It is no coincidence that the years which witnessed the appearance of the modern corporate business were also the years which saw the fragmentation of culture and the appearance of the most acute form of the social class system. Just as the classes separated so taste was divided and redistributed among the deserving. In this new world the old categories were relentlessly broken down and replaced by professional interest groups whose powerful opinions determined market reaction. Just as surely as the older communities were moulded and reacted to the market so too came that now familiar stratification of economic groups into working-class, middle-class and upper-class consumers and with these came the new hierarchies of taste considered suitable for such a convenient taxonomic arrangement. Low-, middle- and high-brow tastes were born together out of economic, social and cultural desire for forms of recognizable stability in an age of inherent instability.

When money alone ruled, the cultural niceties were no longer paramount, perhaps no longer recognizable. Taste alone would make culture safe and would above all preserve civilization — for Matthew Arnold in the 1880s, as for Frank and Queenie Leavis in the twentieth century in Britain, this was the overriding obsession. The cultured person, not market forces, would now make the world civilized. But if the cultured person stood against the market place (and the very success of entrepreneurs was proof of their lack of culture) then it was a paradox that the world of literature was ultimately driven by market forces and a public whose taste for books was insatiable. To cope with this situation a whole viper’s nest of reasons was paraded to justify distinctions in literary culture unknown to earlier generations. At the same time, major industrialists and corporations needed ‘culture’ to create the respectability which would then be recognized by the guardians of taste. Despite their pre-eminent positions as cultural arbiters both Matthew Arnold and the Leavises were essentially a self-styled
‘remnant’ of *amateurism* pitted against what was for them an alliance of corporate interests, professionalized literary journalism and a public taste hoodwinked by both of these former groups into accepting middle-brow literature as great art: the barbarians were not merely at the gates they were already in charge.

Two quotations give some sense of the cultural upheaval and dislocation felt by the emerging intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic brought about by the changes occurring in public taste in the nineteenth century.

When George Templeton Strong sat down with his diary to record his reactions to the death of Charles Dickens in 1870, he found no ready-made cultural category sufficient to sum up the novelist and was forced to deal with the kaleidoscopic, complex strands of Dickens’s work and following: ‘His genius was unquestionable; his art and method were often worthy of the lowest writer of serials for Sunday papers. . . . Few men since Shakespeare have enriched the language with so many phrases that are in everyone’s mouth. . . . I feel Charles Dickens’s death as that of a personal friend, though I never even saw him and though there was so much coarseness and flabbiness in his style of work.’

By 1899, William Dean Howells was one of a growing band of authors and thinkers determined to give status to the *modern* novel. In so doing it was essential to sift out those very elements that had made Dickens universally popular so few years before.

Not one great novelist, not a single one in any European language, in any country, has for the last twenty five years been a romanticistic [*sic*] novelist; while literature swarms with second-rate, third-rate romanticistic novelists. . . . If you wish to darken council by asking how it is that these inferior romanticists are still incomparably the most popular novelists, I can only whisper, in strict confidence, that by far the greatest number of people in the world, even the civilized world, are people of weak and childish imagination, pleased with gross fables, fond of prodigies, heroes, heroines, portents and improbabilities, without self-knowledge, and without the wish for it. . . . the novelist [however] has a grave duty.

By 1898, the old definitions of culture had begun to fade. No longer was culture a word associated primarily with husbandry