

Fall 2020 Course Description

Instructor: Sally Robinson

Course: ENGL 303.970

Title: Art or Trash? Cultural Hierarchy in America

Description: In this section of ENGL 303, we will focus on cultural hierarchy in the United States and explore how aesthetic judgments about the relative value of different forms of cultural production always carry with them social judgments. From the cultural gatekeepers who review books and movies in publications like *The New Yorker*, to participants in internet chat rooms, we all tend to perpetuate the idea that there are qualitative differences between “good” books or movies and bestsellers or Hollywood blockbusters. But these apparently simple distinctions emerge from a history of struggle over who gets to define the terms of American cultural value. Distinctions between high and low have unmistakable class and gender meanings; over the course of American history, complaints about American cultural decline have often been articulated as worries over commercialization, “dumbing down,” and “feminization.” “Mass culture” often means “low class,” and America’s book and movie critics—and its professors and students—have participated in the creation of class and gender hierarchies as they have determined what counts as “good” and what should be rejected as “bad.” We’ll address these questions by reading novels and viewing films that take the high/low culture divide as their explicit subject—to greater or lesser degrees, from widely varying angles. We will also research the cultural and economic contexts in which these texts are produced, read, and distributed, in order to get a broader sense of what is at stake in the ongoing debate over cultural hierarchy.

Proposed Readings: Tentative list of texts:

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (the Norton Critical edition only)

Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Olive Higgins Prouty, *Stella Dallas*

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (this edition only)

Stephen King, *Misery*

Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*

We will also be reading a pretty substantial set of critical essays, both on our primary texts and on the historical and cultural contexts of literary value and hierarchy.