

D. VICTORIAN ART and ACTIVISM

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Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

In the Victorian period of Great Britain, many of the liveliest literary works were feisty engagements with or challenges to the monarchical “brand” of Queen Victoria in its many forms. In this course, I’ll discuss a set of writers and visual artists; how does their work fit into the political and cultural activism of the time?

NOTE: Suggested readings will be available on NUalumnaecourses.org under Course D >Learn More >Course Materials.

Jan. 8 The Queen and the “Poetess”: Feminine Power in Victorian Great Britain

Eighteen-year-old Princess Victoria was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom of England and Ireland in 1837. Two weeks later revered poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning immortalized her coronation in “The Young Queen.” These two women reigned in their separate spheres, were extraordinarily influential, and epitomize what is commonly known as the “Victorian era.” Discussing them together provides context for artistic and activist trends that we will focus on for the rest of the class.

Jan. 15 Frederick Douglass, Great Britain, Enslavement, and Abolition

Frederick Douglass travelled around England and Ireland in the mid 1840s, exhorting its ministers and leaders to take up the abolitionist cause. Upon his departure in 1847, he was feted in fine fashion and gave a speech that is both an oratory masterpiece and a trenchant indictment of slavery. Great Britain outlawed slave trade in 1807, and slavery itself in 1833. But the reality on the ground(s) of the vast British empire was more complicated. I will talk in depth about Douglass’s speech and then use it as a springboard to discuss slavery, the slave trade, and abolition in Great Britain.

Jan. 22 What George Eliot Has to Say When Not Writing Her Novels

George Eliot is, of course, the author of several consequential and quintessential Victorian novels. But she also was an extraordinary scholar and a lively essay writer. In addition, Eliot famously corresponded with Harriet Beecher Stowe; the exchange between these two authors sheds light on the interchange of culture between Victorian England and the equally Victorian (in all the complexity of that term) United States. Eliot would probably not call herself an activist, but as we will see, she lived her life and practiced her art in defiance of cultural norms. In her work she exposes the deep misogyny of Victorian society and the deep hypocrisy of Victorian Christianity.

Jan. 29 Art as Protest? Assessing the Pre-Raphaelites

1848 was a year of unrest all over Europe and the United Kingdom. A group of young male artists including Dante Gabriel Rossetti took the spirit of protest to the realm of art and rebelled against the standards of the Royal Academy. They called themselves the Pre-Raphaelites, challenging the authenticity and vitality of art that followed in the tradition of Rafael, aka Renaissance Art! They loved John Keats, and we will focus on one poem that inspired several Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Theories of the male gaze by twentieth century feminist critics left these artists vulnerable to charges of sexism and misogyny in their treatment of the many women models in their circle, labelled “The Stunners.” We will focus on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt in exploring this fascinating mid-century story.

**Feb. 5 Fallen Women Part One: Devotional Poet
Christina Rossetti**

Dante Rossetti's sister, Christina Rossetti, was a prolific poet, filling three volumes with poems mostly but not exclusively focused on religious themes. And then in 1862 there was *Goblin Market*. Now *Goblin Market* is famous for its many illustrated versions and the many, often contradictory readings of the narrative poem; is it a Christian redemption story or a lesbian love story? But it also draws on real life experience Rossetti and her sister had working with prostitutes and unwed mothers. Rossetti is a contradictory figure who has outlasted her brother and his friends in fame, mostly because of *Goblin Market*. But unlike Eliot, for example, Rossetti was deeply devout. In speaking mostly about *Goblin Market* but also about some other of Rossetti's poetry, I will also explore the milieu that gave rise to such an intriguing poet.

Feb. 12 Aestheticism as Sly Activism in Walter Pater's Works

Walter Pater will probably be the least well-known writer in this class and will at first seem the picture of a non-political aesthete. But a close examination of his major work titled *The Renaissance* will complicate that picture. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, he engages with the past to reflect provocatively on the present. And his writing epitomizes the subversiveness of the call to love “art for art's sake.” Harold Bloom claimed Pater “fathered the future.” Pater's biographer said, “Pater gave modern literature its first act.” What is behind these claims? We will investigate.

Feb. 19 Aestheticism as Overt Activism! William Morris's Vision of Socialism

The ubiquitous boxes of William Morris greeting cards found at all museums bely Morris's emphatic belief in socialist principles. For Morris, equal distribution of wealth included wealth of beauty. All people should be able to live in beautiful, healthy environments. *Art for Everyone's Sake!* For this belief he was scorned by Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx's collaborator, as a "settled, sentimental socialist." I will beg to differ.

Feb. 26 Fallen Women Part Two: Trying to Abolish Prostitution When Powerful Men Don't Really Want To

In 1885, journalist W.T. Stead published a series of sensational articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* about child prostitution and trafficking of young English girls to continental brothels. This is a fascinating story about legislative reform efforts that managed, among (not many) other things, to raise the age of consent from 13 to 16. This real-life muck-raking project gives us a fascinating view into late 19th century English culture and its discontents.

Mar. 5 A *Fin de Siècle* Tragedy: Oscar Wilde

From the picture of insouciance to a caricature of incarcerated despondence, Oscar Wilde first enchanted English audiences with his witty plays. Then he fascinated them as he pursued and lost a brave, risky libel case that landed him in prison for the crime of homosexuality. We will conclude the class with Wilde and what is known as the *Fin de Siècle*. That just means end of a century, but in common use it refers to the end of the 19th century, the Victorian era. The term popularly connotes decadence, nihilism, and hedonism, not activism. Why? We'll explore as the class and the century end.