

Investigating the Impact of Digitalization on Contemporary Literary Culture in Tom Gauld's *Revenge of the Librarian*

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Abstract

The emergence of technology and digitalization has transformed every aspect of contemporary society, whether these changes are positive or negative, they affect the established structure of the society to perceive the different traditional values and systems in a unique way. Tom Gauld's graphic novel *The Revenge of the Librarian* masterfully employs satire and humor to explore the prevailing tension between the emerging dominance of digital technology and traditional form of books. Through his perfectly illustrated minimalist art style and witty commentary, he endeavors to provide a nuanced critique of the digital transformation of libraries and the enduring charm of traditional books. This paper examines Gauld's use of satirical approach to unveil the contemporary absurdities and complications created by the rapidly spreading dominance of digital media while celebrates the irreplaceable sensory and nostalgic value of traditional books. Moreover, it focuses to highlight the significance of the traditional library experience and endeavors to emphasize the necessity of these serene experience as a refuge in a highly distracted contemporary digital world. It highlights the nostalgic appeal of the novel towards the glorious heritage of the traditional literary culture juxtaposed with the present dominated by the consumption of digital formats. It endeavors to present as a poignant and entertaining reflection on the evolving role of libraries and the enduring power of books in a rapidly changing technological landscape. This paper aims to highlight the critical role of satire and humor in Gauld's work, illustrating how these literary devices effectively unravel the complex dynamics between technology and traditional books. By blending humor with insightful commentary, Gauld invites readers to reconsider the value of physical books and the importance of libraries in preserving cultural and intellectual heritage.

Keywords: Automated; Digital; Fragmented; Narrative; Technology.

Introduction

Tom Gault is a Scottish cartoonist and illustrator born in 1976 at Aberdeen, Scotland. His works are widely known for their deadpan comedy, flat dialogues, humor and impressive characterization. He is one of the renowned graphic novel writers of the contemporary era who constantly surprises the readers with his sharp, wittiest and minimalistic illustrative art to unveil the dormant issues of the society. His novels are composed of beautifully and perfectly drawn illustrations which are punctuated with his signature brand of humor, hitting high and low.

Revenge of the Librarian (2023) explores and particularly focuses on the pretentious procrastinating novelist, the commercial mercenary of the dispassionate editor, the willful obscurantism of the vainglorious poet. It contains even more serious issues and aspects of contemporary society than *Mooncop* (2016), *Baking with Kafka* (2017) and *The Department of Mind-Blowing Theories* (2020) written by the inimitably excellent Gault.

Discussion

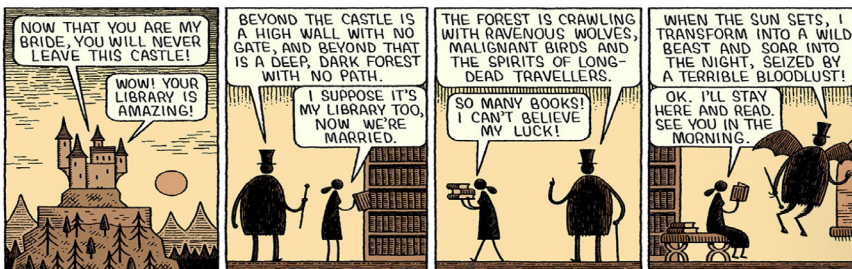
Gault has used the elements of humor and satire to expose and critique the contemporary library system and its increasing over-reliance on technology. He highlights the rapid transformation of libraries with the emergence of the digital media in the contemporary time. Similarly, Alberto Manguel in his book *A Reader on Reading* (2011), raises his concern about the changing reading habits because of digital dominance as: "The constant flow of information through digital media is fundamentally changing our ways of reading, our relationships with time, and our relationship with each other" (223). The overflow of excessive information has curtailed the span of human attention and patience one required to read a physical book. People demand rapid information in a short span of time without paying much attention, the best example of reading without paying attention is audio books which have been used as a medium of passive reading while doing something else of more importance or leisure.

