

Inside Out: Literature in Prisons

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Introduction

This research project seeks to explore how literature has been and can be used to enhance public policy, individual and collective outcomes in English prisons and the criminal justice system. It uses an interdisciplinary approach between literature studies – my own discipline – and sociology, of which the Durham Inside-Out program is a part. The project aims to draw upon both fields to advance a qualitative understanding of the modern “prisoner experience”, as well as to contribute to and advance the quality of education and academic enrichment provision behind bars, particularly within the context of the severe disruption the Covid-19 pandemic has had upon both. The impact of the pandemic on the research itself has proven to be substantial even as restrictions have been lifted – it has been conducted wholly remotely, and at the time of writing has not had the benefit of direct access either to prisons or serving prisoners. Nonetheless, with the invaluable supervision of Dr Hannah King and Professor Simon James, it has benefited from expert advice and guidance, in the crafting of an educational resource that can be used upon the resumption of DIO’s educational activities within the three prisons in County Durham where it operates.

Why Inside-Out?

The most conspicuous value of the Inside-Out programme that motivated this research project was its commitment to providing an educational space within which prisoners can learn alongside university students as equal learning partners. The original founder of Inside-Out, Dr Lori Pompa, described this as creating “a space of freedom within a context that is often the antithesis”.¹ This can be taken to mean that prisoners are given the opportunity during their imprisonment to engage in a process in which their status as an equal participant alongside ‘outside’ students and instructors allows a departure from their everyday reality of living under a hierarchical regime. This is by allowing them to empower students and instructors who themselves are not prisoners at all as well as each other via the collective endeavour of educational advancement.

The primary content of Inside-Out classes in Durham lies currently within the academic disciplines of sociology and criminology. The contribution this research project intends to make is by applying its values and principles to the teaching of English Literature behind bars, specifically via the creation of an educational resource that can be used both within and alongside future Inside-Out classes. As prisoners are required to have a Level 2 (i.e. GCSE-standard) qualification to be eligible for the classes, this necessarily restricts the number of prisoners who could benefit from such research to those whose literacy is above a certain level. Although literacy is a barrier that this work might not yet be able to overcome, it is hoped that participants will be able to benefit from enhanced comprehension and articulation skills as a result of studying the literature within the resource. From a policy perspective, this is important not only in enhancing the employability of those who are released, but will also hopefully over time improve the ability of prisoners to articulate their viewpoints, and thus our wider qualitative understanding of the prisoner experience, and what is needed to make prisons more effective and beneficial from the perspective of the incarcerated.

¹ Dr Lori Pompa, “One Brick at a Time: The Power and Possibility of Dialogue Across the Prison Wall”, *The Prison Journal* 93(2) (17 January 2013), p. 132.

Research question

Original research question (in proposal): What significance and potential does literature composed by prisoners have in shaping political, social and cultural appreciations of the prisoner experience?

Final research question: How can we best understand the past, present and future potential of the relationship between literature and the prisoner experience?

The highly disruptive effect of the Covid pandemic, coupled with 2022 being the first year of Inside-Out hosting a Laidlaw summer research project has necessitated a flexible and adaptable approach both before and during the research period. The most significant effect was not being able to get access to prisons or current prisoners, or the requisite ethical clearance in time. This ruled out the prospect of being able to ask prisoners to compose creative writing for the purpose of the project, as originally intended. However, the benefit of expert advice from supervisions has provided the necessary support and challenge to extend this flexibility to the conceptualisation of the research itself, in appreciating the two-way relationship between the prisoner experience and literature, particularly the potential for literature and access to literature to impact upon prisoners' lives. Both the Inside-Out classes and a prisoner reading group in HMP Frankland led from Durham University provided the inspiration for the idea of creating a resource that would help facilitate prisoners' access to English literature, both in the exposure to views, ideas and cultures with which they may previously have been unfamiliar (i.e. developing cultural literacy), but also to provide the "space of freedom" from being a prisoner that Pompa characterised as being integral to the concept of Inside-Out.

Literature Review

Although the study of literature is not always immediately associated with prisons research, much of the current academic and policy understanding of what constitutes "the prisoner experience" is already derived from qualitative analysis of prisoners' own words. In their recent report entitled "It Doesn't Have To Be Like This", the Prison Reform Trust and members of its Prisoner Policy Network (which includes many current inmates) paint a stark picture of the recent impact of pandemic control measures upon everyday life, with first-hand accounts of feeling "like a dog waiting for a treat" during lock-up offering a hint of their underlying brutality upon inmates' self-worth and feeling of humanity.² Yet beyond the immediacy of the recent pandemic, evidence of the deeper psychological impact of imprisonment can be found recorded over decades if not centuries, not least through the use of writing by prisoners (or former prisoners). In Pat Carlen's 1985 book *Criminal Women*, former prisoner Josie O'Dwyer described her experience of YOI Bullwood Hall as "a dog's life" with the institution pervaded by "an air of viciousness", with physical violence and intimidation tacitly expected and even deliberately solicited by prison officers.³ The similarity of such characterisations to the more recent ones from the PPN, despite a separation of over three decades between them, offers a sobering indication of how the prisoner experience has progressed and changed over this time, even with changes to the systems of prison monitoring and the law, including the Human Rights Act in 1998. Nor does the more recent report offer a more uplifting picture of how prison officers and the regime are perceived by prisoners, with one prisoner writing that "they think that protecting the public means kicking us when we are down" meaning that "people leave worse and more risky than when they came in".⁴

