

## The Literature and Psychology of Disgust

ENGL 4370 and PSYC 4370

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**This syllabus is available on Professor Cassuto's website, [www.lcassuto.com](http://www.lcassuto.com). Go to the "Teaching" section, which is password-protected. Username is "student"; password is "teaching."**

### Course Description:

Disgust is considered a primary emotion – that is, all cultures have similar expressions and experiences that characterize the presence of disgust. Interestingly, despite the universal experience of disgust, we don't understand it very well. Recent work has revealed that disgust is a complex emotional state, ranging from basic food-based revulsion to morally-based reactions. Concurrent with the increased attention given to disgust by researchers, there have been widespread depictions of disgust in many fields.

Literature is full of disgust, and so are other media, like the movies. You might even say that storytelling depends on it. Think of some of your favorite stories: if disgust is not present in them, there's a good chance that the *threat* of disgust is. Disgust is classical (the Greek myths are filled with cannibalism, for example) and biblical (beheadings and crucifixion, for starters), and of course it is contemporary (*Fear Factor*, anyone?).

So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that humanists have studied "the aesthetics of disgust." Disgust and aesthetics together? Yes. Because you can't define beauty without ugliness, and there is no ugliness without disgust lurking in the background. There's some particularly good and interesting work on the subject of disgust in literary criticism, philosophy, and anthropology—and we'll be reading in those disciplines in our own effort to understand this fundamental but (perhaps because it's so reflexive) mysterious emotion.

The idea of emotion opens the door to psychology, and the interdisciplinary partnership at the heart of this course. Psychological research on disgust began with descriptions and experiments around the basic experience of the emotion. The nature of disgust has been covered in a wide range of traditions within psychology – basic experimental, social, psychodynamic, behavioral, clinical, developmental, and evolutionary psychology, as well as experimental neuroscience, all have research investigating disgust. This collective line of inquiry shows that what was originally considered an emotion with a single aim – protection from ingesting harmful substances – evolved to reflect a highly complex emotional experience that covers death, animals/insects, sex, blood and exposed human or animal organs, contamination, and moral standard violations. We will approach each of these disgust domains with the basic question of "What does it mean to feel disgusted?" with extensions to these corollary questions: What are the physical manifestations of disgust? How much effort does it take to alleviate disgust? Are there ways we deliberately avoid the experience of disgust? What motivates our interest in viewing or reading about things that provoke disgust? And finally, what are the associated emotional experiences that come about when disgust is experienced?

In this interdisciplinary course, we will use the imaginative and philosophical literature of disgust as a way to understand the emotion, and vice versa: we will use disgust (which we will explore with the tools afforded us by psychology) to understand literature and the human imagination that produces it. In implicating the work of one discipline with another, we will put them into dialogue, as we seek to understand a complex and powerful human response.

## Communications Protocols

This is a team-taught course. **If you have a question about the course, or about your own work, we expect you to email both professors at once.** (Exception: if you have a question specifically for one of us.) We make decisions about the course together, so if you want us to make one about you or about existing guidelines, please be sure to inform us both. This will save time and avoid misunderstandings.

We get lots of email, so **please give accurate and descriptive subject lines to the email that you send us.** That's one way that we'll be able to tell how quickly we need to reply to it.

For us to share readings with you and otherwise exchange work with each other in the seminar, we will set up a common dropbox folder. You should receive an email invitation to join the class folder shortly. Please let us know if you don't get it.

## Papers and evaluation:

You'll write two papers in this course, the first of approximately 750-1000 words in length, the second of approximately 1250-1500 words, each accounting for 20% of the course grade. The topics for your papers are open: you are invited to devise your own. However, we suggest that you preview your topic with one (or both) of us before you begin the research and writing. We can help you shape and refine your ideas so that your papers will have the best chance of reaching their full potential. We're also happy to help you brainstorm a topic. So if you have an idea that you want to turn into a paper topic, or a topic that feels unwieldy to you, or any other concern or question anywhere in the process, we invite you to consult with us as you plan your projects. You are welcome to devise topics on works or ideas that are outside the course readings, so long as there is a connection to the concerns of the course. Be sure to get our approval if your ideas take you far afield.

