

## On Writing and Being Poor: Samuel Johnson to Roberto Bolaño

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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* \*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford World's Classics).

---. *Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford World's Classics)

Edgar Allan Poe, tales and criticism \*  
Charles Chesnutt, stories \*  
Amiri Baraka, tales and poems \*  
Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. and ed. Sverre Lyngstad (Penguin)  
George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. Katherine Mullin (Oxford World's Classics)  
George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Harcourt)  
Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (Vintage)  
Gwendolyn Brooks, poems \*  
Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (Harper)  
Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (Picador)

### **Assignments and grading:**

Short essay (5-7pp): 10%	<i>Due week 4</i>
Prospectus and annotated bibliography: 10%	<i>Due week 8</i>
First draft of critical essay: 10%	<i>Due week 10</i>
Second draft of critical essay: 10%	<i>Due week 12</i>
Final critical essay (20-25pp): 40%	<i>Due week 14</i>
Participation: 20%	

### **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 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### **Week 2. What was Grub Street?**

Samuel Johnson, *Life of Savage*  
Richard Savage, from *An Author to be Lett*  
Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, Books 1-2  
Excerpt from “Grub Street edition” of *Arabian Nights Entertainments*  
William Hogarth, *The Distressed Poet* (engraving)

Criticism and theory: Karl Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital”; Adam Rounce, from *Fame and Failure, 1720-1800*; Pat Rogers, from *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture*

### **Week 3. Grub Street and gender**

Laetitia Pilkington, from *Memoirs*

Frances Brooke, *The Excursion*

Jonathan Swift, “On Poetry”

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...”**

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Gold-Bug,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” “The Literati of New York City”

Charles Chesnutt, “The Gophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” “Dave’s Neckliss”

Amiri Baraka, “Incident,” “Like Rousseau,” “Snake Eyes,” “What Is Undug Will Be”

Criticism and theory: Max Weber, “Class, Status, Party”; Gavin Jones, “Poor Poe: On the Literature of Revulsion”

### **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*  
Criticism and theory: Will Corral, “Bolaño, Ethics, and the Experts”; Sarah Pollack, “Latin American Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* in the United States”

\*\*\* Second draft due \*\*\*

### **Week 13. Peer draft workshop**

\*\*\* Final essay due Week 14 \*\*\*