

Precarious Lives: tales of survival at the margins of English society

Instructor: Samuel Diener

sdiener@g.harvard.edu

Office Hours: TBA

Class Description:

The emergence of capitalist forms of market society in England saw a myriad of textual genres attempting to represent the lives of people surviving at the margins: pirates, prostitutes, highwaymen, thieves, criminals, foundlings, slaves, and people who were just plain poor. In this class, we will look at some of these “lives” of the socially outcast, the different, and the down-and-out, both biographical and fictional, from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries. We will consider the relationship of these tales to the history of the novel from Eliza Haywood to Charles Dickens and the questions these texts raise about who has the claim to fully human personhood or why, in a “free” society, some people seem to have so much less success than others. We will think about how the stories we tell shape (and are shaped by) our social institutions and our collective optimism or despair.

Along the way, we will consider various methods and frameworks for analysis. We will look at some theories of the rise of the novel and other kinds of prose narrative. How do we talk about lived experiences? What kinds of stories about the world do people want to read, and why?

We will also seek to understand the way literary forms are entangled with social forms. How are economic and social lives regulated by law, the threat of state violence, and the ways—good or bad—that we are made to feel about ourselves? Does Literature offer useful ways to wrestle with our world’s trouble? These questions are not only urgent in our present but necessary to understand our past.



Tutorial Goals:

General Goals

To discover the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write a 20-25pp research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:

- Design a research question
- Identify possible theoretical and methodological frameworks for answering that question
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism
- Identify key primary sources for the research question and develop appropriate methodological approaches to them
- Write with clarity and precision

Course-Specific Goals

This class also aims to prepare you to speak and write articulately about a particular set of questions related to its theme and historical period. You will be able to:

- Describe various histories of the 18th & 19th century “rise of the novel” and situate your own research in relation to them.
- Discuss theories of literary subject-formation and character, particularly with respect to intersections with race, class, and gender.
- Articulate your own approach to the complex differences between genres and between fiction and nonfiction.

Assignments:

Short Essay (Week 5, 10%): A 5-7 page paper that focuses on an extended close reading of a primary text, or one that applies a close-read critical model to a close-read literary text; this will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss the paper.

Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography (Week 6, 15%): two page prospectus of your final paper project. An annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources should accompany the prospectus. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized.

Final Paper (Reading Period, 40%): 25 page paper on (e.g.) a major literary work *not* read in this class; you will engage substantially with secondary sources and/or theoretical texts.

Participation & Preparation (25%): A small seminar like this one thrives only when you have read and thought about the texts before we've met. There will also be ungraded mini-assignments from time to time to complement your reading.

Minor Assignments (10%):

- o ResponsePaper#1 (Week 3): A 1-page response paper that offers a close reading of one of the primary sources.
- o ResponsePaper#2 & Presentation#1 (Week 7): A 1-page response paper that engages with a secondary source and a 5-minute presentation describing that source's method and conclusions.
- o Presentation#2 (Week 8): A 5-minute conference-style presentation of the paper prospectus.

Required Texts:

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*. (Norton, 2004)
Mary Prince, *History of Mary Prince*. (Penguin, 2001)
Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (Penguin, 2004)
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Penguin, 1996)
Possible switch-in: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Penguin, 2003)

All other texts will be provided in PDF and as printed handouts.

Critical Readings:

This class will deploy an array of critical methodologies and theoretical points of view, but it will focus on Marxist criticism after the manner of Jameson and on theories of affect and precarity after the manner of Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and the work being done by 18th-century historians of emotion. All texts will be provided in PDF and as printed handouts.

Ahmed, Sara. 'Affective Economies.' *Social Text* 22.2 (2004): 117–139.
Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think* (2005) Introduction and Chapter 1.
Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism." *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010).
K.O.L. Burridge, "Levi-Strauss and Myth," in *Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Leach. (1967).
Judith Butler, *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence* (2004), selections.
Friedrich Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1854), selections.
Lincoln Faller, *Turned to account : The forms and functions of criminal biography*. (1987) Introduction.
Foucault, Jacques. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (1995.) Selections.
Anthony John Harding, "Commerce, Sentiment, and Free Air: Contradictions of Abolitionist Rhetoric." In *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770-1830*. (2013)
Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (1981) Selections.
Philippe Lejeune, "The autobiographical contract," in *French Literary Theory Today* (1982).
Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character*, (1998) selections.
Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867, trans. 1887), selections.
William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of the Emotions* (2001).
Selections.
Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery* (2002). Introduction.
Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (2007), selections.
Daniel Tyler, "Style and the making of character in Dickens," in *Dickens's Style* (2013).
Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*. (1957) Selections.
Possible addition: David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*. (2003). Chapter 1. (with *Olaudah Equiano*)

Schedule:

Week 1 (January 28): Intro: Discussion & framing. What is “precarity”? How might Literature respond to the problems of society?

Section 1: Picaresque Wanderings, Criminal Lives

We’ll begin this class with a look at how picaresque themes and narrative techniques are transformed in the beginning of the 18th century, with a particular emphasis on novel form. We’ll also consider language of legal repercussions and penal codes as well as the tactical choices each woman makes while within social and economic structures that work to her disadvantage.

Week 2 (February 4): Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*.

Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think*: Introduction and Chapter 1.

Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*. (1957) Selections.

Week 3 (February 11): *Moll Flanders* (finish). Eliza Haywood, *Fantomima, or Love in a Maze*.

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (1981) Selections.

Short response: “close reading.”



