Literature and popular fiction : examining the distinction

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LITERATURE AND POPULAR FICTION:
EXAMINING THE DISTINCTION

by

Mark Collington

A Thesis Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of English
2016
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Contents

Abstract: iv

Chapter 1: I

Introduction ................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: 5

Creating the Divide
– A Brief History of Literature and Popular Fiction .......................... 5

Chapter 3: 42

Textual Properties and the Divide
– Questioning the Differences Between Literature and Popular Fiction ............... 42

Chapter 4: 99

Cultural Consequences
– The Distinction as It Limits Our Understanding ........................................ 99

Chapter 5: 131

Conclusion ................................................................................... 131
Abstract:

As a society we have developed a hierarchical distinction that we apply to fiction, defining some of it as superior (literature), and some of it as inferior (popular fiction). While this distinction undeniably exists, it resides in our social consciousness, and is not a delineation that is supported by demonstrable differences in the properties of the texts themselves. Rather, it serves to inflect our readings and interpretations of the texts dependent upon their categorization. This hierarchy has been constructed and imposed over time through the treatment of works by critics, academics, librarians, marketing departments, and others in a variety of attempts to exercise power over economic and cultural standings.

In this study, I will discuss the origins of the schism between literature and popular fiction, examine the writing of texts placed into each category by critics, and explore some of the reasons that popular fiction is culturally significant and should be both read and studied. From there, I will discuss the ways in which the present divide prevents academics and critics from properly understanding popular works, why neglect of popular fiction threatens both literature and its study, and why it is dangerous for our culture as a whole when popular fiction is left unexamined.
Chapter 1: Introduction

As a culture, we have separated the fiction that we produce into two hierarchical categories, of which ‘Popular Fiction’ is the base form, with ‘Literature’ as the superior form. You can see this distinction everywhere you go, be it in the different ways in which the fiction is marketed, the types of awards bestowed, how critics react to the texts, or even where the books are displayed within libraries and bookstores. However, an understanding of what features actually separate these categories is less forthcoming—the majority of readers will be able to tell you whether a book is literature or not, but they have a more difficult time explaining why it is so.

Let us take bookstores as an illustrative example of the distinction: if you walk into a bookstore today (assuming you can find one), you will find the fiction books separated into categories. These will commonly include, but are not limited to: Romance, History, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Crime/Mystery, Horror, and Literature. Many of these categories are not hard-and-fast, and you may find yourself looking for a specific book in more than one section, owing to a certain amount of bleed-over between the genres. For example, how many historical novels do not contain elements of romance novels within their pages?? How do you decide where to put a book that blurs ideas that would land it in fantasy with those which would label it science fiction? And what section would a book belong in if it demonstrated the trends of a high suspense crime thriller, but also veered into the territory of the horror genre? The attempts to pigeonhole these works is problematic in its own way, yet, the stakes are relatively low, so it is understandable, given the desire to separate books in some way so that people can find material that will suit their tastes or immediate impulses. The worst that will result from this situation is
that you will take a little longer looking for the book you want, or have to resort to asking someone where you will find it.

But can the same be said for the larger categorical distinction between the popular genre fiction, listed above, and the section labelled “Literature”? While it is simple enough to see where the trends of the subcategories of genre fiction blur with one another, it is harder to identify exactly what the distinguishing trends and features of “literature” might be. A case in point: on a recent visit to a Barnes & Noble, I was investigating their literature section and found *Alice in Wonderland* placed there. What were the features of this book, what dividing line was crossed, such that it was defined as literature, rather than placing it in, the perhaps more obvious, “Fantasy” section? My confusion at this decision only grew when I found that C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia Chronicles*, a set of books that bear many of the same hallmarks as Carroll’s work, instead listed under the banner of “Fantasy.” Because of literature’s perceived status as superior, this placement decision seems to carry more weight than the simple allocation of a book to a specific genre. Deciding whether a book is defined by its fantasy or its detective fiction elements is relatively innocuous. However, is it as harmless when you declare that a book is superior in quality to the point where it no longer needs to be labelled by its narrative elements? That is surely a more culturally important decision.

Although society largely accepts these distinctions without question, viewing them as received knowledge, in the past 15-25 years the categorization of literature and popular fiction as separate entities has come to be the target of a more sustained scrutiny and criticism. In this thesis I will be extending this trend and questioning the distinction between the literary and the popular. To keep the scope of these questions manageable, I will focus primarily on print novels.
However, at times it will be necessary to discuss magazines and other outlets for fiction for the purpose of providing context for the larger examination.

To be able to properly examine the distinction between literature and popular fiction, we need to understand how it originally came to exist. For this reason, chapter 2 presents a historical survey of the last two hundred years or so, analyzing the events and choices that led to this separation. This survey will begin with Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, examining a period that was functionally prior to the distinction that we see today. From that point, I will move to the nineteenth century, analyzing the changes in writing, technology, and the marketplace that led to the term popular fiction being coined. Within the twentieth century, I will focus on how the divide was then cemented and maintained as it morphed into the distinction present in our society today. As I examine the past two decades, this conversation will turn to look more at how critics, academics, and the public at large are currently discussing this distinction.

What are the features that define on which side of the distinction a text belongs, and are these features demonstrable and objective, or unsupported and subjective? The third chapter seeks to analyze texts from both sides of this divide, both from the context of the author-created text and the reader-created text, in an attempt to identify whether the distinction can be said to be based on identifiable textual properties. This discussion will examine some of the main criticisms deployed in conversations about the distinction, in particular focusing on concerns that popular fiction is produced primarily for commercial reasons, lacks “aesthetic quality,” and is overly formulaic. These will also be contrasted against an assertion that such claims are exclusive to popular fiction, and not true of those texts designated as literary.
Finally, what effect does the presence of this distinction, whether it is definably objective, or artificially imposed, have upon our society? In the fourth chapter of this study, I will first attempt to provide a functional answer to the questions of “why do we read?” and “what ‘should’ a text do?” With this answer in hand, I will then seek to examine the negative cultural implications that may be caused by the presence of this distinction, and also discuss some of the benefits that might be derived from a removal of these labels.
Chapter 2: Creating the Divide – A Brief History of Literature and Popular Fiction

2.1 - Introduction

To understand the genesis of the terms “literature” and “popular fiction,” we need to go back at least two centuries. Accordingly, I will begin with a brief look at a period before the distinction existed or, at least, a point when the distinction was of a different nature and more transparent. From there I will move forwards to analyze events and opinions from the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concerning the creation and consumption of fiction through that period. This will lead to a similar analysis of the twentieth century, as wider markets and easier methods of production emerged. Finally, I will examine the distinction as it stands in today’s discussion in the public, academic, and critical realms.

2.2 – Elizabethans and Jacobeans – A Different Kind of Divide

Anyone who has studied Shakespeare’s drama and the works of his contemporaries can probably conjure up an image (if potentially distorted by Hollywood at this point) of the Globe Theatre of 1600. For certain performances, royalty and nobles might be in attendance on one of the top levels. Below them, those only willing to pay a smaller premium receive a less elevated view, but are provided a seat on which to sit. Then, on the ground in front of the stage are the peasantry—“groundlings”—who pay only a simple penny for admission. Again, someone who has studied Shakespeare is likely to be aware that the plots contain more complex cultural issues
at times, and images of high society that may be aimed at the more affluent members of the audience, but that the characters are also apt to engage in bawdy humor that we presume is aimed primarily at the groundlings. In this setting, we see a range of classes, from the elite to the masses, enjoying the same performed fiction together, that is targeted at all of them, to a lesser or greater extent.

Because of the extremely low literacy rates and the high cost of production for printed works, theater and music would have been the main source of culture for those people able to indulge in entertainment at all, so these plays had to cater to a range of tastes. This meant there was little need (or room) for any distinction between the literary and the popular. It is easy today to assume that the more complex plots and elevated scenes were aimed at the upper classes while the more base humor was aimed at the working class, creating a class-specific distinction in how the performance was experienced. Although I would posit that there was a class-specific distinction present, it is difficult to be certain that this is the way in which it manifested. It is possible that such an assessment is formed by current day readers projecting our own notions onto the Jacobean playwrights’ works, and such a separation of targeting may be based on our own perceived hierarchy. Rather, it is just as simple to imagine that the groundlings enjoyed the finery and scenes of high-society as a glimpse into a world they could not attain, while the more elite members enjoyed the cruder humor as a form of entertainment they were less able to access in their day-to-day lives.

There are of course exceptions where works were reserved for smaller audiences of the educated and the rich, such as patronage-based plays that were not performed on the public stage, or written works that were not read aloud for the public. However, without getting into a full-fledged discussion of a very different socio-economic system, it seems safe to suggest that
these works were not deemed superior to the public works on a merit of quality; instead their reception was regarded as privileged based on the class and economic dynamics of the time. This more blatant class-separation of consumption may have been present, but it seems to have been a different form of distinction to the hierarchy that we now see between literature and popular fiction, and to have functioned in a very different way.

2.3 – Late-Eighteenth Century to 1900 – The Birth of the Divide

In certain disciplines, literature still merely means something to the effect of “the writing on that topic” (e.g. “I’ve read up on the literature regarding…”), and before the divide that I am aiming to trace here had emerged, the same rule would generally have included all those texts we now classify under the heading of fiction: literature simply referred to any form of writing. When the designation of popular fiction finally did come to be defined, it was done so through its “otherness,” and the designation of literature was reserved for everything that remained. The term “popular fiction” did not actually come into common usage until towards the end of the period that this section discusses; however, it was upon the events of this period that it was built: it is here that we see the definitions of each category being established.

I want to begin my account of how our current distinction emerged by looking at the history and etymology of the term “popular fiction.” In today’s lexicon, we take the term “popular” to mean something with wide appeal. In The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction, however, David Glover and Scott McCracken draw upon the historical work of Morag Shiach to explain that this was not always the case:
In her invaluable history of the word, Morag Shiach (1989) points out that ‘popular’ first began to appear in sixteenth-century legal contexts, referring to rights or prerogatives that were available to everyone, as in the concept of ‘popular government’ or government by all the people and not just some. This usage soon came to be regarded with suspicion by members of the political class and, by the early seventeenth century, to be described as ‘popular and ambitious’ meant that you were someone who sought to trick or deceive people; and ‘popularity’ became a pejorative term for gaining influence over people in order to sever one’s own nefarious political ends. At the same time, the notion of the popular was inverted and disvalued, as when the writer Jonathan Swift described riots and protests as ‘popular commotions’ so that the ‘popular’ signified what is ‘low’ or ‘base’, in the sense of vulgar, degraded or open to manipulation. [3]

In a later essay in Glover and McCracken’s Companion, Roger Luckhurst further extrapolates on the connotations the term has picked up by the nineteenth century as he cites Raymond Williams’ 1976 compendium, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society:

“Where popularis had once meant ‘belonging to the people’, ‘Popular culture was not identified by the people, but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment).”’ [73]

This historical context suggests that by the time “popular” was applied to fiction towards the end of the nineteenth century, although it had some basis in the idea of mass appeal, it was principally being used as a way to denigrate the works. In this situation, the term is not primarily
derived from sales figures and readerships, but rather implemented as a way to draw a distinction grounded in a perceived “quality.”

2.3.1 – The Formation of Genre

This move from “literature” being defined as “all writing,” to instead being considered a superior subsection of fiction, required the ability to somehow categorize certain texts as different. This became a possibility with the development of genre fiction, which was seen as being “of a type,” and could be sweepingly characterized as fanciful and unrealistic, as opposed to the perceived “more serious” nature that came be associated with literature. It is not hard to see how genre fiction came to be depicted as such, given that the first genres to be defined were primarily the gothic, mystery fiction, and folk or fairy tales.

Although the genres as we know them today were not truly established until the turn of the twentieth century, their history can be traced back much further than that—exactly how far back depends on how strictly you wish to define them. For example, Gothic Horror is often consider to have been established during the eighteenth century with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; however, many of the aspects that crystalized into this epitome of the genre, can be traced back and seen in much earlier works, such as John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). In addition, while the genres of detective fiction, romance, and science fiction are considered to have been conceived in the nineteenth century, Glover and McCracken note that in retrospect some of the elements that allegedly define them can be seen “as far back as the myths of antiquities” [4].
Thus, while these genres might claim various ties to the past, what happens in the nineteenth century is a cementing of these forms as they become a part of the establishment. In *Feminist Popular Fiction*, Merja Makinen characterizes this development for one of the oldest forms of fiction:

Fairy tales, as we have come to recognize them, are literary appropriations of oral folk tales, traditionally believed to be collected from peasant women. Women told them amongst themselves while spinning, carding, or collectively performing other monotonous tasks. These tales were also recounted to their children and to the children of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, by peasant nurses. [...] During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there have been a large number of books which have employed fairy tale elements within longer narratives. [56]

Despite these older origins, she sees the format as having been developed into a “‘classic’ format” later on, first by Charles Perrault (1628-1703), and then the Brothers Grimm (1785-1863 and 1786-1859) and Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875). It is hard to trace the exact history of the genres before this point because they were more nebulous in their ideas; however, Makinen, Glover, McCracken, and Stuart Hall all suggest that the genres as we understand them today were refined throughout the nineteenth century and have remained largely unchanged in their basic structure since the turn of the twentieth.

What this means is that during the eighteenth century, these previously nebulous traits came together to create more coherent and established forms. These forms eventually became a receptacle for the label of “popular fiction” and the negative connotations that were tied to it.
2.3.2 – A Reading Public

For a distinction to be drawn between different categories of fiction, there needed to be enough texts being produced to actually divide into a hierarchy. The number of novels being published pre-nineteenth century seems miniscule from a twenty-first century perspective. In 1788 a mere 80 novels were published in the United Kingdom. By contrast, in the mid-1980s just under 5,500 new novels appeared in print in the United Kingdom in a single year; in 2005 “more new titles were published in the UK than in any other country when the annual total (including both fiction and non-fiction) passed the 200,000 mark” [Glover 31]; and today the figure, while certainly higher, is hard to ascertain owing to the advent of self- and e-publishing. The readerships for these novels were, of course, also relatively small, so while readers likely did make distinctions among them—if only in terms of sales, etc.—those distinctions would not, by definition, have had a broad cultural resonance.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, the situation gradually changed. By 1840 the number of novels published per year had risen from 80 to 200. Forty years later, in 1880, that figure had almost doubled to 380. And even more dramatically, by the end of the century the number of new novels being published had grown exponentially to 1,315 in a single year (1895) [Glover 18]. This increase in publication figures was a function of three factors:

1. The size of the public readership was increasing. From around 1760 to the early nineteenth century, Britain was going through the Industrial Revolution. This meant that in the decades following the working class often found that they were working less for more money. David Glover suggests that this period afforded the working class “the three key conditions identified by Richard Altick as vital for the creation of
‘a mass reading public’”: “literacy, leisure, and a little pocket-money.” Glover goes on to suggest that the “growth in the regular consumption of fiction was a major consequence of this broad socio-economic shift” [18].

2. The technology behind the production of physical texts was advancing. Progress in the realms of paper-making and machine presses meant that it was becoming faster and less expensive to print written work. This allowed for a wider variety of texts to be produced that required less certainty of success before putting the money into the original run,¹ and also opened the door to periodical publications.

3. The publishing business grew. Now that there were people who had the time, money, and ability to consume fiction, and the technology to produce works more quickly and cheaply, the enticement of profits lead to the creation of an industry with authors, publishers, booksellers, and libraries seeking to cash in by supplying this new demand. The popularity of some novels meant that a higher price could be charged for a superior binding, particularly for the upper-class readers who wanted something to display in their library; for example, in 1821 a three-volume version of Walter Scott’s *Kenilworth* cost 31s 6d, which “became the going rate for a triple-decker until its demise in the 1890s” [Glover 17]. However, publishers grew to realize that readers with less money were content with a lower quality binding if it meant a lower cost for the fiction itself. This budding industry also allowed for a mass readership to develop in poorer communities through the relatively affordable avenues of serial publications, and memberships to lending libraries such as Mudie’s.

With the book market increasingly intent on selling as much as possible to as many readers as possible, the quantity of texts produced and the number of people reading them had
grown astronomically. This led to a mass public readership that stretched, to a greater or lesser extent, across the classes. It is difficult to gauge the exact readerships across the demographic, as Glover notes, because the publishing information from the time tells “us little about the many ways in which fiction circulated (for example, how texts were passed from one reader to another, or where and when they were read aloud within families and other social groups); nor, crucially, do these data help us to chart the dissemination of the desire for novels among those strata of society that lacked the economic or cultural capital to become members of Mudie’s or to run an account at Hatchard’s bookshop in Piccadilly” [18].

2.3.3 – A Critical Response

However, it was not long before the critics of the day developed a distinction around this industry, separating the literary fiction and the popular. Indeed, several critics of this commercialization of fiction felt that the trend was lending too much favor to quantity over quality. In his essay “Publishing, History, Genre,” David Glover characterizes this backlash by identifying a dismissive term that was applied to the developing popular fiction, based solely on a perception of its production:

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the name of Grub Street developed a very mixed reputation as the place in London where authors, and the booksellers and publishers who paid them, lived cheek by jowl, working together to turn a profit. But by the end of the eighteenth century, the street name had acquired an imaginative life of its own. No longer simply a commercial address, ‘Grub-Street’ became a dismissive term for
any published work that had been hastily written for money and was thought to be of poor quality, the product of literary hacks, no matter where it had originated. [15]

Glover demonstrates the contempt that grew for this new economic model and the sociological concerns that traditional writers were putting forward in his analysis of George Gissing’s 1891 novel *New Grub Street*, which serves as a clear indictment of the emergent publishing industry:

In the novel, Gissing’s characters struggle to survive in what is described as an increasingly competitive transnational market where ‘telegraphic communication’ supplies ‘men of business, however seedy’ with up-to-the-minute knowledge of exactly ‘what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world’. In their desperate attempts to satisfy this demand, aspiring authors are driven into a frenetic, but ultimately empty, labour of writing, whether they prosper or fail. Marian Yule, who clings to the idea that what she calls ‘really good work’ will eventually be appreciated (p.29), nevertheless feels as though she were turning into the equivalent of a factory worker, losing her identity as a woman and functioning as ‘a mere machine for reading and writing’ (p.106). Worse still, she fantasises about the invention of a real ‘literary machine’ that will soon displace her, an ‘automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles’ (p.107). By contrast, her hard-headed suitor Jasper Milvain glories in his skills as ‘an extempore writer’, knowing full well that the price of his success is that he will ‘never … do anything of solid literary value’ (p.74). Motivated solely by the lure of financial gain and contemptuous of his readers, Milvain chooses to churn out reviews and essays for those newspapers and journals that pay the most, rather than waste his time as a novelist. It is a further sign of his cynicism that he quickly abandons Marian for a rich
widow as soon as one becomes available, despite already having proposed marriage to her. [15-16]

Glover gives some credence to Gissing’s bleak view of the fiction industry as being financially driven both in the quantity of work that it produces and the subject matter of the work that is produced; however, he indicates that Gissing perhaps goes too far at times. Rather, Glover suggests that in reality “The crux of the problem lay in the dominant role played by the private subscription libraries like Mudie’s or W.H. Smith’s in supplying what would otherwise be relatively high-priced new novels to the largest pool of regular readers of fiction, the growing middle-class reading public” [16]. In characterizing the model that these libraries ran on, he demonstrates the ways in which the process was a huge boon to the authors of the most popular works (of which libraries would buy vast numbers of copies), but left the average writer practically destitute, and having to produce a large quantity of work to draw in a living wage (as a library would likely only buy a minimal number of copies):

By setting themselves up as the biggest single purchasers of novels and carrying a stock of well over a hundred thousand books in some of their larger metropolitan branches, these so-called ‘circulating’ libraries were able to capitalize on and perpetuate the ‘triple-decker’ or three volume format that had become the norm among publishers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In essence, the graded structure of borrowing rights and subscription rates that lay at the heart of the libraries’ profitability was built upon the division of the novel into three individually bound parts. At Mudie’s, initially the most influential of the library chains, an ordinary member’s annual subscription rate of a guinea (or twenty-one shillings) only allowed each borrower to take out one volume
of any particular novel at a time, while those wishing to borrow additional volumes had to pay a higher rate.

[...] This arrangement offered authors of the most sought-after novels a very good living – a year after publication, Mudie’s could boast that it owned 2,000 copies of Thomas Hughes’s classic tale of manly boyhood *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857), for instance – but the cut-throat economics of library sales meant that many writers suffered. Although ‘a £10 profit was worthwhile for the publisher when added to a similar profit on fifty other novels’, even a figure of £20 was a derisory return for a novelist who would have to spend the best part of a year producing the often unnecessarily lengthy manuscript that the triple-decker required. In *New Grub Street*, one of Jasper Milvain’s favourite postures is to denounce melodramatically this ‘triple-headed monster’ for ‘sucking the blood of the English novelists’ (p.203) […]. Together, libraries and publishers operated as a virtual cartel, maintaining prices and regulating the form that fiction too. [16-17]

Although this economic model was to largely die out, Gissing would be just as dissatisfied with the one that came in to replace it. The nineteenth century would lead to the death of the three-volume novel, as it was supplanted by the single-volume first edition, and eventually the paperback—forms that Gissing felt spoke to the inferiority of the writing contained within:

Initially, the rise of the three-volume novel was a real success story with its roots in what would now be called an early bestseller. When Walter Scott (1771-1832) brought out his first novel, *Waverly*, in 1814, its publication put the author on the road to becoming one
of the most popular nineteenth century writers, not only in Britain, but throughout Europe and North America […]. So powerful was its appeal, that *Waverly* sold more copies, more quickly, than any previous work of fiction, despite being priced at a guinea for each three-volume set, a sign of the strength of demand and the rising number of readers eager for new reading experiences. Sales continued to rise and by 1821 *Waverly* had sold 11,500 copies, with a new edition appearing at least once a year. But prices rose inexorably too and 1821 also saw Scott’s work achieve a peak when his novel *Kenilworth* went on sale at 31s 6d or a guinea and a half, a figure that became the going rate for a triple-decker until its demise in the 1890s. Nevertheless, at these prohibitive prices – 31s 6d was roughly half the weekly income of an average middle-class household – there was always going to be a ceiling on individual sales of new fiction. Beginning in the 1840s and 1850s libraries like Mudie’s offered one way of satisfying demand without sacrificing high prices, while the serialization of fiction in newspapers, periodicals, or popular magazines provided another. Cheap reprints were a third alternative, a practice that became increasingly important in the second half of the nineteenth century as publishers developed a complex mix of format and pricing that radically extended the commercial life of the novel. By 1866, just fifty years after the first edition of *Waverly*, the sixpenny Scott had arrived and in the following decade paperback copies of the *Waverly* novels were being sold for as little as three pence each.[17-18]

As cheaper reprints became available, the need for an expensive subscription to libraries such as Mudie’s and Smith’s became less necessary for the working class, leading to those libraries having to make changes or perish:
When Mudie’s ran into financial difficulties in 1863, a group of publishers put up the lion’s share of the money that kept it afloat as a limited liability company. At the other extreme, the drive to maximize profits led the commercial library W.H. Smith into new areas of business that would radically transform bookselling and with it the very nature of the book. In 1848, the firm started to rent bookstalls from the British railway companies, turning them decisively towards the sale of fiction […]. By 1862, Smiths had entered into ‘a discreet arrangement with Chapman and Hall’ to bring out their own line of reprints […]. Railway travel put a premium on the portability of the fiction that was on sale at station bookstalls, making the affordable single-volume reprint particularly attractive to buyers. Portability was also a matter of weight and design. In 1849, Routledge started to produce a railway imprint bound in glazed paper boards, at one or two shillings a copy, small enough to be ‘slipped inside a greatcoat pocket’, and soon to be known by the generic name of ‘yellowbacks’ after the trademark colour of their eye-catching covers.

