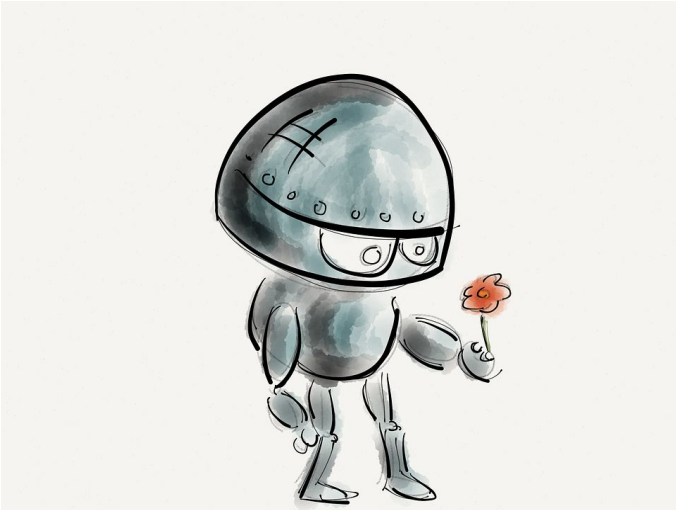
Online Florists, Feminism, Frankenstein's Monster, and Count Dracula's Daughter. A True Story.



The world of online florists seems very much a quirk of the modern age. An unnatural, illogical arrangement if ever there was one.

But the truth is different.

The reality is that a strange, sad, and compelling blood relationship exists between the online world, the age of hearts and flowers, and the way we think and act today.

A relationship as tragic as it was creative.

Whenever you express your feelings of love through an online purchase from a florist, particularly in an overtly romantic gesture, you bring the worlds of two creative geniuses together.

And you do so in a way they never managed in life.

Two geniuses who couldn't have been more different. One an artist. One a mathematician. One a male. One a female. One the father. One the daughter.

It's a story seldom told. And most of the elements that are true are often considered the stuff of myth.

To get to the truth, we need to take a journey through a history that includes feminism, Frankenstein, Count Dracula, art, science, abandonment, and unconditional love.

The Romantic Era — Peak period: 1800-1850

A reaction to what was then modern life, what's odd about the Romantics is what they were rebelling against.

And the extreme influence they had — which is so broad-ranging it almost certainly includes you.

Not that people didn't think about and give flowers before the Romantics came along.

Ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Chinese myths include flowers in one way or another.

The ancient Greeks even associated flowers with the gods — as do order gatherers, probably.

Also, giving flowers has been part of various cultures since at least the middle ages.

But it was in the mid-1700's that an entire language of flowers was discovered in Turkey.

However, it's no coincidence that it was the Victorians (1837-1901), who really picked up on this idea and ran with it, all the way to where we are today.

If the Age of Enlightenment had continued unabashed, it's difficult to say how we would think about love, art, music, literature and, of course, romance.

The Romantics rebelled against the Age of Enlightenment, with particular venom directed towards its scientific rationalization of nature.

Why? Because they believed in the celebration of nature. They believed in passion and intuition over cold logic and technical excellence.

Whether in art, music, literature or life, they wanted to question everything, celebrate the raw beauty in everything, express everything, and experience everything.

Which they did. A lot.

