

Class 9: Closing Acts

A. Final Curtain

1. Class title 1 (*Tempest* and *Death in Venice* scenes)
2. Gallery of artists discussed

This class is devoted to artists in various media who enjoyed such success in their maturity that they were able to do their own thing at the end of their lives, without regard to popular approval. The ten artists shown here—**Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Monet, Matisse, Verdi, Britten, Fellini, and Altman**—may not have had the fame of a modern pop star, but all were well known and highly respected. We will be looking at the very late works of each. You will note that I have arranged the people in pairs, which makes sense in the lower two rows, but I admit that the groupings in the top row are somewhat arbitrary. All the same, it gives us somewhere to start.

3. Section title A (Final Curtain)

The last play that **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) wrote, other than a few very late collaborations, was *The Tempest* (1611). The last work by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) was his *String Quartet in F major*, Op.135. Both works have a distinct feeling of benediction, closing the volume with a blessing.

4. Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, title page from the First Folio

The Tempest was probably written for an indoor theatre; it was certainly performed at least once at court. This more intimate setting allows greater subtlety than Shakespeare's work for open-air playhouses such as the Globe. I made a slide for another course, listing its special qualities in six bullets.

5. *The Tempest* in six bullets

What are the qualities of *The Tempest* that make it so special? First, it is **MUSICAL**. A quick count gives 5 songs by Ariel, 3 by other characters, and at least 5 calls for music in the stage directions, including an important masque towards the end of the play. It is **MAGICAL**: Prospero works through his mastery of magic, and the play is full of special effects, such as a banquet appearing and disappearing in an instant. It is **POETICAL**: well duh, but Prospero's magic resides as much or more in his power to conjure with words than in his mastery of the occult arts. It is **POLITICAL**: in modern times, the play has become a *locus classicus* for discussions of Colonialism; questions of power, of good versus bad government, and of nurture versus nature run right through it. It is **RESTORATIVE**: like all the comedies, it comes out right in the end; like the other late plays, it returns from a darker place, and the restoration takes years in the making. And it is **VALEDICTORY**: it was the last play that Shakespeare wrote without collaborators, and Prospero's speeches in the last act sound awfully like the master himself bidding farewell to the stage. It is these last two qualities I especially want to focus on today.

6. A scene from Gregory Doran's production of *The Tempest* (RSC, 2016)

But you can't get away from the **MAGIC**: in the verse, in the music, and in the stage effects that an indoor theatre made possible. When director **Gregory Doran** staged the play with the RSC in 2016, he collaborated with Intel, who created all sorts of special effects. Let's see how this works in the **masque** in Act IV. The classical goddesses **Juno**, **Iris**, and **Ceres** come on to bless the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda. But Shakespeare counteracts any highbrow implications of this by accompanying it with a dance by **Reapers**, ordinary country folk. The return to the natural order is an essential aspect of the **RESTORATIVE** quality that I mentioned earlier. The music is by **Paul Englishby**.

7. Shakespeare: *The Tempest* (RSC 2016), dance of the reapers

8. David Threlfall and Harriet Walter

Dancing in Shakespeare's late plays always has a restorative intent; there is a very similar country dance scene in *The Winter's Tale*. But he doesn't actually need the music; there is music already in his verse. *The Tempest* is a stage play where the stage itself is a metaphor. And Prospero looks increasingly like an *alter ego* for Shakespeare, especially in his great valedictory speeches in the last act. Here are excerpts from two of them, the first recorded by **David Threlfall** as a very traditional Prospero, the second a very non-traditional performance by Harriet Walter as a female Prospero. Both show what words can do on their own, without any special effects. Threlfall is speaking to the camera, and Walter is in a blacked-out theater, lit only by flashlights that have been distributed to the audience.

9. Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, "Our revels now are ended" (David Threlfall)

10. Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, "Ye elves of hills, brooks..." (Harriet Walter)

11. Beethoven: *Last Quartets*, CD cover

Beethoven had already broken with convention when, after eight symphonies that mainly retained traditional forms, he came up with a Ninth with four soloists and a chorus in the half-hour final movement. I could have focused on that, but his personal utterances come in his 16 *String Quartets*. We will hear the last movement of the last of them, the *String Quartet in F, Op.135*. This final movement has a title, "The Difficult Resolution," and its two main themes are even given words in the score.