We will also request a 500-word account of a disgust experience you've had, which we will post (after removing your names) in a class dropbox folder. (Further details below.)

There will also be a midterm (20% of your grade) and final exam (25%). The midterm will be a 36-hour take-home exam, while the final will be in-class during the final exam period at the time designated by the registrar. A further 10% of the course grade will be determined by class participation, sparking (see below), and completion of the aforementioned disgust narrative (500 words).

Both instructors will read and evaluate written assignments independently (using commenting utilities available in Microsoft Word) and then discuss responses together and reconcile them so that you will receive consistent feedback. Generally speaking, we will be looking at your attention to the literature and literary criticism and the corresponding application of appropriate research from psychology. The ongoing goal of the course will be for you to bring the two disciplines together and integrate them in your analysis. We will therefore aim our feedback particularly toward developing your skills in more effective literary (and film) criticism and understanding experimental approaches to evaluating an understudied emotional experience that is present in numerous novels and the media generally. We also want to see you integrate the feedback we give you from assignment to assignment. Feedback will be cumulative in that we expect you to demonstrate growth in both the understanding of the content of the course and how to describe concepts effectively.

## Midterm grades

We are required to give you a letter grade at midterm time, but we are not given the pass/fail option. Accordingly, if you are passing the course, you will receive a B. If you're failing, you'll get an F. Read nothing into this evaluation other than a pass/fail notification.

## Attendance and Participation:

This is a seminar, and therefore attendance is required. If you don't show up, you can't participate—and participation is likewise required. This course will be run primarily as a discussion-driven seminar in both large groups (when the class

meets all together) and small groups (when we break into two sections). Most days that we meet will include a large-group session followed by a small-group meeting.

In order to promote your prompt attendance, we will give an attendance quiz between 2:30 and 2:35 each afternoon. The quiz will be composed of one question that will be easy if you've done the reading. You get one point for taking the test, and a second point if you get the question right. If you miss the quiz because of lateness or absence, you get no points. The aggregate of these quiz grades (with your two lowest dropped) will be worth 5% of your grade.

Now that we have everybody in place and ready to be disgusted by 2:35, we now move to what happens next. Two or three students will be assigned in advance of each class meeting to prepare discussion questions to "spark" the class. These **sparking questions** will be circulated electronically ahead of time to class members, and their authors will be asked to present them orally during discussion, and to facilitate and help to lead that discussion. *Sparking presentation is a group activity in which all sparkers are expected to participate.* Sparkers are also asked to bring hard copies of the questions (about 40). Sparking questions are due no later than Monday (by 11:59 pm) before our Thursday meetings. Uncertain about how to spark? Look to the sparking guidelines below. We're happy to review your sparking questions ahead of time, too—just be sure to allow enough time in advance.

We will ask for volunteers to spark for next week and the week after. All other class members will submit their preferred dates (please provide 3 or 4) to the instructors via email, and we will formulate a schedule.

As well, the week's sparkers will be assigned each week to orally present to the class examples from each category of disgust that we will be studying at that point in the syllabus. This might, for example, entail introducing an image or one-minute film clip, among other possibilities. So the sparkers will be responsible not only for devising questions, but also for bringing in juicy examples of the week's disgust topic for discussion. *Again, this is a group activity that should involve all sparkers for the week.*

### Academic Integrity

We are confident all students will adhere to the standards set forth by the University regarding academic integrity. In order that no one inadvertently runs afoul of the standards, you are encouraged to familiarize yourselves with the policies established by Fordham. These policies are located here:

[http://legacy.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks\\_publicati/undergraduate\\_academ/index.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks_publicati/undergraduate_academ/index.asp)

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Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of Fordham University. If you believe that you have a disability that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule a meeting to speak with someone at the Office of Disability Services (Rose Hill - O'Hare Hall, Lower Level, x0655 or at Lincoln Center – Room 207, x6282).

### Assigned Readings:

#### Books (or excerpts from books):

Brooks, M.(2006) *World War Z* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Dixon, T. (1905). *The Clansman*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.

Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger (chapters 1, 2,3, & 7)*. London: Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Herz, R. (2013). *That's Disgusting! Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* New York: W.W. Norton.

