

RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULAR LITERATURE AND THE LITERARY CANON

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*Abstract. The following paper tries to highlight some of the major differences between the canon of high-literature and popular fiction, but also ways of transgressing their barriers. Although from a general postmodern perspective this debate may seem irrelevant, it is worth discussing about its institutionalized sides mainly because of the audience, especially that of (high-school) students. Apart from the theory, the analysis is based on the example of crime fiction and fantasy, two genres which are embraced by the contemporary readers, especially the youth. Two of the most prominent examples are the Sherlock Holmes stories and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.*

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From a postmodern perspective it seems almost unimportant to keep up the sharp line between the literary canon and popular culture. Over the last decades in Western European literary sciences and in education, the focus has been on bridging the gap between the two fields, on the overlapping phenomena, as well as on the category switches. However, the Eastern European literary sphere looks to be more rigid at least what education and assigned reading are concerned. High-literature and canon are often reluctant to accept contemporary works by best-selling authors as part of the teaching process. On the other hand, there is an increasing need from part of the students to change and widen the list of mandatory books to read and include today's popular novels.

The literary canon represents a wide field with many issues to discuss, yet this paper tries to highlight only some of the major differences between the canon of high-literature and popular fiction, but also ways of transgressing their barriers. Apart from the theory, the analysis is based on the example of crime fiction and fantasy, two genres which are embraced by the contemporary audience, especially the youth. Two of the most prominent examples are the Sherlock Holmes stories and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

The controversy behind the term *canon* derives from the origin and meaning of the word itself. It stems from the Akkadian *quanu* which means *cane*, in Hebrew *cane* and *measuring rod*, in Greek *kanna*, *kanón*, that is *measuring tool, rule or norm/standard*. During the Hellenistic period the term was mainly used to refer to the list of normative literary works. The process of canonization meant the enlisting of the classical authors in chronological order according to genres (Tapodi 2008, 8). Measuring also implies that weighed against the same criteria, items, in our case, authors and books can stand at the top, in the middle, at the bottom or even outside the measuring area. Thus, there are

some imminent questions regarding canon and canonization, such as whether there is only one, or are there more canons, who defines them, how can they be defined, what is their literary, social and educational role etc.

Canons, for there is more than one, are closely linked to the institutions they belong to, e.g. education, publishing houses and bookstores, libraries, reading circles and clubs etc. Furthermore, it is not enough to merely gather all the similar texts and institutions they represent, but one has to interpret these and come up with conventions for their interpretation. One must take into account the language of the texts in order to establish the preference of values reflected by them, as well as the preexisting but maybe hidden hypotheses, the political, ideological or individual, subjective reasons behind them (Tapodi 2008, 20-21). For example, when defining the canon of the Great Classics, next to the fact that these works have stood up against time, meaning they still last and are read by different generations, one also has to consider that these books have entered into dialogues with texts from several different literary periods (Bloom 1998).

According to Aleida and Jan Assman the institutionalized process of canonization can be divided into three main groups. The first procedure consists of preserving the texts the way they were written, so that they stay the same over the years. The second one refers to the way censorship works, which states that right from the beginning the canon stands for literature as a whole, and that choice also implies disclosure. The third process involves preserving the meaning of the texts. However, this usually happens through the canonical interpretations which are thought to be correct, through commentaries, prefaces etc. In addition, for a canon to be formed one needs to take into account the reception of the works, the social-institutional field, as well as the self-reflecting character of literature (in Tapodi 2008, 22).

The canon used in the field of education is closely connected to the didactic and aesthetic aims of literature, and since it is subject to governmental decisions, it can politically influence the audience. Primarily due to its didactic character, the canon taught in schools is restrictive, focusing on certain accepted interpretations, thus alienating the reader from a personal encounter with the text. A further relevant aspect is that this canon is often felt as obsolete by students, because either the topic, or sometimes the language too is hard to understand and follow. Although it might have some advantages, e.g. to learn the main features of a period, a genre etc., the canon, if stiff, hinders the readers to identify with the text and rarely lets them enjoy reading.

