On Writing and Being Poor: Samuel Johnson to Roberto Bolaño
Instructor: Thomas Leonard-Roy (tleonardroy@g.harvard.edu)

How have writers from the past three centuries depicted their experiences of poverty? How have writers from unprivileged backgrounds confronted literary failure and success? What is the legacy of eighteenth-century associations of writing with drudgery and need? More broadly, what is the relationship between being poor and being a writer, between poverty and culture? In our effort to answer these questions, we will read narratives of poor writers in novels, poetry, tales, engravings, biography, memoir, and confession from the eighteenth century until now. Readings will take us from the Grub Streets of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London, through Switzerland, France, and Italy, to the streets of Oslo, Chicago, and Mexico City, to rural southern Ontario and the Sonoran Desert.

Critical and theoretical readings will raise issues of social class and stratification, literary failure and canon formation, rural versus urban poverty, mercenary writing, readers and reception, transnationalism, horror and the Gothic, and how poverty intersects with class, gender, and race.

General goals of the junior tutorial: The main goal of the junior tutorial is to introduce students to advanced literary study by reading primary texts alongside critical and theoretical works that adopt various methods and perspectives. Students will conduct their own research on a topic of their choice. The ultimate product of this research will be the critical essay. We will devote plenty of time to discussing sources, research practices, argumentation, and finding your own voice in critical writing.

Goals of this tutorial: To read and think together about accounts of writers facing poverty since the early eighteenth century. To uncover a neglected tradition of writing about being poor without erasing the differences between these writers, texts, and contexts. To discuss how experiences of poverty shape subject matter, style, mood, and genre. To discover how literary critics can discuss experiences of poverty in meaningful ways.

Primary course readings:

NB: I will provide copies of the starred readings, many of which are also available in excellent online editions. Students will be responsible for the rest of the texts, all of which are available in libraries and the cheap editions specified.

Alexander Pope, The Dunciad *
Samuel Johnson, Life of Savage *
Laetitia Pilkington, selections from Memoirs *
Frances Brooke, The Excursion *
---. Discourse on Inequality, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford World’s Classics)
Assignments and grading:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Short essay (5-7pp)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Due week 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prospectus and annotated bibliography</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Due week 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>First draft of critical essay</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Due week 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second draft of critical essay</td>
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<td>Due week 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final critical essay (20-25pp)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Due week 14</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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Schedule:

*NB:* I strongly recommend that students read Part 1 of Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* before classes begin. This is quite a long novel—and perfect summer reading.

**Week 1. Introduction: “I was twenty-something and poorer than a church mouse...”**

Roberto Bolaño, “Sensini”; *The Savage Detectives*, Part 1
Samuel Johnson, letters to Edward Cave and the Earl of Chesterfield

**Criticism and theory:** Gavin Jones, “Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism”;
Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat, from *Understanding Roberto Bolaño*

***Course registration deadline: September 9***

**UNIT 1. LITERATURE AND POVERTY IN THE 18TH CENTURY**

**Week 2. What was Grub Street?**
Samuel Johnson, *Life of Savage*
Richard Savage, from *An Author to be Lett*
Excerpt from “Grub Street edition” of *Arabian Nights Entertainments*
William Hogarth, *The Distressed Poet* (engraving)
Week 3. Grub Street and gender
Laetitia Pilkington, from Memoirs
Frances Brooke, The Excursion
Criticism and theory: Heidi Hartmann, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and the Subordination of Women”; Betty Schellenberg, from The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Week 4. Literary outsiders
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, Books 1-3; Discourse on Inequality; from Reveries of the Solitary Walker
Herbert Croft, from Love and Madness: A Story Too True (on Thomas Chatterton)
Bolaño, “Vagabond in France and Belgium”
Criticism and theory: Pierre Bourdieu, from Distinction; Angelica Goodden, from Rousseau’s Hand: The Crafting of a Writer

*** Short paper due ***

Week 5. Visit to Houghton Library

UNIT 2. POVERTY, CLASS, AND WRITING IN AMERICA

Week 6. Poverty and genre: “weaving the dull world around us into dreams…”
Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” “Dave’s Neckliss”
Amiri Baraka, “Incident,” “Like Rousseau,” “Snake Eyes,” “What Is Undug Will Be”

Week 7. Poverty, race, and the city
Richard Wright, Black Boy (American Hunger)
Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Lovers of the Poor,” “We Real Cool,” “The Life of Lincoln West,” “Young Heroes,” “The Egg Boiler”
Criticism and theory: Horace Cayton Jr., from Black Metropolis; Carla Cappetti, from Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel
Week 8. Rural Canadian Künstlerroman
Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*
James Joyce, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
Bolaño, “Last Evenings on Earth”
Criticism and theory: Margaret Atwood, from *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*; Roxanne Rimstead, from *Remnants of Nation: On Poverty Narratives by Women*

*** Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due***

UNIT 3. WRITING, LABOUR, AND COMPARATIVE MODERNISMS

Week 9. New Grub Street and character
George Gissing, *New Grub Street*
Criticism and theory: Karl Marx, from *Capital*; Alex Woloch, from *The One vs. The Many*

Week 10. Writing, working, starving
Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*
George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*
Criticism and theory: Alys Moody, from *The Art of Hunger: Aesthetic Autonomy and the Afterlives of Modernism*; Franco Moretti, from *The Bourgeois*

*** First draft due ***

UNIT 4. IN CONCLUSION: HOW WE REMEMBER POVERTY

Week 11. Poverty, obscurity, disappearance
Bolaño, *Savage Detectives*, Part 2, chaps. 1-12
Rousseau, Preface to the *Neuchâtel* Edition of *Confessions*
“William Pattison (1706-27), poet,” “Stephen Duck (1705?-56), poet,” and “Mary Leapor (1722-46), poet” (entries from *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*)
Criticism and theory: Giancarlo Maiorino, “Picaresque Econopoetics: At the Watershed of Living Standards”; Tim Hitchcock, from *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London*

Week 12. Poverty and criticism
Bolaño, *Savage Detectives*, Part 2, chaps. 13-26, Part 3; “The Vagaries of the Literature of Doom,” “On Literature, the National Literature Prize, and the Rare
Consolations of the Writing Life,” “Who Would Dare?,,” Interview with Mónica Maristain from *Playboy*

James Boswell, from *Life of Johnson*


*** Second draft due ***

**Week 13. Peer draft workshop**

*** Final essay due Week 14 ***