

Edward M. Bury

Professor Madhu Dubey

ENGL 500

December 6, 2016

Affect Criticism Today: An Analysis of Its Value Through
Scholarly Comparisons and Emotions Raised in Reading *Catcher in the Rye*

It's fairly easy to fully grasp and comprehend the definition of the phrase "cause and effect." (Reference.com) In the vernacular, it means one particular action leads to something else, something different or perhaps something unexpected. But let's reposition this thought by incorporating the verb form of the word -- affect -- and adding a word to create the phrase "affect criticism."

What does this form of literary criticism mean? Following some research and analysis, affect criticism -- specifically in terms of literature and the humanities -- can be defined as: A type of literary study and debate that juxtaposes the desire to better understand a creative work with how the reader or observer feels after absorbing the work. In essence, the cause (reading) results in an effect (various emotions based on the subject matter.) This all sounds fairly simple and straightforward; of course reading, as well as many other actions that require intellect or effort, will generally evoke some kind of emotional reaction. But there needs to be a deeper analysis for truly understanding affect as a way to provide criticism.

This passage from the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* delves a little deeper: "Often, literature does not rely simply on basic motivational arousal; it seems to be marked by the intensification of such arousal. Romeo and Juliet are not simply ordinary lovers with the

usual run of ambivalent feelings; they are so driven by love that they risk—indeed, embrace—death. Othello's jealousy causes him to pass out, then murder. Achilles is a paragon of anger, the emotion signaled by the opening of the Iliad.”

That “intensification of arousal” as noted in these examples from three renowned works of Western literature supports and will guide the focus of the thoughts to follow on affect criticism. Upon conclusion of this paper, the reader will come away with a better understanding of this literary genre in contemporary analysis and study in the 21st century. This will be accomplished through a review of the foundation of affect criticism, a relatively new development in literature and other humanities, and its value to readers and critics alike. Furthermore, two leading essays on affect criticism will be partially dissected and reassembled with the intention of determining who's “right,” or better stated, offers the most compelling argument when comparing negative emotions versus those of sentimentality.

Finally, a case will be made to bring an analysis of various emotions raised in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The question one may ask: Why select this landmark mid-century novel, perhaps best known for its coming-of-age story line and study into what's real and what's not as noted through the experiences and observations of the 16-year-old protagonist? These three reasons can be noted: 1) An online search for existing criticism into “affect criticism and *The Catcher in the Rye*” did not yield any noteworthy or appropriate results. This essay will offer a perspective that transcends a psychoanalytic study into

alienation, a formalist approach into characters who inhabit post World War II Manhattan or another common course of analysis. 2) The many characters within the story – from anti-hero/narrator Holden Caulfield to members of his family to other men, women and children readers meet in the novel – spark a myriad of emotions to many readers, like joy, anger, fear and distress. 3) And, the story is well-known to serious scholars and casual readers alike. The opportunities to identify and comprehend instances of emotions that emerge from Salinger’s imagination through the many characters and escapades should be clear and noteworthy, and hopefully groundbreaking.

Affect Criticism Foundations, Its Impact on Criticism Today

Now, onto a brief journey into the foundations and impact of affect criticism in literature, as well as social sciences and humanities, today. One study that points the spotlight on the widening scope of affect criticism in literary scholarship and other fields was published by Ruth Leys in 2011. In the essay, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Leys builds a case for the growth in scholarly research toward affect criticism, while channeling her efforts into “the neurosciences of emotion.” In building her case, Leys cites a geographer, a cultural critic and a social theorist, each offering varying perspectives for their respective fascination with the study of affect within their fields of scholarship. Leys’ conclusion surrounding the growing embracement for affect in these very different areas spans a wide gamut – all however leading back to the conclusion that human beings absorb and process stimuli through the various encounters and occurrences that take place throughout one’s life.

This paragraph from the Leys essay provides a summary: “For the theorists in question, affects are ‘inhuman,’ ‘pre-subjective,’ ‘visceral’ forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these. Whatever else may be meant by the terms affect and emotion — more on this in a moment—it seems from the remarks quoted above that the affects must be noncognitive, corporeal processes or states. For such theorists, affect is, as Massumi asserts, ‘irreducibly bodily and autonomic.’”

