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## Significance of Popular Culture in Perspective of Literature

**Aejaz Ahmad Malla**  
Research Scholar,  
Jiwaji University,  
Gwalior M.P (India)

### **Abstract:**

Popular culture or pop culture is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture of the early to mid 20th century and the emerging global mainstream of the late 20th and early 21st century. Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society. The most common pop culture categories are: entertainment (movies, music, TV), sports, news (as in people/places in news), politics, fashion/clothes, technology and slang.

Popular culture is often viewed as being trivial and "dumbed down" in order to find consensual acceptance throughout the mainstream. As a result, it comes under heavy criticism from various non-mainstream sources (most notably religious groups and countercultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, sensationalist, or corrupt. The present paper seeks to ascertain the change of Culture into Popular Culture and its significance in the Literature.

**Keywords: Entertainment, Mass Consumption, Folk Lore, Self-referentiality, Industrial Revolution.**

The term "popular culture" was coined in the 19th century or earlier. Traditionally, popular culture was associated with poor education and the lower classes. As opposed to the "official culture" and higher education of the upper classes.

The stress in the distinction from "official culture" became more pronounced towards the end of the 19th century, a usage that became established by the antebellum period<sup>1</sup>

From the end of World War II, following major cultural and social changes brought by mass media innovations, the meaning of popular culture began to overlap with those of mass culture, media culture, image culture, consumer culture, and culture for mass consumption. Social and cultural changes in the United States were a pioneer in this with respect to other western countries.

The abbreviated form "pop" for popular. as in pop music, dates from the late 1950s. Although terms "pop" and "popular" are in some cases used interchangeably, and their meaning partially overlap, the term "pop" is narrower. Pop is specific of something containing qualities of mass appeal, while "popular" refers to what has gained popularity, regardless of its style.

According to John Storey, there are six definitions of popular culture. The quantitative definition of culture has the problem that much "high culture" (e.g., television dramatizations of

Jane Austen) is also "popular". "Pop culture" is also defined as the culture that is "left over" when we have decided what high culture is. However, many works straddle the boundaries, e.g., Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

A third definition equates pop culture with "mass culture" and ideas. This is seen as a commercial culture, mass-produced for mass consumption by mass media. From a Western European perspective, this may be compared to American culture.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, "pop culture" can be defined as an "authentic" culture of the people, but this can be problematic because there are many ways of defining the "people".<sup>1</sup> Storey argued that there is a political dimension to popular culture; neo-Gramscian hegemony theory "... sees popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in society." A postmodernist approach to popular culture would "no longer recognize the distinction between high and popular culture".

Storey claims that popular culture emerges from the urbanization of the Industrial Revolution. Studies of Shakespeare (by Weimann, Barber or Bristol, for example) locate much of the characteristic vitality of his drama in its participation in Renaissance popular culture, while contemporary practitioners like Dario Fo and John McGrath use popular culture in its Gramscian sense that includes ancient folk traditions (the *commedia dell'arte* for example).<sup>1</sup>

Popular culture changes constantly and occurs uniquely in place and time. It forms currents and eddies, and represents a complex of mutually interdependent perspectives and values that influence society and its institutions in various ways. For example, certain currents of pop culture may originate from, (or diverge into) a subculture, representing perspectives with which the mainstream popular culture has only limited familiarity. Items of popular culture most typically appeal to a broad spectrum of the public. Important contemporary contributions for understanding what popular culture means have been given by the German researcher Ronald Daus, who studies the impact of extra-European cultures in North America, Asia and especially in Latin America.

## **Folklore**

Adaptations based on traditional folklore provide a source of popular culture. This early layer of cultural mainstream still persists today, in a form separate from mass-produced popular culture, propagating by word of mouth rather than via mass media, e.g. in the form of jokes or urban legend. With the widespread use of the Internet from the 1990s, the distinction between mass media and word-of-mouth has become blurred.

Although the folkloric element of popular culture engages heavily with the commercial element, the public has its own tastes and it may not embrace every cultural item sold. Moreover, beliefs and opinions about the products of commercial culture spread by word-of-mouth, and become modified in the process in the same manner that folklore evolves.

## Self-referentiality

Owing to the pervasive and increasingly interconnected nature of popular culture, especially its intermingling of complementary distribution sources, some cultural anthropologists, literary, and cultural critics have identified a large amount of intertextuality in popular culture's portrayals of itself. One commentator has suggested this self-referentiality reflects the advancing encroachment of popular culture into every realm of collective experience. "Instead of referring to the real world, much media output devotes itself to referring to other images, other narratives; self-referentiality is all-embracing, although it is rarely taken account of." Furthermore, the commentary on the intertextuality and its self-referential nature has itself become the subject of self-referential and recursive commentary.

Many cultural critics have dismissed this as merely a symptom or side-effect of mass consumerism; however, alternate explanations and critique have also been offered. One critic asserts that it reflects a fundamental paradox: the increase in technological and cultural sophistication, combined with an increase in superficiality and dehumanization.

The long-running animated television series *The Simpsons* routinely alludes to mainstream media properties, as well as the commercial content of the show itself. In the episode "Bart vs. Thanksgiving", Bart Simpson complains about the crass commercialism of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade while watching television. When he turns his head away from the television, the screen shows an oversized inflatable balloon of himself floating past.

According to television studies scholars specializing in quality television, such as Kristin Thompson, self-referentiality in mainstream American television (especially comedy) reflects and exemplifies the type of progression characterized previously. Thompson argues shows such as *The Simpsons* use a "...flurry of cultural references, intentionally inconsistent characterization, and considerable self-reflexivity about television conventions and the status of the programme as a television show." Extreme examples approach a kind of thematic infinite regress wherein distinctions between art and life, commerce and critique, ridicule and homage become intractably blurred.

