



American Realism

English 363-03
MW 2:30-3:50 pm
Palamountain 303
Professor Paul Benzon
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Office: Palamountain 316
Office Hours: Weds. 10:30 am-12:30 pm, Thurs. 1-2 pm, and by appt.
Course Blog: <https://americanrealism363.wordpress.com/>

Course Description

In this course, we will study a range of American novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period was a complex moment in both artistic and cultural terms, as authors developed new representational strategies in order to reckon with a range of social transformations, including mass urbanization and immigration, the rise of consumer capitalism, the emergence of new media forms such as telegraphy and photography, changes in race relations in the aftermath of Reconstruction, and the beginnings of modern feminism. Reading the works of these authors closely and setting them in a range of cultural contexts, we'll think about how they represent and respond to the complexities of their social world, as well as what it means to consider their work from the perspective of our own transitional moment in history. In addition to regular posts on a class blog, students will write one short paper, present a critical or theoretical work related to one of our course texts, and develop a seminar paper through several sequential steps, including preliminary research and drafting, workshopping, and revision.

Course Goals

Through this course, you will learn to

- Read complex literary works carefully and critically, attending to a range of formal, thematic, and social registers, and to how a work places these registers in conversation
- Situate the literary work of American realism within appropriate historical, social, and cultural contexts
- Engage with critical and theoretical material in ways that illuminate larger issues within course texts, including questions of class, race, gender, technology, and space
- Conduct substantive scholarly research in critical and theoretical material in order to develop and extend your interpretations of and responses to a literary text
- Pursue a scholarly project through iterative, sequential steps, making use of research, drafting, feedback, and revision

Required Texts

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and In the Cage* (9780375757402)

Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (9780141441344)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (978-0140187298)

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (9780393927733)

Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (9781551115979)

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Other Stories* (9780199536948)

Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (9780140186864)

James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (9780679727538)

Selected other readings available on Blackboard, marked in the course schedule as BB

Materials available online should be printed out and brought to class on the days we will be discussing them. I recommend that you print this material out at the beginning of the semester and keep it all together so that you will have it in hand well before you need it.

Grading

You must complete all of the following course assignments in order to pass the course:

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| Class Participation | 15% |
| Course Blog | 20% |
| Presentation | 15% |
| Word Study | 15% |
| Seminar Paper Proposal /Annotated Bibliography / First Draft | 10% |
| Seminar Paper | 25% |

Preparation, Participation, and Class Structure

We will spend our class time each day on a variety of different activities, including but not limited to full-class discussions, small-group discussions, presentations, and in-class writing. While I may occasionally give short lectures, the bulk of our time will be spent talking and engaging together with the course material and with each other's ideas. In order to do this, it is essential that you come to class prepared to address the day's material. This means printing out (if necessary) and completing all reading before class, bringing the reading to class, and being prepared to discuss the reading thoughtfully. You should have interpretations, questions, and responses to share with the class, and you should be prepared to offer these and to be called on in our conversation. The more each of you brings your own thinking to the discussion, the more all of us will get out of class—I encourage you to offer perspectives, ideas, examples, oppositions, questions, and other contributions as much as possible. If you are uncomfortable with speaking in class, please let me know or come see me at the beginning of the semester so that we can work together to make things easier for you.

Although I will rarely lecture, that does not mean that you should not take notes on what the class has to say about the material we are discussing, just as you would in a lecture course. Having a record of the class' comments, concerns, debates, etc., will be extremely valuable to you in preparing to develop topics and arguments for further writing and thinking in the course. More broadly, consistently remaining actively engaged in our discussions, even if only as a listener and note-taker at certain moments, will help you to develop as a critical thinker and writer.

Laptops and tablets may be used in class only for class-related work such as note-taking, class writing or reading, and research. If inappropriate computer or electronic use becomes a problem for some members of the class, I will revoke permission to use them for the class as a whole. If you have questions about whether a certain use of technology is appropriate or not, please don't hesitate to ask me.

Course Blog

Over the course of the semester, we will all post regularly to a course blog focused on the texts and issues we will be discussing in class. This work will serve several purposes: firstly (and most immediately), it will give us a chance to think and talk critically about some of the course material before we discuss it in class and to gear our discussion towards issues and questions that are important to you or that you are curious about. In giving you the opportunity to bring new material and new areas of concern into our conversation, it will also help you to generate topics, ideas, and arguments for papers.

Blog Posting. Note that the blog is located on our independent course website at <https://americanrealism363.wordpress.com/>, **not on Blackboard** (although we will use Blackboard for email, papers, and other elements of the course). You are not required to register with WordPress in order to post on the blog, but you must subscribe to the blog so that you receive notifications of new material that I post, and you should include your name or other identifying information in your posts so that we can all follow the conversation online and I can give you credit for your work. The most recent main post will appear at the top of the page—click on the comments link for that post to read what others have written and post your writing.

