ANG 6720: Women’s Writing

Topic for Winter Semester 2018:

Bad Behavior, Negative Affects: Postwar and Contemporary Fiction

Eric Savoy  
(eric.savoy@umontreal.ca)

Course Description:

Since the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, academic readings of women’s fiction have analyzed the oppressive matrix of gender, sexuality, race, and class, as well as women writers’ constructive responses regarding community, solidarity, and political solutions. Such reading practices are affirmative: they share an optimistic faith in the righteous American struggle for a more genuine democracy.

But there is another thread that runs through American women’s writing of this period – one whose perspective on moral clarity and political agency is at best opaque. Flannery O’Connor and Shirley Jackson, in the 1950s, and Mary Gaitskill and Lorrie Moore, in our own time, present us with negative affects, destructive impulses, and bad behavior: these subjects arise from social conditions in the contemporary US, but the writers emphatically refuse the redemptive, reparative, and celebratory impulses of feminist intervention.

We shall read these writers alongside, and through, contemporary affect theorists, most of which is inflected through Queer Theory. We shall consider the literary representation of the negative: schadenfreude, irritation, contempt, violence, cynicism, and the cruelty of American optimism.

Be prepared to meet some very nasty people.

Literary Texts:

We shall read the following fictions – a mixture of novels and short stories -- in the following order. Please try to obtain the editions prescribed here. Sufficient copies are on order at Paragraphe Bookstore (2220 McGill College Ave.). Students are expected to read the actual books – not Kindle or other electronic versions – and to bring them to class. Much of our work will involve close reading.

Flannery O’Connor, A Good Man is Hard to Find. Harcourt.
Flannery O’Connor, « Everything that Rises Must Converge “ (on StudiUM)
Shirley Jackson, short stories (on StudiUM).
Lorrie Moore, Like Life. Vintage.
Lorrie Moore, Anagrams. Vintage.
Mary Gaitskill, Bad Behavior. Simon & Schuster.
Mary Gaitskill, Because They Wanted To. Simon & Schuster.
Theory Texts:

All of the theory readings are posted on StudiUM.

Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling”
Adam Phillips, from Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life
John Portman, When Bad Things Happen to Other People
Sianne Ngai, from Ugly Feelings and Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting
Lauren Berlant, from Cruel Optimism
Sigmund Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism”
Lee Edelman, from No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive
Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, from Sex, or the Unbearable

Evaluation:

In-class teaching (date to be determined): 20%
- 15 to 20 minutes in which you present a critical idea with reference to the text in question
- your continued presence and participation in the remaining time devoted to your chosen story or theme

Follow-up short paper (due one week after the in-class teaching): 20%
- about 2500 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 two weeks after the final class): 50%
- about 5000 words
- open topic, with the following strictures
  - this essay must be significantly different than the short essay
  - it must engage with the theory read for the course
- Students whose teaching and short essays fall within the last four weeks of class should speak to me about earlier due dates for the long essays. You do not want all the writing of the course to fall upon you at once.

Class Participation: 10%
As this is a graduate seminar meeting only once a week, your attendance is mandatory and your preparation before and participation during the seminar are presupposed. You are expected in each class to contribute to the discussion and to be able to draw on both literary and theoretical texts to further the conversation.

NOTE: A Schedule of Readings and Class Topics will be posted before the beginning of the Winter Semester. We shall spend the first class, January 10, discussing the stories in A Good Man is Hard to Find (with special emphasis on ‘Good Country People’ in that collection), along with Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling” and Adam Phillips, “On Not Getting It” (from Missing Out), both on StudiUM.
NOTE: Selon la politique de la langue française à l’Université de Montréal, les étudiant·es (sauf les étudiant·es inscrit·es aux cycles supérieures en Études anglaises) ont le droit de prononcer leurs exposés et de rédiger leurs travaux en français.