

Topics in American Literature: Emotion and American Literature

ENGL 680 | Section A | Eisenhower Hall 219 | MWF 9:30 | Fall 2005

Course Website: www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/engl680/

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Office Hours: M & F 10:30-11:20, Thu 9:00-10:20, plus many more by appointment

Course Description

Words have the power to move readers, make them sad, angry, delighted, interested, frightened, ashamed, disgusted, and surprised. Writers write with the desire to stimulate readers' emotions, and readers read to experience an affective charge. Numerous theorists from Plato and Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum and Philip Fisher have made feeling the center of their speculations about literature. Yet emotion remains a subject that often receives surprisingly little attention within academic programs in literature.

Why is that? Is it a good thing or bad thing? Why do so many professors ignore or slight what might be the most important aspect of reading literature, its emotional impact on readers? Are things changing? Could emotion become its own area within literary studies? What place does emotion have in other approaches to literature?



Martha Nussbaum

Using American writing from the colonial era to the present as examples and case studies, this course explores the pivotal, perhaps central role of emotion in literature. We will study the representation of emotion in literary texts and the emotional impact of literary texts on readers. We will also explore the relationship between American literature and famous theories of emotion from Aristotle to Darwin to the contemporary theories of feminists and neurobiologists.

Course Goals and Guiding Questions

The primary aims of the course are to develop ways to think about, to study, to discuss, and to write about the relationship of emotion to literature and literary study. Because "literature and emotion" is not a well-defined or well-established part of university curricula, this course is necessarily experimental. We will survey and absorb some of the most famous statements on literature and affect, but our main goal will be to discover our own ways to approach this topic.



Julia Kristeva

Thus, class sessions should be more like a lab than a recitation; class discussions should be opportunities to try out new ideas, figure things out, and examine unexplored areas of feeling, thinking, and learning.

Because the study of emotion is interdisciplinary, the range of issues we will explore could be varied and extensive at times. Don't be scared or annoyed by this; be fearless and excited about it. Our primary purpose will always be to invent ways of analyzing, thinking about, talking about, and writing about the connection between literature and emotion. A set of guiding questions should help us get started and remain focused.

- In what ways does a particular theory of emotion enhance our understanding of a literary text? What concepts about emotion might provide insights about a literary text, its production, or its reception?
- In what ways does a certain text illustrate or demonstrate a particular theory of or idea about emotion? What does a text teach us about emotion?
- How does the text articulate ideas or theories about emotion? Why?
- How does the text represent emotion? Why?
- What emotional reaction does a text intend to provoke? Why is the text (or author) attempting to arouse such as affective response? What would be interesting or significant about such an intention? How do we know what emotional reaction is intended?
- In what ways do readers and audiences respond affectively to literary texts? In what ways are these emotional responses significant or interesting? What would these responses tell us about emotions, readers, texts, or the historical and cultural contexts of those readers?

Other important issues include:

- role of affectively powerful words in politics and ideology; patriotism and civic emotions
- objects that stir emotional responses (orphans, animals, monsters, ghosts, criminals, etc.)
- function of emotion in the media and popular culture
- place of emotion in professional literary study; emotion as its own field of study in the humanities; methods for studying emotion and literature
- aesthetics of emotion; literary style, form and emotion
- the body, brain, and emotion
- crowds, contagions, panics, and affective epidemics
- gender and emotion; sexuality and desire
- history of emotions; literary periods
- psychological treatment of emotions; literary depiction of subjectivity, including affects
- value of *your* own emotional response to a text; gut reactions; reader response

Course Requirements and Course Policies

Reading. The most important work in this course is the careful, patient, and thorough reading of the assigned texts. You will need to finish the assigned readings by the time indicated on the reading schedule. I encourage you to keep a reading journal or take reading notes on each text.

Attendance and Participation. In addition to careful reading, I expect active participation and good attendance from everyone. As a "lab," some of the most significant discoveries will happen during class sessions, and there is no way to make up such a learning experience.

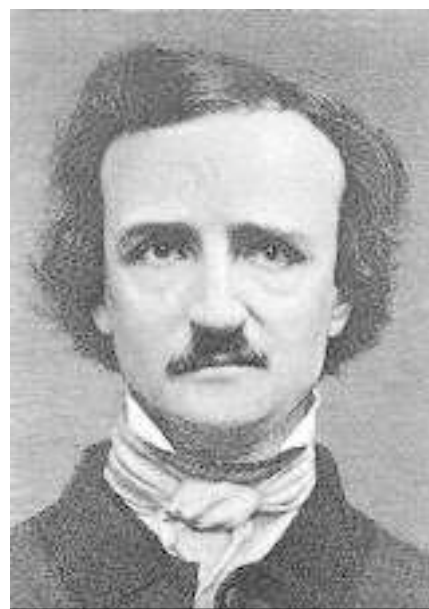
Because students have different ways of actively contributing to the class, I try to be flexible and open-minded about how I evaluate participation. In general, however, I will generously reward students who contribute week after week to the class discussions with intelligent, thought-provoking comments that demonstrate careful reading of the texts and thoughtful attention to what others have said. Students who skip a lot of class, don't listen to what others say, and never say anything should expect a lower grade for participation.

