

COL 255: Crime and Punishment: The Death Penalty in American Literature

Instructor: Mike Baxter-Kauf

Registration #:239825

T-Th: 9:30-10:50

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American discourse on human rights is ever increasingly dominated by the question of the death penalty, insofar as the United States remains one of very few “developed” nations to still utilize capital punishment. Besides the obvious moral concerns, the death penalty in America is a point of intersection for a great number of issues, including state sponsored violence, the acceptance of crime, racial politics, and the very fabric of the social bond. It should come as no surprise, then, that the issue has been taken on by many of America’s most prominent literary figures and seen from so many angles. The death penalty is one of the unique issues wherein liberal and conservative viewpoints converge, uniting both devout Christians, such as Sister Helen Prejean, whose *Dead Man Walking* became an Oscar nominated film, and leftist intellectuals like Truman Capote, often credited with inventing the true crime novel with *In Cold Blood*.

Similarly, any number of contemporary philosophers have become interested in the question of the death penalty insofar as it relates to the idea of the state, the body, and the response to transgression. We will examine, first of all, Michel Foucault, whose book on the prison and punishment begins with one of the most memorable depictions of the death penalty in recent memory. Somewhat more recently, Jacques Derrida has often commented on the role of the death penalty in American society and become a common theoretical grounding for activists and legal scholars opposed to the practice.

This course will concentrate on 20th century American representations of the death penalty. While we will certainly be concerned with the role that these texts assign to capital punishment, we will also pay attention to the literary elements that seem to unite these texts, especially their interesting blend of fact and fiction. Among the questions we will be interested in asking: What is the relation between representative politics and the death penalty? How have views of capital punishment changed over time? What role does the death penalty play in identity creation, on the level of either the individual or the state? What do these texts suggest in terms of resisting the practice of capital punishment?

Two papers will be required for this course, one due at mid-semester of 4-6 pages, another on the last day of finals of approximately 8 pages. The topics for both these papers will be determined in consultation with me, but are generally very open ended. You will need to focus on at least one of the primary texts from the course, but after that may concern the supplementary readings, or any other appropriate material. As such, you should be thinking about what aspects of this topic interest you from day one.

Both of these papers will be submitted to me in electronic form. Send them as Microsoft Word documents attached to an email to me by the end of the date they are due. I will return them, with comments, also by email, hopefully about a week after I receive them. You will have the opportunity to revise the midterm paper, but because of the scheduling, not the final. As such, you should start working on the final paper in advance if you would like comments or suggestions for revision.

Attendance and participation are crucial elements in this course. While I understand that illnesses, other commitments, and snowy roads happen, make sure that you do not make a habit out of missing class. Missing three or more class sessions will negatively affect your grade for the course. Similarly, active participation in class discussion will be essential to developing your understanding of the material.

While there is no explicit formula for your grade in this course, you should figure that the final grade on each of the two papers count for approximately 45% of the overall total. The remaining 10% will be my evaluation of your participation and attendance.

Book List: All books available at Talking Leaves Bookstore (3158 Main Street, Near South Campus)

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*
Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
Norman Mailer, *Executioner's Song*
Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*

All supplemental readings will be available on electronic reserve. You are certainly welcome to purchase these books, they are valuable additions to any library, but they have not been purchased *en masse* for the class, since we will only be using sections from each. They include:

Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*
Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*