Miller, W. I. (1977). *The Anatomy of Disgust (Harvard) (Chapters 1,2,4, 8, & 9)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard

Saramago, J. (1998). *Blindness* (Harvest)

Articles stories, poems:

Andreyev, L. (1906; tr. 1918) "Lazarus" <http://www.classicreader.com/book/2158/1/>

Eskine, K.J., Kacirik, N.A., & Prinz, J.J. (2011). A bad taste in the mouth: Gustatory disgust influences moral judgment. *Psychological Science*, 22, 295-299.

Fahs, B. (2011). Sex during menstruation: Race, sexual identity, and women's accounts of pleasure and disgust. *Feminism & Psychology*, 21, 155-178.

Fessler, D.M.T., & Navarrete, C.D. (2005). The effect of age on death disgust: Challenges to terror management perspectives. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 3, 279-296.

Goodyear, D. (2011) Grub. Eating bugs to save the planet. *The New Yorker*, 15 August 2011.

Hoefling, A., Likowski, K.U., Deutsch, R., Hafner, M., Seibt, B., Muhlberger, A., Weyers, P., & Strack, F. (2009). When hunger finds no fault with moldy corn: Food deprivation reduces food-related disgust. *Emotion*, 9, 50-58.

Kemp, J.J., Lickel, J.J., & Deacon, B.J. (2014). Effects of a chemical imbalance causal explanation on individual's perception of their depressive symptoms. *Behaviour Research & Therapy*, 56, 47-52.

Matchett, G., & Davey, G.C. (1991). A test of a disease-avoidance model of animal phobias. *Behaviour Research & Therapy*, 29, 91-94.

O'Carroll, R.E., Foster, C., McGeechan, G., & Ferguson, E. (2011). The "Ick" factor, anticipated regret, and willingness to become an organ donor. *Health Psychology*, 30, 236-245.

Pescosolido, B.A., Martin, J.K., Long, J.S., Medina, T.R., Phelan, J.C., & Link, B.G. (2010). "A disease like any other"? A decade of change in public reactions to schizophrenia, depression, and alcohol dependence. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 167, 1321-1330.

Rozin, P., Haidt, J., & Fincher, K. (2009). From oral to moral. *Science*, 323, 1179-1180.

Tsao, S.D., & McKay, D. (2004). Behavioral avoidance tests and disgust in contamination fears: Distinctions from trait anxiety. *Behaviour Research & Therapy*, 42, 207-216.

Swift, J. (1731, 1732); "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," "A Lady's Dressing Room."

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180934>

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180935>

Widen, S.C., & Russell, J.A. (2013). Children's recognition of disgust in others. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139, 271-299.

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Class Meeting

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Jan 19: Background & Definitions

Important note: Movies are no substitute for the books

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Jan 26: Fundamentals of Disgust

Miller, (chapters 1,2)

Herz (chapter 2)

Jonathan Swift, selected poems: "The Lady's Dressing Room," "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed"

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180935>

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180934>

(PRINT THESE POEMS & BRING to CLASS)

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*Feb 2: Development of Disgust*

Widen & Russell

Douglas (chapters 1,2)

**Disgust Narrative due (500 words) by email to both professors (See below for prompt)**

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*Feb 9: Snow Day*

*Feb 16: Oral manifestations*

Hoefling et al.

Herz (chapter 1)

Movie: Sausage Party

**Preview topic for first paper: one paragraph email to both professors**

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*Feb 23: Animals & Insects*

Matchett & Davey

Miller (Chapter 4)

Goodyear, "Grub"

Movie: *The Fly* (Cronenberg version), on reserve; watch before class.

**First draft of first paper due by email to both professors**

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*Mar 2: Sex & Death*

Fahs

Herz, 125-131, and all of chapter 7

Fessler & Navarrete

Tom Lehrer, "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhuMLpdnOjY>

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*Mar 9: Death & Body Envelope Violations*

Andreyev, "Lazarus" (online: <http://www.classicreader.com/book/2158/1/>; MAKE A COPY AND BRING IT TO CLASS)

Tom Lehrer, "Irish Ballad" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47bKTtlwrO4>

O'Carroll et al.

