



Popular Literature and Canon Formation: A Study of Five Victorian Novels

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Abstract

This paper analyses five Victorian novels - Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - to argue that the distinction between "popular" and "high" literature is a verdict delivered by cultural elites rather than an aesthetic argument. The paper draws on Stuart Hall's theory of popular culture as an "arena of consent and resistance" and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to demonstrate how each novel was initially dismissed as popular, sensational or immoral. The analysis reveals how the term "popular" works as a disciplinary mechanism by punishing gender and sexual transgression. The eventual canonisation of these texts confirms Bourdieu's theory as elite defenders like Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf wield their cultural authority to force a revaluation. The paper concludes by questioning which contemporary works might follow a similar trajectory - suggesting that popular continues to become a stadium of consent and resistance.

Keywords: Popular Literature, Canon Formation, Cultural Capital, Victorian Novel, Stuart Hall.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was disdained in the late nineteenth century, grouped with minor domestic or sentimental romances. When Emily Brontë published *Wuthering Heights*, Victorian critics dismissed it as a crude, immoral, poorly constructed piece of cheap literature. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was shunned for being independent and unabashedly vocal. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was considered "lurid" by elite literary culture and considered merely a popular thriller rather than a highbrow literature. And Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was condemned as "unclean" and "poisonous" by the *London Daily Chronicle*. All five

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are considered classics in today's world. The difference between "popular" and "high" art is a verdict delivered over time by those with power to consecrate.

In Raymond Williams' foundational book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, "popular culture" carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work and work intended to win favour as well as the sense of being well liked by people, although the latter is overshadowed by the former in the perspective of elites. According to J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, "popular novel" is a loose term for a novel with wide readership, carrying slightly pejorative connotations suggesting a middle or low-brow "audience." This implies that such a novel may not possess much "literary merit." Holt N Parker, in his *Toward a Definition of Popular Culture*, contends that Bourdieu's division between a "popular aesthetic" and "high aesthetic" where working-class people value function over form (with them being incapable of Kantian disinterestedness), stems from naivety. According to Parker, people are capable of making complex, aesthetic arguments all the time about TV, movies, video games and pop music. Popular art can be both good and bad with people arguing pleasurably about which is which.

In "From entertainment to citizenship: Politics and popular culture" by John Street, Sanna Inthorn and Martin Scott, it is asserted that politics was and is always linked to popular culture. It is this culture that provides "voice" to perceptions, experiences and judgements of the world and to the world of the aesthetic and the socio-political.

Stuart Hall contends in his essay "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'", popular culture is not a fixed form of texts or forms. After dismantling the myth of the term "popular" adhering to a single entity of either containment or resistance, Hall argues that popular culture is "the arena of consent and resistance." He rejects the idea of purity in popular culture, asserting that it is a dynamic field of shifting power relations. Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction*, postulates that "popular culture" is a paradoxical notion that imposes dominance of a culture. Only the scattered fragments of an old erudite culture (such as folk medicine), selected and reinterpreted in terms of the fundamental principles of the class habitus and integrated into the unitary world view it engenders, can be found there. This paper applies these insights to five Victorian novels – Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the Brontë sisters' *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, Stoker's *Dracula*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – each of which was initially dismissed as pop sensation rather than considered as high art works as they are now.

Before turning to these case studies, however, it is necessary to understand the history and significance of literary canon. Its mechanization explains why Austen, Brontës, Stoker and Wilde were excluded – and why they were eventually added to the same.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Canon Formation and Cultural Capital

In his *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory attacks both the theoretical assumptions underlying liberal pluralism and the specific approach to curricular reform it has engendered. He emphasizes the exclusion of class in pluralist critique and the reinforcement of class structures that separates the elite from the common crowd. Literary canon is not only formed by the common people, but also by elites, and the value given to the latter is significantly larger than the former. Canon debates were and are never really about the "aesthetic" quality, but about the distribution of cultural capital – who gets to decide what is "great literature" and who it serves. It is important to note that English as a language let alone a literary canon was not given due importance during Austen's or even Stoker's timelines.

