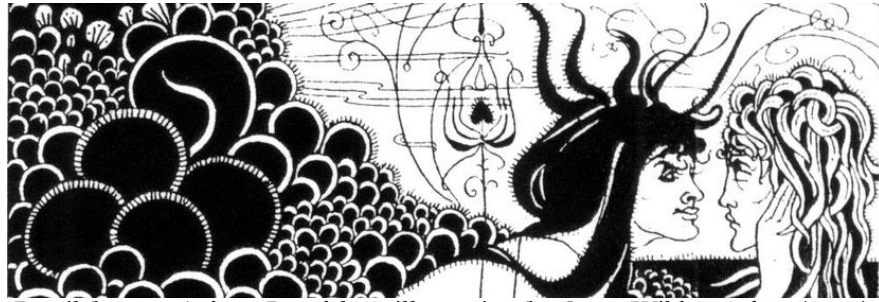


English 495
Fall 2019
Haley Hall 102
TR 1:20 – 2:50

Dr. Robert Volpicelli
robertvolpicelli@rmc.edu
Haley Hall 13
Office Hours: TR 12-1; F
1:20-2:20

**Capstone in English:
Decadence is the Art of Decline**



Detail from an Aubrey Beardsley's illustration for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894)

Course Description:

Decadence is the language of excess—it generally means indulging well beyond the point of what is considered to be “healthy” or “good.” In its preference for these extremes, in its desire to move past accepted limitations, decadence tips over into the language of decay and decline. (Etymologically, the word itself implies a kind of “falling away” from a previous state.) The decadent artist is thus one who goes against the grain of convention and the call of reason to hold up the virtues of the unhealthy, to find the beauty in the ruinous, and to put the value of art and aesthetics above all other needs.

This capstone course is a focused investigation of such decadence as the primary impulse of art and literature during the final decades of the nineteenth century (a period known as the *fin de siècle*) in both Europe and England. It also examines the afterlife of decadence throughout the early twentieth century, where its lingering presence continues to express anxieties about, as well as celebrations of, the idea of cultural decline. Students in this capstone will each be tasked with completing a substantial research project on decadence, a subject that has seen something of a renewal of critical interest in recent years. As a capstone, this course—perhaps more than others—requires every student to take an active role in guiding the conversation and shaping their own research pursuits.

Major Course Requirements:

- exceptional class participation
- regular reading blog posts
- journal article review and presentation
- final capstone essay project

Required Texts:

- J.K. Huysmans, *Against Nature* (Oxford World's Classics; 9780199555116)
- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford World's Classics; 9780199535989)
- Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New Directions; 978-0811216715)

-other texts made available as handouts or PDFs on Canvas

Course Policies:

Attendance: My overall attendance policy is simple: I expect you to come to every class unless your absence is absolutely necessary. Each student is allowed **three absences per semester** (note that I make no distinctions between “excused” and “unexcused” absences). For every class that you miss after your third absence, I will deduct 20% from your participation grade. For every class that you miss after your sixth absence, I will begin directly lowering your final grade by one mark (“B-” becomes “C+”). I reserve the right to fail students for absences beyond this point.

Class Preparation: Students need to be in class **on time** and **prepared to participate**. If a student is late to class more than two times, I will count this as an absence; other late arrivals will result in more absences. Being prepared means having the **assigned reading** with you. If you make a habit of coming to class without the reading, I will mark you absent. Additionally, I will only warn you only once about the **improper use of cellphones or computers**; if you continue to use these devices during class time, I will mark you absent and mark down your participation grade accordingly.

Participation: Since this is an upper-level course, I have very high expectations for student participation. I will evaluate participation with respect to both in-class discussions and informal presentations. In this course, participation will also include contributions to our **course blog** (rncdecadence.art.blog). In all of these forums, quality is as important as quantity. At any point of the semester, you are welcome to query me to receive more feedback on your participation.

Assignments: You will receive a more detailed description of each assignment when it is time to begin working on it. Always use a standard font (like Times New Roman), and make sure your assignments are double-spaced and stapled. **Late papers** will receive a deduction of one third of a letter grade per day. **Extensions** will not be granted on the due date, or after the date has already passed. If you foresee a problem with handing in an assignment, please come see me well in advance. Failure to hand in a **final project** on the assigned date will result in a failing grade of “0” for that work.