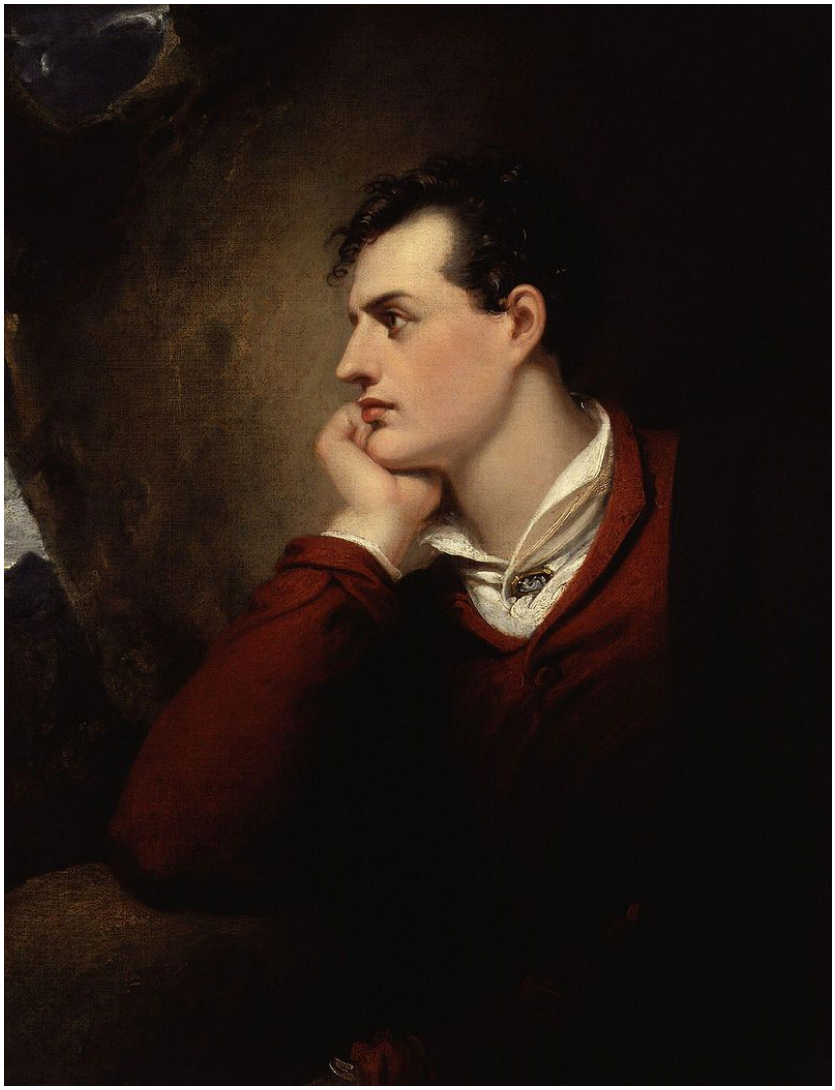
Sound familiar? But wait.

How does a movement peaking between 1800-1850 influence the online world?

And why would people who rebelled against the Age of Enlightenment want anything to do with such an awfully cold and logical thing, even if that had been possible?

Good questions.

Gallery - The Unusual Suspects



Lord Byron - poet, peer, politician (1788-1824) -- regarded by Lady Caroline Lamb - aristocrat and novelist (1785-1828) -- as "mad, bad and dangerous to know."

Artist: Richard Westall.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley - novelist, dramatist, writer (1797-1851) -- wife of poet and fellow DracPack member, Percy Shelley.

Artist: Richard Rothwell.

Percy Bysshe Shelley - poet (1792-1822) -- regarded as one of the world's finest lyric poets.

Artist: Alfred Clint.

John William Polidori - writer, physician (1795-1821) -- Byron's personal physician and number one hater. (Hello, irony.)

Artist: F.G. Gainsford.

These were The Beatles of their day - with Byron as John, Shelley as Paul, Mary Shelley as creative dark horse George, and Polidori as Ringo.

Actually, Ringo was a drummer, not John's doctor. OK, this Beatles thing is silly.

But they certainly were very dark superstars.

And in the summer of 1816, they were on the run: from fame, infamy, social outrage, and various other compelling excuses to spend time hanging out near Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

One scandal was that 18-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, as she was known at the time, wasn't married to Shelley at this point. She was his mistress.

Byron was avoiding the social repercussions of a scandalous separation from his wife, Annabella Milbanke, and rumors of an affair with his half-sister. Both of which put him firmly on a “never to return” footing.

Adding to the fun atmosphere was Mary's also 18-year-old step-sister, Claire Clairmont (pictured right; artist: Amelia Curran). She'd had an affair with Byron and still longed for him.

She also turned out to be pregnant with his child.

Having learned where Byron was headed, the whole idea of this infamous get-together had been hers.

Over to you, Your Lordship.

Why these people didn't get blamed for inspiring the modern day soap-opera remains a mystery.

