Criminology and Literature

By Jeffrey R. Wilson, PhD

Criminology and literature is an interdisciplinary field connecting the social scientific study of crime, criminals, criminal law, and criminal justice with humankind's artistic, imaginative expression in written word. The thesis of the field is that crimes are texts—broadly defined as *things made by humans*—with authors, audiences, and conditioning social contexts. That means crimes can be studied as literary texts are studied, and doing so uncovers new understandings about the origins, structures, and implications of crime.

The argument is not that criminology should be more literary. It's that criminology has always been literary, and literature has always had the capacity to be criminological. The field recognizes literature was a prominent venue for thinking about causes of crime before criminology emerged as a social science in the late nineteenth century, and as an ongoing prompt for developing new theories of criminology. The field also holds that both crimes and criminological theories are fundamentally stories with beginnings, middles, and ends, so the terms of literary studies—tragedy, performance, metaphor, point-of-view, anti-hero, and so forth—are helpful tools for theorizing crime and justice. Some of the driving questions of the field include:

1. How do literary texts represent crime and justice?
2. How can the terms of literary studies help us interpret crime and the criminal justice system?
3. How can criminology help us understand what happens in literary texts?
4. How can literature help us build new theories of criminology?
5. How have experiences with crime and criminal justice systems influenced literary authors?
6. How has literature influenced criminal acts?
7. How has literature influenced the creation of criminological theories?
8. How have criminological theories influenced the creation of literary texts?
9. What kinds of literature do criminals, police, and criminologists read and write?
10. What does literature reveal about crime that criminology misses, and what does criminology reveal that literature misses?

Behind these questions loom global crises in crime and law enforcement—from international white-collar crime, drug trafficking in Afghanistan, and racist police abuse of force in the United States to gang violence in Venezuela, government corruption in India, and a world-wide rape epidemic. Responding to the three-fold challenge of crime in the community, crisis in the criminal justice system, and the shortcomings of academic criminology, the prospect of criminology and literature is a more imaginative, humane criminology and more political—meaning public policy oriented—literary studies.

THE RISE OF CRIMINOLOGY AND LITERATURE

This field follows more than 50 years of the critical criminology that arose in the 1970s, including branches that draw heavily from the humanities, such as radical criminology, peacemaking criminology, convict criminology, feminist criminology, postcolonial criminology, queer criminology, and green criminology. Criminology and literature's most immediate ancestors are the cultural criminology, popular criminology, and public criminology that have shown the arts and humanities to be important social mediators of crime, justice, criminal justice, and criminology. The field is especially aligned with narrative criminology, plus the sister study of criminology and film. But criminology and literature treks beyond these earlier subfields in recognizing the conceptual depth of literature as a particularly powerful resource for thinking about crime and justice. With the psychological and sociological density inherent in literary expression, every imaginative representation of crime and justice is a criminological theory waiting to be discovered and empirically tested.

Although criminology and literature has only become a distinct academic field in the 21st century, precursors date back to the first half of the 20th century, with literary critics comparing Shakespeare to criminologists (Stoll, 1912) or calling Dickens a criminologist (Squires, 1938). One of the earliest scholarly

calls to pair criminology and literature came from Ruth Elinor Wilson in 1963. The 1970s brought academic interest in literature written by prisoners. Spurred by C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), the law and literature movement (White, 1973), and a classroom-friendly textbook (Dow, 1980), the 1980s were a watershed moment for the field, with a series of articles showing that literature can be brought into the criminology classroom as a pedagogical resource (Hirschel & McNair, 1982; Halsted, 1985; Smith, 1987; Smith, 1993).

The first full-fledged theorist of the field was former president of the American Society of Criminology Edward Sagarin, who earlier wrote the pioneering *The Homosexual in America* (1951) under the pseudonym Donald Webster Cory (see Duberman, 1997). Sagarin (1980) felt "it is probably true that criminologists have more to learn from the literary world than the reverse" (p. 76; see also Sagarin, 1981, 1983). He frequently collaborated with his City University of New York colleague Robert Kelly, himself the author of a book of poetry (see Sagarin & Kelly, 1985; Kelly, 1991). Canadian criminologist Charles K. Talbot (1982, 1988) sought to compare—quantitatively—crime rates in fiction to those in reality, while American Ronald P. Corbett, Jr. (1994) studied fiction as sociology.