Quite often children, young adult readers and students prefer books that do not belong to the list prescribed by the canon, but to the realm of popular fiction. Generally, authors and works in this category are regarded as cheap pieces having the only role of entertaining the readers. However, this viewpoint is misleading, because it is not true of all popular fiction and is labeled by the representatives of high-literature as addressing the large public, but less exigent from an aesthetical-poetical perspective.

According to Tony Bennett, popular literature should be considered a residual and relational concept. Residual because it engulfs everything that remains after high-literature has been described. Relational because high-literature needs popular literature in order to increase its own authority and to give account of itself. On the

other hand, popular fiction does not need such self-legitimation (Bennett, Martin, Waites 1983).

As mentioned before, the literary canon does not only refer to the literary texts themselves but also to the different interpretations and ways of dealing with them. Maybe this is the reason that lets the line between high-literature and popular fiction persist. From the viewpoint of literary sciences, aesthetically and poetically, texts that belong to popular fiction are not readable. The most frequent objections to pop fiction works are in the field of sentence structure, the poverty of language, coherence problems etc. Another frequent fault they find in these texts is that they are often built on schemes without any ideological content, meant for fast consumption. Thus, the traditional tools and techniques of text interpretation are inappropriate to analyse popular fiction. It is the perspective of genre analysis they apply, which is quite pejorative and simplistic in its turn. Yet, this type of attitude is no longer fruitful, since popular fiction apart from representing the counter-canon, has its own values that have outstood time and have not only cherished temporary fame, e.g. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

By these examples I have named two of the main genres of popular literature, that is crime fiction and fantasy. There is a whole culture, popular culture built around both of these genres – movies, video games, publishing houses etc. At the same time both have their forerunners dating back to ancient times, whereas many of these older texts belong to the sphere of the literary canon, e.g. Poe's detective stories, or in the field of fantastic literature, E.T.A. Hoffmann's writings.

Modern fantasy resembles and draws on Gothic romantic stories, as well as on medieval great epic poems, chivalric romance, myths, but also on similar genres, such as the worlds depicted in science-fiction novels. Modern fantasy is hard to define. It mainly refers to a coherent narrative within itself which if playing in our world, tells a story that is impossible in the world perceived. If on the other hand it plays in a different realm than ours, then it is that other world that becomes impossible, though the story could be possible according to our rules too (Clute and Grant 1997). According to Todorov, the fantastic asks for a special way of reading too, which is neither poetic, nor allegorical. The reader accepts the fantastic and its manifestations in the text, which have to be credible on their own. Thus, a key element of fantasy is credibility (Todorov 1971).

It was Tolkien who established the main features of modern fantasy literature with *The Lord of the Rings*. He created and set as a norm the idea of the existence of a secondary world providing a background, a geography and mythology for it, which can stand on its own and is credible. If we take into consideration the process that led to writing the novel, e.g. Tolkien's *Mythopeia*, his essay *On Fairy Stories* and *The Silmarils*, we can see how each and every aspect was planned in detail. There are a couple of steps specific of the world created by Tolkien³⁵: it suffers "thinning," e.g. as a result of the work of Sauron's evil forces Middle-earth is deprived of its previous status. Because of

³⁵ For the part on Tolkien and fantasy also confront Mihály Vilma-Irén, *Aspects of Residual Narratives as Spaces in Between Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Fantasies* in Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 11, 1 (2019) 93–107. ISSN 2067-515. (in CEEOL).

the presence of the evil, there is a sense of “wrongness” in Middle-earth, and the urge for the heroes to set out on a “quest.” The hobbits guided by their mentor, Gandalf, on their journey from the known into the unknown lands, realize what their vocation is, thus they reach “recognition” and “eucatastrophe” which then leads to a cathartic experience (Clute and Grant 1997). Next to these structural elements Tolkien uses other methods too, including plot devices or landscapes that can later be found in fantasies written by others after *The Lord of the Rings* was published (cf. James and Mendlesohn 2012, 78).

