



Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines
- Society of Contemporary British Studies -



CALL FOR PAPERS

Congrès de la SAES. Université de Poitiers – 3 au 5 juin 2026
« Emancipation »

Atelier 5 :

Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines (SEAC) / La Nouvelle de langue anglaise

The notion of emancipation is commonly associated with a release from legal, social, political, economic, cultural, religious, sexual or moral restraint to gain autonomy and self-determination. In Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta's words, emancipation "literally means to give away ownership (*ex*: away; *mancipum*: ownership)" and more broadly "to relinquish one's authority over someone."¹ Simon Susen notes that while in Roman law, the term was "used primarily as a technical term referring to the granting of legal rights", in the modern era, "the emphasis shifted from a person's (passive) obtainment of legal rights to a subject's (active) self-liberation from disempowering forms of control."² The term is frequently used in relation to the abolition of slavery (following Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1 January 1863) as well as to various movements, revolts or reforms which have led to the emancipation of populations who had formerly been alienated or deprived of their rights. The quest for emancipation is thus characterized by resistance, opposition and insurrection against the pressures of established orders and dominant groups. For Jacques Rancière, "Emancipation is the way out of a situation of minority"³; it means "breaking out of the established hierarchies, proposing a space of equality, playful and subversive, to replace the dominant order of inequalities".⁴

In literature and the visual arts, emancipation can be portrayed through defiance against oppressive structures relating to race, class, gender, language, moral values or political ideas but it can also be embodied in form itself through a rejection of established conventions. Contributors to this workshop are invited to explore how works of art thematically challenge social, ethnic, linguistic, political and gender assignments to escape constraining frames and hegemonic discourses, and achieve enfranchisement. They may, for instance, examine how writers interested in processes of emancipation have addressed the topic of slavery as in Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010), Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) or Ursula K. Le Guin's novella "A Woman's Liberation" (1995). In terms of gender, one is reminded of Virginia Woolf's statement in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself."⁵

¹ Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, with Jacques Rancière. *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, New York: Continuum, 2010, p. 27.

² Simon Susen, "Emancipation", in Michael T. Gibbons, Diana Coole, Elisabeth Ellis, and Kennan Ferguson (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 1024-1038.

³ Jacques Rancière, "Communists without Communism?", in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, London: Verso, 2010, p. 167.

⁴ Aliocha Wald Lasowski, "Foreword. Understanding Emancipation", in Jacques Rancière, *Rethinking Emancipation. Conversations with Aliocha Wald Lasowski*, 2022, Trans. Andrew Brown, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024, p. ix.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London: Hogarth, 1929, p. 84.

While in 1962, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was celebrated as a pioneering work of female emancipation, contemporary texts by Jeanette Winterson or Ali Smith portray powerful female or non-binary characters breaking free from patriarchal models. In the United States, Kate Chopin's short stories show a constant preoccupation with emancipation, which originated in a sketch entitled "Emancipation. A Life Fable" that she wrote at the age of eighteen and which features an animal leaving the cage where it has always lived. Likewise, in "The Story of an Hour" (1894), which calls to mind Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale "The Wives of the Dead" (1831), Chopin's female protagonist believes she is free of marital obligations—another form of cage—when she is wrongly informed that her husband has died. Her freedom is short-lived and when the husband returns, the wife has a heart attack... Trying to find a room and a voice of one's own relates to emancipation strategies also—Alice Munro's female character in "The Office" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968) or Joan Williams's Amy in "Vistas" (*Pariah and Other Stories*, 1983) are examples of creative women who feel the need to move away from the confines of home so as to bloom artistically. Emancipation can equally concern a liberation from one's social class and pertain to language when writers steer away from the accepted norms of Standard English (as in James Kelman's 1994 novel *How Late It Was, How Late*, or in the work of the poet Bob Beagrie). Contributors may also analyse the ways in which the emancipation of oppressed or subaltern groups or individuals is conveyed narratively and linguistically through a shift from silence, absence and invisibility to the emergence of discordant and powerful emancipated voices and bodies. They may reflect on the means women writers use to "resist amnesia," as Adrienne Rich puts it, and fight for "the particularity and commonality of this vast turbulence of female becoming, which is continually being erased or generalized."⁶