Due to the pedagogical orientation of the first wave, criminology and literature faded from view as the field of criminology and film arose in the 1990s (Cook & Bacot, 1993; Rafter, 2000; Young, 2009; Frauley, 2010a; Rafter & Brown, 2011). Where criminology and film is oriented toward the modern age, and toward America, criminology and literature is more expansive in both era and culture, offering a more global endeavor. If criminology and film is pedagogically useful for the student, criminology and literature is theoretically useful for the scholar.

With a key leading statement from Nigerian criminologist Onwubiko Agozino (1995), the 1990s was an age of expansion beyond pedagogy, with historicist studies asking how literary works have influenced criminology and theoretical studies using literature to build criminological ideas. Two sustained efforts to locate criminological theory in European and American literature deserve special mention: Victoria Time's *Shakespeare's Criminals: Criminology, Fiction, and Drama* (1999) and Vincenzo Ruggiero's *Crime in Literature: Sociology of Deviance and Fiction* (2003).

In the 21st century, pedagogical explorations expanded (Engel, 2003; West, 2005; Bowman, 2009; Powell, 2010; Pérez et al., 2019; Mackey & Levan, 2019), while theoretical considerations grew sharper and more ambitious. Books that have become foundations of the field include *Monsters in and Among Us: Toward a Gothic Criminology*, edited by Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil E. Greek (2007); *The Poetics of Crime: Understanding and Researching Crime and Deviance Through Creative Sources*, edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2014); *C. Wright Mills and the Criminological Imagination: Prospects for Creative Inquiry*, edited by Jon Frauley (2015); *The Criminal Humanities*, edited by Michael Arntfield and Marcel Danesi (2016); and Rafe McGregor's companion books *Narrative Justice* (2018) and *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* (2021). The field has been further explored by Elizabeth Burney (2012), Afra Saleh Alshiban (2012), Jeffrey R. Wilson (2014), Herschel Prins (2014), Sarah Colvin (2015), Stephanie Piamonte (2015), and a new anthology designed for classroom use: *Crime, Justice and Literature: A Reader*, edited by Lawrence Karson, Claudia Slate, and Rebecca Saulsbury (2017). These scholars have called for the founding of a field of criminology and literature, variously conceived under banners such as "the criminological imagination," "the poetics of crime," "the criminal humanities," "imaginative criminology," and "literary criminology."

I opt for the umbrella term "criminology and literature" because it is the most inclusive, allowing a wide swath of concerns and methodologies into the field, and because the sound of the term cites the "law and literature" movement. Criminology and literature is different from law and literature—just as criminology departments and law schools teach different things. Law and literature bridges imaginative texts with everything that goes into rules imposed by the state, while criminology and literature focuses more specifically on acts that break those rules—the center of gravity is crime rather than law. At the same time, just as law and literature has two main branches—*law in literature* (creative representations of legal matters) and *law as literature* (analyzing the rhetorical features of legal documents)—criminology and literature has comparable concerns. We can look at literary texts that depict crime and justice but also at crimes as texts—meaning that, as human creations, crimes invite interpretations leveraging the analytical methods and

vocabularies of the academic disciplines developed to make sense of human creativity, namely the humanities.

THE FORMS OF CRIMINOLOGY AND LITERATURE

While its varieties are infinite, criminology and literature often surfaces in four key approaches: *the lens*, *the theorization*, *the historicization*, and *the comparison*.

1. *The lens* uses terms and theories drawn from criminology to interpret literary texts.
   - In the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the protagonist's turn from rapist tyrant to legendary hero can be read, from the perspective of feminist criminology, as different iterations of performative masculine violence.
   - Marxist theories of criminology can illuminate English author Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), which depicts the state violence of colonizers and the proletariat uprising of enslaved people.
   - Imperialism and neocolonialism are the root causes of crimes in African texts like Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), written on toilet paper while he was a political prisoner.
   - American author Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) carries assumptions about sexuality and crime that can be exposed with the help of queer criminology.

