

BAD FEELINGS: sadness + gender in contemporary culture



UCD Humanities Institute
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UCD School of English, Drama & Film
Scoil na Bhéarla, na Drámaíochta agus na Scannáilochta UCD

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In 2015, *i-D* magazine declared the year of the ‘sad girl’. In the decade since, portrayals of depressed, anxious, and mentally burdened women have scarcely abated, from the breakout success of Sally Rooney to the emergence of Sad Girl BookTok to Gen Z’s recent rediscovery of Lana Del Rey. Meanwhile, in the academy, subfields such as Affect Theory, Disability Studies, and Madness Studies represent growing areas of interest for increasing numbers of researchers and students. Read alongside a generational decline in living standards and prospects, these conjoined cultural and scholarly phenomena suggest that we inhabit a contemporary moment in which non-normative ways of surviving – emotionally, mentally, affectively – assume ever greater importance. In this milieu, sadness, anhedonia, malaise, lethargy, and melancholy all emerge as specifically gendered iterations of a broader, generational ‘structure of feeling’, figuring, perhaps, as a feminised counterpart to the ‘angry young man’ who continues to animate *New York Times* Op-Eds, internet culture, and popular discourse on the reinvigoration of the ‘gender wars’. This conference takes contemporary representations of female sadness as its critical object, asking how we might read the ‘sad girl’ as an artefact of the historic – late capitalist and neoconservative – present. While mental health remains largely the preserve of Biomedical and/or Psychology departments, this conference will foreground interdisciplinary and intersectional humanities perspectives on gendered emotion, thereby widening the scope of what counts as knowledge, and who count as experts, on mental health and wellbeing.

A non-exhaustive list of topics includes:

- Representations of sadness beyond the biomedical paradigm
- Heteropessimism + hetero-nostalgia
- The contemporary fetishisation of female passivity (the ‘Trad Wife’, etc.)
- The pathologisation of sadness
- ‘Cosmetic psychopharmacology’ (Peter Kramer)
- Psychosurgeries + the medicalisation of emotions
- Sadness + collectivity
- Hustle culture vs. depression, anomie, ennui, inertia
- Sadness + Disability Studies: from illness-to-cure narratives to neurodiversity
- Moral evaluation of sadness from self-care to wellness
- Sadness + Left melancholia
- Sadness and/as political feeling

Keynotes

Prof. Anne Whitehead (Newcastle)

Prof. David James (Birmingham)

Disability + Sadness Roundtable

Dr Veronica Heney (Durham)

Dr Lucy Burke (Manchester Met.)

Ruairí Kennedy (Galway)

Please email abstracts of 250 words and brief author bios to Dr Orlaith Darling and Dr Fionnula Simpson at sadnessandgender2026@gmail.com by **1 Jan. 2026**.

