

“[The French] speak of *fin-de-siecle* when they ought correctly to say *fin-de-race*.” (2)

Nordau hastily claims in the opening paragraphs that one thing is clear: the end of mankind is near as the end of the century approaches. He goes on to elaborate that the threat of *fin-de-race* is brought upon mankind by the *fin-de-siecle* disposition—a mood marked by a “contempt for traditional views of custom and morality.” (5) Jumping at the causes of this *fin-de-siecle* disposition, Nordau condemns a society overflowing with diseased degenerates, hysterics, impressionable minds, and nearly the entire population of France. But although he focuses mainly on condemning the *fin-de-siecle* public, Nordau uses a scheme of opposing examples to awaken people to the threat of *fin-de-siecle* world annihilation.

At first, Nordau’s *Degeneration* seems to be simple: condemn those who have brought upon the *fin-de-siecle* era. In regards to the degenerate artist, Nordau says that they, “lack harmony, the absence of balance” (24) and that ultimately, no matter how highly-gifted a degenerate can be, he is “corrupt and delude,” (24) offering only a baneful deep influence on society. To the *fin-de-siecle* followers, he categorizes them as “young persons without judgment” for following the crowd, “superficial persons” for following the trend, and “decrepit graybeards” (33) for pretending to be young. Thus, Nordau is quick to discredit anyone associated with the *fin-de-siecle* disposition. Here, he has painted the artists as diseased and the followers as selfish persons in want of trends and youth.

However, in addition to his scathing criticism, Nordau’s oppositions make the public aware of the imminent dangers of *fin-de-siecle*. At the outset of the essay, Nordau contrasts the *fin-de-siecle* mood to world-annihilation (as believed by Christians) at the end of the first century. He begins by depicting the mood at the end of the first century in which the despair of death “proceeded from a feeling of fullness of life and joy of life. Men were aware of throbbing

pulses, they were conscious of unweakened capacity for enjoyment, and found it unmitigatedly appalling to perish together with the world, when there were yet so many flagons to drain and so many lips to kiss.” (2-3) Nordau uses lively phrases like “fullness of life”, “throbbing pulses”, and “conscious of unweakened capacity” to paint awareness and thirst for life. It shows that, as impending doom lingers, the Christians wanted to live because there was still potential in life—exciting things to do like “lips to kiss” and “flagons to drain”—that would be lost. To the contrary of this world annihilation, world-annihilation as threatened by *fin-de-siecle* is filled with degenerates and hysterics with an “incapacity for action” and “defectively operating senses.” (21) Thus, the *fin-de-siecle* public has little care or knowledge of impending doom because they don’t take action and they don’t have the capacity to sense it. Only when opposed to the Christians’ vivacious mood in the outlook of doom does the *fin-de-siecle* public become aware that they have much to live for.

And yet, Nordau isn’t just raising general awareness in the *fin-de-siecle* public. When he shifts to opposition between diseased and healthy behavior he begins to raise individual awareness. Nordau points out that there is one disease and two variations of it—the first being degeneration, and the second, less severe, version of the disease being hysteria. Nordau describes many examples of diseased behavior. Of hysteria, Nordau says “[hysteria] applies for the most part to the multitude who admire these individuals and swear by them...” (25) and “hysterical painters revel in red.” (29) Of degeneration, he mentions that they have an “irresistible desire to accumulate useless trifles.” (27) Upon reading behavioral descriptions like these, one instinctively asks, is that me? is that my friend? do I revel in red? am I stricken by hysteria? or worse yet, am I stricken by degeneration? All paths of interacting with the text in this way lead to categorization of oneself and others as diseased or healthy.

