

Teacher: Adam Jernigan
Semester: Winter 2006
Contact: adamj@uchicago.edu

Failures of Feeling: Anaesthetics in 20th-Century America

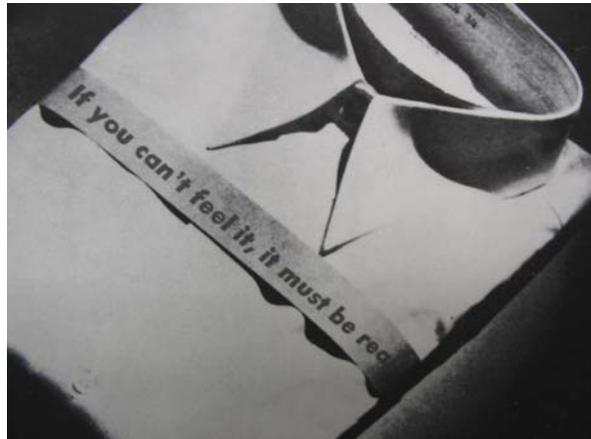
Focus and Purpose

This course will survey the work that emotions do in 20th-century American fiction. We will begin by examining just how it is that people are “moved” in and by aesthetic texts: how they are moved emotionally, and how they are moved to action. From there we will survey some of the aberrations that historians, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts have diagnosed as endemic to emotional experience in the 20th century: for example, the placidity that goes by the name of “cool” (Stearns), the temporal lag called “*Nachtraglichkeit*” (Freud), and the failures of response dubbed “cultural anesthesia” (Buck-Morss, Feldman) and “enlightened false consciousness” (Sloterdijk).

Our literary readings will consist of one novel from each decade in the 20th century. At some point in each of these novels, we will encounter characters who remain unmoved by the emotions of other characters. We will encounter still other characters

who find themselves incapable of experiencing their *own* affects. How do these novels account for the causes of such failure? How might each novel constitute a theory about the relations mind and body, memory and fantasy, etc.?

Finally, how are the emotional failures of characters intended to affect readers? Here, the question of genre becomes paramount. If tragedy and sentimentality are the classical genres of emotionality, we will be exploring genres that often developed in reaction to them: the romance of consciousness, the semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman*, the journalism of war and catastrophe. How have the practitioners of these genres taken up the project of shaping the affective faculties – and motivating the agency – of readers? If there is a type who, as philosophers since Rousseau have observed, “weeps at a tragedy yet has never had any pity for the suffering,” how do these writers go about bridging the gap between the stage – or the page – and the street?



Format and Requirements

The course will consist primarily of discussion. As described below, you will be responsible for semi-weekly assignments (critical-inquisitive responses, due Sunday evenings, 1 solid paragraph), 1 mid-semester assignment (in-class presentation, 10 minutes), and 1 end-of-semester assignment (final paper, due March 14, 10-12 pages).

Semi-Weekly Assignments: Each week you will be expected to read and ruminate over the assigned materials, to post a **critical-inquisitive response** on the Communications section of Blackboard by noon on Monday, and to reflect on the responses of your colleagues before Tuesday's class. Blackboard can be accessed at the following address: <http://chalk.uchicago.edu> The "critical-inquisitive response" should take the form of a single paragraph, as follows: the first part (3-4 sentences) should offer a *critical analysis* of a particular passage or issue in the primary text, and the second part (2-3 sentences) should pose some *questions* which put pressure on that argument, introduce complications to it, etc. You are encouraged to use these responses as an opportunity to experiment with various rhetorical moves, theoretical modes, etc. For those of you who may be new to this genre, I will join you in posting a sample critical-inquisitive response to Blackboard on the first Sunday. The weekly assignments will comprise 25% of your grade.

Mid-Semester Assignment: Each student will be expected to prepare an **in-class presentation** on a single literary or theoretical text. You are free to present on an issue of your choosing, but it should be one that is both raised by the text and somehow related to the theme of feelings. You may use your presentation to broach an issue that has yet to be addressed in discussion; or you may use it to revisit conceptual strands already threaded into our weave of discussions, presentations, and/or critical-inquisitive responses. Last but not least, your presentation should include a couple of *questions* that can be the kindling for class discussion. The in-class presentation, when combined with general class participation, will comprise 25% of your grade.

End-of-Semester Assignment: For your **final paper** you will be free to write on a topic of your own choosing, but please meet with me during office hours to discuss a prospective topic no later than week 7. The final paper will comprise 50% of your grade.

Required Texts

Cather, Willa: *The Professor's House* ('25)

West, Nathanael: *Miss Lonelyhearts* ('33)

Wright, Richard: *Native Son* ('40)

Baldwin, James: *Giovanni's Room* ('55)

Plath, Sylvia: *The Bell Jar* ('63)
Jones, Gayle: *CorRegidora* ('75)
Allison, Dorothy: *Bastard Out of Carolina* ('92)
Ware, Chris: *Jimmy Corrigan* ('00)

Schedule

Week 1: Feeling Privilege: Compassion and Guilt in 20th Century America

- Agee, James: "America, Look At Your Shame!" (in *James Agee Rediscovered*)
- Williams, Patricia: "Gilded Lilies and Liberal Guilt" (in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*)

Week 2: Melancholy Modernism

- Cather, Willa: *The Professor's House*
- Boym, Svetlana: "The Angel of History: Nostalgia and Modernity" (in *The Future of Nostalgia*)

Week 3: Compassion & Cynicism

- West, Nathanael: *Miss Lonelyhearts*
- Sloterdijk, Peter: "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness" (in *Critique of Cynical Reason*)

Week 4: Latent Feelings: Social Suffering &/or Trauma?

- Wright, Richard: Book One of *Native Son*
- Wright, Richard: "How 'Bigger' Was Born" (in *Native Son*)
- Wacquant, Loic: "Inside 'The Zone'" (in *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*)

Week 5: The Anti-Sentimental Novel?

- Baldwin, James: "Everybody's Protest Novel" (in *Notes of a Native Son*)
- Baldwin, James: *Giovanni's Room*

Week 6: Feeling in a Commercialized World

- Plath, Sylvia: *The Bell Jar*
- Plath, Sylvia: Pages 541-542 from *The Unabridged Journals*
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell: "Exploring the Managed Heart" (in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*)

Week 7: Historical Feelings, Feeling History: Remembering, Retelling, Reliving

- Jones, Gayle: *CorRegidora*
- Michaels, Walter Benn: "Remembering" (in *The Shape of the Signifier*)

Week 8: Traumatic Masculinity: Courage, Cowardice, & Intensity Junkies

- Cimino, Michael: *The Deerhunter* (screening TBA)
- Caruth, Cathy: "Trauma and Experience: Introduction" (in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*)
- Silverman, Kaja: ~first 15 pages of "Trauma and Male Subjectivity" (in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*)

Week 9: Feeling Underprivileged

- Allison, Dorothy: *Bastard Out of Carolina*
- Allison, Dorothy: "A Question of Class" (in *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature*)

Week 10: Traumix

- Ware, Chris: selections from *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid On Earth*

Week 11: Re-Read, Re-Read!! Re-Write, Re-Write!!

A well-argued paper is one that is both *well-supported* (by concrete textual details – "re-read"!) and *well-organized* (as a series of sub-arguments which culminate in a compelling thesis – "re-write"!)...

FINAL PAPERS DUE BY NOON ON TUESDAY OF WEEK 11. PLEASE DELIVER THEM TO MY BOX IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT (4TH FLOOR OF WALKER HALL)