Academic Integrity: Violations of the college’s academic integrity policy will result in serious consequences, most likely in the form of academic sanctions. Making use of another person’s writing or ideas without attribution constitutes **plagiarism** and will be treated as such. If you ever have a question about proper citation or your responsibilities as a student, please come talk to me in advance. You can refer to the Randolph-Macon College Code of Academic Integrity in the R-MC Student Handbook, which is also available online through the Registrar’s website.

Course Evaluation:

Participation: 20%

Article Review: 20%

Final Research Project: 60% (includes proposal, annotated bibliography, presentation, partial draft, and final research essay)

Additional Resources:

The Communication Center is available for students who want extra feedback; it provides free, one-on-one conferences with trained tutors. The center is located on the first floor of the library, and you can make appointments online: <http://www.rmc.edu/academics/academic-support>.

Students with disabilities will be fully accommodated in this course. Please let me know right away if you have a need that I can help address. If you have a disability that requires a specific accommodation, the Office for Disability Support Services (located in the HAC) can help you register and provide you with other resources.

My Office Hours are a designated time for you to come by and talk about your writing and other coursework. I encourage you to make use of this resource, as I can often provide more detailed feedback in person than I can in written comments on your drafts.

Course Schedule:

Schedule is subject to alterations. All readings and assignments are **due** on the date scheduled below.

Decadence

T 9/3: Course Introduction: “The Etymology of Decadence”; Charles Baudelaire, from “New Notes on Edgar Poe” (1857) and “Correspondences”

R 9/5: Paul Bourget, “Theory of Decadence” (1881); and Baudelaire, selections from *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) (“I love the thought,” “The Sick Muse,” “The Venal Muse,” “The Enemy,” “Ill Fortune,” “Beauty,” “Hymn to Beauty,” “A Carcass”)

T 9/10: Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” (“The Man of the Crowd,” “Modernity,” and “The Dandy”); and from *Fleurs du Mal* (“Landscape,” “The Sun,” “To a Passer-by,” “Dusk,” “The Metamorphoses of the Vampire,” “The Death of Lovers,” “The Death of Artists”)

R 9/12: J.K. Huysmans, *Against Nature* (1884), chapters 1-4 (2-43)

T 9/17: Matei Calinescu, “Decadent Euphoria” (171-178); and Huysmans, *Against Nature*, chapters 5-9 (44-91)

R 9/19: Huysmans, *Against Nature*, chapters 10-13 (92-143)

T 9/24: Huysmans, *Against Nature*, chapters 14-15 (144-181)

Aestheticism

R 9/26: Walter Pater, Conclusion to *Study on the History of the Renaissance* (1873); and Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91), preface-chapter 3 (1-40)

T 10/1: Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapters 4-9 (41-100)

R 10/3: Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapters 10-14 (101-147)

T 10/8: Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapters 15-20 (148-188); and “Pen, Pencil, Poison” (1891)

R 10/10: Max Beerbohm, “A Defence of Cosmetics” (1894) (48-63); Ernest Dowson (“Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration,” “Villanelle of Sunset,” “Extreme Unction”); Michael Field

(“From Baudelaire,” “A Dance of Death,” “The Mummy Evokes His Soul”); Lionel Johnson (“Nihilism,” “A Decadent’s Lyric”)

Afterlives

T 10/15: Arthur Symons, “Introduction” to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) (1-9); W.B. Yeats (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” “White Birds,” “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” “The Secret Rose,” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus”), and T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1918)

R 10/17: No Class (Read ahead!)

*****Fall Break: 10/21 – 10/23*****

R 10/24: Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926); Countee Cullen, selections from *Copper Sun* (1927) (“From the Dark Tower,” “Threnody for a Brown Girl,” “Confession,” “Colored Blues Singer,” “Lament,” “Two Thoughts of Death”)

T 10/29: Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1937), “Bow Down,” “La Somnambule,” (1-54);

Proposals Due

R 10/31: Barnes, *Nightwood*, “Night Watch,” “The Squatter,” “Watchman What of the Night” (55-113)

T 11/5: Barnes, *Nightwood*, “Where the Tree Falls,” “Go Down Matthew,” “The Possessed,” (114-180).

R 11/7: Research Workshop

T 11/12: Research Workshop

R 11/14: Draft Workshop; **Annotated Bibliography Due**

T 11/19: Draft Workshop

R 11/21: Draft Workshop

T 11/26: Draft Workshop; **Partial Draft Due** (by Wednesday night)

***** Thanksgiving Break: 11/27 – 11/29 *****

T 12/3: Presentations

R 12/5: Presentations

***** Finals Week: 12/9 – 12/13 *****

Tuesday, December 10, 2:00 p.m. (**hard copy on my office door**)