



Daniel (Runner up)

Could the work of 'Pulp' be considered as a literary work?

The question of whether song lyrics can be considered literature has long been debated within academic and artistic circles. Artists such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Joni Mitchell, with their sophisticated poetic techniques and socially relevant themes, are often cited as examples of songwriting that merits literary study. Critically acclaimed novelist and Nobel laureate Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, best known for his novels *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, began his career as a lyricist and offers a nuanced, balanced perspective on this issue. While he greatly admires those musicians, he has also noted that “with an intimate, confiding, first-person song, the meaning must not be self-sufficient on the page. It has to be oblique, sometimes you have to read between the lines,” suggesting that songs are meant to be felt and heard, not merely read. Yet in the same book from which that quotation is taken, Ishiguro praises the Sheffield Britpop band Pulp and the lyrics of their charismatic frontman Jarvis Cocker; an acknowledgment that music and literature can indeed overlap in significant ways.

Pulp's own career illustrates this convergence. After three little-noticed albums between 1983 and 1992, the band suddenly broke through with 1994's *His 'n' Hers* and the globally successful *Different Class* in 1995, even headlining Glastonbury at the last minute. They quickly became part of Britpop's “big four,” alongside Oasis, Blur, and Suede. Yet they were never a typical Britpop act. The genre was defined by guitar-driven rock and catchy, “kitchen-sink drama” lyrics about working-class British life, but Pulp's themes and sounds were more expansive and idiosyncratic, making them both central to and apart from the movement.

One of the most persistent threads in Pulp's songwriting is the kitchen-sink sensibility itself, a postwar artistic movement characterised by its realistic portrayal of working-class struggles. Pulp's lyrics often unfold like sharply observed short stories, rich in social commentary and finely drawn characters who inhabit the grit and humour of everyday life.

In one of their earliest big hits, *Babies*, Jarvis Cocker narrates the complexities of adolescence, blending everyday domestic detail with a mischievous, unreliable narrator. The song tells the story of the narrator, perhaps a teenage version of Cocker, who goes to his female friend's home and ends up in a complicated voyeuristic relationship with her sister. Specifically, the narrator tells of how he began by listening to the sister and her boyfriend from the next room, but then he explains how he “wanted to see as well as hear”, so he “hid inside her wardrobe”. The story culminates in the narrator's female friend catching the narrator having sex with the female friend's sister, and in the punchline of the song, the narrator pathetically exclaims “I know you won't believe it's true, I only went with her 'cause she looks like you”. The lyrics are seemingly simple; however, it is the very detailed descriptions which ground the story in mundane reality. The narrator mentions that his female friend lived on “Stanhope Road”, which is a callback Cocker's childhood; it is a completely unremarkable street in Sheffield, but this mention really emphasises the down-to-earth style of Pulp's songwriting. Overall, this song works as more than just a catchy Britpop single; it's a compressed



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bildungsroman that tells of the messy intersection between voyeuristic adolescence, sexual awakening, and everyday life. And despite its simplistic lyrics, it could definitely be considered literary.

Another example is *Monday Morning*, a song which captures the feeling that would be relatable to so many people of the bleak rhythm of wage-labour existence after a weekend of excess. The beginning of the song describes the feeling of getting up in the morning, with an almost existential tone, “There’s nothing to do so you just stay in bed ... why live in the world when you can live in your head?” Throughout the song, a couplet similar to the following is repeated: “you can go out late from Monday, ‘til Saturday turns into Sunday, and now we’re back here on Monday, so you can do it all over again”. This expresses the relentless cyclical structure of the five day, 9-5 hour work week, punctuated by weekends out, which become routine and unfulfilling in themselves. This is a feeling that many people, particularly the working-class, could identify with, therefore emphasising the literary importance of these lyrics. This feeling comes to a head in the final lines of the song, “Is this the light of a new day dawning? A future bright that you can walk in? No, it’s just another Monday morning, do it all over again”, perfectly capturing the suffocating nature of this structure of life.

