

Literature - more than a thrilling plot

Reading! What could be better? Diving into an unfamiliar life! Sharing beautiful and terrifying hours with a hero or a heroine who is a complete stranger to us, only to become so familiar after a few pages as if we had known him or her for a lifetime! Reading! This means becoming engrossed in a time, traveling to a place we would never have gone to without the book. Books are the key to new realities. They entertain us, they take our mind off things – and they can do much more than that.

If we read them with our eyes open, they lead us into their author's world. They provide us with an insight into his life, into the hopes and fears of his time. What a book can accomplish is far more than simply telling a story. We are given an authentic testimony of another reality – but only if we not only pay attention to a book's compelling story and beautiful style, but also to the small details in the background.

What an author writes

When Anton Chekhov tells his story of the cherry orchard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky reflects on the player, Charles Dickens narrates the fate of an orphan child called Oliver Twist, their realism reveals the sorrows and needs of their time. A book of this sort is easy to read, because the story and the time described coincide.

But what about all the other novels that do not reflect contemporary events? Those that paint one of the author's fantasies? Do they, too, provide us with an insight into the thinking at the time they were written?

Child of its time

Every book is a child of its time. It reflects this time, no matter if it is set in the present, the future or the past. The choice of the topic bespeaks contemporary ideas and needs.

Just think of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the inventor of the historical novel. His stories met the needs of his time. His praise of the virtue of the Scottish Highlanders constituted an antithesis to the widely-held contempt of this specific population group. Highlanders were believed to be traitors. They had fought a war against the young English royal family from the House of Hanover. Scott lived in a torn country. His *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy* or *Quentin Durward*, though, presented Great Britain with new heroes, thus giving it a joint (fictitious) past as a basis for the nation to grow together.

How different the attitude towards life during Jules Verne's time (1828-1905)! A member of the up-and-coming bourgeoisie of the era of industrialization, he (and his readers) firmly believed in technology. To him, nothing seemed impossible. A trip to the moon? Around the world in 80 days? To the center of the Earth? It's a piece of cake. The glorious future, when this would all become possible, was right at his doorstep.

After World War II, the authors were strongly influenced by the disappointment that people were using their sophisticated technology primarily to kill others even more effectively. With his terrifying 1984 vision of the future, someone like George Orwell (1903-1950) did nothing else than immortalize the fears of 1948 through literature.

Shortly thereafter, J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892-1973) vision of a mythical world was released. A world where elves and dwarves, peaceful hobbits and belligerent humans fight their eternal battle against evil centered upon the Lord of the Rings. When it was published, Tolkien's book was something for insiders. And when it was first made into a film in 1970, nobody actually wanted

to see it. Compared against the landing on the moon, elves and dwarves were kids' stuff. Things are different today. Nowadays, many people dream of a simpler world where everyone striving for the good can recognize evil by its looks and actions. Today, the Lord of the Rings is undoubtedly iconic.

Impact history

After all, the time at which a book makes the biggest impact, says much about our society. Published in 1927, Hesse's (1877-1962) "Steppenwolf", for instance, was torn to pieces by the reviewers. The split personality of someone like Heinrich Haller did not fit into a time characterized by rising fascist movements. The protests of 1968, on the other hand, made it a point to question itself. The book became its Bible. Today, "Steppenwolf" is the epitome of an individual that demands wild freedom for itself and leaves the protecting circle of society by his own free will.

About the eternal truth of the trivial

Who says that you can't gain anything from reading light fiction? In light fiction, the intellectual author steps back in favor of a product suitable for the masses. And that simply reflects the everyday life and dreams of Joe and Jane Lunchbucket.

You don't believe me? Well, here is just one of countless examples: to illustrate the increasing emancipation of women in western society, there is no better source than the crime novel.

Let us go back to Inspector Maigret, the character conceived by Georges Simenon (1903-1989) in the 1930s. He is a pipe-smoking bon vivant who likes to return to his comfortable apartment in Paris, where his wife, a housewife of course, is cooking for him.

Compare Madame Maigret – Simenon does not bother to reveal her first name to us – with Paola Brunetti, the wife of Guido Brunetti, the hero of Donna Leon's (*1942) crime novels set in Venice. She is a professor, stems from the best family and moves the plot forward as an independent figure.

And that is nothing compared to the heroines of Tess Gerritsen and the urban fantasy genre. Today, women in light fiction fight not only with their brains, but also with brutal force, and are thus a far cry from the scheming mistresses of a James Bond or a Sam Spade.

About the quality of true literature

So every text, whether the artistically designed masterpiece of literature or the tearjerker that was written in no time, offers insights into the society at the time it was composed. But what is the quality of true literature? The literature that will last for centuries?

There is no better example to demonstrate this than Don Quixote de la Mancha, the unlucky knight who always strives for the good but is always defeated by himself. Everyone is familiar with the image of Don Quixote with his lance, ready to attack the windmills. His fight against the windmills has become proverbial and so impressing that it needs no further explanation.

And yet it is precisely this image that becomes increasingly topical once you learn that windmills were the hallmark of industrial companies in early modern times. Wind power was used to drive fulling mills, forges and, of course, corn mills. If we wanted to translate this image into our times, Don Quixote would have to hit the walls of a nuclear reactor with a little hammer.

It is precisely the literary quality of Don Quixote that we do not need to know about the exact purpose of windmills at the time of Cervantes (1547-1616) to intuitively understand this image.

Literature at the MoneyMuseum

It would have been interesting, however, to know what is behind this windmill image after all. Perhaps this information would have made you want to dig out Don Quixote again. Then our texts would have accomplished their goal. Through them, we want to offer you a way to read the old classics from an entirely new perspective. A temptation to read them again. Or to get to know them. For what could be better than becoming engrossed even more in a time that would have remained a secret without the book?

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