Before 18th century, literary landscape relied heavily on classical traditions, the

elevation of the vernacular and religious movements. While *Beowulf* is the first surviving epic poem written in English language, it was Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* that cemented the vernacular scope of the same. The Renaissance and the Early Modern Era (c. 1500-1660) saw a huge surge in English drama and poetry – predominated by the literary works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Shakespeare's Renaissance plays not only revolutionised dramatic forms, but also explored human condition's universal aspects. Edmund Spenser, John Donne and John Milton were key figures who shaped and defined the evolving literary canon. Critics like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and T.S. Eliot standardised literary principles, cemented literature as a cornerstone in terms of culture and popularised the canonical formation.

While the English literary canon took shape during the 18th century, it underwent a massive reassessment only during the late twentieth century. Until the 19th century, higher education constituted classical studies (Latin and Greek) since English was initially dismissed as a “poor man's Classics.” The literary establishment was initially infatuated with classical antiquity, epic poetry and philosophy. English literature or the novel as a genre, was considered to be lower-tier artform for several reasons. The reasons include mass appeal and moral panic. English literature was firmly instituted in Scottish universities and the University of London in the nineteenth century. It was adopted at Oxford and Cambridge universities only by the end of nineteenth century.

Austen's works were set during the late Georgian era and sought to serve as a sharp critique of social standing and gender roles of the time. The trajectory of domestic realism in English canon was defined by the same. The works of the Brontë sisters, published in the Victorian Era, deftly blended Victorian morals with the passionate, peculiar and, psychological tropes of older Gothic fiction. Wilde employed Gothic horror to critique the hypocrisy of Victorian morality and championed the philosophy of “Art for Art's sake” during the Late-Victorian era. Stoker's novel emerged at the close of the 19th century with its usage of horror to channel the era's anxieties about scientific development, everchanging gender roles and the fear of foreign invasion.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

When *Pride and Prejudice* appeared in 1813, the title page did not bear Austen's name – it was credited simply to the “Author of *Sense and Sensibility*.” Anonymity was a common practice for female authors in the Regency Era as it protected their privacy. Austen sold the copyright for *Pride and Prejudice* to publisher Thomas Egerton for £110, losing all future royalties. The book was an immediate word-of-mouth success with the reading public although literary critics largely ignored Austen during her lifetime. When they did notice her, it was to shun her work as “light entertainment.”

This dismissal continued long after her death. Mark Twain, writing in the nineteenth century, famously wrote, “Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice*, I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone” – a very visceral, telling remark for someone who asserted that “there is only one good sex. The female one.” Charlotte Brontë, known for her famous Bildungsroman novel, *Jane Eyre*, was not particularly fond of *Pride and Prejudice* either. She criticised Austen for lacking “poetry” and “sentiment”, describing the novel as an “accurate daguerretyped portrait of a commonplace face” lacking fresh air or profound passion.

Jane Austen's novel was no stranger to admiration whatsoever. Sir Walter Scott, a

prominent early admirer of Austen, wrote in his journal, “Read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen’s very finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice*.” To him, her writing style was unique, focusing on realistic aspects of literature and rejecting improbable, typical romantic literature prevalent in those times. W.H. Auden, a major 20th-century British-American poet, was a massive admirer of Jane Austen’s works. In his famous poem to Lord Byron, he wrote, “But now the art for which Jane Austen fought, ... Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety the economic basis of society.”