By the mid-1860s this type of novel was being undercut by another innovation: paperbound reprints at sixpence each. [23]

It was these libraries attempts to control costs that lead to the eventual death of the three volume novel: “Mudie’s and W.H. Smith’s, informed publishers on 27 June 1894 that in future they would only pay a maximum of four shillings for each new volume of fiction” [24]. This meant that publishers had to cut the costs of their productions if they were to still turn a profit, a development that was accelerated by the libraries also attempting to “slow the rapidly diminishing shelf-life of reprints by pressing publishers not to bring out cheap editions of any of the titles they had sold to the libraries for at least a year.” By refusing to buy up new reprints of books they already had, they were able to save money and shelf-space by continuing to circulate
the same, still desirable copies they had bought previously. This push against the triple-decker meant that beginning in the 1880s, the number of single-volume books was steadily on the increase, both for reprints and new works. For the most popular writers, this meant a continued success, while for less popular writers it meant that they were no longer bound to the lengthy three-volume manuscript, meaning that they could produce more marketable books in a shorter timeframe, and the paperback market meant more, lower cost sales of each individual book, rather than a single sale to a circulating library. However, according to Glover’s analysis, Gissing felt that this process led to rushed, inferior writing, which was without merit:

In Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, the hapless character of Reardon tries to publish a one-volume potboiler in a last-ditch attempt to change his luck, only to have it rejected. But this episode is another sign of the depth of Gissing’s disillusion with commercial publishing. When H. Rider Haggard’s *She* appeared in book form in 1887, Gissing was outraged to discover that Mudie’s was planning to stock many more copies of this popular imperial adventure story than of his own novel *Thyrza*. This news was a double blow, for in addition to being a sloppy, sub-literary author in Gissing’s eyes, Rider Haggard was among those enterprising writers who were starting to shun the triple-decker altogether, preferring instead to publish single-volume first editions, priced at the reprint rate of five or six shillings. [24]

Gissing’s depiction of Milvain’s acceptance of his inability to do anything of “solid literary value” speaks towards an idea that developed at this time: that literary work attained a purely artistic or altruistic ideal and served to contribute towards the enrichment and enlightenment of culture in a way that was impossible when there was a more substantial financial motive behind the work. This analysis is echoed and expanded upon by Jürgen
Habermas, as Roger Luckhurst points out in his essay “Popular Culture and the Zombie Apocalypse”:

Habermas is completely clear about this. Already by the end of the eighteenth century, literary productions were degenerating because ‘the laws of the market have already penetrated into the substance of the works themselves’. A small public sphere or production and active collaboration is replaced by an anonymous mass market of textual products made for passive consumption. With new print technologies pumping out materials aimed at a mass literate audience, cultural quality declines. Here mass culture involves maximizing sales by pushing towards the lowest common denominator and offering pure entertainment.

Habermas’ portrayal as work appealing to a “mass literate audience” as serving to cause a decline in “cultural quality” may seem classist and elitist, and Luckhurst goes on to note that:

Habermas is unapologetic about the elitism of his position: ‘Serious involvement with culture produces facility, while the consumption of mass culture leaves no trace’. Compared to the psychological and social enrichments of proper culture, popular culture must be considered to be vacuous and superficial, leading nowhere. [73]

2.3.4 – Conclusion

From these events, we can see how the divide was born via the creation of a mass-readership and a publishing industry eager to cater to it, set against writers who felt that the texts
that they themselves were producing were of more literary worth than those of the writers, such as Rider Haggard, who were selling more copies of their own books.

While Habermas’ cultural claims will be more carefully examined in chapter 4, it is worth looking at the claims of a distinction that are suggested by Gissing’s comments. Although Gissing portrays the more widely read and popular works as lacking in literary merit, he fails to define what that means. The only true distinction he can plausibly demonstrate is that these books sell in large numbers, and his anger at these works seems to come from the fact that, in a marketplace that he imagines functions as a zero-sum game, they are supplanting his own works (as seen in his “outrage” at Mudie’s stocking more copies of She than Thyrza). As a cultural commentator, Gissing’s views are clearly self-interested, and grounded in the economics of publishing.

2.4 – The 1900s – Cementing the Divide

The changes in the perception of fiction that took place from the late-eighteenth through to the end of the nineteenth century were largely derived from social and economic developments and the critical commentary that came as a response to those developments. After 1900 we see a shift in both the attitude of this response, and its scale. While the previous section examined the creation of the popular press, and the dissatisfaction that came in response from readers and writers of the quality press (that is, the emerging category of literature, formed reciprocally via the denigration of the popular), this section will examine how both of these
categories were more officially cemented through: the development of the bestseller and the tabloid; forms of canonization; new types of awards; and the rise of the pulp magazines.

2.4.1 – Early-Twentieth Century

In discussing fiction and the habits of the reading public in the late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Q.D. Leavis, in her 1932 book, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, had this to say:

The readiness to read a good novel had become a craving for fiction of any kind, and a habit of reading poor novels not only destroys the ability to distinguish between literature and trash, it creates a positive taste for a certain kind of writing, if only because it does not demand the effort of a fresh response. [Luckhurst 74]

It is clear that by the time of Leavis’ comment the idea of the distinction is solidly present in the minds of critics, and concepts concerning which texts are literature and which are not are being used to comment on culture, reading habits, and the quality of work. Roger Luckhurst suggests that

For Leavis, the real collapse came at the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of the ‘bestseller’ and tabloid journalism. This marks the final ‘collapse of authority’ of any critical public and the triumph of the ‘herd instinct’. As Stefan Collini has observed, this has proved an oft repeated narrative decline. [74]
These sorts of concerns for cultural wellbeing, voiced by Leavis and her contemporaries, suggest that the general populace is incapable of choosing the ‘correct’ texts to read, and this pushing back against popular media leads to the curation of a literary culture in this period.

Nancy Bentley, in her book *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture 1870-1920*, examines one of the key ways that such a curation was able to take place. She identifies figures such as William Dean Howells, who shared the sentiments that Leavis would later expand on, noting that he “put forward the novelist as someone uniquely suited for the cultural elevation of the public: ‘he assumes a higher function, something like that of a physician or priest,’ and is ‘bound by laws as sacred as those of such professions’” [78-79]. Bentley goes on to note that this need to police public culture could be seen to have manifested itself as an industry around the “literary publications” that began to appear in the early 1900s:

Literary production was enlisted as another of the “chief agencies” for the dissemination of a higher pedagogy. High literary culture was organized around a group of leading magazines, most of them the house organ for one of the major publishing companies. These literary publications—the *Atlantic, Harper’s, Century*, and *Scribner’s* were the recognized leaders—reinforced each other’s authority by reviewing the same books, publishing many of the same authors, taking up a similar range of topics (and mutually ignoring others), and hiring each other’s writers and editors. Like other cultural institutions, these journals saw their work cultivating a higher national literature as a public mandate. High culture, in the view of these agencies, was neither a princely possession nor a form of entertainment but a moral resource for the nation, to be administered by professionals who hold a public trust. [78]

There are two important elements to note about this development
1. Through these magazines the publishing companies were able to give themselves the power to make public declarations as to what writing was considered literary, while dismissing the fiction read by the majority of people as trite “popular fiction” (or, to use Leavis’ word, “trash”). Readers’ acceptance of the magazine’s authority on this subject allowed these publications to become gatekeepers of a higher culture—a culture that they themselves had created and defined. This is one of the earliest and clearest examples that we see the distinction that formed in the nineteenth century being implemented to separate the literary from the popular so deliberately and on an official scale.

2. The new model for publications by the emerging literary industry parallels that of the model that surround the Grub Street industry, which Gissing was decrying only decades before. While Howells, Leavis, and those involved in this curating may state that these publications were designed to promote “cultural elevation,” such publications entered the market place in very much the same way, with authors, publishers, etc. working “cheek by jowl.” To suggest that this system was not in any way motivated by economic gain would be inaccurate, disingenuous, or naïve. Gissing and other contemporary critics felt that the market behind the popular press was financially exclusionary to those who were not the authors of the most popular books or able to produce work at a high enough rate. However, rather than removing the issue of exclusion, this newer model instead develops a cultural elite which is exclusionary to any authors that are not deemed worthy by a relatively small group of people coming from a relatively limited demographic. Across the turn of the century,
the power had been turned from those whose work was widely read, to those whose work was deemed “culturally worthy” to read.

As the idea of literature became established, it began to be legitimized throughout society. This legitimizing is perhaps seen most prevalently in the canonization that takes place at this time. Canons served to place pressure on the public to read certain works (those deemed “worthy”) and not others (those deemed “trash”). This pressure manifested in a number of ways, including published accounts of what literature should be; for example, Arthur E. Bostwick’s 1914 work, *Earmarks of Literature: Things That Make Good Books Good*.

One of the most powerful sites for this effort was the emerging public libraries. Some of the largest public libraries in the United States today were founded in this period: Boston Public Library in 1852; New York Public Library in 1895; and the County of Los Angeles Public Library in 1912. Along with similar institutions, such as schools and universities, these locations became the enforcing grounds for canonization, as the decision not to stock a book could limit its availability to many who could not afford to buy their own copies of works, while the decision to stock another functioned to place it on a pedestal, deeming it more worthy. Because the libraries were run on public funds, and not beholden to the needs of a private business, they had no need to not stock books that might be rented in large numbers, and were instead able to create stock lists based around their claims of moral superiority and a pedagogical mandate.

The policing of what should (or, perhaps more importantly, should not) be read was particularly prevalent in the realm of children’s fiction, as Kathleen Chamberlain explains in her essay that “studies the discourse of cultural authorities involved in censuring juvenile fiction” [xvi], “‘Wise Censorship’: Cultural Authority and the Scorning of Juvenile Series Books, 1890-1940” in Lydia Schurman and Deirdre Johnson’s essay collection *Scorned Literature*. 
Schurman’s introduction to the book notes that over the course of a lengthy cultural process, the debate over juvenile fiction had shifted its focus from “‘what do children read?’ to ‘what should children read?’” [xvi]. This observation underscores the conversation that was taking place regarding what should or should not be read, enforcing an objective idea of “good quality” writing and “bad quality” writing under the guise of cultural edification. Chamberlain herself opens her essay with a personal anecdote that serves to demonstrate the way that this idea had permeated into the areas that should most promote reading, and leads to an inability for some people to attain certain books because they were deemed unworthy:

In 1965, when I was nine years old, I asked our children’s librarian for a Nancy Drew book. The librarian said pleasantly, “Nancy Drews aren’t the kind of books we like to have in the library. But we have some other series you might enjoy” She offered me Maud Hart Lovelace’s Betsy-Tacy stories and Laure Ingalls Wilder’s Little House books. I spent many happy hours reading the books found in libraries; I spent just as many pleasurable hours reading the other kind of books, the sort that many librarians and educators did not “like to have in the library.” As a child, I made no qualitative distinctions between the two types of books, but I realized others did. It seemed natural to me that there should be separate standards for library books and home books.

But, of course, the removal of such series as Nancy Drew from many American library and school shelves was not a “natural” phenomenon. The lengthy cultural process that turned such books into “scorned literature” is complex, encompassing a variety of social, moral, and political concerns. From the 1880s onward, and especially during the Progressive Era, those involved in children’s education devoted a great deal of attention to the question of what children did and should read. [187]
As these librarians, educators, and journalists became more involved in the study of what children should read, they attempted to limit the material that was available to only those works which they believed would aid children best for academic and cultural progression. The process of limiting what books were available at libraries, and thus to children and the reading public, took a variety of forms. One of the most official guises that these restrictions came in was that of book lists—both for the books that should be read, and those that shouldn’t.

One example of this, published in 1926, was the *Winnetka Graded Book List* and its supplement which sought to define the “literary merit” of books for children, and thus establish “cultural authority.” The construction of the list was based on a survey taken from 1924-1925 of 36,750 children to determine what books they were reading. They then employed “expert” librarians to sort the 796 books that were mentioned more than 25 times each into one of four categories:

1) “of unquestionable literary merit”
2) “valuable for the list, although not of high literary quality”
3) “not recommended because of low literary value”
4) “not recommended because of subject content”

Regardless of how many of the surveyed children had read or enjoyed them, the 110 books that over seventy-five percent of these expert librarians designated as a “3” or a “4” were deemed “trashy” by the compilers of the list. While the books that were given “1”s and “2”s were placed into the primary hardcover printing of the list, the “trashy” books were only listed in a stapled paper supplement which could, at first, only be attained by contacting the publisher [198-200].

These sorts of lists became a trend among librarians in this period. The idea that there were books that were of “unquestionable literary merit” and others that were of “low literary
value” had seeped into the cultural consciousness to the point where it was almost no longer questioned, and new lists were able to cement this notion of a divide between the “literature” that was qualitatively “good” and should be read, and the “popular fiction” that you might believe that you enjoy reading, but is ultimately culturally damaging. Chamberlain notes that:

By 1929, the dismissal of series of books had become so widely accepted a tenet among librarians that Mary E.S. Root could publish, in a professional journal, a list of “books in series not circulated by standardized libraries.” This list, presented under the title “Not To Be Circulated,” contained “not a word of explanation or justification as to why the nearly 100 different series were kept off library shelves. Nor did it indicate how many libraries were involved, thus giving the impression that the judgements were universal. It is not clear whether the list was intended to be prescriptive or merely descriptive, but in either case, librarians by this time were obviously exercising their mandate over one important avenue of public access to children’s books. [193]

Chamberlain goes on to explain how this mandate was sold to the public as being for their own good, as a way to defend their children from the damaging influence of sub-standard fiction:

The professionals themselves did much to perpetuate the view that only through their expertise could parents and children avoid the harm that would come from the “wrong” reading. In addition to disseminating their view through journals, magazines, books, and university and normal school curricula, they met challenges to their authority by reaffirming not only the superiority of their professional qualifications but also society’s support of their mandate. [195]

These libraries and other institutions were in a positon of power and given a lot of control over what texts became readily available to readers; however, these lists did not exist completely
unopposed. Chamberlain characterizes some of the pushback against such lists through an examination of a bookstore owner’s response to Root’s list:

A fascinating exchange in the *Wilson Bulletin*, a professional journal for librarians, typifies the process by which middle-class professionals were able to consolidate their power. After the *Bulletin* published Mary Root’s “Not To Be Circulated” list, a bookstore owner named Ernest Ayres answered with a column that took issue both with the list and with the librarians’ right to create it. His article opened with a direct attack on librarians’ position as cultural gatekeepers. “Why worry about censorship,” he asked with rhetorical flourish, “so long as we have librarians?” calling library professionals “these worthy arbiters of our literary pabulum,” he raised an important question: “is it the place of any librarian, holding a position as trustee of public funds, to tell men and women who enjoyed those books when they were young, that their children shall not be allowed to read the same tales?” [195]

While fascinating, these sorts of responses were able to achieve very little in the larger scheme of things. These lists overcame such criticisms and serve to exemplify the trends of canonization in this period and the ways in which they were able to cement and enforce the distinction between the literary and the popular, building upon the definition that had come into play in the previous century. Just how internalized the divide had become by this point can be seen in the responses to the *Winnetka Graded Book List*. The list received a vast quantity of attention and was praised and recommended by many; however, what criticism it did receive was largely centered on questioning the methodology of the survey and analysis. That is to say, few critics thought to question the general framework and the concept that literary merit was concrete, objective, and definable.
2.4.2 – Mid-to-Late-Twentieth Century

By the 1950s the divide between literature and popular fiction had been established as fact in the minds of public readers, academics, and critics alike. The processes through which the distinction was reinforced in this time paralleled those that originally created and cemented it. As much of the history for this period repeats what has come before, I will provide only two illustrative examples for these decades, one from each side of the divide: the first demonstrating the sustained denigration of popular fiction; the second the continuation of the self-interested lauding of literature.

Although pulp fiction can trace its lineage back to the early 1900s, and before that to “yellow-backs” and dime novels, its production and readership reached a peak in the late-fifties and early-sixties. These magazines, printed on cheap wood-pulp, are the epitome of the popular press in the twentieth century: low cost, high yield production, designed to cater to an array of different tastes. While the crime and thriller pulps are the most well-known today, the reach of pulp topics was extensive, and they catered to a huge range of readers, sometimes surprising the publisher’s themselves; for example, pulps of lesbian erotica were at first presumed to be read primarily by men, but publishers began to receive letters that demonstrated a wide readership in the lesbian community [Mitchell 122]. Critics had much the same reaction to pulp fiction in the ‘50s as Gissing did to the rise of the popular press previously, dismissing it as culturally unworthy and of inferior quality. This denigration has had a lasting effect and, even today, “pulp fiction” has become synonymous with “bad” or “trash fiction.”
On the other side of the divide, literature continued to work at validating itself in the eyes of the public. This was achieved through the creation of literary awards that appeared in tandem with the rise of the pulps: the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was first awarded in 1918, the National Book Award in 1950, and the Man Booker Prize (in the United Kingdom) came a little later in 1969. These awards function in much the same ways as the literary magazines of the 1920s which hired each other’s writers and editors so as to encourage an elite culture. By awarding prizes to the authors that best demonstrated the characteristics which this cultural elite deemed worthy, they legitimized their own claim to this standard of literature: the book is deemed “good” by a select few, so it is given an award, and it becomes demonstrably “good” because it has the award.

2.4.3 – Conclusion

We can see how, up to this point, “literature” was defined on much the same timeline as popular fiction, both being defined, not in their own right, but rather as a mere antithesis of the other. Every step that has been taken to more rigidly define the categories has done so by asserting its otherness, and thus reinforcing this divide.

These categories and their development speak to the way in which critics perceive the reading populace—the categories’ genesis and continued existence, along with the denigration of the popular, rest on a fear of the effects public discourse. Habermas suggests that “Popular culture everywhere destroys the chance of a proper public culture” [Luckhurst 68] as popular fiction corrupts public discourse, turning the populace into a mindless mass that is
“administered” their conversations rather than thinking for themselves. However, Dawn Thomas suggests that there is a bias of perspectives at play here, that call into question the warnings of figures such as Habermas and Leavis: “To the publishers, the working class was a vast market for their wares; to the cultural critics, the working class was a ‘mob’ without judgement or taste. To the publishers, the reader was disciplined and discerning; to the critics, the reader was unskilled and uneducated, easily manipulated to the publishers’ own ends” [91].

2.4 – The 2000s – The Debate Today

Although the distinction has now been established and maintained for over a century, over the past thirty years it has come under a more sustained scrutiny and has been opened up to new criticism. This growing dissent and the attendant pushback can be seen in three primary spaces:

1. The public space – opinion pieces, journalistic articles, blogs, etc.

2. The academic space – critical works published for research and analysis purposes, mostly used in universities

3. The critical space – pieces written by critics, who are often academics, but intended for a more general public audience, and often in response to, or review of, a specific work or action.
2.4.1 – The Public Space

The debate, as it appears in the public space, was clearly characterized by an article that appeared in *The Guardian* on August 31st 2015, in the wake of the death of Sir Terry Pratchett—the author of the *Discworld* novels who claimed he had been “accused of literature” [Pratchett Author Biography]), and the combative articles that appeared in response to it. They portray the way in which the distinction is instigated by some within the public space, but that there are a growing number of people who vocally oppose the idea in one form or another.

The original article, by Jonathan Jones, led with the provocative headline: “Get real. Terry Pratchett is not a literary genius.” Jones uses the article to propose that “A middlebrow cult of the popular is holding literature to ransom.” Like Habermas and Leavis, Jones feels that popular fiction poses a threat to public discourse and culture. However, Jones takes a new angle here, demonstrating a desire to defend literature itself, and with it the distinction: for Jones, popular fiction not only threatens the public culture, but just as importantly threatens the cultural elite as well. He suggests that his claim is supported by the outpouring or emotions in the wake of Pratchett’s death, combined with the perceived absence of any such outpouring after the death of Gabriel Garcia Marquez a year earlier, in 2014. Jones goes on to characterize Pratchett’s work in contrast to the notion of literature as he pushes for the retention of the distinction:

Everyone reads trash sometimes, but why are we now pretending, as a culture, that it is the same thing as literature? The two are utterly different.

Actual literature may be harder to get to grips with than a Discworld novel, but it is more worth the effort. By dissolving the difference between serious and light reading,
our culture is justifying mental laziness and robbing readers of the true delights of ambitious fiction.

Jones cites Jane Austen and Charles Bukowski as writers who achieve this goal of true literary genius, expanding on some of the things that he feels make them great, and clearly states that he has no desire to waste time on “mediocrity” such as the work of Pratchett when there is superior writing to be read.

