English 21915: The Politics of Aestheticism

Winter 2012

Professor Benjamin Morgan

Rosenwald 415A

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**The Politics of Aestheticism**

In the late-Victorian period (1870-1900), many writers and artists rejected the strict social norms that had governed mid-Victorian society. Reacting against a moral regime they perceived as oppressive, figures such as Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti proposed an alternative set of guiding values that were based on art rather than religion. They argued that beauty, not goodness, was the ultimate aim of life. The movement that they initiated was known as “aestheticism” and was tremendously popular and controversial in England and America between 1880 and 1895. The cultural movement ended abruptly with three spectacular trials of Oscar Wilde that resulted in his imprisonment, exile and death. But the principles of aestheticism decisively shaped modernist art and literature in the early twentieth century.

In this course we examine the politics of aestheticism. In this course “politics” does not refer to particular viewpoints, issues, parties, or coalitions. For our purposes “politics” encompasses a wide range of ways in which art and literature interact with society. Taking aestheticism as our focus, we will ask how art can challenge existing social formations and imagine new ones. We will ask whether a philosophy of hedonism is compatible with social duty and justice. And we will reflect on whether challenging what is “proper” or “appropriate” through art can be a meaningful form of resistance. Is art impotent and crystalline, obeying only its own internal laws of form and beauty? Or is the impotent beauty of art a mask, behind which the artist imagines radically subversive forms of sense-experience and social relations?

Required Texts (available at the Seminary Co-op)

William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford)

Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford)

Oscar Wilde, *The Major Works* (Oxford)

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harvard)

All other texts will be available in the course documents or library course reserve sections of the course website at chalk.uchicago.edu. You must print and bring a hard copy of all readings to class. (I ask you to print the readings because I want you to make marginal notes as you read.)

Requirements

*Weekly short assignments*: I will usually give you an assignment on Wednesday to be completed by the following Monday. For the most part, these will require you to prepare a question, topic, or interpretation of a passage for class discussion. They may involve 1-2 pages of writing.

*Midterm Paper*. A 3-5 page paper is due at the end of week four. I will suggest some topics but you will also be free to develop your own topic.

*Final Paper.* Your final is a 7-10 page paper on at least two texts from the syllabus, excluding those you have written about for the midterm paper. I will suggest topics but encourage you to develop your own for the final paper.

*Discussion Participation*. You’ll notice that a substantial portion of your grade is based on your participation in class discussion. Our readings will often be short but complex and I expect you to have spent time analyzing and developing questions about the assigned reading prior to class.

Extensions

I am generally amenable to requests for short extensions on paper deadlines as long as they’re made at least a day in advance of the due date. I am also willing to negotiate an alternate due date for the midterm paper if it falls at a bad time relative to your other coursework. If you would like to use this option, let me know within the first two weeks of the quarter.

Paper Formatting and Sumbission

Paper should be in Times New Roman font, 12 pt., with one inch margins, double spaced, last name and page number in upper right corner, no separate cover page, and include a works cited page in MLA format at the end. Papers must be submitted by email to [bjmorgan@uchicago.edu](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu).

Attendance

You may miss one class, no questions asked. Each additional class you miss will result in a deduction from your final grade. Please try to let me know in advance if you’ll not be in class.

Grading

Participation: 15%

Weekly assignments: 25%

Midterm paper: 25%

Final paper 35%

Office Hours/Contact Info

Rosenwald 415A M/W 4:30-5:30

**I use the scheduling system on chalk.uchicago.edu for my office hours**. The link for accessing chalk is in the left sidebar of our course website. If you don’t make an appointment, I may not be in my office.

The best way to reach me is via email ([bjmorgan@uchicago.edu](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu)). I’ll usually get back to you quickly. If I don’t reply within 24 hours, it’s fine to send a friendly reminder.

Laptop Policy

In order to facilitate discussion, I prefer that you don’t bring laptops to class.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty Notice

Academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, is a serious offense. Academic dishonesty consists of any presentation of another’s ideas as your own. This includes not only word-for-word copying, but also the presentation of another’s argument without attribution, the purchase of academic work online, and the submission of the same paper paper to more than one class without both instructors’ knowledge. Academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of the course and administrative disciplinary measures.

**Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

**(CD=Course Documents/CR=Course Reserves)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **week 1** |  |  |
| 1/4 | Introduction |  |
| **week 2** |  |  |
| 1/9 | Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ch. 1-2 and Introductions |  |
| 1/11 | Wilde, *Dorian Gray* (all) | Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (CD) |
| **week 3** |  |  |
| 1/16 | **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day: No Class** |  |
| 1/18 | Wilde, *Dorian Gray*; Pater, *Renaissance*, Conclusion | Adorno, from *Aesthetic Theory* (CD) |
| **Week 4** |  |  |
| 1/23 | Pater, *Renaissance*, Preface and Conclusion |  |
| 1/25 | Pater, *Renaissance*, "Winckelmann," "School of Giorgione" | Rancière, "The Politics of Literature" (CR) |
| **week 5** |  |  |
| 1/30 | Swinburne, "Anactoria" (CR) |  |
| 2/1 | Swinburne, "Laus Veneris" | Eliot, "Swinburne as Poet" (CD) |
| **2/3** | **Midterm paper due via email at 5 pm (FRIDAY)** | |
| **week 6** |  |  |
| 2/6 | Rossetti, Poems (selected, TBA); Buchanan, "Fleshly School" (CR) | Danto, "Beauty and Politics," *The Abuse of Beauty* (CR) |
| 2/8 | **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Paintings** (CD) |  |
| **week 7** |  |  |
| 2/13 | Wilde, *Salome*  **Selections from *A Rebours*** (CD) | Nordau, "Decadents and Aesthetes" 317-337 (CD) |
| 2/15 | Wilde, *Salome* |  |
| **week 8** |  |  |
| 2/20 | Beardsley, Venus and Tannhauser  **Beardsley, Illustrations** (CD) |  |
| 2/22 | Wilde, “Soul of Man” (CR) |  |
| **week 9** |  |  |
| 2/27 | Wilde, *Importance of Being Earnest* | Regenia Gagnier, "Creating the Audience" (CR) |
| 2/1 | Wilde, *Importance of Being Earnest* |  |
| **week 10** |  |  |
| 3/5 | Morris, *News from Nowhere* (selections TBA); MEET IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS | Morris, "Singer's Prelude" to *The Earthly Paradise* (CD) |
| 3/7 | Morris, *News from Nowhere* |  |
| **3/12** | **Final paper due via email at 5 pm (MONDAY)** | |