

Department of English
Western University

PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN AESTHETICS

ENGLISH 9133B (Winter 2016)
Wednesday, 9:30-12:30 (SH 3355)

Prof. Kate Stanley
Wednesday, 12:30-1:30; 4:30-5:30 by apt (AHB 3G04)
kate.stanley@uwo.ca

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course traces the legacy of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism in American aesthetics and culture from the mid-nineteenth century up to the present. We will introduce the tenets of classical pragmatism as they are outlined in foundational essays and lectures by William James and John Dewey. Our explorations of the relationship between pragmatism and American aesthetics will begin by examining the fraught relationship between pragmatism and literature. With its emphasis on clear thinking and practical action, the “pragmatic method” of inquiry can seem hostile to literary experimentation. We will focus on William James’s exchanges with his godfather Ralph Waldo Emerson and his student Gertrude Stein to consider sites of intersection and divergence between proponents of “the official philosophy of America” and the nation’s literary innovators at the turn of the century. Next we turn to Dewey’s influential yet hotly contested account of “art as experience.” We will examine his claim that aesthetic experience should be continuous with daily life alongside counter-claims for art’s autonomous status outside the everyday. Our approach to this debate will be grounded in case studies from the visual arts and music (including Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, Anthony Caro, John Cage, and Richard Reed Parry).

REQUIRED TEXTS

Course Reader
William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (Penguin)
John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigree)

*All texts available in the Western Bookstore. Please use Penguin James edition

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSIGNMENTS

Participation	15%	
Primary Text Presentation	20%	
Lit Crit Presentation	10%	
Research Paper (4000-5000 words)	55%	[DUE: April 6, 2016]

Participation:

Attentive reading and reflective discussion are at the heart of this seminar. Your attendance, preparation, and participation are essential. Being prepared means you have completed the reading, reflected on it, and have come to class with your book in hand, ready to discuss your thoughts and questions. Each absence without prior explanation will result in a 2% deduction.

Primary Text Presentation:

This assignment has two parts--

(1) *Seminar Introduction* (10%): You will open class by presenting a focused argument on one of the assigned primary readings. Your presentation should be designed to engage the attention of your classmates with the goal of provoking generative discussion. You are free to take whatever approach to presenting you think will be most productive and stimulating. Your task is to frame the central critical problems, paradoxes, and questions that the reading raises for the class. Please limit your formal presentation to 15 minutes. On the Sunday before your presentation send an email outlining your plan for the class. Please provide a handout that outlines major points, arguments, and questions.

(2) *Position Paper* (10%): By the Sunday following your presentation you are required to email me a three or four page position paper (900-1200 words) that recapitulates the essential points and arguments outlined in your Seminar Introduction. This paper might also incorporate and develop insights that arose in class discussion.

Lit Crit Presentation:

For this presentation you are asked to summarize the argument of a selected piece of literary criticism for the class in a clear and engaging way. You should also suggest how this reading connects to the other assigned readings for that day and to larger questions guiding the class. Conclude with some questions for your classmates with the goal of sparking thoughtful discussion. Reports should be no longer than 15 minutes. Please provide a handout that outlines the reading's key points and arguments.

These presentations will be done in pairs. It is your responsibility to contact your partner to plan the presentation. On the Sunday before your presentation please send an email that provides an outline of the key points you plan to present along with a brief summary of how the work was divided.

Presentations are intended to help you to develop and practice strategies for engaging colleagues and students—in the classroom as well as in conference presentations. You will be evaluated on how clearly, actively, inventively and persuasively you present the material and involve your classmates in discussion.

Research Paper:

For your final research paper you are responsible for formulating a focused and compelling research question on a topic of your choosing focused on one or more of the class's required readings. If you want to write on material you have presented on previously, please ensure that your essay takes a different angle or shows a marked development of thought. The paper should be between 15 and 20 pages (4000-5000 words). Please propose a topic and research question by March 13, 2016.

You will be required to present the argument developed in your research paper in a 5 minutes presentation.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Jan 13: INTRODUCTION

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (R)

Emerson, from "Nature" (R)

Joan Richardson, "Chapter One. Introduction: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Pragmatism" (R)
(from *Pragmatism and American Experience*)

Jan 20: JAMESIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Joan Richardson, "Chapter Two. *Context: William James, Into the Cosmic Weather*" (from
Pragmatism and American Experience) (S)

James, "The Stream of Thought," "Methods" (from *Principles of Psychology*) (R)

Jan 27: JAMESIAN EDUCATION

James, "The Gospel of Relaxation" (R), "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," "What
Makes a Life Significant" (from *Talks to Students*); "Address at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo
Emerson"

Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (R)

Emerson, "Circles" (R)

Feb 3: PRAGMATISM

James, *Pragmatism*; "A World of Pure Experience"

Feb 10: PRAGMATISM & LITERATURE

Richard Poirier, "Reading Pragmatically," from *Poetry and Pragmatism* (R)

Emerson, "Fate" (S)

W. E. B. Du Bois, from *The Souls of Black Folk* (R)

Lit Crit Presentation: Ross Posnock, "Going Astray, Going Forward: Du Boisian Pragmatism
and its Lineage" (R)

Feb 17: READING WEEK

Feb 24: HABITS OF ATTENTION

James, "Attention," "Habit," (from *Principles of Psychology*) (R)

Stein, "Composition as Explanation" (R); from *Lectures in America* and *Narration* (S)

Lit Crit Presentation: Steven Meyer, "Gertrude Stein" (S)

Mar 2: STEIN CONT.

Stein, "If I Told Him" (R)

Stein, "Portraits and Repetition" (from *Lectures in America*) (R)

Lit Crit Presentation: Adam Frank, "Thinking Confusion" (R)

Mar 9: PRAGMATISM & ART

John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

Mar 16: DEWEY CONT.

Dewey, *Art as Experience* cont.

Lit Crit Presentation: Richard Shusterman, from *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (S)

Mar 23: PAPER WORKSHOP

Mar 30: MINIMALISM

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (R)

Lit Crit Presentation: Jonathan Flatley, "Allegories of Boredom" (R)

Apr 6: PRAGMATISM & MUSIC

John Cage, 4'33"; "Lecture on Nothing" (R)

Lit Crit Presentation: Joan Retallack, from *The Poethical Wager* (R)

FINAL PAPER DUE

LAST CLASS: DATE TBA

Wrap-up

Research Reports

Statement on Academic Offences:

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf.