

Emily Cater
 University of North Alabama
 ecater@una.edu

A Response to the Affective Turn

The turn of affect in the humanities and sciences appears to be a huge point of interest, but the issue of the affective study is the difficulty to define and interpret affect. Brian Massumi's article "The Autonomy of Affect" in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* generated a response from two scholars of the humanities, Mary Favret and Ruth Leys. In general, affects seems to be connected with emotions, feelings, mood, etc. and is appealing to literature studies especially those in Romantic studies. Romantic literature is full of emotions and moods and feelings in the author's response to nature. The question is how do we react or what is the 'affect' of certain stimuli, and what causes this reaction. Scholars such as Massumi, want to distinguish what affect is in relation to the mind and body where the mind and body are completely separate. Massumi "presents affect as an autonomic system, functioning alongside but independent of cognition and understood separately, as it were, by the body: by skin, pulse, sweat glands, neurological impulses etc." (Favret 1159). In layman's terms, affect is free from the external control of the body and independent of the internal control of the mind. Massumi claims that affect is its own outside system that "is not ownable and recognizable and therefore resistant to critique" (Massumi 28). Massumi goes on in his study to examine the connection between the mind and body with the autonomy of affect. Affect is like a two-sided coin in relation to the mind and the body, or as Massumi terms it "virtual" and "actual" (35). The key thing to understand, according to Massumi, about affect is the openness of affect and that it needs to be considered in cultural theory. Already, it is evident that the concept and application of affect is a slippery concept to understand.

I feel like this is a really difficult theory to apply to literature, because in literature, especially Romanticism, feelings and emotions of the individual are so important. This is where I feel Favret really helps take Massumi's study and makes it better to understand in terms of Romantic literature. Favret acknowledges the "slippery ground" of affect and how affect's "vagrant nature" allows it "to be used opportunistically to cover a range of needs" (Favret 1159). In other words, we may have the ability to use the affect in a range of fields and studies. Favret's study is on affect with Romanticism. She uses an article called, 'The Affective Revolution in 1790's Britain,' where affect is a combination of emotion and body or internal and external states (1159-1160). This is in concordance with Massumi's claim of the duality of affect. At some point, it is possible to generalize that we can be moved by literature and that what moves us is the affect. She also shows how scholars have connected affect with sexuality which shows us that affect and emotions are definitely connected. Favret claims that affect "allows its students to return to esthetics" or "what *moves* us" as readers (1160). Here, we can start to see a connection between affect and literature. In Romanticism, writers and readers experience the feeling emotion we get from a sense of beauty, and here again there is a link between affect and emotion. The work of Romantic literature evokes a "proliferation" of affects such as contempt, joy, fear, gratitude, shame, etc. (1160). Edmund Burke and Emily Dickinson are introduced and classified as some of those 18th and 19th century writers who can be seen using having a bodily response to poetry. Romantic writers placed a heavy emphasis on feeling and perception, and the goal of affect study is an attempt to answer why.

Favret's article helps us understand how affect plays a role in this literary period. Adela Pinch examines passion and feeling as individual and centered in "forms of social and textual circulation" (1162). Passion was influenced by outside forces; during this time, there was a change in public emotions. It became common for men and women to publicly display emotions as a sign of sensitivity and good breeding so here, feeling in relation to mood became a shared "affective atmosphere" (1162). This change in feelings and emotion is definitely present in Romantic poetry and Victorian novels. Favret continues on to claim that literature serves as a flexible mediator of affect and allows affect to be looked at objectively, even though a work may have been written subjectively. According to Kevis Goodman, "through its affective charge, poetry mediates and bears witness to history" (1165). With this way of thinking about affect, Favret claims Goodman is making a new path for New Historicism by linking the different concerns of affective studies. Goodman's way of viewing affective excess as a record of unknowable history along with Massumi's study and Ruth Leys' article gives literature studies a new way of studying, critiquing, and teaching Romantic literature.

Leys adds to Massumi's study of affect through a critique, and she does a great job of breaking down Massumi's study and theory. She disagrees with the claim that there is no difference or distinction between affect and emotion. Through her critique and examination, we can continue to claim that Romantics use a certain emotional affect in a lyric voice and make the connection between emotion, affect, and history. The new field of affect studies is definitely an interesting one and I feel that it can be productively used in tandem with other critical theories when analyzing texts.

Works Cited

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- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, 2011, pp. 434-472.
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