EN333 Poetry and Emotion
A brief guide

The purpose of this module is to provide a space for thinking about how and why individual poems express emotion. As readers, we can do this by thinking and writing about:

1. the emotional content of poetry, such as joy, grief, love, anger, sadness, hate, horror
2. the ways in which poems fall into specific traditions of emotion, such as sensibility, benevolence, virtue, sympathy, sentimentality, melancholy, affective fallacy, affect
3. the ways in which individual poets use poetry to express their own emotions, or those of a narrator
4. the different methods individual poets employ to provoke or achieve an emotional response in the reader

What does emotion mean?

‘Emotion’ derives from the Latin emovere, which means ‘to move’ or ‘move out’. The word ‘feeling’ refers to any subjective reaction or state, whereas the word ‘emotion’ describes the process of emitting these feelings. When people ‘emote’ they portray or express a feeling. Poems themselves (obviously) don’t feel, but they do emote. As the critic Barbara Hardy argues The Advantage of Lyric (1977):

‘The advantage of lyric in itself is its concentrated and patterned expression of feeling. This advantage is negatively definable: the lyric does not provide an explanation, judgement or narrative; what it does provide is feeling, alone, and without histories or characters’

And here’s Leo Tolstoy, writing in What is Art (1960):

‘“What is art?” What a question! “Art is [that by which] the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt [. . . ] To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.’

Historical definitions of emotion

‘Emotion’ is initially used in the sixteenth century to describe both a physical feeling of being stirred or moved, and also a political feeling of being socially agitated into action. The word then develops in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to refer more specifically to disturbances in the mind caused by excitement or passion (as distinguished from disturbances in the mind caused by thoughts or cognition).
However, during the eighteenth century, many philosophers, like John Locke and David Hartley, began to question the apparent divide between ‘cognition’ (the experience of having a thought) and ‘feelings’ (the experience of having an emotion). This question provoked a debate critics are still arguing about: do we experience emotion in our bodies or our brains? For eighteenth-century thinkers, the idea that everyone could feel made the debate about emotion a political and democratizing one. Against this, ideas like ‘sensibility’ - that is, refined feeling associated with virtue and sensibility - were regarded as defining a way of feeling only men and women of taste and of a certain (middle-aristocratic) class might experience. The labouring classes, by contrast, were associated with coarse emotion, often referred to as ‘enthusiasm.’

The Romantic poets reformulated the question of emotion once again, suggesting that historical conditions like industrialization, war, poverty and capitalism were blocking the experience of ‘authentic’ feeling, and that people needed to be re-taught how to have emotions again. Poets like Wordsworth argued that poetry teaches us how to feel: he claimed in his long poem, The Prelude, that his poetic project was committed to assessing to what extent ‘words can give, / A substance and a life to what I feel’ (XI.340-41). In other words, how does poetry put into words the emotional content of life? And how does poetry re-connect us with this emotional content when we feel divorced or alienated from our experience of emotions?

What to study on the module

In this module, you’re very welcome to explore the above historical debates about how definitions of emotion shift and change from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. However, seminars will be focused on how individual poets and poems answer Wordsworth’s questions. So the focus of the module is poetry itself; but our discussions of individual poems will always be underpinned by the following questions:

1. Why do readers make the assumption that there is a connection between poetry and feeling? Why, in The Republic, does Plato even complain that poetry has a negative moral influence on us is because it appeals to our emotions, rather than our ‘higher’ reason?

2. How does poetry express and articulate emotion, both formally (in specific kinds of poetic language and rhythm), and thematically (in describing our experiences of love, friendship, mourning, religion, nature)?

3. How has the question of communicating this expression been addressed in essay form (both in essays by literary critics of poetry, and prose work by poets)?

4. How do we as ‘modern’ readers understand emotion through our reading of poetry?

The syllabus

The spring term syllabus is divided into five units:
1. **Day dreaming**: that is, psychoanalytic approaches to the relationship between poetry and emotion

2. **Neurological reading**: that is, modern scientific analyses of emotion that debate whether or not we feel emotions in our brains or bodies

3. **Poetry and being**: metaphysical or philosophical interpretations of emotion as a state of consciousness

4. **Elegiac feeling**: that is, how poetry expresses mournful emotion and whether or not it should ‘move’ us to tears

5. **Thinking feeling**: can we ever distinguish between feeling and thought?

