

Slavery as a Critique of the Concept of Human Rights: Plato to Toni Morrison
4000/5000 level Humanities Course

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This course seeks to uncover and interrogate the cultural ideologies informing both slavery as an institution and human rights as a concept. In this process we will examine the manner in which the existence and persistence of slavery in human history, much like the existence of war, seems to be a constant in that same history, a constant that allows us to gauge the gulf between a given culture's public discourse about the dignity and worth of the individual and that culture's actual treatment of the individual. We will try to understand why this is so and continues to be so, that is to say, we will attempt to account for the disjunction between discourse and practice by exploring the ideological contexts out of which both slavery and the concept of human rights emerge.

Our attention to the various forms of slavery will enable us to focus upon what Western culture wishes to affirm or deny about the notion of a human subject. Whether it is the Scholastics in the Middle Ages affirming man as a *res sacra*, a sacredness, or Pico della Mirandola in the Renaissance asserting the dignity of man, or Thomas Jefferson proclaiming the self-evident character of specific human rights, we will note along this continuum just how society and *Realpolitik* invariably undermine such declarations. We will see how slavery provides us with an effective critique of the rhetoric of "high culture", and also how the existence of slavery in the face of such sentiments reveals what these utterances leave out of their formulations. What are often left out, what Roland Barthes terms, "what goes without saying," are the ideologies informing such declarations.

Later in our course when our focus shifts from Europe to the Americas we will find, for example, the ideals of human dignity and freedom as absolutes contradicted in a most dramatic and ironic manner by the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, himself. Lincoln in his famous and defiant letter to Horace Greeley expressed his willingness to sacrifice without hesitation the lives and freedom of black men, women, and children in order

to preserve the Union. These were individuals whom Chief Justice Roger Taney a few years earlier in the 1857 Dred Scott case had referred to not as human beings, but rather as “beings of an inferior order.” Obviously then the consideration of “race” immediately qualifies these Western notions of not only human dignity and human rights, but this racial factor also uncovers the nature of the naked power interests that inform this particular discursive practice. We will then analyze in depth how and why “race” has exposed the striking historical contradictions involving Western discourses about human rights and freedom.

The semester grade will be based on the following:

1. **Quality and frequency** of class participation 25%

2. Reaction paper. During the course of the semester (between weeks 3 and 13) each student will share with the class one reaction paper (3-5 pages) based on the required readings for that week. The presentations may include a brief biographical summary (maximum of one page), but the presentation itself is to be critical and analytic, rather than discursive or biographical in its emphases. 20%

3. End of semester class presentation. A 15-20 minute presentation during the last two weeks of the semester. This may expand upon the ideas presented in your reaction paper, or it may be an entirely new subject. If a student so desires, he or she may utilize this paper as a preliminary draft for the term paper. 25%

4. Term paper. Final papers are to be of a scholarly, well-researched, and well-written character. These papers should be a minimum of 12 pages in length, not including the bibliography, and are due in my office no later than the second day of final examination week _____.
A well developed term paper usually requires sufficient time for reflection, revisions, and assembling the necessary bibliography. Please plan ahead and give yourself the time needed to adequately research and write your term

Cornel West's "The Role of Law in Progressive Politics" in *A Cornel West Reader*

From Derek Bell's *Race, Racism, and American Law*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Week 13 Institutional Racism and the "Law"

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Week 14 Student Presentations

Week 15 Student Presentations

Suggested Readings:

The Adventurous Male – Martin Green

The Ancient Economy – M.I. Finley

The Spirit of the Laws – Montesquieu

The Conquest of America – Tzvetan Todorov

Middle Passage – Charles Johnson

The Black Atlantic – Paul Gilroy

Runaway Slaves – John Hope Franklin

Romanticism and Slave Narratives – Helen Thomas

'Race,' *Writing and Difference* – Henry L. Gates

Dante, Poet of the Desert – Giuseppe Mazzotta

The Black Jacobins – C.L.R. James

The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture- Brion Davis

Slavery and the Literary Imagination- Deborah McDowell

Roll, Jordan, Roll – Eugene Genovese

Reconstructing Womanhood – Hazel Carby

Dessa Rose- Sherley Williams

Law and Literature – Richard Posner