² Lucy Wainwright, Paula Harriott, Soruche Saajedi, Marc Conway, and Femi Laryea-Adekimi, "It Doesn't Have To Be Like This – Prisoner Policy Network Perspectives on Future Prison Design", *Prison Reform Trust* (1 December 2021), p. 4.

³ Josie O'Dwyer, in Pat Carlen (ed.), *Criminal Women* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 142.

⁴ Wainwright and others, "It doesn't have to be like this", p. 7.

An uncritically pessimistic analysis, however, does not take account of the evolution of the policy and public discussion and debate surrounding the prison system, that has also developed during this period. The PPN report offers substantial evidence of a stronger focus on the intention of prison as a means of rehabilitation, which even if far from being meaningfully realised, is still indicative of a shift in emphasis from the rhetoric of punishment during the 1980s. Back then, the “tougher regime as a short sharp shock for young criminals” promised in the 1979 General Election is striking in its specificity that the prisoner experience should be deliberately brutal and unpleasant, whilst the lifting of the slogan from the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Mikado* can also demonstrate the cultural influence of Victorian drama upon the socio-political values of the period.⁵ By 1993, then-shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair had begun the rhetoric of “tough on crime and tough on the underlying causes of crime” via rehabilitation, when he also called for “reforming our monstrous prison regime”.⁶ Indeed, the development of prison conditions being a means for the then-Opposition to attack the Government’s record offers significant evidence to suggest that public opinion and attitudes were shifting within this decade, in spite of the Government’s re-election the preceding year. The significance of Blair in shifting the public debate over the long-term should not be underestimated – as late as 2016 (almost a decade after he left office) David Cameron gave a speech focused solely on prison reform, where he attacked the perception of prisons as “a holiday camp” and characterised them as “often miserable, painful environments”.⁷ Of course, this simultaneously provides evidence not only of a development in political attitudes but also the acknowledgement of a political failure to meaningfully alter the essential nature of the prisoner experience described as “a dog’s life” by Josie O’Dwyer back in 1985.⁸ Yet whether through first-hand testimonials of raw lived experience, or via the politically calculated characterisations of senior Government leaders, this analysis does demonstrate the centrality of words, their meaning (and sometimes unexpected literary and cultural origins) to any political, social or academic understanding of what it means to live life as a prisoner in England and Wales.

⁵ Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979 (11 April 1979), Margaret Thatcher Foundation <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858>> (accessed 26 August 2022).

⁶ Tony Blair, in *The New Statesman* (29 January 1993), *The New Statesman* <<https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2015/12/archive-tony-blair-tough-crime-tough-causes-crime>> (accessed 26 August 2022).

⁷ David Cameron, on Prison Reform at Policy Exchange (8 February 2016), Official Transcript <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prison-reform-prime-ministers-speech>> (accessed 26 August 2022)

⁸ O’Dwyer, in Carlen (ed.), *Criminal Women*, p. 142.

Writers behind bars: the impact of imprisonment upon literature

Throughout history and around the world, literature composed behind bars has contributed to an extraordinarily diverse range of genres, styles and perspectives. Because of this, it is difficult, and perhaps even unwise to attempt to construe all literature by prisoners or prisoner writers as a category in and of themselves, as opposed to recognising imprisonment as a context within which the diversity of perspectives in literature can be used to emphasize the sheer range of backgrounds and experiences that are incarcerated at any given time.

One of the most famous historical pieces of literature composed in prison is *De Profundis*, which was written by Oscar Wilde in Reading Gaol in 1897, during his sentence for gross indecency. In his letter, addressed to his former lover Lord Douglas, Wilde describes having passed through “every possible mood of suffering” during the preceding months of imprisonment, with his quotation of Wordsworth’s description in *The Borderers* of suffering as having “the nature of infinity” particularly striking in its apparent attempt to blur any distinction between mental and physical hardship.⁹ Yet Wilde’s excoriation of the Victorian penal system and its arbitrary imposition of physical hardship leaves us with a more lasting impression, not least due to its specificity:

“The plank-bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one’s fingertips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame ...”¹⁰

