

Literary Girls, by Kathleen Stock: chapter 2, the low-high culture divide

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Abstract. This paper is a response to Kathleen Stock's book *Material Girls*, by way of imitation. I attempt to write a faux chapter in her style, identifying four moments in the overcoming of the low and high culture divide in responses to the arts.

I fear that someone is expecting a further response to Kathleen Stock's 2021 book, feeling that a paper is not enough return. Below is a pastiche, followed by an appendix with some feedback.

This chapter is about the divide between popular culture and high culture in the arts. High culture is composed of difficult but rewarding artworks, like the Spanish novel *Don Quixote*. Popular culture is composed of immediately gratifying artworks, such as a soap opera or a brief funny joke with a pun in it. Everyone knows about the divide. If you're from the lower class, you are supposed to enjoy one set of arts – lowbrow they're called; if you are from the middle class, you're supposed to enjoy another set of arts – middlebrow they are called. And if you are from the high class, you are supposed to enjoy, or at least take an interest in, highbrow arts. And if you try to do anything else than what suits your station, life will be made very difficult for you, as it has been for me.

Now something we do in philosophy is start with a simplification. The idea is that points we make with that simplification can apply to more complicated situations. So let's forget about middlebrow and simply say that there's high culture and popular culture. Everyone forgets about

that in-between stuff anyway. But there are attacks on this division between high and low. Some of the attacks were by earlier philosophers; not analytic philosophers today, who mostly talk only among themselves. I'm an analytic philosopher too, but I am going to try talking to you! In this chapter, I present a brief history of recent attacks on the high-low divide, in the field of responses to the arts. Remember: I'm talking about responses, such as interpretations and university courses, rather than the production of art, and with a special emphasis on literary arts. There are four big moments.

Moment 1: Push-pin and Poetry

According to utilitarianism, the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness, which is understood as pleasure minus pain. Pleasure is not some obscure Aristotelian thing which needs a Greek word to refer to it; it's just sensations. Actually philosophers call this ACT UTILITARIANISM; analytic philosophers distinguish several types of utilitarianism and ACT UTILITARIANISM is one kind. There's also RULE UTILITARIANISM and more sophisticated kinds. What if two actions available to a person both produce an equal amount of happiness in the world and all others produce less and these two cannot be jointly performed? That's a good question. Then there's an option of performing either of these two, according to ACT UTILITARIANISM.

This moral philosophy was invented by Jeremy Bentham, who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Now Bentham said that push-pin is as good as poetry. Push-pin was a game that people played. It was an amusement, and it supposedly produced as much pleasure as the pleasures of reading great writers like Homer and Shakespeare. I don't know much about

what was involved with push-pin, but with Bentham's ACT UTILITARIANISM the divide between high culture and popular culture was undermined. A lecturer at a university would be morally wrong if they just included certain novels which are hard-going on their course, like *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, and didn't include some amusing popular works, which they don't hold in high regard. ("And lecturers always like to be morally right." That's Laura!)

Another utilitarian, John Stuart Mill, famously presented a divide between higher pleasures and lower pleasures as a response to the problem of why anyone should take an interest in arts which are not immediately gratifying. The course giver should prioritize higher pleasures over lower pleasures. The solution has not convinced some.¹

Moment 2: Literary Theory

There's a widely used textbook on literary theory. It's not that good in places, but it's useful on the history of literary theory. Literary theory exploded in the 1960s. Here's what the textbook says:

Some literary theory has indeed been excessively in-group and obscurantist, and this book represents one attempt to undo that damage and make it more widely accessible. But there is another sense in which such theory is the very reverse of elitist. What is truly elitist in literary studies is the idea that works of literature can only be appreciated by those with a particular sort of cultural breeding... Theory was a way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a 'civilized sensibility', and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at

¹ See Bradley essay 3, 1876.

least, anyone could participate. There are those who have 'literary values' in their bones, and those who languish in the outer darkness. One important reason for the growth of literary theory since the 1960s was the gradual breakdown of this assumption, under the impact of new kinds of students entering higher education from supposedly 'uncultivated' backgrounds.²

So “theory” was a replacement for an earlier way of approaching literary works. It’s not fully clear from the textbook what this earlier approach was, but here are four axioms I associate with it:

- (a) Literature is only written by people from cultivated backgrounds.
- (b) To be from a cultivated background, you have to grow up in a family in which older members read works of literature, in a prestigious sense of the word, and they make children read some of these as well.
- (c) If you grow up in this kind of family, you end up with the ability to understand literary works by intuition. When reading a novel, you just know what’s going on when the main character and his love interest are walking home and they meet her father. And you can’t develop this intuition in any other way.
- (d) In selecting students for studying a literary course, you should only take students with this intuition, and only people from cultivated backgrounds have it.

