

Qualifying a Genre: The Case of Morrissey as a Penguin Classic

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Abstract

Reverence for classic literature is timeless. Yet despite the genre's lasting appeal, its definition has proved less enduring. Through the discourse of literary theorists Gerard Genette, Robert Darnton and Pierre Bourdieu, this article will explore different interpretations of classics and the variety of considerations that go into specifying a work as such. Genette acknowledges the absolute power of the publisher in consecrating classics while Darnton describes the process as more interdependent by means of a publishing communications circuit. Bourdieu defines the influence of symbolic capital, illuminating how things, such as classics, receive value from a collective belief that they have meaning at all. These concepts will then be applied to Penguin Book Ltd's inclusion of *Autobiography* by Steven Patrick Morrissey in the original Penguin Classic series, a controversial decision that reaffirmed the publisher's impact as a cultural gatekeeper.

Key Words

Penguin Books Ltd, Penguin Classics, Steven Patrick Morrissey, Classics, Literary theories

Introduction

The concept of a classic work of literature is more complicated than one might imagine. The criteria of a classic are seemingly transparent: They must be old, written by a notable author and uphold some type of literary or educational value. As the publishing industry has evolved, these notions have been challenged and new queries have come to light. One must question not only what the classification system is for a classic, but also who is responsible for making this distinction. Is it the reader, the writer or the publisher? And once the label is enforced, does it require justification in the event of widespread scrutiny? Such was the case when Penguin Books Ltd published Steven Patrick Morrissey's *Autobiography* as a Penguin Classic in 2013. The controversial decision had many doubting the legitimacy of the Penguin Classics series and the brand's reputation as a publisher of great works of literature. This article will explore the varying definitions and interpretations of a classic through the arguments set forth by literary theorists including Gerard Genette, Robert Darnton and Pierre Bourdieu. Upon analysis, each concept will then be applied to Penguin's decision to publish Morrissey's memoir as a Penguin Classic. The overall goal of this assessment is to show that a publisher has the right to choose what to include in a series. Depending on the company's status in the industry, the repercussions of these decisions may result in labelling a work of literature, thereby exercising its role as a cultural gatekeeper. The decision to accept this label, however, lies with the greater public.

Gerard Genette and the Publisher's Peritext

In his book, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gerard Genette identifies the publisher's peritext as the "zone that exists merely by the fact that the book is published" (1997, 16). Whatever form the book is produced (or reproduced) and presented to the public is at the sole discretion of the publisher. The literal application of this was most evident at the beginning of the nineteenth century when works that were considered "serious" and popular were produced in a smaller format, making them easier to transport and read. Prior to this, larger volumes were reserved for such works. The inauguration of

the “pocket format”, as it would come to be known, became responsible for denoting a work as a must-read and “its admission into the pantheon of classics” (18).

In today’s contemporary publishing vernacular, pocket size is synonymous with the concept of a series. According to Genette:

The series emblem, much more than size, conveys two basic meanings. One is purely economic: the assurances (variable and sometimes illusory) of a better price. The other is indeed ‘cultural’ and, to speak of what interests us, paratextual: the assurance of a selection based on *revivals*, that is reissues. (1997, 21)

This more theoretical approach to pocket size explains how publishers adopt a series to support their activities. Particularly in times of growth when output is healthy and diverse, publishers may begin multiple series as a way to typify their works and amplify their industry-wide influence.

The power of a publisher’s series correlates to the company’s commercial and cultural success by the way the series affects readers and writers. The series emblem, for instance, lets a reader know immediately what type of work they are encountering (1997, 27). For example, if one selects a book from a big-name publisher’s classic series, they will likely assume that the work of literature is undoubtedly a classic. This genre specification also extends to an author, often influencing their professional goals and aims. A writer who “thought himself as an essayist but ends up a sociologist, linguist or literary theorist” does so because of the series their work belongs to (28).

Considering Genette’s theory, it is logical to conclude that publishers have complete control over how a book is presented to the public, and so have the freedom to matriculate their series as instruments of culture. Publishers disseminate works how they see fit: If they deem a book a classic and produce it under their respective series, it then irrevocably becomes a classic work of literature.

