

**Department of English and Writing Studies  
Western University**

English 9124A: **Ugly Feelings, Bad Behaviour: Notable American Women**

Fall 2015: Tuesdays, 12:30-3:30  
Lawson Hall 2210

Instructor: Dr. Steven Bruhm, [sbruhm2@uwo.ca](mailto:sbruhm2@uwo.ca)  
Office: A&H 2G19, ext. 85738  
Office Hours: Weds 2-4 or by appointment



**Course Description:**

American women's fiction since the 1950s is most often read as an analysis of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and women's responses to these concerns. Such reading practices usually assume a coherent set of diagnoses and possible political strategies for redress. But there is another thread of women's writing in America, one whose take on moral clarity and political agency is at best opaque. Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson, Lorrie Moore, Mary Gaitskill, and Lionel Shriver: all of these women present us with a palette of "negative affects" that gesture to social conditions in the contemporary US but that refuse the redemptive or reparative impulses of feminist intervention. We will read these women alongside contemporary affect theorists to consider such insalubrious emotions as *schadenfreude*, irritation, cruel optimism (after Berlant), *zaniness* (after Ngai), cynicism, and misanthropy. Be prepared, then, to commune with some very mean people.

**Required Texts:**

Flannery O'Connor: *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*

Shirley Jackson: *The Haunting of Hill House* and selected short stories (available in Leanne's office)

Lorrie Moore: *Anagrams* and *Like Life*

Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behavior* and *Because They Wanted To*

Lionel Shriver: *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, *Sex, or The Unbearable*

**Theoretical Texts** (available in Leanne's office):

Adam Phillips, from *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*

Robert Caserio et al, "Forum: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 819-28

John Portman, from *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*

Sianne Ngai, from *Ugly Feelings* and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*

Lauren Berlant, from *Cruel Optimism*

Laura Kipnis, from *Against Love: A Polemic*

Photo Credit: Maggie Gyllenhaal from Steven Shainberg, dir., *Secretary* (2002)

## Weekly Reading Schedule:

September	15	Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" (from <i>A Good Man</i> ); Mary Gaitskill, "Something Nice" (from <i>Bad Behavior</i> ); Adam Phillips, "On Not Getting It" (pp. 34-80 from <i>Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life</i> ); Robert Caserio, "Forum: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory"
	22	Flannery O'Connor, <i>A Good Man is Hard to Find</i> ; John Portmann, "Introduction: The Sometimes Sweet Suffering of Others," "When Pretty Bad Things Happen to Other People" (pp. xi-xxi, 1-44, 207-10 from <i>When Bad Things Happen to Other People</i> )
	29	O'Connor, <i>Everything That Rises Must Converge</i> ; Sianne Ngai, "Introduction" (pp. 1-37, 357-61 from <i>Ugly Feelings</i> )
October	6	Shirley Jackson, <i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>
	13	Shirley Jackson, selected short stories; Phillips, "On Frustration" (pp. 1-33 from <i>Missing Out</i> )
	20	Lorrie Moore, <i>Like Life</i>
	27	Sianne Ngai, "The Zany Science" (pp.174-232, 295-313 from <i>Our Aesthetic Categories</i> ); Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism" (pp. 23-50, 271-74 from <i>Cruel Optimism</i> )
November	3	Lorrie Moore, <i>Anagrams</i>
	10	Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, "Preface," "Sex Without Optimism," and "What Survives" (pp. vi-xvii, 1-61 from <i>Sex, or The Unbearable</i> ); Laura Kipnis, "Domestic Gulags" (pp. 52-104 from <i>Against Love: A Polemic</i> )
	17	Mary Gaitskill, <i>Bad Behavior</i>
	24	Mary Gaitskill, <i>Because They Wanted To</i>
Dec	1	Lionel Shriver, <i>We Need to Talk About Kevin</i>
	8	Catch-up and Conclusion

## Evaluation Scheme:

In-class teaching (date to be determined): 20%

- 10-15 minutes in which you present and flesh out a critical idea with close reference to the text in question;
- your continued presence in leading and contributing to the discussion in the remaining time devoted to your chosen story or theme (probably 1.5 hours)

Follow-up short paper (due one week after the in-class teaching stint): 20%

- 2500-3000 words
- not just a write-up of your presentation but a (re)statement of your critical project following class discussion and further thinking

Term Paper (due 8 December 2015): 50%

- 5000-6000 words
- open topic, with the following strictures:

- must be significantly different from the short paper
- must engage with the theory read for the course
- NB: students whose teaching stints and short essays fall within the last 4 weeks of class should speak to me about earlier due dates for long essays. You really don't want all the major writing for the course to fall upon you at once.

Class Participation: 10%

- Please see “*Thinking*” description in **Evaluation Key** below
- Around the middle of the term I will provide each of you with a tentative grade on your participation to date. This grade will not factor into your actual final grade but will be an indication to you of the quality and quantity of your participation to date.

