

Summer 2019

AP/EN 4581 3.0A (S2)

Decadence

Course Director:

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Delivery Format:

Seminar

Time:

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5:30-8:30

Description:

In today's common parlance the term "decadent" might be found in an advertisement for luxury items promising indulgence: chocolate, spa treatments, low-fat yogurt that still purports to deliver pleasure (if only on the level of fantasy). At the end of the nineteenth century, however, "decadence" was an epithet of warning, denoting transgression, moral lassitude, and degeneracy symptomatic of a culture in decline. In response to the growing monotony and cacophony of urban life, the erosion of traditional footholds of religious faith, and the surge in radical new figurations of sex and gender in the public sphere, there arose an amorphous literary, artistic, and social movement known—disparagingly—as Decadence. The art-for-art's-sake Aestheticism of Oscar Wilde and the stylistic extravagance of Charles Baudelaire came to characterize Decadence in all its enthusiasm for excess, sensuality, and explorations of pain and pleasure. Practices like spiritualism and séances took the place of traditional Christian belief; sexual experimentation was prioritized over utilitarian sexual reproduction; gender identity became a realm of play rather than hard and fixed roles. This course explores the seductions and subversions of Decadent culture and Aestheticism, taking into account the work of British and Continental writers and artists, painting, cartoons from the popular press, music, and stage productions. Among our guiding questions will be the following: How does Decadence craft a new model of the subject? What are the requirements and expectations of art in Decadent and Aestheticist practice and theory? How does gender become newly configured in Decadence (if at all)? What are the possibilities for spirituality opened by Decadent culture? And, in our own moment of extreme wealth and poverty, unbridled consumption, and unstable global leadership, what might fin-de-siècle Decadence tell us about ourselves?

Category:

C

Historical Requirement:

Period II

Requirements:

Five short online responses	5% each (25% total)
Seminar Presentation	25%
Final Paper (3000 words)	30%
Informed Participation	20%

Reading List:

Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (Rutgers UP)
Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (Dover)
—, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford World's Classics)

Additional required readings are available under the Readings section of the course Moodle site.

Open To:

Yr 4 Honours