The cultural elite is not a clear-cut assemblage of resistance since Austen’s defenders like Scott and Auden were elites themselves. Although raised in a middle-class family, Scott moved among the highest literary, political and social circles. A successful lawyer who was knighted by King George IV, he promoted Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* with radiant literary reviews, public praise and private journal entries. Scott’s massive popularity and his public validation of Austen helped the latter cement her reputation as one of the finest realists in English Literature. This was during a time when women’s writings were marginalised. It is ironic how a knighted, politically conservative male elite figure like Scott used his massive platform to bring a middle-class woman’s domestic realism into serious consideration. Auden’s popularity spans from critical to mainstream acclaim thanks to his technical brilliance, vast intellect and his ability to blend traditionalism with modernity. Auden noted how Austen frankly detailed “the amorous effects of ‘brass’”. Auden actively resists the Victorian “Janeites” who treated Austen as a “quaint aunt.” Thus, Hall’s “arena of consent and resistance” is crystallised here – both consent and resistance come from the top, i.e., the elite. Canon formation is not just a competition between the elite and the masses but the “factions” or “portions” in the elite. Thus, the “top” is not a monolith – it is a messy battlefield with spontaneous, ever-changing ideals. One can use Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory to add insight to this development. Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital is a sociological concept that represents social aspects (education, style of speech and dress) that enhance social mobility. This non-economic resource signals social standing, providing individuals with power and advantages within the society. Thus, when Scott and Auden defended Austen, they weaponised their high cultural capital to legitimise a writer who was initially shunned by other critics as a mere domestic writer.

Pride and Prejudice evolved into mass popular culture, spawning stage plays, cheap mass-market paperbacks, and countless imitations. For critics like Twain and Brontë, this popularity was itself the proof of triviality. A novel consumed by masses could not be, by definition, “serious” literature. Hall’s arguments disprove this speculation by drawing on Antonio Gramsci to define popular culture as a primary site of ideological struggle. It is not merely “low art” meant to pacify the masses, but an arena of both consent and resistance. Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* operate as this dual arena by comforting the audience through traditional romance and materialism while simultaneously resisting patriarchal norms and rigid class structures through Elizabeth’s (Lizzy) character.

Movie adaptations of this novel like the 2005 Keira Knightly film adapt the novel for pop culture by forgoing social realism for picturesque visuals, amplifying romance between Elizabeth and Darcy, and altering character traits for a modern audience. The social commentary in the novel relies on Elizabeth’s sharp, witty nature and her analytical inner monologue. The film transforms it into a romantic drama by adding an extravagant rain scene to further the physical tension between Darcy and Elizabeth. While this film has a resonance of its own, it takes away Austen’s sharp satire from the non-readers – a drawback of pop culture’s imposition on its people. They contribute to the butchering of the novel albeit willingly by preferring the movie’s romantic gaze over the novel’s nuance. Hall’s popular imperialism applies to this movie in two specific ways: omission as imperial propaganda, and normalisation of the power-bloc. The evidential ambiguity of the execution of dominant

ideologies allows the viewers to bathe in the sanitized glory of English countryside with its British history expurgated. Hall posits that popular culture strives to reconcile masses to the existing social order. The movie underpins this by focusing on the aspirational wealth and aristocratic beauty of the elite, reaffirming cultural appreciation for the British elite class and its conservative values.

3.2 Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

If Austen's crime in the eyes of the literary critics was being too domestic and too popular, Emily Brontë's was the exact opposite. When *Wuthering Heights* appeared in 1847, it was widely considered monstrous, shocking, and immoral by Victorian standards. The famous English poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, called *Wuthering Heights* "a fiend of a book — an incredible monster." He furthered his disdain by adding that "the action is laid in hell, — only it seems places and people have English names there." The reviewer for the North British Review, James Lorimer, was so scandalised by the book that he wrote, "it will never be generally read." According to the *Quarterly Review*, the novel was "too odiously and abominably pagan to be palatable" for the English. Emily died in 1848, a year after publication, without ever seeing her work achieve worldwide success.

The novel's transformation from a despicable anomaly into a pop-culture staple started from the late nineteenth century. Influential figures like Virginia Woolf championed the book, arguing that Emily Brontë possessed a visionary genius that allowed her to unite a world "cleft into gigantic disorder." Woolf believed that *Wuthering Heights* was more difficult to understand than *Jane Eyre* since Emily was a "greater poet" than Charlotte. Woolf praised the lack of personal "I" and the novel's utter reliance on raw, detached emotional force. By focusing on a fierce, metaphysical bond between Cathy and Heathcliff, Brontë redefines romance. Her action of not shying away from the depiction of sadism, degradation and the cyclic nature of abuse while initially affronting early critics, turned out to be a unique, revolutionary feat applauded by the rest. The story's brilliant, nested, "story-within-a-story" framework forces the reader to piece the truth through subjective, unreliable and retrospective perspectives. The bleakness of Yorkshire forces the reader to draw parallels with the complexity of the characters — a primitive force that pushes them to break from societal norms.

