

Alexander Burry, Assistant Professor
Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures
Freshman Seminar Proposal
2-credit Seminar for Fall 2006/Winter 2007

Literary Representations of Capital Punishment

Course Description and Goals:

The death penalty remains highly controversial today in the United States, dividing people along political, religious, and moral lines. In this course we will expand our perspectives on this issue by exploring how capital punishment has been represented in literature. Many of the most famous literary figures in history have made executions a central part of their works. In reading and discussing them, we will raise some key questions: how have different societies justified the death penalty? How have writers tried to access the last moments of a person facing execution, and why do these moments serve as a source of such great interest? What insight does access to this particular psychological state give us? What questions does the death penalty raise regarding our understanding of human consciousness and morality? The goals of the course will be to gain exposure to this theme as an organizing principle in some of the world's greatest literature, as well as to explore how literary representations of the "ultimate punishment" may shed light on the present-day debate.

Texts

Victor Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Part I)
Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*
Elie Wiesel, *Dawn*
Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall"

Selections from *The Holy Bible*, the "Code of Hammurabi," and writings of Draco, Solon, Thomas Aquinas, and Cesare Beccaria.

Films: *Dead Man Walking* (1995), *The Life of David Gale* (2003)

Readings are available at SBX (1806 N. High St.) and in a coursepack that may be purchased at the Foreign Language Center (198 Hagerty Hall). There will be separate screenings of the two required films outside of the regular class time. Students may choose to attend these screenings or view the films independently.

Assignments

Students are required to participate actively in every class. There will be two short written reactions (one double-spaced page), accompanied by brief (5-10 minute) in-class presentations. Either or both of these assignments may be incorporated into the final project, which will be a five-page double-spaced paper. Topics for this paper will be chosen by the students, in consultation with the instructor.

Grading

The letter grade (no pass/fail or S/U) for this course will consist of the following distribution:

Participation: 30%

Reaction papers: 20%

Presentations: 20%

Final paper: 30%

Academic Integrity

For all the assignments in this course, the Code of Student Conduct of The Ohio State University is in effect. Academic misconduct is defined as: any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the university, or subvert the educational process. Examples of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to:

1. Violation of course rules as contained in the course syllabus or other information provided to the student; violation of program regulations as established by departmental committees and made available to students;
2. Submitting plagiarized work for an academic requirement. Plagiarism is the representation of another's work or ideas as one's own; it includes the unacknowledged word-for-word use and/or paraphrasing of another person's work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person's ideas;
3. Submitting substantially the same work to satisfy requirements for one course that has been submitted in satisfaction of requirements for another course, without permission of the instructor of the course for which the work is being submitted;
4. For an extended version of these examples please refer to http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/resource_csc.asp

To avoid plagiarism:

1. Always cite your sources (following the MLA format).
2. Read the guidelines for written assignments more than once.
3. If in doubt, consult with your professor.

Students with Disabilities

Any student who feels that he or she may need an accommodation due to a disability should contact me privately to discuss his or her specific needs. Students with documented disabilities may contact the Office for Disability Services at 614-292-3307 in 150 Pomerene Hall to coordinate reasonable accommodations. More information is available at the internet address of this office (<http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu>).

Schedule of Class Discussions and Reading Assignments
(subject to change)

Week One

Class: Introduction: The Debate

Reading: *The Holy Bible*, Hammurabi, Draco, Solon, Aquinas, Beccaria (excerpts)

Week Two

Class: Ancient and Modern Laws, Philosophical Critiques

Reading: Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*

Week Three

Class: Romanticism and Capital Punishment

Reading: Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Part I)

Week Four

Class: The Last Five Minutes: Dostoevsky's Averted Execution

Reading: Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (finish Part I)

Week Five

Class: Execution and Religious Inspiration in *The Idiot*

Reading: Melville, *Billy Budd*

Week Six

Class: American Views, Then and Now: Melville and the Contemporary Debate

Reading: Melville, *Billy Budd* (finish)

Week Seven

Class: American Views, Then and Now: Melville and the Contemporary Debate

Reading: Sartre, "The Wall"; Wiesel, *Dawn*

Week Eight

Class: Existentialism, War, and the Death Penalty

Reading: Wiesel, *Dawn* (finish)

Week Nine

Class: The Ultimate Punishment for the Ultimate Crime: Death Penalty and the Holocaust

Assignment: Prepare rough draft of final paper

Week Ten

Class: Concluding Thoughts, Discussion of Final Papers

Faculty Biography

Alexander Burry is a specialist in Russian literature. He earned a Ph.D. at Northwestern University in 2001 and has taught at the Ohio State University since Autumn of 2004, following a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Princeton University. His publications include articles on Fyodor Dostoevsky, Venedikt Erofeev, and Sergei Prokofiev, and he is currently writing a book on transpositions of Dostoevsky's works into opera, drama, and film. In 2003 he co-translated a book by Anna Politkovskaya on the Chechen War entitled *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (University of Chicago Press). He has taught undergraduate courses at OSU on Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and other nineteenth-century Russian writers.