

Books that Endure

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Overview

Literary works typically endure because they address the great, recurring questions about human nature in some of their full complexity. By embodying our most profound inquiries in the lives of particular characters, they invite us to examine and understand the many dimensions of human relationships.

Each of the six books in this series has generated vital and significant discussion for well over a century. Together, they introduce us to worlds that are, in many ways, light years removed from the twenty-first century with its dizzying pace of technological and social change. Yet in the struggles of their heroines and heroes to negotiate the conflicting demands of individual desire and social expectation, of tradition and inevitable change, they explore themes as universal today as they were one hundred fifty years ago.

Published in 1813, Jane Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, is a quintessential comedy of manners, offering an engaging satiric view of village life in nineteenth-century England. The novel centers on the spirited clash between independent and witty Elizabeth Bennet, a daughter of the rural gentry, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich, aristocratic landowner. The account of their sparring and the accompanying adventures of the entire, sometimes inexcusable, Bennet family provides a surprisingly complex reflection on workings of "pride and prejudice" in the author's time.

Set in the early years of the post-Napoleonic monarchy, *Père Goriot* (1835) depicts a Paris society in transition, where alliances are formed for the convenience of social advancement and at the expense of deeper family and marriage ties. Desire for money, material goods, and status governs the relationships in this novel, considered by readers to be one of the best works in Honoré de Balzac's celebrated series, *The Human Comedy*. The bonds formed by the eclectic mix of characters in the boardinghouse where the protagonists live also demonstrate a central feature of Balzac's world, social connectedness.

In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne raises the enduring question of the extent to which personal love and morality transcend institutional and social values. Set against the backdrop of a Puritan frontier community in New England, this classic romance tells of vengeance and penance, love and loneliness, endurance and forgiveness. Isolated from each other and from their community by deed and circumstance, the four main characters nevertheless sustain powerful relationships that shape their inner and outer lives.

Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (in Russian, *Fathers and Children*) is the classic 19th century novel of intergenerational relationships. Set in Russia in the politically turbulent 1860s, the story presents the age-old conflicts and attachments through which generations, and individuals, define themselves in relation to one another. While many intellectuals of Turgenev's time overtly identified themselves by their commitment either to western European cultural values or to native Russian/Slavic traditions, *Fathers and Sons* attends to the deeper affinities and antipathies that derive from timeless forces in human nature.

Nora, the heroine of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1880), shocked the sensibilities of contemporary audiences when she walked out on her husband and children, having discovered her marginalized role in marriage and in life. Nora's gradual realization that she must find her own identity outside of her society's traditional definitions reflects recurring questions about gender relationships and marriage that have continued to be vital and have fueled the play's many revivals and its frequent use in college classrooms. Despite its widespread acceptance as a feminist text, however, Ibsen himself insisted *A Doll's House* was more about human rights, than women's rights.

There exists no more moving description of the consequences of transgressing the moral code of late nineteenth-century, middle-class German society than Theodor Fontane's hauntingly beautiful novel *Effi Briest* (1895). Effi is a young woman married to an older man, a man who treats her with affection but also as a child who must continually be taught lessons or reproved for mistakes. In the novel's incisive social analysis and psychological insight into the conventions of nineteenth-century marriage, it bears comparison with *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.

For Further Reading

Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*
Arnold Bennet, *The Old Wives' Tale*
Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*
Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*
Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*
Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*
Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*
Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*
Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
Benito Perez Galdos, *Fortunada and Jacinta*
Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*
Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*
Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of our Time*
Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*
Giovanni Verga, *The House by the Medlar Tree*
émile Zola, *Nana*

General Comments on the Series

For those of you leading discussion on Books That Endure, here are some study questions and Internet links on Austen and Hawthorne that I've created for past courses. I hope you find them helpful. – Deb

- **Study Questions** for Pride and Prejudice (<http://www.nwc.cc.wy.us/id/koellind/austen/pride.htm>)
- **Links for Jane Austen** study (<http://www.nwc.cc.wy.us/id/koellind/austen/links.htm>)
- **Study Questions** for The Scarlet Letter (<http://www.northwestcollege.edu/id/koellind/2310/ScarletLetter.htm>)
- **Links on Early American Literature** (<http://www.northwestcollege.edu/id/koellind/2310/linksnew.htm>) Notes: (1) the Eric Eldred site on Hawthorne isn't working this morning . . . but a valuable site and worth it to keep trying; (2) I'm not maintaining the EAL page right now, so some links may be out of date.

I'd like to share parts of two summary evaluations from Julianne Couch. They speak in general about the kinds of issues that can arise in the series as a whole and, as such, may be useful for people starting out the these two series in the 2002 program. Thanks, Julianne. Judy.

This was an enjoyable series for me to lead since 19th century lit was a big part of my studies in grad school long ago. These books were a big part of lots of people's studies, it seems, which was both a strength and weakness of the series. Some of the more familiar titles, such as Scarlet Letter and Pride & Prejudice, lured people to the series so they could re-read books that were perhaps not their favorite reading material in high school or college. These titles were the honey, so to speak, while authors such as Turgenev or Fontane could be considered the medicine of this series. But as is often the case with medicine, once it is consumed, one is glad to have it around and can acknowledge it wasn't nearly as bad as was feared.

So, to my point about strength and weakness, I think some people participated because there were familiar titles. Other people probably shied away, or were selective about attendance, because in fact they had already read the book in question at least once and were ready for something new. Some group members questioned whether books that "endure" do so under their own power or because the "English teacher mafia" keeps them around. A legitimate question, I think, and one we talked about a great deal this year.

As far as changes to the series, I found a good balance of English language and translated works. I particularly enjoyed reading the works by Balzac, Turgenev, and Fontane, because I hadn't read them before, nor had most of the group. I was familiar with the Ibsen play, but the group was less so, which was fine. We were all familiar with the Hawthorne and Austen works. Possibly it would be good to select in their place English language works that are less oppressively part of the canon. These are not tit-for-tat replacements because they represent slightly different time periods, but I'd suggest Henry James' Roderick Hudson (written about 1870 - not too lengthy and accessible early Henry James about artist vs. the rest of us, and of course, Europe vs. America), also, Mary Shelly's Frankenstein would be fun.

I served as the humanities scholar for this book group last year when we pursued the Eastern Europe series, so I can offer a few comparisons. The EE series was more demanding, but as a result, I think it created more thoughtful discussion. We really dealt with issues of freedom, humanity, moral relativism... things that seem in keeping with the goals of the WCH. This year the discussion was "fun." We talked about characters, their behavior, the life & times of the author, modern life vs. the life of the period, etc. Perhaps my weakness as a leader is at fault here, but I didn't feel we ever critically examined our own values and behaviors during this year's discussion. Maybe with the world being such a "heavy" place these days it is okay to just talk about plot and theme in books without turning mirrors on ourselves. I'm not sure.

The strength of this series is the caliber of the literature. It's wonderful and reveals the attitudes toward women in the 19th century. There are views from several areas of the world, but their similarities are wonderful and complete. The imagines of the world and the snapshots of the times are interesting and revealing. Do not change the literature. I was interested, as the scholar and as an English major, in the attitudes of the various participants. Our resident censor was a great barometer of the value of the literature. Because she didn't find it particularly uplifting made me all the more avid in its defense. If I were to do this particular series again I would do more background reading and reveal more up front for the participants. I let them find their own way and perhaps that wasn't the best approach for this particular group.

Vicki Vincent

The Scarlet Letter

Our discussion began with the question: "What is a classic, and what makes a book a classic?" They decided that a book is a classic because of the message it contains and also its timelessness. We discussed books from Harry Potter to Scarlet Letter and why and how they become classics. From there we moved in to the book and discussed the characters in depth along with the individual sins and consequences of those sins. The ladies were pretty harsh on Dimmsdale. We wrapped up the discussion by deciding that *The Scarlet Letter* would fit into our definition of a classic. The discussion group enjoyed themselves and the discussion immensely. As a high school teacher, it would have been beneficial for my students to see this worthwhile discussion of literature.

Steve Beck, Cokeville

I divided this group of 10 into three small groups. The topic for each group was one of: Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth. This worked extremely well, and after about 20 minutes I had the small groups come back together. Their assignment had been to describe their character, and discuss his or her values, behaviors, relationship to each of the other two, and relationship with the collective culture of the community. Dimmesdale was seen as a man consumed by his fear of censure (and death) by the town's VIPs, and controlled by his fear of passion, especially the passion of love. Chillingworth was seen as one consumed by a need for revenge, and hence by his drive to acquire control and power. Hester was presented as the only moral voice in the book, where punishment of her wrong led to ever more egregious evils and wrongs by others. Her scarlet letter became both a symbol of the intolerance of the community as well as her badge of honor.

In the large group, the discussion could not see Pearl as more than a foil for the other interpersonal dynamics, especially due to her consistently behaving in a way unexpected by normal behaviors that are controlled by doing the right thing. I asked about the A representing America. The initial response was "of course not." Then after a brief pause, several commented that in fact it could be appropriate, due to the enduring evils of our settling in America, and our continued arrogance regarding our behaviors and supposed moral high ground vis a vis any who disagree with us or get in our way. Very interesting!

Bob Brown

The Scarlet Letter was the last book in this mis-named "Books That Endure" series. We had a good turn out for this small community and we had a good discussion. SL has such an enormous critical apparatus that it was difficult to find new perspectives on the story. I mentioned that just as Longfellow's Paul Revere was really about the crisis of the Civil War and not about the Revolution, so too was Hawthorne's text aimed at the moral dilemmas of women's roles in the newly created middle class, as were all of the other books in the series. The author's paradox is

that the publicly castigated persona of Hester is, in fact, the sole character with a consistent moral code. Guilty of fornication, yes, but that seems small in comparison with the truly evil characterizations of Roger and Arthur. We managed to get the books in mostly chronological order, and it would have been good to have had Hester et al at the start, still, it worked well as a summary.

Dennis Coelho

We began our discussion by talking about the use of the word "maze" in the novel. We also discussed the repeated use of the word "ignominy." The group was somewhat impressed with Hawthorne's seemingly modern knowledge of psychology. One member made the fascinating interpretation that the American Colonists were in a sense themselves, collectively, adulterers, as they abandoned England and gave birth to a new society. We spent a long time talking about history, truth, and lies, as I asked the group why does Hawthorne sprinkle in the fictitious history of Hester Prynne with real historical figures, events, and dates. Some of them were surprised to learn that "The Custom House" preface was a fabrication, but I asked them to consider the pattern of Hawthorne's historical dissembling throughout the novel. In many ways the novel comes down to a tension between the real and the symbolic, with the symbolic often winning out in terms of importance.

As for characters, we initially focused on Hester and her A, seeing her as a symbol for America (of the mid nineteenth century) and other associations -- angel, able, adulterer, etc. I then asked if Dimmesdale was the real central character, as he metamorphizes from the sick pastor to the revealer of truth at the end, or if Chillingworth or Pearl were the protagonists. We agreed that Pearl could not be the center, but we were split about the importance of Dimmesdale versus Hester.

I posited that a great writer attempted to elicit an honest interiority that was more important than the external actions of the characters, particularly in this novel. We also agreed that dissembling was a huge part of the construction of history. We are normally given history as a straight line (good vs. evil; right vs. wrong), but the novel clearly demonstrates that history zigs and zags -- to each historical event, the clarity can be called into question by a close examination of the characters involved. Significantly, the moral clarity is most often more ambiguous than what we are given.

Cliff Marks

I began by asking (as per scholar suggestion!) participants to share what they thought was the main theme of the novel. This launched a discussion of the concept of original sin. A reader had recently read DH Lawrence's critique of Hawthorne's novel (who saw the story as satire) and shared that review, one very critical of Hester's motives! We discussed the main characters, the scaffold scenes, history of the Puritans, and the role of the

introduction. No one was very interested in Pearl as anything more than a difficult child, although I tried to present her in a more important light. The group agreed that the themes of *Scarlet Letter* are enduring themes. Our readers loved the language and greatly enjoyed the book, although most did not read the introduction.

Barbara Gose

We began discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* with the question: "Why 'The Custom House'?" I offered background information on Hawthorne's early Salem ancestors who were judges, especially Jonathan Hathorne, one of the presiding judges at the Salem witch trials in 1692, and the purported curse placed on the family by one of the accused and executed women. But the novel as apologia for this ancestral past hardly seems sufficient to justify the lengthy prefatory essay. Nor does the interesting memoir-like material on H.'s three years in the Custom House seem directly relevant to the novel itself, except to provide a fairly convoluted introduction to the fictional material found in the attic, which then does lead into the tale itself. The group discussed these topics at some length, but no satisfactorily inclusive explanation could be decided upon, nor do I have one. I look forward to other BDG comments on this.

The discussion of the tale itself was lively and interesting. Each of the four principal characters was considered, and their actions and interactions discussed. Hester was of course the most interesting for the group, as it considered her treatment by the Puritan community and its culture, and as it discussed the choices she made and her integrity throughout the tale. Pearl's behavior seemed unrealistic, except as foil for the hidden thoughts and feelings of the adults, and their hypocrisies. While I find Chillingworth to be a fascinating character, the group spent more time (though not a lot) on Dimmesdale and his deplorable weaknesses.

I pointed out some of Hawthorne's several mid-19th Century idealizations of the future perfect woman as mediator of the patriarchal culture of 17th century Salem, as well as some of what I consider to be H.'s ambivalence about the nature of evil and the role of the church. While the former met with some intended humor, the group very effectively disputed the latter.

Bob Brown

The question Bob's group raises about "The Custom House" is one the committee who created the series discussed. Jane Nelson, who was a member of that committee and is a 19th Century American lit. person, said she would tell people to skip that part of the book on first reading and then go back and read it later, if they wanted to. At least, I think that's what she said. She's on this listserve so maybe she'll speak for herself.

Judy

Yes, I do recommend that discussion leaders either (1) advise readers to skip "The Custom House" and go back to it later, or (2) let readers know what they are going to get with "The Custom House." It's not a memorable introduction to the novel. A couple of weeks ago, Julianne Couch (a discussion leader here in Laramie) said she advised her group to skip it. So I feel justified in my violation of Hawthorne!

Jane Nelson

When I was teaching American Lit. in high school and came to the *Scarlet Letter*, the only way we all survived was to skip the Custom House - so I think that's a splendid plan.

Norma Christensen

I'm meeting with my library group next week on the *Scarlet Letter*. I'd suggested to the group when we met last month to skip the Custom House, if it meant time spent reading it would prevent their finishing the novel. Of course, I encouraged all who had the time to read the Custom House after they'd finished the novel proper. I'll let you know how that plan works when I report in next week.