However, movie adaptations reduced this gothic, niche novel into a conventional romance. High-profile film and television versions—like Emerald Fennell's controversial 2026 adaptation—often lean heavily into romanticisation of toxicity and eroticization. Its character archetypes and plot points are heavily recycled in teen dramas, making critics consider the novel to be basic or commonplace rather than a masterpiece. However, this arises from misinterpretations and the conspicuous gap between the real novel and its movie adaptations.

Hall argues that popular culture is inseparable from questions of race and class. The 2026 adaptation of the novel proves the significance of his assertion by erasing both. Heathcliff, who is described in the book as a "dark-skinned gypsy" with "black eyes" is played by a white actor in the movie, stripping him of his racial ambiguity that positioned him as a marginalised outsider and fuelled his villain origin story. The film further reframes Heathcliff through visual cues that evoke Christ-like iconography, aligning the character with the Western representation of Jesus Christ rather than a person of Romani ethnicity as described in the novel. Critics and novel enthusiasts draw on this to point out the racial concerns, proving the relevance of race and class in popular culture. The novel, by itself, breaks away from class struggle in the end with a hopeful generational shift from abuse and oppression.

3.3 Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* sparked a fierce moral criticism when it was published. Compared to Emily's unapologetically dark and starkly Gothic approach, Charlotte's was introspective, didactic, and socially grounded. However, critics still admonished *Jane Eyre* because the novel rejected strict Victorian gender norms. An infamous review published in the *Quarterly Review* by Elizabeth Rigby not only accused the novel of promoting anti-Christian spirit but also questioned the author's morality. Rigby stated that the novel was "the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit" because of its independent, rebellious nature. Rigby infamously declared that if the author were a woman, she "had long forfeited the society of her own sex." Critics were not only scandalised by the depiction of female passion but also by how the protagonist defied rigid class divides, traditional gender roles and orthodoxy of religion. The Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold denounced the significance of Jane's writing, dismissing *Jane Eyre* as a "hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel", considering it "one of the most utterly disagreeable books" he had ever read.

However, *Jane Eyre* did have its early supporters as well. Take the Victorian critic George Henry Lewes who praised the novel for its arresting realism, detailed character sketches, and depiction of emotions at a visceral level. He championed the novel, lauding the depiction of Jane Eyre in her independent, multi-dimensional glory. Queen Victoria herself was a massive fan of the book, going as far as to mention in her private journal that it was an "intensely interesting novel". For Brontë's close friend, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Jane Eyre* was a direct inspiration for her later heroines such as Margaret Hale in *North and South* as they share Jane's fierce defiance and her pursuit of dignity and agency.

In his essay, Hall breaks down three distinct ways used to define the popular: the commercial/market view, the descriptive view and the political/strategic view. If the commercial/market view was taken into consideration, the focus would be on how Brontë leveraged the popular Gothic romance trope to make her social commentary profitable and well read. The descriptive view focuses on the micro-realities and how the text mapped the low wages of the working class and the displacement felt by unpropertied educated women of the Victorian era. Hall's preferred definition is the political/strategic view i.e., that "the popular" is a site of ongoing class struggle over cultural meanings. *Jane Eyre* is an active battlefield – it forces confrontation between the culture of dominance (the Rochesters, the Ingrams, the Brocklehursts) and that of subordination (Jane, the servants).

3.4 Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Dracula was probably as repulsive as *Wuthering Heights* was to early critics and authors. For Stoker's contemporaries, it was a "loathsome," "morbid," and "ghastly" chore to read. It had an almost imperceptible presence in Stoker's obituaries. When the novel was published in 1897, it was criticised primarily due to its shocking content, its controversial exploration of sexuality, and its defiance of Victorian literary conventions. The *Manchester Guardian* argued that Stoker had erred by including "too much horror." They added that while "the reader can follow the story with interest to the end", it is "an artistic mistake to fill a whole volume with horrors." Highbrow critics dismissed *Dracula* as a glorified "penny dreadful" (cheap, lurid pulp fiction) rather than serious literature since the book relies on sensationalist scares and the supernatural. The *Athenaeum* (June 26, 1897) claimed that Stoker's approach lacked the "essential note of awful remoteness," and that it relied instead on "crude statements of incredible actions." The Victorian critics were revolted by its explicit content, especially the way the concept of "blood-drinking" barely concealed sexual intent. The book included macabre horror elements – specifically desecration of tombs and staking of the vampire – that repulsed early reviewers.