Douglas (chapter 7)

Film: *Alien* (on reserve; watch before class)

(and get started on Brooks for next class)

**Take-home midterm distributed; due by email to both professors on Friday, 3/10 by 12:00 midnight**

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*Mar 23: Zombies!*

Brooks, *World War Z*

**Final draft of first paper due by email to both professors by 8 a.m.**

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*Mar 30: Contamination*

Tsao & McKay

Saramago, *Blindness*

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*Apr 6: Stigma*

Goffman, *Stigma*, 1-40

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Pescosolido

Kemp, Lickel, & Deacon

Film: *Freaks* (on reserve: watch it before class)

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*Apr 20: Moral Disgust*

Eskine, et al., (2011)

Rozin, Haidt, & Fincher

Miller (chapter 8)

Douglas (chapter 3)

Tom Lehrer, "I Hold Your Hand in Mine" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9C2v1oLXQo>

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*Apr 27: Moral Disgust*

Dixon *The Clansman*

**Second paper due by email to both professors**

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*May 4: Disgust in Society*

Miller (chapter 9)

Film: *A Clockwork Orange* (on reserve; watch before class)

*May 11: Final Exam*

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### **Assignment: Disgust Narrative (500 words)**

This assignment will not be graded, but it is required, so you will be penalized if you do not complete it. However, we think you'll enjoy it.

We ask you to describe a personal experience of disgust. You can describe a scene, tell a story, or even write a dramatic dialogue—but your goal is to recount an experience of disgust in your own life.

We will remove your names from these narratives and make them available in a dropbox folder that the class will have collective access to. That means that you should beware of identifying details if you are concerned about remaining anonymous. (You are invited to draw on these narratives, individually or in clusters, or even as a whole, as a source of possible paper topics.)

### **Papers**

We are looking for clear, thesis-driven essays that introduce a thesis and defend it with textual evidence. Your papers should engage with the course material and ideas, but we don't require that you limit yourself to the assigned readings and films. We're asking you to develop your own paper topics because a writer writes best when she cares about what she's writing about—and what better way to do that than to choose the subject yourself? But we're happy to help you develop a topic. We require that you preview your first paper topic with us, but you're welcome to do the same with your second.

Among the possibilities before you: test one of the theories of disgust that we'll be analyzing on one or more works of literature and/or popular culture (movies, tv, advertising, etc.). Or you can develop a topic based on one or more of the

class disgust narratives, which will be available to you in dropbox. (Perhaps several will cluster around a theme that you can work with, using some of the theories that we'll discuss. You can analyze public texts (like speeches) or behaviors (rituals)—and so on. The possibilities are open, and we're here to help you construct sound and compelling topics and then execute them.

### **Sparking Guidelines**

Asking questions is a skill just as answering them is a skill. Realizing that your practice lies mainly in the latter, we invite you to review your ideas with us (or one of us) a week or more ahead of time, so that we can offer help to prospective sparkers at an early step of the process. You're welcome to ask questions about this anytime, of course. Here is a list of some possibly useful thoughts and hints.

—**Four or five questions are optimal.** More than that can overwhelm, while fewer may leave vital topics untouched.

--Remember that your job here is not to show what you know (you're welcome to participate in the discussion that follows) so much as to frame questions that will allow your colleagues to show what *they* have learned in the course of reading and thinking about the assigned material for the week.

--You are encouraged (though of course not required) to frame questions that link with and pursue issues raised in previous weeks. This will give our class an organic continuity.

--The best questions usually cannot be answered "yes" or "no." They often begin with "how" or "why" or other open-ended constructions.

--The best way to check whether you're on the right track is to ask yourself whether you can imagine the class debating or analyzing your idea. If you can envision an open-ended exchange, then you've probably identified a good issue for discussion.

You will spark the class in groups of two or three. **We ask that groups collaborate to avoid overlap**, and to plan a unified approach to the week's assignments. Please work together with your colleagues so that your class presentations go smoothly.

**Remember that sparking questions are due to the class (and the teachers!) by no later than 11:59 pm on the Monday before our Thursday class.**

**Don't forget** to make sufficient hard copies of your sparking questions for the whole class. That's about 38 altogether.