

# STUDENT RESEARCH WEEK

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## The Degeneration-Regeneration Conundrum: Paul Gauguin, "Decadent" Symbolism, and the Idea of Regeneration in Fin-De-Siècle France

**Talk:** Duncan R. Parliament  
*Bachelor of Arts: History, MacEwan University*

**Faculty mentor:** Dr. Liz Lawson  
*Fine Art, MacEwan University*

### Abstract

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century European academics, artists, and intellectuals engaged in fevered discussions on the future of Western European civilization. Fears of imminent social and moral degeneration intermingled with the hopeful belief that the seemingly imminent collapse of Europe's old social order would give way to a new, revitalized society. One of the more idiosyncratic participants in this discourse was the notorious French post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin. So concerned was the artist with this question that he famously attempted to find refuge from what he deemed the "old, degenerate races of Europe" (Gauguin, 30-1) amongst the "primitive" people of the French colony of Tahiti. Eschewing mainstream conceptions of the "primitive", Gauguin saw in the Tahitians neither the noble savage nor a harrowing reminder of the fragility of civilization and progress. Instead, Gauguin's view of the "primitive" blended buoyant hopes of regeneration with a decadent, near-apocalyptic anxiety in complicated and occasionally contradictory fashion. A variety of sources in literary theory, history of ideas, history of science, art history, as well as Gauguin's own paintings and writing are referenced and cross-examined in an attempt to contextualize and understand the artist's peculiar and confounding contributions to the often histrionic European discourse on decay and rejuvenation.

### References

Gauguin, P. (1919). *Noa Noa* (O.F. Theis, Trans.). New York: Nicolas L. Brown