However, some of Stoker's contemporaries also viewed the novel as a thrilling and transgressive commentary in their era. For Arthur Conan Doyle who authored Sherlock Holmes, *Dracula* was "the very best story of diablerie" which he had read for many years. Outlets like the *Daily Mail* was all praises for its "appalling gloomy fascination" that was unlike any other Gothic tale of that time.

Maurice Richardson's influential 1959 essay describes *Dracula* as a "kind of incestuous, necrophilous, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match." Richardson applies Freudian lens to argue that Dracula is best understood as a figurative representation of perverse fantasies and Oedipal dynamics. For him, Count Dracula acts as a perverse father figure – competing with the younger male protagonists for female affection.

Dracula was primarily interpreted as an "invasion literature" since it mirrored the late-Victorian anxieties about the fall of the British empire. Rather than permeating England by military force, Dracula enters England as an immigrant. He arrives on a ghost ship via the Whitby port, representing the vulnerability of the borders of an island nation. His infiltration is systematic – he studies English maps and purchases multiple properties before setting up forward operating bases. He feeds on the people, turning them into vampires – thus contaminating the place in a "social" manner. *Dracula*'s enduring nature reflects Hall's assertion of the audience drawn to disruption, distortion. *Dracula* shatters Victorian constraints and morality, allowing the modern-day audience to establish a discourse that is both for and against this monster, or rather, a figure of freedom. Hall's assertion about popular culture being a continuous redefined concept rather than an abstract theory is further proven by the varying figures of Dracula – who, apart from being a villain, could be portrayed as a romantic anti-hero, an allegory for minority or a symbol of capital extraction. This is how popular culture can be reactionary. Literary critic and scholar Stephan D Arata introduced the concept of "reverse colonisation" (in "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation") where he argued that *Dracula* inverts the Victorian narrative of British imperialism. Instead of the British conquering primitive foreign lands, we have Dracula, a primitive, ancient force, trying to conquer the British Empire.

For present-day critics, the book captures the cultural anxieties of the Victorian era and is thus a complex allegory. While *Dracula* was initially shunned for its format, it is a brilliant example of an epistolary novel where the story takes place through diary entries, telegrams, newspaper clippings and audio recordings. According to John Pistelli, an author and critic, religious elements and folklore trappings are the novel's weakest elements along with its somewhat regressive Gothicism. However, they represent a clash between the superstitious, ancient dread and the redeeming power of modernity. Dracula's anti-Christ nature is contrasted with faithful Christians like Van Helsing and other characters. This works in the favour of the Victorian, orthodox audience who associates success directly to religious devotion. As Hall pointed out, the popular is constantly subject to suppression by the majority. This is visible in the novel's structure, this usage of Victorian progress (typewriters, blood transfusions etc.) only to ultimately neutralise the threat of Dracula, the "Other".

3.5 Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* faced perhaps the most personally destructive backlash of any novel in this study. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was hated by the Victorian society because of how unabashedly it challenged their strict moral code. The backlash was rooted in not only the heavy homoerotic undertones between Dorian and Basil, but also in the depiction of upper-class corruption. It was no surprise that the book was not immune to criticism. A prominent journalist wrote an anonymous, scornful review of the novel in *The Scots Observer*. By denouncing the book as "false art" and notoriously declaring that it was

written for “outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys”, he attacked on the era’s gay subculture due to his homophobic bias rather than having a genuine reason for reproach. Reviewers in the *St. James’s Gazette* condemned this book, describing it as “unclean,” “poisonous,” and “heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and social putrefaction”. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, the plot was a “tale of horror and blood” fraught with “sham morality.”