What constitutes popular culture is debated, and the definition that one chooses influences the interpretations one makes about popular culture. Popular culture may be said to be represented by those objects and icons that are recognizable to a large number of people but that have not yet passed into the social canon. When something becomes part of the social canon, it becomes part of the norms, rules, and expectations of the members of a society. For example, one may argue that a famous basketball player is part of popular culture, because he is widely recognized, but that the player is not part of the social canon, because he is not a model of conduct or historical example, as are such figures as Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., or a living president. The borders between popular culture and canonical culture are clearly quite fluid, and precise definition is impossible. Some art, in fact, has as its theme the ease with which images and cultural references can shuttle between canonical culture and popular culture.

Many critics make a distinction between popular culture and mass culture. When this distinction is made, "mass culture" is used to describe popular culture materials that have been

appropriated by commercial interests. This is often a circular process, with commercial interests producing objects and images that are adopted by groups as cultural icons, which in turn are further exploited by commercial interests. An example is the artist Andy Warhol's using a commercial image, the Campbell's soup can, in his art, and then the art's being printed on shirts,...

Popular culture fiction is marketed as genre literature. Genre literature is accused of being simplistic, sometimes banal, and at its most controversial, of defying social norms. Genre literature is a type of mass and popular culture material. It is studied by popular culture theorists as a branch of literary study. To popular culture theorists, a text is any societal production, therefore any media—books, film, television shows, recordings, radio, and music—are texts. Genre literature consists of written texts.

Genre literature—romance novels, science fiction, fantasy, mystery and detective, horror, pornographic books, and Westerns, for example—creates a system of expectations for the reader. Genre literature consists of texts with recognizable, conventional themes and plots. In order to reduce financial risk, publishers prefer to reproduce fiction similar to what has successfully sold before. Marketing by genre is one way of reducing the financial risk of publishing. Genre fiction announces to the potential purchaser what to expect from the product. Meeting these expectations can often be crucial to the fiction's success. The set of assumptions of genre fiction also allows the writer to exploit conventions of plot and vocabulary. Readers and writers demand a certain amount of innovation or novelty to be entertained. In genre literature, there can be too much and too little innovation. Genre literature innovation tends to be slow and steady, not taking great leaps, as a result of market forces. The categories of genre fiction can be as fluid as the definition of popular culture; the elements that are...

Published scientific discussion of the psychology of reading and writing—literacy—is abundant but little has been done to examine the uses of texts by the consumer. Notable sociological exceptions include Herbert J. Gans's discussion of the uses of the action-adventure film by lower-class males in his book *The Urban Villagers* (1966). Many of the social factors involved in the production of literacy are simple to recognize. An isolated subsistence economy has little need of literate people and, typically, the people in such an economy have little desire for literacy. The more industrialized a country is, however, the more literate people it will have. Worldwide, literate men outnumber literate women nearly four to one. This fact points out the economic and political uses of literacy, which in turn affect the production of commercial fiction.

Urban areas become literate before rural. The economic elites tend to make better use of institutions where literacy is acquired, such as schools. The poorer economic groups make less use of these institutions and this contributes historically to the gap between literates and illiterates becoming wider over time if left uncorrected by other forces. Democracy, as a governmental form, seems to promote literacy better than dictatorships, and literate people who immigrate to industrialized countries do better economically than illiterate or sub-literate people. Literacy is an important prerequisite to other forms of education and to the development of reading as a leisure activity.

Commerce was the most likely driving force behind the creation of writing systems and the spread of literacy. Industrial employers, for example, know that literate employees are easier to train and seem.

The primary market for genre literature being white households, it is not surprising that the majority of fiction that reaches the commercial market has white male and white female characters. For example, the conventional Western features a white cowboy. Native Americans are typically depicted as bad guys. Women in a cowboy novel are usually stereotypes. Traditional spy and detective novels also feature, primarily, white males, although market forces have created a demand, and a supply, of women detectives, black detectives, gay detectives, and so on. An example is the series of detective novels, written by Sara Paretsky, featuring V. I. Warshawski, an athletic, intelligent, and attractive woman who lives in Chicago. Detective novels tend to treat sex as love and romance consists of a quick hop into bed. As a hard-boiled detective, Warshawski seems to follow this tradition.

Horror and occult fiction that has a female main character usually does so in order to terrorize her. Most often, she triumphs over evil, since that is what the genre conventions call for, but most often it is with the help of a male character, and both of them are almost inevitably white. Historical romance novels, in common with horror novels, tend to follow the basic conventions of the genre, in which the heroine is white, beautiful, and in the end submissive to her male romantic lead. Only late in the twentieth century has genre fiction begun to explore positive and nontraditional images of American ethnic...

For popular, genre fiction to become literature that is recognized by the elite culture, it must stand the test of time. Writers of popular fiction who aspire to enduring fame and critics who deprecate contemporary popular fiction may recall that William Shakespeare's plays, at the time of their composition, were not considered great literature. Shakespeare wrote popular literature and measured its success in financial terms. Thus the boundaries between popular culture and elite culture are mutable. Although it is impossible to define with great accuracy what does and what does not belong to popular culture or to define accurately what genre literature is and what elite literature is, such lack of definition does not preclude fruitful critical and scientific study. Popular culture informs elite culture and vice versa; the issue of which cultural artifacts are preserved, and which names are remembered, depends not exclusively upon a committee of experts but also upon popular acceptance and the accidents of history.

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