

# A Blind Taste Test of Literary Genius

## *Can You Tell the Difference Between Great and Bad Literature?*

BY MIKHAIL SIMKIN

*Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me." On this Ernest Hemingway commented, "Yes, they have more money."*

ARE FAMOUS WRITERS DISTINGUISHABLE IN SOME measurable way from their more obscure colleagues? Can you tell the difference between the prose of acknowledged great writers versus the prose of those who are considered inferior?

I started thinking about these questions after I conducted a study of misprints found in scientific citations that revealed that about 80% of citations are copied from the lists of references used in other papers.<sup>1,2</sup> In a majority of cases a citation is not a result of an independent evaluation of the qualities of the cited paper but merely an imitation of another citer's selection. Not only is a paper that was already cited more likely to be cited again, it is even more likely to be cited in the future. Thus some papers can become much more cited than others even when identical in merit. Mathematical modeling of the process of citation copying demonstrated that major features of the citation distribution could be explained even assuming that all papers are created equal.<sup>2</sup>

Years ago the sociologist of science Robert K. Merton named a similar phenomenon the *Matthew Effect*,<sup>3</sup> after Matthew 25:29: "For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away." Merton observed that if a scientist gets recognition early in his career he is likely to get more and more recognition through the cumulative advantage process. (Interestingly, the attribution of the quote to St. Matthew is unfair. The quoted words belong to Jesus and also appear in the gospels of Luke and Mark. Nevertheless, the name *Matthew Effect* was accepted by thousands of people who did not read the original quote in the Bible.)

This led me to wonder if highly popular writers can become such as a result of similar feedback loops. Can people appreciate the prose of a famous writer if his name is detached from it? Is the popularity of famous literary figures due in part not to independent evaluation and merit, but to repeated exposure?

We decided to see if we could answer this question by offering test subjects unlabeled prose quotes from either the extraordinarily popular Charles Dickens, or from Edward Bulwer-Lytton, considered by many to be the worst writer in history of letters. In fact Bulwer-Lytton is considered so bad by most literary critics that an annual "Wretched Writing" contest has been established in his honor.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Charles Dickens is considered a literary giant. But can one tell the difference between their prose?

I developed an online quiz called "Great prose or not?"<sup>5</sup> It consisted of a dozen representative literary passages written either by Bulwer-Lytton or Dickens. The quiz takers were instructed to choose the author of each quote. Over 9,000 subjects tried to determine which writer was which. Their score was about 50% correct, or what could be gotten by random guessing. This suggests that the quality of Dickens's prose is indistinguishable from that of Bulwer-Lytton.

Here is a sample from the quiz. Which passage was written by Dickens and which was written by Bulwer-Lytton? (The answer may be found in Table 1 on the next page as numbers one and two.)

It was a dark night, though the full moon rose as I left the enclosed lands, and passed out upon the marshes. Beyond their dark line there was a ribbon of clear sky, hardly broad enough to hold the red large moon. In a few minutes she had ascended out of that clear field, in among the piled mountains of cloud. There was a melancholy wind, and the

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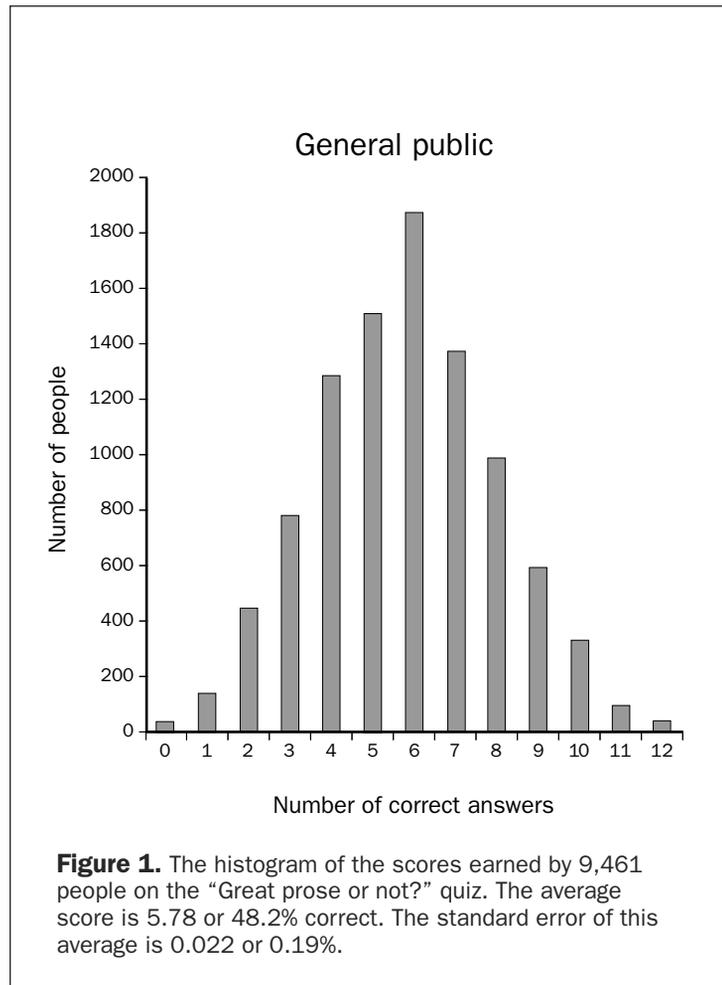
marshes were very dismal. A stranger would have found them insupportable, and even to me they were so oppressive that I hesitated, half inclined to go back. But, I knew them well, and could have found my way on a far darker night, and had no excuse for returning, being there. So, having come there against my inclination, I went on against it.