Examining emancipation entails reflecting about one's position in relation to canonical works and forms. Contributors are thus invited to examine the ways in which innovative literary and artistic movements (modernism, expressionism, the avant-gardes, postmodernism....) have developed in an effort to emancipate from former models or modes in order to create something new. Writers and artists have defied existing norms and conventions, emancipating from what they perceive as dominant and, in some cases, exhausted forms or genres⁷ to experiment with innovative and hybrid modalities. Escaping the straitjacket of watertight literary categories set by publishers, booksellers or theatre producers, and sometimes expected by reviewers, they can opt for polygeneric forms such as the *stoku* invented by Ben Okri (a mixture of story and haiku), playfully blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction as in Virginia Woolf's imaginative biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel *Flush* (1933), combine prose and verse as in Bernardine Evaristo's semi-autobiographical novel-in-verse *Lara* (1997), blend fiction, history, biography and essay as in Julian Barnes's *Elizabeth Finch* (2022), or experiment with new forms of theatre by breaking the fourth wall and removing the stage as in immersive theatre. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière notes that emancipation means "the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those who act," thus challenging the hierarchy between the artist as master and the audience as pupil.⁸ Another manifestation of emancipation can be found in film or theatre adaptations of canonical works that deliberately depart from the original. In the visual arts, emancipation may occur in space itself when artists turn away from traditional art galleries and museums to occupy alternative

⁶ Adrienne Rich, quoted in Ann Harleman Stewart, "A Voice of One's Own: Contemporary Short Fiction by North American Women," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 10 (Spring 1988): 128.

⁷ John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," 1967, in *The Novel Today*, Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), 1977, London: Fontana Press, 1990, p. 71-85.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2008, Trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York: Verso, 2009, p. 19. In *The Ignorant Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Jacques Rancière had already recommended the emancipation of students from their dependence on explicators.

sites. In *Pour une esthétique de l'émancipation*, Isabelle Alfonsi suggests breaking out of processes that tend to homogenize and universalize artistic experiences, in order to welcome practices that emancipate from dominating models.⁹

Contributors interested in the genre of short story may reflect on the choice of that genre by writers intent on resisting the pressure of market-oriented publication requirements, who have turned their backs on the dominant genre of the novel to privilege the short story as Alice Munro famously did. Following Marcel Thoene's contention that "acts of emancipation – in themselves renegotiations of the spatial category of hierarchy – are heavily informed by space and spatiality,"¹⁰ it could therefore be stimulating to reflect upon the short story in relation to other genres. Since many writers let passages from novels in-progress emancipate in the pages of magazines and newspapers, contributors may decide to consider those publications as independent pieces and discuss how they were redesigned to fit the genre. The idea of a particular design also comes to mind when considering New Women writers who, according to Ruth Robbins "adopted the short story form as a key mode in their struggle for self-expression and social emancipation."¹¹ This could be applied to other groups of short story writers such as African Americans who recorded their experience from bondage to freedom, or postcolonial authors who envisage their relationship to the Empire.

This workshop organised jointly by the Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines (SEAC) and the *Journal of the Short Story in English* welcomes proposals that address the notion of emancipation from a wide range of perspectives, the directions suggested above being non-exclusive. Papers may take as their focus British literature and visual arts of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Contributors may also turn to the genre of the short story in English from the 19th to the 21st centuries.

Proposals for papers in English (300 words + short bibliography) and a brief biographical note should be sent jointly to Vanessa Guignery (vanessa.guignery@ens-lyon.fr) and Gérald Preher (gerald.preher@univ-artois.fr) before **November 30th 2025**.

Papers will be submitted for publication to the peer-reviewed journals *Études britanniques contemporaines* or *The Journal of the Short Story in English*.

⁹ Isabelle Alfonsi, *Pour une esthétique de l'émancipation, Construire les lignées d'un art queer*. Paris: B42, 2019.

¹⁰ Marcel Thoene, *Toward Diversity and Emancipation: (Re-)Narrating Space in the Contemporary American Novel*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016, p. 24.

¹¹ Ruth Robbins, "Gender and Genre in the Short Story," in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English*, Paul Delaney and Adrian Hunter (eds.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019, p. 298.