

**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)
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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).

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

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.