### **Evaluation Key:**

*Thinking* (as per class participation grade):

As this is a graduate seminar meeting only once a week, your attendance is mandatory and your participation before and during the seminar is presupposed. You are expected in each class to contribute to the discussion and to be able to draw on both primary and secondary texts to further the conversation. In so participating, you must observe the following protocols of collegiality – that is, “good behavior,” regardless of what you may be feeling:

- Full attention to the conversation at hand. Surprising as it may seem (and embarrassing as it is to say), some students in recent years have devoted their class time to Facebook, emailing, games, or things extraneous to the course. I won't have it. Such behavior, if detected, will result in a forfeiting of the participation grade and, if repeated, removal from the course. Technology may of course be used to contribute to the intellectual pursuits of the class (note-taking, on-line research, etc.) but it will not replace it.
- Collegial treatment of one's colleagues. This does not mean agreeing with or praising everything someone says, but rather conversing respectfully and generously, even in one's disagreements. I will emphasize throughout the course that we attend to what the literature, theory, and discussions are saying, rather than what they are not; by this I mean I want us to focus *not* on the ways texts *do not speak* to certain issues (the ubiquitous “race, class, and gender” trinity that I note in the course description) but on what texts and colleagues *do* speak to, which I hope to be the strange aesthetic functions of negative affect. Bluntly put, please do not call your fellow students to account for not speaking directly to your political concerns.

*Teaching* (as per in-class seminar):

As graduate students and teaching assistants, you are continually honing your skills (as is your instructor) on the effective presentation of ideas that are germane to a literary text, the overall thrust of the syllabus, and the diversity of learning styles in the people you are teaching. Teaching is, among other things, an exercise in understanding what your participants know already, what they need to be informed of, and how they can be best

challenged. It is also, in an English course, an exercise in being responsible and fair to the significations of the text, even if (or especially when) one is reading against the grain of that text. Your in-class seminar, then, should take us directly to a problem as posed by the text (literary or theoretical), one with which all class members can engage. To that end,

- please avoid building your seminar around texts that your fellow students have not read and cannot directly engage with. You can certainly refer to external research, but you should do so judiciously and in a “teacherly” way, remembering that the people you are teaching will probably not know the work to which you are referring. Don’t dazzle us with what you’ve read that we haven’t.
- please ensure that your teaching incorporates a close, focused reading of a short section of the text – about one paragraph’s worth. The primary texts for this course have been chosen for the degree to which their authors deploy a slippery and suggestive writing style, and good teaching requires that you attend to that style. Grand claims are often useful but only if they can be located in particular evidence.

*Writing* (as per short and long essays):

As with teaching, scholarly writing means identifying the audience who will receive and engage with your work. In the immediate context that audience is me, but you should be writing for the scholarly community more generally (and this is where your external research plays a huge role). As part of the apprenticeship quality of any graduate course, I am asking you to do two major pieces of writing – a seminar paper and a major term paper – that should be modeled on the professional demands of the conference paper and article respectively. In both genres, one must write with economy and with an attention to the conventions of presentation; one must say something new about a text or an issue while acknowledging the previous work in the field; and one must structure one’s writing to carry the argument across the assigned word count. Final products must be free of errors typographical, grammatical, or citational; quote cleanly and felicitously. Ideally, I would love to have you leave this course with an 8-10 page paper you could deliver at a conference and a 15-20 page paper you could send out for publication. Take yourself and your work seriously enough to hold these goals as realistic and desirable.

### **Other Important Matters:**

In all matters of teaching and research, please note the university’s **Statement on Academic Offences**: “Members of the University Community accept a commitment to maintain and uphold the purposes of the University and, in particular, its standards of scholarship. It follows, therefore, that acts of a nature that prejudice the academic standards of the University are offences subject to discipline. Any form of academic dishonesty that undermines the evaluation process [] also undermines the integrity of the University’s degrees. The University will take all appropriate measures to promote academic integrity and deal appropriately with scholastic offences.”

For a complete discussion of this matter, see the Web page, “Scholastic Discipline for Graduate Students,” issued 06/2011, here:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

### **Graduate Course Health and Wellness:**

As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on-campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. For example, to support physical activity, all students, as part of their registration, receive membership in Western's Campus Recreation Centre. Numerous cultural events are offered throughout the year. For example, please check out the Faculty of Music web page <http://www.music.uwo.ca/>, and our own McIntosh Gallery <http://www.mcintoshgallery.ca/>. Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at <http://www.health.uwo.ca/>. Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at [http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental\\_health/resources.html](http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html).

### **And finally, fun stuff:**

A number of the texts on this course have been made into films: Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" (as well as her first novel, *Wise Blood*, which we aren't reading), Mary Gaitskill's "Secretary," and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. I'm sure no one would object to a film night where one or more of these films were screened. Just saying.