Julianne Couch

I started off the discussion on a cold blustery October evening by asking group members to describe in a sentence or two what *The Scarlet Letter* is about. I assumed I'd get responses such as "It's about a minister who..." or "It's about a woman who...". Instead, I got thematic, rather than plot/character responses, which I found very interesting but which, of course, blew my plan of talking about the central symbol as "character." I got the idea to take this approach from reading the Custom House, which presents the letter as the most "real" element of the story, more real than the main players, whose fate is uncertain due to the passage of time between the "true" story and Hawthorne's discovery and retelling of it. It was interesting that although most of us had read the book in the past, few of us could remember the ending as we reread this time. Turns out that phenomenon played right into my theory of the book really being more about the letter, and the themes, than about character or plot. That Mr. Hawthorne was quite a writer, we discovered, in spite of a prose style more difficult than most readers today are used to. (I came across an interesting quotation from TS Elliot during my research, which I'll paraphrase as follows: Hawthorne was the only American writer before Henry James whose characters were aware of each other.) Naturally, we also discussed character, plot, and the Puritan culture. We concluded that this book endures (translated by the group to mean "is still assigned by English teachers," but we'll work on that) because its themes are about human behavior and human desire, which hasn't really changed much. I confess now I wish I hadn't underemphasized the Custom House because I believe it plays a real part in Hawthorne's

achievement of realism with the story. However, most participants said they'd started reading it but "couldn't get into it" and went instead to the novel. I don't think my asking them to have read it would have advanced the discussion of theme central to the purpose of a WCH discussion. Instead, it would have led to inappropriately in depth literary analysis -- not what this group is about.

Julianne

I understand that many people may not wish to read all of "The Custom House. But a couple of passages in it are worth looking at with a discussion group and may—if one wishes—be taken out of context.

The first is when the speaker in "The Custom House" encounters the inspiration for the novel: the scrap of red material with gold embroidery. The passage begins, "But the object that most drew my attention in the mysterious package was a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded. (I don't know which edition the Book Discussion is using; in Signet's edition, the passage is on pages 40-41.) In these two paragraphs, we see the imagination working upon the mysterious scrap. Ironically, it's lost all its significance—the symbol is no longer comprehensible. So the speaker tries different approaches to it: he tries to understand it by comprehending how it was made (but its art is lost to time); he tries describing and measuring it (an analytical approach that also fails to plumb its meaning); he speculates about its use ("no doubt" an ornamental badge of rank, honor, or dignity—wrong again!). But when he gives up on his analytical powers, the "mystic symbol" streams meaning to his sensibilities, and he experiences the symbol's meaning accurately when it falls upon his breast and causes the shuddering, awful sensation of red-hot iron.

This first passage prepares us readers for our own experience of the "Scarlet Letter." We can try to understand it with our analytical powers of mind, but if we do, we'll fail. We must let the mystic symbol work upon our sensibilities. Throughout the novel, the scarlet letter remains a protean symbol.

A second passage from "The Custom House" reinforces this point. A beautiful passage on the power of imagination begins, "On Hester Prynne's story, therefore, I bestowed much thought," and ends with, "Then, at such an hour, and with this scene before him, if a man sitting all alone cannot dream strange things and make the look like truth, he need never try to write romances." (In my Signet edition, pages 43-45.)

In this passage, the speaker describes his struggle with making Hester's story come alive. He tries to "see" the story in various lights: morning light, noonday light, moon light, coal fire light, mirror image, and—later—candle light. When all of these ways of seeing are joined by an active imagination and held in tension, then one begins to capture the meaning and significance of Hester's story. I think of this as "the problem of imagination." Initially, the speaker fails. Finally, he figures out he needed some distance from the Custom House experience before his imagination would begin to function properly. He won his

distance when he lost his politically-appointed job: "The moment when a man's head drops off is seldom or never, I am inclined to think, precisely the most agreeable of his life" (50). Yet losing his job gave Hawthorne the distance and the financial incentive to write *The Scarlet Letter*.

So if one feels guilty about suggesting readers skip "The Custom House," that guilt can be assuaged by looking at these two passages during discussion. They make a useful springboard into issues of symbolic meaning, necessary distance, Romantic theory, and so on.

FWIW,

Deb

We had a LIVELY discussion about this book. Like many teenagers today, some didn't like the book. Some loved it; some were a bit wishy-washy. We didn't get to the deep symbolism that English majors do, but our discussion had variety and substance.

Some of us saw Hester as a noble woman in a difficult society. Others saw her as a self-imposed martyr. None of us thought Dimmesdale was worth much. One person thought Chillingworth was not a dastardly character, but one who had the right to exact more revenge than he did.

Many participants liked the lighter tone of Balzac and thought Hawthorne was way too severe on the Puritans. Great discussion overall.

Reactions were mixed to *The Scarlet Letter*. But those who read "The Custom House" thought that it was really interesting.

We talked a lot about the various meanings of the letter "A." We discussed the characters and what their names suggest; one member insisted upon calling Dimmesdale "Dimwit." We looked at the strength of Hester, and we compared the guilt of and the results of guilt on Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. We booed Chillingworth with vehemence. Most of the group members had trouble grasping the significance of Pearl. Most saw her only as a willful, bratty child. Perhaps that happens when a group of grandmas get together.

Of course, we talked about hypocrisy and how society deals with human error. I went over the basic beliefs of the Puritans.

At the end, one member said, "What makes this a classic? What makes any of these books classics?" And that wasn't said in a positive way, I may add. Others said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." We had talked about the concept of classics during the first meeting, but we wrapped up by again talking about what makes a classic and why the books we've read might be classified as such

Maggie Garner

15 Basin folks had an animated discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* last evening. Surprisingly, some had missed it in their educational experience. Some were put off by the writing style, but it, like Shakespeare's, takes some getting used to and then they moved on into the book. Queries about why this book was a "classic" were answered by other members who recognized the picture of Puritan society that the book presents - probably better than any other of its time.

We had fun with the book. We assured the men in the group that they were NOT the Dimmesdale type - nor even Chillingworth. It continues to be a good book to read - and a fun book to discuss.

Norma Christensen

I started with a little background on Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*. Then I handed out notes and a diagram on the structure of the novel. The 24 chapters are very carefully structured with the second scaffold scene coming in the middle of the book, which most consider the climax. Although most of the town is asleep, Dimmesdale confesses aloud his sin marking the turning point which leads to his ultimate revelation of the sin. We then discussed all three scaffold scenes, their significance, and the changing roles of the four major characters. The first scaffold scene constitutes the beginning of the rising action and the third scaffold scene concludes the falling action. Chaps. 1 & 24 are the prologue and the epilogue. The middle of the first half of the book and the middle of the second each have a lesser crisis: the first when Hester retains custody of Pearl, and the second when the lovers meet alone in the forest for the first time in over seven years.

The rest of the discussion was lively with relatively balanced participation from everyone. Since only 3 of us had even read *The Custom House*, I just mentioned its connection to the scarlet "A" story. Another interesting point to the *Custom House* narrative is that Hawthorne's fellow officers mostly owe their jobs to patronage and family connections, customs that America supposedly opposed. As a group we found it ironic that, although America was founded on the principle of religious freedom, the Puritan culture, in which Hester and Dimmesdale find themselves, created a set of rules much stricter than found in Europe where most of the colonists have come from. Thus Hester and Arthur plan to escape to the freedom which anonymity in Europe would afford.

Most of our discussion focused on the symbolic nature of *The Scarlet Letter*, including the symbolic uses of the scaffold, the letter "A," night, day, sun, forest, brook, and colors black, red, and gray. We also discussed the use of physical setting for events and how different rules applied to the town from that of the forest. Most agreed that Hester suffered far less for her sin because it was openly acknowledged, and then she lived a life of good works by her own standards. There was not total agreement as to why Hester chose to return to Boston to live out her life when she didn't have to. We also spent time on character

analysis of the four major characters and the significance of the names that Hawthorne chose for them. Overall the group enjoyed the book, but didn't care for Hawthorne's very long sentences!

Kay Hinton, Kemmerer

Nine people attended the discussion for Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, at the Eppson Center in Laramie. The first part of the discussion focused on Hawthorne's life, ancestors and life.

We started into the book talking with a discussion on how Hawthorne's narrator, whom we meet in the introductory chapter, *The Custom House* is a fictional character and while he has many things in common with Hawthorne, we as readers can not presume he is the author. Several people indicated that they found this chapter tedious to read and skipped ahead to Chapter 1. Readers questioned if Hawthorne had included *The Custom House* introduction in the original work because many who had read the book previously did not remember the introduction.

Much of the book discussion centered on Hester's circumstance and her willingness to bear the brunt of responsibility of Pearl's birth. We spent time looking at how the time period played into Hester's life. The theme of finding one's identity and balancing one's identity while living within the standards and expectations of society shaped Hester's life. In the course of the story, Hester changes her identity from the woman with the mark of a scandal to one who administered to others who were less fortunate. Most of the readers believed that Hester was a honest, hard-working woman. Hester's strength of character and sense of responsibility far exceed that shown by her evil husband, Chillingworth, and her weak lover, Dimmesdale,

We also spent time talking about the Puritan religion and how it has influenced the value structure of the USA. People wondered what happened to the church and how it may have influenced other religions. We also discussed how Indians, Catholics, and other non-Puritans were depicted and how the forest and Indians were used to depict evil and how that was symbolic in the text. The story shows how Hawthorne focuses on good/evil through references to dark/light, wild forests/civilization, and the nature of evil.

The group wanted to talk how a book gets designated as a classic and who decides what is a classic and what is not. (I will take in several copies of satirical essay by Henry Louis Gates that talks about a writer's experience of being accepted into the cannon. getting We talked about how some readers have difficulty reading some of the books in the current series. We discussed ways that might help the readers when they are reading other books that may be difficult to read and understand.

We finished up our time by returning to *The Custom House* and discussing the similarities between the narrator and Hester and how they have both done something that is outside of their society's norms.

Eight of us, all women, gathered to discuss *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Friday, Sept. 24th, at 3 p.m. at the Baggs Library. Three of us had read the novel only in school decades ago; a few were reading it for the first time. The first chapter, "The Custom House," long and historically discursive as it is, discouraged a couple of readers. It is a famous set piece in itself, presenting the Puritan history of Salem, including the role of Hawthorne's ancestors (his great grandfather was famously one of the judges at the Salem witch trials, a judge who never repented his decisions, even after the hysteria passed). Supposedly the narrator finds an ornately embroidered letter A, which leads into Hester's story.

We discussed first the multi-layered conflict of the novel: the adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale, leading to the birth of little Pearl and Hester's A-labeled ostracism in the Puritan community. Puritan society is presented as stagnant, hypocritical, and judgmental, but nevertheless Hester bears her burden with courage and dignity; her good works and artistic ability win admiration for her in the community, causing some children to believe her "A" is for Admirable. As for Dimmesdale, his burden is different but more deadly than Hester's. Because his is hidden, it festers within the conscience-stricken Dimmesdale, undermining his physical, mental and spiritual health. However, his painfully festering sin gives him "sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, so that his heart vibrat[e]s in unison with theirs." His eloquent and powerful sermons derive from this sense of empathy, winning him the love and admiration of the community. We discussed the irony in Hester's love life: her ostracism for breaking Puritan society's laws, when she is true to her love for Dimmesdale. Conversely, she sees her greatest sin as lovelessly marrying the man who becomes Roger Chillingworth, demonic tormentor of Dimmesdale and herself, against the dictates of her own heart.

The discussion was lively about Hester. Hester is healthy in all ways to balance Dimmesdale's failing mental and physical energies. Hester's strength enables her not only to bear the A as a burden, but to flourish under its burden. Pearl is an eerie and precocious child, and the joy of Hester's existence. Hester was the favorite character of most of us; she undoubtedly was Hawthorne's favorite as well. One reader commented that Hawthorne was clearly in love with Hester, and this can certainly be supported from the novel. Dimmesdale is weak by comparison, unable to counter his spiritual sickness and Chillingworth's cancerous parasitism. After Dimmesdale confesses and dies, Chillingworth dies within the year, his devouring hatred and desire for vengeance now pointless. Hester takes Pearl and leaves; in the epilogue, she returns, after Pearl's marriage, and lives the remainder of her life there. We discussed the reasons why: this is where she loved Dimmesdale, this is the scene of her greatest growth and triumph; this is the culture she served so selflessly. Perhaps all those reasons are true; Hester as a character is realistically developed and capable; she is, just as we are, a creature of complex emotions and conflicting motivations.

Next month we will read Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

Mary Karen Solomon - Baggs

Pride and Prejudice

Eleven of us gathered at the Uinta County Library to talk about *Pride and Prejudice*. The group included many new faces. I briefly introduced the WCH, the discussion program, and the theme of the series.

People jumped right into the discussion. One man in the group described the plot of the story as "female: who'll pay the rent?"; male: I'll pay the rent." We decided that this wasn't a plot-driven or a character-driven novel, but a novel of manners. We talked about the ideal of the accomplished woman and the emphasis on beauty and appearance as a measure of worth. The value of appearances, we decided, governed much of the characters' actions, including the Bennett family's concerns over Lydia's escapade with Wickham. On the other hand, clear moral standards were also in play.

We talked about Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth at some length. Some people thought that Darcy was the only character who changed in the course of the novel from being arrogant to showing compassion. Others thought that his arrogance early in the story was simply a cover for shyness and being uncomfortable in artificial social settings such as the ball. Elizabeth was seen as being impatient with the social strictures she lived under; her change of heart regarding Mr. Darcy was seen as coming from her recognition that they were very much alike.

The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Bennett also came under scrutiny. All agreed that Mr. Bennett was detached and Mrs. Bennett was silly, but one woman commented that Mrs. Bennett acted like a good mother in working hard to make sure her daughters were provided for in the only way open to her.

Throughout the discussion, we talked about how the characters were recognizable personalities. We all knew people who were arrogant, obsequious and pompous. Although some of us confessed to stumbling over Austen's syntax in spots, the characters shone through. One woman commented that Elizabeth's insight into her true feelings opened her own eyes into "my inner self."

The discussion concluded with a consideration of the limited social world in Austen's novel. "It's just like living in this small town," commented one participant. We all know one another for generations back. We live in a similar kind of social network as the characters in the book.

A good discussion and a good beginning to the series.

Barbara Allen Bogart
Evanston

While a few said this was their favorite book, many found the syntax of the language difficult to read and comprehend. Some commented that they had to re-read

passages multiple times to get the meaning. Almost immediately, the discussion jumped on criticism of the character of Mrs. Bennett. When we explored the role and expectations of women during that time, the meaning of entail to the Bennett family, and the modern equivalent money values, they tempered their feelings somewhat. These points also led to a discussion of today's emphasis on money and materialism in contrast with the "get-by" work ethic under which many of these ladies grew up.

Many see rich people, like archetypical Lady Catherine, becoming absorbed with riches and power to the point that they can't see the plight and difficulties of the poor or middle class. The group explored how and why the characters of Darcy and Elizabeth, through self-reflection and seeking to serve a greater cause than self, were able to overcome pride and prejudices to become admirable, valued people in the end. Just as it happened with Elizabeth in the story, the group saw how the author did an admirable job in moving the reader from disliking to appreciating Darcy's character at the end.

Calling them evil, they group explored the influences of money and attitudes toward other races, religions, and social stature both then and now. As some shared personal stories of their own prejudices and prideful actions, they also recognized that good and bad friends have powerful influences in people's lives. They considered in depth the relationships of Bingley and Darcy, Elizabeth and Jane, Collin and Lady Catherine, and Elizabeth and Charlotte. Seeing strength and positive qualities in Elizabeth, Jane, and Charlotte, in particular, the ladies appreciated how each coped with, managed, and handled his or her own personal dilemmas and challenges. Ultimately, the group determined that this book was primarily a character study that differed vastly from the descriptive and vivid language of the previous year's series on the Western landscape.