The problem with (d) in the 1960s was that the university system was expanding massively and literature and other arts departments were taking in people from uncultivated backgrounds, so they needed “theory” because the new students lacked the intuition to understand literature. (By

² Eagleton 1996: viii.

the way, although (d) seems really elitist, some people who hold it probably think, “I, from a cultivated background, don’t have the intuition to understand your lowbrow arts.”)

The simplest way of understanding the claim that literary theory overcame the elitism in (d) is like this. A literary theory is basically a formula.³ You can apply the formula to a text to produce an interpretation, like how a science student might apply a formula to a situation. For example, a physics student works with the simple formula that all objects fall to the ground at the same speed and they answer the question “Which will land sooner if dropped at the same time, this heavy book or this light book?” by saying, “They will land at the same time.” Similarly, anyone who grasps the formula can apply the literary theory. There’s no need for having intuition. Literary theories can be very strange but they’re a bit like a system for interpreting palms. Everyone knows palmistry systems, which tell you things like “Those marks mean you will have two children” and “This other mark means that a child will be taken from you.”

The development of literary theory actually challenges the divide between high and popular culture in two ways. (1) It allows more students who lack literary intuition to join courses, as long as they can use a theory. They’re no longer confined to lowbrow entertainments. (2) A theory can be used beyond works classed as literature, in a prestigious sense. You can apply the formula to an advertisement or a trashy romance novel.

Moment 3: Analogies

Let’s do a thought experiment. Imagine that I write a textbook but it omits some information which people are expecting to see there. And a critic reads it. I’m a critic, but even

³ In a way the four axioms are a literary theory, but they’re not a literary theory in the sense which the textbook writer has in mind.

critics have critics. And this critic is looking for an analogy. Then one of his friends proposes: it's like chess without the king. "NO!" shouts the critic, "That's not what I am looking for." Then he begins searching for an analogy. But what if the best analogy requires delving into lowbrow culture? Because he wants the best analogy, he has to do that. He can't say, "I don't touch that stuff." (As Marilyn S_____ might have said, "There is a set of analogies internal to a domain, but one can import an analogy from outside, on the condition that none of the internal analogies suffice.")

This is about a textbook, but what about literary criticism proper? Sometimes you need analogies from places you don't want to go to – literary critics probably know this, even if they haven't got an explicit set of guidelines about the matter. The famous characterization "This is an episodic novel" was probably taken from responses to lowbrow works. It was then used in response to Yukio Mishima's novel *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and also Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. She had to publish in a periodical monthly, then the material was collected together and turned into a book, so it's episodic. I don't know why his novel is episodic, but maybe something similar went on.⁴

Moment 4: The Technocratic Loophole

There are skilled craftsmen and they're mostly very snobbish. But they don't protest against things like revealing dresses worn at movie award ceremonies. It seems they privately would, because they're so conservative. But actually they wonder why you can't see even more. Why does the dress not just fall down, like what happened to that French actress? Until that

⁴ Or maybe monks just have episodic lives.

puzzle is solved, of how the dress stays up, those revealing dresses are allowed at ceremonies. Because first and foremost these people are technocrats. They want to know how that technical problem is solved. Things which would otherwise be regarded as low culture, by some snobbish group, are sometimes accepted because of a technical achievement. The discovery of that way in must have happened but, compared to the others, it's a secret moment.

Appendix

This is not part of the pastiche, though it is not always easy to exit pastiche mode. Stock writes:

Still, it's worth noting that, despite my recent professional turn in sex and gender, I'm still mostly considered an outsider to the area. Although I have been writing and speaking on the topic in public for a couple of years now, and have authored academic papers about it, I don't work in a Gender Studies department, or in the field of queer theory, or in Trans Studies. I'm not trans myself. I'm not even a proper feminist philosopher; at least, I didn't used to think I was. (2021: 8)

I think "others" are mostly not going to see Stock like this. Some people will react by means of analogical thinking, though perhaps in a subtly different sense to before: by comparing her work to work by people they already know. For example, Stock explains Judith Butler in various places. But I know at least two others who have been members of a certain department and do that (in lectures, if not books), and all these efforts seem quite similar. "Stock is like so-and-so," someone might think. In her professional role, she is perceived as analogous to that person. (That could be a reason for ignoring her work. But perhaps the reader is like a restaurant critic, who

eats the same meal at a number of restaurants and is concerned with subtle differences.⁵ I worry then that they would not regard what I have provided as a very good pastiche.⁶)

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⁵ On reflection, the differences are not that subtle. I think there are six main methods of interpretation. One is assimilating Butler to an actual philosopher or a stock character, e.g. “She is just a Hegelian.” See Edward 2022b.

⁶ By the way, the history presented contains major omissions and “episodic” was used well before Mishima’s novel.