

# Literature and Torture: From Athens to Abu Ghraib

CLEN W3977: Sem. in Literature & Culture

W: 11-12:50; 613 Hamilton

Spring 2009

Joey Slaughter

jrs272@columbia.edu

Office hrs (511a Philosophy): W. 3-5; and by appt.

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Every decade or so, citizens of Western democracies re-discover that their governments torture in their name. Indeed, the current public debate about torture shows a surprising lack of familiarity with the history and literature of torture in the Western tradition—proceeding as if torture (and the ethical and political issues around its use) is somehow something altogether new in a post-9/11 world. However, in the Anglo-European tradition, torture has been practiced, and the morality and efficacy of that practice challenged, since at least Aristotle; contemporary popular culture (in TV shows like *24*) and legalistic arguments advocating the use of “coercive interrogation” have simplified the problem of torture by reducing it to a simple narrative device. Torture, practiced under the pretext of seeking confessions, is a profoundly anti-narrative activity; studying literary, filmic, and visual representations of torture—along with legal, polemical, governmental, and theoretical materials—this course will examine the narrative effects and literary consequences of torture.

## Reading/Discussion Schedule

Jan. 21

Introduction

W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts”

Ariel Dorfman, “Hope”

Jan. 28

Janette Turner Hospital, “Dear Amnesty” (pdf)

Luisa Valenzuela, “Other Weapons” (pdf)

Elaine Scarry, “The Structure of Torture” (pdf)

UN

(pdf)

Amnesty International, “Torture Worldwide” (pdf)

Feb. 4

Aristophanes

Page Dubois, from *Plato and the Poets* (pdf)

Matthew Lippman, “The Development and Drafting of the UN Convention Against Torture” (pdf)

Feb. 11

Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” (pdf)

Foucault, “The Body of the Condemned” (pdf)

Voltaire, “Question—Torture” (pdf)

Cesare Beccaria, “On Crimes and Punishment” (pdf)

Wayne Booth, “Individualism and the Mystery of the Social Self” (pdf)

Feb. 18

**(Will need to reschedule)**

Feb. 25

(film)

Ñacuñán Sáez, “Torture: A Discourse on Practice” (pdf)

Kate Millet, “State and Sexual Authority” (pdf)

browse “KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation” manual excerpts (pdf)

Mar. 4

Octave Mirbeau,

Talal Asad, "On Torture, or Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment" (pdf)  
Mario Klarer, "Humanitarian Pornography" (pdf)

Mar. 11

George Orwell,  
Jean Améry, "Torture" (pdf)  
Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others" (pdf)  
Naomi Klein, "Torture's Dirty Secret: It Works" (pdf)

Mar. 18        **Spring Break**

Mar. 25

(film)  
Darius Rejali, "Torture Makes the Man" (pdf)  
Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction" to  
Jean-Paul Sartre, "Introduction" to

Apr. 1

J. M. Coetzee,  
Constantine Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians" (pdf)  
Peter Brooks, "The Ethics of Reading" (pdf)  
Memorandum for Alberto R. Gonzales (1 August 2002) (pdf)

Apr. 8

Alicia Partnoy,  
Idelber Avelar, "Five Theses on Torture" (pdf)  
Selections from (pdf)

Apr. 15

(film)  
Ariel Dorfman,  
Nina Philadelphoff-Puren, "Genre's Judgment" (pdf)  
Elizabeth Stanley, "Torture, Silence, and Recognition" (pdf)

Apr. 22

Edwidge Danticat,  
Diana Taylor, "Double-Blind: The Torture Case" (pdf)

Apr. 29

Torture Today  
(episode)  
Fernando Botero Paintings (pdf)  
Jane Mayer, "Whatever it Takes" (pdf)  
Schuyler Henderson, "Disregarding the Suffering of Others" (pdf)  
John Beverley, "The Question of Torture, the Spanish Decadence, and Our Own" (pdf)

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**Texts (available at CU bookstore):** Aristophanes ; J. M. Coetzee, ; Edwidge  
Danticat, ; Ariel Dorfman, ; George Orwell, ; Alicia Partnoy,

Octave Mirbeau, (free pdf can be found online)

**Grades:** Participation: 15%; 2 presentations (with 5 page paper, due week after presentation): 50%; final project: 35%  
**Attendance** (Mandatory): more than 3 absences in this class will result in failure.

**Presentations:** Twice over the course of the semester, you (and another student) will be in charge of presenting one or two of the secondary readings to the class. You should confer with each other to figure out how you want to approach the presentation, but the goal is to provide a short critical overview of the main points of the authors' arguments, framing some of the most important concepts, issues, and problematics, and discussing their relevance for the literature and the class. Rather than trying to be comprehensive in your overview, you should choose a few main points that you want us to discuss and that you want to elaborate. Each presenter should plan to talk for 5-10 minutes (I will cut you off), and to initiate the class discussion with some pointed questions; each of you also needs to hand in a 5 page paper (one week after your presentation) that makes a formal argument about the literary text using the secondary material.

The presentation is not a rote exercise; it is intended to further and deepen our discussion and to be compelling. Present only what you think is most important or useful to our conversation; be insightful and provocative.

**Participation:** There is a reciprocal side to presentations: presentations are interactive. As a participant in the class, you are expected to engage with each of these presentations, to ask follow up questions, to take up the material and consider it with the text—that is, to be collegial. This class provides an opportunity for you (us) to engage with the issues and literature we are reading and with each other. You are expected to come to class having read, having digested the reading, and having prepared to discuss your responses, reactions, and insights with the class. If you have not done these things, both your participation grade and the quality of the seminar discussion will suffer.

**Final Project:** to be determined by the class.

**Contact Information:** The best way to reach me is by email. If you put "**torture seminar**" somewhere in the subject line, your email will come to my attention more quickly. If you have questions, concerns, or just want to discuss further the course, I encourage you to visit me during my office hours. If you are unable to meet with me at those times, we will arrange another appointment.