Robert S. Beck
Cokeville

Before beginning a summary of the discussion I would like to mention a wonderful website provided by Deb Koelling. <http://www.northwestcollege.edu/id/koellind> <<http://www.northwestcollege.edu/id/koellind>>. And on that website a wonderful resource: <http://pemberley.com/>. On the latter website, besides finding a plethora of information, I also found a map of England with real places in the life of Jane Austen marked along with the "imaginary" places of the novel. I handed the map out to the group and they loved it.

I began with a back ground to Jane Austen. I told of the two periods of her literary productivity and put the time of her writing into an historical time frame (American Revolution, French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era). Additionally I explained that she refused to write about anything she did not know; hence the lack of conversations between men and the portrait she gives of the society of the country gentry within which she lived with her family.

During our discussion we considered how matrimonial prospects direct the action of the story and in so doing covered the unions of Collins and Charlotte, Wickham and Lydia, Bingley and Jane, and Darcy and Elizabeth. In examining the relationships we pondered how they were driven by personal passions or social claims; how some couples were united by outside forces and finally how the the first three relationships directed and brought together Elizabeth and Darcy.

We examined the issues of pride and prejudice as well as vanity and how each character was influenced by pride and/or blinded by prejudice, as well as the difference between vanity and pride. Another thread we followed was how the various houses reflected their owners. I put this in the context of the "architectural" framework of "Pride and Prejudice".

In connecting the book to the title of the series "Books that Endure" the group took the lead in what I found to be a very interesting and rich discussion as to how and why books do endure. Some of the readers had read the book while in school and others later in life; some had not read the book before their engagement in WCH book discussions. Those that read the book in school mentioned that they "got the book more", in this reading. This led us to discussing how life experiences sometimes better prepare readers to relate to, and appreciate, some books. Others mentioned they had never read Austen and were so pleased to have the chance because they knew she was an author who wrote classics, that endure. After reading the book they agreed the book should continue to endure for its insight to life in the late 1700's and early 1800's; as well as quite simply being a great story.

In tying the book to its relevancy to our times we discussed how gossip, social pressures, and the public nature of scandal has changed so drastically in our times. We pondered change in terms of how letter writing, having the patience to wait and hear for news, and then upon hearing news have to carefully respond to the situation at hand, is no longer possible. Today instant messaging, cell phones and gossip often have misinformation fly through the internet and cyberspace in incredible ways; and often it appears in the local newspaper.

Everyone really liked the book and it was a good discussion.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

A few people pointed out early on that they were disappointed that this book was so shallow--no references (or sign of awareness of) to anything that was going on at the time. The characters seem to live in a vacuum and they seem not to feel the effects of the industrial revolution or the unrest going on around them. I thought that was pretty perceptive of them, but we did discuss the difference between the time when the book was written and the time when it was published (later), and also the fact that Austen was in her late teens/early 20s when she was working on this book.

We talked quite a bit about the lack of opportunities for women in those days. While we all agreed that Mrs. Bennett is a silly woman, members of the group pointed out that her task of finding husbands for 5 daughters was a serious and important one in that day. Some of the readers were critical of Charlotte's decision to marry Elizabeth's pompous cousin Mr. Collins, but we all had to agree that in her day this was probably a wise and practical decision.

There was a lot of discussion about the character of Mr. Bennett. Most of the group members wanted to see him as something of a hero for putting up with Mrs. Bennett, when actually I think Austen meant for us to recognize that he was perhaps the more irresponsible of the two parents; he could see how poorly his younger daughters were behaving and yet refused to step in and parent.

Of course, we talked about pride and prejudice. Mr. Darcy's and Elizabeth's. We talked about the ways in which this novel might have been seen as groundbreaking for the intelligence and independence of Elizabeth, and for Mr. Darcy's eventual alliance with someone beneath him.

Carol Bell, Cody

Three participants met to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* at the Eastern Wyoming Community College. In the past this group has averaged about 15 participants for each discussion, and there didn't seem to be any particular insight into why others had not shown up. Nevertheless, the three were able to generate a thoughtful consideration of the book's characters and how their personal value systems and worldviews led to the stereotypes with which they formed their first impressions of each other. One of them pointed out that this was the prototype for all subsequent, including contemporary, romance novels. Borrowing from the notes of other BDG scholars, I asked them to consider the idea that self-justification (I might rather say our need to feel and justify our own self-worth) might lie behind many of our ways of initially experiencing and interacting with others. I also suggested that the limited choices available for women plays an important part in each of the works in this series, and asked them to consider, as they read and discuss the rest of the books and the play, how their own experiences as contemporary women might be related to those of the women in the series. This seemed to be an interesting idea for each of them.

Bob Brown

For our last meeting of the year, the Encampment BDG encountered Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1835). Though there were some complaints about the difficult French pronunciations, the group mainly enjoyed this view into post-Revolution French society. I began by asking the group if they found the selections (of the series) coherent and if these books were indeed "classics that endure." For the most part they agreed. I then asked "what makes a classic?" After tossing this question around for awhile, we

eventually emerged at the notion that a classic is a work that reads as powerfully in the future as it does in its contemporary times. A classic focuses on a particular community but says something to everyone, I offered. I then asked them if they knew anything about Balzac and why he might write this novel. I filled in some gaps on French history and early nineteenth century Europe and we then turned specifically to the novel. In response to what the novel was about, they replied "putting on airs, money, class, status, and appearance, and, centrally, parenting and passion." They contended that while overindulgent, *Goriot* was in no way bad. They made the astute observation that he was a tragic figure. We then tossed around who was the central character in the novel, and most agreed that Eugène deserved that title. Eugène served as a bridge between *Goriot* and the world, and in so doing permitted *Goriot* to reap some benefits from being a good person. Eugène also remains a future character in Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* (the term given to Balzac's series of novels that examine the whole of French society). One member commented that parenting was "on the job training" and we all heartily agreed. Parenting was not about right and wrong or good and evil; rather, it was about trying to develop or encourage moral behavior and to see your offspring safely into a hostile adult world. How one achieves these things is different in each case. This session was particularly enjoyable because it gave everyone a chance to talk about their families and their multiple parenting experiences.

Respectfully submitted,

Cliff Marks

Though we had a small group, we still had a spirited discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*. We began by talking about the obvious central subject of the novel: marriage. We discussed all the marriages and wondered what might be radical or, at least, suggestive of what Austen portrays. Austen's depiction of Darcy and Elizabeth finding each other based on mutual attraction and intelligence (for the most part) is quite provocative for its time. The other marriages and their arrangements are far more reflective of the state of marriage in England in the early nineteenth century. I then turned the discussion toward the broader themes of manners, pride, and prejudice. We agreed that while there could be affirmative forms of pride, there could not be positive forms of prejudice. I then outlined some conventions of Romanticism and the Victorian Novel, of which *P&P* shares both, and we discussed how those conventions operated in the novel. Finally, I shared how the novel follows some of the norms of the Romantic Comedy, intriguingly anticipating the screwball comedy of the twentieth century, but that the moral structure, or marriage map, is the primary force of the book. Towards the end I asked them to compare Austen's original title, "First Impressions," with what she settled on, *Pride and Prejudice*. The group offered that the final title gives more thematic emphasis, while the original title emphasizes the plot. Finally, I asked about the relationship between moral growth and self-knowledge. We agreed that the emotions

and thoughts in the novel coincide with similar emotions and thoughts today.

Cliff Marks

Busy time of year and only half of the group finished the book. I prefaced the discussion with some background on Regency England, particularly the architecture, which, I feel, is well-illustrated in the novel. We also discussed politics, including the reign of King George III and the Napoleonic Wars (by the way, Master and Commander is an excellent preface to *Pride and Prejudice* as they both take place in similar times, a fine movie). Those who finished the book enjoyed it, but were not overjoyed with it. I understand. It seems an interesting sketch of higher society in this period, but is limited. The most interesting thing about the book, I think, is the 3rd person narrator. The narrator has its own personality. In a nut, an important book for its day, but we had trouble deciding why it should "endure" next to the heavy hitters in the list.

Jon Billman, Dec. 2003

The Afton discussion of "*Pride and Prejudice*," our first of the year, was small—only six folks—but spirited. We explored how it's a book about human nature—the pride and prejudice that is in us all, the tendency to give into "First Impressions" (the original title of *P&P*)—and carried this train of thought to considerations of most of the characters in the book. Participants were interested in Jane Austen herself—how both she and her beloved sister were each once unlucky in love (and how Lizzie and Jane in the book could be a fairy tale version of what they didn't have); how she wrote in the sitting room in the spare minutes that nieces and nephews let her be; how very carefully she plotted out her novels, how she refused to write about anything she did not know (such as a conversation between two men alone, which does not occur in her books). The famous insult of her work by Emerson, and the strange comment by Mark Twain caused some interest and even anger. The comment by Frank O'Connor, that she was one of the main "inventors" of the modern novel, gave rise to some interesting discussion. (These reviews were all found in the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* series.)

Richard Kempa 12-03

The Wheatland group had an active and interesting discussion of *Pride & Prejudice*. An interesting question from one of the group members was: "Is the series (*Books That Endure*) about self-justification?" This was asked in the context of Austen's eventual title for this particular book (its first title was proposed by her as *First Impressions*), as well as the preceding four that the group has considered in this series. This led to consideration of the book's characters as well as of our own pride and prejudices, and how powerful they are in forming our first impression of people and situations, and that both can in a certain sense be seen as based on our need for self-

justification (I did not offer typology as another dynamic). The discussion also considered the effects of this phenomenon on the relationships in the book, and how the growth of the characters (some disputed whether any took place at all) in turn affected their sense of themselves and their relationships.

Bob A. Brown 02-03

Those who participated in this discussion were excited to begin and stayed that way. Several in the group had difficulty with Austen's style; all enjoyed the characters and evolution of the various relationships in the book. It was noted that this book lacked the political/social commentary at the level of the previous books, but that the satirical look at the English upper class was entertaining. It was also noted that the underlying theme of the series (to the group) regarding the status and treatment of women in society was again a central part of the book. Everyone enjoyed the strong, yet human, character of Lizzy/Elizabeth and her maturation over the course of the novel. We explored the different marriages as well as the views regarding love and friendship. This book seemed similar to today's soap operas given the absence of children. Also an interesting discussion regarding the author's intended audience given her biographical information and her treatment by audiences today.

T Frankland, Casper, 0203

Some liked this book, and some did not. Those who did not like it cited the language and slow pace as contributors to their dislike. Those who liked the book said that once they got past the first 70 pages or so, then they liked it.

We talked a lot about the characters. Participants talked about knowing people today who fit those character profiles. Then we discussed that the characters are one reason the book has had such appeal over the years. The biggest part of our discussion was about the place of women, especially in Jane Austen's era but also in the years before and after her time. We talked about women being considered property and being considered less worthy than men in current times. One person mentioned that a local ranch family had two sons. One son had all girls and one son had girls and boys. The ranch was left to the grandsons only. The family of the son who had all girls was excluded entirely.

Of course, we also talked about the concepts of pride and prejudice, marriage, education, life in the times of Austen. We were able to make good comparisons with *A Doll's House*, which we read in Sept., especially in the areas of women and marriage.

Maggie Garner (Medicine Bow group)

Of all our reading to date, this novel had the most "baggage" in connection with it. Some participants had already read *Pride & Prejudice* at least once, others had

never read it but always felt they should, and still others had avoided it on purpose throughout their school days. Of course we discussed concepts of pride, prejudice, maturity, and other major themes from the novel. But I think the most fun was discussing the incredible endurance of Jane Austen herself. I wowed the group with my findings from the online World of Pemberley, including the hypertext version of the novel. That Jane Austen can claim (if she were alive to make such claims) a cult of personality to the degree that she does we found very interesting. We noted that there is a Jane Austen "type" - folks who love her, her writing, and all things "Austentatious" as they say. Others can't stand her: they find her world too narrow, her concerns too shallow, and her prose and technical style too limited to explain her popularity today. Eventually we came to agree that the book, and the author, endure because the characters and the world do still surface today, even though we may hate to admit it!

- Julianne Couch

Jane Austen was competing with an Upton High School basketball game, but nonetheless 14 participants showed up to discuss *Pride & Prejudice*. Several volunteered that this was their favorite book; then slowly the group discussion began to gain momentum, as the many personalities in the book were examined. From this delightful array of unique but oddly familiar people it was easy to add a consideration of their many prejudices, and in turn compare these to the several (sic) in our own time and culture.

I gave some background biographical material on Jane Austen, and also on the class structure in England, including its development and rigidification as an outcome of the English Reformation (one of my current particular interests). This led to an examination of the pride of class displayed in the book, and its resultant limiting of personal freedoms in the matters of relationships and expression.

These notes may make this group discussion seem to have been very structured and formal. In fact, it was a delightful, and many times hilarious, free flowing conversation among the group's interesting and interested participants.

Bob Brown

For the most part everyone enjoyed the book. Some found the language archaic, but others thought that was the charm of the novel. Most agreed Austen is a goddess!

We discussed English society extensively: i.e., how it made marriage necessary for women; how options were limited; how, even then, there was a clear distinction in mental ability. Though all of our discussions have been lively this was the most lively. We did a lot of comparing to Balzac and most agreed that Austen's sense of humor made her more endearing.

. Vicki Vincent

Twelve folks in the Basin area concluded their Spring book discussion group with an animated discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*. The discussion began slowly, as does the book, but very soon the conversations, as does the reading of the book, speeded up. We analyzed the characters, noting how finely Austen draws the distinctions between the characters. Our initial reaction, and one which we maintained throughout the discussion, was that we were glad we didn't live then. Our boredom level might have been excessive. This led us, of course, into conversations about modern day life, social and political, and we had a GOOD time. Everyone liked the book (eventually). This has been a fun series to do with a very bright group of men and women.

Norma Christensen

Although *Pride and Prejudice* is a "classic" with long sentences and a hefty vocabulary, the group had mostly already read it and seen a movie version, so the book was much easier to discuss than last month's. Most of our discussion focused on the characters, since it's really a story told through dialogue, which is in turn used to develop the characters. Everyone shared his or her favorite character, whether it was a character who was admired, despised, or simply entertaining.

Discussion also focused on the evidence of pride and prejudice in the major characters. Since the original name for the book was *First Impressions*, we discussed the role they played and found that many first impressions were sources of prejudice throughout the book. We also talked about the various ironic situations in the book including the overall ironic tone established in the famous first sentence: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

I shared some of the author's background with the groups, and we found that Austen's life is obviously reflected in her works. Although Austen never married, her books all deal with marriage. However, Ms. Austen came close to marriage twice, circumstances which show up in the courtship/pre-marital situations in this book. We also found that Ms. Austen's characters and settings are limited to the England she knew of middle and upper class people in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Overall the group enjoyed the book and had a lively discussion on it.

