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SEASON

STUDENT MATINEE STUDY GUIDE

CIRCA: DUCK POND

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THE HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS: FROM ANCIENT ROOTS TO CONTEMPORARY MARVELS

The circus is a **spectacle** that has **enthralled** audiences for centuries, blending daring performances, theatrical artistry, and awe-inspiring **feats** of skill. Its history is a colorful tapestry that spans continents and epochs, evolving from ancient **traditions** to the modern **extravaganzas** that continue to captivate audiences today.

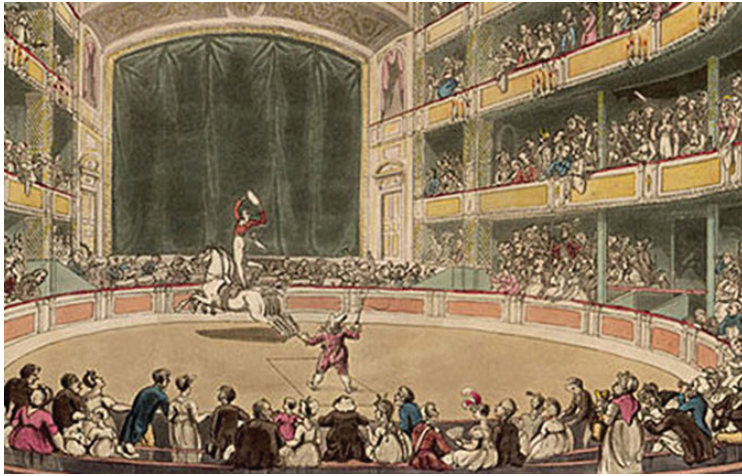
The origins of the circus can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Rome and China, where exhibitions of **acrobatics**, animal training, and comedic performances entertained crowds in grand **arenas** and amphitheaters. These early spectacles showcased the physical prowess of performers and the **ingenuity** of their acts, setting the stage for the development of more elaborate and structured performances in the centuries to come.



In ancient Rome, the Circus Maximus was the largest and most famous circus, accommodating up to 150,000 spectators. It was primarily known for chariot races, but also hosted gladiatorial combat, animal hunts, and public games. Roman circuses were grand events that demonstrated the power and wealth of the Empire, serving both as entertainment and a means of political propaganda.

Simultaneously, in ancient China, acrobatic traditions were flourishing. Chinese acrobats were known for their incredible feats of balance, contortion, and

strength. These performances were often part of larger festivals and celebrations, and they laid the groundwork for many of the acrobatic skills that would later be integral to circus performances worldwide.



The modern circus as we know it began to take shape in the late 18th century in Europe. One of the pivotal figures in its development was Philip Astley, an English cavalry officer who opened the first modern circus in 1768 in London. Astley's circus featured equestrian acts, acrobats, clowns, and musicians performing in a circular arena known as the ring—a design that would become synonymous with the circus.

Throughout the 19th century, the circus experienced rapid growth and **popularity** across Europe and later in North America. Legendary circus families like the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus brought together a dazzling array of acts, including tightrope walkers, jugglers, trapeze artists, and exotic animal trainers. These traveling shows captivated audiences with their daring stunts, spectacle, and sense of wonder.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked the golden age of the circus, characterized by larger-than-life performances and elaborate productions. P.T. Barnum, known for his promotional flair and showmanship, played a key role in popularizing the circus in the United States. The merger of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1919 created the largest and most famous circus in history, showcasing a diverse range of acts that thrilled audiences under the big top.

Barnum's circus, often dubbed "The Greatest Show on Earth," was **renowned** for its extravagant displays and promotional techniques. Barnum masterfully blended the bizarre and the beautiful, presenting both oddities, such as the famous "Fiji Mermaid," and awe-inspiring acts like Jumbo the elephant. His ability to generate public interest and excitement played a significant role in the circus becoming a beloved cultural institution.

As the 20th century progressed, the circus adapted to changing social attitudes and technological advancements.

The advent of cinema and television provided new forms of entertainment, challenging the circus to innovate and stay relevant. This era also saw a growing awareness of animal rights, leading to a decline in animal acts and a shift towards showcasing human talent and artistry.

In the 21st century, the circus has evolved to reflect changing tastes, cultural diversity, and technological advancements.

Contemporary circuses often blend traditional circus arts with modern theatrical elements, creating immersive experiences that appeal to a new generation of audiences. Companies like Cirque du Soleil have redefined the genre with their avant-garde productions that combine acrobatics, dance, music, and multimedia to create visually stunning and emotionally resonant performances.



Unlike traditional circuses that focused heavily on animal acts, contemporary circuses emphasize human skill, creativity, and storytelling. Aerial arts, such as trapeze, aerial silks, and hoop, showcase performers' agility and grace as they soar through the air with precision and elegance. These acts not only entertain but also inspire awe and admiration for the dedication and discipline of circus artists.



Among the contemporary circus innovators is Circa, a renowned Australian circus company. Known for their stripped-back, raw approach, Circa combines acrobatics with a stark, minimalist aesthetic to create powerful and emotive performances. Their production "Duck Pond" is a standout example of their ingenuity, taking the classic ballet "Swan Lake" and reimagining it with a fresh, modern twist. This production is an illustration of how contemporary circus can transform traditional narratives and breathe new life into them, blending humor, skill, and

creativity in a way that both honors and reinvents the source material.

The history of the circus is a testament to human creativity, resilience, and the universal desire to be entertained and amazed. From its ancient origins to the modern-day spectacles that push the limits of **imagination** and possibility, the circus continues to evolve while preserving its timeless appeal. Whether under the big top or in state-of-the-art arenas, the circus invites audiences to suspend disbelief and experience the magic of human achievement in all its daring and artistic glory.

Watch this recap video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3uXVuXk8s4>

Consider the following questions to summarize what you've learned.

1. How did the cultural and social contexts of ancient civilizations like Rome and China influence the development and popularity of early circus performances? (Consider how the values, entertainment needs, and available resources in these societies shaped the acts and structure of early circus spectacles.)
2. In what ways did figures like Philip Astley and P.T. Barnum contribute to the evolution and global spread of the modern circus?



Questions to consider while watching Circa's Duck Pond:

1. In what ways does Circa's production "Duck Pond" reimagine the classic ballet "Swan Lake," and what techniques do they use to modernize and reinterpret this traditional story?
2. How does Circa's approach to storytelling through circus arts reflect broader trends in contemporary performing arts, and what might this indicate about the future of circus and live performance?
3. How does Circa distinguish it from traditional circus performances, and what artistic or thematic purposes might this serve?

VOCABULARY LIST

Spectacle: An impressive or striking public display or performance

Enthral: To captivate or charm; to hold the attention of someone completely

Feats: Extraordinary acts or achievements that require great skill or courage

Traditions: Customs or beliefs passed down through generations

Extravanzas: Large, elaborate, and spectacular events or performances

Acrobatics: Skilled performances involving gymnastics and physical agility

Ingenuity: The quality of being clever, original, and inventive

Arena: A large, enclosed space used for sports or entertainment

Popularity: The state of being widely liked or admired

Renowned: Known and admired by many people for some special quality or achievement

Contemporary: Belonging to the present time; modern

Imagination: The ability to form new ideas, images, or concepts not present to the senses

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