During Wilde’s 1895 trial, the book was condemned for “gross indecency.” The novel’s themes of hedonism and homoeroticism were used as evidence against Wilde by his prosecutors. Regardless of this, the novel is a timeless Faustian allegory – fluctuating nature of surface-level beauty and the avarice of the soul divorced from morality. The portrait absorbing human sins before eventually morphing back into its original handsome owner – who turns into a disfigured corpse – is a haunting, timeless imagery.

When the famous critic, Walter Pater, reviewed the novel, it was with mixed feelings. On one hand, he acknowledged Wilde’s brilliant style, considering the dialogues to be “really alive” and recognising Wilde as a genuine successor to Matthew Arnold’s tradition. On the other hand, he condemned Wilde’s equation of aestheticism to Dorian’s hedonism and was always afraid of Wilde’s “flamboyant propaganda.” According to John Paul Riquelme, Dorian Gray “proceeds against the background of Walter Pater’s aesthetic writings, but also against Pater in a stronger sense. It provides in narrative form a dark revealing double for Pater’s aestheticism that emerges from a potential for dark doubling and reversal within aestheticism itself.” For the acclaimed poet, W.B. Yeats, “The Picture of Dorian Gray, with all its faults, is a wonderful book.” He was interested in the novel’s dark aesthetics and vociferous social commentary. He felt that the tale was as sensible as Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*. Later on, Thomas Mann, a Nobel Prize laureate, known for his novels and essays, famously noted that, “Wilde might have come from Nietzsche, and Nietzsche from Wilde.” He recognised how Dorian’s unthinking adherence to Lord Henry’s hedonistic philosophies ultimately led to his moral deterioration.

The book’s evolution into pop culture and horror cult, was in a way, horrid and inaccurate. The book does not portray a vivid, scary, monster people always tend to associate with horror. As Katie Gill while writing for the *Medium*, notes, “The actions of classic horror monsters are always a little inhuman. Dracula drinks blood, turning young women into fiendish monsters like himself...In contrast, Dorian Gray and his actions are aggressively human. He murders, he blackmails, he indulges in depravity, and he coerces people. All of his crimes are absolutely terrible, but they are crimes that the average human could commit.” The very significance of Dorian Gray’s character lies in his humanity – the way it portrays how depraved a normal person can turn to be.

Hall’s insight about cultural forms shifting across high and low art depending on power relations is played out in the novel. Oscar Wilde’s text by itself bridges the gap between elite/high art and commercial/low art. While written as a piece of highly sophisticated literature, it was published in Lippincott’s monthly magazine (commercial magazine) for mass consumption. Within the novel, Dorian Gray himself is the epitome of fluidity – shifting from elite opera houses, high fashion and fine art to low-culture opium dens and cheap music halls in London’s East End.

2. Gender and Sexuality as Disciplinary Mechanisms

Reading across these three novels authored by women, a clear pattern emerges which Hall did not directly address – how the label “popular” was applied on gender basis. For Austen, the problem was that it was too domestic – concerned with marriage proposals – something people

brushed off as trivial while ignoring the social critique underneath. For Emily Brontë, the charge was the exact opposite – it was labelled as unfeminine and crude. The brutal, passion-driven narrative was of an unladylike mannerism for her. Austen was criticised for staying inside the domestic sphere while Emily Brontë was punished for escaping it. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was an intermix of the domestic and the wild – and yet, it satisfied none. Neither properly domestic nor unabashedly monstrous, *Jane Eyre* was hated for its “unregenerate and undisciplined spirit.” A woman embodying independence and autonomy was so uncalled for – scandalising patriarchal figures. The label “popular” punished women unambiguously – be it for slight subversion (Jane Austen) or total autonomy (Emily Brontë) or a refusal to total subordination (Charlotte Brontë). The judgement, rather than being merely aesthetic, is a disciplinary mechanism dressed as literary criticism. To be read widely was to risk being dismissed as trivial while to be independent was to risk being judged as unwomanly. The eventual canonization of the Brontë sisters and Austen proves Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital; how their defenders (Scott for Austen, Woolf for Emily Brontë, and Lewes for Charlotte Brontë) possessed enough elite influence to force a reassessment.

