

**English 491: Senior Seminar in Literary Studies: Decadence, Symbolism, Modernism**

Thursday 2:00-4:50

Room: Mark Taper Hall of Humanities 110

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## Course Description

Decadence is a falling, a sinking, a decline. As a literary movement, Decadence began in France in the mid nineteenth century with a remarkable book of poetry: Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*). From this single author and work came three intertwined literary movements that have dominated all of the arts to our present day: Decadence, Symbolism, Modernism. Decadence can be regarded as the second stage of Romanticism, defining the exhaustion of Romanticism's naturalism and optimism. Decadence proclaimed both the natural and the social to be worked-out mines; they may once have provided satisfaction and meaning, but not any more; the present generation has been born too late. The only hope now is through transgression and perversion, questing for meaning in new, negative directions, in search of unprecedented, dangerous experiences and sensations, hoping to "break on through to the other side." We will look at the theory and practice of Decadence (and its companion movements Symbolism and Modernism), as it developed in France, its adoption and transformation by German, English and American writers, and its relations to sexuality, intoxication, transgression and religion. What is the Decadent looking for: new possibilities of "alternative" vitality beyond a belated culture of sterility and fragments, or "my only friend, the end"?



## Learning Objectives

1. Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures. In the period we will be studying, writers, artists, philosophers thought that the very idea of the human was in jeopardy. All of the established certainties of the human seemingly no longer worked. People no longer *felt* them, and then the new century, the twentieth, was to be the century of inhumanity. What does it mean to be human after the world wars, after the extermination camps and the gulag? The writers we will be studying are each struggling to find new ways of being human. So should you.
2. Cultivate a critical appreciation for one of the most profound and innovative forms of human expression: the long fictional prose narrative.
3. Understand and engage critically with the cultural and intellectual movements that these novels propose, examine, oppose. Thought, like matter, is clumpy. As matter tends to constellate into planets, stars, solar systems, galaxies, so ideas tend to constellate into movements. By the end of the course, students should understand the following intellectual and artist movements and concepts: Romanticism, Romantic Epiphany, Romantic Quest, Aestheticism, Decadence, Derangement of the Senses, Symbolism, Modernism, Anti-Semitism, Cosmopolitanism, Post-Modernism.
4. Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively. With this in mind, we will write two substantial long-form papers. I will give extensive written instructions on what works and what does not. The goal is to learn from the first draft of the paper, in order to improve your thinking and writing substantially in the writing of the second. Every student should budget at least one hour to go over your first draft with me.

## Required Reading

- Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), *Flowers of Evil*, tr. McGowan, Oxford UP
- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing, Doubleday Anchor
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin
- Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), *Against Nature*, tr. Robert Baldick, Penguin
- Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Damned*, tr. Teresa Hale, Penguin
- Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), *Complete Works*, *Selected Letters*, tr. Wallace Fowlie, U Chicago Press
- William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), *Yeats' Poetry, Drama and Prose*, Norton
- Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), *The Well of Loneliness*
- Franz Kafka (1883-1924), *The Trial*, Schocken
- T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), *The Waste Land*, Norton
- Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), *Nightwood*, New Directions
- Joyce Johnson (1935-), *Minor Characters*, Methuen
- Chuck Palahniuk (1962-) *Fight Club*, Norton



## **Schedule**

August

29: Introduction

September

5: Baudelaire

12:

19: Nietzsche

26: Huysmans, *Against Nature*

October

3: Huysmans, *The Damned*

10: Fall Recess

17: Rimbaud

24: Hall

31: Kafka

November

7: Eliot

14: Eliot

21: Barnes

28: Thanksgiving

December

5: Smith

26: Palahniuk

10 Summational Experience, 2-4

## **Evaluation**

Students will give one oral presentation and write one paper (two drafts); there will be no final examination.

## **Illustrations**

Gustave Moreau, *Salomé Dancing before Herod*, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum (though hanging in Des Esseintes' house in Huysmans' *Against Nature*); Fernand Khnopff, *Secret-Reflet*, Bruges, Groeningemuseum.

## **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

Academic Conduct: Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems: Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255 Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.  
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call  
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086 Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.  
<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710 Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC – <https://diversity.usc.edu/> Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students