This class explores the relation between the aestheticist and decadent movements and their crucial determination of modernist aesthetics. Beginning with the fin de siècle, we will consider works by Hardy, Wilde, James, and Huysmans. The late-Victorian period was a time of pervasive fears and fantasies dominated by such figures as the New Woman, the urban detective, the homosexual bachelor, the Anarchist, the Oriental, the overreaching colonialist, the self-preening aesthete, the vampire, and the femme fatale. In the diverse writings of Pater, Olive Schreiner, Vernon Lee, Symonds, and Wilde, aestheticism emerged as a theoretically coherent and varied movement absorbed in exquisite surfaces and useless artifice. For decadent writers and artists, scientific theories of “degeneration” could be recalibrated as erotically charged, non-teleological experiments, while Freud drew on “decadent” scenarios for his proto-modernist narratives of hysteria and sexual disorder. Women writers, meanwhile, struggled to find a place within the male-defined coteries of aestheticism and decadence, a theme dramatized in James’ tale “The Author of Beltraffio,” narrated by a decadent acolyte, in which the aestheticist project must be sequestered from female readers, who can only misconstrue it as immoral. Yet there were also alliances between male decadents and their feminist colleagues; Wilde promoted Schreiner’s "Story of an African Farm," saluting its bold challenge to realist conventions as well as its symbolist exploration of colonialist malaise.

In the class’s second part we will explore how the fin outlasted the siècle, maintaining an intense afterlife in the Anglo-American modernist writing of Yeats, James, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, and Djuna Barnes. The morbidity, subjectivism, sexual experimentalism, and excesses of literary technique characteristic of 1890s sensibility foment modernist revisions. Wilde’s "Picture of Dorian Gray," with its hero who refuses to "develop," inspires modernist counter-bildungsromans. We consider Joyce’s “Stephen Hero,” an early version of “Portrait of the Artist as Young Man,” arguably a satire of aestheticism as well as a novel with an explicitly Paterian protagonist. The keenly observing, detached bachelor familiar from James also narrates Rilke’s “The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge” (arguably the first modernist novel) and forms the paralyzed solitary consciousness of Eliot’s “Prufrock.” We will consider, too, Eliot’s absorption in the figure of the Jew as an emblem of a malevolent decadent cosmopolitanism versus Djuna Barnes’ depiction of the decadent Jew in her novel “Nightwood” as a more positively transformative cultural agent. In Lawrence’s "The Woman Who Rode Away," we discover a modernist investment in a savage, socially reactionary primitivism. Intensifying our class’s focus on productively murky transitions, we will consider the discord between Edwardian realists, with their stress on social and historical topicality, and modernist experimenters obsessed with subjectivity and interiority, a rift made famous in Virginia Woolf’s essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

A mid-term paper and a final paper that may be drawn from the mid-term essay.