Kay Hinton, Kemmerer

Pride and Prejudice. Some love it, others hate it, but very few of the dozen people who gathered at the Eppson Center in Laramie to discuss the book were neutral about Jane Austen's famous novel. Most of the participants were familiar with the basic story line of this time-honored

novel well before they received their books. Some knew the book, and had read it multiple times throughout their reading lives. Others "pretty much" knew the story but had never read, or at least completed the book. The clever and quick-witted, Elizabeth Bennet is one of the best known female characters in English literature. The story of her mother (the noisy, often silly Mrs. Bennet) and her quest to find suitable husbands for her five daughters has entered the folklore of our culture.

The cast of characters in *Pride and Prejudice* is lengthy and their overlapping relationships can be a bit confusing. So the first item on the agenda was to make a character map listing the main characters and illustrating their blood and business relationships to each other. This served as a good tool for group members who were confused about who was who or had read the book early in the month. It was also a good springboard into the discussion because we had to comment and talk about each character as they were listed.

Once all characters were on the chart we started looking closely at the parents in the Bennet family. From the get-go Mrs. Bennet is obsessed with finding good husbands for her girls. The group placed Mrs. B in a historical context and the setting (time, place, and social/political condition) of the book. Generally, the group saw that Mrs. B's behavior was driven by the necessity of finding spouses for the girls. Because the family did not have any sons, the senior Bennets needed to find someone to care for them their old age as well as take care of their daughters. Some noted that near the end of the book when the girls were pretty much settled into their adult lives that Mrs. B became a more likable character.

We also looked at Mr. B's role in the family. At first, he may appear to be the good guy surrounded by a flock of flitty women and girls, but in fact the group held him responsible for a great deal of the Bennet family dynamics. He has detached himself from his family, forcing Mrs. B to take responsibility to see the girls settled. He was not active in the girl's lives, which may have impacted the younger sister's behavior and their seeking the company and approval of any male. Mr. B is weak and he is an inefficient parent at critical points in his family's life. The discussion group held him responsible for the misbehavior of Lydia because of his detachment from parenting responsibilities.

Most of the group discussion members felt that Austen's book was a satire that was written as a criticism of society and the class system. Many people liked the formality of the book and the use of dialogue. Others found the wording a bit more difficult. The group was interested in learning about Austen and we spent time discussing her and her life. Before the group discussion time ended, we talked a bit about the books we are reading in this series. The four books are all from the 1800s and each author represents a different country (Hawthorne is American, Austen is English, Ibsen is Norwegian, and Turgenev is Russian).

The number of participants has been a concern for our group. The Eppson Center changed how they were marketing the discussions. They are focusing more on

each individual book. This helped draw some new people to our discussion and does not give people the feeling they have to commit to full series if they are only able to come a time or two. The group reiterated the need for larger font size or at least a copy or two to be available in large font for some of the readers who have vision challenges.

Although 9 people had picked up books (including a couple of teenagers whom we'd love to add to the group), only 6 of us showed up to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* at the Baggs Library on August 20th. I found it hard to believe fall was beginning, even though I have to start teaching this upcoming Monday. Everyone liked *Pride and Prejudice*; that is no surprise. Many have considered it the greatest English novel ever written, although no work of Jane Austen's is included in either the Norton Anthology of World Literature or the Norton Anthology of British Literature, as I pointed out to the group. Why is that? I have no idea.

We considered the context of P&P, including Austen's response to the growing popularity of early romanticism, in particular Ann Radcliffe's novel *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, which illustrated finding true love through trusting the heart, following first inclinations and instinct, rather than reason or others' opinions. *Pride and Prejudice* was first entitled First Impressions, but argued against trusting first impressions. Elizabeth's initial dislike and distrust of Darcy is revealed to be prejudice, rather than true instinct, as is her first, favorable, impression of Mr. Wickham. Jane Austen believed with John Locke that both experience and reasoning are necessary to form valid judgment.

Linda pointed out that conversation and description both play important roles in Austen's work, which is certainly true. Conversation reveals the speaker's concerns and character; description is important to keep the reader grounded in the plot. It is a device that Austen uses successfully to add humor to the novel as well, especially through Mrs. Bennet's and Lydia's conversations. It's a wonderful novel! With Elizabeth, as Darcy's true character is revealed to her little by little, as she overcomes her prejudices, we grow in our understanding and admiration of him to understand why he would be a perfect match for Elizabeth. And so, when that comes about, as a result of character rather than coincidence, we are totally satisfied.

At our next meeting in September, we will discuss the *Scarlet Letter*, and we hope everyone will be there.

Mary Karen Solomon - Baggs

Pere Goriot

This was our last discussion, and we only had 6 attendees. Half of those attending were really bored by Balzac's "padded" prose, and the other half really loved this book.

We began the discussion with some biographical information about Balzac, and that lead to a discussion of the similarities between the life of the book's character Eugene Rastignac and Balzac. Both were law students in Paris, both came from peasant families, and Eugene shares Balzac's tendency to incur large debts!

We spent some time comparing Pere Goriot to King Lear, and then we talked about Goriot's downfall as a parent--his desire to give immediate gratification to his daughters no matter what he must sacrifice to fulfill their desires.

We talked about the whole idea of immediate gratification in the post-Neopolitan Parisian world represented in the novel; Rastignac desires social status and wealth, but he doesn't want to work towards those goals slowly by gaining his degree and going to work. Goriot wants the love and gratitude and happiness of his daughters, but he isn't willing to deny them anything or teach them to build happy and contented lives for themselves. Many of the group members compared Goriot's parenting skills (or lack of them) to those of today's parents, mentioning our tendency to want to provide our children with cell phones, nice cars, computers, etc. We spent some time wondering if the older generation has always felt (and will always continue to feel) as if their grandchildren are too indulged. Do people always feel that the youth of the day are more indulged than the youth of yesterday? Is it true?

We spent the second half of our time together talking about the series as a whole. We all really appreciated the opportunity to read 4 books by authors from different countries who were writing at the same time. We loved the way that that gave us a feel for what was going on in the world.

We talked about what this series says about "human relations"-- that young people often behave patronizingly towards their parents and if they mature they grow out of being embarrassed by their parents and into an appreciation of them: that women in the 19th century had little power other than the power of their beauty and sexuality: that it is difficult to create real friendships and relationships outside of one's economic background: and that true and lasting love begins in friendship.

These books made for a nice connected series. We all really appreciated having read them together.

Carol Bell, Cody

This is a difficult report to write, as the group was so astonished by the characters and their values that it took most of the time to frame it in a way that could be considered rationally (whatever that means). The social climbing and financial measures of success eventually became a topic that was discussed in light of their presence in American culture. The group couldn't get over the behavior of the Goriot daughters, and thought Pere Goriot himself a madman. Eugene and his manipulations were roundly criticized. The most likeable character, and the one most readily related to, was the Vicomtesse de Beauseant. Vautrin, one of my favorite characters in

Balzac's works, was dismissed as a sociopath. So it goes. It was still an interesting and challenging discussion, just not what I had encountered before, or was initially prepared for.

Bob Brown

An excellent discussion. The social and moral ideas of the author, presented through his almost three-dimensional characters, were compared to both present-day ideas here, in our country, and in Europe. The experience of one of the participants who lived in Europe for a while and traveled extensively was a great addition to the discussion. Participants talked about how even though technology has changed the world a thousand-fold, human nature has stayed quite constant. Though we are better than half way through this particular group, they are seeing the connection between then and now with Books That Endure.

Richard Kalber, 01-04

This was a good discussion and, surprisingly, readers enjoyed it more than Jane Austen. After some background on Balzac and the Human Comedy we discussed the novel's nods to Shakespeare's Lear. The group felt that it's a hero-less novel, but felt compassion for both Eugene and Goriot and even his daughters. We talked about the richly-described boarding house as a symbol and microcosm for society, then moved to theme. Are the material pursuits of 1830s Paris and contemporary America evil? Not necessarily, but sad nonetheless. Finally we discussed the novels construction and the warm narrator Balzac gives the book.

Jon Billman

We might never have read Balzac without this series. And we're glad we did. This discussion came on the heels of television's reprise of "The Music Man," and its "Balzac" comment. We mused about "Goriot" in film form (because the descriptions are so vivid) and one person commented on recently seeing Cousin Bette. A reader suggested "The Red and the Black" as a good supplement to Balzac. I provided background on Balzac and his ideas for La Comedie Humaine. One reader commented that Paris was the main character in the novel, and from there we discussed how vividly Balzac described the boarding house, the city in fog, the balls, drawing rooms, carriages, clothes, etc. We could picture all of it. We discussed the main human characters (several appeared in earlier books and in later ones), with an emphasis on the parents, from Goriot to Eugene's family, and on the Victorine's. We drew the inevitable conclusions to modern day parenting and pursuit of material wealth. This provoked great discussion. We ended with comments on how readable we found Balzac; that his writing style seems fresh, especially compared to last month's Scarlet Letter.

Barbara Gose 0203

The Albany County Public Library's first session of the season got off to an interesting start because we're running the series on a different night of the week than we've done in the past. Consequently, we had many new folks in attendance, several of whom were new to Laramie and joined the discussion group for social as well as intellectual reasons. A few of the disenfranchised members from years past found us, too, and I hope more will resurface as the series continues. Whether through the influence of the new group dynamic or the really good book, I believe we had a fruitful first discussion of *Pere Goriot*. Most of us hadn't read Balzac before and found both his content and his style to be amazingly contemporary. That realization walked the group right in to discussion of theme: for what reasons has this book "endured"? We agreed that spoiled children, obsessed parents, pragmatic ambition, social climbing and strained intimacy were all a part of today's world. The only difficult part of the evening was getting the group to wind down at the end and go home. They left with copies of the *Scarlet Letter*, which I hope prompts as lively a discussion next month as *Pere Goriot* did for round one.

Julianne Couch

The group did not respond as enthusiastically to Balzac as to Ibsen and Austen. Everyone found the book to be interesting, but were muted in their praise. We found Eugene to be the focal point of the book rather than old Goriot, despite Balzac's plea at the beginning of the novel.

The vacuity and futility of searching for happiness via the pursuit of material wealth or social status is pretty starkly outlined in *Pere Goriot*. We all agreed that in all three books we have read, this is a fundamental, underlying cause of conflict and unhappy lives. The question remains: if this is the consequence, why do we keep trying it?

We pretty much agreed that there were few characters--maybe only one, Blandon--of whom much complimentary could be said.

It will be interesting to see how Turgenev "stands up" with Austen, Ibsen, and Balzac.

Robert Lange

Good reaction from the group. Some thought Balzac prattled on a bit too much, but they were in the minority. Most found his observations of mid-19th century Parisian society both entertaining and telling. They also found the lessons and general gist of *Père Goriot* to be applicable in modern times. "This book shows that little has changed," said one participant. "We all want money, things, and the approval of society."

Samuel Western

For the most part, everyone who read it enjoyed the book. One lady wanted "this filth" banned from the universe, but the group kindly handled her diatribe. We'll see how she handles *The Scarlet Letter*.

This is the seventh group I've led and the discussion for this book was some of the best I've encountered. We discussed French society in the nineteenth century. We discussed its similarity to *King Lear*. We explored the interaction and development of the characters.

As a French teacher, I brought out this book's place in the world of French writers and why Balzac ranks highly in the world of "lettres française." It was a highly effective discussion with MOST participants sharing ideas and knowledge bases. For this "scholar," it was a delightful experience.

Vicki Vincent

After spending time reviewing the book and its characters and their behaviors (and values), we explored why we, as Americans, found so many of these issues as they were portrayed in the book to be reprehensible. This tied in with the group's earlier consideration of *The Scarlet Letter* and the Puritan underpinnings of so much of our American history, as well as of our current culture. As in other groups, the current issues in our national life were also discussed in the light of the morals portrayed by Balzac. Enron, Arthur Andersen, Dick Cheney, etc., provided rich fodder for this part of the discussion.

Bob Brown

I'm always disappointed when the group doesn't like a book as much as I do. That happens a lot. I really like *Pere Goriot*, but the Medicine Bow group had a lukewarm response to it.

The first question of a member was, of course, why this book endured. By the end of the discussion, I think everyone understood why it endured. We looked at the universality of the issues and themes. Noting that we know people similar to the characters always helps in getting closer to the book.

We discussed the futility of people seeking happiness through material means and the fact that people continue that search. We looked at the values of 19th-century Parisian society and compared them with the values of 19th-century American society and our culture today.

The only character who they found admirable was Victorine.

This is a good book with which to end the series because we could compare it so well with the other books: parenting in *Fathers and Sons*, marriage in *Doll House*, importance of status in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Effie Briest*, values in *Scarlet Letter*. And it gives great material to compare with our contemporary world.

Margaret Garner

On a very stormy night, 12 members of this Upton group were present to discuss *Pere Goriot*. As I had spent most of the day plowing out from the ranch, I missed my usual "last day" cramming of looking up biographical material and collateral references. So it goes. Some habits die hard.

After spending time reviewing the book and its characters and their behaviors (and values), we explored why we, as Americans, found so many of these issues as they were portrayed in the book to be reprehensible. This tied in with the group's earlier consideration of *The Scarlet Letter* and the Puritan underpinnings of so much of our American history, as well as of our current culture. As in other groups, the current issues in our national life were also discussed in the light of the morals portrayed by Balzac. Enron, Arthur Andersen, Dick Cheney, etc., provided rich fodder for this part of the discussion.

Bob A. Brown

Although 13 people checked out *Pere Goriot*, only 6 came to the discussion. Opinions on the book varied, but most found it challenging reading as were all the classics. As with Turgenev in Russia, the group had difficulty understanding why Balzac is considered one of France's foremost writers.

We discussed the book for an hour, but it was not a lively discussion. The major reasons for the lack of interest were that no one could relate to the book and we all felt like we didn't know enough European history. Several also expressed that they didn't "like" any of the characters; whereas even though we couldn't relate to the lifestyle in *Pride and Prejudice*, we all enjoyed and were entertained by its variety of characters.

Many critics consider *Pere Goriot* to have elements of melodrama. We discussed how the characters seem to be types rather than real people, and the conflict as well as the characters appear to be good or evil with no middle ground. Although the book really has 3 major characters with different stories, we felt they tied together well. We agreed that the novel can be called a bildungsroman, or coming of age book, for Rastignac who also appears in others of Balzac's works that are part of *The Human Comedy*.

The theme of *Pere Goriot* being the doting father to his unappreciative daughters we compared to *King Lear*. Some felt that that aspect of the story was more believable than the transformation of Rastignac.

We concluded the discussion by comparing this classic with the other three we've read, indicating which we each liked the most, the least, and why. It was generally agreed that *The Scarlet Letter* and *Pride and Prejudice* made for

easier reading and more riveting discussions than *Fathers and Sons* or *Pere Goriot*. Most thought the challenge was good for us, but we decided to go a little "lighter" next year.

Kay Hinton, Kemmerer

Fathers and Sons

When we arrived for our meeting, we discovered that the room at the library was full of tables holding books for the annual library book sale. So it took a good ten minutes to get all the book addicts, myself included, rounded up for our discussion.

I began with a brief comment about this period of Russian history. One of the participants actually knew quite a bit about it, especially about the tsar's program to free the serfs so he filled us in on that.