It was one of those nights, half dim, half glorious, which mark the early decline of the year. Nature seemed restless and instinct with change; there were those signs in the atmosphere which leave the most experienced in doubt, whether the morning may rise in storm or sunshine. And in this particular period, the skiey influences seem to tincture the animal life with their own mysterious and wayward spirit of change. The birds desert their summer haunts; an unaccountable inquietude pervades the brute creation; even men in this unsettled season have considered themselves, more (than at others) stirred by the motion and whisperings of their genius. And every creature that flows upon the tide of the Universal Life of Things, feels upon the ruffled surface, the mighty and solemn change, which is at work within its depths.

This turns out to be a formidable task and quiz takers are often surprised to learn the correct answers. As one of my respondents wrote me: “What mindless boob would write such tripe? Dickens, one would know now.”

The distribution of the scores received by over 9,000 quiz-takers is shown in Figure 1.<sup>6</sup> The average score is 5.78 or 48.2% correct.

There are two possible answers to each test question. If one is completely clueless and resorts to random guessing, he will on average get 50% of the questions right. With the average score of 48% our quiz-takers lost a point or two to randomness. On average, a quote from Bulwer-Lytton was selected as Dickens (or as great prose) by 52% of quiz-takers, while a quote from Dickens was selected as Dickens by only 48%. Does this mean that Bulwer-Lytton is a better writer than Dickens? Not really. Table 1 shows what fraction of people that attributed quotes to Dickens. This fraction varies, with the lowest number of attributions being 36% (No. 9) and the highest 74% (No. 12). This suggests that a different selection of quotes could lead to a different average score. To check this, I removed the most Dickensian Bulwer (No. 12) and the most Bulwerian Dickens (No.

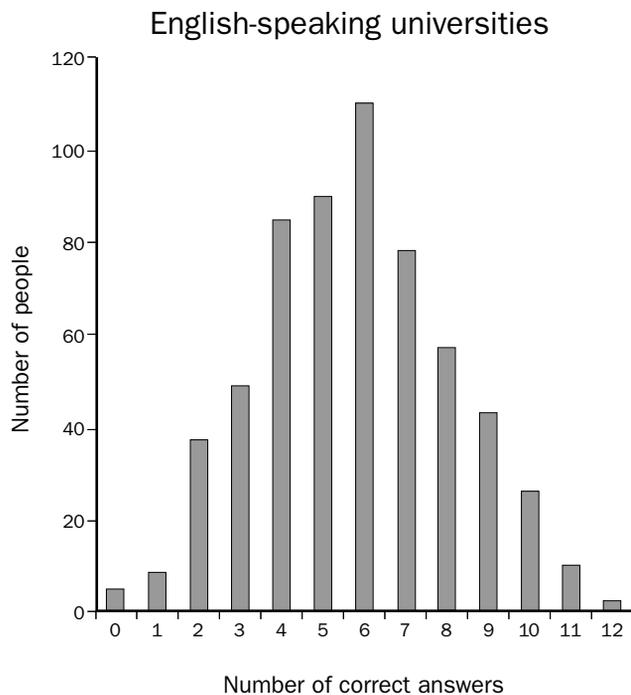


**Table 1.** Fraction of people who attributed each quote to Dickens or to Bulwer-Lytton, along with the true author.

Question number	The real author, and the book the excerpt is taken from	Selected as Dickens	Selected as Bulwer-Lytton
1	Charles Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i>	42.5%	57.5%
2	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Eugene Aram</i>	50.5%	49.5%
3	Charles Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i>	54.6%	45.4%
4	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Eugene Aram</i>	49.9%	50.1%
5	Charles Dickens, <i>David Copperfield</i>	50.7%	49.3%
6	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Eugene Aram</i>	50.1%	49.9%
7	Charles Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i>	59.9%	40.1%
8	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Paul Clifford</i>	49.6%	50.4%
9	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Eugene Aram</i>	36.5%	63.5%
10	Charles Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i>	40.6%	59.4%
11	Charles Dickens, <i>David Copperfield</i>	40.8%	59.2%
12	Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>Paul Clifford</i>	74.3%	25.7%

**Table 2.** Statistics of the elite (Ivy League and Oxbridge) scores on “Dickens or Bulwer-Lytton?” quiz. The average elite score is 6 or 50% correct. The standard error of this average is 0.3 or 2.6%.

