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### Don't Hate on Captain Underpants

Growing up with a mother who is an English teacher is quite the challenge. She force-fed me all the classics: *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. She insisted we listen to New York's #1 Hits on the radio. (Country music was strictly forbidden.) She took me to watch the Brooklyn Philharmonic and *Mary Poppins* on Broadway. Even though my mother had her best intentions at heart, I suspect that she tried to rear the perfect child by exposing me to “classic” forms of art and banning me from the vices of society—listening to explicit rap music and watching *Spongebob Squarepants*.

My mother did not realize it, but she had fallen victim to the concept of an authoritative interpretation. There are many ways that the phrase “authoritative interpretation” can be defined, but for the purpose of this paper, I argue that it represents a canon of art selected by academia. These works of art are typically well-regarded by published, prominent scholars and are universally accepted as inherently “superior” than other types of art—effectively isolating those who prefer “inferior” types. Society enforces the existence of an authoritative interpretation of art by trusting the expertise of the academic community and the criteria it sets forth for what constitutes as “good” art; however, we should work against its existence because it fosters cultural elitism.

The abstract concept of an authoritative interpretation of art can be proven by comparing

two different types of the same art form. What do you consider to be a more respectable work of art: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (the upside-down urinal signed R. Mutt) or Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*? Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* (where two students transform their principal into a crime-fighting superhero) or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*? *The Lego Movie* (where an ordinary Lego is tasked with saving the world) or *The Godfather*? An authoritative interpretation does not require everyone to agree on the answers to these questions, but most people would concede that the *Mona Lisa*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *The Godfather* are more highly regarded than the counterpart I assigned them. In fact, I assumed that certain literary works were superior, so I did not include a description of them in parenthesis. The reach of an authoritative interpretation of art is so ingrained in our culture that we automatically equate certain works as "better" or "worse" than others.

Our idea of what constitutes a "good" work of art is generally not based on our own opinion, but is decided by scholars who consider the novelty, replicability, and sophistication of a work of art. So, how would a member of the academic community determine whether Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* or Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is worthy of being accepted into the literary canon? First, Lee's work contains original plot points that are difficult to replicate: showing racism through the eyes of a white child and making readers fall in love with Atticus Finch. There is also a level of cultural awareness one needs to understand the injustice and racism Tom Robinson faces.

In stark contrast, *Captain Underpants* has been largely ignored by literary scholars. Its plot is similar to books such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Big Nate*. Parents have to grapple with the shame of having their child carry a book with the cover of a naked, bald man—with the

exception of the giant diaper he wears. Even though the value of *Captain Underpants* may be overlooked by the academic community, it does not mean that it is an “inferior” book. The audience and purpose must also be accounted for when determining the value of an artistic work. If you are looking for a leisurely book that six-year olds would enjoy, *Captain Underpants* is the literary masterpiece they need. In fact, it instills a love of reading that could lead them to appreciate *TKAM*. However, if you are an adult who wants to read about Professor Poopypants’ latest scheme to take over the world, that is okay too. Society places too much concern about how they may be perceived by the artistic works that they appreciate, so we gravitate to what has been culturally accepted as a “great” work of art. Rather than relying on authoritative interpretations of art, we should consider audience and purpose when we decide which art forms we truly enjoy.

An authoritative interpretation of art extends beyond just literature to encompass photography, theater, dance, and especially music. When I first listened to Bourdaugh’s lecture, I considered Sakamoto Kyu’s song *Sukiyaki* to be more respectable (or worthy of being accepted into the canon) than Snoop Dogg’s *Lodi Dodi*, even though it was inspired by *Sukiyaki*. *Sukiyaki*, a Japanese pop song with Western elements, spoke about love and reached the Billboard Hot 100 in 1963. *Lodi Dodi* used the same lyrics and rhythm as *Sukiyaki*, but was presented as a hip hop song about sex and dope. Although Snoop Dogg may have altered the original message of *Sukiyaki*, the value of his art (and the time and effort he put into production) should not be diminished. In addition, *Lodi Dodi* is a more upbeat dance song that caters to an American audience in a way that the slower paced *Sukiyaki* cannot match. Hence, there is no need to rank one song as better than the other when they satisfy different listeners.

By recognizing that an authoritative interpretation of art exists, the fundamental problem of cultural elitism arises. In the article "Thick Description," Geertz argues that culture is public because it is "a system of inherited conceptions . . . of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life." Society tends to view people as more cultured if they appreciate "superior" works of art and this standard has been perpetuated by teachers, parents, and scholars. This can be demonstrated by *Citizen Kane*, a film that has been praised for its advanced cinematic techniques. *Citizen Kane* is studied extensively by scholars and has been accepted into the canon of great works. Those who dare to admit that they did not enjoy the movie run the risk of being labeled a philistine. Rather than voicing their opinion and appearing uncultured, many people choose to agree with the authoritative interpretation of the film.

Another elitist view that dominates the artistic world is that classical music is "better" than pop music. This is a central part of Theodor Adorno's argument in his article "On Popular Music." He attacks popular music fans by calling their music "standardized" (they all sound the same) and "predigested" (they take no work to enjoy). Adorno then proceeds to accuse pop listeners of "not understanding music as a language in itself." By using an obnoxious vocabulary to drive home a point with little evidence, Adorno comes across as a musical snob and a cultural elitist. He plays off the stereotype that people who listen to classical music are more sophisticated than those who enjoy other types of music. Music is meant to be a form of entertainment and a source of pleasure. By creating a standard of "ideal" music, Adorno takes away from the individualistic aspect of listening to music and instead pits musical genres against each other.

The problem with an authoritative interpretation is that it narrows how we perceive the world by presenting an ideal form of art. Although academic elites may have criteria for what constitutes an artistic masterpiece, the untrained layman has more than one way of assessing the value of art whether through the emotions, memories, or aesthetic the piece brings to mind. The next time you cross a work of art, forgo any thoughts of whether it is “good” or “bad.” Different forms of art appeal to different audiences, and it is your choice to find what speaks to you—whether that be listening to classical music, watching *The Godfather*, or reading *Captain Underpants*.