I wondered about the title of the book, but participants all saw that the successive generations of family was at the heart of the story. We discussed the fact that it isn't a highly plotted novel, that it seems to be more about the period than the story. One woman commented that she enjoyed reading the book but that she couldn't connect with any of the characters. Others agreed that the characters, except for Barazov, seemed not to be especially fully developed. One woman, though, thought Anna was an interesting character in keeping her life under such strict routine and marrying for security rather than love. We decided that neither she nor Barazov knew what to do with emotion.

At the next session, which is our last, we agreed to bring the name of a contemporary book that we think fits the theme of books that endure. I will pass those one to all of you.

Barbara Allen Bogart
Reading Wyoming
Wyoming Humanities Council

This was our first meeting for the series Books That Endure. The discussion began quickly, in fact so quickly I did not have time to introduce the series or themes! Questions came fast and furiously. I slowed things down and began with some background on Turgenev, his place in Russian literature and background on Russian history as it pertained to the novel (1840's generation and that of the 1860's and the emancipation of serfs). After providing some background the group said the book made "a lot more sense". We proceeded to discuss fathers and sons, generational conflicts and humanities versus the sciences. Additionally we discussed the female characters and how the novel reflected Russian society. Nihilism was of course center stage and many brought in definitions from the dictionary. One member of the group had a definition which included the word terrorists. I explained that a nihilist did assassinate Alexander That led to a rich discussion of 'change' and what changes were occurring in

the novel, historically and within the generations; as well as traditions underlying characters and relationships. We discussed the women, slavophiles and which characters changed and why. No one liked Bazarov. Everyone liked Arcady and the parental generation. Finally we discussed the richly drawn scenes presented by Turgenev. Everyone loved his description of Bazarov's mother. Part of their dislike of Bazarov was his cruelty and rudeness to his parents.

The group commented that they find the background given to the novels, which are somewhat difficult and outside of their common frame of reference and reading habits, enormously valuable. I am going to give them some brief background to both the Doll's House and Effie Briest during the meeting preceding the discussion of those books.

It was a terrific discussion and there were so many characters, themes, conflicts and traditions to explore. Before we knew it, it was time for the library to close. This came at the point when the group was asking what role nihilism had in the Russian Revolution!

A question for fellow book discussion leaders who have done this series. A member of the group mentioned that they read Turgenev invented (so to speak) the word nihilism. I thought it predated him as a term; but he was the first to introduce a character in fiction who was a nihilist. Can anyone help me out?

Katie Curtiss
Sheridan

While many of us struggled with the Russian names, the major part of the discussion dealt with the plot and various characters in the story. Some reported that other members of the local reading group who didn't attend had found the plot too dark and chose not to finish reading the novel.

The group spent considerable time analyzing character relationships. In the servants Piotr and Prokofitch, they saw the analogous relationship of the novel's serfs (newly emancipated servants) to the black slaves in the South in the 1840s and 1850s. In Arcady, representing the realistic present, and his father Nikolai, representing a romantic who dreams of his past happiness and keeps a mistress (Fenichka), they perceived a tense but threatened closeness. They considered how the theme of the natural antagonism that exists between succeeding generations may or may not mend itself as in the cases of Arcady and Bazarov with their fathers. We agreed that Arcady was not and could never be a true "nihilist" who believed in nothing. His ultimate transformation was affirmed through his enduring relationship with Katya, his reconciliation with his father, and his change to a more practical philosophy.

As scientist, rationalist, nihilist, intimidator, and cynic, Bazarov was seen as a catalyst and antagonist for those around him. We explored his influence on Arcady, his duel with Pavel, his failed relationship with Madame Odintsova, and his inner turmoil. They saw the irony in

the character of Bazarov who could proclaim "that a person who stakes his whole life on the card of a woman's love, then withers and sinks to the point of becoming incapable of anything when that card is trumped—a person like that isn't a man, isn't a male" when in fact he later becomes that person in his unrequited love for Odintsova.

Drawing from personal reflections and experience, the group's perceptions and discussion of the themes, issues, and divergent characters in this novel created an enjoyable evening of discussion.

Steve Beck, Cokeville

We started off with a discussion of Nihilism, and fortunately I had found an interesting article about the difference between the Russian Nihilist movement and what we think of as nihilism today. The Russian Nihilist youth movement was marked by rebellion against authority, a desire for greater political freedom, and a desire for a shift away from the feudal state. Today nihilism often refers to belief in nothing.

Most of the group members were fairly apathetic about this book. They enjoyed it enough to finish it, but nobody really loved it. Still, we had a great discussion.

We talked about the way in which the plot moves forward as the characters move from place to place. Not a whole lot happens, but we see the characters against different backdrops as they come into contact with different people.

The main characters, Bazarov and Arcady, are young college students, both of them nihilists. Bazarov is the ring leader, and Arcady is Bazarov's groupie and good friend. They are rebelling against the ideas of their fathers' generation. Bazarov is an arrogant, impolite young man and he is easy to dislike. His most redeeming characteristic, according to the group, is that he is a catalyst for change in the lives of those he comes into contact with. It is due to Bazarov that Arcady's father, Nicolai changes enough to feel he can marry his mistress (a lower class woman), and that Arcady meets and falls in love with Katya.

By the end of the novel, Arcady's rejection of authority has been tempered by experience and maturity, and he and his father settle in with their wives to run their estate.

Bazarov, unfortunately, after a brush with love that undermines his belief that human emotion has no place in the modern world, returns home to work with his father and becomes infected with typhus.

We finished the discussion by comparing this book to *Pride and Prejudice*. Both books are, in a sense, coming of age stories. Elizabeth Bennett and Arcady learn to feel compassion and understanding rather than to judge. Both novels end with happy marriages. Both novels are largely character studies. Both novels are set in a feudal society, and the feudal system is questioned and found failing by the characters in the novels; Nicolai marries his

mistress/servant at the end of *Fathers and Sons* and Mr. Darcy marries the suitably unsuitable Elizabeth Bennett (who is a member of a lower class than his) in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Great novels for comparison. On to Ibsen's *A Doll House*.

Carol Bell, Cody

The new "combined" Torrington group met to discuss *Fathers and Sons*. Most of the initial discussion centered on Bazarov, with varied points of view about him and his nihilism: some saw him as unchanging and terminally unpleasant, others saw him as understandable and unfortunate. His nihilism was considered as an extension of the western European shift to rationalism and its concomitant belief in man's superiority through science, and its late effect on Russian thought and manners. This was in contrast to Paul's clinging to the old ways of the aristocracy and its privileges. Their conflict, their duel, and their eventual deaths (physical for Eugene, spiritual and psychological for Paul) were discussed in the light of the similarly unbending arrogance of each. Arcady and his growth as evidenced in his relationship with his father, Bazarov, and Katya was also considered, as were the parents and their necessary adjustments to the changes brought about by their young adult sons. The discussion wrapped up with consideration of how conflict and change affects each of us. Interestingly, group members most rigid in their opinions about the novel were most superficial in their comments about change, and vice versa.

Bob Brown

The group enjoyed this book a great deal. The relationships of parents and children invited us to think of our own relationships. A close look at Bazarov and his struggle to NOT love led us to agree on how the "rational" life is not usually compatible with happiness. We forgave him his stern and sterile idealism, thinking it to be a rightful excess of his youth and energy. We felt warmth for Arcady, as he moved from Bazarov's sphere of influence into that of his family and eventual lover.

Richard Kempa, 1-16-04

As with the other books in this discussion series, I spend a little time discussing the author's life. I believe this helps the group understand why the particular book and author are a part of the series. With this book, I made colored copies of two maps of the area covered by the story and showed how the boundaries have changed from time of story to today.

Of course, the book brought on some discussion of nihilism as well as political and cultural thinking around the Russian Revolution.

We talked about the picture of the chicken and marauding cat in the farmyard and whether the author intended for readers to get the idea that Bazarov was the cat.

Richard Kalber, 11-03

The small loved *Fathers & Sons*, and all considered it to be the best and most interesting in the series. They considered the role self-justification played in the many relationships and interactions. I argued for Bazarov as the precursor of both the modern scientific/rational person, as well as representing the elitism of the outcome of Russia's eventual Bolshevik Revolution and the belief that a culture ruled and planned according to scientific rules would conquer the world. The group went along with this, but their visceral dislike of Bazarov (poor man!) limited this theme as an avenue for discussion. I gave some brief historical information about Russia's recent (to the book's 1859 beginning) defeat in the Crimean War, as well as the imminent emancipation of the serfs.

I've had interesting responses to my different efforts to provide historical and biographical information for different books and their authors. I can spend several hours preparing for three or four minutes (it's probably longer) of this type of material, yet the general response seems to be a courteous interest, but then a response that effectively says: "OK, now let's get back to the discussion." As it should be, I suppose.

It was pleasant for me to have them respond to Turgenev as they did, as his work is some of my favorite in Russian literature.

Bob A. Brown 02-03

The Medicine Bow discussion group enjoyed *Fathers and Sons*. We talked a lot about the intergenerational relationships and how the tensions of those relationships haven't changed over the years. We also talked about the political environment in which the novel was written and the fact that the emancipation of the serfs that occurred in 1861 caused the serfs to then be oppressed because of economics. This led to a general discussion of emancipating slaves without preparing them for their freedom. We looked at Nicholas' attitude towards his serfs and his sale of timber on the land that would eventually be given to serfs.

In our discussion about characters, group participants all agreed that they disliked Bazarov, but he was also the most interesting character. We discussed how his life view didn't work when he fell in love and how his self-sufficiency eventually proves disastrous. We related his life to the overall situation in which the old social order was dying but a new one had yet to be born.

We were able to compare the marriages in this book with the marriages in *A Doll's House* and *Pride and Prejudice*. And, of course, the overall family relationships presented

in the books are comparable as well. Overall, we had an interesting discussion.

Margaret Garner

Turgenev's *Fathers & Sons* made for interesting discussion of plot, character, Russian history and thematic issues. Thanks to Margaret Garner for passing on some of her resources, namely *Turgenev: His Life & Times* by Leonard Schapiro and *Turgenev's Russia* by Victor Ripp, both of which provided good background on the period and the writer. The group took a careful look at what Turgenev wanted to achieve through the creation of Bazarov. We looked at Bazarov as a man, a son, a friend, a doctor, and a political force. Discussion over his death yielded some thoughtful insights about metaphor in the novel: the death of the character occurred not just because of sloppy medicine, but because individualism, along with destruction with no plan for rebuilding, were both rejected by Turgenev. In the place of individualism Turgenev supports the family unit, with all its imperfections, as the catalyst for hope, if not change, in Russia. We also looked at the purpose of the duel in the novel and came up with a few ideas, but mainly concluded that the scene was a hoot, to use a sophisticated term from *Three Stooges Literary Criticism*. Although several people did not like the novel, they joined the lively discussion with those who were enthusiastic in its praise.

Julianne Couch

Seventeen Basinites held an animated discussion of *Fathers and Sons*. Opinions were varied as to whether Barazanov was a good guy or a bad buy, depending on what translation they had read. The Penguin version gives much more background than others and the translator is a Turgenev admirer = and that makes a lot of difference about the attitude of the reader. But all enjoyed the book even though some hadn't finished it. When I pointed out that the death scene is considered one of the best in all literature, the non-finishers were intrigued and may indeed make an effort to get to the end. Generally, everyone liked the book and we are now looking forward to Effie Briest.

Norma Christensen

Everyone judged the book an outstanding novel.

The discussion focused mainly on development of character and the political and social ferment of the mid nineteenth century. As one might expect the major emphasis was on Bazarov, his philosophy of life, and his view of the world. We were unanimous in our feeling that no life lived on a nihilistic basis could be called a success. The relationship of Bazarov to Mme. Odintzov was revealing. Who (not even Bazarov) can resist the power of love. We agreed that his love for Anna made him a believable character.

We also concluded that the final scene where Bazarov's parents visit his grave points to a peaceful and redemptive future.

Robert Lange

The discussion was, as usual for this group, interesting and lively. It roughly paralleled the development in the book of the main characters, especially Arcady and Eugene.

A marvelous example of the growth of Arcady was his early shift, under the influence of Bazarov, from referring to his father as daddy (p. 14) to calling him father (p. 23), then the late referral back to the more intimate daddy (p. 203). This seemed an interesting and telling reflection of Arcady as boy the son of his father, to student the admirer of Bazarov, to man the son and friend of his father.

Bazarov seemed to be a prototype of the late 19th Century rational man, the precursor of Russia's shift to revolution against the old order and customs in favor of a supposed rational, planned approach to economic and population control. On a personal level, his introduction as an arrogant scientist, his subsequent falling prey to falling in love (in spite of his ideals), his acquiescence to the duel, his subsequent depression, and his final self-destructive behavior leading to his infection with and death due to typhus, was discussed as a paradigm for the failure of science when it excludes passion and the irrational.

Arcady's and Eugene's fathers were seen to be similar in their love of their sons, as well as their doomed wishes to be friends and confidants with their sons, though Arcady and his father did have a remarkable and telling reconciliation at the end of the story. The role of women was particularly noted, with Anna Sergeevna's fear of intimacy being in contrast to the more human and quietly wise Katya and Fenichka.

The backdrop of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, and the transition to the emancipation of the serfs, formed an interesting subplot for Paul Petrovich's efforts to cling to the old order of gentlemanly behavior and adherence to aristocratic customs, and his eventual need to isolate himself from the pressures of change that were so tellingly portrayed by the younger men and women.

Turgenev's marvelous descriptions of landscape and subtle behaviors were incredibly evocative of the feeling tone present in the scenes, without the need to explicitly describe each part of the scene and its behaviors and emotions (e.g., p. 19 and p.170). As I read and reread this book, I fell more and more in love with it. To my great pleasure, it was also well received by the Upton group.

Bob Brown

We began by talking about Russian literature and the nicknames and themes. It was good to hear the responses to Russian ideas and plot lines. Everyone there had something to say. We discussed character development, contrasts among the characters and how the setting enhanced the plot development. We talked about the role

of science in that period of time and how well developed the foil characters were.

I introduced Golding's essay "Thinking as a Hobby" and how it pertained to the doctor. He was a grade 2 thinker who saw all that was wrong with the world, but didn't make anything right.

Vicki Vincent

Although 13 people checked out *Fathers and Sons*, only 5 came to the discussion. I think that speaks for the lack of interest we all had in the book. Everyone present had read at least one other Russian novel, but none by Turgenev, and no one liked Turgenev's writing as well as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Pasternak. The negative reaction was due mainly to the book's lack of plot and lack of engaging characters other than perhaps Bozarov, the nihilist and central hero.

We discussed the book for an hour, but it was not a lively discussion as we've had in the past. *Fathers and Sons* created a furor when it was published in 1862 because it addresses the social/political situation of emancipating the serfs as well as the young radicals who wanted to Westernize Russia. Since we are so far removed from the time and the place, it obviously didn't move us at all. But we compared the book to *Animal Farm* and 1984 which had a stronger impression on most of us.

