

What is a Classic?

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Office Hours: Monday, 4:00-6:00pm

Class Hours and Room: Monday, 2-4pm

Course Description

Classic pop songs, classic movies, classical literature – our culture thrives on remembering, remixing, and reviving its own past and, for that, quickly tends to form rigid canons made up of so-called ‘classics’. But what does it mean for something to be "classic?" Across history, we continually observe a tendency to elevate some works of art above the rest, works that set the standard for future artists to follow and improve upon.

In this class, we will examine the concept of the “classic” and its consequences, for better or ill, from antiquity, the epitome of the notion, to the present and interrogate it from different angles: Is it possible to create a great work without studying the earlier masters? Do works become classics simply because they are better? Are our canons that collect those classics inherently elitist and exclusionary? Who owns classics and the culture around them and what happens when people feel the need to defend their ‘rights’ to them? These issues are not only debated in the ivory tower of academia, but in our society at large, as seen in various contemporary appropriations of the concept for racist purposes, or the vigorous reactions to the recently proposed deaccessioning of three ‘classics’ (e.g., Andy Warhol) at the Baltimore Museum of Art in order to diversify the collection.

In this class students reflect critically on the enduring yet often unexamined assumption of the value of classics for culture and education. We will engage with it in many different areas and media, from literature, to movies, to music – historic as well as contemporary.

Class Modality & Assessment

The class will meet once a week for two hours. Sessions will be split up into two sections, the first of which will be dedicated to group discussion of last week's material, the second of which will be introductory in nature and prepare students for reading assignments.

Students will be mainly assessed on the basis of their participation in class discussions (which will make use of the "Questions, Quote, Comment" method). Additionally, each student will produce a short essay demonstrating their ability to apply the ideas of the class to various cultural productions. This essay can be replaced by an in-class presentation.

All readings and other resources will be provided online via Blackboard. Students will not have to make any purchases.

Learning Outcomes

In this class, students will:

1. develop a critical awareness of the concept of 'the classic' and discover its many ramifications, good and bad
2. identify and interrogate the main strands of arguments and cultural determinants in the debate about the concept of 'the classic'
3. be able to apply the ideas developed in this class to their own field of interest and study

Schedule:

Class 1:	<p><u>Is there anything new?</u></p> <p>Imitation and Originality</p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K. Ferguson, <i>Everything is a Remix</i> (Documentary, Parts 1-3) • Seneca, <i>Letter</i> 84 • T S Eliot, <i>Tradition and the Individual Talent</i> (1919) • “A Hundred Years of T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (<i>The New Yorker</i>, Oct. 27. 2019)
Class 2:	<p><u>What Is a Classic?</u></p> <p>Material:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walter Pater, <i>Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry</i> (on the Mona Lisa) • Italo Calvino, <i>Why read the Classics?</i> (1993) • Pierre Bourdieu, <i>Distinction</i> (Introduction) (1973)
Class 3:	<p><u>Canonicity</u></p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i>, 34. 22-23 • Gellius, <i>Noctes Atticae</i>, 19.8 • Harvard Admission Requirements 1873/74 • “Revisiting the Canon Wars” (<i>NYT</i>, Sept. 16, 2007) • Macaluso: “Teaching the Canon in 21st Century Classrooms” • Harold Bloom, <i>An Elegy for the Canon</i> (1994)
Class 4:	<p><u>Who owns Culture?</u></p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary Beard, “Are Classics Classy? A Roman View” (<i>The New York Review</i>, Dec. 16, 2009) • Database: <i>Pharos. Doing Justice to the Classics</i> (https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/)
Class 5:	<p><u>Melancholy and Retrospect</u></p> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • S. Reynolds, <i>Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past</i> (2010), Introduction

Class 6:	<u>Trading in Classics</u> Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robert Iger, <i>Ride of a Lifetime. Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company</i> (2019)
Class 7:	<u>Internet & Copy Rights</u> Materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> K. Ferguson, <i>Everything is a Remix</i> (Documentary, Part 4) "The Latest Artist Selling NFTs? It's a Robot" (NYT, March, 25. 2021)
Class 8:	<u>Baltimore Museum of Art – Deaccessioning</u> Materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Baltimore Museum of Art to sell 3 paintings, including Warhol's 'The Last Supper,' to fund diversity initiatives" (<i>Baltimore Sun</i>, Oct 2. 2020) "The Baltimore Museum of Art made a bold decision to sell three important paintings. The blowback has gone national" (<i>Baltimore Sun</i>, Oct. 24. 2020) "Commentary: Baltimore Museum of Art uses COVID as cover to sell a Warhol. Floodgates open" (<i>LA Times</i>, Oct. 19. 2020)
Class 9:	<u>Final Discussion and Student Presentations</u>

Integrity:

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams (quizzes and tests), plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition. For more information, you may call the Office of the Dean of Students at 410-516-8208 or email at integrity@jhu.edu.

Disabilities:

If you require accommodation for any form of disability, including extra time on tests, please get in contact with Student Disability Services (studentdisabilityservices@jh.edu).

Mental Health:

We in the Classics Department and the University as a whole are aware that many students experience anxiety, depression, and other emotional challenges during the course of the semester. If you are experiencing difficulties along these lines and would like to speak to a professional counselor, please visit the campus Counseling Center. More information is available on the Counseling Center's website: <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/counselingcenter/>.

If you are struggling with anxiety, stress, depression or other mental health related concerns, please consider visiting the JHU Counseling Center. If you are concerned about a friend, please encourage that person to seek out their services. The Counseling Center is located at 3003 North Charles Street in Suite S-200 and can be reached at 410-516-8278 and online at <http://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/counselingcenter/>