So what does this analysis of the Leys essay mean and contribute to this essay? The key phrase --“noncognitive, corporeal processes or states” -- means, according to Brian Massumi, that the conditions that drive affect or emotions through literature and other elements of the humanities are not learned or taught. They are, rather, absorbed unwillingly yet influence and guide how we appreciate novels, plays, film and art, as well as other creative and structured disciplines and fields.

One contrary argument to the above assertion from Massumi is this: Without cognition, without learning and comprehending commonly accepted societal values, how can we organize and demonstrate emotional reactions like joy and surprise, disgust and fear, distress and shame? Don’t we have to have life experiences – either through personal interactions or through absorbing knowledge from other sources like books or film – in order to “get emotional” or, better yet, “affected” in some way?

No, emotional reactions are conscious decisions driven by some kind of knowledge or understanding of what actions, events or revelations are driving the emotion. Please bear with

the casual nature of this next sentence as a way to provide a different – and hopefully whimsical, yet poignant and successful – perspective to the contention above. To borrow a phrase and to paraphrase Holden Caulfield, “For Chrissakes how can ya really know if you’re acting like a jerk unless you’ve acted like a jerk before, and what you did as a jerk really pissed someone off?”

A quest for “a little more” into the origin and perspectives on what defines affect criticism led to a review of some findings posted in 2011 (the same publication dates as the Leys essay) on the online site, Quora. The gatekeeper of the scholarly thoughts posted does concur that the type of criticism discussed here took hold recently: “Affect theory is a relatively new approach to art critique.” Yet, the examples cited and interpreted don’t qualify as being “seminal” viewpoints that define affect nor do they offer a defined time stamp when the practice initiated. (Later in this paper, we’ll discuss essays published in 1998 and 2005, so perhaps we can safely conclude that affect criticism did initially gain a foothold in the late 20th century.)

Responses that stand out include: “Affect is the manifestation of the body’s internalization of an intensity.” (Brian Massumi). “...a judgement rather than an emotion or an expression of an emotion.” (Theresa Brennan). “Affect is in a virtual space containing infinite potential.” (Patricia Clough). “Affect is a corresponding element of a preexisting object.” (Sarah Ahmed). “Affect has the ability to rouse people in one moment, and then move quickly away from the minds of the affected.” (Megan Watkins). “...both a movement within a state of relation between different things or people, and the exchange of intensities (as well as the

duration of the movements between these intensities)." (Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Gregg).

And, as more eloquently stated in this passage from a post on *Humanities and Social Sciences Online* seeking further scholarly research on the subject: "Affect theorists share an interest in the contingencies of being and in a model of becoming, offering an ontology that accounts for the complexities of lived experience and that promises a space for freedom resistant to the prisonhouse of discourse, to normative ideology, to state thinking."

The wide scope of thoughts and directions above culminate with this personal conclusion on affect criticism in the second decade of the 21st century. The practice provides another barometer, another framework for scholars and casual readers alike to absorb, appreciate, grow, explore and ultimately more fully appreciate creative works by comprehending how the experiences, situations, environments, characters and developments depicted make us feel. Channeling an analysis of affect criticism creates another medium to let us learn and better understand, thereby providing boundless opportunities to grow personally and intellectually. To briefly summarize, affect criticism opens windows to literary interpretation not sequestered by other subscribed ways of appreciating the humanities.

Two Sides of the Affect Coin: Analyzing "Poor Eliza" and "Ugly Feelings"

Two scholarly perspectives on affect criticism will now be explored with the intention of shedding light on how one perspective of the genre, as embodied in the phrase, "...the unfinished business of sentimentality," (Berlant 636) relates to and/or expands upon theories

presented in the introduction to a book that will study “the aesthetics of negative emotions, examining their politically ambiguous work in a range of cultural artifacts.” (Ngai 1)

In the essay “Poor Eliza,” Lauren Berlant, by the work’s title (the name of a character from *The King and I*) establishes from the onset that there will be a feminine undercurrent to the ideas that follow as the author explores the process of identification in part by citing the portrayals of some women characters in fiction who endure suffering or pain. She maintains that in the United States, there’s some sort of “conspiracy” that generates a mass audience of supporters who subscribe to believing in actions that can prove harmful. What’s more, the process has been “deployed mainly by the culturally privileged to humanize those very subjects who are also, and at the same time, reduced to cliché within the reigning regimes of entitlement or value.” (Berlant 636)

The discussion of identification continues with an assault of sorts on liberal ideals related to sentimentalism as the author claims literature that depicts injustice somehow corresponds to modern life in the nation. And, a final thought raised draws the conclusion that feminist literature (called “Women’s texts”) not only defines who women are but also helps define the “ideal” woman.