Robert Darnton and the Publishing Communications Circuit

Robert Darnton states that the key to understanding book history is about understanding “the literary experience of ordinary readers” (2002, 1). Unlike Genette, Darnton believes that the history of books is attributed to more than just publishers’ decisions. For the sake of this article, we can contextually equate the phrasing of history of books to the history of types of books, such as classics.

One of the most helpful methods for tracing the history of books is envisioning it as a communications circuit. This cyclical circuit illustrates the interaction between different agents at each stage of book production, from the reader and writer to the publisher and bookseller. But the circuit is not as straightforward as it would appear, as some agents are involved at multiple points throughout the process. According to Darnton, the reader completes the circuit because of how he/she influences the writer before and after a work is created:

Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of literary enterprise, which affects their texts, whether they are composing Shakespearean sonnets or directions for assembling radio kits. (2002, 10-11)

In practice, an author who frequently reads and associates with historically classic works may then transform their writing to suit these standards. They interpret these works as prestigious and then attempt to mirror them, thereby fostering a substantial attitude towards the genre. Therefore, classics authors may owe their literary status to their behaviour as a reader as well as a writer.

Book advertising is also a major area ripe for analysis. As Darnton states:

One could learn a great deal about attitudes towards books and the context of their use by studying the way they were presented – the strategy of the appeal, the values invoked by the phrasing – in all kinds of publicity, from journal notices to wall

posters. (2002, 19)

Booksellers and publishers are heavily involved in this subject through their respective roles in the communications circuit. Like publishers, booksellers also act as cultural agents because of their pivotal role in publishing's commercial network (20). Retailers change their sales strategies based on the economic and social environments at the time, meaning that to a certain extent, they control the purchasing behaviour of consumers by deciding which books are stocked and displayed. Similarly, publishers act as marketers by implementing widespread promotional campaigns for different books. For example, a reader may see an ad for a book distinctly labelling it as a classic and then come to forever regard it as such.

Through the scope of the communications circuit, classics owe their endurable appeal and value to readers, writers and booksellers as well as publishers. The methods of presentation utilised by commercial agents are encouraged and enforced by the response of readers.

Pierre Bourdieu and Symbolic Capital

When exploring classic literature, perhaps the most applicable concept Pierre Bourdieu presents is that of symbolic capital. This type of economic capital, though not explicitly monetary by nature, still promises profit by way of its longstanding influence and meaningful foundation (1996, 142). As it applies to the literary field, a work claiming symbolic capital will consistently bring in financial gain due to its cultural durability.

But for a classic to hone symbolic appropriation, someone or something must take responsibility for inscribing it appropriately. Bourdieu has an answer for this as well:

The education system, which claims a monopoly on the consecration of works of the past [. . .] does not grant, except *post mortem*, and after a long process, the infallible sign of consecration that is constituted by the canonization of works as classics by inscribing them in curricula. (1996, 147)

If a work is academically adopted, it can be regarded as a classic. Building on this idea, Bourdieu then equates the role of a publisher as that of a "simple merchant" or "audacious

discoverer” who can only succeed once they have acknowledge the “specific laws” recognising the education system as the sole determinant for what makes a classic (1996, 147). The only way for the publisher to have the power to consecrate a work of the past, Bourdieu explains, is for them to become an irrefutable success within the industry:

The only legitimate accumulation [. . .] consists in making a name for oneself, a name that is known and recognized, the capital of consecration – implying a power to consecrate objects [. . .] and hence giving them value, and of making profits from this operation. (1996, 148)

In order for a literary work to make a lasting profit, it must have symbolic capital; but for a work to have symbolic capital, it must first be consecrated as a classic. Today, the privilege to do this lies with powerful key publishers.

But is a classic consecrated because of its age or value, or are the two qualities inextricably linked? Based on Bourdieu’s analysis, ageing fosters value – but it must be recognised that there is a difference between ageing and simply “sliding into the past” (1996, 157). True ageing occurs when a work is fighting against seemingly unconquerable forces: They are objects that “have an interest in stopping time, in eternalizing the present state” and are striving for what Bourdieu calls “marks of distinction” (1996, 157).

