



LIT 115 - Introduction to Literature



Serious vs. Popular Literature

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Writers write for different reasons. Some write because they have complex ideas about humanity and the human condition which are best expressed in narrative or poetic or dramatic form. Others write because they want to amuse their readers with tales of intrigue, horror, or romance--and perhaps to make money. Some want to do both.

The table below categorizes major differences between writing that is serious and reflective in its intent and writing that is meant mostly to entertain (sometimes referred to as "escape" literature). Whether we classify a work of literature as serious or as popular, however, may have little to do with how much we enjoy it. We might love a serious piece and hate a popular one, or vice versa. And stating that a piece is either serious or popular (or perhaps a mix) does not equate to saying it is good or bad writing, either. Both good and bad writing can--and do--occur in either category.

How to Distinguish Between Serious and Popular Literature

Serious Writing	Popular Writing
Definition:	Definition:
1. Writing that requires philosophical thought by both the reader and the writer.	1. Writing that deals with the obvious or with the easily seen.
2. Writing that deals with deep moral problems of life that affect people permanently.	2. Writing that deals with temporary problems.
Purpose:	Purpose:
1. To help us gain insight by expanding our minds and our awareness of life.	1. To provide escape and entertainment for the reader.
2. To present a universal truth about life as the author sees it. (Thematic intent)	2. To make the reader's dreams come true.
Identification Mark:	Identification Mark:
1. Original plots, realistic characters. At the end, the reader will have to make decisions about the way the author and/or characters solved the problems. Ambivalent endings.	1. Predictable plots often involving a god-like figure who solves everyone's problems. At the end, all the reader has to do is sigh with satisfaction. Happy endings.
2. Characters are usually individuals and may act in unexpected ways as do real people.	2. Characters are often stereotyped ("good guys wear white hats") and predictable in their actions or decisions, as real people are not.
3. Characters make major personality changes slowly and, sometimes, painfully.	3. Characters make major personality changes easily and quickly.
4. View of life is complex; world and characters are seen in shades of grey, having both good and bad qualities.	4. View of life is simplistic: world and characters are seen in black or white, as good or evil.
Life Expectancy:	Life Expectancy:
A well-written serious book has a good chance of being a permanent addition to the literature of a country and/or the world. It can sell immediately after publication or be ignored until many years after the author is dead.	A well-written popular book usually has a temporary, although well-paid, existence. It can be tremendously successful for a short time and the author gets as wealthy as income taxes allow, then is forgotten just as fast.

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