Later, Berlant poses a range of “pain-focused” questions that will fuel the balance of her study into affect and sentimentality. These include: How did some examples of pain depicted in literature become modern entertainment? How does society address accepting instances of pain in “excessive” manners, remembering just what caused the pain in common people? How

do various individuals and groups of people get recognized as the one(s) who overcome pain and mark a stamp on history? And, what causes pain to become a part of our lives that gets bought and sold? (Berlant 637) One encompassing answer to the above has its roots in human nature that dates back for centuries. Romans found enjoyment and entertainment in watching gladiators compete in colosseums throughout the empire; today, society finds entertainment in absorbing film, literature and video games where pain or even death are portrayed. A case can be made that human beings for centuries have found pleasure in suffering of others.

The answers to the impact of identification resulting from literature center on these two teachings, one that surfaces through *The King and I*, the other through a much earlier work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: 1) Embrace and accept a monumental moment of history for the power it has to establish and influence positive changes. 2) Virtuous literary characters who overcome truly challenging circumstances in life can – through the fictional actions depicted in the story – have the power to compel others to create transformative art. (Berlant 638)

Following the argument on identification and sentimentality, Berlant continues with an analysis of two other prospects for studying the subject: Embracing the feminine way of life and what it means in modern society, and how femininity relates to what she refers to as the “capitalist culture” through depictions of lower-class people who provide a sort of template for rising above their downtrodden existence, and thereby offer virtuous examples of life that provide society the inspiration needed to succeed.

Regarding the former, the key conclusion that can be made from the author's prose and citation of women characters in *The King and I* can be linked to the "sacrificial costs" endured to fictional women whose virtuous lives established "guidelines" of sorts for what should be considered positive examples of life and how to live it. Through these sacrifices, women characters set standards for others to learn about and identify how to be a virtuous woman, regardless of race or social status; and furthermore, women can engage in sexual acts as being a "normal" part of their sexuality. Regarding the latter, as embodied by Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the actions of women who overcome great obstacles can be commoditized through literature and the cinema, prompting society to admire and identify with those trials and tribulations conquered. Berlant sums this up thusly: "the act of enraptured consumption becomes inextricable from the moral act of identification." (Berlant 643) Or, in other words, the world becomes better by way of these actions being propagated for profit.

To incorporate a somewhat modern and certainly popular phrase, one might interpret the Introductory chapter in Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, a book exploring emotional negativity in selected fiction and cinema, as a tiptoe journey into "the dark side of the Force." (Wookieepedia) And, for clarification, Ngai's writing on affect criticism, published in 2005, addresses "lesser evil" dark forces of human feelings like "envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation," and she even coins the phrases "animatedness" (or a way to provide an unsubscribed ethnic or racial identity) and "stuplimity" (a serious attempt to balance aesthetic and political) to better explain her theories presented later in the Introduction. Rest assured, there are no ventures or citations in the Introduction made to the actions of the evil Empire -- or Jedi forces as a

counter-balance, for that matter. However, the well-known mid-19th century Herman Melville short story featuring a passive-resistance office worker, “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” and two American dramatic films set in the workplace are referenced in the exploration of negative feelings; the former to demonstrate alienation as embodied in the individual working a small office environment, the latter to demonstrate the negative emotions brought on through crime and conspiracy that led to worker alienation from corporate America.

The author maintains that an exploration into “ugly feelings” is justified for study today because society has evolved from the mid-20th century, but perhaps not in a positive way. As noted in the essay: “The evidence here would suggest that the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together – a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in a (sic) increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society – is a prime occasion for ugly feelings.” (Ngai 3) Or, in other words, it makes sense to study “stuplidity” and its impact on humanities due to the way modern society has become during what once was referred to as the New Millennium – more dystopian and fragmented.