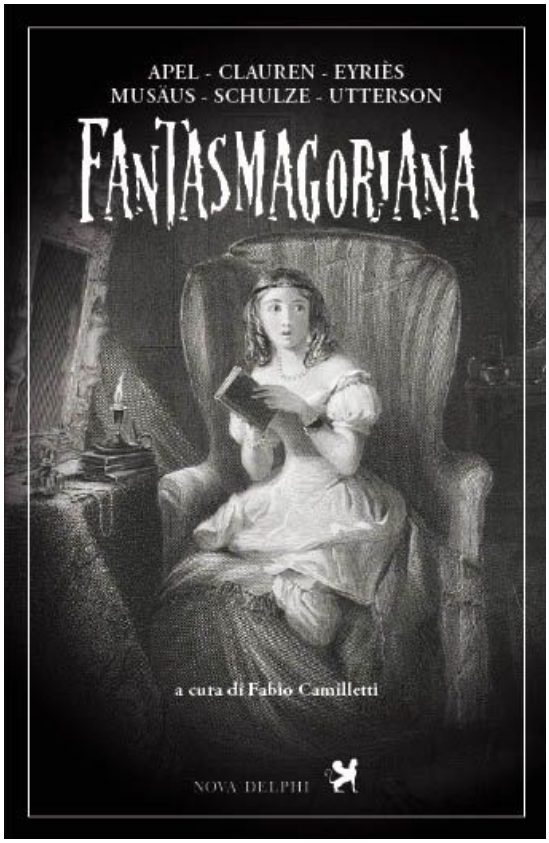
Ironically, the summer of 1816 became known as *The Year Without a Summer*, which is very fitting.

While the Shelley’s had rented a house nearby, Lord Byron rented the Villa Diodati (left: Photo by Robert Grassi), as he named it, in the village of Cologny, near Lake Geneva.

Over three fateful days in June, “incessant rain” as Mary Shelley later described it, kept the DracPack holed up together in the Villa Diodati.

And from there all hell would break loose forever.

Feminism and Frankenstein



The DracPack (as they have never been known, except to people silly enough to keep reading this post), decided to pass the time by reading scary stories to each other, such as Fantasmagoriana.

Oh, that!

Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before this creative group decided to start making up their own stories, and a sort of contest ensued.

It's fun to imagine that Byron and Shelley, the two literary rock stars in the room, felt this would be a good chance to compete with each other and shine in front of the others.

After all, the only competition was a young physician Byron loved to humiliate, and a couple of women.

Big, historically significant mistake, boys!

There's little point going into attitudes towards women during this time, or defending the Romantics' liberated ideas — Byron's treatment of women speaks for itself and this post is more about actions, not *ideals*.

Still, one lady who would become known to history as Mary Shelley was all about action.

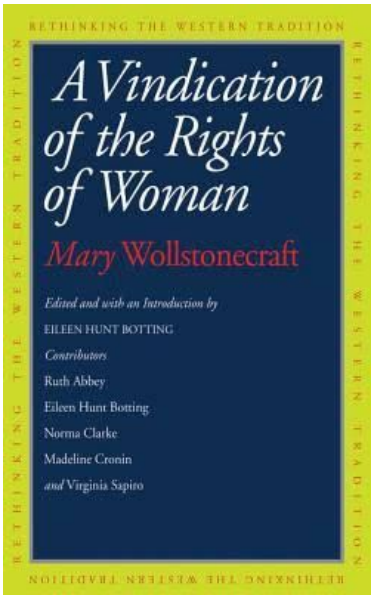
And there are interesting reasons for that.

Mary's father was a political philosopher named William Godwin; her mother was the philosopher and feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft (right; artist: John Opie).

She died less than a month after her daughter was born, at the age of 38.

Themes of loss and abandonment are strong in this post, as will become apparent.

Still, in her short life, Wollstonecraft managed to knock out a slew of works including a history of the French Revolution, a children's book, a "conduct" book, a travel narrative, treatises, and various novels.



Her most famous work: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) put forward the argument that women are not naturally inferior to men, but are made to appear that way due to a strongly encouraged lack of education.

Imagine!

Although she never knew the great lady, Mary Shelley was brought up idolizing the mother she never knew, and constantly read her work.