Perhaps Pulp’s best-known track, *Common People*, stands as a biting satire of class tourism. Its escalating verses mirror the growing frustration of the working-class narrator as he recounts the story of a wealthy Greek student who wants to “live like common people.” Cocker skewers the privileged fantasy of slumming it while retaining a safety net: “You’ll never get it right ‘cause when you’re laid in bed at night, watching roaches climb the wall, if you called your dad he could stop it all.” He peppers the song with vivid details of working-class Britain: “rent a flat above a shop ... smoke some fags and play some pool, pretend you never went to school”, that ground the satire in lived experience. Structurally, the song builds dramatic intensity through a series of verses separated by evolving choruses. The first quotes the woman’s wish: “I wanna live like common people, I wanna do whatever common people do.” The second reframes it as the narrator’s skeptical question: “You wanna see whatever common people see?” The third becomes a blunt refusal: “You’ll never live like common people,” and the fourth concludes with a warning to “never live like common people, never do what common people do, never fail like common people, never watch your life slide out of view.” This progression not only drives the song’s musical crescendo but also provides a narrative arc worthy of short fiction, transforming a pop anthem into a sharp lesson in class consciousness.

The politically charged *Mis-Shapes* reads almost like a manifesto, turning slurs into rallying cries. Cocker uses words usually meant as insults, “Mis-shapes, mistakes, misfits”, to unite those who resist social and economic hierarchies. He urges the marginalised: “Brothers, sisters, can’t you see? The future’s owned by you and me,” then warns the privileged: “We’re coming out of the sidelines ... we want everything you won’t allow us, we won’t use guns, we won’t use bombs, we’ll use the one thing we’ve got more of, that’s our minds.” His trademark sarcasm underscores a serious point: power based solely on wealth is fragile, and the so-called misfits may in fact be more intelligent and resilient than their oppressors. With its mix of rebellion and wit, the song stands as both protest literature and pop song.



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Another rich vein in Pulp's writing is their frank exploration of sex and sexuality, where desire becomes a way to examine power, vulnerability, and performance. The six-and-a-half-minute *This Is Hardcore* is a striking departure from their usual sound, using the world of pornography as a metaphor for fame and emotional exposure. Over a cinematic, unsettling arrangement, Cocker delivers lines like "You are hardcore ... you name the drama and I'll play the part," full of sexual innuendo yet aimed at a deeper critique of the music industry's exploitative power. "There is no way back for you, this is hardcore, this is me on top of you," suggests both physical dominance over someone and the control record companies exert over musicians. "This is the end of the line, I've seen this storyline played out so many times before," acknowledges a familiar cycle of artists being consumed by their own success. The climactic lines: "Oh, what a hell of a show, but what I want to know is what exactly do you do for an encore? 'Cause this is hardcore", have a sexual element; a reference to the desire for more afterwards, however it is again a clever metaphor for the troublesome life in the spotlight. Yes, the album has been a success, and the narrator is now a hugely successful musician, but the question is, where do they go from here? How are they supposed to live up to expectations? This could be seen as quite reflective of the massive success of Pulp's seminal 1995 album *Different Class*, to which the album *This Is Hardcore* is the follow-up (or "encore"). Rather than titillation, this song offers commentary on the human condition, using erotic situations, the way a modern novelist might, to reveal character and the tensions between private longing and public spectacle. This constant contrast makes for a song which is so masterfully written that it must indeed be able to be considered literature.

Pulp's reach also extends beyond personal or domestic concerns. Their most recent album, *More* (2025), reflects on contemporary global issues with a mature, contemplative tone. The closing track, *A Sunset*, meditates on consumerism and materialism, asking what endures when the culture of endless consumption fades. Using the natural image of a setting sun, the song questions how even beauty is commodified. A recurring couplet: "I'd like to teach the world to sing, but I do not have a voice", laments a world that has lost its creative spirit to relentless monetisation. Later lines sharpen the critique: "It's a sunset, someone said, but now they've found a way to make it pay," and "It's a sunset, someone said, and just exactly how much did you spend?" The narrator admits his own complicity: "I like to look at pretty things, I like to feast my eyes, went to see the Northern Lights, but they were pale and weak, and not as advertised." Here the disappointment reflects how media's heavy editing distorts reality until authentic experience feels inadequate. With its combination of environmental reflection, social critique, and almost mythic language, *A Sunset* demonstrates Pulp's continuing evolution as literary songwriters.

Taken together, these songs show that Pulp's work operates far beyond conventional pop entertainment. Their lyrics employ characterisation, metaphor, and narrative structure comparable to contemporary fiction. They create complex characters, deploy irony and satire, and tell stories that stand on their own even without the music. While their medium is musical rather than printed text, the thematic depth, social engagement, and sophisticated storytelling in Pulp's catalogue justify considering their work a distinctive form of modern literary art.