

Being Bored & the Art of Ennui

Spring 2017, Department of English, University of North Florida

LIT 4934 (Senior Seminar)

Tues. and Thurs. 3:05-4:20

Bldg. 51, Rm. 1104

“Now you are never lonely, because your friends are always reachable. You are never bored, because there are infinite streams of information and entertainment.”

—Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google

“Tedium is not the disease of being bored because there is nothing to do, but the more serious disease of feeling that there’s nothing worth doing. This means that the more there is to do, the more tedium one feels.”

—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

“I like boring things. I like things to be exactly the same over and over again.”

—Andy Warhol

Boredom was discovered, or first diagnosed, in the 19th century (or so), and its creation continues to afflict and entertain us to this day. We have, of course, a love-hate relationship with boredom; or it (like a virus) has a relationship with us. We just can't seem to shake it, to find a cure for this curiously modern condition of being bored.

Ever since its infectious spread, writers and artists have found boredom irresistibly interesting as a topic, as it crops up again and again in their works. So much so that one might wonder if boredom is a fundamental fact for being modern, a diagnosed symptom of our tiresome and tedious age: boredom, being bored, being bored with being; or even, as the 19th-century playwright Henrik Ibsen wrote of Hedda Gabler, of her “one real talent in life ... Boring [herself] to death.”

Our focus in this class will be upon a variety of materials, from modern and contemporary fiction, theater, poetry, painting and performance, where boredom is often at the chilled heart of the matter presented, setting in motion events that threaten at any moment to collapse beneath their own exhausting weight.

How has such boredom, such dis/ease, been represented in literature and the arts? Why did it arise and how has it endured as a representable theme? And finally, perhaps paradoxically, how can boredom, “radical boredom,” be such a rich, revealing and, yes, fascinating focus for writers, artists and readers alike?

1. *Georg Büchner: Complete Plays & Prose*, by Büchner (1813-1837); Publisher: Hill and Wang; ISBN-10: 0809007274
2. *Madame Bovary* (1856), by Gustave Flaubert (Lydia Davis, trans.) Publisher: Penguin Classics; ISBN-10: 014310649X
3. *Notes from Underground* (1864); by Fyodor Dostoevsky Publisher: Wm. B. Eerdmans. ISBN-10: 0802845703
4. *Uncle Vanya* (1897), by Anton Chekhov (David Mamet) Publisher: Grove Press; ISBN-10: 0802131514
5. *The Book of Disquiet*, by Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935). Publisher: Penguin Classics; ISBN-10: 0141183047
6. *Mercier and Camier* (1946/1974), by Samuel Beckett. Publisher: Grove Press; ISBN-10: 0802144446
7. *Warhol*, by Klaus Honnef, Publisher: Taschen; ISBN-10: 3836543893

Handouts/PDF's:

1. “Boredom” (1924), by Siegfried Kracauer (chapter from the book, *The Mass Ornament*)
2. “The Rotation Method” (1843), by Søren Kierkegaard (from *Either/Or*)
3. *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), by Charles Baudelaire
4. “Lady with a Little Dog” (1899), by Anton Chekhov
5. “Lady in the Looking Glass” (1929), by Virginia Woolf
6. “Wiggle Room” (2009), by David Foster Wallace
7. *From A Philosophy of Boredom*, by Lars Svendsen
8. Gertrude Stein: a sampling of her writings.