While this article continues to apply the hierarchical distinction, doing so earned Jones numerous impassioned rebukes. One such response came from Damien Walters, who published his reply on the same day with the headline: “Sorry Jonesy, but I can write for The Guardian AND love Terry Pratchett.” In the article he scathingly dissects some parts of Jones’ argument:

It’s worth asking why Jonesy begins his tantrum against Pratchett by flouting the fact that he has never read a single one of the author’s works. He’s “flicked through” one and, because of his vast cultural expertise was able to classify, and therefore dismiss it, as a “potboiler”. […] What Jones is too high in his ivory tower to consider is what this strategy says not just about him as a critic, but the entire cultural edifice he seeks to represent – the elitist[sic], and poisonously classist world, of British arts and culture.

Another response came from Sam Jordison, who took Jones’ paragraph espousing the virtue of Austen’s Mansfield Park and replaced references to the author and book with Terry Pratchett and his novel Equal Rites:

When he turned his attention to “the true delights of ambitious fiction”, though, I had to speak up. Jones writes:

“This summer I finally finished Mansfield Park. How had I managed not to read it up to now? It’s shameful. But at least now it’s part of my life. The structure of Jane
Austen’s morally sombre plot, the restrained irony of her style, the sudden opening up of the book as it moves from Mansfield Park to Portsmouth and takes in the complex real social world of regency England – all that’s in me now. Great books become part of your experience. They enrich the very fabric of reality.”

Funnily enough, I finally finished Equal Rites by Terry Pratchett this summer. And I too can’t believe that I haven’t read it before. In fact – and I hope you’ll forgive my irony for its lack of restraint – I could write almost the exact same paragraph about this Discworld novel.

Here we go:

“This summer I finally finished Equal Rites. How had I managed not to read it up to now? It’s shameful. But at least now it’s part of my life. The structure of Terry Pratchett’s morally sombre plot, the restrained irony of his style, the sudden opening up of the book as it moves from the tiny village of Bad Ass to Ankh Morpork and takes in the complex unreal social world of the pre-Vetinari Discworld – all that’s in me now. Great books become part of your experience. They enrich the very fabric of reality.”

Jordison’s exercise helps to demonstrate that the elements which Jones found so endearing in Austen were just as present in Pratchett’s work, if perhaps in a slightly altered guise. However, Jones missed them because his elitism drew him to refuse to actually read the work of Pratchett before dismissing it.

These responses demonstrate that, while the distinction is well enough established for Jones to have written the original article, there is a dissatisfaction with the ideas behind it and the dismissal that it has for certain books based on their ostensible category. With public voices
becoming more prevalent through the age of blogging, these voices of dissent are becoming
more powerful and numerous every day.

2.4.2 – The Critical Space

The conversation in the critical space exhibits the combatant divide between those who
uphold the distinction, praising literature and denigrating the popular, and those who feel that
popular fiction is able to be just as worthy as literature is, while simultaneously being crucial to
sustaining and understanding our culture.

This conversation is perhaps best exemplified through the reaction the critical world had
to the horror and popular fiction author, Stephen King, being awarded the Medal of
Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2003. Harold Bloom gave an aggressive
response decrying the decision, criticizing King’s work as being “inadequate” and its only merit
being commercial value:

The decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for “distinguished
contribution” to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of
dumbing down our cultural life. I've described King in the past as a writer of penny
dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind. He shares nothing with Edgar Allan Poe.
What he is is an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-
paragraph, book-by-book basis. The publishing industry has stooped terribly low to
bestow on King a lifetime award that has previously gone to the novelists Saul Bellow
and Philip Roth and to playwright Arthur Miller. By awarding it to King they recognize
nothing but the commercial value of his books, which sell in the millions but do little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat. If this is going to be the criterion in the future, then perhaps next year the committee should give its award for distinguished contribution to Danielle Steel, and surely the Nobel Prize for literature should go to J.K. Rowling.

King’s rebuttal to Bloom’s comments came in the form of his acceptance speech. In it, he highlighted the importance of acknowledging popular fiction’s contributions, and the dangers of ignoring it:

Tokenism is not allowed. You can’t sit back, give a self-satisfied sigh, and say “Ah, that takes care of the troublesome pop lit question. In another twenty years or perhaps thirty, we’ll give this award to another writer who sells enough books to make the best-seller lists.” It’s not good enough. Nor do I have any patience with or use for those who make a point of pride in saying they’ve never read anything by John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Mary Higgins Clark, or any other popular writer.

What do you think? You get social or academic brownie points for deliberately staying out of touch with your own culture? [Castle 11-12]

King’s response does nothing to try and sway Bloom’s thoughts on the quality of his writing—the issue is not even raised—rather, he acknowledges that his books are commercially successful and uses that fact to indicate that these books have become a major part of our culture. In this part of the debate, we see King directly attacking the elitist literary culture for attempting to hold itself above the popular, and ignoring key aspects of the public culture it claims to defend.
2.4.3 – The Academic Space

The past three decades have seen a steady increase in the willingness to consider popular fiction as a serious subject of study within the academic space. However, that is not to say that the study of popular fiction and its literary counterparts has reached a point of harmony—popular fiction is still shunned by the majority, and the treatment of the divide still varies from person to person.

In 1990, Tony Bennett’s book, *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading*, sought to bring popular fiction into the realm of English and Cultural Studies through an examination of popular fiction that included print literature, television, film, and radio. Although he argued for the importance of examining popular fiction as a way to understand our culture and acknowledging its relevance in that field, he was also eager to reinforce the divide between the “popular” and the “literary” or “art”: “our aim is not to transform popular fiction into something else—into literature, say, or art cinema,” but instead only to develop “better, politically more productive ways of reading it” [x].

Nearly twenty years after Bennett’s book, Nancy Bentley’s 2009 offering, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture 1870-1920*, took a similar tack as she aimed to investigate the state of literature and popular culture around the turn of the twentieth century. She posits that the line between the two categories was blurred during this time in the form of a convergence of ideas and attitudes. As an example of how these two domains dealt with similar issues, she describes the popular culture occasion of forty thousand people making their way to Crush, Texas to witness “The Crash at Crush” (two locomotives colliding head on, put on as a sensationalist, and commercial event) [1-2], and examines the ways in which an increasing
number of such sensationalist affairs influenced the writings of literary authors such as Edith Wharton, whose works contain a reliable motif of the possibility of crash [21]. Similarly, she provides an analysis of the convergence in a comparison between the description of an excessively rich lifestyle in William Dean Howells’ literary Rise of Silas Lapham and P.T. Barnum’s boasts of his newly constructed mansion in the mass culture piece Struggles and Triumphs. Bentley draws some contrasts between the two categories, but the parallels that she presents are both more numerous and more convincing. However, Bentley insists that this was merely a temporary convergence which came to an end in the early 1900s. She, like Bennett, feels that these texts are worthy of study, yet is keen to maintain a separation between the popular and the literary, saying: “it is important to resist the move to place mass culture and high culture on a single plane” [5].

Both Lydia Schurman and Deidre Johnson’s 2002 collection, Scorned Literature, and The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction, David Glover and Scott McCracken’s 2012 essay collection, seem to respond to the call for a greater study of popular culture. Through a series of essays, both books provide a survey of the nature of popular fiction, its importance in understanding our culture, and the history behind its creation and denigration. However, these books do more than that, going further to present a challenge to the divide between the categories. Glover and McCracken focus upon the ways in which the development of the divide was based in arbitrary definitions put forward by self-interested parties, while Schurman and Johnson focus on the ways that canons were formed and used as a way for cultural elites to exercise power.

Perhaps the most comprehensive challenge to the distinction between the popular and the literary came in Terry Eagleton’s 2012 book, The Event of Literature, in which he explores the
question “what is literature?” to exhaustive ends. He prefaces this exploration by asking whether it is actually possible to define literature, addressing how hard it is to pin down a strict definition and noting Tony Bennett’s suggestion that perhaps we do not need “a theory of Literature but a theory of literatures.” He demonstrates some caution towards any such classifications, wary of the problems that can be caused, and citing Michel Foucault’s insistence that “all classification would seem an insidious form of violence” [16]. Eagleton’s next step is to determine that there is no single attributes or complete set of attributes that can be said to be true of all literature:

“Those pieces of writing dubbed ‘literary’ have no single property or even set of properties in common” [19]. He goes on to court Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances in relation to defining literature. Under this theory, any piece of fiction need only have one or more of a set of properties to be identifiable as literature, and is not required to present all of the possible features. However, he finds that this theory also fails to provide a satisfying definition of literature as either the “lattice” of criteria is too tight to allow for all works which we already considered literature or, as Stein Haugom Olsen was concerned, is too loose and would “let in too much” of “what he considers non-literary (popular fiction, for example), thus jeopardizing the notion of literature as writing which is especially valuable” [23].

Eagleton, Glover, McCracken, Schurman, and Johnson all work towards the notion that we cannot, in fact, separate works of popular fiction from literature, and that any attempts to do so rely on unsubstantiated claims that there is an objective definition of what is “good” or “worthy,” and are largely driven by self-interested economic or culturally elitist motives that serve to be exclusionary.

I am inclined to agree. Our culture has built a hierarchy placing literature above popular fiction, and there is undeniably a distinction that has been created by these categories. However,
it is a distinction that resides in our social consciousness, inflecting our reading and interpretations of texts—and not, that is, a distinction that derives from or relates to the text itself, where we will find no consistent classifiable difference in the writing from books relegated to one category or the other. Rather, the definitions have been developed self-interestedly and used as a way to exercise power over economic and cultural standings.

Having established the origins of the divide, in the next chapter I will examine the criticisms lodged against popular fiction in relation to their allegedly deficient or problematic textual properties.
Chapter 3: Textual Properties and the Divide – Questioning the Differences Between Literature and Popular Fiction

3.1 - Introduction

In order to be good literature, therefore, a work must possess good form. The work of literature is the polished gentleman among other works. A man may have sterling worth, but he cannot hope to move among people if he eats with his knife or sits with his boots on the table.


Having established the existence of the divide and the history of its creation, it is time to turn to the ways in which the divide is defined and held in place today. The claims that define the divide can be split into two groups, and from there it is possible to identify and address the themes that are key to each. The first of these groups relates to the author-created text: the physical marks on the page, the way that it is produced, and how it is marketed. The second covers the reader-created text: that is, the text as it is perceived and interacted with by a reader.

3.2 - The Author-Created Text – Claims on Production and Economics

3.2.1 – Criticisms Based on Production
The collection of criticisms attributed to the author-created aspect of popular fiction centers around the idea that the work is of a lower quality because it is produced in large quantities and for monetary reasons. These criticisms go back at least as far as Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, with the character of Marian Yule, as I mentioned in chapter 2, and he fear of functioning as a “mere machine” in her production of literature, which is presented as being too frenetic to produce “really good work,” and with the character of Jasper Milvain linking the notion of chasing after financial gain with the acceptance that it means he will “never … do anything of solid literary value.”

The concern that this fiction is of low quality because it is produced in large quantities can be addressed reasonably simply. The Marian Yule style issue is commonly aimed at King, but is even more often targeted at James Patterson’s writing, who releases new books so frequently that keeping track of them can become difficult. However, the fact that a writer is prolific does not always correlate with their work being viewed poorly. So, for example, while critics are apt to be disdainful of yet another Patterson book, those same critics are likely to be welcoming of another swathe of Joyce Carol Oates short stories. This suggests that the speed of production is irrelevant to the quality that we attribute to the works; rather, a high speed of production is merely an aspect of an author and his writing that critics have decided can be used to denigrate the work by characterizing it as “churned out.” Such criticisms are absent in relation to literary authors, and non-prolific popular authors are not given any additional credit for slower production rates—nobody is complaining that George R. R. Martin is writing too slowly, for example.
The second part of this form of criticism relies upon two assumptions: that all popular fiction is written purely for financial gain, while no works classified as literary are; and that work that is written only for profit must inherently be of a lower quality.

Demonstrating that popular fiction is written solely for the purpose of economic enrichment poses somewhat of an issue. It is easy enough to find authors of popular fiction commenting on the relation between their work and the money they receive. Some of them embrace the commercial position that is attributed to their work; for example, Mickey Spillane was known to gleefully tell crowds of fans and aspiring writers to “write for the MONEY” [Schurman 5, emphasis in original]. However, others have rejected the assertion that the economic incentive is in anyway relevant to their decision to write. For instance, Stephen King in his acceptance speech for the Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters:

Now, there are lots of people who will tell you that anyone who writes genre fiction, or any kind of fiction that tells a story, is in it for the money and nothing else. It’s a lie. The idea that all storytellers are in it for the money is untrue, but it is still hurtful; it’s infuriating and it’s demeaning. I never in my life wrote a single word for money. As badly as we needed money, I never wrote for money. [Castle 9]

While these comments from the authors are interesting to look at, we have to be somewhat skeptical about what writers say about their own works and intentions. The motives behind the writing of a text are tied up in authorial intent, and we can never know what the intentions behind are piece truly are, given an author’s ability to lie for whatever reasons they may have. It is an indisputable fact that Spillane had, and King continues to have, a very successful career, but that does not mean that profit was their primary goal in writing (or even a goal at all), nor that it is the goal of other popular writers, whether they are successful or not.
This same inability to know an author’s intentions plagues our ability to determine whether literary works can be said not to be driven by economic gains—there is, after all, still a commercial interest present in works that are deemed to be literary. It is impossible to say that one author is only interested in economic gains while another is writing for entirely artistic or altruistic reasons, unless you yourself are that author, if even then.

While it is likely that market interests do sometimes affect the writing of popular fiction authors, it is impossible to say how often or how much. However, it is possible to demonstrate that such an impact is not exclusive to popular fiction: any number of apparently literary authors throughout history could as fairly have been said to be writing primarily for money as any popular author could be. Perhaps the most visible example would be the now-canonical Charles Dickens, who famously wrote in serial form and was paid by the word, the effect of which was to create an elongated style, heavy with additional description, menu plans, and tangential subplots that did not directly drive forward the story as a whole. On the other end of the spectrum, Somerset Maugham writes in the preface to his 1936 collection of short stories, *Cosmopolitans*, of his experience writing for *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, in which his stories were provided as an enticement to view the advertisements from which the magazine made most of its money. As a consequence of this, he had to develop complete stories that would fit around the advertisements, but still provide a fulfilling tale to the reader, which lead to a very concise and succinct style of writing. In the criticism of popular fiction, such interference from commercial concerns are automatically assumed to result in a lower quality of writing. For Dickens and Maugham, by contrast, who also made such changes because they were writing for money, not only did the text not suffer, but this motivation might be said to have led to the work being so well received.
Indeed, had they not had such outside influenced, Dickens’ work might conceivably have been lacking in detail, while Maugham’s style may have been offputtingly verbose.

3.2.2 – Marketing and Awards

The author’s creation of the words on the page may play a key part in the reception of a book, but there are other aspects at work—casting aside old adages, people are inclined to judge a book by its cover, along with other elements of the way that the text is presented to the reading public. For this reason, when it comes to the author-created text, the marketing department behind a book take on some level of authorship themselves, influencing how a book is perceived, and thus interpreted. Because books which are deemed popular fiction tend to get more marketing (it could be argued, in fact, that a book receiving more marketing may result in it being more likely to be classed as popular fiction), it is easy to suggest that their authorship is lodged in commercial gain.

However, while critics will suggest that literature is above commercial concerns and motivations, doing so serves to ignore the many parallels between the public presentation of such books and that of those denigrated as popular. These texts have their own marketing departments that work in very similar ways to those of popular fiction books. For example:

1. It was hard to miss the aggressive marketing campaign that surrounded Go Set A Watchman by Harper Lee, of To Kill A Mockingbird fame. Large displays filled the front of every bookstore, and the campaign was based almost entirely upon the work’s heritage and authorship, rather than any notion of its textual properties.
2. Many works deemed to be literary, particularly new editions of older texts, include a foreword by another big name author or critic. This means that the cover includes the name of another famous figure, and inside a few pages are devoted to espousing the virtues of a work before the reader has had a chance to actually read it. This functions as further marketing, drawing the reader in based on what amounts to an association with a better-known brand and claims of quality from a respected source.

While these particular commercially driven aspects of the multiplicity of authorship are just as readily seen in popular fiction, literature has a commercial marketing opportunity which it keeps to itself: the literary award. There are, of course, awards that are more likely to be given to popular fiction. However, these awards function in a different way, and make less claim to objective superiority over the majority of writing—while the Edgar Awards, bestowed by the Mystery Writers of America are given to works of perceived quality, they are framed within the idea of “quality within the constraints of this popular form of fiction,” rather than the more absolute and global decree of superior quality that is tied to the literary awards.

Awards such as The National Book Award serve to hold literature above other writing, maintaining the hierarchy, and instructing people on what is deemed “worthy” literature (it was a breakdown in this trend which upset Bloom with the award to King in 2003). Yet, these awards do not only indicate which works have been designated superior, it is the nature of any award (even ignoring that many of them hold cash prizes) to act as a commercial boon for the book as it is placed on a public pedestal. When a book is given an award, it is not merely discussed in quiet circles regarding its artistic merit; rather, it is announced through all media possible, and a new copy of the book is printed, emblazoned with the information about its new award. These awards commodify a text as much as a *New York Times* number one bestseller spot, or any sales
technique that is used to market popular fiction; they demonstrate the acknowledged commercial nature of literature itself. These awards function in relation to marketing in much the same way as a bookstore’s or library’s “literature” section does: it says “this book is fundamentally better, and you should buy it.”

3.2.3 – Conclusion

The commercial influences that critics chastise popular fiction for are almost certainly present, at least in some texts. However, these criticisms remain unjust, as it is not clear that the commercial influences function to the detriment of the work. More importantly, these influences are hardly restricted to popular fiction, and can be seen influencing all fiction and forms of writing across the board.

It is worth noting that in discussing the differences in the way that works are marketed, the distinction between texts deemed popular and those deemed literary can appear more clearly defined. This is not because there is an inherent difference in the physical texts, but because of how the categories are perceived by our culture. Marketing and criticism fall in line with the distinction in their portrayal of the texts, and the public toe the line because the divide has become so internalized in our social consciousness.
3.3 - The Reader-Created Text – Claims on Aesthetics and Form

I suggested that awards serve to position certain works above others in a hierarchy of quality by stating that a work is “fundamentally better.” While critics and academics are keen to indicate the superior aesthetic quality of literature, they often fail to define what this means, or even demonstrate that it is a definable quantity. To examine and challenge these claims, we will turn now to the concept of the reader-created text to analyze: how these notions of a demonstrable “aesthetic quality” are understood; how society’s assessment of, and criteria for, textual qualities shifts over time; and how popular forms are perceived to restrict the very possibility of a superior “aesthetic quality.”

3.3.1 – The Hunt for Aesthetic Qualities

3.3.1.1 – Aesthetic Quality in the Literary and the Popular

*I cannot locate any aesthetic dignity in King’s writings: his public could not sustain it, nor could he. [...] King will be remembered as a sociological phenomenon, an image of the death of the literate reader.*

He is a man who writes what used to be called penny dreadfuls. That they could believe that there is any literary value there or any aesthetic accomplishment or signs of an inventive human intelligence is simply a testimony to their own idiocy.

— Harold Bloom, in response to hearing that King had been selected to receive National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, 2003.

In recent years, it has become remarkably easy to find words in the defense of popular fiction. While their incidence might only be on a slow increase in the publishing world of the critic, academic, and scholar, when you turn to internet searches and opinion columns, they are abundantly present. In recent years, it has become much easier for the average person to have their opinion published, both in magazines and online, so our sources for critical thought have grown to reflect stances that exist outside of the world of restricted publishing. The greater prevalence of pieces defending popular fiction outside of academic sources is a sign of the divide that has formed between the publishing world and the broader public, that is, between a cultural elite and the general populace.

While the defense of popular fiction tends to be mounted unambiguously, it can be difficult to find the criticisms against it stated quite so explicitly. For the majority of people who hold it to be true, the hierarchy between literature and popular fiction is taken as received knowledge, and is thus not something that they feel the need to publish books or essays clarifying. When the academic world does publically discuss the issue, it either defends the idea of literature, or denigrates popular fiction. This manifests in one of two ways:
1. A mourning for the loss of the reading of “great literature,” bemoaning the preference of “the masses” for cheap paperback thrills, rather than the denser, apparently more worthy novels of, for example, Tolstoy.

2. An attack, not directly against popular fiction as a whole, but on a single author or text, which is made to serve synecdochally for the entire category.

The latter trend is particularly clear in the comments from Harold Bloom quoted at the beginning of this section. Bloom has picked Stephen King as a symbol for all that he sees as wrong with the written word today. Because Bloom has been so outspoken in his feelings, both about the decline in the reading of literature, and against King as both cause and symptom, I will use the two of them as touchstones of the debate for this analysis. For example, in the case of the first manifestation—a mourning for the decline in the reading of “great literature”—we can see that he believes King’s work will be the “death of the literate reader,” and suggests that “King has replaced reading,” stating that “[h]undreds of thousands of America schoolchildren, who will read nothing else that isn’t assigned, devour King regularly” [Stephen King 2].

Bloom’s claims that King’s writing lacks “any aesthetic accomplishment” are characteristic of the criticisms that are made against popular fiction most regularly. The statement that he makes here is that there is a quantifiably superior “aesthetic” quality of writing which is to be found in the texts he deems literary and worthy, but is absent from popular fiction. To evaluate whether this claim is true, we will turn first to Bloom’s own explanation for the superiority of a literary text. Identifying a text that Bloom holds in high esteem is easy, given that he has taken it upon himself to publish several books that serve as lists of them, such as *The Western Canon* (1993), *How to Read and Why* (2000), and *The Daemon Knows* (2015).
In *How to Read and Why*, Bloom dedicates a section to discussing Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. The following section is the part that deals most closely with the text, rather than Dickens, his other works, or wider concerns:

We will go on reading *Great Expectations* as we will continue to read *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*:

My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip. [3]

Pip’s sense of his own pathos is unceasing; it begins with his nickname and does not end when he is in the company of his godson, little Pip, as the novel achieves its original (and better) ending:

I was in England—in London, and walking along Piccadilly with little Pip—when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady in a carriage who wished to speak to me. It was only a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another.

“I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!” (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.)