An aside: One can wonder what conclusions Ngai today would uncover through an analysis of the “ugly feelings” perpetrated increasingly by internet trolls and other digital villains. Actually, studies have revealed that people who anonymously post offensive or inaccurate content may have serious behavioral issues and find satisfaction with the power to deliver unpleasant communications without provocation or fear of reprisal. (*Slate*)

Given this mandate, one can now raise these two questions regarding the statement above: What specific “evidence” is Ngai referring to that supports the claim that the study of the unsavory side of human emotion is driven by recent changes in socio-political theory? And, why was this challenge made more urgent in recent times, given the fact that throughout Western civilization, history has long been based on seemingly countless examples of war, dissention, plague, strife and other lesser conflicts and maladies? Perhaps answers lie later in the chapter, when the author states that the modern global society increasingly “defines our contemporary moment,” thereby causing a rejection or abandoning of classic socio-political theories and philosophies dating back centuries. These developments call for establishment of “a new set of feelings – ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth.” (Ngai 5)

Ngai later states that the true strength and value behind a scholarly, historical study of “ugly feelings” will be concentrated in the “theoretical groundwork it will construct.” Two cornerstones to the foundation for the scholarship are: 1) Establishing a starting point to take an entirely new perspective on modern social issues and challenges. 2) Giving the impetus to take literary criticism on an entirely new course. (Ngai 8)

Integral to the author’s arguments behind the need to study the lesser type of negative feelings is a discussion on what separates “affect” from “emotion,” which she states has its origins in psychoanalysis, where it serves as a way to balance analyst and patient: The affect

representation of feelings is attributed to the analyst (third person), while emotional responses point in the direction of the subject participating in therapeutic session (first person). Theories from other scholars are cited to better define and separate the two critical perspectives, yet Ngai counters by stating that the focus of *Ugly Feelings* tackles perspectives that “are obviously not as strategic as the emotions classically associated with political action; with their indeterminate or undifferentiated objects, in particular, they are less than ideally suited for setting and realizing clearly defined goals.” (Ngai 26)

A final element of note to the Introduction addresses the author’s definition of “tone” and the role tone plays in literature and other humanities. (Ngai 28) “Tone,” as described, can be viewed from a global perspective and one that also collects feelings in order to provide scholars the basis to provide criticism and to let readers better comprehend the work based on the time and place the work is produced. This argument is central to the *Ugly Feelings* debate because, as stated, “Tone *is* the dialectic of objective and subjective feelings that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce.” (Ngai 30) For clarification, Ngai states that analyzing tone in literature will prove challenging when it becomes the focal point in scholarship involving negative feelings, and what’s more, addressing tone should not necessarily usher in positive feelings. The true value of tone in affect criticism lies in its lack of a precise definition, allowing for interpretation.

So, following this succinct analysis of “Poor Eliza” and *Ugly Feelings*, what conclusions can be made regarding affect criticism in terms of its status and role in the scholarly hierarchy? Melding together perspectives and insight explored with both works, one can surmise that

Berlant clearly incorporates a decidedly feminine approach to her study of sentimentality, referencing passages of literary works that demonstrate how strong, virtuous women can overcome obstacles and succeed among great odds; this makes the world a better place because we can identify and thereby learn and grow ourselves. The creative works cited in *Ugly Feelings* feature men involved in somewhat passive negative emotional situations of alienation and duplicity; the outcome of the men characters referenced is not positive, and reflects a breakdown of societal norms and dysfunctional society.

Collectively, the two works reveal that appreciation of the humanities can be gained through an analysis and understanding of both the overwhelming and the subtler messages and stories told.

Fear, Uncertainty and Sentimentality in *The Catcher in the Rye*

When released in 1951, *The Catcher in the Rye* was a sensation, in terms of book sales and also by providing inspiration for scholars and critics. The first-person account of a confused, boarding-school kid from the Upper East Side on a two-day trek through New York is perhaps best known for the portrayal of alienation. As noted in this essay, the book “has served as a resonant expression of alienation for several generations of adolescent readers and adults who have considered themselves at odds with the norms and institutions of American society.” (Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute) Other scholars have broken down Holden Caulfield from a psychological perspective, and he’s even been awarded the status of being the prototype for the 1960’s counter culture/hippie movement.