According to Brian Attebery, fantasies can be defined as a group of texts sharing a cluster of common tropes, e.g. objects or narrative techniques. Since we are talking about fantasy, the core of the texts is represented by tropes that are completely impossible, whereas towards the periphery there are only a small number of tropes, or only those that make the reader doubt whether the text is fantastical or not (cf. James and Mendlesohn 2012, 29). From another perspective one can differentiate four distinct modes from each other within fantasy according to the way the fantastic enters the text and the rhetorical voices required to construct the different types of realms created. The first one is the portal quest, it introduces a new world into the text. The second is the immersive one, the text is part of the fantastic world. The third is the intrusion of the fantastic into the primary world, and the last is the liminal one stating that magic might or might not happen (James and Mendlesohn 2012, 29-30). The fourth mode gives us the possibility to consider fantasy on its own and not according to the rules used in case of mimetic fiction or the literary canon. In this way we can evaluate the quality of fantasy works based on equal terms other than those used to evaluate the canon and according to which fantasy would lose right at the beginning (James and Mendlesohn 2012, 29-30).

In this case quality measurement happens through the writer’s belief in the world created by him/her. It is obvious that Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* stand at the top of the high-fantasy canon, thus setting the rules of the genre. Everything and everyone has its place, people, the hobbits, the good and the bad. At the same time, the way Tolkien uses language, the reciprocal game between myth and language amaze the reader. On the other hand, Tolkien’s work is also knocking at the door of the literary canon. Tom Shippey, who has been dealing with the Tolkienian oeuvre, talks about Tolkien as the author of the century, mentioning him next to Vonnegut or Golding (2000). This means that enlisting texts into a canon based on their genre, should not be taken for granted when setting their value.

Another popular genre is that of crime fiction. According to Winks (in Bényei 2009), at the end of the 1970s every 10th book published belonged to this genre, which has been flourishing ever since, if we only think of contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction, cyberpunk, feminist crime stories or historical crime series. The genre has a specific inner dynamics, it pushes its boundaries, a trait that is actually characteristic of high-literature. Crime fiction readers are hybrid consumers of culture, since they can be found on both sides of the line (Bényei 2009).

In a similar way to fantasy, crime fiction has also its predecessors that belong to high-literature. If we think of the oral tradition, myths (Oedipus), the Bible (Cain and Abel), through *The Arabian Nights* told by Scheherazade to the Chinese tradition with

the *Judge Bao* stories, we can find elements of crime fiction in all these narratives. Later on in the medieval works about the dragon-slaying knights and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* there are also murders depicted. In and after the Renaissance period, many texts also involved crime, e.g. murder was a key element in many of Shakespeare's plots too. Although murder has been present in narratives for long, there needs to be a detective in the story so as to speak about detective fiction (cf. Alexander 2010, 8).

Thus, it is Edgar Allan Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) that is considered the first official, canonic detective story with detective C. Auguste Dupin as the central character who solved the mystery behind the double homicide. The figure of Dupin was then present in Poe's two other stories. Thus, Poe can be considered the first who wrote a detective series. The unnamed first person narrator specific of detective fiction is also attributed to Poe (cf. Alexander 2010, 8).

However, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character of Sherlock Holmes created in 1887 is probably the most famous detective of all times (Maurice 2017). A whole subgenre of detective fiction evolved from his figure, these are the stories starring the private eye type detective, who solves the case even if endangering his own life. Then in the first decades of the twentieth century through the novels of Agatha Christie detective fiction reached yet another peak of popularity (Maurice 2017). In her stories the main character is an extraordinary intelligent and witty person who when confronted with a puzzling situation solves the mystery (Todorov 1966). There are three types of detective, the "cerebral sleuths" in the early twentieth century (e.g. Agatha Christie's detective). The hard-boiled detectives, intelligent, just, but lonely, who know how to handle weapons and are physically strong enough to be safe in a fight (e.g. in the works of British writers) (Maurice 2017, 20). The third category is that of the cops, who represent the law, and whose hands are often tied when in action. They have to follow either a code or rule before taking an action.