And the Winner is…

On that rainy night in the Villa Diodati, Mary, at the age of 18, began writing what would become her eternally celebrated masterpiece: *Frankenstein*.

Actually, to be fair to Percy Shelley, Mary wrote because of his encouragement, and he provided editorial services later.

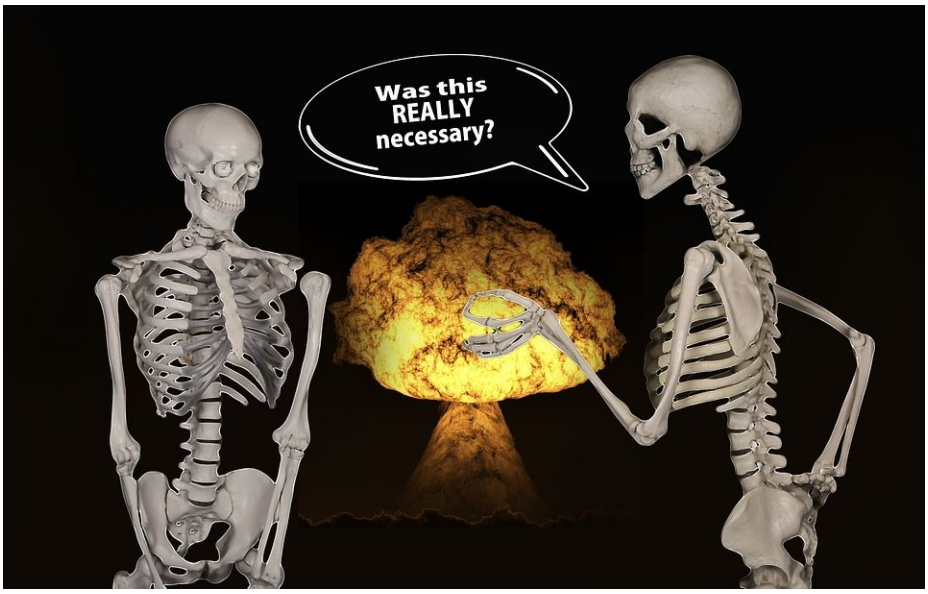
Mary would go on to become a celebrated writer during her lifetime, even if some of the sharper political edges in her works were willfully ignored.

Some have since attempted to overplay Percy's role in the creation of this novel, despite Mary's own praise of his help and descriptions of what happened and how.

These debunked ideas are, perhaps, not too surprising. The other female genius central to this post went through the exact same thing.

Pure coincidence, of course!

Not coincidental was Mary's Romantic era questioning of science and its potential for disaster.



Could man ultimately wield more power than he's capable of dealing with?

Nuclear bomb, anyone?

Speaking of people who wielded more power than they could deal with, Byron was busy bringing his relationship with his physician, Polidori, to breaking point.

Part envy at being overshadowed by the alpha-male superstar, part understandable reaction to being made the butt of his master's acid wit, Polidori's revenge would take on a life of its own.

And, like Mary's own creation, strike fear into the hearts of millions.

The Hateful Creation of Count Dracula

Christopher Lee starred as Byron, sorry, Dracula, in several Hammer films

Yes, this is where the horror double-bill really got started. The question now is, who started it?

Byron had written about vampires in the past, but his poetic creations had been the zombie-like creatures of ancient folklore (below; scene from *Nosferatu)*. On the night in question, he began a vampire story, but never expanded on it.

Polidori did.

And in Polidori's novel *The Vampyre*, the lead vampire is a strikingly human-like nobleman called *Lord Ruthven*, the first of this particular breed of vampire — later immortalized (so to speak), by Bram Stoker.

It's also based on Byron.

In fact, the character's name was actually lifted from the novel *Glenarvon* by Lady Caroline Lamb. Her Ruthven was based on Byron and did not put him in a good light.

Which is probably just as well, considering that a good light might have melted him.

Even more frustrating to Polidori than Byron himself was the fact that his novel was eventually published with Byron credited as the author.

How he must have laughed.

Happily, Byron himself was equally annoyed and the whole mess was eventually straightened out.

Polidori's Byron-bashing novel was so influential that there's absolutely no point talking about it. Just watch a few vampire movies and you'll get the picture.