What follows will be an exploration into sentiments and emotions a reader may identify and absorb after reading the novel, and how these feelings may be intensified through a closer look at the protagonist and the characters he encounters following his unceremonious evening departure from the Pencey Prep school to the novel's conclusion, as the clearly disillusioned Holden watches his sister Phoebe on a carousel in a December rainstorm.

In light of Holden's at times humorous narrative, a reader could clearly be alarmed for the immediate and long-term outlook for this kid as he navigates New York and its environs, often at night. He visits nightclubs and drinks to excess, engages a prostitute and gets slugged by her elevator-operator/pimp, and strolls (drunkenly) through Central Park at night. A visit to former teacher Mr. Antolini leads to an unexpected sexual advance. Even though Holden is a born and raised New Yorker, one can be fearful for his future, and from a bigger perspective perhaps fearful for the direction the nation is headed at the dawn of the Cold War, a world Holden believes is increasingly being dominated by phonies. As noted in this passage: "One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. They were coming out of the goddam window." (Salinger 16) Will these same "phonies" be the people in power as he and war-torn America chart the balance of the 20th century?

Another emotional state raised throughout the novel is uncertainty – for Holden's wellbeing after his odyssey and commitment to a mental health treatment center. And, since the novel is set in post-World War II New York, a time when the nation and world emerged from the greatest global conflict in recorded history, it's realistic to have questions on the

future of the nation as America, like Holden, is at a crossroads of sorts. Will Holden find direction, return to school, learn to cope with depression (and phonies of course) and chart a course toward a normal life? And, can the nation Holden lives in recover emotionally and find its place in the world as a dominating super power? If Holden can be perceived as some embodiment of 1950's America, the outlook is decidedly grey; the fact he's institutionalized and may not even return to school in the upcoming fall supports that premise. *The Catcher in the Rye* really doesn't offer a viable conclusion.

Finally, there's the prospect of identifying passages within the novel that generate emotional sentimentality for readers who endured the journey of this often quixotic and fascinating character. We learn of Holden's love for his departed brother, Allie, whose passing caused the then 13-year-old to smash garage windows with his fist. We learn of his fondness for a more innocent time in his life (and perhaps society's) as he helps some children tighten their roller skates. Holden effectively supports this perspective in the closing lines of the novel: "About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice." (Salinger 192)

Through the identification of these three emotions – fear, uncertainty and sentimentality – one can better appreciate or find new reasons to read *The Catcher in the Rye*; and who knows, perhaps that will inspire more studies into affect criticism for this great American novel, for crissakes.

References

1. Reference.com, "[What does 'cause and effect' mean?](#)"
2. Oxford Research Encyclopedias, "[Affect Studies and Literary Criticism.](#)"
3. Ruth Leys, "[The Turn to Affect: A Critique,](#)" Pages 434-437
4. Kat Beavers, Quora: "[What is 'affect' and 'affect theory' as it relates to art critiques?](#)"
5. Tiffany N. Florvil CFP: [A Feel for the Text: Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice,](#) October 1, 2015
6. "Poor Eliza," Laurent Berlant, 636
7. *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai, 1
8. "Poor Eliza," Laurent Berlant, 636
9. "Poor Eliza," 637
10. "Poor Eliza" 638
11. "Poor Eliza" 643
12. Wookieepedia, "[The Dark Side of the Force.](#)"
13. *Ugly Feelings* 3
14. *Slate*, "[Internet Trolls are Really Horrible People,](#)" February 14, 2014
15. *Ugly Feelings* 5
16. *Ugly Feelings* 8
17. *Ugly Feelings* 26
18. *Ugly Feelings* 28
19. *Ugly Feelings* 30
20. *Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute*, "[The Catcher in the Rye: The Voice of Alienation.](#)"
21. *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger, 16
22. *The Catcher in the Rye*, 192