Irregular attendance will hurt your grade; good attendance and active participation in class discussions will improve your grade. To be specific, students who miss no class or only one class will be poised to earn maximum credit for attendance. Students who miss two weeks of class or six class sessions will receive zero points for attendance and participation (10% of the grade). Students who miss more than three weeks of class (ten or more classes) automatically fail.

Papers and Exams. The writing in our course will consist of two major essays and several informal and in-class writing assignments. I will also ask you to take part in a group project (either a turn at teaching the class or a jointly-compiled annotated bibliography) and to take a midterm and a comprehensive final examination. During the semester, I will distribute handouts describing these assignments in more detail.

Late Papers. I don't usually accept late papers, but in certain, limited circumstances I will accept papers after the due date. Assignments will lose a letter grade for every class period that they are late. I collect papers at the beginning of class on the due date.

Grades. When I figure final grades, I will consider all of your class work: attendance, participation, group project, in-class assignments, longer writing assignments, and the two exams. The only assignments that will receive individual letter grades, however, are the exams and the final drafts of the two major essays. In determining final grades, each course requirement will carry the following relative weight:



Edgar Allan Poe

- Essay 1 20%
- Midterm Exam 10%
- Essay 2 30 %
- Final Exam 20%
- Group Project 10%
- Attendance, Participation, and In-Class Assignments 10%

The Honor Code. Kansas State University has an Honor Code, which stipulates that you should do all your academic work at the university individually. Do not collaborate on any academic work unless specifically approved by your instructor. On all of your assignments, exams, and other course work, the following pledge is implied, whether or not it is explicitly stated: "On my honor, as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work."

Perhaps the most serious violation of the Honor Code in an English course is plagiarism—taking or copying someone else's words or ideas as if they were your own. Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses and may be punished by failure on the exam, paper, or project; the truly gnarly XF grade for the course; and/or expulsion from the university

Complete copies of the academic dishonesty policy are available in the Office of Student Activities and Services in the Union, or you may visit the Honor System web page at www.ksu.edu/honor.

Course Listserv. During the first couple weeks of class, I will subscribe each member of the class by your K-State e-mail address/eID to an ENGL 680 listserv. I will then provide everyone with the listname.

The purpose of this listserv is to try out ideas, to continue discussions and problem solving begun in class, and to facilitate communication among class participants outside of class. Posting to this listserv is not required; it is here strictly for our convenience. The only rule is this: all postings to the list should be related to our class in some way or another.



Toni Morrison

If you have technical questions about using a listserv, you might want to check out K-State's listserv information page www.ksu.edu/cns/services/listserv or contact the Help Desk: helpdesk@k-state.edu or 532-7722.

Students with Disabilities. If you need special accommodation in this course for a learning or physical disability, please contact Disabled Student Services in Holton Hall, Room 202 (532-6441), so that they may assist you and me in making those arrangements.

Course Texts

The following books are available at the K-State Union Bookstore and Varney's Bookstore in Aggieville. All seven of these texts are required, and all are paperbacks.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*. Norton.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Norton.

Hollander, John, ed. *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*. Library of America.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper & Row.

Williams, Tennessee. *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays*. New Directions.

Morrison, Toni. *Love*. Vintage.

Hahn, Susan. *Self/Pity*. Triquarterly.

Note: You will also be doing reading from a large coursepack with texts from various theories of emotion from Plato to the present. It is available now at the Arts and Sciences Copy Center in Eisenhower Hall and costs about \$23

Introductory Reading Schedule

Aug 24 W Silvan Tomkins, "Surprise-Startle" (in coursepack [CP])
 William K. Wimsatt, Jr. & Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy" (CP)

Aug 26 F Joseph LeDoux, from *The Emotional Brain* (CP)
 Antonio R. Damasio, from *The Feeling of What Happens* (CP)

Introductory Writing Assignment

Write a brief autobiographical account of an emotional reading experience. Describe the situation or setting, the reading material, and the emotions you experienced. The account should provide some insight into why the specific text produced the emotional response that it did, but you are not required to write about a certain kind of reading (it could be anything written, literary or not-so-literary) or any particular emotion (it could be weeping, but it could also be curiosity, amusement, revulsion, or any response you would consider emotional).

Length: one to two (typed, double-spaced) pages

Due Date: Wednesday, August 24