When the so called *whodunit* appeared, it introduced a sort of duality into the genre. The question is "Who has done it/the crime?" There are two murders, the first is committed by the murdered, and "is merely the occasion for the second, in which he is the victim of the pure and unpunishable murderer, the detective" (Burton qtd. in Todorov 1966, 44). According to this line of thought there are always two stories in these types of detective fiction. The first presents the crime itself that has to be investigated by the detective. In this way the first story creates the second one, which is "present but insignificant", and that could not exist without the first one. The second story presents the path which the detective, and with him the reader has to follow, the beginning of the first story is usually revealed at the end of the second one. The detective plays the role of the mediator, guiding the reader through the mystery in order to solve the riddle (Todorov 1966, 46).

A further type of popular detective novel is the thriller. In thrillers the two narratives coincide, the crime is committed while the investigation is in progress. The most common location of these stories are the streets, suburbs, where it is difficult to survive and detectives have to possess the skills to defend themselves. Thus, in thrillers

we have hard-boiled detectives. Although the reader does not have to guess the outcome, there is still tension.

Next to classical crime fiction stories there is the subgenre of historical detective fiction as well. The most prominent example is perhaps Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which is a mixture of the classic version and its rewritten forms, in which the investigation process is presented as a metaphor of cognition (Bényei 2000). The detective in Eco's novel, William of Baskerville establishes that the order follows the Book of Revelation, whereas at the end of the story together with William we realize that through this statement he has in fact created the perfect plan for the murderer. Thus, as a detective he fails, and due to his failure, the novel does not fulfil the previously mentioned main feature of the genre. Eco's *The Name of the Rose* becomes an anti-detective novel (Bényei 2000, 25). However, this can be regarded as a natural development of or within the same genre of crime fiction, since it is the postmodern that allows a reflection upon the previously written texts, concomitantly with the use of intertextuality.

The above listed main characteristics of crime fiction and the examples mentioned prove the border-land status of the genre, namely that it consists of works and has readers belonging to the literary canon and popular literature as well. An aspect which brings crime fiction closer to or keeps it in the realm of pop culture is the commercial one. For example, if we think of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, there was tense criticism directed towards the author back then, precisely because of the fact that he wrote for money. The financial interests may have existed, yet these stories are not to be looked down upon, because they contain elements, such as for example, traumas and desires characteristic of Victorian culture that are relevant in the field of cultural and gender studies or can be analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective as well. If so, then there is a crack on the barricade built up between the literary canon and popular fiction, as aesthetical-poetical reasoning mixes with other points of view and opens up new ways of interpreting these texts (cf. Bényei 2009).

Just as in the case of fantasy, within the counter-canon of crime fiction, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are undoubtedly ranked at the top within this genre of pop fiction. At the same time, they are also to be found at the periphery of the literary canon, due to the standard established through having created the character of the detective, i.e. Sherlock Holmes. Thus, it is inappropriate to generalize based on genre or on the affiliation of the text to the canon or popular literature, as well as to value the works merely according to these aspects.

In conclusion we should try to make the line between the two seemingly different and opposing groups, that of the literary canon and its counterpart, popular literature, a more flexible one. Our aim should be to become more open-minded and think of not only two, but more groups and spaces-in-between within the field of literature. Both, high- and popular literature are important constituents of culture, guaranteeing its continuity, while in perpetual change.

As far as education is concerned there should be an opening towards popular literature as well. As seen above, in case of the genres of fantasy and crime fiction there

are plenty of authors and works who are worth reading, because they either use an elaborate language and/or handle issues that are important and relevant to discuss even at present. Both genres have their set of rules and well defined elements that make it possible to evaluate them on their own, without being constantly weighed against the literary canon. However, the main advantage of including such texts into the list of assigned books next to canonic ones is that students enjoy reading these texts. In today's world when the internet, media and movies are gaining ground, we have to find the proper ways to bring back the habit of reading and working with texts. Contemporary popular fiction is a way, a means for doing so.

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