The dominance of technology and rapid digitalization in every sphere of human life has inculcated the behavioral changes which further affect their reading habits. Jonathan Franzen in his essay "Why Bother?" highlights the role of digital media in transforming the reading habits of the contemporary generation as: "The big question about the technology is, is it making us happier? Is it making us better able to read deeply? No. The reading experience that you have on the screen is much more akin to surfing the net than to reading a book" (149). In the present age dominated

by Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, humans have lost the patience to read books which demand higher levels of concentration and more time to comprehend them. Gauld's meticulously drawn illustrations portray the postmodern absurdities and explore the clash between modern technology, digitalization and traditional books. The novel is full of elements and themes which evokes nostalgia for conventional libraries and physical books. The focus of the creator is to re-establish the relevance of physical books over digital ones and traditional libraries over contemporary digital libraries. He highlights the emotional and sensory experiences produced through the reading of physical books as compared to the consumption of digitally available formats.

Gauld has subverted the traditional stereotype of librarians to portray them as empowered and assertive. He focuses on the symbolic significance of the librarian as a defender of cultural and intellectual heritage. Gauld has used his illustrations to provide social commentary on contemporary issues such as digital overload, the creative process, and the role of libraries. The creator has beautifully depicted the Digital Dilemma in the novel; it examines the tension between physical books and digital media as a major threat to literary culture and implications of this tension for the future of libraries and reading habits. Gauld humorously portrays the struggles and triumphs of writers, artists, and librarians. It also focuses on the depiction of literary culture and the often-pretentious nature of the literary community. Gauld has portrayed libraries as places of both solitude and community and how this dual role reflects broader societal needs and challenges.

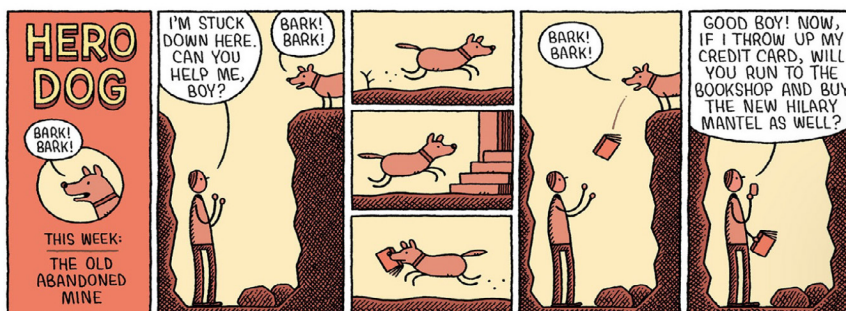
In the below given panels, the creator has humorously depicted the value of books in ones' life, their power to make one forget about the tumultuousness of the outside world. In the first panel, a castle is illustrated from a wide-far perspective and highlights the dismal and bleak background of the scene.



Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 1

The focus of the creator is to depict the importance of libraries through the dialogues without showing any character in the scene. One of the characters who is married, take his bride into the castle and says; "Now that you are my bride, you will never leave this castle". His bride is totally unbothered on being quarantined in a castle by her husband, on the contrary, she has been drawn as amazed to see the library in the castle and exclaimed in wonder "Wow! Your library is amazing". Even in the rest of the above given panels, the dialogues between the two characters highlight the value of traditional books, libraries and reading as a source of comfort and relief in the adverse situations of one's life. The traditional books have the capacity to engage one to the deepest level of concentration and teleport the readers to another world to provide a relaxed feeling.

