INCARCERATION AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.

So begins the main body of Nathanael Hawthorne’s 1850 masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne’s statement exemplifies a long American literary fascination with incarceration. It also speaks to an important social and political history. For, Hawthorne’s novel was written near the peak of a multi-decade period of dramatic change in American life—one that saw the creation of the modern prison system and that witnessed alongside it the development of some of the crucial and enduring institutions of American life: popular democracy, the capitalist marketplace, the domestic family, mass slavery and the ideology of white supremacy, among others. All these recently defined institutions played significant roles in Hawthorne’s life and art, as they did in the work of many of his most illustrious contemporaries. For Hawthorne, as for several of his peers, these issues often seemed most clearly framed when seen through a prison door.

Why? Well, that is a question we’ll consider in various ways over the course of this semester. For now, keep in mind that *The Scarlet Letter* is but one of many rich literary texts, written during the antebellum era and since that time, that seeks to understand core issue of democracy in the United States by focusing on the institution of the prison. For Hawthorne and for many other writers, both celebrated and neglected, prison stories pose in especially stark ways some fundamental questions about law, justice, power, and crime, and about their relation to the pillars of social order, among them gender, sexuality, and race.

In this course, we will consider Hawthorne’s novel and other works that respond to the central role of incarceration in American life. How do these texts understand the significance of imprisonment? What relation do they see between the prison and democracy? Between prison and slavery? Between prison and industrial capitalism? Between prison and the norms of American society, including those of gender, sex, status, and race? Between, not least, prison and literary expression itself?

We will only be able to read a small sample of the vast range of relevant literature. Our main goal will be to understand some of the enduring patterns of narrative and symbolism that have
cohered around imprisonment in the U.S., but we will also seek to develop a sense of the extent to which images and stories of incarceration have shifted as criminal justice policy in the U.S. and the ideologies and methods of punishment and rehabilitation have changed over time.

REQUIREMENTS

Because this is a research-option course, there are two broad ways to fulfill the writing requirements of the course. See course Moodle for fuller explanations of writing assignments.

Non-research-option

- Three position papers (3-4 pp each); choose any three of five assigned dates (30% of final grade)
- Three short responses (one page each) to peer position papers; choose any three of five assigned dates
- Term paper (10-15 pp) considering in depth any 2 or more primary works assigned during the course (at least one, not previously discussed in a position paper) and citing at least 2 supplemental readings

Research option

Please note, submission of a research paper proposal by October 7 will serve as your notice to me that you intend to complete the research-option version of the course.

- One position papers (2-4 pp each); choose any date
- One short response (one page each) to peer position paper; choose any date
- research paper proposals (one page)
- One survey of critical literature
- One annotated bibliography
- Research paper (15 -20 pp)

Requirements for all students

- Class attendance is a requirement of the course; two or more unexcused absences will result in a penalty to your grade.
• Please bring hard copies of primary readings to class on the days when they are due to be discussed.

• Following notice of the paper groups to which you have been assigned, please identify on the Moodle wiki by September 12 the dates on which you intend to submit position papers and response papers.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Don Carpenter, *Hard Rain Falling*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*
H. Bruce Franklin, ed., *Prison Writing in Twentieth-Century America*
Nathanael Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
Piper Kerman, *Orange is the New Black*
Simon Ortiz, *from Sand Creek*
Albert Race Sample, *Racehoss: Big Emma’s Boy*
Supplementary readings posted on course Moodle (m)

LAPTOP POLICY

Electronic devices—including laptops, smartphones, and tablets—may not be used during class time without express permission of the instructor.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible (during the 2nd or 3rd week of the semester), so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at [www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html).
WRITING TUTOR

Jenna Shapiro (Class of 2017) ([jshapiro02@wesleyan.edu](mailto:jshapiro02@wesleyan.edu)) will be the writing tutor for this course. Please consult Jenna for advice about assignments, feedback on drafts, consideration for revisions, etc.

REVISION POLICY

With the exception of final papers, any returned assignment for the course may be revised and resubmitted, and the highest mark the assignment receives will be the official grade. Three provisos apply, however: (1) In order to submit a revision, you must notify me of your intent to revise the essay and schedule an appointment with myself or Jenna Shapiro to discuss the assignment within two weeks of my returning the original assignment to you. (2) Revisions must be submitted within one month of the return of the assignment. (3) Revisions must be submitted in two documents. One using MS-Word’s “track changes” function or another mode of annotation to indicating the changes you’ve made, and one clean version of the final document.

SCHEDULE

9/5 course introduction


*Group A position paper*

9/14 “A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life and Remarkable Conversion of Patience Boston” (m)

*Group B response paper*
9/19  Emily Dickinson, selected poems (m)
Edgar Allan Poe, “The Pit and the Pendulum”; “The Cask of Amontillado” (m)
Selections from, Bandits & Bibles: Convict Literature in Nineteenth-Century America (m)

**Group C position paper**

9/21  Charles Dickens, “Philadelphia and its Solitary Prison,” American Notes for General Circulation (m)
Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

**Group A response paper**

9/26  Nathanael Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter
Caleb Smith, “Civil Death and Carceral Life,” The Prison and the American Imagination (m)

**Group B position paper**

9/28  Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter

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**Group C response paper**

10/3  Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
Orlando Patterson, “Honor and Degradation,” Slavery and Social Death (m)

Recommended:
George Fitzhugh, “Labor, Skill, and Capital”; “Government a Thing of Force, Not of Consent,” Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters (m)
Selection from, William Harper, “Memoir on Slavery” (m)
Group A position paper

10/5  Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*
Angela Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System” (m)

Group B response paper

Research paper proposal due (N.B., this assignment is only for students taking the research-option version of the course.)

10/10 “From Plantation to Penitentiary,” *Prison Writings in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. H. H. Bruce Franklin
Selections from *Leadbelly Songbook* (m)
Alan Lomax, “Rise Up, Dead Man,” *The Land Where the Blues Began* (m)
       Recommended: David M. Oshinsky, “Prologue,” “The Mississippi Plan,” *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (m)

Group C position paper

10/12  Albert Race Sample, *Racehoss: Big Emma’s Boy*

Group A response paper

10/17  Sample, *Racehoss: Big Emma’s Boy*
       Robert Perkins, introduction, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America’s Prison Empire* (m)

10/19  William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*

Group A, B, or C position paper

10/24  Fall break

10/26  Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
Group A, B, or C response paper

10/31 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Group B position paper

11/2 Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Group C response paper

Survey of Critical Literature due (n.b.: this assignment is only for students taking the research-option version of the course)


Group A position paper


Group B response paper

Eric Cummins, “The Gates Open Up and the Experts Pour In,” *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* (m)

11/16 Don Carpenter, *Hard Rain Falling*

Group A, B, or C position paper
11/21  Carpenter, *Hard Rain Falling*

*Group A, B, or C response paper*

*Annotated bibliography due* (N.B., this assignment is only for students taking the research-option version of the course.)

11/23  Thanksgiving break

11/28  Simon Ortiz, *from Sand Creek*

*Group C position paper*

11/30  Ortiz, *from Sand Creek*

*Group A response paper*

12/5  Piper Kernan, *Orange is the New Black*
Marie Gottschalk, introduction, *Caught: The Prison State and The Lockdown of American Politics* (m)

Recommended: Christopher Castiglia, introduction, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Cultural-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patricia Hearst* (m)

Perkinson, “The Triumph of Texas Tough,” *Texas Tough: America’s Prison Empire* (m)

*Group B position paper*

12/7  Kernan, *Orange is the New Black*

*Group C response paper*