I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.
Dickens in not a Shakespearean novelist; his deeper affinities are with Ben Jonson’s comedy of humors. The Shakespearean novelists [...] invest themselves in characters who change, but Pip darkens without development. Yet Dickens manipulates *Hamlet* in *Great Expectations*, by parodying it and then reversing revenge into Pip’s universal forgiveness. Magwitch, Pip’s surrogate father and Estella’s actual progenitor, returns as the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, without however converting Pip into a Hamlet.

[163-164]

This is the extent of his commentary on the lines. Although his criticisms of popular fiction rest chiefly upon its lack of aesthetic quality, in the pages that Bloom devotes to lauding Dickens and *Great Expectations*, he focuses not on anything that could be described as “aesthetic value.” Instead, he analyzes the character of Pip in relation to literary works, discusses how Pip’s character might be read (as lacking development, among other things), and goes on to situate Dickens’ writing among other literary figures. He closes his section by saying:

> How to read *Great Expectations*? With the deepest elements in one’s own fears, hopes, and affects: to read as if one could be a child again. Dickens invites you to do so, and makes it possible for you; that may be his greatest gift. *Great Expectations* does not take us into the Sublime, as Shakespeare and Cervantes do. It wants to return us to origins, painful and guilty as perhaps they must be. The Novel’s appeal to our childlike need for love, and recovery of self, is nearly irresistible. The “why” of reading it is then self-evident: to go home again, to heal our pain. [165]

Bloom deals not with word choice, poetics, or any definable sense of aesthetics as he discusses this work, rather he deals with the subjects, the context, and the way that it affected him as a reader. For Bloom, Dickens’ work is artful because of what he perceives it to achieve on
a level that is personal to him, not because of the as-yet-unidentified aesthetic ideal that he holds popular fiction to, and then finds it wanting.

Bloom’s ability to extol the virtues of a *Great Expectations* without identifying this aesthetic quality demonstrates the double standard that permeates the foundations of the distinction—literature is assumed to be aesthetically superior, and popular fiction is assumed to be inferior, until proven otherwise. To be able to maintain the divide on this criterion, we must be able to identify Bloom’s “aesthetic quality,” either by his provision, or through our own analysis, and then find it present in literature and absent in popular fiction. In an attempt to thus identify this quality, I will first examine texts which have been dubbed literary, including Bloom’s own analysis of them, and then compare their properties to those of popular fiction. As, for *Great Expectations*, Bloom chose the opening lines to deal with primarily, I will follow his methodology here and focus on opening lines as well. To select the literary texts, I will continue to dog Bloom’s footsteps, and return to his lists of approved titles.

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is mentioned in all three of the books by Bloom that I listed above: it is given a full chapter in both *The Daemon Knows* and *How to Read and Why*, while in *The Western Canon* Bloom cites the novel as a work for the American Renaissance in which Shakespeare was “overtly present” [74] and highlights the “Cervantine influence” [130] as he draws strong comparisons to Don Quixote. Bloom suggests it is “one of the few authentic contenders for our national epic” [*How to Read and Why* 235] and is a book he has “venerated since childhood” [238], so it seems like a reasonable place to look again for Bloom’s aesthetic ideal in action. Here is what Bloom has to say about the opening passage in *The Daemon Knows*:

Few initial chapters haunt me as does “Loomings,” with its uncanny onset:
Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.

I write on a damp, drizzly November day in New Haven (November 13, 2012), at four in the afternoon, when the outside air reminds me (as it does rarely) that our dreary university town actually is a seaport.

“Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States”

“WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL”

“BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGHANISTAN”

Casual, unhurried, paradoxically driven yet easygoing, Ishmael starts off upon a questless quest not at all his own. His loneliness ends with a New Bedford marriage to the harpooner Queequeg.” [128-129]
This is the full extent of Bloom’s commentary on this section of the text before he moves on to discuss other parts of the novel. In his comment on “damp, drizzly November days,” we again see Bloom’s primary concern is with the effect that he perceives the work to achieve on a unique and personal level, rather than aesthetic quality.

Turning to his brief assessment of the writing itself, the opening to *Moby-Dick* can be seen to hold to Bloom’s brief assessment of being “paradoxically driven yet easygoing,” and as serving to deftly set up a key character and the style of the narration, along with an inkling of the type of story that we might expect to follow. The first sentence could certainly be characterized as concise, snappy, and drawing us quickly into the next, and it has become one of the most quotable lines in literary history. The parenthetical in the following sentence makes it clear that the first person narrator is going to directly address the audience in a less formal style, suggesting a story-teller/folklore nature to the narrative, and allowing us to question the reliability of the narrator. At the same time, the use of relatively new physiological terms seeks to suggest a more intelligent character than we may otherwise assume. It is a start that can leave an engaged reader wanting more. In all, I can perceive Bloom’s decision to hold this up as a well-written text as substantiated by a closer-reading. (Obviously, he is concerned with more than just the opening lines, and explores a larger part of the novel in his books, but this will serve for this discussion). However, what he deems to be the superior aesthetic quality here remains unclear: he claims that the text is “casual, unhurried,” but does that translate to a universal form of aesthetic quality?

As with Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, the works of Henry James appear in all three of these Bloom books, receiving a chapter each in *The Daemon Knows* and *How to Read and Why*, and being featured in the canon list which Bloom includes in the appendices of *The Western Canon*.
[546]. The opening to James’ novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, takes a slower pace than Melville’s work as James sets this scene:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. […] From five o’clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned. The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wickerchair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. […] The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration, and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch. [1]

Within *The Daemon Knows* and *How to Read and Why*, Bloom focuses his attention, as with Dickens and Melville, on the story, how things fit together, and the larger contexts of the work, sparing little if any time to discuss the writing more closely. The nearest that he gets to this is in his discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* in *The Daemon Knows* when he, having provided two pages of the novel, says: “I have quoted all of this because it is the great set piece of the
novel and a Jamesian triumph of pace, proportion, diction, and profound compassion. The perfect rightness of the mutual tact that is a mode of love is exquisitely rendered.” While Bloom tells us that it is his opinion that this piece is perfect for these reasons, he fails to tell us what it is about these aspects that makes it so. Would a similar combination of the same “pace, proportion, diction, and profound compassion” make any work “aesthetically superior”? It certainly is not required for these features to be present in this degree, as all of the above would presumably be measured quite differently in Moby-Dick. One also has to wonder to what extent Bloom’s (or, indeed, my own) evaluation of such aspects can be said to be held true for all readers, and we will come back to this question shortly.

Although James’ writing lacks the concise style I perceive in Melville’s opening in which I felt as if every clause served a distinct purpose, his could be said to be just as artful in its use of language. In my own reading, the dense and thoroughly-developed imagery functions to provide a strong sense of location and atmosphere, serves to illustrate the characters via their surroundings and, again, hint at the sort of plot that I might expect to come afterwards. With only a few discreet observations of distant characters and surroundings, I can extrapolate the location in the class structure that these characters and the plot are situated within. Read alongside, for example, the opening to Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton, a reader would be unlikely to have trouble declaring which novel was to focus on the working class, and which on the upper. Again, I might be inclined to agree with Bloom’s declaration that this text demonstrates great skill in writing. However, while Bloom and myself both read these openings and deem them satisfying, I do not identify anything within them that might be deemed a universal or fundamental aesthetic quality for all readers. While I read the opening to Moby-Dick and feel that the writing is “concise” and “snappy,” I can imagine a reader who might interpret it as terse or graceless.
Equally, while I feel that James’ introduction uses dense imagery to provide a vivid picture of the setting, I can just as easily imagine a reader who might see it as tedious or overwrought.

These two passages, and indeed Dickens’ opening, are very different in their styles, but are all deemed to be literature and of superior quality. While the elements that I have identified in these texts might be seen differently by other readers, perhaps there is still some underlying aesthetic quality that is yet to be identified in these literary works. If so, then it should become evident by its absence in an examination of the openings to popular fiction works, which Bloom tells us lack these aesthetic qualities. Using these literary openings and my analyses of them as a measuring stick, I will now evaluate their popular fiction counterparts and provide my own readings of them. It seems obvious to begin with Stephen King:

April 9-10, 2009

Augie Odenkirk had a 1997 Datsun that still ran well in spite of high mileage, but gas was expensive, especially for a man with no job, and City Center was on the far side of town, so he decided to take the last bus of the night. He got off at twenty past eleven with his pack on his back and his rolled-up sleeping bag under one arm. He thought he would be glad of the down-filled bag by three A.M. The night was misty and chill. [Mr. Mercedes 3]

This is the opening to King’s 2014 novel, *Mr. Mercedes*, the first book in the Bill Hodges trilogy, in which the author tries his hand at crime fiction, rather than the horror stories he has become so renowned for. King’s introduction might share James’ slightly detached air, but it is distinctly different from his image-laden prose; however, its utilitarian nature is reminiscent, at least in function, of Melville’s introductory lines. As with Ishmael, we quickly get a sense of the character’s situation, motivations, and a hint of background. The short first sentence, followed by
a longer one split by a parenthetical, is here replaced with a rush of short clauses which might similarly work to draw the reader rapidly into the prose. While Melville was drawing on relatively recent medical ideas (such as “spleen” and “circulation”) to appeal to the times in his characterization, King implies that Odenkirk has fallen on hard times by hinting at the recent economic recession and contrasting the date of the setting (2009) with that of Odenkirk’s car (1997), thus grounding the work for the contemporary reader in the moderately present day. The canonical nature of *Moby-Dick*, combined with the notion that archaic language makes a text superior, serves to obscure the fact that there is actually little to distinguish between the craft that appears in the lines of Melville and those of King. If there is an aesthetic quality that is present in the former and lacking the latter, I fail to see what it is.

To stay with the crime genre, we will turn now to Sara Paretsky’s first novel, *Indemnity Only*:

The night air was thick and damp. As I drove south along Lake Michigan, I could smell rotting alewives like a faint perfume on the heavy air. Little fires shone here and there from late-night barbecues in the park. On the water a host of green and red running lights showed people seeking relief from the sultry air. On shore traffic was heavy, the city moving restlessly, trying to breathe. It was July in Chicago. [1]

Here, Paretsky’s narrator, the private investigator V.I. Warshawski, employs a series of sensory images to develop the atmosphere of the area, the precise location, and serves to give the reader an indication of the type of story that may follow. Place names function to anchor the location for a reader who is familiar with the area, while enough detail is provided that any reader might be comfortable with the setting. Paretsky subtly cultivates an air of danger through the simple combination of “rotting,” “fires” (although innocent in this precise nature), and a
struggling to breathe, but undercuts the immediate threat with Warshawski’s experience showing through, to demonstrate that none of this is unexpected: “It was July in Chicago.” Paretsky’s metaphor-free, direct, first person narration echo’s Melville’s Ishmael, but does so to paint a picture, rather than to draw us into a plot. In this way, the introduction is much more like James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* as Paretsky picks out key details from the imagery which serve to demonstrate the nature of the setting. Sitting between these two works on the spectrum, *Indemnity Only* contains similarities to both styles, to a lesser or greater extent, yet does not lack anything that at least one of the pair does not also lack.

When we move away from crime fiction to science fiction, we can see a similar use of a series of images as in Paretsky’s work, but perhaps in a more Jamesian fashion, in the opening to Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It*. The images serve to quickly give us a sense of the characters, and the world and class-structure which they inhabit, much as James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* does. The parallel may seem somewhat removed owing to the science fiction nature of the piece; however, the effect is the same: rather than securing the story within the English upper-class, the reader is shown a society with something as familiar to our world as a custody battle between two parents, but set in a foreign place where men and women might wear a white backless suit to a formal occasion.

Josh, Shira’s ex-husband, sat immediately in front of her in the Hall of Domestic Justice as they faced the view screen, awaiting the verdict on the custody of Ari, their son. A bead of sweat slid down the furrow of his spine—he wore a backless business suit, white for the formality of the occasion, very like her own—and it was hard even now to keep from delicately brushing his back with her scarf to dry it. [1]
Piercy combines the seemingly more concise and direct nature of Melville’s introduction with what I perceive as the vaguely romantic feel to the imagery that James employs, using delicate descriptions and minor actions to tell the reader a lot about the characters and the world which they inhabit.

Piercy’s supplanting of an expected scene and the knowable into a fantastical world in her introduction can serve to both ground and distance the reader, whilst also intriguing them, in the space of a few lines. This use of the unheimlich can be seen, more overtly, in the poetic imagery that Ursula Le Guin uses in the opening lines to *The Left Hand of Darkness* as she combines references to the narrator’s “homeworld” within a discussion of the familiar ideas of storytelling, truth, and pearls:

I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive. [1]

Le Guin combines effects that we see in both Melville and James. The narrator embodies the storyteller/folklore nature, directly addressing the reader and making it clear he will tell a story, in much the same manner as Melville’s Ishmael. This is then melded with strong poetic imagery and the more drawn out and extensive prose that is typical of James. If we are examining this passage for the “aesthetic quality” that Bloom claims is present in *Great Expectations*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, then the similarities between the styles—either in its apparent poetry, its conciseness, or its emotiveness—indicate that those qualities must be present in both the texts deemed literary, and those designated popular fiction. If it is required, as Bloom seems
to suggest by his constant desire to do so, that we can locate literary texts in relation to other
texts acknowledged as literary, it seems that that is just as possible to do with the popular, as I
have demonstrated above. I have yet to see any evidence that either King’s work, or any other
popular fiction, lacks an aesthetic quality that can be identified within the works that are held up
as literature.

Returning briefly to King’s work, it is worth examining his horror writing, in this case
*The Shining*, published thirty-seven years before *Mr. Mercedes*. Part of the worth in considering
this second King text comes from the fact that Bloom has provided, in tandem with *Carrie*, a
brief evaluation of it in the introduction to the 1998 collection of essays *Stephen King*:

> I will confine this brief introduction to just two of King’s works, *Carrie* and *The Shining*,
equally famous, and clearly representative of his achievement, whatever that is. With
great effort, I have just reread both, after an interval of some years. The narrative line of
each book has a certain coherence and drive; the prose is undistinguished, and there is
nothing much that could be termed characterization or inwardness, or even vivid
caricature. [2]

Now the opening lines to *The Shining*, keeping in mind that Bloom designates this as
“undistinguished” prose, with little characterization, but that the opening of *Moby-Dick* “haunts”
him:

> Jack Torrance thought: *Officious little prick.*

> Ullman stood five-five, and when he moved it was with the prissy speed that
seems to be the exclusive domain of all small plump men. The part in his hair was exact,
and his dark suit was sober but comforting. I am a man you can bring your problems to,
that suit said to the paying customer. To the hired help it spoke more curtly: This had
better be good, you. There was a red carnation in the lapel, perhaps so that no one on the street would mistake Ullman for the local undertaker. [3]

While the reader’s first thought may be that the opening appears crude, and thus make it easy to suggest a lower quality or baseness to the writing, such expressions are hardly exclusive to popular fiction—Shakespeare and Chaucer often employed bawdier humor and insults, not to mention the countless other more recent examples. That single opening line, however, can be seen as highly efficient. Its bluntness can function to throw the reader into the story in much the same way as “Call me Ishmael.” It can also be read as providing immediate characterization for Jack, turning the snide, understated description of Ullman into further description of the point-of-view character by defining this power-figure as someone Jack immediately dislikes and distances himself from. Tonally, the imagery used and choice of context, from “small plump men” to “mistake Ullman for the local undertaker,” potentially serves to situate Jack in the novel’s hierarchy and larger world, without even discussing him directly. The similarity to Melville, together with the characterizations of both Jack and Ullman through thought-out prose, leads me to question Bloom’s interpretation of King’s work, and challenge his portrayal of it as lacking a quality that is found in Melville, James, or Dickens.

The last popular fiction opening to examine comes from a crime thriller by James Patterson, an author who is a target for criticism roughly as much as King himself.

To the best of my understandably shaky recollection, the first time I died it went something like this.

Mortar rounds were thumping all around me, releasing what sounded like a shower of razor blades. I was carrying Marine Corporal Danny Young over my shoulder, and I loved this guy. He was the toughest soldier I’d ever fought beside, funny as hell,
and best of all, he was hopeful—his wife back in West Texas was pregnant with their fourth kid. [Private 3]

Writing in this instance with co-author Maxine Paetro, Patterson presents a first-person narrator recounting a time from when he was in the war in Afghanistan. Similar narrative devices to Melville’s are used to throw the reader into the action and set up the character, world, and plot. Although the violent nature of the imagery makes it harder to draw comparisons to James’ sleepy English setting, the processes are similar. This piece does tend towards phrases that might be considered clichés in places—a favorite point to be touted by critics—however, that is not to say that this writing is of a lower “aesthetic quality.” Patterson and Paetro employ clichés here to provide a first person description of the relationship between the narrator and the late Corporal Danny Young. I feel that it is thoroughly believable, and in fact probable, that a soldier who is telling the story of a friend lost on the battlefield would use such narrative tools to hide his emotions and lionize his fallen comrade. Here, these clichés do not necessarily degrade the “aesthetics” of the writing as it is possible to instead perceive them as serving their purpose in a fitting situation.

If the writing in the above literary passages can be said to demonstrate “aesthetic accomplishment,” as Bloom would lead us to believe, then those same properties must also be present in the popular fiction passages that function in much the same way. So why is it that critics can apparently find these “aesthetic qualities” in literature but find them lacking in popular fiction? The answer is that they can’t. As I noted in the way that Bloom praises these literary authors, he cannot pick out an objective “aesthetic” superiority, but rather deals with how the text influences him as a person in a purely subjective way. For Bloom, Dickens’ work is artful because it makes him feel a certain way: for him, Great Expectations allows you “to read
as if one could be a child again. Dickens invites you to do so, and makes it possible for you.” Similarly, the opening lines of *Moby-Dick* speak to him about his own “seaport” November environment. However, that is not going to be the case for every reader. For Bloom, the writing serves its purpose, just as the clichés of Patterson, or the apparently undistinguished prose of King may serve their purpose for another reader.

3.3.1.2 – A Multiplicity of Aesthetic Qualities

The debate over the way in which writing, such as Patterson or King’s, might be perceived to be lacking in quality when that is not demonstrably the case is illustrated in a back-and-forth between Arthur Krystal and Lev Grossman via articles in *The New Yorker* and *Time*, respectively, which appeared during 2012.

In his first article, *Easy Writers*, Krystal suggests that, although he does not feel that genre fiction is as good as literary fiction, it does have a place in a reader’s life—that place is for when they desire a break from “more serious literature.” To illustrate his point, Krystal invites us to “Consider two novels—one literary, the other a mystery—that begin, not far apart in time, on a railway platform” and proceeds to place the introductory paragraphs to Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* against those of Ford Madox Ford’s *Parades End*. Krystal provides the opening to Christie’s novel, and then gives us his reading of it:

It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus
Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining car, a sleeping car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small lean man, muffled up to the ears, of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward curled moustache.

It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully.

For mystery buffs, no further clues are needed: the sentences open Agatha Christie’s “Murder on the Orient Express,” still in print after nearly eight decades. Christie’s writing is like that of many others in the field: practical, no-nonsense, bordering on cliché, with a faint didactic hum. The scene is set, a tone is established, and nothing, one feels, will come between us and the story.

This analysis may recall my own examination of Patterson’s work—as with Melville, the text is more or less utilitarian. Krystal goes on to examine the opening to Ford’s novel, and provides us with his analysis of the comparisons:

The two young men—they were of the English public official class—sat in the perfectly appointed railway carriage. The leather straps to the windows were of virgin newness; the mirrors beneath the new luggage racks immaculate as if they had reflected very little; the bulging upholstery in its luxuriant, regulated curves was scarlet and yellow in an intricate, minute dragon pattern, the design of a geometrician in Cologne. The compartment smelt faintly, hygienically of
admirable varnish; the train ran as smoothly—Tietjens remembered thinking—as British gilt-edged securities.

The second passage introduces Ford Madox Ford’s four-decker novel “Parade’s End.” Ford also has a story to tell, but he’ll take his time about it, unfurling complex sentences in a series of dependent clauses, with an eye toward the unique (“minute dragon pattern”) as opposed to the generalized detail (“pink-tipped nose”). Christie’s language wants us to settle in; Ford’s demands that we pay attention (varnish is admirable, but who knew?), which, of course, puts any serious writer at risk—style may not be the man, but it surely makes us notice him.

The typical genre writer keeps rhetorical flourishes to a minimum, and the typical reader is content to let him. Readers who require more must look either to other kinds of novels or to those genre writers who care deeply about their sentences. In his article, Krystal suggests that genre fiction’s lack of “rhetorical flourishes” makes it less serious, and less artful. His example here raises some questions, however. He states that “pink-tipped note” is a generalized detail, but to what extent is this the case in a way in which “minute dragon pattern” is not? If this is a “generalized” detail, would Christie describing a character’s nose as having a “minute dragon pattern,” perhaps of reddened blood vessels, make it superior writing that requires more of its readership? Or does Christie’s writing merely serve the purpose of the scene, and if she were describing a scene where minute dragon patterns were the focus, her language might be different? In addition, Krystal seems to take as read that a work is of superior quality if it has more “flourishes,” and “takes its time” with the story—a fact that has not been substantiated here, but is rather little more than Krystal’s personal opinion.
Lev Grossman responded to Krystal’s analyses of these texts in his *Time* article, “Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle,” in which he rejects the hierarchy created by placing literature above popular fiction. He does, however, maintain the distinction between them, suggesting that they are two categories that are merely defined by a different style, not an objectively ratable distinction in quality. Grossman’s analysis of these selections and Krystal’s assessment of them serves to question the idea that there is a single criterion for “quality” writing:

It’s an excellent, highly instructive comparison, though I don’t read it the same way Krystal does. [Krystal’s reading is] praise, but it’s pretty faint. He goes on, further down the page: “Readers who require more must look either to other kinds of novels or to those genre writers who care deeply about their sentences.”

But the funny thing is, seeing it there next to Ford’s, I couldn’t help but think what a masterly opening that passage from *Orient Express* is—how taut and clean and pregnant with possibility it is. Anybody who thinks that what Christie does there is easy has never tried to do it. Christie’s writing is artless, it flows quickly through the mind, but to create that effect of artlessness requires an extraordinary amount of art. Smoothness and clarity are not things that occur naturally in prose, they require a great deal of grinding and polishing. They don’t happen by accident. She cared about those sentences, deeply.

