

What is a Classic?

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Literature – the art of the written word. It’s a familiar field, as we’ve been bombarded with classic literature since grade school. But what are these classics?

The Odyssey. L’Inferno. War and Peace.

Stuffy old tomes you’ve read the Cliff’s Notes of. Your teacher told you they were important and somewhere, deep down, you knew it was true. But why? They were so old, so long, so *boring*. If these behemoths of language were considered classics, then you didn’t want anything to do with them.

The Great Gatsby. Of Mice and Men. To Kill a Mockingbird.

Now we’re talking. Much like the previous titles, these books have something to say, but they have the distinct advantage of being written in the past century, and likely more readable. The messages of these works – the death of the romantic in *Gatsby*, squandered dreams in *Mice and Men*, innocence lost and racial injustice in *Mockingbird* – were and are relevant enough to join the ongoing cultural discussion and to be cemented in society’s collective mind as classics.

Star Wars. Watchmen. BioShock – wait, what?

No, these titles do not belong to traditional novels. But they are literature nonetheless. *Star Wars*, *Watchmen* (a graphic novel) and *BioShock* (a video game) are all pieces of art whose messages, with the help of visuals, are communicated through written word; yes, movies, comics and games are mediums in their own right, but just like novels, plays and poems, they are examples of how the umbrella of literature is still unfolding, revealing new classics along the way.

In fact, this democratization and evolution of literary media, and also the increasing interconnectedness of the world’s societies, has a revolutionary, but not all-too unexpected consequence; since these new forms of literature complicate the old, established relationship between author and reader, the old rules to determine what a classic is just can’t apply anymore.

But before we can figure out these new rules, what were the old ones to begin with?

As long as literature has existed, people have tried to answer this question. One of the early notable attempts was made by French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, who, in his mid-eighteenth century essay, “What is a Classic?” laments the traditional, dictionary definition of a classic: “a classic, according to the usual definition, is an old author canonized by admiration, and an authority in a particular style.” He even goes so far as to identify a dichotomy that’s plagued the classic for years – the struggle between the old, structured, dense classic and the classic that

innovates in both style and substance and is – God forbid – a pleasure to read. Ultimately, Sainte-Beuve settles on his preferred definition of a classic, which “is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; who has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered... who has spoken to all in his own peculiar style, a style which is found to be also that of the whole world, a style without neologism, new and old, easily contemporary with all time.”

Sainte-Beuve’s description of a classic, while hardly a testable hypothesis, is actually the only saving grace of his argument. According to Sainte-Beuve, a classic, rather than attempting to be the master of a certain style, instead uses its own style to communicate its message. And if that style can “enrich the human mind” and “increase its treasure” while “discover[ing] some moral and not equivocal truth,” then it has earned its right to be a permanent participant of that ongoing cultural discussion. Sainte-Beuve’s claim that classics utilize their own distinct style could even be interpreted as an endorsement of the new mediums of literature that have cropped up and come of age in the 20th and 21st centuries. If applied today, Sainte-Beuve’s argument says that there is no set-in-stone requirement about the actual medium through which a work is expressed. As long as it can enter that unending cultural discussion that transcends time, a work of literature becomes a classic. What his admittedly vague thesis does is set the stage for future acceptance of new media, and new classics as a result of them.

So in a broad sense, Sainte-Beuve’s definition still holds up. But it doesn’t bode well for your argument as a whole when your most wishy-washy statement is, in fact, your most poignant one – a truth Sainte-Beuve falls victim to. This is because when you zoom in to see his more concrete criteria for defining a classic, they fail even by his own standards. He asserts that classics can only be determined in hindsight, but then contradicts himself in his admission that “Dante appeared, and from the start posterity greeted him as a classic.” Furthermore, Sainte-Beuve claims that a classic does not necessarily have to revolutionize literature, but later says that “the greatest names to be seen at the beginning of literatures are those which disturb and run counter to certain fixed ideas of what is beautiful and appropriate,” citing the inarguable classics of Shakespeare. He even acknowledges his argument’s incompetency, somewhat, in his admission that “there is no [recipe] for making classics.”

Thankfully, T.S. Eliot avoids such contradictions in a 1944 speech, also titled “What is a Classic?” to the Virgil Society. Just like his French counterpart, Eliot frames the classic question in vague terms. He admits that the word has “several meanings in several contexts,” and even realizes, much like Sainte-Beuve, that the term can imply “either the highest praise or the most contemptuous abuse... either the perfection of the form, or the absolute frigidity.” But while Sainte-Beuve drowns in his inability to come to terms with his explicit rules for determining a classic, Eliot sails with his specifics. Maturity, Eliot argues, is the main arbiter of classicism. And this makes sense, especially in regard to new media. University of New Mexico professor Iain Thomson, in his essay “Deconstructing the Hero,” marks *Watchmen* – Alan Moore’s gripping deconstruction of the superhero genre comics are so famous for – as the defining work when “comic books came of age.” Thomson’s statement, of course, implies that before *Watchmen*, the comic book medium had not reached its critical point of maturity, where it could have contributed to history a classic of its own.