Though the wife is in confinement and the husband is narrating different fearful and odd things to her, yet she is entirely engrossed in enjoying the presence of books, carefree of the negativity around her. She ignored her husband's instruction and expressed her joy of being in the library as: "So many books! I can't believe my luck"! In another panel, where her husband is shown as warning her about, "When the sun sets, I transform into a wild beast...", she looks untouched by the outer world and says; "Ok, I'll stay here and read. See you in the morning". Through the depiction of the library scene, the creator has highlighted the value and importance of books in one's life. They have the power to provide comfort and peace to the readers amidst the hectic lifestyle of contemporary life. On the page number fourteen, the creator has depicted the similar theme through the illustrations of a man falling in a pit, calling someone to help him out.



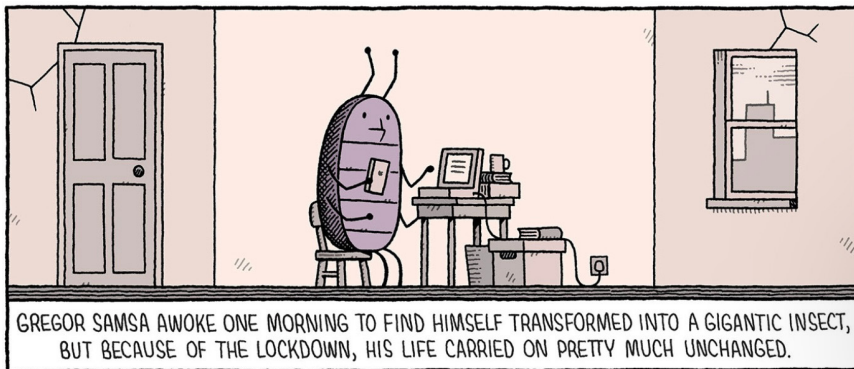
Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 14

In the first panel, the dog is portrayed as "Hero Dog", though it did not save the man from the deep trench. The motive of the creator is to depict

the need to understand the basic human need of being around the books. The dog that provides a book to the man in the trench is shown as a hero just because it understands the need of man when calling upon for help. In the second panel, a man is illustrated as in a trench, asking for help to a dog as: "I'm stuck down here. Can you help me, boy? Instead of bringing someone to help him out, he brings a book to make him feel better in a difficult situation. Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird* (1995) writes about the value of reading in life as:

Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: They feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship. (76)

This increasing habit of staying indoors results in decreasing reading habits and less interest in visiting the libraries to read books among the youth. With changing reading culture, various characters, plots and the entire books have been losing their relevance in the context of contemporary time.



Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 2

Gauld has humorously satirized the state of libraries in contemporary society through the reference of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. He highlights the

negligence of books over other social media platforms and the change in people's habit of attending libraries. Nail Gaiman in his essay "Reading and Obligations", published in the book *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction* (2017), warns about the decreasing reading habit among the young people as; "I worry that here in the 21st century, the number of people who are reading for pleasure seems to be dwindling. Especially among the young. I worry that this means that fewer people will be empathetic, more people will be at the mercy of whatever grifters and charlatans can push their way" (25). Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is considered as one of the classic books and its story of Gregor Samsa being transformed into a metamorphosis is widely famous among the readers of books. The reference is used to criticize the contemporary trend of staying at homes, busy with gadgets. The protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* faces devastating changes in his life as he goes out in the form of a large insect, Gauld placed the character of Samsa amidst the contemporary settings to display that his life would not change much in the modern time as everyone is confined in his homes. He symbolizes the lockdown as a general situation of contemporary time society, where everyone prefers to remain at home, untouched by the affairs of the outer world. The below given panels perfectly highlight the present situations of vacant libraries due to peoples' disinterest in coming out of their homes to visit the book places.