Of course, she’s still doing something very different from Ford Madox Ford. But is it trivial? It’s commonly thought that ease and clarity disqualify a novel from literary greatness, but—and I realize I’m an outlier on this issue—I don’t think that should be the case at all. As Krystal points out elsewhere, difficulty in fiction was largely an innovation
of modernism—it was one of the period’s stylistic signatures. But as such it’s not a permanent feature of the literary landscape. Before modernism there were great books that read easily (Dickens, Turgenev, Austen). There have been great ones since then, too. Krystal sees Christie’s opening as straightforward and unobtrusive and perceives this as a demonstration of poor quality writing and lack of care for her sentences. Krystal, on the other hand, is suggesting that both the works hold superior quality, but in different ways—it is merely that Krystal is too narrow in what he is willing to perceive as good quality, or fails to perceive quality that is not to his taste.

In another *New Yorker* Article, “It’s Genre. Not that there’s anything wrong with it!,” Krystal responded, rejecting Grossman’s view that Christie’s writing is artful in its own, but different, way:

But one of the things we don’t expect is excellence in writing, although if you believe, as Grossman does, that the opening of Agatha Christie’s “Murder on the Orient Express” is an example of “masterly” writing, then you and I are not splashing in the same shoals of language.

This sort of response demonstrates the problem that arises from critics holding popular fiction to a standard of undefinable “aesthetic quality.” It allows critics such as Bloom and Krystal to comment on the superiority of literary writers owing to the presence of this mysterious “aesthetic quality,” while declining any merit to popular fiction because, according to such critics, those texts lack it. Then, when someone such as Grossman responds by suggesting that there is not a single aesthetic ideal to be met, but a variety of productions that may display artistry or mastery in a different way, figures such as Krystal have a rebuke ready that is not
supported by evidence but rather amounts to the claim that the original commentator does not understand, or does not read literature in the “correct way.”

The above conversations suggest that the aesthetic quality of a work is unquantifiable, and subject to a reader’s own perceptions. A reader can suggest that a work has potent imagery, that the writing flows well, or that it makes them feel a particular way, but these are all personal experiences and will not be shared across the board—such experiences are a matter of opinion, formed through context and personal history. No text is universally loved, and to suggest that the people who dislike it are merely reading it wrong functions to either deny a difference in human experience, or to claim a hierarchical superiority over the experience of those you believe to have read the text “incorrectly.” This brings us to the crux of the conversation about “aesthetic quality” in literature: the assessment of whether a work succeeds in its purpose will be dependent upon subjective opinions and personal taste, not on objective facts that can be defined in any plausible or satisfying way.

3.3.1.3 – The Reader and Subjective Aesthetics

Scorn, like beauty, is apparently in the eye of the beholder.


In 1967, the French literary critic Roland Barthes published “The Death of the Author.” In this essay, Barthes argues against the idea that there exists an objective reading of a text that is defined by the original intentions of the author: “The explanation of a work is always sought in
the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” [Lodge 313]. He suggests that the reliance on discovering what the author “meant” is convenient for critics because it allows for criticism to have an achievable end goal:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the author […] beneath the work: when the author has been found, the text is “explained”—victory to the critic. [Lodge 315-316]

However, Barthes states that “We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash,” and suggests that we only deny this fact because “[o]nce the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” [315]. For Barthes, the meaning of a text is not objectively created when the author first lays down the words, but rather created subjectively as the reader interprets the words: “every text is eternally written here and now” [315] within the context under which it is read and “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. […] a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” [316]. He suggests that “to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth [of the ‘message’ of the Author-God]: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” [316].

Over the next decade, this mode of thought gained in popularity. A year after Barthes published his essay, Michel Foucault echoed the concern, suggesting that the hunt for the
objective intention of the author functioned as a limit to free interpretation in his essay “What is an Author?” He directly suggests that the author is “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning,” and desires an ideal “form of culture in which fiction would not be limited by the figure of the author” [Irwin 22].

In 1972, Wolfgang Iser laid out his own take on the authority of the reader in “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” Starting from Roman Ingarden’s 1968 approach to the phenomenological theory of art, Iser notes that “in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” [295]. He suggests that this means

The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader—though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. [295]

Iser goes on to elaborate on how the final form of a text is created through the interaction the reader has with it, which, as with Barthes’ theory, allows for a multiplicity of subjective interpretations to any text based on a reader’s own experience, rather than a single “right” objective assessment:
Thus begins a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications worked out by the reader’s imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own. In this way, trivial scenes suddenly take on the shape of an ‘enduring form of life. What constitutes this form is never named, let alone explained, in the text, although in fact it is the end product of the interaction between text and reader. [296]

The key suggestion here is that art may be present in a text, but it is the reader’s mode of interacting with that text which creates any “aesthetic” value. From this perspective, in other words, when a critic like Bloom praises texts that he deems to have “aesthetic” value, he does so in relation to how he perceives them to make him feel. If, then, he finds that popular fiction does not provide him with this aesthetic satisfaction, it does not mean that the quality is lacking in the work, but rather in his interaction with the work—he has not had the relevant experiences, etc. to appreciate the work, or, as Iser would put it: he is not the “Implied Reader.”

A similar case was made by Norman Holland, in 1975, in 5 Readers Reading:

To analyze the text in formal isolation as so many “words-on-a-page” (in the old formula of the New Criticism) is a highly artificial procedure. A literary text, after all, in an objective sense consists only of a certain configuration of specks of carbon black on dried wood pulp. When these marks become words, when those words become images or metaphors or characters or events, they do so because the reader plays the part of a prince to the sleeping beauty. He gives them life out of his own desires. When he does so, he
brings his lifestyle to bear on the work. He mingles his unconscious loves and fears and adaptations with the words and images he synthesizes at a conscious level.

It is, therefore, quite impossible to say from a text alone how people will respond to it. Only after we have understood some specific individual responds, how the different parts of his individual personality re-create the different details of the text can we begin to formulate general hypotheses about the way many or all readers respond. Only then—if then. [12]

Holland, like Iser (but perhaps to a lesser degree), still acknowledges the necessity of the text, but rather than referring to it as “art” suggests it may be a “matrix of psychological possibilities for its readers.” And in his presentation of the possibility of unlimited possible readings, he makes allowances for non-serious readers: “One would not say, for example, that a reader of that sentence from “A Rose for Emily” who thought the “tableau” described an Eskimo was really responding to the story at all—only pursuing some mysterious inner exploration” [12].

Emphasizing the range of subjective responses that are created by different readers, he calls into question any study that focuses solely on the text: “The work finds its fulfillment, so to speak, when a reader gives it life by re-creating the work in his own mind. The text as such almost vanishes in the astonishing variability of different readers’ re-creation of it.”

David Bleich’s *Subjective Criticism* lays out an argument for a subjective paradigm that has a lot in common with the other reader-response critics’ suggestions (“It is not possible to separate the meaning of words and of literature from the way language and literature are handled by speakers and readers” [7]), but focuses more upon why such a mode of study is important, and what the problems are with the current methodologies:
The standards for literary and linguistic knowledge have been developed in imitation of the well-established quantitative sciences. New Criticism has formulated “objective” explications of literature, and Generative Grammarians have formulated distinct logical rules to explain linguistic functioning. By and large, however, the objective standard of knowledge when applied to the language-dependent disciplines has actually lost a good deal of its authority. Students electing these disciplines because of their promise of subjective and social involvement are increasingly disappointed by the acrobatic maneuvers of their teachers to present literary and linguistic knowledge “objectively.”

[...] Underlying my discussion is my argument for the recognition of the subjective paradigm, which I think is considerably more compelling and pragmatically consequential than the currently prevailing objective paradigm. I will try to show that under the new paradigm, our present conception of language may be productively altered; such alteration implies new conceptions of the act of interpretation, the act of reading, and the pedagogy of language and literature.

[...] Too often in current practice, academic thought is segregated from the classroom cultivation of literacy and language awareness. My view is that subjective thinking can end such segregation and can make important new knowledge, and the means for acquiring such knowledge, available on a much larger scale than heretofore considered possible. [8-9]

Bleich suggests that the objective paradigm comes to stifle the thoughts of new readers who might have developed their own interpretation of a text had they not been didactically told that it meant one specific thing. While Bleich’s primary concern is with schools and pedagogy, the
same issues are at work in our larger culture, and I will return to the problems that the objective paradigm pose in my discussion of culture in chapter 4.

Some studies have been conducted by critics over the years to analyze how readers may respond to a text in isolation. Their results have been varied, but enlightening. The two that I will use as examples here are from I.A. Richards and Norman Holland.

Richard’s study predates reader-response theory, taking place in the 1920s. He conducted “An Experiment in Criticism” on students at Cambridge University and published his results in *Practical Criticism* (1929). He explains his methodology:

> For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognized. [25]

The anonymous written responses that Richards receives (he refers to them as protocols) did not agree with his own interpretations of the poems, and he found them to be startlingly inadequate. It is his opinion that: “The deficiencies so noticeable in the protocol writers […] are not native inalterable defects in the average human mind. They are due in a large degree to mistakes that can be avoided, and to bad training” [31]. This assessment is dismissive of the student’s own interpretations in a very similar way to Krystal’s response to Grossman, in that Richards did not receive the responses he expected and desired from the students, so he deemed them to have read the texts incorrectly, having failed to achieve “the mental condition relevant to the poem.” This demonstrates the problem with believing in a correct, objective reading that must be found, ignoring the possibility of context-dependent subjective readings.
In the post-Barthian years of Holland’s writing, the study went a little differently—the results are documented in *5 Readers Reading*. Throughout the book, Holland provides many examples from his study and his analysis of them. I will provide a brief overview of the first:

The story was William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” and its one description of Miss Emily as a young girl was as clear as a description could be. The narrator, apparently one of the townspeople, says “We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a sprawled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door.” Faulkner has pictured the Griersons as exactly as a photographer would, but that precision disappears when the description passes over into the mind of a reader. It disappears even if the reader is as well trained and fairly experienced as the five students of English literature who are the subjects of this book. [1]

While Richards was keen to dismiss a differing of readings as deriving from a lack of training, Holland recognizes it as being *in spite* of their training. The fact that they provide a range of responses is seen as a matter of the way they engage with the text, rather than an inability to engage with the text “correctly.” Holland goes on to provide the responses of each student with a brief analysis—I include his full, somewhat extensive, description of the candidates and their responses here as I feel that it paints the clearest picture of this experiment and their varied interpretations:

Good-natured, easygoing, dapper Sam singled it [the tableau] out as virtually the first thing he wanted to talk about in the story: “The father was very domineering. One of the most striking [sic] images in the book is that of the townsfolk looking through the door as he father stands there with a horsewhip in his hands, feet spread apart and
between or through him you see a picture of Emily standing in the background, and that pretty much sums up exactly the kind of relationship they had.” Sam was stressing the father’s dominance and, in doing so, was positioning the townspeople so that they could see Emily between her father’s legs.

This was part of what he found highly romantic in the story. “The frailty and femininity that that evokes!” he sighed. “Just that one frail, ‘slender figure in white,’ just those words there really show us the Emily that was and the Emily that might have been.” Yet, almost at the same moment he was responding to this lacy, feminine Emily, he could say, “The word tableau’ is important. While they [the townspeople] may be envious and while they may be angry at the way that these people act, they yet need it, it seems, they in a way like to have it, much as one is terrified at the power of a god and yet needing him so much and, you know, sidling up to him and paying homage to him in the same way I think Emily comes to function as this god symbol” A curious turnabout from frailty to femininity.

By contrast, Saul, a scholarly type, was circumspect. Sam, in his expansive way, trusted his memory, but Saul, when I asked him about that image, took out his copy of the story and read it over carefully to himself. “Ummm. I had remembered the word ‘tableau,’ and I had forgotten the rest of it. ‘Horsewhip’ there— rings— ‘spraddled silhouette.’ That seems right to me. That summarizes the relationship,, I think. She’s in the back in white, of course. I think of these white gowns in the plantation balls. They father a ‘spraddled silhouette.’ He’s no longer stern and erect. He’s spraddled across the door.” Sam was seeing Emily’s father as exactly the opposite way from Sam, as a weakened, sprawled figure, at least until he read over to himself the sentence with the
horsewhip in it again, “A horsewhip suggesting all sorts of nasty, sexual, sadistic overtones,” but then he blurred that image. “Do they mean the horsewhip rather than his own stern demeanor? Or just the normal embodiment of his traditions suggests the decline like ‘spraddled’ does? And then ‘framed by the back-flung front door’ just completes the tableau. It’s a nice device. Faulkner makes that one work, too. That’s a nice emblem.” Well, maybe so, but Saul had so divided it into questions and alternatives as to leave me quite puzzled about what he thought the thrust of the image finally was.

Shep presented himself as a rebel and radical, but his reading of the tableau seemed to me no more original or idiosyncratic than Saul’s or Sam’s. I read the passage to him, and he commented simply, “O.K. Protective image. That he’s defending Southern womanhood, perhaps, and defending it in that same sort of mindless way that says, ‘Well, now, we’ve got to defend it.’” He went on to decide that Southern womanhood might well have defended itself and then to make a suggestion quite opposite to “protective image.” “You could, I suppose, as an alternative interpretation say that the horsewhip is something which he’s also adept with indoors as well as outdoors, but I don’t think so. Maybe there’s overtones that Daddy is sadistic enough—horsewhips being pretty sadistic things to carry around when you’re greeting people, you know—that Daddy is sadistic enough where he wouldn’t mind taking a belt at Emily once in a while, but I don’t think they’re much more than overtones.” In talking about the tableau as such, he talked only about Emily’s father, and in this curiously alternative or opposed way. Earlier he had recalled Emily as a young woman (and the tableau is the only place she is so described): “I can see her as a very good-looking, dark-haired girl who had a penchant for wearing
dark clothes.” Again, I sense in his substituting dark for white a will opposing the text, although at the same time, Shep said he liked this story very much.

Sophisticated, sardonic, somewhat cynical, a lapsed Catholic with aspirations toward aristocracy, Sebastian did not discuss the tableau as such, although he clearly remembered it in typing Emily as “the aristocrat of the Southern town, whose father is the original superego with a horsewhip, beating off suitors.” “He’s denying her access to suitable sexual partners.” Often, Sebastian tended to distance and type the characters this way and to flirt with the actual, physical details. Here he saw Miss Emily as “the aristocrat,” her father as “the original superego,” but converted to “suitors” to “sexual partners.”

Sandra, the fifth reader, was a tall, very attractive woman, gentle and subdued in her manner. She liked the story intensely, had read it several times, and had even, in her freshman year, written a term paper on it. Yes she recalled the tableau oddly: “They said they always had this picture of him standing, you know, sitting in the door with a whip in his hand.” As for Emily, “I see her as very young and dressed in white and standing up, I guess she’s supposed to be standing up behind her father, who would probably be looking very cross., say, if someone had come to call on her. No doubt, she would have a certain amount—Possibly fearful, but probably more regretful because she’s being, they even say, robbed of something at that point…. There would be a great amount of strain on her face because of her inability to do anything except just watch.” Sandra saw the emotional overtones in the tableau in a more subtle, emphatic way than the four male readers did, so that she, too, had her own version of the image.
Indeed, one can say that each of the readers had a different version of Emily and her father. He was standing, sitting; erect, sprawled; domineering, weakened; sadistic, protective, and so on—sometimes even to the same reader. Emily was dressed in white, as for a plantation ball, or black; frail, but godlike; fearful, but “the aristocrat.” Some of these differences involve outright misreadings, but most do not. Conceivably, one could “teach” or coerce these five readers into consensus, but even so, whatever in each person’s character originally colored his perception of the tableau would go on coloring his perception of every other element in the story. [1-4]

Holland’s study deals with a very small sample size, and with a skewed demographic: four men and only one woman. However, this actually lends strength to his argument, as the similarity between the readers makes the stark difference between their responses that much more notable. If five university students can have such different opinions about a few lines of text, who has the authority to say which, if any, is objectively correct? Such a wide range demonstrates the subjective nature of our interpretations—their difference does not make them wrong. On the contrary, they are all correct for themselves, in that moment, in terms of the attendant social, intellectual, and personal contexts. If these readers were to read the same passage ten years later, they would inevitably be in a different context and read it differently. But their readings would still be, in this sense, valid.

These reader-response critics largely deal with meaning, yet when there is such a variety of opinions available for the interpretation of meaning, it is fair to say that the interpretation of any supposed “aesthetic” quality is going to be subjective as well. That aesthetic, as Iser suggests, is created by the reader, not the text. When Bloom says “I cannot locate any aesthetic dignity in King’s writings,” the keyword in that quote is “I.” All he is saying is that for himself,
as a reader, the matrix that King provides does not create within his reading experience a sense of aesthetic pleasure. While he attempts to write about the text objectively and then discard the text itself as flawed, he is—from this perspective—making a categorical error. It would be more accurate for him to say that the text is merely not to his liking, just as the texts that he lauds may not be to the liking of others. No one is wrong to say that they do not like a text, or that they cannot appreciate it, but they are wrong to say that the reason for it is because the text itself is bad, and wrong to say that therefore nobody should appreciate it.

Any reader that approaches a text brings with them a wealth of lived experience. A place where it is perhaps easier to understand the effect such experiences might have upon a reading is in the use of clichés. While many of the experiences that might affect interpretation will be based on life details—a relationship with a parent, the economic environment the reader grew up in, etc.—this one can be more easily defined by whether you have come across the expression in the past. Clichés are defined by their repeated use, and we recognize them because we have either a) seen them many times before, or b) have been told by a reliable source that the phrase is a cliché. If a reader who was familiar the clichés and idiomatic expressions of our society were to come across the phrase “don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” then they would likely think the writer was being lazy, and label it poor writing (unless the cliché fit the scenario, as, e.g., in the opening to *Private*). Yet, if a reader had managed to never encounter any occurrence of the phrase, then they are liable to read it very differently, perhaps as a particularly clever analogy that they wish they had thought of, or a comfy phrase that they welcome.

To extend this more clearly to the realm of aesthetic issues in fiction, we can consider Sarah Kane’s final play *4.48 Psychosis*. If the context of consumption of the play were for it to be read on the page with no prior knowledge of its history or its author, the text could be
conceived as an, at times, barely connected string of words and phrases in a broken stream of consciousness, veering to new indistinct subjects randomly, and punctuated with sections of numbers laid out on the page in an apparently random pattern. However, if you were to change that context to seeing it performed, or knowing that some critics believe the text to be Kane’s suicide note, an expression of her battle with mental illness and hospitalization, it becomes something very different. The interpretation can still be mitigated at this level as well, though. A reader who has little-to-no experience of mental illnesses may still perceive the play as gibberish or unrelateable. Meanwhile, a reader who has suffered from mental illness, or knows people who do, may find it to be a beautifully painful and haunting rendering of the experience.

Our own lives contain infinite layers of experience that filter our understanding of a text. A reading that we produce is created by the texts interaction with us, and our entire lived-experience. When Harold Bloom chastises the readers of popular fiction, informing them of its lack of “aesthetic merit,” claiming that they have failed to read it correctly as the “trash” that it is, he denies them their own alternative experience of the world, instead insisting that they rely on his experience to modify their own. As Holland suggests: it may be possible to teach consensus, but it will not change the way they experience the world outside of those texts.

3.3.1.4 – The Primed Reader

It seems far more accurate, therefore, to depart from critics like Bloom, and to acknowledge that the act of interpreting a text is a subjective matter, and every reader’s definition of “aesthetic quality” will be different depending on the contexts (both social and
personal) that they read under. However, the divide that our culture has instigated between popular fiction and literature, though grounded in a false objectivity, has become an aspect of these contexts, and it comes to define the reading experience for many readers in our society.

This is best understood when you combine the above reader-response approach to understanding aesthetics with the theories of readership put forward by Stuart Hall in “Encoding and Decoding in the Media Discourse” and by Elizabeth Flynn in “Gender and Reading.” These theories are explained succinctly in Merja Makinen’s *Feminist Popular Fiction*.

Hall posits three types of reading:

1. The “Encoded” reading – here the “audience adopts the ideologies in the text.”
2. The “Oppositional” reading – where the “audience rejects the mores” of the text.
3. The “Negotiated” reading – in which the audience accepts some of the ideas, but is resistant to others.

Elizabeth Flynn’s model functions similarly, but focuses more upon the interaction between text and reader, and which of the two has agency in the dynamic. Her three interaction states are:

1. The “reader-dominated” interaction – “the reader resists the text, becomes bored and probably discards it.”
2. The “text-dominated” interaction – “the reader’s self is effaced and ‘the text overpowers the reader and so eliminates the reader’s power of discernment.”
3. The “mutual dialogue” interaction – “reader and text interact in such a way that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance.” [Makinen 13]

Although these models were originally designed for ideological discussions, they can be used just as effectively to understand the control the hierarchy has over the subjective judgement of “aesthetics.” While there are obviously many criteria involved in defining the kind of
interaction a reader will have with a text on an ideological level—political views, social experience, etc.—the suggestion of an objective aesthetic divide between popular fiction and literature plays a large part in how a reader will respond to a text’s perceived quality.

The social expectations which we have developed for both the popular and the literary function as a form of priming to govern our interactions. The average reader has internalized the concept of a literary hierarchy, and it affects their own judgement when they come to a book that they have been told sits in one level or another of that hierarchy.

When a reader picks up a text that has been deemed literary, they are encoded to find the text to be of superior “aesthetic quality”—if they find the book unenjoyable, then they feel that they are merely failing to understand the work and must try harder to see what others have seen, rather than exercising their own judgement. In this situation, the interaction becomes dominated by both the text and their social context and they reject their own judgement in favor of the text and society.

Then, if such a reader were to pick up a popular fiction work, the priming functions to suggest the writing will be of inferior “aesthetic quality” and not really worth reading. If they find it enjoyable, it is not because it is “aesthetically good,” but rather that they themselves must have poor taste and it becomes a “guilty pleasure” and something to enjoy between “more serious literature.” Here, the priming has served to make them an oppositional reader in a reader-dominated interaction—here, the reader rejects the texts actual qualities to instead, once again, be dominated by their social context.

