

## POPULAR LITERATURE: A FEW QUESTIONS

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A course on ‘popular literature’ seems to be a staple in the literature departments of the country these days. It tends to bring to the classroom authors and texts hitherto neglected by the university professors, but adored by readers beyond the walls of those institutes. Does a course on ‘popular literature’ truly bridge this divide? Or does it further problematise our understanding of these texts?

Parsing the phrase ‘popular literature’ reveals gaping problems. What is ‘popular’? Much loved? Much sold? Or in case of books, much read? So, should the likes of Dickens or Scott — both extremely popular and commercially successful authors during their lives and thereafter — be studied under ‘popular literature’. Apparently, yes. But, they aren’t. Then there is inevitably the more glaring uncertainty around what qualifies as ‘literature’, whose contours are always nebulous. So, it is perhaps better, for the time being to use the term that is more often used in the publishing industries and the larger reading public: ‘popular fiction’.

That doesn’t solve the problem though. Popular fiction is often understood as a kind of fiction that is intended for the larger reading population and is shaped by their demands. But what constitutes this ‘population’? Is it the ‘masses’? While talking about ‘mass culture’ Marxist thinkers have often defined the ‘masses’ as people without access to approved means of cultural capital — economic or symbolic. This definition doesn’t seem to apply to the reading public. This is because anyone who reads fiction, popular or otherwise, must have access to a certain level of literacy. Moreover, some sub-categories within the set of ‘popular fiction’ have very limited readership. Horror, for example.

So, what can be a logical key to approaching ‘popular fiction’? By defining it in opposition to what it is not: Literary fiction. We look at the possible ways in which this distinction can be made. On the question of style, literary fiction is seen as more minimalist than popular fiction. Popular fiction seems to be more plot-driven than literary fiction. Literary fiction is claimed to be more intent on originality, whereas popular writers need to be prolific. But none of these distinctions are water-tight and absolute. Master authors such as Dostoevsky, Austen, Eco or McEwan have repeatedly dissolved these boundaries.

That, perhaps leaves us with the only way in which to distinguish the ‘popular’ from the ‘literary’: through ‘genre’. Popular fiction is often called ‘genre fiction’ because it is written, marketed and consumed generically. Genre provides the primary logic for popular fiction’s production, identification and evaluation. We tend to think of writers of popular fiction as genre writers — Christie is a writer of murder mysteries, Georgette Heyer is a romance writer, Isaac Asimov is a Sci-Fi writer. A work of literature on the other hand, is often thought to have transcended genre. So often do we encounter the term ‘genre-defying’ to refer to works of great literary value.

What is genre, then? In its most expansive sense genre is any artistic category, defined by certain thematic and structural conventions. To belong to a genre is to be aware of the structuring of a particular work in that mould. Even literary fictions belong to certain genres, but they are not always immediately recognisable. With popular fiction, generic identities are not only explicit, but often the whole reason of their existence. These generic identities are created not by the writers alone, but an entire network of authors, publishers, booksellers, readers and aficionados. Similar and formulaic stories are to be expected in genre-fiction. Those patterns often create the expectation which drives the reader to a piece of popular fiction in the first place. It’s success or failure is often determined by how well the work at hand is able to live up to or even overwhelm the reader by conforming to, manoeuvring, or even upending those conventions.

But formulaic plots are only a small part of it. Generic identities are primarily built through marketing strategies. By using similar cover designs, blurbs and endorsements from more well-known writers of the same genre, building franchises through popular characters like Sherlock Holmes, James Bond or Harry Potter are ways in which popular fiction builds strong generic categories. Genre magazines and blogs that allow readers, fans and enthusiasts to interact, share reviews and create hype, also add to the nexus. The market place, with its logic of large-scale production and broad-based distribution, thus is key to understanding the whys and wherefores of popular fiction. Literary fiction, placed on the other end of the spectrum is often produced and consumed in isolation. To go by Pierre Bourdieu’s categorisations, literary fiction belongs to ‘the field of restricted production’. The scenario is changing though.

Time then to return to our original question: What is Popular Literature? At worst it’s a non-entity, at best an academic hybrid. In the university courses on popular literature, traditional humanist approaches to literary studies are being used in the choice of texts and in the method of study. Formal and ideological concerns are still being used as keys to these texts. A typical essay topic for students might look like: ‘Analyse the uses of madness in Philip K. Dick’. Or, ‘Discuss Christie’s art of characterisation’. These approaches do broaden the

field of literature and our understanding of it. They make the literature departments more inclusive and less elitist. Above all, introducing such texts to the syllabus is usually received with enthusiasm by the students and actually encourages them to read more. But as our discussion shows, any attempt to appreciate the dynamics of popular fiction without taking into account the logic of its market place is a job half-done. May be we need to find fresh, more inter-disciplinary methods to study these texts and authors. And that will take time. But it is worth the effort.

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