2. *The theorization* uses examples and ideas related to crime and justice in literary texts to generate new theories that are able to explain how crime and justice work in society.
   - In the Hebrew Bible, Adam's eating of the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden could be theorized into the notion that new laws can prompt the very crimes they seek to prevent.
   - In English playwright William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist's delay in exacting revenge against his uncle could be theorized into an explanation for delays in modern death sentences, when often the state is doing to a criminal the very act that he did to someone else.
   - Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), in which four people recount a crime in contradictory ways, has been theorized into the Rashomon Effect, which addresses the unreliability of eyewitnesses.
   - The link between the horrors of slavery and child abuse in American novelist Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) could be expanded into a theory of postcolonial criminology.

3. *The historicization* shows how literature has influenced the thinkers who have developed criminological theory and how the criminal justice system and academic criminology have influenced authors when writing literary texts.
   - The purportedly scientific writings of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso are filled with literary examples from Dante, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Schopenhauer, Zola, Molière, and Stendhal.
   - After teaching sociology and criminology for 15 years, the Brazilian professor Antonio Candido became a leading literary critic.
   - Iranian novelist Shahrnush Parsipur wrote the first part of *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1989) while a political prisoner.
   - Australian playwright Rose Myers's play *Criminology* (2007) was based on the story of Anu Singh, who earned her degree in criminology while serving a prison sentence for killing her boyfriend.
   - Drama provided Timothy Griffin and Monica K. Miller (2008) a vocabulary for theorizing the "crime control theater" done by programs such as AMBER Alerts.

4. *The comparison* shows how crime and justice appear similarly or differently in criminology and literature.
   - *The Eumenides*, the final play in ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus's Orestia trilogy, can be read as peacemaking criminology: It depicts the shift from a culture of vengeance to one of juridical trial.
   - Whereas the psychological school of criminology emphasizes the mental conditions that lead to crime, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) shows those that crime leads to.
   - Although Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso's *The Criminal Woman* (1893) suggests violent female criminals have masculine traits, American author Susan Glaspell's *Trifle* (1916) shows Minnie Wright's crimes to be intimately bound up with her femininity.
   - Criminologist Howard Becker's *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963) and novelist S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) represent similar

attitudes toward the labeling theory of criminology and "secondary deviance," in which deviance grows in response to being labeled as deviant.

THE FUTURE OF CRIMINOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Ultimately, criminology and literature is a challenge to both disciplines as traditionally practiced. The field calls for criminology—which can be curtailed by limitations in what data can show and too cozy for comfort with well-moneyed institutions and their vested interests—to be more creative, humane, and conceptually ambitious in its theories of crime and justice. The field also calls for literary studies—which can be insular and abstract—to be more active and practical in the public policy implications of this line of work.

While criminology and literature grows from critiques of "abstracted empiricism" in academic criminology (Mills, 1959, p. 50) and of an "administrative criminology" that is scientistic, unimaginative, and government funded (Young, 1986, p.9), the field is not hostile to quantitative criminology. Having moved beyond the 20th-century totalizing methodological disputes of the biological, psychological, and sociological schools, criminology has entered an age of integration and interdisciplinarity, synthesizing the best aspects of various fields and theories for targeted analysis of specific aspects of crime and justice. This new era has seen the rise of qualitative criminology, yet one underdeveloped avenue is integration with the humanities. Instead of chastising quantitative criminologists, criminology and literature invites criminologists—both quantitative and qualitative—into new ways to achieve their goals. Thus, criminology and literature should ask and answer—with empirical research—three questions as the field moves forward:

1. *Do literary studies programs contribute to lower crime rates on an individual level? On a social level?* Put differently, are programs that respond to crime in the community with the arts and humanities empirically effective? How could this connection be measured? What would be the criteria to settle these questions?

2. *Do literary studies make criminology better?* Here the proof is in the pudding—in the generations of scholars who have use critical criminology as a compelling theoretical position in the discipline, and in the growing field of criminology and literature. But skeptics will—justly—not

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be persuaded until there is empirical data of the efficaciousness of literary studies for criminology.

3. *Do literary studies contribute to better criminal justice?* We need controlled and reliable studies that show whether or not criminal justice education that is infused with literary studies—in schools, in training academies, and in professional development programs—leads to better criminal justice practices out on the street. ■

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