

# BOREDOM

English 90BD

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30-11:45am EST, or as arranged with enrolled students

Professor: Dr. Elizabeth Phillips [she/her/hers] [ephillips@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ephillips@fas.harvard.edu)

Office Hours: Mondays and Thursdays, 3:00-4:30pm EST and by appointment



What is boredom? In many ways, it has likely never been more deeply felt, culturally contentious, and all-consuming than it is right now. But this feeling has a long and rich history in literature, drama, philosophy, and science. We will ask: how is the emotion of boredom destructive and/or generative? How might its effects and moral resonance change across lines of gender, race, and class? How does boredom transform or become magnified in spaces like schools, theaters, trench warfare, arctic winter, or solitary confinement?

## COURSE STRUCTURE AND ASSIGNMENTS

This is a discussion-based seminar. We meet on Zoom for 75 minutes twice a week (and anticipate many breaks, visual aids, and activities to break up those minutes) to discuss our relatively heavy load of dense, strange, and often arduous readings. Unlike other girls seminars, the readings in this course are not always meant to be useful, easy, or interesting. Most of our fiction/drama/poetry readings feature boredom in their content (like a character getting bored, or a description of how boredom feels or what it does). Some readings/viewings will purposefully create boredom in the reader. I hope they will motivate you to examine your own boredom and how it transpires within you. What does it make you do? How does it control you? How do you control it? Does it generate positive or negative feelings and actions? If you can't get through the readings, that is cool and useful for our discussions. If you can, there will be plenty to discuss

related to the content and phenomenology of attention; I, for one, find many beautiful, exquisite, and strange things to focus on within each reading. These “meta” questions—how to read, study, watch, attend, stay awake, be still, be motivated, find purpose, and so forth—will be as important as other, potentially more familiar, forms of literary discussion such as close reading, analysis of characters and themes, introduction of historical background, and philosophical speculation.

**There will be no essays assigned** in this course, though I am happy to coach and grade them, if you wish to write one or more English Papers this fall. Instead, each Thursday, I will assign a short **homework project** for the following Tuesday. It should take somewhere between 5-60 minutes to endure, experience, research, or prepare. These assignments might include: responding to a reading or presentation on Canvas discussion or Miro board, journaling, filming yourself doing an activity, creating a piece of sound art, dance, poetry, or visual art, becoming gravely bored, boring others, tracking your sleep, preparing a short presentation about a niche cultural phenomenon or literary subject, etc. **This is not a writing intensive course**, though I may ask that some of your work be submitted in writing, particularly if we begin regularly to run out of time to discuss each student’s work on Zoom, or if we are suffering under, e.g., time zone logistics. It will be useful to set aside some time each week from Friday to Monday to complete your readings and homework. I recognize, however, that this semester may be very unpredictable in terms of physical health, university policies, and political life, so my chief concern is that you remain in communication with me over email and regularly attend (at least once or twice a month) my Zoom office hours (Monday and Thursday 3-4:30EST), so that if the assignments aren’t getting done, I can make alternative accommodations for your bandwidth and learning style.

These scaffolded homework assignments will guide you to your **final project**. For the final assignment, you will create and articulate **your own theory of boredom**. You could share this with the class in any form. It could be an artistic work, a shared experience, a social experiment, a novella, a manifesto, etc. of your own design, relying on your own point of view and skills in other disciplines (music, math, journalism, psychology, dog training, baking?) to engage the questions we ask in the course from a new perspective. The logic, scope, and design of your project will be approved by me in a prospectus stage (in writing, due Nov. 13), and you will spend the last month of the course working on it. You may complete your own final project or work in pairs or small groups. Depending on your project’s medium and scope, I may encourage you to write a reflection or provide theoretical discussion of an artistic/experimental project.

## Schedule of Course Meetings

Week 1.

Th, Sept 3: Introduction to Course  
Jenny Odell, *How to do Nothing* Ch. 4 “Exercises in Attention”

Week 2. BORED IN THE HOUSE AND I’M IN THE HOUSE BORED

Tue, Sept 8: Gustav Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)

Th, Sep 10: Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* (1890)  
Émile Zola, “Preface to *Therèse Raquin*” (1873), “Naturalism in the Theater” (1881)

Week 3. PSYCHOLOGY OF BOREDOM

Tue, Sept 15: Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya* (1899)  
Laura Goering, "Russian Nervousness: Neurasthenia and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Russia"  
Otto Fenichel, excerpt from *The Psychology of Boredom* (1934)

Th, Sep 17: Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903)  
David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (2011) (excerpts)

Week 4. ENNUI

Tue, Sept 22: Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892) (excerpts)