While gender transgression does explain the abrupt dismissal of Austen and the Brontë sisters, it does not fully account for the cases of Wilde and Stoker. The weaponised label is no longer about gender but about sexuality in these cases. When *Dracula* was first published, it was not only hated for its morbid horror but also for its barely concealed exploration of sexual elements in the novel. The vampire's bite, the barely hidden sensual tension and Lucy's sudden attractiveness after turning into a Vampire – can be considered as a euphemism for penetration. The female desire is monstrous and devouring. Critics, rather than calling it out directly, labelled the book as “cheap.” For Wilde, however, the matter was far worse – the homoerotic elements in his novel were leveraged against him in his trial regarding homosexuality. Basil's fascination with Dorian goes beyond what was considered normal in the society during Wilde's era. While Stoker remained a respectable figure (with a life beyond being an author), Wilde was prosecuted, imprisoned and destroyed. This is how Hall's insight about popular forms a new meaning – the ideological struggle depends on who is writing the book and in what time it is written. If Wilde was a 21st century author writing about queer love, he would be respected and loved by readers. However, the Victorian era crucified him because of their narrow-mindedness regarding sexuality and love. Calling a book “popular” was to say that it is not for respectable people. However, times have changed – the eventual canonisation of all these books represents the slow work of later generations who reread the novels with diminished homophobia and misogyny.

3. Conclusion

The case studies of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrate how the distinction between the “popular” and “high” literature is not just about the aesthetics – it is more so a verdict delivered by those in power. As Stuart Hall argues, popular culture is not a fixed entity – it is the arena of power struggle, that of conformity and resistance. The label “popular” was weaponised to dismiss texts that transgressed Victorian norms: Austen's domesticity, Emily Brontë's unfeminine brutality, Charlotte Brontë's rebellious independence, Stoker's racial and sexual anxieties, and Wilde's explicit homoeroticism. The charge of being “popular” was never about literary criticism; it was all about a disciplinary mechanism, a curbing force.

Their eventual canonisation confirms Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital – how the elites themselves advocated for the texts, resulting in their success. Scott praised Austen; Woolf elevated the Brontë sisters; Critics both admired and refuted Stoker in post-colonial readings; Pater held a begrudging respect for Oscar. The canon did not merely appeal to the masses; rather, it developed through factions of elite who were willing to elevate the texts and showcase

it to the people. This study does not claim that all Victorian penny dreadfuls, circulating-library romances, and Gothic thrillers that have vanished without trace. It seeks out and distinguishes these five texts for their interpretive flexibility – their capacity to influence post-colonial, feminist, Marxist, and queer readings. These novels survived not just due to their enduring popularity but also because of how later generations found them useful for their cultural struggles.

This enduring utility exposes the intrinsic instability of literary value and proves that the latter is more of a historically contingent construct rather than the universal truth. The very transgressive elements policed by the critics (be it be hedonism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or the dark Gothic elements in *Wuthering Heights*) have been redefined as contemporary aesthetic standards in the later centuries. This reveals a heavily tangled relationship between popular culture and academic recognition: the academy relies on the utility of popular narrative to remain relevant, while popular texts need academic canonisation to retain their importance. Today's cultural field mirrors the Victorian era; "culture wars" are manifested through censorship and institutional banning of books. The usage of "inappropriate" or "crude" is used to ambush the underlying anxieties regarding race, gender and sexuality.

This raises an important question for future literary historians: which of today's popular texts will evolve into classics over time? Will J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, dismissed as children's fantasy follow Austen's trajectory? One can apply Bourdieu's framework here to suggest the requirement of a new generation of elite gatekeepers – scholarly factions, literary prize committees and university syndicates – to appropriate contemporary texts and weaponize them. Hall's framework predicts that the answer lies not in the essence of the texts but on the cultural struggles of the twenty-first century. What remains certain is that the labels 'popular' and 'high' will continue to shape cultural hierarchies – and that the verdict will always be delivered by those in power.

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Bio-note

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