We will also look at two very short accounts of real-life lawbreakers in the eighteenth century alongside *Moll Flanders* & *Fantomima*. Since these texts have long been read through a Marxist theoretical lens, we will use that lens to think about the social functions of the criminal narrative, and the ways that it works to enforce compliance and reinforce social stratification.

Week 4 (February 18): Capt. Charles Johnson, *Lives of Captain James Hind*, Thomas Savage (1734).

Anon., *The Trial at Large, Behaviour, and Dying Declaration, of Mary Edmundson* (1759).

K.O.L. Burridge, “Levi-Strauss and Myth,” in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (1967).

Lincoln Faller, *Turned to account: The forms and functions of criminal biography*. (1987) Introduction.

Houghton visit sometime this week: we'll look at a range of textual artifacts that relate to criminal lives or that (in preparation for the next section) articulate, demonstrate, or process emotion.

Section 2: The Gothic: Horror And The World of Work

In this unit, we will read *Villette* and discuss the elements that the Gothic tradition might inherit from earlier ways of representing the perilous, the precarious, and their psychological toll. We will wonder about 1). how literary form can generate skin-crawling, hair-raising effects, and 2). the way such literature might enable the reader to negotiate their life's own bad feelings. We will read some recent theory, and we'll think about how we might use it to understand both the feelings of work and the work of feelings over their long historical past.

Week 5 (February 25): Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*

Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (2007), selections.

Foucault, Jacques. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (Vintage, 1995.) Selections.

Short Papers (5-7 pages) Due.

Meetings in office hours this week to discuss potential paper topics.

Week 6 (March 3): (*Villette* cont.)

Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism." *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010).

William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (2001). Selections.

Diary of the housekeeper of the Bishop of Oxford, 1745. Beinecke Library. C 291. NRA 18661 Osborn coll. Available online.

In-class exercise: scanning, skimming, reading: sorting through secondary sources.

Research consultation with librarian this week.



Week 7 (March 10): Interlude

This week will offer an opportunity to read ahead for students who wish to write about texts or topics to be covered later in the course. If there is collective interest on one of the later sections, we can preview it this week; if not, we can use this class period to discuss the primary theoretical approaches we have considered and the task (and problems) of engaging with a theoretical conversation in papers focused on questions of literary style and form.

Final Paper Prospectus Due. Required meeting in office hours to discuss feedback and next steps.

March 17: SPRING BREAK

Section 3: Abolitionism & Moral Sentiment

In his essay “Expressive Language,” the poet Imamu Amiri Baraka writes, “Speech is the effective form of a culture . . . Very soon after the first generations of Afro-Americans mastered the language, they invented white people called Abolitionists.” In this unit, we will consider the way that free(d) Blacks (and white abolitionist editors) deployed narratives of struggle and survival to generate sentimental identification and sustain social critique. We will wonder how people’s theories about how their emotions work have shaped both the development of literary form and the forms of political activism since the eighteenth century.

Week 8 (March 24): Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*.

Anthony John Harding, “Commerce, Sentiment, and Free Air: Contradictions of Abolitionist Rhetoric.”

Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Penguin, 2010). Selections.

Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery* (Minnesota UP: 2002). Introduction.

In-class exercise: presenting (Presentation#2) and workshopping prospectuses.



Section 4: Memoir Form

This week we will consider the way that one person of working-class origins represented his own life. We will use this narrative to think about the genre of memoir, the representation of the self, and formal markers of the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction.

(Note: based on student interest, either this week's reading or the previous week's reading could be swapped out with *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.)

Week 9 (March 31): James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington (1791)*. Project Gutenberg.

Philippe Lejeune, "The autobiographical contract," in *French Literary Theory Today* (1982).

Short response: find & summarize an article about your research topic & present it in class (Presentation#2)

Section 5: Dickens—Comic Characters, Precarious Life

In this section, we will have a look at the work of Dickens. We will consider the novel subgenre of the bildungsroman, which tracks the development of a character from childhood or youth into adulthood. The arc of the bildungsroman implies a depth of character, and yet Dickens' characters often seem on the very edge of caricature. What can we make of their contradictions? How do Dickens' characterizations, his plots, and his stylistic choices grapple with the problems of poverty? Finally, we will come back to the social and economic problems this class has covered all along by reading the work of a key theorist of poverty and precariousness, Judith Butler, and we will wonder how each of the texts we have read have marked those whose loss is worthy to be mourned.

Week 10 (April 7): Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (or other, depending on student interest and writing progress)

Friedrich Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England* & Karl Marx *Capital*, selections: particular emphasis on the "reserve army of labor."

Judith Butler, *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence* (2004), selections.

Week 11 (April 14): (Dickens cont.)

Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character*, selections.

Daniel Tyler, "Style and the making of character in Dickens," in *Dickens's Style* (2013).

**Week 12 (April 21): Writing, finish Dickens.
Paper draft due (min. 18 pgs.).**

Week 13 (April 28): Writing.

**In-class exercise: reverse-outlining workshop,
discussion of revising and polishing prose.**



Images: 1. Cover image of Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Penguin, 2010. 2. William Hogarth, *Harlot's Progress*, engraving 1, 1732. 3. Cover image of *The Complete Works of Charlotte Bronte*, Harperperennial, 2014. 4. 'Am I Not A Woman And A Sister' American Typefounder's Cut From William Lloyd Garrison's Abolitionist Newspaper *The Liberator*, 1832. 5. "The terrible stranger in the churchyard," illustration by Frederick William Pailthorpe from the 1885 Robson & Kerslake edition of *Great Expectations*.