It is only a reader who has rejected the claims of the divide between popular fiction and literature who can thus take place in a truly negotiated reading through an interaction of mutual dialogue. The objective definitions of quality that are inherent in the divide serve to overrule the
subjective personal experience of quality a reader may have, before they have even had a chance to crack the spine.

3.3.2 – Aesthetics Over Time

The concept that notions of quality are best understood as subjective, rather than objectively definable, offers an explanation as to how our idea of what literature, or “superior” writing is, has shifted over time. Every reader’s individual definition of quality is tied to their social context and their lived experience, so as centuries pass and the social contexts for readers change, so do their assessments of the qualities of fiction. When the contexts of the cultural elite who instigate the distinction are shifted, this then causes the definition of what is literary to shift as well.

We can see this effect on an author like Shakespeare. While he pre-dated the divide that we see today, and was a writer of drama for entirely mixed audiences, he is now widely considered to be an elite figure in literature. Similarly, an author like Charles Dickens, who was writing for magazines, paid by the word, and fond of cliffhanger endings to help ensure the reader would buy the next issue, would originally have been designated as an author of popular fiction. As time has moved on, however, we have shifted him to the other side of the divide to the extent that even Bloom venerates him as a great writer of literature. The same can be said for Edgar Allan Poe, for whom few would dispute his work being classed as literary today; and the works of Arthur Conan Doyle are moving in the same direction, despite the fact that both writers were once dismissed as purveyors of trite sensationalism by the elite critics.
One of the most recent authors to begin to make this transition has been Raymond Chandler, whose writing was originally denigrated and appeared in pulp magazines, but is now more apt to be considered literary in many circles. For example, Arthur Krystal recently praised Chandler’s work as literary, piggybacking on W.H. Auden’s comment that Chandler’s “powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art.” Chandler shunned having his work categorized as literature, feeling his work was unworthy and that he had just “jacked up a few pulp novelettes into book form” [Krystal], and Krystal is quick to point out Chandler’s professed distaste for the hardboiled form that he wrote in. However, the author’s opinion that his work is not literary does not change the way that it is perceived, nor does it affect the fact that his are hardboiled detective novels that are now being held up as literature.

As is often the case in these cases, the suggestion that Chandler’s work is in fact literary is couched in a suggestion that this is not “good genre fiction,” but rather that it has become literary by “transcending the genre.” James Harold discusses this issue in his essay “Literature, Genre Fiction, and Standards of Criticism” as he cites Edmund Wilson’s examination of Chandler’s work, in which Wilson denies Chandler’s heritage within detective fiction, as well as his self-claimed mentor, Dashiell Hammett:

While some genre fiction is thought of as respectable and serious, it is not seen in this way unless it is seen as transcending its status as mere genre to become something more important. Edmund Wilson makes this explicit when he denies that Raymond Chandler’s works, which he admires, are really detective novels:

“But Chandler, though in his recent article he seems to claim Hammett as his master, does not really belong to this school of the old-fashioned detective novel.
What he writes is a novel of adventure which has less in common with Hammett than with Alfred Hitchcock and Graham Greene … It is not simply a question here of a puzzle which has been put together but of a malaise conveyed to the reader.”

Sara Paretsky also noted this in relation to crime writing during her opening remarks for the session “Voices on the Margins” at Bouchercon 2014:

As lovers of crime fiction, we are further marginalized by writing genre fiction. We aren’t writers, we are crime writers. Every now and then a carrot bobs up in the stew and is proclaimed as having “transcended the genre.” Kate Atkinson, for instance, regularly “transcends the genre.” The rest of us are hacks.

This argument is as cyclical as the response that if you think both literature and popular fiction are masterful then you are “reading it wrong.” It claims that genre fiction is bad, because if it was good, it would no longer be classed as genre fiction. This demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the divide between these categories: critics, over time, can take a work that was seen as low quality popular/genre fiction, and redefine it as literature of high quality. In this process, the text itself has not objectively changed, and its contents will still fit the classifications of the genre that it always had. The change does not take place in the text, but rather in the larger social context and the reader’s subjective perception of the text.

This larger contextual change can be seen in the shifts that have taken place in the way that the “literature” has been defined by the cultural elite in our society over the years. This shifting can be seen clearest by looking at definitions before and after the Modernist movement. In Arthur E. Bostwick’s 1914 book, *Earmarks of Literature: The Things That Make Good Books Good*, he self-consciously struggles with many of the same issues that Eagleton would cite as
being problems with defining literature nearly a century later. However, he pushes through these issues to produce some key features which he feels a text must contain to be seen as “good.” In doing so, he coaches his ideas in a frame that permits him to discard the opinion of a figure who does not agree with him through arguments that are similar to Krystal’s suggestion that a reader “has not read it correctly,” or Richards’ indication that they must be trained to read it correctly.9

We have seen that literature has earmarks—that there are signs to identify it among the mass of trivial, unfit, ignoble and ephemeral works with which it first sees the light and under which it is often buried. Those signs may be vague; it may not be possible for some to read them. He who does not know correct English from incorrect cannot condemn the ungrammatical book; he who has not a sense of fitting will not be able to discard what is unfitting; he whose feeing for rhyme or rhythm is deficient will never be a judge of poetry. And he whose pulses do not respond to what is noble and inspiring will never recognize nobility and inspiration when he meets them in literature. Some readers, doubtless, never acquire these things. Others, unfortunately, have lacked opportunity.

Bostwick’s criteria for “literature” are as follows: “To pass muster [literary form] must be: (1) Grammatical; (2) clear; (3) appropriate to its subject; (4) characteristic of the writer” [9]. The primary requirement of literature, to his mind, is that it imparts its meaning clearly to the average reader:

No style is good that is not clear. In fact, no book is a work of good literature when the ordinary reader cannot understand the author’s meaning readily, whether his difficulty arises from the subject or from the way in which it is treated. If the subject is a complex or confusing one, which requires close study, the book is a technical treatise or a text.
book, and is therefore, as we have seen, without the borders of pure literature. If, on the other hand, there is no particular difficulty with the ideas that the writer wishes to impart, but his meaning is obscure owing to the way in which he tries to express them, then his want of clearness mars the literary quality which his work would otherwise possess. [76] A century later, and this primary concern with clarity and a style that fits the material feels like a distant notion. This becomes evident when figures like James Harold provide us with their own reading policy, as he does at the opening of his essay discussing the critical treatment of literature versus genre fiction:

Many years ago, I adopted a deliberate policy in order to guide my choices in fiction reading. I resolved to alternate a “serious” book with a “fun” book: so Elmore Leonard’s *Swag* would follow Vladimir Nabokov’s *An Invitation to a Beheading*; after Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, I picked up Stephen King’s *Under the Dome*. I still follow this pattern, at least most of the time. The appeal of the approach is simple. Serious literature and genre fiction offer different kinds of pleasures. Serious literature is rewarding, but it requires some effort and attention, and so it makes sense to take a break and read something lighter in between, rather like running intervals.

This view that literature has become a chore we feel we must do, and popular fiction is the relaxing break after is also evident in Arthur Krystal’s “Easy Writers”: “Call it a vice (Edmund Wilson does), call it an addiction (Auden’s word), a guilty pleasure in book form simply means time off from heavy lifting or heavy reading.”

If literature is heavy enough going to read and interpret that Krystal and Harold feel the need for a “break” afterwards and to read something “lighter,” it would seem to be betraying Bostwick’s primary principle. Lev Grossman speaks to this development in literature in his 2009
article for *The Wall Street Journal*—“Good Books Don’t Have to Be Hard.” Here Grossman suggests that that the social contexts that gave birth to Modernism led to authors introducing the concept of difficulty to the novel and, in doing so, the idea of a text that is a chore to read and from which you might take a break to relax. He concludes that this was necessary at the time that the Modernists were writing, but suggests that we have moved on from that period now, and with it fiction needs to move away from this style.

Let's look back for a second at where the Modernists came from, and what exactly they did with the novel. They drew a tough hand, historically speaking. All the bad news of the modern era had just arrived more or less at the same time: mass media, advertising, psychoanalysis, mechanized warfare. The rise of electric light and internal combustion had turned their world into a noisy, reeking travesty of the gas-lit, horse-drawn world they grew up in. The orderly, complacent, optimistic Victorian novel had nothing to say to them. Worse than nothing: it felt like a lie. The novel was a mirror the Modernists needed to break, the better to reflect their broken world. So they did.

[...]

This brought with it another, related development: difficulty. It's hard to imagine it now, but there was a time when literary novels were not, generally speaking, all that hard to read. Say what you like about the works of Dickens and Thackeray, you pretty much always know who's talking, and when, and what they're talking about. The Modernists introduced us to the idea that reading could be work, and not common labor but the work of an intellectual elite, a highly trained coterie of professional aesthetic interpreters. The motto of Ezra Pound's "Little Review," which published the first chapters of Joyce's "Ulysses," was "Making no compromise with the public taste."
Imagine what it felt like the first time somebody opened up "The Waste Land" and saw that it came with footnotes. Amateur hour was over.

He then revisited this issue in 2012 in his response to Krystal’s “Easy Writers” article:

It’s commonly thought that ease and clarity disqualify a novel from literary greatness, but—and I realize I’m an outlier on this issue—I don’t think that should be the case at all. As Krystal points out elsewhere, difficulty in fiction was largely an innovation of modernism—it was one of the period’s stylistics signatures. But as such it’s not a permanent feature of the literary landscape. Before modernism there were great books that read easily (Dickens, Turgenev, Austen). There have been great ones since then, too.

This is not to suggest that a text cannot be difficult. However, it should not be unjustifiably difficult—the style should suit its subject matter—and we should not believe that difficulty makes writing literary or superior in quality, just as we should not believe that “ease and clarity disqualify” a text from being good.

There are some critics who would suggest that this shift over time of popular novels coming to be deemed literary is due to the fact that the writing has “stood the test of time.” However, this seems a question, and potentially spurious, criterion for literature given that the National Book Award is largely bestowed to books in the year of their publication, when the test of time they have stood would be measured in months.

The fact that a novel that was once defined as popular fiction can be redefined as literature and held to a higher level of quality undermines the whole notion of the divide. The text has not changed in any way: the words that appear on the page remain unaltered over the years. Thus, the ability to shift it at a later date either accepts that the dismissal of a work because it was popular fiction was previously incorrect (an acceptance which is masked behind
the continued dismissal of all popular fiction that has yet to “transcend its genre”), or it acknowledges an arbitrary or self-interested nature to the decisions behind what texts are considered literary.

3.3.3 – Aesthetics of Form

After a lack of aesthetic quality, one of the more frequent criticisms seen against the quality of the writing in popular fiction is that it is a slave to formula. Critics perceives popular fiction to have a form to fit to and expectations that must be met—some of these are explicit, while others are left unspoken. One of the more explicit examples of an attempt to lay out these rules appears in the form of S.S. Van Dine’s essay Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories, which includes entries such as: “There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than a murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much bother for a crime other than a murder.” [Haycraft, 234]. The implications, critics suggest, are that a) the formula restricts the story from making any sort of statement (a claim that will be examined in chapter 4), and b) that because of the perceived formula, the work is predictable and uninteresting—it is this second claim that we will examine here.

While some critics cite this as a reason to avoid all such writing, Arthur Krystal, in a kinder tone, suggests that the restrictions that the formula creates, while being an intrinsic part of the category, are an aspect which draw the reader to these texts:

Genre, served straight up, has its limitations, and there’s no reason to pretend otherwise. Indeed, it’s these very limitations that attract us. When we open a mystery, we expect
certain themes to be addressed and we enjoy intelligent variations on these themes.

[“Easy Writers”]

First, we must question whether Krystal is right in saying that these limitations truly exist. If there is, as he suggest, a formula for all genre novels—that is, all mystery novels must contain “these things,” all science fiction novels must function in “this way,” all romance novels must be told through “these narrative modes,” etc.—then those formulas have undoubtedly changed over the years. Crime writing today is very different to what it was a century, or even half a century, ago: the works of James Patterson and Agatha Christie would not be mistaken for each other on any level. This change has been enacted by the repeated subversion of the forms that Krystal says are limitations to the works—if the limitations can be so easily subverted, they are not very limiting. Once something becomes expected, a writer changes the style and provides something new, as has been the case with almost any art form.

Yet, Krystal frames this evolution of style as merely part of the genres’ “formulaic nature,” putting genre in a position where it cannot win: for Krystal, if a genre text does not fit the form, then he sees it as only serving to emphasize the form:

Still, [Raymond Chandler] knew that certain expectations must be met, since it’s the formulaic nature of genre writing (variations serve to underscore such expectations) that keeps us coming back.

This rhetoric can be added to the list of inescapable circular arguments that literary critics have created around popular fiction:

1. “This popular fiction is equally well-written as this ‘literature.’”
   a. “You are reading it wrong.”
2. “This work you say is high quality literature was just genre fiction before, so genre fiction can be good?”
   b. “No. This work has transcended the genre.”

3. “This genre fiction novel does not follow the formula you say genre fiction follows.”
   c. “That only serves to demonstrate that genre fiction is a slave to its form.”

While critics are apt to decry popular fiction’s adherence to form, they fail to address the fact that this is not an issue which is exclusive to popular fiction: literature is just as likely to be held to a form as popular fiction is. The idea that following a strict form for writing makes it bad is entirely forgotten when they turn to praising literature. Harold Bloom will contentedly wax lyrical on the brilliance of Shakespeare’s work, but neglects to criticize the playwrights adherence to the forms of the five act play, the traditions of comedy and tragedy, and the expectations tied to those forms (which were already well established among the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights). Similarly, the vast majority of lauded poetry (particularly that which was penned over a century ago, before Modernism and the Beat Generation) adheres to a range of formulas, whether it be something as simple as a rhyme scheme, the stricter forms such as sonnets, or the stringent rules that define the villanelle. If we wished, we could pick up Krystal’s own rhetoric here, and suggest that blank and free verse only serve to “underscore such expectations” as these forms provide.

Over the centuries there have been countless other forms applied to writing, from the heroes journey to the bildungsroman, often equally visible in texts that have been deemed literary and ones deemed popular fiction. The five act play and the sonnet were vehicles for the stories, jokes, and messages which Shakespeare wished to impart, and today the genres of mystery and science fiction serve the same purpose for Patterson and Le Guin. As with criticism
against the prolific production rates and commercialization associated with popular fiction, the criticism against genres and form could just as easily be applied to either category and is not inherently a negative aspect, but critics have latched onto it as a way to denigrate popular fiction. The attempt to create an arbitrary hierarchy, and in doing so denying the ways in which writing functions, is summed up succinctly in Grossman’s retort to Krystal:

And all this is to imply that literary fiction is, by contrast, free from formulas and conventions. It’s one of the curious conceits of literary fiction, one of the ways that it tries to separate itself from genre fiction, that it invokes a kind of doctrine of literary exceptionalism whereby it’s considered free from or above convention. But that is itself a convention, and I’m pretty sure literary fiction actually has the usual number of them. In other words — and here’s the real nightmare, horror-movie reveal, wait for it — literary fiction is itself a genre, just like mysteries or westerns or fantasy. (I can’t resist quoting M. John Harrison here: “The sooner literary fiction recognises & accepts its generic identity, the sooner it can get help.”)

3.4 - Conclusion

The dividing line between popular fiction and literature is built upon a series of criticism of popular fiction. Each of these falls apart when examined more closely, and mostly for the same reason: the divide is only present as a construct which we impose upon fiction, and any criticism that a critic tries to apply to one side of the dividing line, is either falsely established, or can just as easily be applied to the other side of the line.
In the author-created text, we see this with claims that popular fiction writers “churn out” works without thinking, whereas a literary writers are just called “prolific,” and in claims that popular fiction is commercialized, which can just as easily be said of literature and is more of a critique of our society than its fiction.

In the reader-created text, many of the claims are built upon the idea that there is an objectively superior “aesthetic quality” to be attained in writing which will appeal to all readers, and that this is lacking from popular fiction. Yet, evidence suggests that any sense of “aesthetic quality” is to be judged subjectively, and there is not one superior type of writing: some readers will prefer texts which have been designated “literary” while others will lean towards popular fiction—that does not mean either person is wrong, merely different. These claims are then defended with the use of cyclical responses that refuse to enter into a conversation on the topic, merely dismissing the criticism of the claim and of the divide.

The divide prevents readers from developing their own subjective readings of texts through the instigation of objective meanings and interpretations, which serve to deny the lived-experience of individuals. This effect does larger damage to our cultural consciousness, and this will be discussed in chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Cultural Consequences – The Distinction as It Limits Our Understanding

4.1 - Introduction

Having traced both the origins of the divide between literature and popular fiction, and how it is maintained today through notions of “aesthetic quality,” I turn now to examine the ways in which this distinction affects our culture.

To discuss this properly, I need to settle, at least provisionally, on an answer to the question of “why do people read?” From there, I will look at how the ideas of canonization and objective knowledge that I raised in chapters 2 and 3 influence what people read and how they interpret those things, both in academic and public spaces. This will lead to a discussion of the negative effect that the distinction has upon our society’s readerships, and to the cultural boons that can be derived from both a mass readership of popular fiction and the serious study of it.

4.2 – Why Do We Read - What “Should” A Book Do?

To talk about how the distinction affects us culturally, I want to first identify, at least provisionally, a primary reason why we as a culture read, so that—in turn—I can consider what cultural benefits, if any, might be lost or damaged by this distinction between popular fiction and literature.

There are, of course, innumerable possible answers to this question. Moreover, the distinction itself complicates the matter, since it suggests that people read popular fiction for one
set of reasons, but literature for a different set. To address both of these issues, I will begin by looking at two of the key suggestions of what fiction’s purpose is, or “should” be, and how the criticisms of those ideas tie into the distinction that is manifested between popular fiction and literature.

4.2.1 – Escapist Fiction: Providing a Release

We often hear that people read popular fiction to escape (that is to receive a release from their day-to-day lives) by losing themselves in an engrossing plot. This is one of the most criticized reasons to read, and the term “escapist fiction” is rarely applied to a text in a positive way, and more often than not it is applied to texts that society deems popular fiction, while serious literature remains curiously exempt from what amounts to this accusation. In “Easy Writers” Krystal suggests that “[George] Orwell had a weakness for escapist fiction, or ‘Good Bad Books’”—citing the title of Orwell’s essay in which he defines them as “the kind of book that has no literary pretensions but which remains readable when more serious productions have perished.” Similarly, Bloom suggests that escapist fiction would “provide a distraction from the social and moral issues of the day” [Stephen Crane’s Maggie 14]. For these critics, if you read to escape, you are reading poorly written work (with “no literary pretensions”) which has no substance beyond its basic plot: for them, it is designed to immerse the reader in an apparently unsophisticated and therefore problematic way, and require nothing more of them.

This analysis of the idea of escapism is flawed in that its claim that these works provide escape is tied—automatically, it would seem—to the idea that they are poorly written: they are
“bad books.” This point is refuted by Bloom himself in *How to Read and Why*, as he holds Dickens’ work as superior, but suggests that it can be read as a form of escape: “I used to reread Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* twice a year, wearing out several copies in the process. If that was escape, I was glad to escape” [163].

Furthermore, this analysis only considers a single layer of a text. While the plot of a novel might be engrossing (as the plot is usually seen as the source of escapism), there are subtexts present within any fictional world that can act as a commentary on the very “social and moral issues of the day” which Bloom suggests the fiction serves to distract from. These elements can be seen in a range of popular fiction:

- Stephen King’s *Mr. Mercedes* sets the story within the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash, depicts the continued issues associated with race relations, and provides a study of the treatment of mental health within our society through the examination of three characters with similar issues but in differing circumstances.

- In the introduction to Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the author states that she is “describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies” [v]. In this particular instance, Le Guin creates elaborate lies about a race of androgynes as a method of examining our own gendered society.

- James Patterson’s *Private* uses its ex-military protagonist to examine and critique the war in Iraq through flashbacks, the character’s issue with trauma, and the reactions that other characters have to his service.

- Walter Miller’s 1959 novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, provides a narrative built across three time periods and explores important cultural and political questions about the
position of church and state in relation to each other, and the topic of nuclear armament and usage in a period of cold war.

These real world issues tend to be presented either through parallels or as the backdrop to stories, and this method is just as likely to appear in texts that we call literature as those that we call popular fiction. This positioning means that it is possible to ignore them, if you so choose—it is possible to read texts for a plot and willfully ignore the suggestions towards issues with our culture, but it is also possible to read more deeply, and see the text as an analysis of the world around the reader. “Escapism” is not a textual property, it is a mode of interaction that the reader has with a text. This is, in a sense, a variant on, or perhaps even the flip side of, aesthetic quality: when we hear about escapist fiction we tend to think of Stephen King, but clearly, the right reader could just as easily escape into a haiku, Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, or a Shakespeare play.

Even seen as a reader’s relationship to a text, escapism cannot be seen as a negative thing. The ability to escape can provide personal benefits. It can allow a text to serve as self-care; for example, for those struggling with depression or other mental illnesses. It can also facilitate a text being a more efficient educational tool, particular (but not exclusively) in the case of children’s fiction which aims to teach life lessons. However, books cannot teach unless they are engaged with, and it is often the features of a text that do the most to promote such engagement (such as a plot that keeps you wanting to know what happens) that mean it is labelled as escapist fiction.

Escapism is certainly a reason to read, but critics’ suggestions that it is a reason to read only problematically popular texts is, like the distinction between the literary and the popular itself, erroneous. It may be that a certain individual only reads those texts by means of which he
or she finds relief from day to day troubles, but such texts could, as I have suggested, just as easily be *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter* as *Mr. Mercedes* or *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In short, whatever escapism is, it is not the sole province either of works classified as popular or literary.”

**4.2.3 – A Representation of the Real: Sensationalism vs. Realism**

As with the claim that escapism is a problematic motive for reading, and only applicable to popular fiction, critics similarly criticize popular fiction for being a source of trite sensationalism and cheap thrills for its readers. The other side of this coin is those same critics lauding literature for its adherence to realism. Here, the suggestion is that readers turn to popular fiction for their substance-less thrills, while they go to literature for a tangible portrayal of reality.