From this extract, and from the picture to the right of his prison cell (taken in 2016), we can see that the harshness of Wilde’s experience as a prisoner was clearly enough to infiltrate the content of his writing, even if the text itself is seen as an attempt to transcend the oppression of his daily regime, as he himself claims in his stated intention of “a spiritualizing of the soul”.¹¹ Yet what is more difficult to elucidate is the extent to which Wilde believes his progression to “silence ... solitude ... shame” is one inherent and specific to his own journey and personal responsibility, as opposed to the realization of a calculated attempt by the prison authorities to impose a regime that deliberately aims for these outcomes, as further punishment over and above the deprivation of liberty. If the latter, Wilde would have been far from mistaken – the minute detail with which the prison regime of the day was dictated by the then-recently retired Chairman of Convict Prisons, Sir Edmund Du Cane, represented a break with earlier prison reform movements in its overt willingness to deprive prisoners (or at least certain categories) of their sense of humanity, and the picture painted by Wilde is, if nothing else, a testament to the effectiveness of its impact.¹²



Turning to American literary approaches, Bob Kaufman’s *Jail Poems*, written in the nascent era of the Civil Rights movement in the United States is comparatively more political in tone and focus than Wilde chose to adopt specifically within *De Profundis*. Although Wilde chose to rail against “wrong and unjust laws” and “a wrong and unjust system” that victimized him for his sexuality, these are framed in distinctively moralising terms that engage justice in its more philosophical form.¹³ Yet

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Robson (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (10th Edition) – The Victorian Age* (New York, 2018), pp. 868-869.

¹⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, in Greenblatt and Robson (eds.), *Norton Anthology*, p. 870.

¹¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, in Greenblatt and Robson (eds.), *Norton Anthology*, p. 870.

¹² Bill Forsythe, Sir Edmund Frederick Du Cane, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <<https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/32910>> (accessed 1 September 2022).

¹³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, in Greenblatt and Robson (eds.), *Norton Anthology*, p. 869.

Kaufman on the other hand is more willing and prepared to engage directly with the socio-political power dynamics perpetuated by the American prison system, most memorably asking us in Poem 3:

“In a universe of cells – who is not in jail? Jailers.

In a world of hospitals – who is not sick? Doctors.”¹⁴

The power of these lines can in no small part be attributed to their scansion, with the abrupt switch from iambs to trochees across the dashes, with the further isolation and concision of the single-word answers on the other side of the question marks heightening the forcefulness of delivery. The content of the second line can be further attributed to Kaufman’s time incarcerated in psychiatric wards as well as normal prisons, with the swift single-line progression and almost identical scansion between them potentially offering a point about their lack of difference. Yet most power can be found in the characterisation of status – both being “in jail” and “sick” superficially appear to be factual states of being, but on further reflection, especially within the second line, are actually types of assigned status that within the specific contexts described can be arbitrarily imposed upon their subjects. The discomfort elicited by the directness of questioning “who is not” is realised most effectively via its focus on power dynamics between individuals and social groups – particularly via the lack of individuality granted to “jailers” and “doctors” – which in the context of Kaufman’s writing could also contain an implicit point about inequalities of race and class beyond the narrow context of prisons and secure hospitals, as suggested by the word choices of “universe” and “world”. Dr David Grundy’s characterisation of the poem as “a sustained tension that sustains imaginative flight yet also attests to terrifying claustrophobia” is certainly true in its identification of the tension created by the juxtaposition of Kaufman’s own position as a writer of the poems (“*Written in San Francisco City Prison Cell 3, 1959*”) and his wider historical and social context.¹⁵ Yet we can expound upon this “terrifying claustrophobia” further, as Kaufman’s description of his universe and world as consisting of cells and hospitals may certainly be unsettling to look back on, yet its composition behind bars could be more accurately read as a statement of anger and defiance, in its sentiment of acting as a snapshot of wrongdoing as opposed to the righteousness of personal suffering seemingly preferred by Wilde.

Yet in the final and most recently published work by writers behind bars examined here, although many of the themes of focus (notably social and racial inequalities) are continued from Kaufman, the focus upon hope as an emotion as well as an intention offers a substantial departure from the sustained cynicism of Wilde and Kaufman alike. *Hope on a Postcard* is a modern anthology of over 40 poems written from within HMP Frankland, in a project commissioned by Newcastle University. In Sean’s poem ‘*Missing You*’, his address to his partner combines longing (“it’s you that I always think of”) with contrition (“I’m sorry I’m not there with you”) to find a new purpose (“I’m willing to change my ways for you”).¹⁶ This poem can thus be distinguished in bearing witness to an individual journey in charting a progression of emotions and motivations, as opposed to providing a singular snapshot of a worldview and perspective from behind bars. In Mohammed’s poem ‘*The Path*’, the speaker’s distancing at the end from the preceding story of seeking refuge with “This was the path of an unknown person / from a washed-up diary” has the effect of heightening our awareness of the blurred boundary between personal and political, having already established the main subject’s sense of isolation in a world “Where the day is grey and the truth is dislike”.¹⁷ The perspective upon hope is projected through a darker lens, however, with the mysterious companion who “*represents your*

¹⁴ Bob Kaufman, *Jail Poems*, in *Solitudes Crowded With Loneliness* (New York, 1965), p. 56.

