gravedigger Elizabeth Grant took over. She hired men to collect admission and watch the windows to make sure no one got in without paying. Dragging the coffin under a pew, she sold peeks at the bones for whatever the market would bear, usually sixpence. Only when the spectators had their fill was Milton reburied.

News of Milton's involuntary resurrection and dismemberment horrified London. One church member bought back most of the remains and reburied them. But that wasn't the end for poor Milton. Rumors spread that it wasn't Milton in the coffin but a woman. Apparently, the rumor-mongers were ignorant that at Cambridge, he was nicknamed "the lady" for his fair complexion and effeminate nature. Nevertheless, Milton was dug up a second time so a surgeon could pronounce the bones to be masculine. Only then was Milton, at last, allowed to rest.

Cooking Shelley (1822)

On an isolated, windswept beach near Viareggio, Italy, a grim group of men climbed out of boats and waded toward the shore. The party of two Englishmen, an Italian health official, and several soldiers had an unpleasant task ahead.

They were there to cremate a poet.

Five weeks before, Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned during a

Writers' Colonies of the Dead

Like real estate, the most important factor in a writer's final resting ground is location, location, location. Writers and literary fans looking for a tomb with a view should check out these neighborhoods:

- Kensel Green, London: Established 1837. For admirers of classic English literature. Home to William Makepeace Thackeray, Wilkie Collins, poet Leigh Hunt, and Anthony Trollope.
- Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts: The American equivalent to Kensel Green, where Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau hang their hats.
- Forest Lawn, Glendale, California: While better known as the movie stars' final resting place, there are plenty of tourists willing to make a side trip to visit L. Frank Baum, Clifford Odets, Louis L'Amour, and Theodore Dreiser.
- Le Pere Lachaise: A sure sign you've arrived. More than eight hundred thousand come here yearly to visit the million or so Frenchmen, laid alongside an international cast of writers: Oscar Wilde, Richard Wright, Molière, Balzac, Gertrude Stein, and Marcel Proust.