

## The Question of Literature

By  
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What is literature? What is good literature? What is bad literature?

These are the grand questions in writing—and for obvious reasons. The word ‘literature’ has taken on its own meaning in academia. On the whole, literature simply means the collected written works of a culture, society, or historical time. In this sense, everything ever written, published, or inscribed on some medium and which others may read and, in some way, interpret constitutes the whole of literature. That includes the first Batman comic book and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; it also includes—technically, to be certain—the telephone book, a how-to pamphlet on garden hose repair, and the information sheet included with your latest prescription. All of these forms of written communication are part of human literature.

The great qualifier for writers is the *intent* of the writing. After all, most people would agree that literature is composed of both fiction and nonfiction (or factual) writing and that the intent to present specific forms of writing is the litmus test of quality. Forms of literature have been appearing throughout history, and contemporary cultures recognize some of the same forms that have been around for thousands of years. Poetry is an ancient form, after all, and began as an oral tradition long before anyone bothered to capture it in writing. Newer forms have appeared from time to time; the treatise, the history, the fable, the narrative, and the novel—and various subcategories within these forms, such as the presidential history, the children’s fable, and the detective novel. These are all very obvious ways of differentiating *types* of literature. Publishers (or producers of literature) use these classifications to identify reading audiences; and we, as readers, use these classifications to identify the types of writing that we prefer to read.

In some societies, the literature type was forced upon the readership; in other societies the readership instructed the publishers through commercial support. This paradigm continues to this day, though we understand the former as propagandists and the latter as ‘the publishing industry’.

The question of literature has always been tied to education. Since the earliest institutions of learning the matter of curricula has always been an important one, leading teachers to create lists of materials that

they considered to be instructive for the student mind. At one time it was Greek manuscripts; at another time, Latin texts (laboriously copied by ever-suffering scribes). Depending on the world location the instructional literature manifested itself in a variety of forms and texts. As history progressed the cumulative amount of written (and preserved) material provided instructors with a mountain of literature from which to choose their examples. Today, public schools and universities spend an inordinate amount of time deciding exactly what constitutes valuable curriculum materials. At one time, Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a popular novel, and now it is taught in university literature classes as an example of fine American literature. The book itself hasn't changed; in the unexpurgated version, the text remains the same as when it first appeared in 1884. Only the perception of its place in the categorization of literature has changed, as its qualities as a work of writing have been assessed and re-categorized. This is the process of most written works, from the *Canterbury Tales* to Shakespeare's plays to Edgar Allen Poe's tales of terror.

And that is where the question of quality in literature begins—

But before I begin defining this aspect of selectivity in literature, let me restate that the categorizing of types of literature has been going on for thousands of years and is nothing new to the scope of human endeavors. Aristotle's *Poetics* created a standard for categorizing literature (in this case, drama) that has never really been surpassed for its complexity of criteria. The question that Aristotle was trying to answer (and the question that faces us today) is: what aspects of writing produce specific effects of perception? This perception is, of course, the perception of the reader as to what information is being presented. In the case of drama, it has to do with qualities that describe the hero, the hero's conflict, the nature of that by which he is conflicted, and the manner by which he resolves the conflict. Aristotle was clear that only certain qualities of the hero would comply with the moral and ethical boundaries of his culture (and we are speaking of Aristotle's time). And when we perceive these qualities we know him to be a certain type of man. And when we are presented with an antagonist who possesses certain qualities that are opposed to the moral and ethical boundaries of a culture, we know him to be a villain. These kinds of specifications as they relate to our perceptions of social, religious, political, esthetic, and philosophical qualities of life have been used throughout history to determine the artistic quality of written works. Of course, these values change from culture to culture, and from one point in history to another. But they remain the basis by which we judge quality in literature.

This pattern of defining quality in literature began to evolve into a different form of selectivity with the advent of the university; for it was in the halls of the university that selectivity itself was refined, and the only way to refine a method of selection is by the process of selecting. In the case of literature it has always been *examples* of the types of rhetoric considered to be of the most intellectual value to the student. These examples had to conform to the specifications of the rhetorical devices being taught, and so completed the first step toward what we call *academic literature*. In the purest sense, academic literature is simply that literature which best illustrates the esthetic sense which, when absorbed by the reader, produces the most profound effect upon that reader in other

categories of perceptions (such as the perception of character traits, poetic qualities in the prose, the significance of the theme of the work as it relates to the human experience, and etc.). These categories have been debated and recalibrated throughout history as well. And the greatest controversy involved in this manner of defining literature is the rhetorical criteria declared of ultimate value to the student (and, subsequently, the reader).

