English 665
Topics in Cultural Studies

Vanity

Our most famous cultural summing up of vanity—the remark in Ecclesiastes, attributed to “the Preacher,” that “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”—is itself a summing up that claims everything for vanity and makes vanity co-extensive with the world. This course will examine the cultural history and meanings of vanity by considering its appearances in literature, art, language, and mass culture. Discussing vanity not only as conceit or self-regard but as futility, meaninglessness, and materiality, we will also work to understand how vanity has contributed to notions about gender, class, aesthetics, and death. The course will move toward an examination of vanity’s relation to “the world” in thinking about its intersections with a cultural disdain for worldliness and materiality. Doing so, we may also think about the novel’s special generic assertion of its ability to make worlds, wondering if the novel has, then, some particular relation to vanity.

Texts, and tropes examined will likely include works by Bunyan, Alcott, Thackeray, Freud, and James (among others), the figures of the looking glass and the vanity table, the danse macabre tradition, the memento mori, taxidermy art, fashion, and the construction of the social world as a vanity fair. We will also spend some time with works in which critics and theorists have engaged the issues that circulate around vanity.

In addition to one or two short papers, students will be asked to write a final research paper of 20-25 pages, and they will be encouraged to bring the ideas we think about in class to bear on texts in their planned areas of specialization.

The course will fulfill the distribution requirement for a course organized around a concept, issue, or theme, and, in consultation with the professor, may also fulfill the requirement for literature from 1660-1900.

The class will meet on Thursdays from 6-9 in 535 LAAH.

Please feel free to email me or to come by office hours to talk about the class.