Th, Sep 24: Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (1884)

Week 5. STOKING IMAGINATION

Tue, Sept 29: Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Blind* (1890), selected poems from *Hothouses* (1889), "The Tragical in Daily Life" (1896)

Th, Oct 1: Charles Baudelaire, "Spleen and Ideal" from *The Flowers of Evil* (1857)  
John Berryman, "Dream Songs 14"

Week 6. ETERNAL CONDITIONS and RADICAL OPTIMISM/PESSIMISM

Tue, Oct 6: Karel Čapek, *The Makropoulos Case* (1922)  
Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in *Problems of the Self* (1973)

Th, Oct 8: Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence" (1891)  
Élie Metchnikoff, [The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies](#) (excerpts)

Week 7. EXISTENTIALISM

Tue, Oct 13: Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1940)  
Friedrich Nietzsche, excerpts from *The Gay Science* (1882)

Th, Oct 15: Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (1944)

Week 8. HERMENEUTIC FATIGUE

Tue, Oct 20: Sianne Ngai, from *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Introduction and Chapter 6 ("Stuplimity")

Th, Oct 22: Gertrude Stein, *An Exercise in Analysis* (1917), *A Circular Play* (1920), *Short Sentences* (1932)

Week 9. WAITING

Tue, Oct 27: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1953)

Th, Oct 29: Martin Heidegger, excerpts from *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929)

Week 10. SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Tue, Nov 3: ELECTION DAY; NO CLASS

Th, Nov 5: Stuart Grassian, "The Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement" (2006)  
Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance, 1978 – 1979* (Cage Piece), 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece), and 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)

Week 11. BLACKNESS AND BOREDOM

Tue, Nov 10: August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (1987)  
Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963)

Th, Nov 12: [Prison Songs \(From The Mississippi State Penitentiary\)](#)

Friday, Nov 13:  
FINAL PROJECTS PROSPECTUS DUE (email, 5pm EST)



Week 12. SILENCE

Tue, Nov 17: John Cage, *4'33"* (1952)  
Jay Z, *4:44* (2017)

Th, Nov 19: Andy Warhol, *Eat* (1963)

Week 13. STILLNESS

Tue, Nov 24: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (1979)

Th, Nov 26: Thanksgiving; NO CLASS

Week 14. BOREDOM GAMES

Tue, Dec 1: Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018)

Th, Dec 3: Episodes from *Naked and Afraid*, *The Bachelor*

Monday, Dec 14:  
FINAL PROJECTS DUE, presented during exam period or emailed by 5pm EST

## GRADING

This course will be graded on a **contract basis**. This means that during the first week of the course, I will meet with each student individually to determine the mutually agreed upon requirements for participation and rigor (or lack thereof, as needed). **In other words, there will be no B/C/D grades for the course, unless you want one.**

Given the unfathomably stressful conditions under which you are now attending Harvard College, if your work is satisfactory, meaning:

- You attend an agreed upon number of synchronous Zoom meetings,
- You complete or view an agreed upon number of readings, group work, and asynchronous content,
- You complete an agreed upon number homework projects,
- You submit a final project prospectus,
- You submit a reasonable, interesting, thoughtful final project (rubric to be distributed at a later date),

I will submit an A for you, or a Pass/Sat, as discussed with each student. I will work to ensure fairness, flexibility, and equity, and create an environment of stability, learning, creative fulfillment, and health.

For Student 1, an A might look like attending 90% of Zooms, participating in 50% of asynchronous course content, completing 10/14 homework assignments, writing a prospectus, and making a 20 minute film. For Student 2, this might look like completing 100% of asynchronous content with strong participation in online asynchronous discussions, but only showing up to a couple of synchronous Zoom discussions, completing all of the course readings and submitting vivid, fantastic assignments, and writing a 14-page paper in December.

I have no draconian requirements for your camera being on or what you wear or what your bedroom looks like. I do require that you remain in communication, be conscientious, and treat your classmates with respect and decorum—part and parcel of that policy being that you approach each other's ideas with enthusiasm, mutual support, and kindness appropriate to a semester backlit by global emergency.

## ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

*Disability accommodation.* Students with disabilities are encouraged to request accommodation, as soon as is convenient, through Harvard's [Accessible Education Office](#). Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. I will work with students and AEO officers to create captioning, asynchronous content, and accessible options for different learning styles as needed.

*Academic honesty and collaboration.* Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failing grades on assignments to dismissal from the course or even more serious actions. Here's [The Harvard College Honor Code](#):

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity—that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

If you have questions about what constitutes proper collaboration, or about how to cite lectures, sections, conversations with peers, and other fleeting inspiration, ask me.