We discussed themes running through the novel like the generation gap, different views of love, and nihilism. We also discussed the ironic situations in the book, but found them not to be very obvious. I also gave information about how the book is a comedy in the Aristotelian sense, as well as the more obvious tragedy. The group is hoping that our final classic, *Pere Goriot*, will be more engaging.

Kay Hinton, Kemmerer

Why is *Fathers and Sons* considered a book that endures? This was the overarching question asked by one of the participants early in the discussion of Ivan Turgenev's novel. Everyone agreed that they had enjoyed reading the book. The structure of the novel was easily accessible and the language more precise and not as superfluous and flowery as our last book (Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*) nor as dated and difficult to follow as our first book (Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*). Not one of the seven people who had gathered for the Eppson Center group discussion had heard of the book before this discussion series, much less read it and everyone found the book to be a pleasant surprise.

The book read like a modern novel and reminded some of a good mystery book. So why, we wanted to know, had we not heard of the book and why was it included in the Humanities Council series. The 1862 book is often considered one of the first entirely modern novels in Russian literature. Readers in the United States are not as likely to be familiar with Turgenev's work as some of the

other Russian writers from the 1800s because his work was some of the last of that period of work to be translated into English.

Turgenev is credited with inventing the word "nihilism" and this work gives readers an in depth examination of the generation gap, and the rupture of the Russian social order in the 1830 and 1840s. Our group had an in depth discussion of this and other periods of great change in the social order. Members of the group shared their stories of either being a child (or the parent of a child) of the Sixties, memories of hearing about their great-grandmothers being marching feminists in the late 1800s, or grandmothers who bobbed their hair and refused to follow the "good Girl" rules in the 1920s. We were able to find parallels with the book and the generation gap that happens every few years and may be the answer to why the book endures. Because the Eppson Center draws multi-generational readers were able to see the gap from both sides and many angles. The group discussion also looked at the class system and we were able to tie changes in the positioning of social class with divisions in the generations. One fact about Turgenev that the group found reflected his own Bolshevism was that he was infatuated with a singer, Mme. Viardot and lived in the "west" (France) with her, her husband and children and great deal of the time. We could not decide if this reflected the mores of his time or his social rebellion.

Most of the group members had trouble with the names of the many characters. Because we read the book in translation and the names were Russian, it was difficult to follow characters when they were referred to by nicknames or the family pet name for that person. This led us to question how much influence the translator of the edition we read had influenced our enjoyment of the book. The language in *Fathers and Sons* did not feel dated and read very smoothly. We read George Reavy's translation and wondered if we would have enjoyed the book to the same degree if we read an older translation. We ended our time together discussing how the books we have read to date are all from the same period, but each from a different country. Most in the group would like to read some non-fiction from/about the same time as the books we are reading. We felt this would help us get a deeper understanding of the period.

The Eppson Center group wants to thank the Humanities Council for hearing their request for some books with a larger font or books on tape so those with vision impairments could enjoy the literature.

On October 22, 5 of us met at the Baggs library to discuss *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev. *Fathers and Sons* is a historically important novel, but it evidently wasn't a popular one among readers in Baggs. Turgenev was the first not only to represent a nihilist as his main character but also to explore the gap between the fathers of the 1840's generation and the sons of the '60's, a gap that would lead to terrorist acts and ultimately the deposition and murder of Nicholas II, last of the Romanovs', to make way for the Bolsheviks. Bazarov, Turgenev's nihilist, is scientifically minded, putting behind him old myths and

traditions, including kindness and courteous to the older generation and veneration of one's parents. Turgenev meant Bazarov to be progressive, strong and charismatic, as a letter of his to a critic friend makes clear, but I was glad to find I wasn't the only one who found Bazarov obnoxious and rude. His friend and foil, Arkady, turns out to have a much more positive and productive life, falling in love, marrying, taking over and working hard in his father's estate, as the ladies who came to discuss the book pointed out. He flowers after separating himself from Bazarov's influence. Bazarov, on the contrary dies, a victim of his scientific curiosity and typhus, a dangerous mixture. However, he was out of joint with his time; the Russian world wasn't ready for him – yet.

The slowly developing plot, the lengthy setting of scene, and the multitude of Russian-named characters were discouraging to many readers, but their thoughts about the novel were stimulating and the discussion lively. I pointed out to them that, in Russian, the title is *Fathers and Children*, yet there were no Father-daughter pairings of characters in the novel, although there were three sets of fathers and sons, plus a fatherly uncle as well. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the novel again; the last time I had read it was as an undergraduate decades ago. I liked it then, and I like it now.

Mary Karen Solomon - Baggs

Effie Briest

I began with some historical background on Germany, Prussian society and values; as well as German nationalism and unification.

For many this was their favorite book. Many felt that this book was a great book with which to end the series because it brought forth a discussion of the issues we have touched on in the previous books. They found the book to be a great synthesis of many themes from relationships within families and communities; to how societal pressures and values result in people judging, accepting or shunning those who make individual choices. We also explored just what is morality and how it has been defined, shaped and changed over time. As discussed in the other books we discussed public and private spheres and ways in which women are trapped by societal pressures, or challenge and/or break out and try to meet their needs and find identity outside of societal rules. All agreed that Insetten was not a bad guy and Effie had been betrayed by both Insetten and her parents. She was unprepared for marriage and Insetten did not protect her from Crampas; who was a sexual predator.

We had a great discussion about Effie's parents' reaction and initial rejection of Effie because of her transgressions. What is the worst thing a child can do that justifies a parent's rejection? We also discussed how society reacts to parents that support their child in choices which go against the "norm". This led to a discussion of Sheridan and acceptance of gay and lesbian children along with issues of child abuse; which unfortunately are a favorite

storyline in the Sheridan Press, as of late. We also discussed the characters in the series as a whole that are rebels and all agreed that every generation has rebels and their actions lead to changes in concepts of morality and the role of women in private and public spheres. We also discussed the "slam of the door" in the Doll's House and Effie leaving Annie behind. Could they have challenged their husbands for access to their children? What rights do fathers, mothers and grandparents have today?

This series really challenged me as a discussion leader and I had to do a great deal of work to prepare for this series. As an historian I was confident in my understanding of the "historical" context, but had a great deal of work to do in terms of literary criticism. I was so pleased that in our last session the group agreed that this series was one of the richest learning experiences and discussion of humanities issues they had engaged in; as it was for me in terms of a learning curve. The group loved the fact that the title of the series was Books that Endure and they had never heard of Effie Briest. Though they had heard of Fathers and Sons, no one had read it. They were delighted they read both books and agreed both are books that should endure. They also agreed that all the books were classic studies of human relationships and the discussions were exciting, enlightening and enriching. They felt the four books were all excellent choices and led to not only good discussions about the books individually, but we were able to make good connections between the books; as well engage in a discussion of human relationships in our world today.

Katie Curtiss, Sheridan

The EWC discussion began with a brief review of the book's plot and its characters and actions. There was considerable sympathy for Effie, and appreciation of Roswitha. I shared some historical material about the Prussian culture. This formed a backdrop for consideration of ways in which our own culture (especially Wyoming, but also U.S.) defines relationship and marriage and the ways in which pressures are exerted to heighten conformity. Contemporary lifestyle issues came up: gay and lesbian relationships, mixed marriages (ethnic, racial, religious), divorce, and abortion. And, how much reputation still plays a part in self-definition and the need for acceptance.

Bob Brown

Five of us in Afton had a vigorous discussion of Fontaine's Effie Briest. This was the last discussion of the year, so I spread out all six of the books on the table, and we began by reminding ourselves of them. This got us in the mood to find all kinds of lovely parallels, comparisons and contrasts throughout our nearly two-hour discussion. We explored how just about everyone in Fontaine's novel was under the constraint of the societal norms—with behaviors so fixed in the collective consciousness that they were ritualistic, and that hardly anyone thought to go against them. Effie's fling with Crampas was totally understandable to us, given how she had no preparation for the life that awaited her,

how Innstaten failed to protect her, and how Crampas (creep that he was) was the first person who ever courted her. We worked through our initial negative reactions towards Innstaten and Effie's parents to get some understanding of why they acted the way they did. We liked the forgiveness theme at the end—the parents realizing their mistake, Effie realizing how her husband “did the best he could,” the minister giving her a benediction of sorts. We felt sympathy for Innstaten when he realized how he'd blown it. As usual, we found all kinds of relevancies to our own lives and relationships, and some truths to take on home.

Richard Kempa, 04-04

The discussion was partially on the questions brought by the text – how free is the individual? What right does society have to place its domination on an individual? What is happiness? Is it attainable, if so, how? What becomes of individual happiness when faced with social pressures?

There was lively discussion on Frau Briest's words – “All men get on their wives' nerves.” There were mostly women in the group - only one other man besides myself - and he had some fun with this.

The book brought some discussion on the idea that all people are a composite of all their experiences.

When Effi wrote in a letter about the spring arrival of storks we talked about the migration route across the Strait of Gibraltar between the African wintering grounds and summer European grounds.

Richard Kalber, 10-03

I started the discussion with some historical background on the Prussian rise to power under Bismarck, the Franco-Prussian War and German unification under Prussian control in 1871. It seemed to me that these events were the unstated context of the novel in the same way that the Napoleonic Wars were the unstated background to Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, driving people's lives in unseen ways.

We felt that poor Effie is among the most insubstantial of characters in modern lit. Once her mother deals her off to salve an old wound with an old suitor, the poor girl hardly seems to have any initiative or life at all. And at the end she just quietly fades away. We discussed at some length these 19th century novels of adultery (along with *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, and the upcoming *Scarlet Letter*) and wondered at the anxieties of male writers at a time of redefinition of women's roles in industrial, middle class society. Present interest in the novel seems to stem from the well-known (in Europe, anyway) film by Fassbinder in 1974.

A surprisingly animated discussion. We have Ibsen's *A Doll House* next and since the text includes other plays, we agreed to also read Hedda Gabler for comparison.

Dennis Coelho

On 10/28/03 a small group of eight met to discuss Effi Briest. While I showed more enthusiasm for Fontane's novel than the group, we were still able to generate a decent discussion. I spent a little time situating the work in the European tradition, asking the class why a German novel (a Prussian one at that!) would be considered a continental classic. We spent the great majority of the evening talking about the characters -- Effi, in particular -- gender roles, and what most critics consider to be the central crux of the text: the moral/ethical values of society versus the moral/ethical values of the individual. We considered Crampas's position in the military as a symbolic "situating," and we asked questions about propriety and strict social systems. There was less enthusiasm than normal for this novel. I found that surprising, as I quite enjoyed Fontane's portrayal of a world that is foreign to me.

Clifford J. Marks

The Lusk BDG finished this year's series with Effi Briest. As a continuation of the other discussions in the series, the group considered the moral and social environments in the book: how they were intertwined, and how they influenced the relationships and behaviors. In turn, the limitations of choices for Effi as a function of the Prussian code of honor and control were discussed, and these forces' effects on Instetten, and thus on both Effi and Crampas.

I gave a brief history of Prussia and its militaristic surge for dominance in uniting Germany. The group found the most interesting part the fact that “Prussia” as a political and geographical term and identity were outlawed after WWII. This brought home the force of its code of honor, as well as its allegiance to personal status and the powerful centralized government, both of which played such a dominant role in the book.

Bob A. Brown 02-03

This session began with the background of the author and his place in German and European literature. Most disliked the book (comparing it unfavorably to the last by Ibsen). The group was particularly hostile towards the character of Instetten (and not to Crampas?), which led to a fruitful discussion of Prussian society and its values. Effi seemed to be liked by the group, who universally noted the presence of strong women in all of the books of the series (it was suggested to change the series title to something dealing with gender studies). The group found this book somewhat period bound compared to the others which seemed to have a more universal quality. Some enjoyed the illustration of Prussian values (illuminating their

husbands' backgrounds) and favorably contrasted it to French society as described in Pere Goriot. The participants enjoyed the vivid imagery, but struggled with the meaning of all the symbolism.

Erich Frankland 02-03

The Upton BDG engaged in an energetic and at times hilarious discussion of Effi Briest, with 15 participants. Each of the major characters and their values were discussed, with Effi and Innstetten naturally drawing the most interest. I provided some background on the late 19th Century Prussian pride in its military traditions, and how this provides some of the backdrop for the book, as well as some of the future German arrogance and tragedy in the first half of the 20th Century. Much more interesting was the participants' discussion regarding the reasons for the behaviors of the characters, and their relationship to the social code in which they lived. I enjoyed playing the devil's advocate, trying to portray Crampas as more than just a sexual predator (the group's consensus). They won (happily). Interestingly, the group was more sympathetic to Innstetten than was I, so again there was an opportunity to play devil's advocate. They won, though Effi's forgiving of Innstetten's behavior, as she was dying, seemed unrealistic to most.

I think the most challenging part of the discussion came when the book's issues were related to our own 20th Century lives. The group is well represented by a wide range of ages, so those of us in my bracket (the older) were able to contrast the expectations of relationships and roles (and our subsequent mistakes and disasters) when we were younger with the happily more related early expectations of the younger bracket. Needless to say, my comments about my men peers brought hoots and boos, lots of laughter, and actually had me blushing at times. It was lots of fun, and the book, which most thought more interesting than *Scarlet Letter*, generated lively discussion.

The Medicine Bow group liked this book. We talked a lot about Effie and how she reflects her upbringing, gender, and birth. We discussed the situation in which she was placed and felt an empathetic understanding. Her marriage was easy to compare with Nora's in *A Doll House*. The focus on marrying off daughters to good matches was reminiscent of *Pride and Prejudice*. The role of parents was compared with the role of parents portrayed in *Fathers and Sons*.

We discussed the moral and social environment in which the story took place, noting the restrictions on personal freedom. Of course, we brought up how this way of thinking was applied differently to men and women.

We also discussed other characters and how we come to know them (i.e., from their actions and statements). From here, we went on to discuss Fontane's writing style. We speculated on what the novel would be like if it were written by a younger person and/or a woman.

Maggie Garner

There is so much to talk about when discussing Effi Briest that our 12-member group had to just go with the big stuff. We couldn't fully unravel the meaning of the Chinaman, the crocodile on the ceiling, the sacrificial stones, and all the other plot details which obviously are not random but require a much closer reading and lengthier discussion than this setting can provide. We took a pretty careful look at the implications about the relationship between Crampas and Effi. Jenny Ingram, the project manager, was a German major and has read this book in the original language. She felt the original was much less ambiguous about the nature of the relationship, while in our translation it seemed that the two could be guilty of emotional entanglement but possibly nothing deserving of a scarlet A. By the end of our discussion of the character's personalities and the plot details (even those that were seemingly random) most of us were convinced that Fontane meant us to understand the relationship was sexual. In the end we figured it didn't matter what the two were up to exactly: the main themes dealt with expectations, blame and forgiveness. We had a fascinating bit of discussion on the keeping of secrets. The group (all women this time) agreed it would be madness to keep love letters from an affair while one was still married, as Effi did. However, many talked about keeping private diaries and journals which contain secrets just as personal, which they'd never want read by another! I gave a bit of literary background and talked about the progression of the narrator in 19th c. lit and how the writer's choice of narrative roles matters in the story telling. The group seems interested in looking at the craft of the novel, in addition to the story and humanities themes.