In 2009, Nancy Bentley discussed this point, citing William Dean Howells to ground her conversation:

Howells’ responsibility as a leading man of letters, as he saw it, was not only to publish and disseminate masterpieces of fiction, but to counter the degenerative effects of a vast machinery of “shows and semblances” appearing everywhere in the American landscape. “Love of the marvelous,” Howells laments, had produced a species of fiction on par with the circus and burlesque theater. Conceding that even a cultivated person might enjoy “the trapeze” in occasional “moments of barbarism,” Howells is nevertheless adamant that circus-like attractions of unreal spectacle and melodrama, when absorbed into
fiction, produce a literature of distortion. He writes, “In a world which loves the spectacular drama and the practically bloodless sports of the modern amphitheatre,” novelists too often fall into the “service of sensation.” Like “burlesque and negro minstrelsy,” such literature will inevitably “misrepresent life.”

The mark of worthy fiction, in contrast, is precisely its aspiration to “represent life”—that same goal pursued, through their respective professional methods, by museums of ethnology, history, and fine art. Howells enlists for fiction his era’s supreme confidence in the power of expert representations. Realism has cultivated an audience of serious readers who ‘require of a novelist… a sort of scientific decorum. He can no longer expect to be received on the ground of entertainment only.” Howells claimed his friend Mark Twain for the campaign to cultivate American fiction, but it was Henry James who represented the “finished workmanship” and “dispassionate analysis” that were central to the highest realism. Only fiction like James’s, possessing the kind of mastery on view in museum exhibitions, will be able to adequately “represent life.” [24]

While the claims of reading popular fiction for sensationalist thrills and reading literature for its ability to “represent life” are interconnected, the two are best discussed in series.

### 4.2.3.1 – Sensationalism and Cheap Thrills

The suggestion that sensationalism is a negative reason to read, and one which is only applicable to popular fiction, has three key problems. The first issue parallels the problems that we saw with claims of “aesthetic quality”: it is an undefined quantity, judgements about which
will inevitably be subjective. Applied to fiction in its broadest sense, the term “sensational” would merely mean that a fiction produces a sensation, an effect that, for the right reader, one would hope would apply to all fictions (you could argue that even a perceived lack of sensation would itself be a sensation). However, in the sense in which I suspect Howells means it to be used, it is something that contains an element of surprise, a “wow factor,” or just something unusual and perhaps fantastical. Bentley’s example of a sensationalist event in mass culture in the introduction to *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture 1870-1920* is, as I mentioned in chapter 2, “The Crash at Crush” in which “more than forty thousand people traveled by chartered railcars to a site fifteen miles north of Waco, Texas, where they prepared to watch a novel form of entertainment: the head-on collision of two locomotive trains” [1]. Bentley feels comfortable drawing a parallel between this event and “[t]he high literary culture of this period” such as the work of Edith Wharton, where she sees “‘the rush of physical joy’ of riding in a motorcar” and the “dread of a ‘possible crash’” [21] as being in the same class of sensationalism and spectacle. The term clearly has a very broad definition as we use it, and finding a dividing line between “sensationalism” and “any event worth reading about” would surely prove difficult.

If we assume that critics decrying sensationalism are taking a more restricted definition of what the term might mean, perhaps as something closer to spectacle, we run into the second issue: the fact that sensationalism is addressed as a problem that is exclusive to popular fiction. This falls afoul of the same failures of the divide as seen in the commercial and aesthetic claims. Bentley’s identification of Edith Wharton’s work (traditionally classified as literature) as containing sensationalist events betrays this point from the start. The presence of this sensationalism did not preclude Wharton’s work from being considered literary, but in popular
fiction, it seems to serve that purpose in the eyes of critics. While Bentley is positing the turn of the century as a point of convergence between literature and mass culture, sensational events, depicted in a sensational manner, can be seen in countless works deemed literary, both before and after Wharton. The sensationalist violence in *Titus Andronicus* does not prevent Shakespeare from being considered literary, and the same can be said of the farcical catastrophes present in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale.” It is a relatively small subset of fiction that might be said to not contain sensationalism (judging from my presumption of Howells’ use of the term). Only those stories that hold themselves to dry drama, perhaps *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Madam Bovary*, but even in dramas that do adhere to “representing life,” there is a risk of sensationalism—it is not an element that is exclusive to popular fiction.

The final issue with this claim is that it casts sensationalism as a fundamentally bad property which leads to a lack of substance or cultural worth, without explaining why this would be beyond an unsupported notion that spectacle fundamentally obscures any other meaning. As suggested by the above examples, as a standalone property it does not, even by critics’ standards, lead to the loss of artistry or the ability to “represent life.” Realism and sensationalism are not mutually exclusive, if for no other reason than the fact that events that many people would regard as shocking and sensational take place in real life. On an average day, people will survive shocking car crashes—the fact that this may be seen as a sensational event does not preclude it from being real, nor does it prevent an account of it from being told “artfully.” Why should it be any different in fiction?
When Howells suggest that “The mark of worthy fiction [...] is precisely its aspiration to ‘represent life,’” he draws a problematic distinction between high and mass culture. For, just as sensationalism is not unique to works classed as popular fiction, realism or a push to “represent life” is not exclusive to literature.

As with literature, an attempt to “represent life” in popular fiction can manifest either directly (in a rendering of events that could believably take place in the real world), or indirectly (offering an insight into life through parallels and allegories), or some combination thereof. An example of the first might be seen in Sara Paretsky’s novels, which are set very much in the real world of her contemporary Chicago and deal with current day matters, in a setting where the crime is motivated by real world issues (environmental degradation, insurance fraud, etc.), and the punches break (fictional) ribs. This direct “representation of life” as a mark of worthy fiction takes another step in validating Patterson’s use of potential clichés in the opening lines of *Private*, as such speech patterns would be a more accurate “representation of life” than, for example, Jamesian diction.

The indirect “representation of life” takes a less traditionally “realist” style, in which the world that is created, and the events that take place, seek to “represent life” through their use of allegories and literary parallels. This is perhaps most often seen in science fiction: Ursula Le Guin uses this approach to characterize issues over gender, while Marge Piercy represents a litany of real world problems set around believably real characters housed within a futuristic world. Literary works are just as likely to use these indirect methods to “represent life,” however, because science fiction and fantasy works are less likely to be considered literary, these
allegories are perhaps likely to be less overt. For an author to provide a cultural commentary or message within their work, it is not always necessary (or productive) to directly depict reality as it currently stands, and these indirect methods can help to provide such a message without sounding overly didactic.

It could, of course, be argued that Howells’ claim is that to be worthy a text must only “represent life” directly, ruling out such allegories and parallels in favor of attempts at pure realism. It is, of course, questionable how closely any text is truly able to “represent life” in a direct fashion—any number of language theories illustrate the difficulties of explaining the connection between printed words and the “real” world that they ostensibly represent, such that our very use of language can perhaps be best understood as a form of allegory or parallel. If Howells were to allow something in between the two, then there are plenty of literary works that seek to “represent life” through allegory (Angela Carter’s famous retelling of fairy tales in the form of feminist literature in *The Bloody Chamber*, for example), and this use of the distinction would rule those texts outside the bounds of the literary.

Bostwick’s 1914 definition of literature supported the idea of the non-direct representation of life, lending credence to the wider definition, which would unavoidably include a significant amount of popular fiction:

Another thing is true of literature as a form of art—it does not have to represent nature exactly. Written speech that professes to describe nature must do so, of course, but this is usually science or travel and not generally pure literature, though it may be. A literary masterpiece may be entire fanciful; its object may be to inspire a feeling of vague beauty or even of mere uneasy suspicion or terror, as of objects seen through a mist. Thus the criticism “it is not true to nature” may be quite beside the point. Even where the writer’s
aim is to give an impression of reality he may often best do this by departing from literal
description. [90-91]

Looking at the supposed reasons that readers turn to literary versus popular fiction books
here demonstrates the basic issue that critics have with trying to define literature. As was
discussed by Terry Eagleton in *The Event of Literature*, any definition that is provided would
either allow in too many texts that critics want to designate as popular/inferior (as in representing
life, including allegory), or becomes exclusionary to texts that they want to deem literary (as in
representing life, excluding allegory).

**4.2.4 – A Bloomian Motive**

These suggestions of why we read and what a text should do help to illustrate how the
divide fails to be consistent in its delineation once again, and further demonstrate how the
interaction between reader and text remains a subjective experience—even the notion that the
primary reason to read is for personal enjoyment and relaxation is contested, by those who
suggest that popular fiction is the light break to the “hard work” of “serious literature.” Because
of this subjective nature, it becomes impossible to pin down a single, objective reason for why
people read, no matter many of them we analyze here. To combat this issue, I will instead
employ the tactic I have used previously, and pick up Harold Bloom’s suggestion as to why we
read. Taking the reasoning of one of the greatest critics of popular fiction and instigators of the
divide as a starting point, I will suggest a modification, that I feel should leave us in a good
position to fairly analyze the cultural implications of the distinction.
In one form or another, Bloom has repeatedly made the same suggestion as to why we should read: “to understand ourselves.” In the 2001 *Business Insider* article “In Conversation with Harold Bloom,” Bloom was asked what he would put on a reading list for Bill Gates:

At the risk of sounding too predictable, I would have to start by recommending the works of William Shakespeare. Everything we could possibly want to know about ourselves we can find in Shakespeare. He invented himself so brilliantly that he invents all the rest of us. He is at once the best, the most original, the strongest cognitive and aesthetic writer there has ever been, in any language. And yet he's also an entertainer. He's directly concerned at every point with keeping the play moving.

I find that reading Shakespeare is like overhearing yourself, which, by the way, is very different from hearing yourself. When you overhear yourself, you're almost unaware that you're the speaker. In other words, you learn about yourself without any self-consciousness. There is this moment of literal non-recognition, in which you're shocked that you are speaking. For people who find it difficult to talk to themselves […] reading Shakespeare is an incredible way to learn about themselves.

Bloom goes on to add Cervantes to the list for the same reason:

Miguel de Cervantes, who wrote the classic, *Don Quixote*. Cervantes remains the best of all novelists, just as Shakespeare remains the best of all dramatists. There are parts of yourself that you will never know fully until you know *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Panza*.10

This trend can be seen throughout *How to Read and Why*, in which Bloom gives at least a brief explanation of why we should read each of the texts he is examining. They run to the same tune as each other, of reading to understand your inner-self. I provide excerpts here:
- Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*: “How to read *Great Expectations*? With the deepest elements of one’s own fears, hopes, and affections: to read as if one could be a child again. […] The ‘why’ of reading then is self-evident: to go home again, to heal our pain” [165]

- Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*: “We have to read it—though it is harrowing—because, like Shakespeare it alters our consciousness” [166]

- Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*: “Hans Castorp matters now, in 2000 and beyond, because the reader, seeking to understand him, will come to ask herself or himself, what is my dream of love, or my erotic illusion, and how does that dream or illusion affect my own possibilities of development or unfolding” [193]

On this issue, I agree with Bloom. Gaining knowledge about oneself is, to my mind, one of the key aspects of the reading experience. This is, of course, still a subjective matter, and cannot be said to be a universal experience.

However, I do have an issue with Bloom’s above suggestions, which leads to the modification I would make to his motive for reading. I believe that he is too limited in the scope of what he hopes to glean from reading. He suggests that we read to know ourselves, but suggests that we must shun social information, as well as social service in fiction. For example, in his discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* in *How to Read and Why* he says:

*Why read *The Portrait of a Lady*? We ought to read for many purposes, and to gain copious benefits, but the cultivation of an individual consciousness is certainly a prime purpose, and a major benefit, of deep reading. Zest and insight: these are the attributes of the solitary reader’s consciousness that are most enhanced by reading. Social
information, whether past or contemporary, seems to me a peripheral gain of reading, and political awareness an even more tenuous dividend. [173]

And in his Business Insider interview he stated:

Moreover, I am very unhappy with any attempt to put the humanities, and literature in particular, in the service of social change. So many novels these days are overpraised for social purposes, and as a result, what should be regarded as supermarket fiction is canonized by the universities. This is a terrible disservice to the reading public.

He suggests that we read to understand ourselves; however, we do not exist in a vacuum, thus we cannot understand ourselves by reading fiction in a vacuum. Attempting to remove the text from its social context limits our understanding of the text. For example, to remove Shakespeare from its social context would make any understanding of the text superficial at best—there were historical and political events at work, and without knowledge of these events certain themes and messages would pass by even the closest of readers. Furthermore, it damages the understanding of our selves: When we read to understand ourselves, an understanding of our situation is implicit in that, and thus we must also be reading to understand our culture, our society, our history, and the people we interact with daily. There is a give and take between fiction and culture because each informs the other, and therefore one cannot be fully understood independently. Without an understanding of our culture, we cannot hope to properly know ourselves—when Bloom calls for one, but denies the other, he promotes a process that is destined to fall short of its goal, and precludes and opportunity for social advancement. Through an understanding of both ourselves and our culture it is possible to identify problems in each, and comprehend the actions of others that may have left us puzzled before.
Taking Bloom’s reason for reading—to “know ourselves”—but understanding that, despite his own suggestions, that relies on knowing our society and our cultural history, and that knowledge can lead to social change, we can pose the question: does it matter that our society instigates a division between popular fiction and literature and, if so, why?

4.3 – Canonization and Objectivity - Limiting and Dividing Readerships

The issues of canonization, objective versus subjective knowledge, and priming, as I raised them in previous chapters, might not seem to have inherently bad properties. However, in application, they are tools by which the distinction crafted between popular fiction and literature creates a cultural divide based on readerships.

4.3.1 – The Distinction as an Impediment to Understanding

The distinction, particularly as it is currently maintained by canonization, leads academics and critics to focus their attention almost entirely upon a relatively small subset of fiction that they deem worthy of critical study, which they then define with the honorific title of “literature,” and thus ignore much of popular and genre fiction. Scholars who have been indoctrinated with this mindset suffer from the priming that I discussed in chapter 3, meaning that if and when they should happen to turn to popular fiction, they have been primed to expect certain things: lack of “aesthetic quality,” sensationalism over substance/realism, etc. Because of
the subjective nature of an interaction between a reader and a text, this leads them to find these elements, while becoming blind to aspects that they may not expect to be present. The same effect can be seen when an indoctrinated scholar reads literature, and they are primed to pick up on “aesthetic quality” rather than matters of cultural importance, etc.

The distinction’s drive towards a reader finding in a text only what they would expect, and thus missing out on other aspects is highlighted in a pair of essays that appear in Tony Bennett’s 1990 essay collection, *Popular Fiction: Technology, Production, Reading*. In Neil Harris’ essay, “The Operational Aesthetic,” he demonstrates how the distinction between “literature” and popular fiction, through canonization, leads scholars to miss out on the cultural matters of a text, both internal and external. Harris recognizes an art to Poe’s stories, but suggests that their position within literary canon has served to distract critics from examining them for the ways they influenced and were influenced by contemporary culture. In a comparison to the hoaxes of P.T. Barnum, Harris uses Poe’s texts to draw wider cultural evaluations based upon America’s infatuation with mystery at the time, seeking to explain this passion, and demonstrating how that part of our culture could be seen in even the highest elements of political campaigning and public opinion:

In 1860, shortly before the presidential election, William Dean Howells wrote a brief but influential campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln. Howells faced the problem of proving that this little-known western lawyer, poorly educated, with few intellectual pretensions, was really quite intelligent, and equal to the burdens of the office he sought. Howells turned to Lincoln’s reading habits to make this point. Having a mathematical bent of mind, he wrote, Lincoln was naturally pleased ‘with the absolute and logical method of Poe’s tales and sketches, in which the problem of the mastery is given, and
wrought out into every-day facts by processes of cunning analysis’. In the isolation of the rural Midwest men could sharpen their wits by studying the reasoning of C. Auguste Dupin. Lincoln allowed no year to go by without reading some Poe, added Howells to clinch his argument. [411]

In his introduction to the section, Tony Bennett suggests that “Harris’s discussion casts valuable light on an episode in the cultural history of Poe’s stories which has been eclipsed by their subsequent installation as important works in the literary canon” [399].

On the other hand, Jacqueline Rose in “Peter Pan and the Commercialization of the Child” comes at the problems posed to interpretation by canonization from the other side. Rose claims that J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan has been condemned to the heading of “children’s fiction” where it cannot properly be appreciated. Here, as it is outside of the literary canon, argues Rose, scholars are unable to appreciate its true artistic and literary value. She closes her essay with a call for the play to be released from its heading of “children’s fiction” so that it might be viewed as a “serious” play:

The wish which I have often seen expressed that Peter Pan should at last be freed from the wrong connotations of infancy (mere childishness) and into the upper reaches of our cultural life (‘the intuitive wisdom of childlike humanity’), by being interpreted by a director such as Peter Brooke or performed at the National Theatre as a wholly serious play.

While both Harris and Rose take issue with canonization, their approach to the matter differs. Harris suggests that the system as a whole is problematic as it serves as an impediment to the proper understanding of the text, and through that our culture and ourselves. Meanwhile, Rose merely takes issue with the position of a text within the canon, and the effects that that has
upon its interpretation. While she sees the canon as restricting the reading of this text, she believes that the problem will be fixed by redefining the position of the single text within the structure. Her call for *Peter Pan* to be removed from children’s fiction and placed in literature, only serves to emphasize the arbitrary nature of canons and this distinction. In these cases, the canons serve to dictate an objective reading of each text, thus restricting the potential engagement of a reader and their ability to create their own subjective understanding of the text, as Bleich suggested in *Subjective Criticism*. By outlining the limits that a canonical understanding of these texts creates, both of these essays serve to illustrate how the distinction can be toxic for our interpretation of texts, both those which are considered literary, and those that are not.

### 4.3.2 – Divided Readerships

The priming achieved by the provision of objective readings through canonical expectations has a greater effect upon academics and critics, who are housed within the intellectual elite who define these canons. However, the effect is less potent on the general populace—as evidenced by the huge sales figures for bestsellers, which are denigrated by most academics and critics.

In this way, canonization works as a form of censorship which serves to maintain an intellectual elite, an elite that is cultivated in expensive institutions such as universities, and thus serves to encourage class separation. Literature has become a form for the elite, who have prescribed correct ways of reading it—the general populace are then told that they should strive
to read it, but if they present a dissenting view of a text, they will almost certainly be told they have read it incorrectly. This leads to situations where reading literature becomes a chore, or where such readers are led to feel that these texts are in some way above them. Rather than toeing the institutional line, the vast majority of the reading population are reading novels deemed as popular fiction and non-literary, which are less likely to have correct objective readings already ascribed to them, and which we can assume contain cultural messages that they can relate to, or reflect views that they can identify with. However, the same elite that tells them they are reading literature wrong indicate that these texts are “trash.”

This means that, for academics, there is a huge body of work that is being created and read en masse that they do not study. This obviously limits both their range of inquiry and, hence, our broader knowledge and cultural understanding, in effect discounting the majority of readers as “wrong” or lacking in “discernment” rather than attempting to understand the appeal of these texts and their cultural significance.

The separation that this process cultivates between the intellectual elite and cultural awareness can be further illustrated, as it pertains to a historical understanding, by examining Paul Holsinger’s essay on stories written for boys during World War II: “‘Blood in the Sky’: The World War II-Era Boys Series of R. Sidney Bowen.” Holsinger’s extensive examination of Bowen’s “stories for boys” from the 1940s obsesses over several of the issues that I raised in chapter 3, suggesting the writing is “hackneyed” and the storytelling “clichéd.” He further chastises them for their “bigotry and racism” in relation to their treatment of foreign enemies. These criticisms are framed within Holsinger’s bewilderment as to how these books could have been so popular and commercially well-received. This is rather missing the point. Judgements about the quality of the writing are subjective, but the “bigotry and racism” indicate the cultural
influence here. If, rather than being caught up with his perception of the quality of the writing, Holsinger had examined the purpose of these books in a time of war, his essay may have been more illuminating rather than stating that these books are bad and the “scorn heaped upon [them] […] was well deserved” [77]. The books served as a form of propaganda for the youth, functioning to glorify the armed forces and to encourage a patriotic drive to join the war effort themselves at a later date. To condemn the “bigotry and racism” is likely correct, but it is more useful when framed within an explanation of why it is there in the first place—the question of whether it is right to publish false, racist propaganda in the service of the country is almost certainly a more important question, and more the style of question that academics should be seeking to answer.

For the author, fiction that is widely read can be a powerful tool to push ideas and to encourage social change. However, it is also a useful instrument for scholars in measuring the cultural pulse, both historically and contemporarily, and understanding how society is presenting and comprehending the issues of the time.

4.4 – Popular Fiction and Culture

I have established that the divide appeared over, roughly, the last two hundred and fifty years, and that it is based on claims that do not stand up to scrutiny. Above, I have shown what this distinction between the popular and the literary does to our culture’s reading habits, its ability to blind academics to various aspects of texts, and its encouragement of cultural divides. Now I will turn to the way that popular fiction can help our culture when the distinction is
ignored or overcome, and address some of the cultural fears that have been expressed over the prevalence of a mass popular fiction.

### 4.4.1 – Academics Understanding Culture

While the study of some popular fiction is gaining traction in places, there are certain areas that academics struggle to take seriously as a field of study. However, these areas can pay great cultural dividends when examined properly. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of one of these areas would be the lesbian pulps of the 1950s. These are dismissed in much the same way as the Mills & Boon books, or Harlequin romances; however, they present a very clear picture of the give and take between culture and fiction, as each informs the other.