Blog Content. Your work on the blog will take different forms at different points in the semester. Sometimes I will post a question for you to respond to, while at other times your posts can be more open-ended; sometimes I will ask you to address a particular passage or other element from the reading, while at other times I will ask you to think about a broader issue or question that connects several texts. The blog is a space for us as a group to be reflective about the material we are discussing, and to begin to air initial responses, interpretations, and reactions before we pursue them more fully in class discussion. In this spirit, your posting to the blog should be thoughtful and analytical—you should offer interpretations and questions rather than summaries or solely personal responses.

Each week on the blog, you should submit **one post of your own and one response to a classmate's post**. Your own post should be at least 250-300 words—you might write and edit your post in Microsoft Word or a similar program so that you know the length of your post and so that you have a backup of it on your computer. I encourage you to include images, links, video clips, and other media elements in your posts as relevant—this is fairly easy to do and we will discuss it in class at the beginning of the course. Your response can be shorter than your post, but should engage your classmate's post thoughtfully and substantively.

Blog Scheduling. In order to ensure that everyone has a chance to post, comment, and absorb the online discussion before we discuss a given text in class, blog posts are due by **10:00pm the night before we discuss a text in class**, and comments are due by the time we meet in class (see the course schedule below for specific due dates). **Because of the time-sensitive nature of the blog, late posts and comments will not receive credit.**

Blog Grading. I will grade your blog posts on a scale of 1-5 each week. Criteria for each grade are as follows:

Grade Characteristics

- 1 The post is missing, late, or severely underdeveloped, consisting of only a few sentences.
- 2 The post is underdeveloped: it meets most the technical requirements of the assignment (use of text, use of media, length, etc.), but only engages with the material and the issues it raises in a passing or overly general sense.
- 3 The post is sufficient: it meets all of the technical requirements of the assignment, and addresses the material and the issues it raises in reasonable depth, but does not do much to develop or respond to them.
- 4 The post is successful: it uses textual or other material to make analytical claims, and begins to develop them, but those claims or connections are not fully developed or analyzed.
- 5 The post is exceptional: it uses textual or other material to make thoughtful, original analytical claims and/or connections and engages and analyzes the issues it raises in independent, in-depth ways.

I will grade blog comments on a pass/fail basis.

Presentation

Once during the semester, you will be responsible for offering a paired presentation of a critical or theoretical article related to the novel currently under discussion. I will circulate a signup sheet for texts and dates at the beginning of the semester. I have listed suggested articles for each novel in brackets on the course schedule below; you also have the option of presenting an article of your own choosing, provided I have the chance to approve it at least one week before your presentation date. For your presentation, you and your partner should be prepared to speak for approximately ten minutes: in this time you should introduce us to the basic workings of the article—the issues it raises and the argument its author makes—and discuss how we might use it to illuminate our thinking about the literary text in question. You should also be prepared to open up and help lead our discussion of the novel through the lens of your article. I encourage you to prepare handouts and/or slides to help us follow your thinking; if you do so, please email me a copy of your materials before your presentation.

Word Study

As part of our work in the early part of the course, you will select one “rich” word from one of the texts we read, and analyze that word as it appears across your chosen text. This assignment is intended to help you practice with literary analysis at the microscopic level and with placing that analysis in the context of a larger work. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment early in the semester.

Seminar Paper

Your concluding assignment in the course will be a final seminar paper in which you explore a particular text, author, or set of issues from our course conversations in greater depth, incorporating critical and/or theoretical material to deepen your thinking and situate it within a larger scholarly conversation. Because good academic research and writing is a developmental process that requires time, exploration, reflection, dialogue, and revision, we will break the work of writing this paper down into several sequential assignments. As we proceed through this work, you should be sure to keep both paper and electronic copies of each stage of your paper and of all feedback you receive from me and from your classmates. Each stage of the process is explained briefly below; I will provide more in-depth instructions for each assignment over the semester.

Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography. Your research proposal should be a formal, yet provisional discussion of what you want to explore in your seminar paper. You should propose a topic that is specific enough to write about in a focused way, yet also complex and large enough for you to engage in an extended analysis, and you should contextualize this topic within the issues and questions of our class work. In proposing your topic, you should also raise a set of tentative research questions that you hope to explore through your work. Your annotated bibliography should include citations and descriptions for a range of critical and theoretical sources that you plan to explore and engage with for your paper.

Seminar Paper First Draft. Your first draft of the seminar paper should be a substantive first attempt to engage with some of the questions and issues of your topic, and should incorporate outside research. It does not have to be a polished finished product, but it should be at least 6-8 pages of writing, and should be in formal paper format rather than in rough notes.

Because the proposal, bibliography, and first draft for the seminar paper are early steps in a larger, ongoing project, I will grade this work largely on your successful, diligent, in-depth, and timely completion of these steps.

Seminar Paper Final Draft. The final draft of your seminar paper is due electronically by Tuesday, December 15 at 5:00 p.m. It should be at 10-12 pages in length (not including a full Works Cited listing) and should represent significant revision, expansion, and further research from your first draft.