Herein lies the debate between the so-called literary elite and the proponents of literature displaying qualities outside the sphere of the criteria posited by that elite. Some propose that only certain kinds of written work display qualities of great literature, while others say that this stance is simple academic snobbery and that all types of written works should be included in the canon of good literature. But who is right in this argument? And is there a reasonable measurement of greatness in literature; at least, one that can differentiate between good literature and bad literature?

Too often the line of demarcation in literature between the good and the bad falls over types of literature. Genre fiction, for instance, has garnered a reputation for bad writing, while more realistic fiction has retained a reputation for being the harbor of good literature. This manner of differentiation displays an ignorance only second to the posturing of diehards on either side of the line who complain that King's *Dreamcatcher* is the literary equal of Marquez's *One Hundred Years in Solitude*, or that Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is automatically exempt from good literature because it deals with trolls and dwarves. This simplistic posturing on either side of the literary argument fails to recognize the primary qualities of good writing. As writers, we should never apologize for bad writing no matter what form it comes in; and, as readers, we must never dismiss good writing because it's subject matter is not one with which we feel any affinity. The criteria for recognizing good and bad literature are evident to anyone willing to remove him or herself from the impassioned declaration of warring camps. And that is where the greatest fallacy of literary criticism exists in contemporary art.

*Good literature has always been and will always consist of written works of significant subject matter that are presented in the most eloquent prose appropriate to the artistic display of that subject matter.*

I have placed the above definition in italics specifically to emphasize the importance of it as a tool for assessing the literary value of any written work. But let me repeat the phrase for the sake of clarity:

Good literature has always been and will always consist of written works of significant subject matter that are presented in the most eloquent prose appropriate for the artistic display of that subject matter.

If we are brutally honest we can take any work of literature and objectively break it down line for line to assess the rhetorical quality of the prose. We can also ask questions of the subject matter being presented to try to understand whether or not that subject matter has any greater significance than mere titillation. The loudest cry from the defenders of genre fiction is that the literati dismiss these works merely because of their subject matter. Whether or not this is the case, I believe that too much genre fiction fails to deliver anything more significant than a manufactured arrangement of fantastic circumstances that produce

nothing more than a clever puzzle. This is true for science fiction, fantasy, mystery, detective fiction, romance novels and a multitude of other types of genre works. I am not being elitist about this opinion; too many writers come into the profession believing that the genre forms offer an easier introduction into publishing because all you have to do is follow the conventions while creating a reasonable plot. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is readily exposed by the appearance of *good* writing within these categories. Orwell's *1984* is a work of speculative fiction, but it is also a work which uses refined rhetorical technique to explore its subject matter. Often, though, it is not a matter of subject content declaring the quality of the written work, but the quality of the writing that enlightens the subject matter. Almost exclusively, the key to quality in literature lies in the manner in which subject matter is presented.

But what, then, is significant subject matter?

Herein lies the basis for all of the misdirection created by proponents of one kind of literature or another. After all, what is of cognitive value to one person may be sheer tripe to another. Also, as always happens in history, hindsight is the best arbiter of significant subject matter, for in the assessment of a cultural time period it is those works which best describe that time period to the assessors of it that rate the term 'significant'. Contemporaneously, we, as readers, decide what subject matter is significant to us and to our individual lives. The only manner in which we can deepen our appreciation for the potentiality of literary subject matter is to ask ourselves questions pertaining to the work that we are reading. Such questions may include:

What advances us as a species?

What promotes a deeper understanding of our own humanity?

What brings us a greater appreciation for who we are as a culture?

What accurately exposes our intellectual beliefs as a society?

What deepens us as human beings?

