

The Importance of Reflecting on Popular Culture

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With millions of students enrolled in related classes, popular culture studies are just that--popular. Despite their success among members of my generation, such studies are still often thought of as unworthy of critical analysis in the classroom. In other words, many scholars would not see any value in comparing the public outrage that Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" triggered to the outrage that Michelangelo sparked by leaving his statue of David totally nude. Who knew in the 1950s that Elvis's controversial gyrating hips would start a movement that continues to this day, fifty years later? That is why popular culture studies are important. They allow students and professors to gain new perspective and to reflect on the society in which they live.

In "Schlock Waves Felt across U.S. Campuses," Eric L. Wee states, "There was a time when teaching Plato at Oxford was considered radical. English literature as a field of study was considered avant-garde on American campuses in the 19th century" (para. 7). Such a statement reveals how substantially times have changed and simultaneously demonstrates how every culture experiences its own shock waves of scandal and controversy. Plato stirred up his own controversy with his unorthodox teachings, yet his ideas and ethics withstood the test of time.

Here's a more popular example: When professors ponder cultural genius, the poetry and plays of William Shakespeare often surface. Like Plato, Shakespeare's works have been studied and interpreted worldwide for centuries, and Shakespeare's understanding of human character and his insight into the culture of his time have led to his wide-ranging appeal around the world. In addition, Shakespeare was

knowledgeable about other areas of study. His allusions to the Bible, art, law, politics, sports, and history made him popular in his day among a wide cross-section of society. Despite Shakespeare's ability to perceive and explain such things, scholars believe that he was never professionally schooled in these subjects. Such talent makes this author an opportune historical figure to study. He is considered by many to be the greatest poet and dramatist in the history of the English language, and his astonishing popularity is reflected in classrooms around the world. Today, further testimony to Shakespeare's popularity, not only among students but also the general public, is reflected in the many modern dramatic and film adaptations of his works.

However, that does not mean that there aren't prodigious thinkers living today that students may find even more compelling and relevant to their own life experiences. Authors, directors, musicians, and even advertisers have something important to say. Take the novelist J. K. Rowling, for instance. She, like Shakespeare, has won the respect of the masses from Brazil to Japan with her best-selling series of books following the life of a troubled teenaged wizard, Harry Potter. In Rowling's early descriptions, Harry is an awkward boy, plagued by the memory of his troubled past. Throughout the texts, he faces difficulties that many readers, especially young ones, can relate to. In a way, this gives Rowling the advantage over Shakespeare. We students can more easily relate to this contemporary artist who is familiar with the society in which we live. I know I'm more comfortable discussing the virtue of humility in The Sorcerer's Stone than I am talking about either Platonic ideals or notions of familial love and justice in Shakespeare's King Lear.

In "Pop Culture Studies Turns 25," author David Jacobson questions those critics who "rip" popular culture scholars for daring to deemphasize "highbrow" works of art like Shakespeare's plays in favor of close analysis of "unworthy," lowbrow topics like video gaming. Even though such

Careful study might have once been reserved for authors like Plato and Shakespeare, Jacobson seems to agree with Dr. Ray Browne, the “godfather” of the pop culture studies movement, that “you can teach critical thinking and gain as good a liberal arts education using pop materials as with the old highbrow ones” (para. 10). The same people who disparage the study of “lowbrow subjects” like video games may be uncomfortable with professors who endorse the Harry Potter novels as meaningful literature. However, students today find Rowling’s exploration of moral and ethical issues, rather than Shakespeare’s, more relevant to their own lives.

Despite Eric L. Wee’s concerns, popular culture studies do much more than “bring in bodies” and “tuition dollars” (para. 11). Analysis of the society in which we live will help students gain a better perspective and understanding of the world, resulting in a richer and more relevant educational experience. Is that not the human ideal? Scientists created the scientific method, a means of thinking that orbits around human discovery, in order to apply scientific thinking to everyday situations. Dr. Ray Browne insists that popular culture not be studied in a vacuum. Such an educational philosophy helps professors and students alike reach the goal of all successful teaching: to understand the world around us.

Popular culture studies do merit the time of both the teacher and the learner. By reflecting upon the ever-changing society around us, we not only gain a better understanding of cultural changes and of people’s reactions to them, but ultimately a deeper understanding of ourselves. As Ray Browne says in “Pop Culture Studies Turns 25,” “There is just as much glory and virtue in being a Madonna person as in being a Hemingway person. . . . If you want to study culture through Madonna, it seems to me that’s a marvelous opportunity” (para. 10). It seems that way to me and to millions of other college students, as well.