12. *The Difficult Resolution*: themes in the last movement of Op.135 [1:27]

Beethoven was quite sick by this time and did not live to complete another work. So it is difficult not to think of "The Difficult Resolution" as accepting the prospect of death. But there is evidence to suggest that it might be no more than a worry about where the next check was coming from! Even if it is, though, this posture of whistling in the face of doom is utterly characteristic of Beethoven's humor. Anyway, let's hear the movement, with my onscreen annotations. It is played by the Cincinnati **Ariel Quartet**, made up of Israeli players. Do watch the players' faces; this really is a conversation.

13. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op.135*, final movement [6:49]

14. CD cover (repeat)

What did you think: death or a cash-flow problem?

B. Spiritual Insight

15. Section title B (Raffaella Aleotti)

16. Parent and Son by Michelangelo and Rembrandt

Here are the two final works by **Michelangelo** (1475–1564) and **Rembrandt** (1609–69) respectively. Just as Shakespeare and Beethoven seem to have been seeking spiritual closure in their last works, so it is here. But expressed in very personal terms: a parent and son in each case: Jesus and Mary in one, the Prodigal Son and his Father in the other.

17. Transformation to focus on Michelangelo

18. Michelangelo: *Pietà* (1499, St. Peters)

19. Michelangelo: *Pietà Rondanini* (1564, Milan, Castello Sforzesco)

Like his famous sculpture in Saint Peter's (about 1499), Michelangelo's subject is the *Pietà*, a standard Renaissance composition with the Virgin Mary holding the body of her dead Son. But the second, which Michelangelo was working on only days before his death in 1564, might almost be by a different artist. Would anyone care to compare them?

20. — the two *Pietàs* compared

Everything about the earlier composition is balanced; it sits firmly on its pedestal; it has weight, which serves as a base for the sensitive emotions in the two figures. But the *Rondanini Pietà* (so called because it was originally owned by the Rondanini family in Rome) has no balance at all; it seems too etiolated to bear its own weight. Indeed, Michelangelo has chipped and chipped away at it, trying to reach the spiritual core, until Christ's right arm no longer connects to his body and the faces can hardly be made out. You cannot really call it a finished work. But you can call it a process, a spiritual excavation that the artist was still in the middle of when he died, and thus a journey that the beholder takes with him. Let's look at it in a video rather than via stills.

21. Michelangelo: *Rondanini Pietà*

22. Transformation to focus on Rembrandt

23. Rembrandt: *The Prodigal Son Tending the Swine* (1645–48, British Museum)

The story of the **Prodigal Son** is a parable made up by Jesus to illustrate the boundless love of God. A rich man has two sons. The elder works hard around the estate, but the younger one asks for all his inheritance in advance so that he may go out into the world. His father, who loves him dearly, accedes to his request, and the young man goes off. And predictably, he falls for the snares of the flesh and the devil, until he is reduced to the most menial job of all: tending pigs. Then he has an epiphany:

But when he came to himself he said, "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough to spare, and I'm dying with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.'" He arose, and came to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran towards him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

This is from the Luke's Gospel, where the story is told. The Rembrandt drawing is from around 1645. In fact, he made three versions of that final return that he made over the course of around 30 years. Let's compare them:

- 24. Rembrandt: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (etching, 1636)
- 25. Rembrandt: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1642, Haarlem)
- 26. Rembrandt: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1661–69, St Petersburg, Hermitage)
- 27. — combination of all the above

What do you think? What was he after in each? We have to distinguish, I think, between several ways of looking at it. In terms of my first profession, art history, the series begins rather theatrically, full of baroque movement, and gradually gets more personal, less demonstrative. In terms of biblical exegesis, I would question the other people in each picture: surprised servants in the first, a rather touching young boy in the second, and a strangely patriarchal figure in the last. Is the son's envious elder brother to be seen in any of them? And finally, in terms of Rembrandt's personal concern, note how the father gets older each time, not perhaps the artist's age, but getting older as he does. This suggests a shift of identification from son to father, and it also increases the view of the father as a symbol of God. Is he, perhaps, presented as being blind, and if so why?

C. Going Out in Style

28. Section title C

By the end of their lives, **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) and **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) were each the best-known composers in their countries. They no longer needed to please the public; they could write just about whatever they wanted. I'll take them in the reverse order, so as to end on an upbeat.

29. Britten and posters

Britten, as is well-known, was homosexual, and lived all his life with a constant partner, the tenor **Peter Pears**. But the demon he struggled with his entire life was his attraction to pubescent boys. From all accounts, this was a temptation he never indulged, although he included boy soprano parts in many of his works. In his final opera, though, *Death in Venice*, he treated the subject explicitly for the first time. For the protagonist of the novella by **Thomas Mann** (1875–1955), a celebrated writer named **Gustav von Aschenbach**, becomes obsessed with **Tadziu**, the beautiful son of an aristocratic Polish family at the same hotel on the Venice Lido. As a result, he ignores the signs of a mounting cholera epidemic in the city, stays too long, and dies. I'll play two clips, which should be self-explanatory. Despite its premiere at the Royal Opera House, it is almost a private opera, with only two significant characters: Peter Pears

appearing in every scene as Aschenbach, and one other close associate, the baritone **John Shirley-Quirk**, singing all the other roles. I wouldn't call it redemptive, like *The Tempest*, but it does lay a lot to rest.