These kinds of questions can be asked in a variety of ways and can be answered in a variety of literary forms. Usually, only the distance of time allows us as a species to appreciate our greater accomplishments. As individuals living today, we have to ask these questions of ourselves. In fairness, sometimes we give ourselves very simple answers as to the types of literature that give our lives meaning. Horror stories that give us a reason to feel a little harmless fear, novels about lawyers disguised as morality tales, espionage thrillers focusing our intellects on the dangers of subversive governments and etc. Sometimes, too, we seek the answer in the perceived subject matter of greater meaning, such as novels about angst-ridden corporate executives, college professors who must navigate the labyrinthine mores of their contradictory intellects, and even elitist writers battling the demons of their own troubled psyches. The bottom line, though, is that subject matter is made significant by its application to the dilemmas of the human condition. And since the human condition is a vast subject area, the opportunities for good writing and even great writing in relatively small subject areas are always present.

The primary value of good literature, then, lies in the presentation of significant subject matter; and, paradoxically, much of the time that subject matter is made significant by its presentation.

Good literature enriches us psychologically, artistically and spiritually; poor literature satisfies only specific expectations, and the shallower the effect the more minimal the value of the experience.

Again, the question has been raised in recent years, more as a defense of mediocre reading habits than as a serious attempt at understanding: *why should anyone have the right to say that one kind of literature is more meaningful than another?*

And I must answer in all seriousness: *because the quality of a literary work can and must be judged by the subject matter and the manner in which that subject matter is presented.*

If we, as a nation of discerning readers, cannot differentiate between well-written works of meaningful subject matter and poorly written works of derivative titillation then we have no business offering an opinion about the quality of anything in America.

But let me elaborate—

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a good work of meaningful literature, not because Hemingway wrote it, but because he wrote it in a manner that bespoke that artistry in the words on the page. His subject was an old man at the end of his usefulness as a fisherman, and who must face the concept of his own mortality even as he is losing his vital energies as a man and productive member of his village. In grappling with the great fish he is attempting to overcome the irresistible forces of life; and though he wins a temporary victory, the reality of his environment and the overwhelming power of the sea takes away what he has painstakingly captured and leaves him with only the impression of his triumph as he wearily returns to his village.

This story is a perfectly constructed metaphor for what we all must endure as human beings in life, and each aspect of the story, each hazard that the old man meets, the ridicule that he must endure, and the hollow satisfaction of momentary victory that he experiences mirror those same experiences that each of us finds in our own lives. Hemingway not only marries the very specific story of the aging fisherman to a metaphor for life, but he does so in beautiful, simple, and powerful language that follows all of the traditional qualities of suspenseful and vivid fiction. And he does so without any intrusive errors of expression, nonmusical language, or vulgar effects of prose that add nothing to the closed universe of the story. In short, Hemingway has built a clean and beautiful house where other writers would have built an expansive slum.

The importune declaration that a mega-selling work of popular literature automatically qualifies as good or great literature is self-deluding, as is the assumption that a tome on some arcane or angst-ridden topic is automatically a work of art. These attitudes serve as apologies for the celebration of mediocrity: simply because a written work is read by a great number of people or describes some typical artsy paradigm is not reason enough to assign it a quality that it may not possess. All works of literature, if they are nominated for greatness, must acquit themselves not by popular vote or noble aura but by meeting the requirements of good rhetoric which have been refined in the human arena over thousands of years. Again, some of these requirements include—

—A significant subject matter defined by its impact on the human condition (specifically or generally)—

- The rhetorical manner in which this subject matter is presented—
- The prosodic techniques used to produce the rhetorical manner—
- The cohesiveness of effects produced by the prose—
- The absence of extraneous or unnecessary or effectively inappropriate techniques, expressions, or words that detract from the cohesive effect of the work—
- The accuracy of facts or reflections presented in the work—
- The artistic manner in which the work is presented (found in that special genius of an individual writer's expressive ability)—

Whether a writer has produced a long, dark work of enduring pathos, or a short, comic work of infinitely clever satire, the criteria for evaluating its literary quality remain the same; they are also the same for whatever genre in which the writer happens to be working, or for whatever age in which the writer happens to be writing. The consequences for settling for mediocre work are obvious. And though the evaluation of good literature requires an objective and unemotional response, the benefit of maintaining a higher level of artistic literary achievement for our culture and society helps to define the stature of that culture and society. We should never delude ourselves into abandoning a very necessary attitude of discernment.