THE BOOKSHOP CAT AND THE PANDEMIC



Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 9

Gauld humorously addresses the evolving nature of libraries in the digital age. He presents the traditional images of libraries as quiet sanctuaries of knowledge juxtaposed with modern challenges such as digitalization and budget cuts. Cliff Guren, Thad McIlroy and Steven Sieck in their report "COVID19 and Book Publishing: Impacts and Insights for 2021", published in the journal *Publishing Research Quarterly*, write; "Library eb-

ook aggregator Overdrive reported that, by the summer of 2020, weekly library ebook lending had increased by nearly 50%". Their concern over the decreasing attendance in libraries is apparent in the report. The rise of digital media and increasing addiction of youth to social media played a vital role in the downfall of reading habits and libraries. Naomi S. Baron in her article "Reading in a Digital Age" (2017), analyzes the contribution of digital platforms in the decreasing reading habits in the present time. She writes, "Reading on screen encourages browsing and scanning, key-word spotting, one-time reading, and non-linear reading.

This way of reading discourages the mental discipline to think abstractly about the text". Gauld hits upon the similar theme through his beautifully and simply drawn illustrations in *Revenge of the Librarian*. In the above given panels, the bleakness of modern libraries has been reflected through the depiction of a cat resting on the bookshelves of the library. The creator has aptly chosen the cat to symbolize the desertedness of libraries in present time. Cat is considered as one of the most attentive and swift among the animals, it frequently gets disturbed by even the smallest of the human movement. The creator has used the illustrations of the cat as care freely sleeping among the books to highlight the emptiness of libraries, as there is no one to disturb, it is resting peacefully in the library.

Gauld frequently satirizes the world of high literature and its sometimes-pretentious culture. He makes fun of the self-importance of certain authors, the absurdity of literary trends and the often comically serious world of literary critique. This theme resonates with readers who are familiar with the literary community's quirks and contradictions. In the below given panel, the creator unveils the changing practices in the field of writing and prevailing dearth of traditional values in the writers required to compose good books.



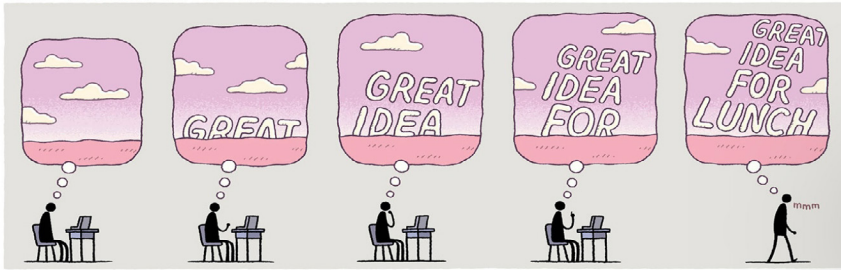
Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 5

The creator has used humor to satire the writing as a profession in the contemporary fast-moving societies. The dedication and concentration needed to be a writer is very rare among the current writers, as most of them are interested in writing short forms of content like Vlogs, articles etc. Writing has always been considered a noble and challenging profession but the rise of social and digital media has made it more daunting. The rapidly evolving nature of publishing and proliferation of social media platforms have created stormy situations for the budding writers to succeed amidst the contemporary distractions. Austin Kleon in the book *Steal like an Artist* (2014), highlights the issues faced by the writers in the contemporary time as; "The biggest challenge for writers today is not the lack of ideas, but the abundance of distractions" (15). The emergence of technology and digital media platforms have made content abundantly available which leads to a saturation in the market. It has made it hard and difficult for the new writers to stand out in the rush of contemporary content creators.

Gauld has satirized the contemporary generation of writers who primarily lack the concentration and vision to explore the outer world for creating good books. In the page no five, he sarcastically mocks the writer who is writing about the outer world, exploring the natural elements to provide a variety to her writing. The two birds have been illustrated as sitting on a tree and discussing a writer who is looking outside the window while writing something on the laptop. The focus of the creator is to highlight the lacking necessary vision and connection with nature through illustrating two birds saying; "Judging by the amount of time that she spends staring out of the window at us, she's either a very committed ornithologist or a very unfocused writer". As most of the contemporary writers used to sit at home and produce artificial content untouched by nature, someone looking out of the window at the birds is depicted to mock the current generation of writers.

