

The Simple Reason for the Decline of Rational Argument

Once upon a time, I adamantly agreed with Mark Twain's [assessment](#) of Jane Austen's books. He noted, "Everytime I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her [Jane Austen] up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone."

Then I finally forced myself to sit down and make my way through Austen's [Emma](#). And I changed my mind.

For those unfamiliar with the story, Emma is a rich, intelligent young lady who has a penchant for matchmaking. She's also quite ready to use her wits to engage in argument, most notably with the book's hero, Mr. Knightly.

Yet Emma's arguments are based on her own opinions. She rarely seems to listen to the arguments of others, nor does she seek to broaden her opinions through reading, evidenced by the fact that she never makes it through the first selection on her great books list of "100 titles." And it is these traits which eventually lead her into much grief.

I was reminded of Emma's characteristics while reading [a speech](#) by Bret Stephens in the *New York Times*. Stephens, like many today, points out the high level of disagreement taking place in society. Disagreement, he notes, has been common for centuries; yet today's disagreements are far more personal, political, and based on a more limited knowledge and understanding than of those in the past.

In other words, modern society argues like Emma. Many of those who argue are bright and witty, and they may even advance arguments that are persuasive, at least on the surface. Nevertheless, they are often based on individual, myopic, uniformed opinions, and the people making them are reticent to listen to an opposing view.

Stephens chalks these tendencies up to one of the same flaws that Emma had, namely, a lack of informed reading.

As Stephens explains, previous generations were given a “liberal education.” An education which allowed students like him to “read books that raised serious questions about the human condition, and which invited us to attempt to ask serious questions of our own.” As Stephens hints – and as [various evidence confirms](#) – such an education is no longer present in most schools.

But why is it that this type of education, which is disappearing, is important to healthy argument and debate? Stephens explains:

“... to disagree well you must first understand well. You have to read deeply, listen carefully, watch closely. You need to grant your adversary moral respect; give him the intellectual benefit of doubt; have sympathy for his motives and participate empathically with his line of reasoning. And you need to allow for the possibility that you might yet be persuaded of what he has to say.”

Does Stephens have a point? If we are to move beyond the myopic, poorly informed, Emma-like arguments of today’s society, do we need to place a greater emphasis on teaching the great books to the next generation? Are they truly the key to reopening serious, informed, and more rational argument and debate?

[image Credit: FanPop]