30. Britten: *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach sees Tadziu

31. Britten: *Death in Venice*, ending

32. Verdi and posters

Verdi had retired many years before, actually, after *Aida* (1870), but he came out of retirement to write two last operas based on Shakespeare: *Othello* (1886) and *Falstaff* (1893). The latter was a significant innovation, in that apart from an unsuccessful first opera, he had hitherto written only tragedies. I don't say he identified with Falstaff like Britten did with Aschenbach, but when the opera ends, it is Falstaff who brings it to a close. Verdi was quite an innovative composer in his time, but he ends his last opera with two homages to the music of an earlier time. First a **minuet** as sweet Nannetta is united with the man she really loves, while the old stick who is her father's choice gets the comeuppance he deserves. Then a **fugue** to out-Bach Bach, as Falstaff unites stage and audience in the spirit of laughter.

33. Verdi: *Falstaff*, final scene

34. Class title 2 (All the world's a stage)

D. What Disabilities?

35. Section title D (Waterlilies)

Beethoven's deafness may have enabled him to imagine sounds he would never have heard. Both artists in this video, **Claude Monet** (1840–1926) and **Henri Matisse** (1869–1954), suffered from crippling disabilities—one from encroaching blindness, the other from cancer and arthritis—yet neither allowed this to put an end to their artistic creation.

36. — still from the above, cool

37. — still from the above, warm

You would have had no difficulty, I imagine, in recognizing the background that came up behind the two painters as part of a *Water Lilies* painting by Monet. I put a blue filter on it to resemble the paintings we know and love. But the picture he actually painted was the multi-colored one at the end, with colors that look more like Matisse. In fact, as I said, he was going blind. This had two consequences: one nearly destroyed him, the other gave rise to some of his greatest works. But let me back up.

38. Monet: *Japanese Bridge* (1899, Washington NGA)

39. Monet: *Weeping Willow* (1900, private collection)

In 1883, now becoming quite well known, he moved with his family into a rented house at Giverny, not far from Paris; he later bought it in 1900, and lived there the rest of his life. He was an avid gardener, and over the years turned a patch of swampy land into a beautiful water garden in Japanese style, which

in turn became the main subject of his paintings over the last quarter-century of his life. Here is a painting of the *Japanese Footbridge* in his garden from 1899; it is now here in Washington. You will notice the quite precise brushstrokes and the subtle color-scheme, generally cool and in watery colors, like most of these paintings. But there are a few in which he adopted a much warmer palette.

40. 1900 and 1922 paintings compared

In about 1912, however, he became aware that he was losing his ability to focus and perceive color; he was diagnosed with cataracts. Surgery was possible at that time, but it was risky; his friend **Mary Cassatt** had a botched operation and never painted again. So Monet put off doing anything about it. But he kept painting. By 1922, he was legally blind. He had to label his paints so that he would know which color was which, but even so, the only colors he could really distinguish were reds and oranges, which now dominated his paintings even of the cool garden. Now, however, the fiery palette was a symptom of his disability rather than a matter of choice. As he also suffered from rheumatism, he built a specially large studio where he could paint in big strokes, and avoid the fine work which he could no longer execute or indeed see.

41. Clémenceau, Monet's studio, and Monet recuperating

In 1914, French President **Georges Clémenceau**, who was a personal friend of Monet's, commissioned a series of large-scale paintings for the French State. These were installed in 1927, a year after the artist's death, in two specially-built oval rooms in the **Orangerie** in the Tuilleries Gardens; they are still there today. Largely because of failing sight, Monet tried to withdraw from the project, but Clémenceau insisted. A physician by training himself, he finally persuaded the painter to have the surgery. One eye went badly, but the other was a complete success. Monet's color vision was restored, although he still could not manage fine focus. But in fact this did not matter. He had already discovered that deteriorating eyesight had removed the last vestiges of temptation to be over-literal in his paintings. For some time, he had no longer been painting things, so much as atmosphere and light. Now with his sense of color restored, the literally free-floating forms of his waterlily garden at Giverny provided the perfect opportunity to make the most of his infirmity, and not be laid low by it.

