

Course Number: AP/EN 4581 3.0A (S2)

Title: Decadence

Course Director: Dr. Amanda Paxton
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Delivery Format: Seminar

Time and Location: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5:30-8:30; BC 325

Course 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?

Required Texts:

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.

Course Evaluation:

Type of Assignment	Weighting	Due Date
Short online responses	5% each (=25% total)	Various dates throughout the term
Seminar Presentation	25%	TBA

Final Paper (3000 words)	30%	August 1 (due online)
Informed Participation	20%	ongoing

Short Online Responses (5% each)

A 200-word response to one of the week's readings, to be posted on the Discussion Board on the course Moodle site no later than 12 noon the day of class, and to be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class.

Seminar Presentation (25%)

A fifteen-minute oral presentation providing an interpretive analysis one of the week's assigned readings. A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the first week of class. Because the seminar presentations are considered a part of the class material for each week, no deferrals of presentations will be allowed. Students who fail to appear or fail to present their work on the agreed-upon date will receive a mark of zero.

Final Paper (30%)

A 3000-word formal essay on the topic of the student's choice. All students are required to discuss their topics with me at least one week in advance of the final essay workshop. I will not accept essays from students who have not discussed the topic with me by July 18.

Informed Participation (20%)

Students are expected to attend class having completed the required weekly readings, with questions and comments prepared in advance in order to contribute to seminar discussions. Students are also expected to engage actively and collegially with the ideas presented by their colleagues in the ongoing seminar presentations.

Week-by-week schedule:

June 18

Introduction to the course

June 20

Precursors

Required Reading: Charles Baudelaire, "To the Reader"

Théophile Gautier, preface to *Mademoiselle du Maupin*

June 25

Pre-Raphaelites

Required Reading: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Nuptial Sleep," "The Blessed Damozel"

Robert Buchanan [pseud. Thomas Maitland], "The Fleshly School of Poetry"

Christina Rossetti, "In An Artist's Studio"

June 27

Manifestos

Required Reading: Walter Pater, Conclusion to *The Renaissance*

Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying"

July 2

Decadence and Modernity

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

July 4

Open Secrets

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

July 9

Orientalism and Gender

Required Reading: Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*

July 10

The “New Woman”

Required Reading: Selections from *Daughters of Decadence*

July 16

Spiritualities

Required Reading:

Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*

July 18

Parodies

Required Reading:

Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience* (in-class screening of 1995 video recording of Australian Opera)

July 23

Whither Decadence?

Todd Haynes, *Velvet Goldmine* (in-class screening)

July 25

Final Paper Workshop

Late Submission Policy

Essays are to be submitted in hard copy in class on the due date. Late submissions will be penalized by 2% per day. Extensions on essays may be granted in the case of a personal emergency. Extensions on essays may also be granted in advance of the deadline if students consult with the instructor at least 5 days before the deadline. No extensions will be granted for seminar presentations.

Professional Conduct and Electronics in the Classroom:

Use of cellphones and/or headphones is prohibited during class time. Participation marks will be deducted from students violating this policy.