Julianne Couch

About 22 folks in Basin engaged in a VERY lively discussion of Effi Briest. This is a particularly animated group just on general principles, but the animation level increased considerably in the discussion. There were frequent reminders that we were reading about a social climate considerably different than the one we live in presently. They commented at length on the emphasis on social position, prestige, etc., in the books we have read so far. The effect that emphasis has had on the characters in Effi was discussed at length.

We are all glad the practice of dueling has gone out of fashion!! We had a great time with this book - there were a couple people who couldn't bring themselves to finishing the book, but all those who did thought it was great. We had varying opinions on the character of Effi, Crampas, and Innerstetten and had a great time discussing those opinions. (and what would I do if "great" weren't a word in my vocabulary?)

Norma Christensen

Fontane's major concern in the novel is personal relationships, and our discussion moved along that line.

We concluded that Effie's "indiscretion" with Crampas was simply a fling rather than a serious love affair, and that it exactly fit the adolescent behavior of Effie. Even after the marriage and the birth of her daughter, Effie never shook off her tendency to act on the emotion of the moment--that is, until the end of the book and the end of her life.

We respected Instetten's integrity. He was a good husband and provider and always considerate of Effie, but severely restricted by his Prussian ethos and code of honor. He was, indeed, incapable of love.

Little emphasis was laid on social conditions or restrictions. All the characters accepted their way and station in life without rebellion or distress. Even the twenty year difference in age between Effie and Geert did not seem that odd.

It was interesting to compare Torwald's treatment of Nora and Instetten's relationship with Effie.

Robert Lange

We loved this book for the most part. Some said Effi got what she deserved while others felt she was too young to marry and a victim of the times. We all thought the husband blew it by burning all his bridges so that she was forced into the role of the "scarlet woman." Some structural problems weakened the prose in parts, but it was a marvelous mirror to the times. It was a wonderful way to conclude this series.

Vicki Vincent

Most of the group seemed to enjoy the novel except for one, who willingly listened to others' more positive opinions of the book. We considered Thomas Mann's comment that the novel *Effi Briest* was among the 6 most significant novels ever written. None of us had ever heard of it, but we were very glad we had the opportunity and the impetus to read it. We started our discussion with a short overview of the history of the era, including discussion of the role of Bismarck in German history as well as the Franco-Prussian War, and the importance of class, order, obedience, duty, and education for the Prussian people. We located the area of Germany/Prussia/Poland on a map. From there we went on to discuss Fontane's characters. We found significant similarities between *Effi Briest* and *Nora Helmer* from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Both women were inexperienced child-wives, uneducated and powerless, who found their feminine attractiveness to be their only source of power. A clear difference that we noted was that education for Nora was a doorway out of her repressive marriage; whereas in *Effi Briest*, education was not Effi's salvation but a source of her husband's arrogance and superiority. Fontane seems to be arguing that highly educated characters contribute to Effi's fall. Effi is the natural, self-confident, risk-loving, young girl destroyed by a highly inflexible and highly structured society. We don't see her going out to improve herself through education as Nora does. Fontane was 75 years

old when he wrote the novel, and we found a number of sympathetic older men in the story who could appreciate Effi's personality without judging her. His judgment seems to be against powerful, ambitious men who hide their emotions in order to further their careers. Effi's husband, Geert, is criticized because he is always trying to improve everyone. At the end of the novel he seems to have some insight into the part he played in Effi's destruction, but his plan to live a better life includes going to Africa to try to improve those people. So in truth, he hasn't changed much at all. We all appreciated the excellent Preface to the novel, and found there much to add to our discussion. One of the questions we tackled was whether female values are vindicated against male values in this novel. The problem seemed to us more connected to the inflexibility of the Prussian culture of the time rather than anything inherently male because there are sympathetic male characters in the book. The most sympathetic male character, the chemist Gieshubler, is half Spanish (p. 46), however, so he is saved from the inflexible German characteristics. Several significant quotes from the Preface impacted our discussion. A quote from Charlotte Bronte: "Conventionality is not Morality." A quote from a character in Fontane's last novel says: "There are no such things as incontrovertible truths, and if there are, they're boring." In *Effi Briest* Pastor Neimeyer, a sympathetic male character is said to "leave everything open to doubt." In the end Fontane has Geert von Innstetten admit that the things he has valued are not really of value after all, but Fontane gives us no clear alternatives.

Seven people attended this, our last, session. We began with some comparisons to the other books, fleshing out the idea of relationship to include intimate, family, community and societal relationships, with their emotional, spiritual, sexual, financial and social aspects. Several people believed that the books in this series have endured because they dramatize and examine enduring features and predicaments of human life, especially the issue of the tension between individual desires and impulses and societal strictures. Everyone identified the fact that this book had endured without their ever having heard of it.

For some readers, *Effi Briest* was difficult because the author provides so little interpretation about what is going on, and relies so fully on the actions and statements of the characters to reveal events. While "show" not "tell" is a famous piece of advice from teachers of writing, some readers had difficulty with such a single-minded emphasis on showing.

We discussed the questions of morality in the novel. What is morality? How powerful are the forces of convention and societal standards in the face of human loneliness and desire? Everyone seemed to agree that there is truth and falseness in the two main characters. Geert is truly respectful and loving, but also distant and ambitious and somewhat patronizing. Effi is charming and energetic, but also spoiled, self-centered and basically callous to the feeling of others. As a result, there was no villain or hero. Even Crampas (one person noted the similarity to Crampus, a German word for the devil) struggles with an unhappy marriage and does offer Effi the attention, even if manipulative and designing, that she longs for. We

discussed the difficulty of transferring one's loyalty from one's family of origin to the family of marriage, and pointed out that Effie never stops being a Briest, even in the title of the book. We asked the question of whether people can change. Some believed that the characters had changed, but only in the sense of coming to terms with, and understanding more fully, their participation in the destruction of the marriage. At the same time, they seemed helpless to change.

We discussed the place of principles in human life, and the implicit values that guide all of our lives, even if we overtly espouse others. We placed the novel in its historical period, and then moved to the question of societal pressures in our own lives, and how we deal with them. We spent quite a bit of time discussing male/female relationships generally, with some people sharing some of their personal experiences. I said that my practice has taught me that, in order to have a successful intimate relationship, you have to be willing to learn a foreign language. Someone else quoted Margaret Mead, that the one thing everyone wants is to know that, if they don't come home, someone will worry about them. On that note, we concluded.

The discussion was energized and lively throughout, and was still going strong after two hours, when we had to wrap up.

Stephen Lottridge, Jackson

A Doll's House

Six of us sat down for the final discussion in the series. The issue of the feminist theme was dealt with right off the bat. The consensus was that the story was not so much about women's rights as it was about self-realization and self-awareness, about becoming fully human.

Some participants said that they had not liked any of the characters at the beginning, but changed their perceptions in the course of the play. One woman said that Nora drove her crazy with her jittery flightiness. There was an extended discussion of the presentation of Nora as a piece of fluff, in contrast to her taking on the responsibility of a debt to take care of her husband's health. Nora was proud of how she managed to pay off the debt, demonstrating that she had the capability of acting like an adult.

One participant is steeped in the theater and provided us with great insights into how a production shapes an audience's perception of the play. He pointed out that the truly great playwrights -- Ibsen included -- are the ones who have a deep understanding of people and what motivates them. One man said he thought the play could be described as a "sit trag," comparable to a "sit com", because it invites the audience into a home, a domestic setting, and lets us watch people working out their relationships. All agreed that this play could be staged with a contemporary setting and retain its meaning. It might even have a similar impact on a contemporary audience as

it did on Ibsen's original audience. Its theme, in other words, endures.

Finally, we turned to considering Nora's decision to leave. One woman could not understand how she could leave her children, but another pointed out that Nora's relationship with the children was that of playmate, not mother. Perhaps she would return one day as a fully developed woman and reclaim them. I thought Nora's decision to leave was too abrupt and unconvincing. But another woman said that it was the decision that a child would make -- Nora having been kept in a kind of perpetual childhood first by her father and then her husband -- impetuous and without thought for the consequences.

Everyone enjoyed reading the play and agreed that the series was an interesting one.

I began with general information on Ibsen, realism, and a literary and historical background. Discussion points included the title - *Doll's House* and *A Doll House* and who was playing at marriage. We discussed the resounding slamming of the door and Ibsen's point of view - human rights versus women's rights. As we entered into a more particular discussion of characters we examined the value systems presented in the play. We discussed "middle class" values and marriage and who was trapped in a social value system, and in what ways. The discussion also examined the study of human relationships as we explored what middle class values mean today, as well as Nora's decision to leave her marriage and family. Many readers had no sympathy for Nora, rather their concern was for the children. We also discussed the juxtaposition of Nora and Torvald, a marriage in crisis; versus Ms. Lynde and Krogstad and their emerging connection. As the evening drew to a close we discussed how materialism and social pressures still exist in our society today. Fortunately we have two "20 ish" members in our group. In this discussion the male "20 ish" voice was able to attend and he provided great insight and thoughts as to his "generation's" concerns and attitudes about marriage as an institution as well as materialism in our society. He was eloquent in his disclaimer that he did not speak for "a generation"; but his comments added to our discussion of how and why books endure in terms of "classic studies of human relationships". In wrapping up the evening we made some connections to (or the lack thereof) to *Fathers and Sons* and *Pride and Prejudice*. This provided us with a good discussion of the historical context in terms of when each book was written and how history and literature provide a context to understand then, and now.

I ended the discussion by presenting some historical and literary background to our next book, *Effie Briest*.

Katie Curtiss
Sheridan Wyoming

I began with some background biographical information about the author and his writings. The group saw Nora as

a developing character that grew through her experiences in the play. In addition to the obvious function of each primary character in the plot of play, the ladies saw these characters as archetypal personalities with realistic human conditions which timelessly endure even in today's world.

Comparing and contrast between the characters of Kristine and Nora, Rank and Krogstad, Nora and Krogstad, Nora and Torvald, Christine and Krogstad, etc. animated the discussion and helped guide the group to see common themes and discuss pertinent issues. Most sympathized with Nora who was treated like a "doll" by her condescending, self-serving husband who regarded her as his pet, possession, or play thing. Also they saw in Nora a victim whose flaws, adolescent behaviors, and deceptions forced her to confront herself and the abusive realities of her existence. While they struggled with the idea that she could really leave her children; ultimately, they felt that her character developed a valuable new self-awareness, independence, and individuality.

Drawing from their own experiences, the group spent considerable time discussing this play's essential themes:

- "real" marriages versus abusive relationships
- consequences of deceit
- misplaced value in public appearances and personal social standing
- selfishness of only serving one's personal wants and needs.

Steve Beck, Cokeville

It was a small group; however, those who showed up were enthusiastic about Ibsen's "A Doll House." We began by reading sections of ACT I and discussing the relationship between Nora and Torvald. Most admitted that they were unprepared for how childish Nora is here. They expected her to be a dowdy, submissive, even beaten down wife (not literally, of course). They were surprised by her level of energy and how truly childish she is--how she sneaks the macaroons, talks about spending money before they have it, and answers to, with cheer, Torvald's pet names for her. Torvald, puffed up and full of himself, spends ACT I gently admonishing his "little lark," confident in his role as husband/father to Nora. The group noted how perfectly both characters conform to social expectations of the day and how some of those roles are still played today and reinforced by communities (hint, hint). They further wondered what would move one or both of these characters out of their mutually crippling relationship. They both seem fairly content. As readers, we may see and understand the lack of respect and integrity in their relationship, but what will get them to see it?

We combed through for large and small conflicts that would push Nora to a conscious realization of the power relations within her marriage. Certainly Torvald's tantrum at the end of the play tells her and us all she needs to know; however, a many clues are provided through her conversations with Mrs. Linde, Krogstad and Dr. Rank. Rank's scene with Nora (when she considers asking him

to loan her the money) was short but important to her understanding of the role of money in her relationship with Torvald. As one member said, "Every scene, every line contributes to her awakening, pushing her forward to suicide or walking out the door." The more we read, the more we appreciated, not only the characters and plot, but the structure of the play.

We discussed the ideas and themes of moral sickness, heredity, pride, deceit, and more. Of course, after all the analysis, we had to deal with the problem most readers have with Ibsen's tale: How could Nora leave her children? This is a difficult question because no matter how you explain it and how much "sense" it makes, few can see themselves doing it. One member, however, told that she walked out of her house/marriage on night, with fifty cents in her pocket. She took the children, she explained, but what she wanted to tell us was that if she had thought about it—I mean sat down and considered what she was doing and all the consequences—she may have never done it. But, she added, I just knew we had to get out. She's still glad she did what she did.

Carol Bell, Cody

A small group met to discuss A Doll House, and engaged each other in considerations of the characters and their behaviors. After examining the value systems present in the play, they discussed the value systems present during their own childhoods, and also in their marriages. There was then a more general consideration of and reflection upon the role of women in our local and national governments and, though noting the changes over our own lifetimes, how our personal and cultural underpinnings of patriarchal authority still influence our society and us. It was interesting for me to observe a shift, from an initial consideration of the drama as being unique to its time and place, to the group members seeing it as speaking to and challenging them about their own time and place. The group's discussions are increasingly exploring the many relationships each of us deals with: our selves; our interpersonal relationships; and our relationship to our culture and its manifestations in local, regional, and national settings.

The discussion ended with Nora's "I'll try to discover who's right, the world or I." (p.111)

Bob Brown

None of the participants completed reading the forward. They read the plays. General comment was "I almost didn't read the book because of the forward." They did not want to discuss the forward and were more interested in Ibsen's life.

We spent as much time on that as we did on the plays themselves.

Although the author was writing about life in his country a century ago all agreed that human personalities have not changed from country to country or over the years.

They spent time at the end talking about the series as a whole and picking one for next year.

Richard Kalber, 03-29-04

Twenty degree temps and high winds reduced our numbers to a half-dozen. I was five minutes tardy myself due to cars off the road (not mine) between PB and Cheyenne. I started with a few comments about the eccentric life of Ibsen himself drawn from the description in Paul Johnson's biographies in *Intellectuals* (Harper, 1988). I had asked everyone to read both this play and Hedda Gabler for comparison but most of the group had read all of the plays!

We tried to place the issues of these women's lives in the context of similar fictional biographies in *Effie Briest* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Pere Goriot*. One wag suggested that the series is profoundly misnamed (i.e. "Classic" Studies Human Relationship) and should instead say something of the dysfunctional cultural bondage of females in industrialized 19th century societies. Nora and Hedda and Effie form a trio of northern Baltic Europeans in the 1880's, a time of intense class status issues which always involved control of women, to an extent almost mirrored in fundamentalist societies today. In many ways, these women's lives are all the same tragic story: Effie withers away, Nora considers suicide but runs away, and Hedda does kill herself, in each case the only real choice each had.

Hester Prynne (*Scarlet Letter*, our next and last text) should feel right at home with these ladies.

