A Fortnight in Oxford 2016

Seminar

Oscar Wilde and Decadence

Short Description: The course focuses on writers, artists and intellectuals living and working during the time of fin-de-siecle period of the 1890’s. The works of Oscar Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans, RL Stevenson, Leopold Sacher-Masoch and various French decadent tales in translation will be covered.

Long Description: In the dying days of the Victorian era and the British Empire, a new artistic sensibility emerged reflecting the sense of exhaustion and fatigue in the long and glorious century coming to a close. For writers and artists of ‘decadence’, the fin-de-siecle had glutted itself with an excess of riches. Vices, both moral and sexual, now had free rein, and a new kind of flamboyant bohemian, the dandy, came to embody the style of the moment.

No-one performed the role of the dandy better than Oscar Wilde. From the 1880’s onward, Wilde was a key figure in London, Paris and America, promoting his ideas of aestheticism and the values of ‘art for art’s sake.’ He was inspired by the leading literary and artist figures of the day – the art critic Walter Pater, and the European sensations, Huysmann’s A Rebours, featuring the quintessential literary decadent Des Esseintes, and Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs. And he inspired in turn his contemporaries. His novel The Picture of Dorian Gray was commissioned at a dinner with Arthur Conan Doyle whose Sherlock Holmes reimagines the Wildean dandy as an Investigative genius. Wilde and R.L Stevenson were close friends and Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde reveals the dark side of dissolute libertinage. Wilde’s own life, his illicit homosexual love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and his scandalous trial and imprisonment, provides a compelling parable of the fate of the decadence movement. His trial and imprisonment signalled not just the end of the movement, but of an aesthetic style and a way of life.

This course uses the life and times of Oscar Wilde as the key thread through which to survey the key artists, writers and dandies of the decadence movement. Oxford will provide the ideal setting for the course, allowing us to revisit Wilde’s haunts while a student at Magdalen College, Oxford. Film versions of his famous plays will be on offer as evening entertainment.

Set Texts
Joris-Karl Huysmans, Against Nature (Oxford World Classics, 2009)
Leopold Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs (Penguin, 2000)
Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray (Oxford World Classics, 2006)
Oscar Wilde, The Major Works (Oxford World Classics, 2008)
Robert Louis Stevenson, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales (Oxford World Classics, 2006)
French Decadent Tales, ed. Stephen Romer (Oxford World Classics, 2013)

Tutor Biography:
Dr Angus McFadzean is from Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied literature at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, obtaining a DPhil in the novels of James Joyce at Wadham College, University of Oxford. He currently teaches at various Oxford colleges and with the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education.