Within these units, we'll look at poems by the following writers: e.e. cummings, Wallace Stevens, Charles Tomlinson, Robert Browning, William Carlos Williams, Sylvia Plath, Simon Armitage, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Bukowski, J. H. Prynne; we will then end the module by returning to William Wordsworth and comparing his theories of emotion with those of his predecessor William Blake.

**Assessed essays**

Everyone on the module has to write at least one 5000 word essay to be handed in on Monday of week seven, term two. This is a specially extended deadline given because of the fact I wasn’t here last term. You are welcome to formulate your own question; or choose one of the questions Professor Bell gave out last term; or adapt one of the questions Professor Bell gave out last term to your own interests. Those of you doing the module by 100% assessment will need to write a second 5000 word essay to be handed in on Monday of week one, term three; those of you doing the module 50% assessed 50% exam will need to think about preparing for the exam in term three (see below for the section on the exam).

5000 word essays can be quite difficult to write: they’re long, but not as long as you might expect once you get into your argument. Remember to start the essay by presenting the reader with your topic AND thesis. Distinguish the topic (what you’re writing about) from your thesis (what you will attempt to argue or prove). A thesis is an interpretation of the text at hand that you will set forth in specific terms and propose defend by argumentation and literary analysis. Your thesis is the position you are attempting to persuade your reader to accept. Try and summarise your thesis in one or two sentences to make it clear and coherent. You will not know what your thesis is until after you have written the essay. Start by thinking about a provisional thesis so you have somewhere to begin from; your final thesis will emerge from your close-readings, rather than precede them. A thesis cannot be a statement of fact; if you think a reader could either easily agree or disagree with your thesis, you’ve probably set forth a statement of fact. A good thesis is specific not general; don’t make sweeping or ‘universal’ statements about human beings, about poetry, about life, about anything ‘through the ages’ as you’ll find you’re simplifying.

Always start with the texts you’ve chosen to write on and work out from them, rather than thinking up a thesis and then trying to impose it on the texts; reread the texts you will be discussing and make clear notes on passages that seem relevant. Your
argument should proceed in a logical progression from one thought to the next (don’t skip around back and forth between ideas). This logic should be clear within each sentence (from one phrase to the next); within each paragraph (from one sentence to the next); and within the essay (from one paragraph to the next). Check that the paragraphs are connected and that you have provided a transition between your key points (the transition is the connection between the point of the preceding paragraph and the point of your present paragraph - if you’re struggling with this, write out what each point is in a list and then work out what links them: this is the transition).

If you feel overwhelmed by the length of the essay, split the 5000 words into three short (1500 word) essays, and then connect them to prove your thesis. When you conclude your essay, think about how your reading of a given text or group of texts pertains to some of the larger issues you have addressed during the module. The conclusion should be brief: pull together your ideas, suggest how your reading relates to larger issues and/or restate your key thesis in a new way: do not simply repeat what you have already written.

For tips on close reading poetry, please refer to the EN227 Romantic and Victorian Poetry website, which has a detailed guide on how to approach poetry: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/undergraduate/current/modules/fulllist/second/en227/closereading/

The exam

This is the first year Poetry and Emotion has an exam, so there are no past papers to look at. Because of this, I will write up some ‘mock’ exams for you to practice answering questions from over the Easter holidays and in term three.

The exam is TWO hours long; there is no reading time. You will be given ten questions and must choose TWO questions to answer. Unless the question directs you otherwise, you must discuss at least TWO and no more than FOUR poems in each answer. Remember that you cannot repeat material from assessed work in your exams.

This is how I would recommend you revise for the exam:

1. Choose three to four poets whose work you have enjoyed reading over the module and who you feel confident writing about
2. Choose several poems by each of these poets and get to know them in detail (you can either choose three or four short poems by these poets; or perhaps one long poem by one poet, and three or four short poems by another poet)
3. Once you’ve done this, write practice questions based on the poems you’ve revised on two or three revision ‘topics’
4. Choose this revision topics and go and do some research into them; write out practice answers or practice essay plans so you have a sense of how you might answer on these topics should they come up on the exam
5. The key revision ‘topics’ are:
   a. Emotion and authenticity/sincerity
b. The emotional experience of reading poetry

c. Emotion and the imagination

d. Emotion and the unconscious/dreams

e. Emotion and thought

f. Emotion and science

g. Emotion and the body/brain

h. Emotional expression

i. Emotion and elegy