Dennis Coelho, February 2004

We discussed the two titles: *A Doll's House* and *A Doll House* and decided that *A Doll House* more accurately described both Helmers, who play at their marriage. One of our readers has played Mrs. Linde in *A Doll's House* and was most helpful in sharing her insight into all of the characters and in describing how the play was staged. I shared background on Ibsen. We discussed each of the characters, the plain language that was a hallmark of Ibsen, and the main theme of the play, concluding that Ibsen was making a point about the need for every human to develop to her/his fullest potential. We argued over Nora's ability to leave her children. How was this possible? Did this make the ending unrealistic? Some pointed out the time in which the play took place, Nora's having been raised by a nanny, and the fact that she knew the children would be in that nanny's hands as facts supporting her decision. Others felt she would not have left the children with Torvold. We debated the role of the doctor, which characters evolved and which did not, and the extent to which this play has a feminist message. We had no problem seeing *A Doll's House*, its view of marriage and

the question of individual fulfillment, as a play that endures.

We briefly reviewed the series as a whole and concluded that it had achieved its purpose - to examine human relationships. Simply stated the books and play endure because they all deal with subjects as alive today as when the books were written. We were especially glad to read Balzac And Fontane, authors most of us had not read.

Barbara Gose

The group enjoyed the use of symbolism by Ibsen (hide n seek game, Christmas tree) and spent time discussing the struggle between public and private images and how that affected the institution of marriage and the expectations regarding love and family. Nora was either regarded as a heroic figure on a path of self-discovery or a shallow, manipulative woman searching for a new relationship to control. Everyone enjoyed the "realness" of the characters who had human fragilities and flaws. The gender issues raised by the play provoked discussion and also led to a determination that many of the same issues are relevant in today's world. The lack of attention paid to the children drew some concern, which also was the case when the play first played out before audiences. Nora's exclusion from the norms of society (church, morals, etc.) by the men in her life was also a matter of discussion (though she was also party to the continuation of these lapses?). Interesting discussion of the relevance and different meanings of the divergent titles assigned to the play (*A Doll House* vs. *A doll's House*). Everyone concluded that Nora was a survivor and would do fine away from the Helmer home, but they were less certain about Torvald and his ability to function in upper society after her departure.

Tammy Frankland 02-03

The Medicine Bow group very much liked the play and could see its universal and timeless appeal. One person said that if a few names and details were changed, then it could be talking about today. We talked a lot about the need for individuals to have freedom and how Nora could not have that freedom in her marriage. One participant said that she last read the play when she was in 7th grade during the Depression. At that time, she couldn't understand how anyone would leave a house that had bread on the table. When she read the play this time, she was angry because Nora didn't take some of her husband's money because the money belonged to her too. Her comments led to discussion of the effects our lives and our times have on the reading of a text. I asked the group to cast the play, and they chose June Allyson to play Nora. We had a wonderful discussion that covered marriage, obligations, personal growth and freedom.

Maggie Garner

The participants took off from an initial question about the character of Nora and Torvald and explored the relationship of all the major characters to all the others. Surprisingly, we did not spend much time on the "women's rights" theme, but went beyond that to a discussion of the defects which all the characters shared and which brought them into conflict with each other.

We concluded that selfishness and self-centeredness and a focus on material things was the root cause of the conflicts. No character was exempt from this fault. I think this is what Ibsen meant when he said that the play was not about oppressed women.

Of course we walked about marriage relationships and whether such rifts could be repaired and what the best course of action might be in any case.

Robert Lange

The Upton BDG had an interesting and lively discussion of *A Doll House*. I had the 17 group participants divide into four groups and "assigned" each group a principal character (or characters), with the instructions to spend time discussing the values and behaviors of each, and then to present their character and their group's point of view about the character, to the rest of the group. The rest of the group was then instructed to take an opposing point of view about the character being presented. The characters assigned were Nora, Torvald, Krogstad, and both Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank. I was surprised at how energetic were the small groups' discussions, and after about 15 minutes (I had expected maybe five or so) I finally asked them to wrap up and "present."

The ensuing discussions were insightful, challenging, and fun. The presenting groups without exception were thoughtful and forceful in their presentations, and though one or two of us perhaps overdid our assigned role as devil's advocate (I confess, though I had a hard time selling the "doll house" of the role expectations of the culture on Torvald), the group process was still going strong at 8:30, the usual wrap up time. I had been apprehensive about how animated a discussion might be possible with a play, but this group certainly reassured me about this. I look forward to group responses to next year's new series on six dramas.

We had a rollicking discussion of *A Doll's House*. Much bantering around about the role of men and women in that society and our inevitable conclusion that we (mostly women) would probably not have survived in that milieu. Or the people with whom we'd have had to associate wouldn't have. It was a lot of fun and several of the members had not read plays before so we had a good discussion about reading plays - all liked doing that and, in fact, one person who had not read a play before read all of those in the book. She was fascinated. We had a great time and left with sides drawn, so to speak, about whether the husband would or could mend his ways. There was also much speculation about whether Nora really could make it or not.

Norma Christensen

We discussed the play in light of women's roles then & now, civic/institutional conflicts, then & now, and ethics, for which a then & now contrast doesn't seem to work. The group liked the play, mostly, although we did poke a bit of fun at some of Ibsen's technical hiccups. It may not have been fair to do this, but I taught the play recently to an Intro to Lit class, and I shared with the group some of my student's public comments and reactions. It was interesting to reflect on the fact that our group felt Nora did the right thing in leaving her home, painful though it was. By contrast, nearly all my recent Lit students (age approx. 20) felt that under no circumstances should a woman abandon her children. We wondered if the difference was mostly due to the age & life experience in the two groups, or if it was because many of the younger students could well be products of broken homes and related to the children in the family much more than to the adults. Who knows. Anyway, it was an interesting and thoughtful discussion, and ended the series on a positive note.

Julianne Couch

This was a wonderful discussion. I love Ibsen and found that all but two of those in attendance did, too. We began by giving personal insights and reactions to the play. I introduced background about Ibsen and the themes of his works. We then discussed his messages in this work. One woman hit the nail on the head when she defended Nora's decision by saying that she had come to realize that the most important thing a woman can do for herself is to learn who she is before she tries to give herself as a wife and mother.

All participants recognized the demon Victorian male in Torvald and his desire for the perfect "trophy wife." All participants saw modern parallels in "*A Doll's House*" to our day and the discussion ended on a very positive note.

What was interesting to me was that most participants read more than one of the plays in the collection.

Vicki Vincent

During the discussion we looked at some of the major themes in the play. Nora's exit at the end has been called the most famous door slam in theater history. Whether she should have left or should have stayed interested our group. They were very sympathetic to her marital situation, but most felt that she shouldn't have given up so readily. Our problem was that none of us believed that Torvald would change if Nora stayed. We compared her leaving to the same situation today where Nora would have asked Torvald to leave, would have kept the children, kept the apartment, demanded child support and alimony, and enrolled in the local community college. Ibsen seems to set us up to accept Nora's departure by including old Anne, the nanny who raised Nora and now takes care of

Nora's children. We feel, as Nora does, that the children will be OK because Anne will be there for them. We would not support her leaving if Torvald would be raising the children himself. We also realize that in the background is Dr. Rank, who has admitted to loving Nora and is now on his deathbed. Through several hints in the play, Ibsen leaves us suspecting that Dr. Rank will leave his money to Nora, thereby smoothing her way somewhat. We discussed the fact that Ibsen declined to call himself an advocate for the new "emancipated woman." He said that he was for the underdog. If men were down, then he would try to bring them up. Despite his claims to the contrary, 19th century women saw Ibsen as their spokesman. We talked about the response of audiences who watched the play in 1879. Some people got up and walked out at the outrageous behavior of Nora. Some directors insisted that Ibsen change the ending and have Nora stay and try to work it out. We saw elements of emotional abuse in Torvald's behavior. Nora says, "Torvald is so absolutely fond of me that he wants me absolutely to himself, as he says. At first he used to seem almost jealous if I mentioned any of the dear folk at home, so naturally I gave up doing so. But I often talk about such thing with Dr. Rank because he like hearing about them." This called to our minds the kind of isolating behavior an emotionally abusive spouse uses to control a partner. The control Torvald has over Nora is so important to his ego that we concluded that he could never change unless she left. So she must. I brought up a critical article by Paul Rosefeldt in which he analyses the father-figures in the play, concluding that every father figure is a flawed human being in some way. Ibsen's father died of alcoholism early in Ibsen's life and left the family to fend for themselves. Ibsen himself fathered a child out of wedlock. These behaviors are mirrored in the various father-figures in *A Doll's House*: Torvald, Dr. Rank's father, Nurse Anne's child's father, Mrs. Linde's father, Mrs. Linde's husband, Krogstad, and Nora's father are either absent or flawed in some way. So while on the surface this play appears to be about mothers, the underlying message is about fathers.

Karen Love, Rock Springs

The discussion was lively and engaged. We began with someone's observation that Nora's transformation seemed very abrupt, which led us to a discussion of the difference between the text of a play and a prose narrative, in which motivation and history may be presented more fully. Several people identified ways in which Nora's transformation had been in preparation throughout the play, and that actors could make that clear in a way that the text alone could not. That led to the question of whether Nora's transformation was credible. We spent a good deal of time looking closely at the last section of the last scene. In general, people believed that it was Torvald's selfish response to getting Krogstad's letter that clarified matters for Nora. That led to a discussion of the psychology of the characters: how their personal histories had formed their characters; the relationship between "role" and genuine experience; the relationship between social expectation and personal desire. People related the experiences of the characters to their own experience, and the difficulty of honesty in relationships.

To some, it seemed that the ending was more a sociopolitical thesis than a truth arising out of the characters, but further discussion led most people to see it as both. I mentioned that many viewers had seen this play as a feminist manifesto. In general, people saw it as more complex than that, with truths and falsehoods on both sides of all the confrontations. We discussed the image of the doll house, with its social and familial traditions, and the ways in which Torvald and Nora were equally trapped and therefore equally "dolls."

The question of whether people are, in fact, capable of change occupied much of the discussion. While opinions varied, many believed that, while we have a few basic struggles throughout our lives, how we deal with them and how we conduct ourselves in relation to others, may change. The question of whether Nora ought to have left or not did not engage the group as it evidently had some other groups. People did not think Ibsen presented the issue so much in terms of morality as psychology, despite Torvald's deperate references to morality and religion. Most people did not believe that anything fundamental between Nora and Torvald would have changed had they stayed together. Feeble though it may have been, there was more hope for change in the separation.

We also discussed the other characters, especially Kristine and Nils and their acceptance of interdependence in relationship, down and out, and flawed, as they may have been. Discussion of Dr. Rank led to the larger theme of the sins of the fathers being visited on their children. While his was literally fatal physical illness as a result of the physical sins of his father, all the main characters suffered from the absence or actions of their fathers.

At the end, we contrasted and compared this work to the five before it, from the point of view of the tension between individual wants and needs and the strictures of family and society, the destructive effects of actions motivated by fear and shame, and the questions of what constitutes strength and fortitude in the face of adversity.

Stephen Lottridge, Jackson

Nora Helmer probably would not have left her husband if *The Doll House* had been set in Laramie, Wyoming on the afternoon the reading group met at the Eppson Center. She would have waited for a warmer day. Only three members braved the 3° F weather and the brisk wind to attend the group discussion. The center had a cozy room and hot tea and coffee to award the brave souls who bundled up and made the trek.

The first part of our discussion focused on Nora's ah-ha moment of discovery. Torvald Helmer believes the return of Krogstad's note saved him, and in turn Nora. This is the end for Nora who was waiting for the "miraculous thing," the moment when her husband would realize the sacrifices she has made and share the responsibility. When he does not, Nora sees her life for the first time with clarity – and knows she cannot continue with the status quo. In the play, the story had moved quickly through the

climactic scene. Our group returned to the play and reread the section aloud.

This gave us the opportunity to give each sentence a close reading. We could relate the dialogue to early sections of the text that gave the reader clues about what was to come. This discussion flowed into an analysis of the main characters, their actions and what each character contributed to the play.

We looked at pairs of characters. Nora and Kristine who each wanted what the other had and by the end of the play had switched their social position. Dr. Rook and Krogstad, who symbolized physical and mental health problems. Nora and Krogstad, who had a similar relationship/view of society. The both went against the social norms for what they believed was morally correct. Torvald and Rook, who were both a bit of show. And, of course, Nora and Torvald, who originally came together through Nora's father and fall apart because Nora is like her father in some ways. Nora is stronger than Torvald's and she is not willing to continue in a marriage where she is only superficially valued.

Readers learn that Nora and Torvald had not communicated in their marriage. Our group looked at the implications that the couples lack of communication had in their marriage. Torvald lived in a fantasy, Nora lied and undermined her safety by looking at reality. One of the reasons the group felt the play had endured the test of time is the lesson to be learned about marital communication.

We also talked about how the book has been popular in Women's Studies and seen as a statement for women's rights. Ibsen did not see the play this way. Rather, he saw the play as a statement for human rights. Our ending thought was the loss of freedom and value for one gender can place the burden of responsibility on the other. Neither side really gains. Communication may be the only venue that can save anyone from his or her own weaknesses.

For our last session this year, five of us, a smaller number than usual, met in the library at Baggs to discuss Ibsen's "A Doll House," on Friday, November 19th. More of our readers had read the book but were unfortunately out of town. The weekend before Thanksgiving is a busy weekend! We had a good discussion, nevertheless. I gave a little background about Ibsen, and pointed out that the basic plot of the play was taken from a situation of friends of his, the Kielans; however, when Laura Kielan's forgery was revealed, her furious husband committed her to a mental hospital. In the play, Nora at least receives freedom with her new self-knowledge and desire to become a real woman. We all agreed that Ibsen's view of marriage was provocative and advanced for his time.

In *A Doll House*, Nora believes herself to be a secret heroine, savior of her husband's life, though he treats her as his pet, his "little squirrel," and she happily plays along. She is determined to keep her role unknown to him, since it would humble him and lead him, in return, to sacrifice

himself for her. When the secret comes out, Nora is horrified by her husband's anger & frustration. She realizes how inadequate her view of men, her husband, and reality in general is, since she has never been educated, never been on her own in the world to learn to understand it. And so, before she can become a good wife and mother, she must rectify that by going into the world on her own to earn a living and to learn about herself. When the play came out in the late 1870's, it created quite a furor, forcing its audience to look at their own marriages. In Germany, Ibsen was told that his play would fail, as the population would certainly be offended by it. For it to be produced, he was forced to write an alternate ending for "A Doll House," one in which Nora, in the final scene, after her argument with Helmer, her husband, is taken to see her children and collapses weeping with her arms around them – and the curtain comes down! Ibsen was furious about this and to the end of his life called the alternative ending a disgrace to the original play.

Since a couple of our readers had read all four of Ibsen's plays in the collection, *A Doll House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*, we broadened our discussion a little to include some of Ibsen's other heroines. One lady who had read all four of the plays was impressed with the strength of the heroines: she pointed out accurately that Ibsen's central women characters are strong, smart and usually control the men. She also mentioned how different the plays were in character, plot and topic; Ibsen definitely didn't write the same play many times, but recreated many different thoughts and plots. This is certainly true of Ibsen: similarities can be found between characters, but each play's concept and plot are entirely different!

Mary Karen Solomon -Baggs