Modernity and Ethics

Module Code
AREN211S7

Credits/Level
30 credits/ Level 7

Module Convenor
Dr Peter Fifield

Department
English & Humanities

Term and Class Times
Monday 6-7.30

Synopsis
This module examines a number of ethical flashpoints in the recent history of what Martha Nussbaum has called the “ancient quarrel” between literature and philosophy. Working chronologically and thematically, we will trace the development of modern literary aesthetics by examining philosophical and historical arguments around controversial or difficult ideas and texts. The instinct to read for moral guidance and the fear that such guidance might be harmful, is one of the most pervasive and powerful of cultural tensions. It is often the reader’s first instinct, and has been an apology for art; it can be the motivation for critical engagement, as well as legal and cultural suppression. Equally, the wish to assess the protagonists and speakers of literary texts according to moral precepts remains a source of affective depth for many: a source of readerly anxiety, disappointment, satisfaction and joy.

The experimentalism that characterises modern and contemporary literature is marked by the repeated return to moral and ethical arguments. Modern literature has frequently upset its audience by representing things previously withheld, in a way that is shocking and difficult to deal with. These innovations are so diverse, indeed, that it may better to identify modern literature with a capacity to cause anger, frustration or distress!

Learning Aims and Objectives
• To understand a range of literary and philosophical arguments about morality, ethics and literature.
• To learn about specific instances of literary controversy from the late C19th to the C21st, their theoretical and cultural basis, and their historical development.
• To consider the development of modernisms more widely, their forms and themes, why they are important and why they might be distressing.
• To develop a critical appreciation of the tensions between philosophy and literature, the restrictions and the openings that these provide in literary criticism.
• To provide a set of tools in close reading and research that can be used in future work.

Coursework/Assessment

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Basic Requirements</th>
<th>Weighting</th>
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<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>5,000 words</td>
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For primary and secondary reading list please refer to the programme handbook.