What Bourdieu continues to emphasise is that the fight is only won and importance is only achieved once readers assign the work value:

At least at this extreme end of the continuum which goes from the simple fabricated object, tool or piece of clothing to the consecrated work of art, the work of material fabrication is nothing without the labour of production of the value of the fabricated object. (1996, 172)

The “labour of production of the value” is carried out by the reader and the publisher. Readers perceive value based on what publishers declare a classic. A collective belief in the

work's meaning is then formed, thereby ensuring its symbolic capital and durable status as a literary classic.

A "Classic" Problem: Penguin and Morrissey

On 17th October 2013, Penguin Books Ltd released the memoir of Steven Patrick Morrissey, *Autobiography*, as an original Penguin Classic. The event was met with controversy and praise, but ultimately the decision resulted in what every publisher desires: sales. To date, more than 180,000 paperback copies have been sold, resulting in over £1,200,000 total revenue (Nielsen BookScan, 2015).

Co-founder of The Smiths, singer-songwriter Morrissey has achieved global recognition and esteem, including being voted the second greatest living British icon by BBC viewers, as listed on Penguin's website since 2013. As of October 13, 2013, Penguin wrote of Morrissey on its website, "It has been said 'Most pop stars have to be dead before they reach the iconic status that Morrissey has reached in his lifetime.'" Debate spurred. Is fame enough to be associated with Penguin Classics authors by the likes of Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde and Charles Dickens? Writer Beverley Stark tweeted, "Don't books become classics when they have proved their worth over time?" Eoin Devereux, co-writer of the book, was confident Morrissey was as relevant as any other classic writer (*Reuters*, October 16, 2013).

It's important to point out that it was not Penguin who originally had the idea to publish Morrissey as a Penguin Classic. In fact, it was Morrissey who first expressed this desire back in 2011. In response, Penguin said the book would be a "natural fit" for the series (*The Bookseller*, September 19, 2013). The question lingers: What gives Penguin the right to make the call to name Morrissey's *Autobiography* a classic work of literature?

By Bourdieu's standards, Penguin has the right to consecrate works as classics. Penguin has undoubtedly secured its place in publishing history, serving as a key player in the industry essentially since its beginning in 1935. In 1946, Penguin inaugurated the Penguin Classics series with the publication of *The Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu. Rieu, who became the series editor, maintained that classics should be accessible to everyone and their thematic

significance open to widespread interpretation (Edwards, Hare and Robinson, 26). In accordance with this standard, Penguin has fulfilled their role in Darnton's publishing communications circuit, presenting Penguin Classics to the world as esteemed books that are meant to be respected, enjoyed and cherished. Readers, in response, have come to regard the term 'Penguin Classics' as being interchangeable with the blanket specification of 'classic'. In this way, Penguin definitively established themselves as a cultural gatekeeper, redefining how the world perceives classic works of literature.

In the case of Morrissey, Penguin exercised their influence over the market and gave *Autobiography* symbolic capital by labelling it as a classic. Once the work has symbolic capital then, theoretically, its relevance, longevity and profitability is secured. This theory is questioned by the controversy which ensued upon Morrissey's publication.

Calling upon Genette's explanation of the power of the series, Genette explains that for a book to be included in a series, it must fit a certain "profile" and live up to it. Penguin's admittance of Morrissey to the Penguin Classics series labels him as a classic author and so his work must live up to what this means to the general public. In application of Bourdieu's theory, Penguin has the power as a big name publisher to distinguish a work as a classic, thereby giving it value as such, but the public must then accept the collective belief in its importance. Whether they do, though, is their choice, as illuminated by Darnton's communications circuit. As readers, their response also influences the status of a literary work.

Conclusion

The question is not whether *Autobiography* is a classic or if Morrissey is a classic author. (In fact, through Darton's analysis, Morrissey indeed professed himself as such when he desired to be included in the series.) The larger issue and what is worthy of reflection, is if Penguin's role as a cultural gatekeeper permits them the dominant liberty to denote what works are and are not classics. As Rieu maintained when he began the Penguin Classics series, value is interpretable and, therefore, the definition of a classic is as well. Publishers retain control

over their series, but they do not have the power to define and enforce what the series means to its global readership.

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