But how does one identify maturity? Eliot's response: "if we are properly mature, as well as educated persons, we can recognize maturity in a civilization and in a literature, as we do in the other human beings we encounter." In other words, we'll know maturity when we see it; but we can only see maturity if we ourselves are mature, and we'll know when we're mature because we'll see maturity, and so on and so forth.

But Eliot's tautology shouldn't be confused with Sainte-Beuve's indecisiveness. Eliot explores the concept of maturity without qualifier, leaving his argument intact for others to pick apart. He argues that in order to create a classic, there needs to be maturity in the writer, maturity in the society that produced the writer, and maturity in the language the work has been written in. This isn't an entirely novel concept – Sainte-Beuve asserted that certain periods are "the only true classical ages, those which offer protection and a favourable climate to real talent," only to contradict himself later by saying that Shakespeare, Dante and Milton all fashioned classics in spite of not living in one of these "classical ages" – but Eliot refines the argument enough to make it his own. In fact, he didn't say it, but Eliot develops something of a triangular process for determining maturity – take a side away, and it falls apart. Eliot reflects this sentiment when he says that "a writer who individually has a more mature mind, may belong to a less mature period than another, so that in that respect his work will be less mature" and therefore not be a classic.

While this may have been true in the past, Eliot understates one side of his triangle while overstating the other two. For example, take *The Kite Runner*, the 2003 novel by Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini. Although Hosseini wrote the book in America, one could argue that the society that truly produced the work was Afghanistan, since the novel's plot and themes draw entirely from the recent history of a country that has not experienced stability in living memory – hardly the pinnacle of maturity in Eliot's eyes. And yet *The Kite Runner* has already been listed twice on essay prompts as a work of literary merit alongside such classics as *Invisible Man*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on the College Board's AP Literature exam, which has become the defining determiner of what students read in the classroom.

The widespread participation of the exam grants the College Board the authority, whether wanted or not, in choosing which works are represented in the ongoing (and in this case, literal) discussion of what a classic is and should be. And although in their AP Literature course description, College Board emphasizes that "There is no recommended or required reading list for the AP English Literature and Composition course," the repeated inclusion of certain pieces as suggested works of literary merit (and therefore mature pieces in their own right) makes them mainstays in classroom curricula across the country.

Eliot had reason to believe that the society that produces the author and her work needed to be mature, as he lived in a time where societies remained largely independent of each other; where if a classic arose, it was influenced primarily by the culture it came from. But this all changed in the aftermath of World War II, where decolonization swept the developing world. Works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* – even those as early as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – depict the tenuous relationships between colonies and their colonizers. They don't belong to any one culture; their entire authority to be called "classics" is derived from their communication of an experience shared across the cultural and historical divide; the oppression of one society inflicted upon another.

The claim of language as an important aspect in determining a classic piece of literature is also not new. Sainte-Beuve explains that “modern Italy had her classical authors, and Spain had every right to believe that she also had hers at a time when France was yet seeking hers,” while Eliot ridiculously proclaims that “we have no classic age, no classic poet, in English.”

The language distinction is arbitrary, even for Sainte-Beuve and Eliot’s respective times. There *may* have been a time – before even the archaic classics of Homer and Virgil – where certain languages lacked lexicons developed enough to create a classic work of literature. But every single modern language has classics it can point to – both Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* and Saavedra’s *Don Quixote* were published well before Sainte-Beuve’s time – but the very nature of what a classic is makes the language of origin completely meaningless. For a work to be a classic, both the ideas it generates and the message it communicates transcend linguistic and societal boundaries to enter that perpetual cultural debate. *Don Quixote* is as much of a classic in Spanish as it is in English, Chinese, French – whatever. Just because it was originally written in Spanish does not mean Saavedra’s themes or message deteriorate if his work was written in another language.

Take, for example, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which chronicles the lives of individuals born on the eve of Indian independence. Rushdie faced the moral dilemma of writing the novel in English or his country’s native Hindi, but he ultimately chose to write the piece in English. He reasoned that “those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it ... perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles ... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (Baker 550). Rushdie didn’t refuse to write his novel in his native Urdu because the language wasn’t *mature*; rather, he made a stylistic decision by writing in English – it adds depth to his depiction of a new generation of Indians picking up the pieces after the damage done by its former ruler.

Language distinctions are becoming increasingly obsolete with the rise of new forms of literature as well. Comics, films, video games – even without the crucial element of language, the visual components of these mediums bear an equal share of the burden of communicating their messages. This in turn makes it much easier to compel these new classics into cross-cultural ubiquity – a necessity for a classic. Even the advent of subtitles, as simple as they may be, make a work’s language of origin even more meaningless – maybe, in some cases, a stylistic option.