42. Monet's Water Lilies, video

43. Matisse at the easel

You might not think of it, but standing all day at the easel requires a certain amount of stamina, and fine manipulation of the paintbrush can be greatly hindered by arthritis. In later years, **Henri Matisse** encountered both problems. Like many of us, he developed arthritis in his hands, and a diagnosis of intestinal cancer in 1941 confined him to a wheelchair. But he could still hold a pair of scissors so, using assistants to paint sheets of paper with colors he selected, he would cut them out to see what he could do with the shapes. He referred to this, which occupied his last decade, as his "second life." Here are two videos, one from the web, the other made by me. The music is by **Darius Milhaud** (1892–1974).

44. Matisse making a cutout

45. Matisse: Jazz video

E. The Director does as he pleases

46. Section title E

47. Fellini posters

Both the image and the music there come from *E la nave va* (And the Ship Sails On, 1983), a late (1983) film by **Federico Fellini** (1920–93). He had made 38 other feature films by this time, many of them often listed among the greatest ever made. We will look at a snatch of this and also his very last film, *La voce della luna* (The Voice of the Moon, 1990).

48. Altman posters

The other director on the title video is **Robert Altman** (1925–2006), who had made 39 films before the two we are going to sample: *Company* (2003) and *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006). The only point I want to make about these four films is that they are highly personal statements, made without regard for commercial success. Neither Fellini film found a foothold in America, and only *Prairie* of the two Altman films recouped its budget—just.

49. Roberto Benigni and Paolo Villaggio in *La voce della luna* (Fellini, 1990)

Fellini's last film, *La voce della luna* (1990) is about a recently released lunatic trying to foil a plot to capture the moon (don't ask!). He falls into the orbit of Gonnella, a former civil-servant fired on account of his rising paranoia. It is all weird, but beautiful too. Here Gonnella goes into a warehouse that has been turned into a disco by a horde of frantically partying young people. But somehow he finds a partner, and makes his own kind of music.

50. Fellini: *La voce della luna*, disco/waltz sequence

51. Crystal orchestra from *E la nave va* (Fellini, 1983)

But the late Fellini film that I like best is from *E la nave va* (And the Ship Sailed On, 1983). The music you heard under the title comes from it: a group of passengers on a luxury liner come down to the ship's kitchen to turn the array of half-empty glasses into a crystal orchestra. And why are they there? The film is an historical fantasy. The year is 1914. A luxury liner carrying opera lovers and various other oddball characters sets out from Naples to scatter the ashes of a celebrated Italian soprano on the island where she was born. Other passengers include an unexplained rhinoceros in the hold and a group of Serbian refugees (fleeing from Sarajevo) who appear on deck in the night. My copy has still to arrive, but I found this compilation on YouTube. I'm not sure if it's an actual trailer or merely a fan tribute, but it captures the visual atmosphere especially well.

52. Fellini: *E la nave va*, quasi-trailer

53. Closing shot of *E la nave va* (Fellini, 1983)

The ship is pursued by an Austro-Hungarian battleship demanding the return of the refugees. The captain agrees, but one of the Serbians throws a bomb into the ship just as they are approaching. The

warship opens fire, with the result that both ships eventually sink—an opportunity for Fellini to dive into *Titanic* mode with the passengers singing a Verdi chorus on deck. But at this point, Fellini does something even more extraordinary. Watch.

54. Fellini: *E la nave va*, ending

55. Altman: *The Company*, poster

Robert Altman found some independence late in life when he left the Hollywood studio system and began to work with small independent companies that gave him the freedom he wanted. One of the first fruits of that freedom was *The Company* (2003), a drama film with characters and at least the thread of a normal story, but containing documentary elements about the **Joffrey Ballet** in Chicago. This allows him to include sequences of pure poetry, like this. The song, “The Swan,” is by **Julee Cruise**; **Ryoko Kono**, a real member of the Joffrey Ballet, is the dancer.

56. Altman: *The Company*, "The World Spins"

57. Altman: *A Prairie Home Companion*, poster

Altman’s last film was *A Prairie Home Companion*, a film tribute to the end of Garrison Keillor’s long-running radio show. It contains an incredible list of major stars, joining in a loosely-conceived plot and performing various variety-show numbers in between. It is held together by the figure of **Guy Noir** (**Kevin Kline**), Keillor’s tribute to the hard-bitten detective, who opens movie. I’ll go straight from there to the closing scene

58. Altman: *A Prairie Home Companion*, opening sequence

59. Altman: *A Prairie Home Companion*, closing sequence

60. Class title 3 (original gallery, modified)