

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

English 9124A: **Ugly Feelings, Bad Behaviour: Notable American Women**
Fall 2017: Tuesdays, 12:30-3:30
Lawson Hall 2205

Instructor: Dr. Steven Bruhm, sbruhm2@uwo.ca
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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 (available in the Bookstore):

Flannery O'Connor: *Collected Works*
Shirley Jackson: *The Haunting of Hill House* and selected short stories (available on Owl)
Lorrie Moore: *Anagrams* and *Like Life*, plus two stories from *Self-Help* (available on Owl)
Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behavior* and *Because They Wanted To*
Lynne Ramsay (dir.), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Note: due to the newly introduced Fall reading week, we don't have time to read Shriver's actual novel. The film will have to suffice, although do read the novel sometime when you have time!)

Theoretical Texts (available on Owl):

Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling"
Adam Phillips, from *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*
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*
Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, from *Sex, or The Unbearable*

Image Credit: Steven Shainberg, dir., *Secretary* (2002)

Weekly Reading Schedule:

September	12	Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling”; Adam Phillips, “On Not Getting It” (pp. 34-80 from <i>Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life</i>); Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People” (from <i>A Good Man</i>)
	19	O’Connor, <i>A Good Man is Hard to Find</i> (excluding “The River,” “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” “The Artificial Nigger”); “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”; 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>)
	26	O’Connor, <i>Everything That Rises Must Converge</i> (excluding “Greenleaf,” “Parker’s Back,” “Judgment Day”); Sianne Ngai, “Introduction” (pp. 1-37, 357-61 from <i>Ugly Feelings</i>)
October	3	Shirley Jackson, <i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>
	10	READING WEEK: NO CLASS
	17	Jackson, short stories; Adam Phillips, “On Frustration” (pp. 1-33 from <i>Missing Out</i>)
	24	Lorrie Moore, <i>Like Life</i>
	31	Lorrie Moore, “How” and “How to Become a Writer” from <i>Self-Help</i> ; 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	7	Moore, <i>Anagrams</i>
	14	Mary Gaitskill, “Secretary”; Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, “Preface,” “Sex Without Optimism,” (pp. vi-xvii, xxx from <i>Sex, or The Unbearable</i>)
	21	Gaitskill, <i>Bad Behavior</i>
	28	Gaitskill, <i>Because They Wanted To</i>
Dec	5	Lynne Ramsay, <i>We Need to Talk About Kevin</i> (from Lionel Shriver’s novel)

Evaluation Scheme:

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

- 15-20 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 15 December 2017): 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

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 out your fellow students for not speaking directly to your own political concerns.

Teaching (as per in-class seminar):

The purpose of the in-class teaching exercise is to have you engage your colleagues in thinking about a particular ugly feeling, negative affect, or non-salvable emotional current. To that end, I want you to spend your 15 to 20 minutes identifying that affect, explaining or defining what critical, relational, or political problems it offers, and locating it in one of the stories on the syllabus for that day. I would encourage you to use the theoretical arsenal that we are reading in the course, but not to rely on it to such a degree that the theorist does all your thinking for you. Also, if an earlier seminar has already exhausted what can be said about an affect, you should avoid returning to that affect; choose something else, or be prepared to take the discussion in a very different direction.

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 your professor, 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

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.



Image credit: Lynne Ramsay, dir. *We Need to Talk About Kevin*