Bad Feelings

Negative Affect in Contemporary Literature

Dr Alexandra Kingston-Reese
Office D/J/217B
alexandra.kingston-reese@york.ac.uk

What does it mean to feel envious? To feel panic, to feel afraid, ashamed, or hopeless? To be in the throes of agony? Have you ever felt this way? Has reading ever made you feel this way? Since the “affective turn” at the beginning of the 21st century, cultural studies has turned to more than just the many mutations of positive feelings, like happiness, to consider how collective feelings like shame, panic, envy, fear, anger, disgust, loneliness, sadness, and hopelessness penetrate literary works.

In this module, we will consider the many overlapping biopolitical constellations of negative affect with respect to a range of literary works (poetry, fiction, and memoir) concerned with feeling badly in contemporary society—from ecosickness, to shame, anger, disgust, agony, panic, envy, fear, and unhappiness.

By reading works by prominent contemporary writers like Paul Beatty, Maggie Nelson, and Hanya Yanigahara, and contemporary affect theorists like Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed, Leo Bersani, Lauren Berlant, and Eve Sedgwick, we will examine the structures and unstructures of affect theory by considering how vectors of inequality—gender, race, sexuality—demand fictional explication of negative affects and how the invocation of particular affects might open up or foreclose particular kinds of interpretation.

Along these lines, a core aspect of this module is the recent explosion of affective criticism—imbuing critical works with personal, emotional responses to texts. Please note that while some of these texts may be hard going depending on your own personal experiences, my hope is that this module will allow us an opportunity to discuss how literature draws out our own feelings as we read. Together, we will grapple with the question: what are texts’ manifold feelings making you feel as you read?

Books to buy (any copy is fine)


**Preliminary preparation**

Please read the core texts and make a start on each week’s required critical reading. Note that our novel in Week 7 is very long; while its length is why it falls after the Reading Week, you should make a start on this as soon as you can.

Aside from reading the core texts, you might find it helpful to start researching our key terms—affect, emotion, feeling—and reflect on your own thinking around our key affects—shame, anger, disgust, agony, panic, envy, fear, unhappiness, and happiness. While the subject matter may sound serious, the aim is to approach the module with a touch of humour. The background reading below should help provide a start.

**Background Reading**


Module outline

You’ll note that each week is organised around a singular affect and that sometimes we will spend more than one week on one or a collection of interrelated affects. While each primary text does speak to the specific affect we will discuss that week (e.g. Chee’s Edinburgh and shame), these texts draw a more complex affective picture than that singular, linear relationship might suggest. The weekly focus on one or more affects then is designed to help us delve deep into the recent writing about specific affects, while the texts will provide us a way of thinking through the relationship between a range of bad feelings.

Week 2  An Ecosickness: What is Affect?

Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, #Misanthropocene: 24 Theses (2014):
https://communeeditions.com/misanthropocene/


Week 3  Shame I


https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/14/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson/

See below for Suggested Readings for Weeks 3 & 4
Week 4  
Shame II


**Required:**


**Suggested:**


Week 5  
Anger & Disgust


**Required:**


**Suggested:**


**Week 6**  **Reading Week**

**Week 7**  **Agony & Overwhelm**


**Required:**


**Suggested:**


**Week 8**  **Panic-Envy-Fear I**


**Required:**


See below for Suggested Readings for Weeks 8 & 9
Week 9  Panic-Envy-Fear II


Suggested Readings for Weeks 8 & 9:


*The Good Fight* Season 2. HBO TV Series. 13 Episodes.
**Week 10**  
**My Year of Unhappiness**


**Required:**


**Suggested:**