Late Work

Late papers (or other formal writing assignments) will lose one-third of a letter grade for each day after the due date.

Attendance

You are permitted a total of two absences throughout the semester without penalty. For each subsequent absence, your final course grade will drop one-third of a letter (e.g., from an A- to a B+), and after four absences, you risk failing the course. Repeated or excessive lateness will also count as an absence.

If you miss all or part of a class, it is your responsibility to keep up with the work for the course—make sure to follow the syllabus, stay on track with the reading, turn in any written work that was due for the day, and consult a classmate, check the course website on Blackboard, or come see me during my office hours to talk about what you might have missed in class.

Office Hours

I want each of you to be successful in this class. Helping each of you develop as readers, writers, thinkers, and students of American literature is important to me, and I want to do what I can to help you achieve those goals and succeed in my class. More importantly, I have a great deal of interest in the material we will be working on this semester, and I would love for you to get the same enjoyment and excitement from it that I do. If you have any questions, problems, or things you want to discuss—about the course, the readings, writing assignments or paper ideas, life at Skidmore, future academic or career plans, or anything else at all—or if you simply want to talk more about what we're doing in class, please come see me. I encourage you to think of meeting with me not just as a last resort or something to do when you need help, but as a central part of making your learning more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. My office hours are Wednesday 10:30 am-12:30 pm and Thursday 1-2 pm in Palamountain Hall 316—this time is set aside for us to talk and for me to help you and work with you. If you aren't free during that time, get in touch with me before or after class or by email and we can set up a time that is more convenient—I'm also happy to talk via Google Chat, Skype, or other means. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are having trouble or feel you need help, or for any other reason at all.

Accessibility

If you anticipate needing accommodations regarding any element of this course, please come talk with me early in the semester so that we can work together to address these issues. You should also visit the Office of Student Academic Services at <http://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/index.php> for more information.

Academic Integrity

Independent thinking and writing are crucial elements of both your work in this course and the intellectual culture of Skidmore more broadly. Violating these principles through plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is a serious offense. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade for the assignment and may result in more serious consequences as well. If you have any questions about citation, attribution, or plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask me before you hand in your work. For more information about Skidmore's academic integrity policy, visit <http://www.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.php>.

Course Schedule

The schedule below may change over the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class and/or via email. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of these changes by attending class, checking your email and the class blog regularly, and contacting me or coming to my office if you have any questions.

Introductions, Foundations, Contexts

- Wed. September 9 **Course Introduction**
Introductory Blog Post Due Friday 10pm
- Mon. September 14 **Contexts for Realism**
Pam Morris, selections from *Realism* (BB)
Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" (BB)
Theodore Dreiser, "True Art Speaks Plainly" (BB)
Frank Norris, "An Opening for Novelists" (BB)
Blog Post on Contextual Essays Due Sunday 10pm

Consciousness, Style, Technology

- Wed. September 16 Henry James, *Daisy Miller*
- Mon. September 21 Henry James, *In the Cage* 115-163
Blog Post on "In the Cage" Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. September 23 Henry James, *In the Cage* 163-end
[Richard Menke, "A Winged Intelligence"] BB

City, Class, Gender

- Mon. September 28 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 35-146
Blog Post on Wharton Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. September 30 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 146-259
- Mon. October 5 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 259-369
[Thorsten Veblen, from *Theory of the Leisure Class*] BB
Blog Post on Wharton Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. October 7 Class Visit to Edith Wharton Collection, Scribner Library Special Collections
Short Paper due
- Mon. October 12 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 1-93
Blog Post on Dreiser Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. October 14 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 93-187

- Mon. October 19 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 187-265
Blog Post on Dreiser Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. October 21 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* 265-end
[Walter Benn Michaels, “*Sister Carrie’s* Popular Economy] BB
- Mon. October 26 Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (all)
Blog Post on Crane Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. October 28 Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* continued
[Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City”] BB
Paper Proposal and Bibliography Due Friday
- Mon. November 2 **Paper Proposal Conferences**

Bodies, Space, Power

- Wed. November 4 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (all)
- Mon. November 9 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* continued
[Elaine Showalter, “*The Awakening: Tradition and the American Female Talent*”] BB
Blog Post on Chopin Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. November 11 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* 1-114
- Mon. November 16 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* 115-221
Blog Post on Chesnutt Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. November 18 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* 221-end
[John Mac Kilgore, “The Cakewalk of Capital in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*”] BB
- Mon. November 23 **Draft Workshop**
Drafts Due Sunday, November 22 by 5:00pm
- Wed. November 25 **No Class: Thanksgiving Vacation**
- Mon. November 30 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* xxxix-109
Blog Post on Johnson Due Sunday 10 pm
- Wed. December 2 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* 110-end
[Samira Kawash, from *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative*] BB
- Mon. December 7 TBD/Open Day
- Wed. December 9 **Contemporary Realisms, Conclusions, Celebrations**
Tues. December 15: Seminar Paper Due, 5 p.m.