Elite School	number of respondents	minimum score	maximum score	average score
Brown University	2	3	6	4.50
Columbia University	13	2	9	5.08
Cornell University	3	4	7	6.00
Harvard University	14	1	10	5.71
Princeton University	2	3	9	6.00
Un. of Cambridge	16	2	9	6.13
University of Oxford	10	3	10	6.30
Un. of Pennsylvania	7	2	11	7.71
Yale University	9	3	11	6.56
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6.00</b>



**Figure 2.** The histogram of the test scores earned by 602 people, coming from American, British, Australian, and New Zealandian universities. The average score is 5.76 or 48.0% correct. The standard error of this average is 0.095 or 0.8%.

10), and recalculated the scores based on the 10 remaining questions. This time, the average score came in at 51%. A quote from Bulwer-Lytton was selected as Dickens (or as great prose) by 47% of quiz-takers, while a quote from Dickens was selected as Dickens by 50%. With this quote selection Dickens surpassed Bulwer on the great prose scale, but again the difference between them was small.

An interesting result was that out of 9,461 people, 38 got every question wrong and 37 got everything right. The approximate equality of these numbers is consistent with random guessing, but their magnitude is not. It is more than 15 times larger than what random guessing would produce. The explanation is that some people can sniff stylistic similarities between certain literary passages and attribute them to the same writer. This would help them to get a higher score, if they can determine which writer is good and which is bad, otherwise they are equally likely to get a very high or a very low score.

What about other factors that may have influenced the evaluation of the two writers? Could the poor performance of some quiz-takers be due to the possibility that they are not native English speakers? Fortunately, the program I used for the quiz recorded a taker’s IP address. From it, one can infer where their computers were located. I selected a subset of scores, which were received by people coming from English-speaking universities in America, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (identified by their Internet domains: edu, ac.uk, edu.au, and ac.nz). The histogram of the scores received by 602 such people is shown in Figure 2. The average score is 5.76 or 48.0% correct. The standard error of this average is 0.095 or 0.8%. Educated English-speaking folks lost to the general public, whose average score is 48.2%. The difference between the scores is, however, statistically insignificant, because it is less than the standard error.

Could it be that the beauty of Dickens’ prose is so far beyond the apprehension of the vulgar that only the most cultured can appreciate it? To check this I selected a subset of scores that came from elite universities (Ivy League and Oxbridge). Table 2 contains the scores received by 76 of the chosen. The average score is 6 or 50% correct. The elite bested the crowd by only 2%—a statistically insignificant result. Due to the small size of the elite sample the standard error of the average

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elite score is 2.6%.

These data are supported anecdotally by the feedback I received from the test takers, indicating that even educated people can't tell Dickens from Bulwer. One of the quiz-takers wrote me: "I got a 50%. My cat could do that well. The wine experts say a peek at the label is worth a thousand sips, and that seems to hold here. As a classicist I'm frequently called on to teach stuff I think is wretched, just because it's old." Some experts do not even dare to take the quiz. Professor Scott Rice, the founder of the Bulwer-Lytton bad fiction contest, wrote to me: "I haven't really taken it yet myself. Perhaps I am afraid to." Based on my data he probably should be, for the results of this test demonstrate that people cannot appreciate great prose when the name of a great writer is detached from it.

I began this paper with a question: Are famous writers distinguishable in some measurable way from their obscure colleagues? The answer is: Yes, they have more readers.

Of course, the method used in this investigation has limitations. A novel is characterized not just by its descriptive prose, but by character development, plot construction, and the overall narrative arc—and Dickens in particular is remembered for his use of the novel to critique Victorian society—all qualities that would not be measured by comparing single paragraphs. ■

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3. Merton, Robert K. 1968. "The Matthew Effect in Science." *Science*, 159(38), 56-63.
4. Bulwer-Lytton fiction contest, <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>
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6. When I looked at the quiz results I noticed hundreds of cases when two or more scores came from the same IP address within few minutes. In many of such cases the later score was 100%. This suggests that many people took several shots at the quiz. To eliminate this cheating I cleaned the data by selecting only the first score from each IP address. Afterwards I cleaned the data from the results, where one or more questions were skipped.

## The Nature of God

by

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