

Language and Literature Paper 2

While so-called “high literary art” is said to deal with the noblest aims of humanity, popular culture takes obvious pleasure in more pedestrian entertainment. Referring to at least two of the works you have studied, consider the ways in which these texts either embrace or reject popular culture and to what effect?

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler by Italo Calvino and *The Snapper* by Roddy Doyle are two very different novels when it comes to their relationship with popular culture. Popular culture is, “put simply, the events, people, fads and trends that capture the public imagination” (Glynn 1). The idiom of popular culture, by definition, has mass appeal. While Doyle embraces popular culture, Calvino overtly rejects it.

Calvino is an intellectual whose interest in the vocabulary of popular culture seems purely academic. He is a writer's writer. It is as if his intended audience is other authors who struggle with the art of writing. The structure of his book is unorthodox and clever. The concepts that Calvino presents in his novel such as the nature of reading and writing, do not necessarily appeal to the mainstream. They are more in the nature of a philosophical rumination. Doyle on the other hand, explores difficult social and moral dilemmas that have universal appeal. The story of a young, Irish working class woman having to deal with the stigma of rape and an unwanted pregnancy has resonance with a large audience and is written in a simple, direct style.

Calvino's is a work of metafiction. Metafiction is a branch of fiction that playfully and self-referentially deals with the writing of fiction and its conventions. Calvino explores the fundamental dilemmas of all writers: should a writer be writing to please the maximum number of readers, or should he be writing to express a distinctive voice and style? Should an author rely on inspiration (like the “tormented writer”) or should he rely on diligence, craftsmanship and formulae (like the “productive writer”)?) He notes that each type of writer envies the other. In Chapter 8, Calvino uses the voice of Silas Flannery, a successful novelist suffering from a creative block, to explore a number of these questions. Silas notes down his reflections in a diary and observes that an author who thinks too much about pleasing all types of audiences risks losing his or her style. The “readers are [his] vampires,” (170) and in his struggle to please the ideal reader, what he is writing is no longer “[his] anymore.” Calvino uses the reflections of Silas to explain the intellectual basis for his book and its structure. Calvino sets for himself an ambitious goal: to “[to write] the books of all possible authors,”—to write a book that never loses its novelty therefore constantly keeping the reader on his or her toes (181).

Calvino uses the technique of an embedded narrative harking back to a story telling technique that goes to the “Arabian Nights”. The story follows “the Reader” (the main character) who has come across a book of incomplete manuscripts. While every odd numbered chapter follows the actions of the Reader, each even numbered chapter is a piece of the book which he (the Reader) is reading. It is through this structure that Calvino explores different genres of creative writing, including popular writing like Japanese eroticism.

With these elements, Calvino has produced a complex novel that addresses the nature of reading and writing provides an entirely different reading experience through its style of writing and structure.

In contrast, Roddy Doyle's novel is embedded in popular culture. It focuses on issues that have universal appeal. The story is about the impact of an unwanted pregnancy on the Rabbitte family, especially on Jimmy Sr., father of the expectant mother. The novel addresses issues like alcohol and sexual abuse, issues that loom large in contemporary Irish society. It traces the challenges faced by a very brave and determined Sharon who, having been raped by a drunken friend of her father's, decides to have the baby in the face of rejection from her father and her own friends. In the end her very proud father becomes her strongest ally as the whole family rallies around her. The tale is an artful retelling of a timeless story about the ultimate strength of the love that binds parent and child, of love overcoming prejudice. Doyle has made a powerful use of a subject matter firmly rooted in popular culture to tell a story that would appeal to a large contemporary audience—so much so that the book has been adapted into a movie.

In addition, Doyle uses language specific to Irish English – the idiom of the novel allows Doyle to connect with a wider readership. Doyle uses Irish English vocabulary and expressions to keep the novel very real and also to inject humor into the story. This colorful use of language helps make Jimmy Sr. what one critic has called “one of the most engaging and loveable arseholes to ever grace the written page,” (“The Snapper” 1). Compared to Calvino's work, *The Snapper* uses language that is easy to understand and a structure that is easy to navigate. Without underlying complexities, *The Snapper* makes for an easy read.

Whereas the subject matter and idiom of Doyle's novel is firmly and deliberately embedded in popular culture, Calvino's book is a cerebral work intended for the intellectual reader. Calvino's novel (if it can be called that), is an exploration of the dilemmas and challenges facing a writer and the nature of the relationship between reader and writer. In it Calvino references popular culture only as an example of a style of writing that a writer may chose in order to reach a wider readership. Both are very different authors, with completely opposite implicit attitudes towards popular culture.

Word Count: 995

Works Cited

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