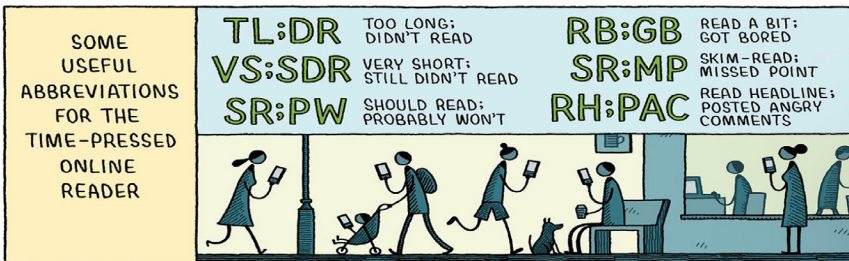
The emergence of digital media has given birth to a culture of instant gratification, where content creators are expected to write instantly, quickly and constantly. The demand of instantly generated content results in the compromise of quality. Gauld's focus is also to showcase the decreasing quality of writers in the present time; their content lacks the depth and variety of classic works. In the below given panels, the creator has perfectly illustrated the deficient interest and perseverance among the writers of the present era. It has been depicted that writers who are about to write something great often get distracted or demotivated by the prevailing external distraction. They do not possess the patience and motivation which is needed to attain the higher level of ideas and imagination to create great works.

THE WRITER AT WORK...



Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 10

Nowadays, the focus of the writers is on quantity over quality to remain in the race of competition. The constant fear of trailing behind in competition has forced the writers to ignore the quality, meaningfulness and craftiness of the work. Sean Morey in his book *The Digital Writers* (2017), states: “The digital age has brought about a fundamental shift in the way writers work, and it has also brought about a fundamental shift in the way writers are perceived” (45). He talks about the different changing aspects of writing and writers’ life in the rapidly changing contemporary society. Similarly, Gauld’ *Revenge of the Librarian* delves into changing aspects of writing as a profession, but in a satirizing and humorous tone to expose the prevailing downgrade trends in the area. His concern is to reflect on the difficulties and challenges faced by the writers as professionals in the digitally dominated contemporary time. However, despite facing various challenges, some writers continue to persevere and strive, driven by their passion for the craft of writing. But the emergence of social media and the internet as a dominating force has transformed the literary culture in which books and libraries were once highly valued and considered as an important aspect of one’s life.



Revenge of the Librarian, p.no. 8

Moreover, with the rapid transformation in writing practices and profession, the reading has also gone under a drastic change. Reading as an activity demands concentration and perseverance from the readers' side that is lacking in the contemporary generation of people. The consumption of information in the form of shorter formats of digital and social media has made the youth deficient in consternation and comprehension ability which is needed to understand the hidden meanings of the books. Gauld has exposed the readers' decreasing interest and ability in reading the books. His focus is to highlight the role of readers in the recent constant fall in the popularity of libraries and traditional books. In the above given panels, through the illustrations depicting the prevailing trends in literary culture, the creator's intention is to draw a decreasing level of interest and concentration in reading.

The line "Some useful abbreviations for the time-pressed online readers" points at the lack of time for reading books among the young generations. The illustrations of everyone busy with their phone reveal the negligence of books over other gadgets, as the people enjoy consuming fast and rapid sources of information and entertainment like YouTube videos, Instagram Reels, Vlogs etc. The creator has used abbreviations to reflect upon the extinguishing interest in traditional books. TL; DR stands for "Too long; didn't read", VS; SDR stands for "Very short; still didn't read", SR; PW stands for "Should read; probably won't", RB; GB stands for "Read a bit; got bored". SR; MP stands for "Skim-read; missed point" and RH; PAC stands for "Read headlines; posted angry comments". All these short forms highlight that either the people do not want to read due to long formats or do not have the interest and time to engage themselves in reading exercises.