¹⁵ Dr David Grundy, “The Collected Poems of Bob Kaufman”, in *Music and Literature* (7 July 2020), <<https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2020/7/5/bob-kaufmans-collected-poems>> (accessed 1 September 2022), and Kaufman, *Jail Poems*, in *Solitudes*, p. 61.

¹⁶ Sean, *Missing You*, in *Hope on a Postcard* (Newcastle, 2019), p. 15.

¹⁷ Mohammed, *The Path*, in *Hope on a Postcard*, pp. 24-27.

grave” and whose “*beauty is your good deeds*” indicating both an uncomfortable proximity to the prospect of death, alongside a determination that purpose can still be found in doing good for others with the reward of a more favourable legacy within the memory of others beyond death.¹⁸ Although the intended audience of Imran’s titular ‘*Hope on a Postcard*’ is unclear (albeit presumably a relative or loved one on the outside), the focus upon hope’s properties as “my new friend”, “my loyal companion”, and “the light that shines through my dark thoughts” is heavily reminiscent of how Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘“*Hope*” is the thing with feathers’ imagines it as a bird when “sweetest – in the Gale – is heard – ”.¹⁹ Yet the six-line brevity of Imran’s poem is strongly indicative of a more direct approach compared to that of Dickinson, whereas the tonal ambiguity of whether the person being addressed is being reassured or cast away (particularly given the ambiguous meaning of “until we are reunited”) is offered as a more substantive focus for contemplation.²⁰ Thus, although the poems may have been commissioned with a more contemporary style and focus, this does not detract from the power which they assign to their largely disempowered creators – not least in allowing them to convey and portray their depth of perspective and personality otherwise suppressed by their regime and surroundings.

¹⁸ Mohammed, *The Path*, in *Hope on a Postcard*, pp. 24-27.

¹⁹ Imran, *Hope on a Postcard*, in *Hope on a Postcard*, p. 53, and Emily Dickinson, ““*Hope*” is the thing with feathers’, in Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall, and Mary Jo Salter (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry Sixth Edition* (New York, 2018), pp. 1176-1177.

²⁰ Imran, *Hope on a Postcard*, in *Hope on a Postcard*, p. 53.

Reading poetry: my attempt to use literature to impact imprisonment

The resource for Inside-Out eventually took the form of a pack of guided poetry reading. The most difficult aspect of producing this was striking the balance between accessibility for those who, due to their circumstances, have limited access to educational resources and support, and offering challenge for the most able inside students who are otherwise limited from developing their full potential. As much of the prison education landscape has turned to remote self-guided learning due to the pandemic, the format of the resource is designed to be suitable both for individual self-guided study, and should future circumstances allow, guided group work as part of an Inside-Out class. In selecting the poetry for inclusion, alongside the need to balance accessibility with support, I tried to ensure a balance between contemporary and older works, but also offer a selection that included some of the most celebrated historical poets. Of the 9 poets whose works were used, 3 are women, 1 is non-white, 4 are from England, 2 from America, and 1 each from New Zealand, Guyana and Ireland. Upon reflection, more could and should have been done to facilitate access to a more diverse demographic of writers. Yet within the 6-week period available to create the resource, the overall perspective provided is of a reasonably global nature, and more importantly a wide range of themes and styles is provided, ranging from coming of age to the process of writing to romance, in a variety of forms from praise songs to lyric poetry to sonnets. Although the outcome of this research may only be fully understood once the resource can be provided to inside students on the programme, it is hoped that the pack will be enjoyed by participants and effective in facilitating the objectives of the Inside-Out project.

Conclusion

The process of proposing and developing a research proposal relating to prisoners and literature was itself daunting and uncertain, but the greatest challenges within the project have also been the more unpredictable ones. Within the research period itself, I have not had the opportunity to access any of the prisons myself – indeed the entirety of the research and the resource creation was conducted remotely. However, to answer the research question I set myself at the beginning of the project (*How can we best understand the past, present and future potential of the relationship between literature and the prisoner experience?*), the potential of such a superficially unlikely relationship is best measured in its ability to advance our collective understanding of both what the current state of the prisoner experience is, and in visualising what we want it to become in the future. But the potential of this relationship is equally as important in its ability to provide prisoners with the prospect of self-determination (albeit in a very narrow and contextually limited way) within a system and regime which continues to be centred upon the deprivation of personal liberties and rights.

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