So two of Eliot’s claims – maturity of both society and language – do not hold up. He should be thankful that his third one – maturity of the author – does. In fact, amidst the increasing irrelevance of language divisions and distinctions between colliding, overlapping and combining societies, this is the most important factor of all. And it is guaranteed to be held constant for the foreseeable future because a classic needs an author to create it in the first place.

But how does one identify a mature author? A good sign, Eliot suggests, “is a development towards greater complexity of sentence and period structure.”

Eliot qualifies his ludicrous statement, as he should – this isn’t to say an author should simply use big words when small ones would do. Instead, the reasoning goes, complex ideas are more likely to be expressed if they are put into complex sentences. His argument unravels when faced by perhaps the most prolific author of the 20th century, an author who has touched more minds than

any other – Theodore Geisel. Geisel, under his pseudonym Dr. Seuss, wrote nearly fifty books in a career that lasted as many years. He was honored by a series of awards, such as a 1984 Pulitzer Prize for his contribution “to the education and enjoyment of America's children and their parents” (Pace). And while forced to keep his vernacular simple for his target audience, Geisel easily achieved the purpose of his Pulitzer while also packing poignancy in such pieces as *Yertle the Turtle*, *Horton Hears a Who!*, and *The Sneetches*, among others.

Geisel’s books aren’t classics simply because they’re bestsellers. They fulfill an essential criterion that Daniel Johnson, in his 1995 column for *The Times*, says is unique to the past couple of centuries of literary history. He argues that up until the 1800s, classics were primarily defined as “the archetypal classic,” which “creates or develops a recognisable archetype or pattern.”

What Johnson says makes sense. The quintessential characters, stories and settings – even rhetorical devices – of literature all have their origins in antiquity. For example, *The Odyssey* does not live on for its commentary on a particular subject. Instead, it earns its spot as a classic for its introduction of timeless literary constructs like the Epic Journey, the hero crippled by hubris, and the *deus ex machina*. Subsequent classics have added to this literary lexicon, often including a moral or statement of universal truth. Johnson elaborates further: “The oldest classics... all create their archetypes within a theological or metaphysical framework. Their human conflicts are played out according to unspoken but unquestioned moral criteria... [The archetypal classics] have all bounded the mental horizons of every generation down to our own. They have created the moral vocabulary which enables us to interpret our own lives. Language does not limit their appeal; and through countless allusions, often unconscious ones, they remain living, albeit subterranean, presences in our midst.”

But at the turn of the 19th century, the classic criteria changed. Instead of the archetypal classic, which “creates or develops,” the analytical classic, which “dismantles, dissects or ‘deconstructs’” archetypes, ultimately took charge. For their credit, though, 19th century authors didn’t stop trying to compete with their archetypal ancestors. Johnson says the Romantic Movement of the 1800s “was the most international of all literary movements, but even though their works are archetypal classics, Coleridge and Keats, Kleist and Holderlin, Pushkin and Lermontov have all failed to become popular in translation, and their direct influence has remained localised.” The *analytical* classics, which didn’t seek to discover (as Sainte-Beuve would argue a classic should do) “some moral and not equivocal truth,” were instead “of their place and time. All have replaced divinity with psychopathology, even if they have immortal longings” (Johnson).

So where does Dr. Seuss fit into all of this? Johnson argues that in the 20th and 21st centuries, a classic should “take into account, however indirectly, the horrors of our time.” By and large, this trend sticks – see the postcolonial works discussed earlier, Orwell’s warnings against totalitarianism and Stalinism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, *Watchmen*’s caricature of Cold-War hysteria and superhero culture, and *BioShock*’s criticism of Objectivism taken to both a logical and fantastical resolution.

But most of all, look past the simplicity of Dr. Seuss’s picture books. *Yertle the Turtle*? A tirade against Hitler and authoritarianism. *Horton Hears a Who!*? A statement against, and apology for prior support of, Japanese- American internment camps. *Sneetches*? Racial equality. It is no secret

that Dr. Seuss planted political messages in many of his books. But their simple presentation makes it an easier pill to swallow for audiences, allowing the message to spread farther and farther, across cultures and countries and languages and, yes, time. The same applies to games, movies and comics. Their intuitive, visual components don't bar them from entering that ongoing cultural discussion; when used right, they can be an asset in communicating their messages to an audience Homer and Dante could never have dreamed of.

This brings us back to our central question: *What is a Classic?* With evolving mediums accompanying an evolving world, it is more difficult to answer than ever. Just as Eliot said the word "classic" "had several meanings in several contexts," it also had several meanings at several different times. Today, a classic shouldn't establish new archetypes; it should smash them. And even when it uses those archetypes, it should reinvent them and apply them to the struggles individuals and societies face today.

Perhaps Mark Van Doren, a professor at Columbia University, sums it up best: a classic is simply any work that manages to stay in print (Trelease). So when future high school students are discussing the themes of *The Matrix* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, we'll know for sure.

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