Counting on Count Dracula's Daughter

Augusta Ada King-Noel, Countess of Lovelace (*née* ***Byron*** — 10 December 1815 - 27 November 1852), never met her father, Lord Byron.

And this fact influenced everything she did.

Byron had wanted a boy and was disappointed by the gift of a daughter. At the same time, after a year of marriage, Ada's mother, Anne Isabella Noel Byron (*née* Milbanke), had been forced to conclude that her husband was stark, raving mad.

A highly intelligent, highly educated lady, she was almost certainly right.

Seeking medical assistance for her husband, a physician was called. Unfortunately, both physician and patient were male, and the doctor advised her to do whatever Lord Byron told her, even if he was bananas.

Thanks, doc. Don't be a stranger.

It was during this period of alleged mental instability that Byron decided to abandon his family, move to Europe, and become the King of Greece.

Unfortunately, he caught a cold and died before managing the last bit.

Just as Mary Shelley had idolized her mother and absorbed all her works, so Ada began to idolize her father and do the same.

Fearing her daughter may be prone to the same “romantic” leanings toward emotional and mental instability, Anne had her daughter educated in mathematics and science.

The results were astounding.

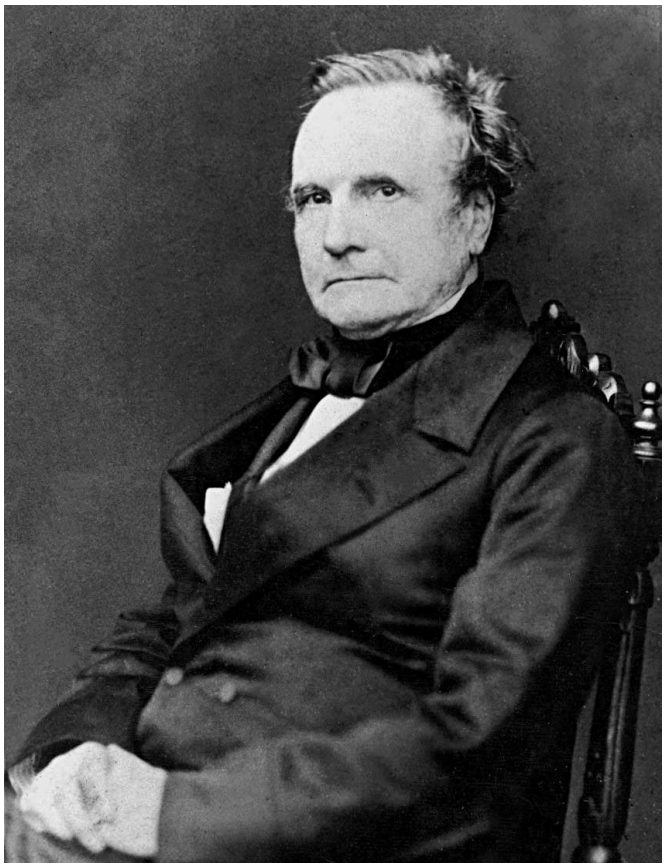
However, the success wasn’t due to a determined escape from the influence of Lord Byron. It was due to a powerful combination of opposing influences.

A combination of what could be seen as the Age of Enlightenment and the Romantic era, brought together at last in the form of a brilliant young woman.

Ada, affluent and socially influential, eventually became a successful mathematician.
Her obsession with her father and his work led to her calling her professional approach “poetical science.”

This science-infused, poetic vision, would help change the world forever.

Mr. Babbage, Ada Lovelace, and the Birth of Our World



“The Computer” originally referred to a person, not a machine.