In her essay “Gender and Sexuality in Popular Fiction,” Kaye Mitchell explores the roots of the genre, suggesting a strong development in 1950, and elaborating on the cultural assumptions about such a text at the time, and the surprising response the work received:

Tereska Torres’s *Women’s Barracks* (1950) – ‘the frank autobiography of a French girl soldier’, as its tagline proclaims – was one of the first books to be published in the new paperback format by Fawcett Gold Medal Press and is generally held to be the first lesbian pulp novel. It sold 1 million copies in the first year of publication, more than 3 million in total before going out of print. […] In the light of its success, a young jobbing journalist, Marijane Meaker, was asked by editor Dick Carroll at Fawcett to write a novel about lesbian affairs between college girls. The result was *Spring Fire* (1952) (‘A story once told in whispers now frankly, honestly written’). Carroll informed Meaker that the
book had to have an unhappy ending (e.g. ‘the lesbian going crazy’) or copies of the book ‘would be seized by the Post Office as obscene’, telling her, ‘you cannot make homosexuality attractive. No happy ending’, and insisting that ‘your main character can’t decide she’s not strong enough to live that life. She has to reject it knowing that it’s wrong.’ Meaker followed these instructions (one character decides she’s not gay, the other ends up in a mental asylum), and acknowledged that the book was meant to be a titillating read for heterosexual men, yet she says: ‘when it came out I got just hundreds of letters, boxes of them, all from women, gay women. It took them all by surprise, this big audience out there.’ The first printing sold more than 1.4 million copies, whilst Ann Bannon’s *Odd Girl Out* was the second bestselling paperback of 1957. Hundreds of lesbian pulp titles were produced through the 1950s and ’60s. [129]

The women behind the “hundreds of letters” demonstrated a market interest that had not been anticipated previously and, as Mitchell notes, the production rate of this type of work increased dramatically over the following decades. However, it was not only the rate of production that changed—the tone, and what was allowable within the plot, moved with it.

Mitchell indicates that as time went on, more positive endings began to appear, in which homosexuality was not denounced in the same way, such as in the works of Ann Bannon [132]. The original books were marketed to men, because the culture at the time dictated that those were the only people that would be interested in such texts. However, the pulps had an influence on the culture, in which more lesbian readers came out of the woodwork to have their voices heard, and helped to move culture forward on the road to acceptance. This in turn then influenced the future writings of this area of fiction as authors marketed to the newly
acknowledged demographic. This give and take between culture and fiction is further elaborated on in Merja Makinen’s *Feminist Popular Fiction*:

Long before feminism, some of the smaller romance imprints had story-lines including lesbians, usually as the third party who comes between the protagonist and her lover/husband. The dénouement tended to have the protagonist returning to the man’s arms, having learnt the error of her ways, while the lesbian takes to drink, or becomes insane. Despite the condemnatory closures, these earlier narrative had allowed some brief exploration of women’s love for another woman. Naiad Press’s narratives were much more openly celebratory. Initially their main writers were Sarah Aldridge and Katherine V. Forrest (who also wrote feminist detective fiction), followed by Michelle Martin, whose lesbian regency romance, *Pembroke Park* (1986), was highly successful. In these overly lesbian romances, it is the lesbian lover who rescues the woman from an unhappy heterosexual relationship, the preponderance of rape scenes between the male lover and the protagonist serving to highlight the failings of heterosexuality. [42]

Not only does popular fiction demonstrate a source of cultural knowledge and potential for social change, due to the way that we have historically treated fiction, it is potentially freer to do so than the more closely guarded “literature.” Pulp fiction, in particular, was able to “get away” with including much more in the way of controversial issues and daring subjects than other, more closely regulated forms, Mitchell suggest:

Pulps resisted regulation through their sheer availability: they were sold via drugstores and newsstands, rather than conventional bookshops; and by popular presses (such as Fawcett, Beacon and Midwood) which were not subject to the controls of more ‘literary’ publishing houses. [132]
Responding to Lee Server’s assertion that the pulp publishing boom of the 50s was ‘subversive’, Christopher Nealon writes that ‘pulp fiction seemed to open the door to unregulated consumption of literary materials, out of reach – briefly indeed – of censors, but readily available to readers’. [133]

This speaks in opposition to the idea that is often voiced by critics of popular fiction, in tandem with the idea that popular fiction is a “slave to its genre” (see chapter 3), that genres are fundamentally conservative, and thus unable to push for social change. Makinen further pushes against this idea of conservative form in the introduction to her book:

> Are romance, or fairy tale, or detective fiction inherently conservative formats? The received assumption is that they are. Researching the feminist debates within each of these genres, I have been struck by the marked similarities. Each genre has been having basically the same dispute. Feminist theorists assert that the conventions of genre are conservative and therefore inimitable to feminist writers, whereas the genre historians argue that the genre contains subversive and proto-feminist examples. Thinking through the question of why the same debate was surfacing in all the genres has brought me to the conclusion that no popular genre can be called ‘inherently conservative’ because there are all such loose, baggy, chameleons. [1]

The “bagginess” of popular fiction and its supposed “forms” enable it to be malleable to any message, and thus, as Scott McCracken puts it, allows provides “popular fiction’s ability to gesture to a better world” [126].

This sort of “gesturing” is not uncommon in any fiction, and popular fiction is no different. It frequently raises social and cultural issues, either suggesting a way in which things
could be better, or merely highlighting functions and problems within society. As I mentioned before, this can particularly be seen through the parallel worlds created in science fiction, which can function as a way to question the nature of humanity, offering its own brand of philosophy and demonstrating that existentialism is not exclusive to texts deemed “literary.” These issues are not always the primary topic of the text, but sometimes provided as subtext to a more prominent plot—because scholars are primed to address these texts as escapist or trite sensationalism, they do not necessarily read them in the enough depth, with enough consideration of different possibilities, to pick up these cultural boons.

4.4.2 – Readers Understanding Culture

Reading can serve as a way for scholars to understand our culture, and the distinction that we have built between popular fiction and literature can serve as an impediment to that, but it functions in a similar, but potentially more dangerous, way for the average reader. For many readers, I would suggest that popular fiction functions as an important tool for more fully comprehending important cultural issues, and encouraging conversation of those matters amongst groups that might be less inclined to follow those discussions that are held in more restrictive spaces. This sort of informed discussion amongst the general populace is essential to the functioning of a democratic society in which every person is in the position to understand and voice their own opinions.

While news networks work tirelessly to provide us with information on a 24/7 basis, this process does not truly inform us. What information is provided is filtered, partially for content
based on what would be too shocking to show, and partially on what is deemed of interest—a citizen of the United States is more likely to hear about a terror attack in Paris than Bahrain, in Brussels than Ankara. Beyond what is filtered out by the news network, we ourselves filter out some of the content, and the extent to which we properly comprehend this information is difficult to say. Because it is often the most shocking of stories, and a topic most likely to be censored, let us take war, and the terror attacks that have become ubiquitous with it, as an example to see how popular fiction helps to work past the media’s potential censorship, and our own desire not to know.

In the episode “Sight Unseen” for the Radio Lab podcast, a photographer is interviewed about their experiences while they were embedded with a medevac team in Afghanistan and capturing the final moments of a wounded marine. Members of the unit wanted the photographer to stop shooting, and the conversation turns to an issue of consent, who has the right to give it, and who has a right to see these pictures. The suggestion is that these pictures need to be seen, to show the citizens of the country fighting the war what the reality of it is, but this is not always possible. During Vietnam, the “first T.V. war,” there were no consent forms for these images, and when they made their way back to the States, the people were outraged, and spoke out against it—if the pictures are withheld for whatever reason today, then the people are not given that chance. For Afghanistan and Iraq, the exposure has not been the same, it has been more carefully curated, and the response is harder to define. However, even when these images are made public, people are not always able or willing to accept it, instead turning away or mentally filtering it out. Tom Junod has discussed this issue in response to his infamous article “The Falling Man” on photos from the 9/11 attacks.
When people turn their heads from a reality that is too stark to be accepted bluntly, or do not have access to that reality in the first place, there must be another method of understanding. That understanding can come in the form of fiction. By reading a fictional text, an audience can begin to understand a concept in the abstract, with some distance from the reality of it. The events are thus related to them through someone they have an attachment to—the fact that that person is a fictional character is neither here nor there—this fictional buffer allows them to comprehend ideas that when presented flatly by the news would be too powerful, or too obscured. Once these ideas have been comprehended within fiction, the reader can then apply them to the real world and begin to develop an informed opinion on a matter that they may otherwise have looked away from, or been oblivious too.

This process is not purely limited to an understanding of war, but that is a clear place to see it. For example, returning to the opening to James Patterson’s *Private*, the novel’s protagonist cannot bear the idea that his friend has died and chooses to carry the man’s body to safety, wishing he might still be alive. In doing so, he leaves another man to die. The reader, through Patterson’s portrayal, can begin to understand the horror and the guilt that accompanies such a situation, and from there they can begin to understand the complexities and difficulties that a veteran may be dealing with, and to question the political motives and actions that lead to such a position.

This is a function that can be accomplished by any fiction. However, only certain texts will be able to provide this service for a particular reader. For this reason, it is important that any reader feels free to read whatever appeals to them, for whatever reason that might be. However, the pressure that critics and academics place on readers, as discussed above, can lead to members of the general populace feeling pushed away from reading literature, while reading popular
fiction feels like something that they will be looked down on by society for doing, and causes them to be less likely to discuss their reading experiences. This is where the distinction that we have created becomes dangerous to a democratic system—it becomes a form of attempted censorship. A tool to understand society should not be locked behind an arbitrary wall of elitism, created in the form of literature. *Private* is a bestseller that provides this tool to millions of readers all over the world, yet academics deny it their attention.

### 4.4.3 – Popular Fiction and the Public Sphere

While the claims of textual distinctions between popular fiction and literature are purely subjective, because of the way we have presented the texts as a culture, they have developed slightly more distinct readerships. For literature it is accepted that there are deep social, cultural, and philosophical questions posed and answered within the texts; however, this is just as true of popular fiction. A study of fiction needs to take place across this imposed divide to be able to accurately reflect the concerns of a culture, how those concerns are perceived, and the ways in which these fictions influence their readerships.

However, at the suggestion that popular fiction, as well as literature, can influence a readerships’ thoughts and feelings, some critics get concerned over a detriment to the culture of a society as a whole. Most notable among these critics, is Jürgen Habermas, who (as I mentioned in chapter 2) has suggested that “popular culture everywhere destroys the chance of a proper public culture” [Luckhurst 68]. This concern derives from the idea that a popular fiction with a mass readership will corrupt public discourse, making people into a mindless mass, by
“administering” conversations to them, and thus preventing them from thinking for themselves. He instead pushes for a more closed intellectual elite in which he sees true discourse taking place. Roger Luckhurst notes that

Habermas is unapologetic about the elitism of his position: ‘Serious involvement with culture produces facility, while the consumption of mass culture leaves no trace’ (p.166). Compared to the psychological and social enrichments of proper culture, popular culture must be considered to be vacuous and superficial, leading nowhere. [73]

If Habermas is correct in saying that popular fiction is a corrupting influence upon our cultural discourse and lacks the ability to produce “facility” then, given its vast readership, it would seem only more important for scholars to study popular fiction so as to identify the ideas that are being “administered,” how those ideas are portrayed and received by the public, why the public is so receptive to these texts, and what damage might be caused by them.

However, I would suggest that Habermas’ idea is flawed. He bases his suggestion on the idea that there is a single “popular culture” which the mass readership engages with, and that there is a single conversation which is thus “administered” to them. His concept also relies on the readers having no power of discernment of their own, and therefore being apt to blindly accept any argument put forth by a fiction that they interact with. I would posit that neither of the assumptions that Habermas holds here are based in truth.

The latter point is more of a sociological issue that goes beyond the scope of what I am able to demonstrate here, but harkens back to Dawn Thomas’ suggestion that it is a matter of how the reader is perceived:

To the publishers, the working class was a vast market for their wares; to the cultural critics, the working class was a ‘mob’ without judgement or taste. To the publishers, the
reader was disciplined and discerning; to the critics, the reader was unskilled and uneducated, easily manipulated to the publishers’ own ends. [91]

Just as the experience of aesthetic quality varies from individual to individual, so too does the interaction with a text’s ideologies. I would suggest that no reader is an encoded-reader for every text they read, and they are likely to function as an oppositional reader to ideas with which they do not agree, demonstrating a power of discernment that Habermas would appear to deny to someone who is not a part of the intellectual elite.

Habermas’ first assumption, that popular fiction speaks with a single voice, can be refuted simply by looking at the range of ideas put forward in even a small collection of texts. The ideas that are put forward in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin’s popular series of *Left Behind* books, which deal with a view of the Christian End of Times, are very different from those suggested by, for example, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Popular fiction is not an exclusionary area, and as such it builds a conversation in which it is possible for people of very different beliefs and backgrounds to take part. In this way, it becomes a place for an active, if never entirely free, interchange of ideas, and is sometimes freer from censorship than other publications, as was the case with the lesbian pulps. The suggestion that all popular fiction speaks with the same voice is a parallel of the idea that genre fiction is inherently conservative, as was discussed earlier in the context of Makinen and *Feminist Popular Fiction*. Makinen goes on to explain how all of the different genres have been able to be appropriated by feminism over the years in such a way as to push against the values of the day and to suggest cultural change. In the same way that genres’ “looseness” allows them to change to suit the cultural need of the era and to carry subversive messages, popular fiction’s openness as a whole allows it to bear a wide range of malleable views.
While the distinction may make the average reader feel as though the books they read are “trash,” they read them anyway, with a sense of guilty pleasure. These texts then develop such a wide readership that many people develop a shared topic of discussion. Through the text, they are able to raise issues with friends, co-workers, and peers—and at least sometimes these conversations are on topics that, in the restricted elite world of literature, lie behind a wall of objective knowledge. Popular fiction is less likely to have been assigned these objective readings by scholars, meaning that readers can form their own subjective views, and these differences spawn vigorous debates among the general reading public. Rather than destroying public discourse and culture, as Habermas fears, popular fiction can surely breed it.

As it stands within our society, popular fiction is freer to have a range of interpretations than literature is, but scholars focus their attention only on the literary texts. This wall between the texts needs to be broken down in such a way that popular fiction can be studied for its cultural importance without being labelled with pseudo-objective, automatically pejorative interpretations, while literature needs to be freed from didactic and unsubstantiated objective readings to make it more accessible to the average reader.

The distinction between popular fiction and literature currently serves only to maintain an intellectual elite as part of a high culture establishment ruled by “experts.” When Harold Bloom was outraged by the bestowing of a literary award to the popular author figure of Stephen King, his concern was not truly for the standard of literature, but for the standing of a divide that keeps him and his ilk in a position of power, or at least prestige. Without the distinction, and its canonical objective readings, all readers’ interpretations of a text could be weighed with the same consideration. The widespread literacy that we see today calls for an accessibility to all fiction, and for the unrestricted ability to develop subjective interpretations, so as to allow for
democratic thought to reign. The administered conversation that Habermas fears comes not from popular fiction with a mass readership and subjective interpretations, but from a prescribed reading—an ostensibly “objective perspective”—on texts that have been designated canonical.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 – The Divide as it Stands

Stephen King, in the afterword to the 1999 edition of his second novel, ‘Salem’s Lot (originally published in 1975), provides an explanation of his impetus to write, his childhood reading experiences, and how ‘Salem’s Lot itself developed as he wrote it. He describes his mother’s perception of certain of his childhood reading choices as “trash,” with certain pieces earning the distinct title of “bad trash” [745]. “Trash” in this instance, meant merely that it was popular fiction, and was not necessarily a statement about the quality of the writing—that distinction was left to “bad trash” in which his mother actually indicated that she thought the writing was of poor quality. As King shows a retrospective fondness for Salem’s Lot, he praises his work on several points

‘Salem’s Lot was originally published by Doubleday in 1975. It is dated in many ways (I have always been more a writer of the moment than I wanted to be), but I still like it well enough to number it among my favorites. I like the picture it draws of a small New England town; I like its sense of deepening menace; I like its strong, intended echoes of Dracula and of the EC comics where the vampires ripped and snarked and tore instead of sipping delicately like wine-snobs at a vicarage tasting party. Most of all I like the moment where it takes off like a big-ass bird into a world where all the rules have become moot and anything is possible. Carrie, the book which came before it, seems almost fey by comparison. There is more confidence here, more willingness to be funny
(‘The world is falling down around our ears and you’re sticking at a few vampires,’ one of the characters says), more pushing of the envelope. In a way, this book was my coming out party. [751]

Despite this list of virtues that he perceives in his work, King demonstrates a depressing awareness of how culture at large perceives popular fiction as he imagines how his mother, who passed away before she could read 'Salem’s Lot, might have reacted to the book: If she had read it, I like to think she would have finished the last hundred pages in one of her marathon chain-smoking readathons, then laughed, put it aside (not without some affection), and pronounced it trash. But maybe not bad trash [751].

We can see that this distinction is historically constructed for reasons based in economics and cultural power rather than in textual properties. Recall Nancy Bentley’s examination of William Dean Howells:

As the leading advocate of realism, Howells helps establish a new understanding of fiction in which selected works emerge not only as extraordinary art objects but also as artifacts of a special order of representation, an order which, like a museum exhibit, claims access to knowledge unavailable in other forms of display. Only with this distinctive literary sphere in place could Howells greet brand-new magazine stories like James’s as the equivalent of the works of old masters—instant “masterpieces.” [24]

The constructed nature of this distinction perhaps becomes even more visible when we try to understand the definition of literature as it stands today. There is no demonstrable basis behind assertions that popular fiction has stronger commercial interests, is of a lower aesthetic quality, is a slave to its form, or deals with less serious issues than are found in literary texts. All of these are either based on a subjective assessment that simply does not hold true for all readers,
or can be found to varying degrees across the professed distinction, and are not notably more apparent on one side of it or the other.

The rhetoric of “worthy” fiction that tends to accompany this hierarchy leads to a form of censorship of public thought in which popular fiction is felt to be of little substance, while false privilege is granted to intellectual academic gatekeepers. Within academia, this boundary prevents popular fiction being studied in depth, leading scholars to ignore the works that most appeal to the majority of the reading population, and with them the cultural concerns of those people. Meanwhile, it hinders readers in being free to express themselves through their reading choice, or from openly discussing topics raised in their reading, without (on some level) being concerned about being judged for reading trash, and feeling a degree of guilt that they were not reading, instead, a more literary book that society tells them they “should” read. Texts such as *Private* have a diverse, worldwide readership in the millions, yet, in academia such works are largely ignored. Popular fiction has value as writing because so many readers clearly enjoy it and respond to it. It has value as a topic of study precisely because those readers engage with it as a source of enjoyment and cultural information.

To encourage an understanding of our own culture at all levels of our society, and to emphasize the free thought and individual thinking that is necessary for a democratic society, we must find a way to break down this distinction that we have spent hundreds of years developing and instigating, but which only truly exists in people’s minds and on bookshop shelf labels.
5.2 – The Fall of the Divide and the English Department

Clearly, removing this old and durable distinction will be difficult. One approach may be to focus our efforts on academia, and work from there into the rest of society, functioning as an inside-out campaign. Alternatively, the effort could work in an outside-in fashion, beginning with the bookshops, which would do away with any “literature” or “general fiction” section, to instead either list books by genre, or simply by author.

Were the latter sort of campaign to succeed, it might put serious pressure on English departments as they are currently constituted. That is, if the discipline of English Literature continues to eschew popular works, choosing to wall itself behind the elitism of a supposed literature then, as a degree course, it will begin to disappear. English departments already have difficulty maintaining major enrollment for undergraduates, and English professors tend to not have a ready answer for why people should study their subject. In the introduction to Subjective Criticism, Bleich warns of the effects of enthusiastic students being demoralized by English’s misplaced attempts to insist on an objective knowledge that stifles subjective thought and social change [8]. If literature is not contributing towards social change, then its purpose begins to be reduced to getting people to read specific texts (which they can do without paying a school for the privilege), teaching composition (which can be done without a full department for it), and teaching literary criticism.

While such criticism is useful, it is fundamentally a series of matrices that we apply to the texts in an attempt to understand them. These, then, are really existential philosophies, and the best thing to be garnered from them is a way to view the real world around you and understand the actions of others. If that is all that an English department is offering, it will soon, at best, be
subsumed under another department and deemed “applied philosophy.” The study of literature, if it goes beyond its current brand of elitism, has the potential to provide a greater understanding of our culture and the changes that happen in it. However, these cultural connections have often been forgotten, replaced instead with an attention to how individual texts function to create meaning, with little concern for what that means to the outside world. To ignore cultural concerns and block sections of fiction and society off behind walls will kill either democratic thought or English departments. The departments have been integral to both the creation and the maintenance of the distinction between literature and popular fiction. When it comes to the dismantling of this distinction, English departments will either be able to lead the charge, or will become a victim of it, their demise hastening the fall of the distinction.
Notes

1 We are currently seeing an extreme version of this element with advances in e-publishing through smaller publishing houses, who are now freer to take risks on first time authors without having to put up capital for costly print runs on day one.

2 Many of the largest university libraries predate this period, but they served a very different purpose and were less concerned with the “cultural elevation” of the general populace.

3 There have been innumerable suggestions for what the distinctions are that separate popular fiction and literature, and to tackle each of them exhaustively here would be unfeasible for the scope of this thesis—in Eagleton’s book of over 200 pages he is only able to gloss over some of the points, and relies on drawing from previous works to deal with others. Therefore, I am narrowing my focus to the key issues that are prevalent today.

4 Where the book opens with an epigraph or chapter title, I will omit these. While they may have an impact upon the story as a whole, they are not necessarily representative of the type of writing that we are examining here, and they are often quotes from other sources, or affecting the style of such.

5 To include the entirety of James’ opening paragraph would have shifted the ratio too far from this work being my own, to being an annotated version of his work, so I have cut a few sections for convenience.

6 It is, perhaps, unfair that we think of King so directly as a horror writer. It was what made him famous, yet he has produced a wide range of other fiction that deals with human nature in a different way, e.g. *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (1982), which was made into the acclaimed 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*. 
It is interesting, that in 1998, the year in which King published his 34th novel, Bloom feels that his writing career is demonstrated by two of the first three novels he published, in 1974 and 1977 respectively.

Bleich had already laid out theories on the matter before, and is credited with helping Holland with 5 Readers Reading [Holland, xv].

Harold Bloom has his own version of this dismissal, saying, “If a student, friend, or acquaintance were to tell me that Pearl S. Buck was preferable to James Joyce and Marcel Proust, or that Stephen King was comparable to Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, I would not stay to argue” [The Anatomy of Influence 124].

Though provided as an interview question, Bloom has lifted this line almost verbatim from How to Read and Why: “Why read Don Quixote? It remains the best as well as the first of all novels, just as Shakespeare remains the best of all dramatists. There are parts of yourself you will not know fully until you know, as well as you can, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza” [150].
Works Cited


Walter, Damien. “Sorry Jonesy, but I can write for the Guardian and love Terry Pratchett.”