Despite the satirical tone, there is an underlying affection and appreciation for books and reading. Gauld's minimalistically drawn illustrations celebrate the joy and comfort that traditional books can provide, even though they frequently satirize the eccentricities of contemporary readers and writers' thoughts the novel. His work endeavors to establish the relevance and importance of traditional books amidst the modern dominance of technology over every aspect of life. Similarly, the renowned Italian writer Umberto Eco highlights this in *This Is Not the End of the Book* (2012), a record of his discussion with French writer Jean-Claude Carrière on the possible future of the books, he states; "The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved. You cannot make a spoon that is better than a spoon. When designers try to improve something like the corkscrew, their success is very limited; most of

their “improvements” don’t even work” (17). Eco’s concern about forcefully altering the form of books is evident, as he considers them already in the perfect form. Gauld has explored the similar theme of irreplaceability of traditional book throughout the novel.

This theme helps in establishing the narrative around the enduring value of traditional books in a rapidly transforming world. In the novel, Gauld illustrates a humorous scenario where an e-book is returned to a library, overloaded with unnecessary complications, to emphasize the simplicity of traditional libraries. He has depicted a librarian who has been entirely replaced by an advance digital system, leading to humorous and chaotic results as librarian and the readers struggle with impersonal technology. He has also portrayed books as different characters attending a support group, sharing their fears of being replaced by digital versions, adding a layer of humor and empathy for the printed word. He frequently satirizes the modern world of high literature, its sometimes-pretentious culture and absurdity of recently emerged literary trends. Moreover, *Revenge of the Librarian* reflects on various broader aspects of human nature through the lens of literary and library culture.

Conclusion

Revenge of the Librarian beautifully explores the contemporary dichotomy between traditional books and emerging digital formats. Gauld’s meticulously drawn illustrations, implementation of humor and satire for commentary, showcase the enduring importance and relevance of traditional books. He frequently takes dig at the over-hyped popularity of the social and digital media. His novel endeavors to present a celebration of reading physical books and also a critique of the modern rise of digital media. The novel displays a nostalgic affection for the traditional reading and books through thoughtfully illustrated panels. Gauld has tried to place this nostalgia amidst the contrasted world of clinical and sometimes overwhelming presence of digital technology. Through his mastery at minimalistically drawn illustrations, Gauld has been successful in capturing the sensory experiences of reading a traditional book. The feel of the pages, the smell of the paper cannot be replicated through the digital formats.

The novel humorously explores the prevailing absurdities and frustrations caused by the digitalization of reading exercise and libraries. His depiction of a librarian struggling with digital formats, software updates or in maintaining digital catalogue system is to reflect upon the value of traditional library system. Throughout the novel, the creator has highlight-

ed the complications and apathetic nature of digitally produced formats. The prime focus of the creator is to divert the attention of the readers to acknowledge the value of traditional libraries and book reading as noble exercise for the development of overall personality.

The American graphic novelist Neil Gaiman, in his lecture on “Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming”, states about the importance of preserving books and developing reading habits among youths as: “The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. And that means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read them”. Gaiman’s concern is akin to that of Gauld in the *Revenge of the Librarian*, both the authors stress on the need to return to the traditional books and libraries to enjoy the reading. The irony in Gauld’s work often lies in the over-reliance on technology, sometimes at the expense of practicality and simplicity. For instance, he illustrates a futuristic library that is entirely automated but fails to serve its readers and the librarian effectively. This satire points out that technological advancements are not always synonymous with improvements.

Revenge of the Librarian as novel heavily relies on the use of humor and satire to explore the rapidly shifting landscape of libraries and literature, the affection for physical books, the writing as a creative process and different other broader human themes. It celebrates the value and importance of literary culture and presents a critical examination of the emerging challenges to expose the contemporary downfall of the traditional books and libraries. It uses books versus technology theme as one of the recurring motifs to highlights the present tension between traditional books and modern digital media through humor and wit. Through humor and satire, Gauld not only demonstrates a critique of the challenges and absurdities of the digital age but also reaffirms the cultural and historical significance of physical books.

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