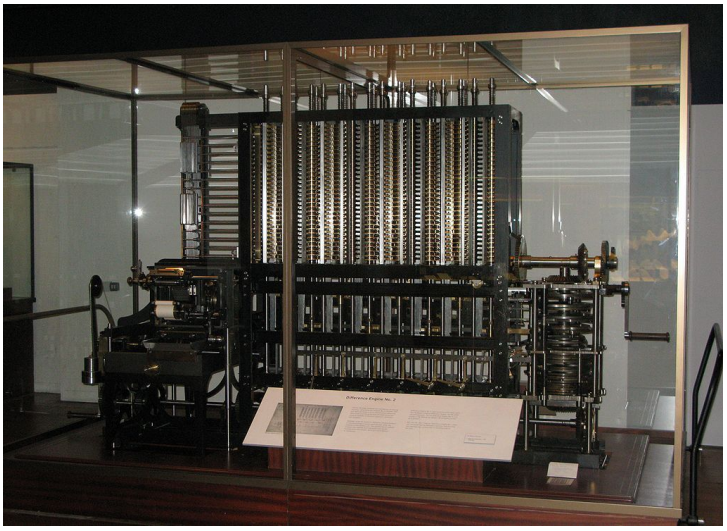
His job was to process hundreds of thousands of information requests from all over the world every day and answer them all immediately, while attempting to sell products. His name was Jonathan Google.

OK, we made that up.

However, the first computers actually referred to humans rather than machines.

This inspired English philosopher, mathematician, inventor, mechanical engineer, and organ-grinder hater, Charles Babbage (1791-1871), to invent a machine that did not suffer human fallibilities such as mistakes, tea breaks, and holidays at the seaside for the purpose of splashing up and down in the water, being silly.

This would be a cool, calculating, relentless mechanical brain.



No doubt inspired by his own brain, in all senses of the term, Babbage's *Difference Engine* (right), began in 1822, was basically an automatic, mechanical calculator designed to calculate polynomial functions, and was never completed.

However, this was followed by his *Analytical Engine*. Conceived in 1834, Babbage worked on it for the rest of his life. The *Analytical Engine* was a general-purpose, programmable computer, designed to employ many elements used in modern computers.

And it was at this point that *poetical science advocate,* Ada Lovelace, turned up.

Byron's daughter apparently met the great man at a party in June 1833. We presume that no organ-grinders had been invited, otherwise the whole thing would have ended in a punch up and we'd all still be banging away on typewriters.

Phew!

Babbage and many of his anti-organ-grinding friends were impressed by the intelligence and accomplishments of this beautiful, society lady.

Which was a great call.

Luigi Menabrea, an Italian engineer, who would later become the Prime Minister of Italy, wrote up one of Babbage's lectures on the Analytical Machine in the French language.

Published in 1842, a friend of Babbage then commissioned Ada to translate the paper into English.

And so it began.

After doing the basic translation, Ada augmented it with extensive notes (right).

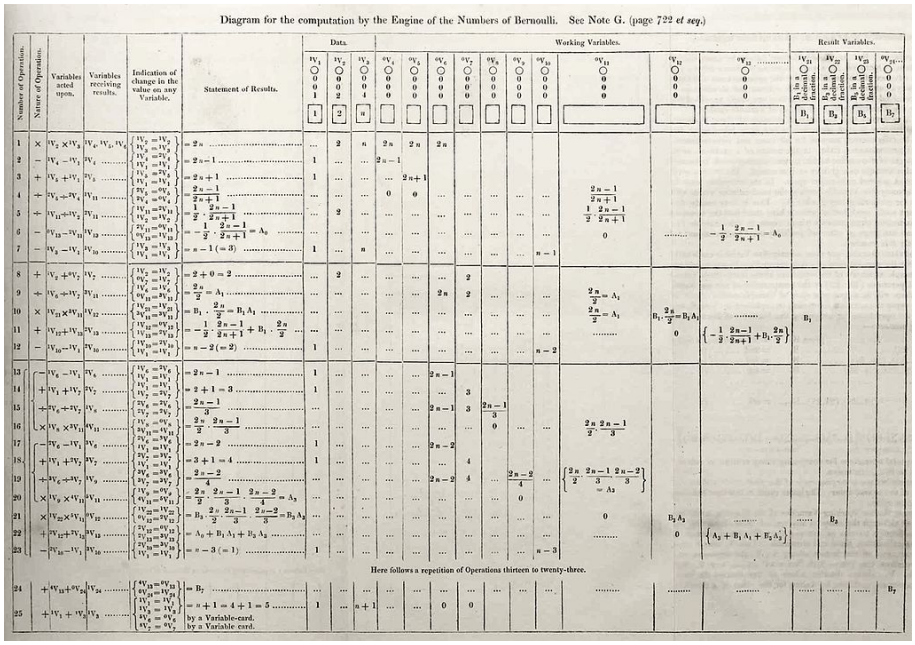


Diagram for the computation by the Engine of the Numbers of Bernoulli. See Note G. (page 722 *et seq.*)

So extensive were they, in fact, that she spent a year absorbed in the task, and corresponded with Babbage during that time.