In opposition to diseased behavior, Nordau shows that healthy behavior still has its lunatics. He separates healthy behavior into weak-minded and sane. Of the weak-minded follower, Nordau groups them as “other converts besides the hysterical who have accepted the new belief by way of suggestion.” (33) These are the people who border on the impressionability found in hysterics, and as a result, are fueling the *fin-de-siecle* public with numbers—the important distinction being that they are not diseased. Of the sane men, Nordau exemplifies them as men who “take quiet enjoyment in works of sane talent, and do not feel obliged to shout out their appreciation in the streets, and to threaten with death harmless passers-by who do not join in the jubilations.” (33) Nordau conjures respect with phrases like “not feel obliged” and “[not] threaten with death.” It shows the sane man is independent and confident enough to make his own decisions and not impose them on others. Therefore, Nordau opposes his harsh view of the *fin-de-siecle* public—driven by the weak-minded—with the exemplary sane men. As a result, Nordau pushes the reader to identify himself, and then aspire to the traits worthy of a sane, balanced man.

After raising individual awareness, Nordau’s categorization becomes clear: the degenerates and hysterics are lost to disease, the healthy-sane men are balanced men who appreciate sane art, and the healthy-weak-minded are now lost but can soon be saved from the *fin-de-siecle* disposition.

Nordau then elaborates on the plight of the healthy-weak-minded by showing that the weak-minded are not fully at fault for their actions. Nordau exempts them when he states: “The great majority of the middle and lower classes is naturally not *fin-de-siecle*.” (7) Instead, they are victims: “The [diseased] give the ton to all the snobs, the fools, and the blockheads; the latter make an impression upon the weak and dependent, and intimidate the nervous.” (7) This passage

reveals that healthy but weak-minded men have been intimidated by the trend of the masses. Nordau absolves more responsibility when he says, “weak-minded or mentally-unbalanced persons, coming into contact with a man possessed by delirium, are at once conquered by the strength of his diseased ideas, and are converted to them.” (31) The weak-minded is shown to be a victim because they are “conquered” and “converted” as opposed to being associated with *fin-de-siecle* by their own choosing. However, it is significant to note that Nordau doesn’t remove the weak-minded of all responsibility. With scornful words like “nervous”, “dependent”, and “mentally-unbalanced” he shows that to be respected the weak-minded still have to better themselves

By shifting a part of their responsibility, Nordau shows the weak-minded that they can, ultimately, be cured of the *fin-de-siecle* influence. Of the weak-minded, Nordau states that “By separating them from the source of inspiration, it is often possible to cure them of their transmitted delirium.” (31) Their association with *fin-de-siecle* is “transmitted” and the cure is simply separating themselves from the source. This suggests that the weak-minded need only to take action to remove themselves from the *fin-de-siecle* public.

Lastly, Nordau convinces the weak-minded that they should want to cure themselves of the *fin-de-siecle* disposition. Nordau influences the weak-minded by attacking their pride and more specifically, their ability to take action. He does so by painting the *fin-de-siecle* man as a beggar. Nordau says, “Men look with longing for whatever new things are at hand, without presage whence they will come or what they will be... The poet the musician, is to announce, or divine, or at least suggest in what forms civilization will further be evolved.” (6) The men are “longing” and “without presage,” words that suggest apathy and idleness. But Nordau is most clear when he says that men, in the very end, want someone else to “at least suggest.” The

progression from “announce” to “at least suggest” in the same sentence is a strong transition from a bold order to a begging tone. Thus, Nordau paints the idea that the *fin-de-siecle* public has been reduced to begging—a person who relies on others, taking no initiative to better his own situation.

Nordau’s *Degeneration* isn’t a clear solution. Instead, Nordau stops short of leading weak-minded persons directly out of the *fin-de-siecle* trend. Instead, he condemns the *fin-de-siecle* public, he identifies the victims—the weak-minded and curable—in that *fin-de-siecle* public, he shows them that they can and should cure themselves, and most importantly but more subtly, he shows exemplary oppositions—mainly in healthy behaviors of the sane man—to the people he condemns. He isn’t announcing a solution to beggars, he is compelling the beggars to act now that he has shown them the sane man they can aspire to; an action that alone redeems a man from an incompetent, weak-minded, *fin-de-siecle* follower who has long lost the ability to take action.

Works Cited

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