The notes, much more extensive than the original lecture paper itself, were published.

And here is where it gets sticky.

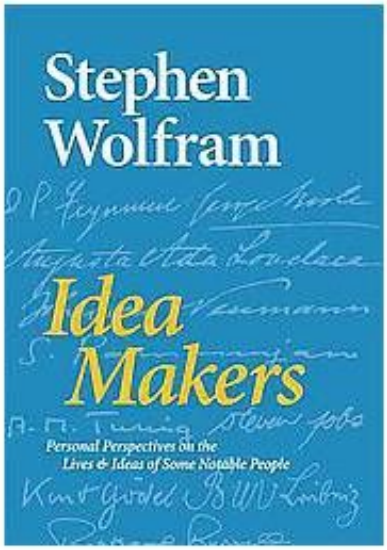
One of her notes describes an algorithm to enable the Analytical Engine to compute Bernoulli numbers.

Which would make Ada Lovelace the world's first computer programmer.

Calculate *these* figures: Ada Lovelace, Srinivasa Ramanujan, and Steve Jobs.

But does it? The Analytical Engine was never completed, so her program was never tested.

Also, and not surprisingly, controversy about her original contributions rages to this day.



Some point out that Babbage wrote many sample programs before Ada's existed. However, in his book *Idea Makers,* Stephen Wolfram points out:

There's nothing as sophisticated—or as clean—as Ada's computation of the Bernoulli numbers. Babbage certainly helped and commented on Ada's work, but she was definitely the driver of it.

It's also interesting that some criticisms of Lovelace are based on mathematical errors by others she failed to correct, or character assassinations about her high opinion of herself, or her social position.

This type of criticism stops short of saying she doesn't count because she's a woman.

Still, it's hard to ignore the fact that the errors and personal faults of many collaborative male geniuses have never led to their achievements being questioned in the same way.

So perhaps the answer lies in the objective knowledge we have.

One objective fact is that Ada's poetic vision enabled her to see the potential of Babbage's computing machine in a way he never did.

This fact is striking and seems to shine a light straight back onto those who believe she was indeed the author of the world's first computer program.

Babbage's view of what his machine might become certainly seems limited in retrospect.

Ada Lovelace, on the other hand, envisaged its potential in terms of what we now know as the modern computer:

The idea of a machine that could manipulate symbols in accordance with rules and that numbers could represent entities other than quantity mark the fundamental transition from calculation to computation. Ada was the first to explicitly articulate this notion and in this she appears to have seen further than Babbage. — from The Computer History Museum's biography of Ada Lovelace.

On October 18,1871, Babbage died of renal inadequacy, secondary to cystitis. He was 79 years old.

Having been an enemy of loud street music for years — and having fought successfully for laws to help tame it — he was finally tortured by scores of organ-grinders who gathered under his bedroom window as he lay dying. They played their hearts out — until his gave out.

His post-mortem revealed that he was suffering the onset of deafness.

Ironically, and revealingly, the damage causing it would have made any loud noises seem much louder and extremely distorted.

Nineteen years earlier, on November 27, 1852, Ada Lovelace died from uterine cancer.

She was 36 years old. The same age as her father when he died.

Ada suffered for months and her mother forbade her seeing any colleagues or friends.

Undergoing a religious reawakening of some kind, she confessed something to her husband that caused him to abandon her. Nobody knows what it was.

At her own request, she was buried beside the father she never knew.

So the next time you purchase flowers online for romantic reasons, consider that your romantic feelings, and your ability to purchase online in the first place, both owe a debt to the tragic characters described in this blog.

Or do they?

Get on your favorite social media page (Thank you, Charles and Ada!), and share your thoughts.

Even if it's only to defend organ-grinders.