Comedy: 
Having the Last Laugh

Description

This course is an introduction to the genre of comedy. It surveys examples of comedy across a long historical range—from classical Greece to contemporary America—and a breadth of media forms, including drama, novel, film, and stand-up. Among other questions, we'll ask: why is comedy so difficult to define, despite its persistence across history and saturation of everyday life? Why is it often treated as less important or meaningful than other genres, like tragedy? If comedy is light entertainment, why is it so often the genre that most directly comments on politics? How can comedy be at once associated with the best and worst of living with people, of laughing at others and laughing with others?

Required Texts


You are required to buy the correct print editions of the texts listed above. Versions of the play that are online, for an e-reader, or published by a different company are not acceptable. The total cost of the above editions on Amazon is currently about $30, cheaper if you buy used. If you are looking for ways to lower costs, contact me and we can go over options.
Calendar

Week 1
1/6: Introduction
1/8: Perspectives on Comedy Across the Disciplines: Simon Critchley, from On Humor; Mary Beard, “A History of Laughter—From Cicero to the Simpsons”; Jordan Raine, “The Evolutionary Origins of Laughter are rooted more in survival than enjoyment”; Gina Mireault, “Five-Month-Old Babies Know What’s Funny”

Week 2
1/13: Aristophanes, Lysistrata lines 1-705
1/15: Lysistrata 706-1320.

Week 3
1/20: Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream Act 1
1/22: Midsummer 2 Paper 1 due

Week 4
1/27: Midsummer 3-4
1/29: Midsummer 5

Week 5
2/3: Austen, Northanger Abbey 5-49
2/5: Northanger 49-92.

Week 6
2/10: Northanger 92-139.
2/12: Northanger 139-187

Week 7
2/17: Kafka, Metamorphosis Paper 2 due
2/19: Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “Good Country People”

Week 8
2/24: Charlie Chaplin, Modern Times
2/26: Modern Times

Week 9
3/2: I Love Lucy
3/4: Chewing Gum.

Week 10
3/9: Sketch: Key & Peele, SNL
3/11: Stand-up. Paper 3 due
Assignments

Attendance: Coming to class on time, ready for discussion, with the correct text is required. Missing more than three classes will result in your final grade being lowered by 2.5 points for each additional absence. Coming to class without the text or without having done the reading will count as an absence.

Discussion Questions: Once a week, you will submit a question about the day’s reading for discussion with the class. Along with the question, you must include at least one quotation with citation from the reading and 2-3 sentences explaining why this question interested you and/or how it relates to previous class conversations. At the beginning of the term, half the class will be assigned to Monday, half to Wednesday. Submissions are due via Canvas by one hour before class time—late will not be accepted. You are allowed to miss three submissions without penalty. (10%)

Quizzes: Quizzes will be held once a week. These will be short and have multiple choice questions. They cover the contents of the literature we’re reading and information covered in lecture like literary concepts, genre definitions, and historical contexts. Your lowest three scores are dropped. (20%)

Paper One (3-4 pages). First, choose a short passage from *Lysistrata*, no more than 30 lines. Write it out on a page of its own. Second, in one paragraph, summarize what is said in this passage, aiming to be as accurate and clear as possible, and putting it in your own words. Third, choose three to five details about how the passage says what it says that aren’t part of your summary. These can be metaphors, ambiguities, hyperboles, omissions, aspects of sentence length or syntax, and more. Quote each chosen detail, then provide a few sentences about how that detail adds to or changes the meaning of the passage. (20%)

Paper Two (3-4 pages): Write a close reading of one passage of your choice from either *Midsummer* or *Northanger Abbey*. The first paragraph of your essay should describe two possible reasonable interpretations of the passage, that is, interpretations you can imagine one of your classmates having. The rest of your essay should choose one of these, supporting its choice with evidence from the passage. This evidence should include literary details, like what you gathered in the first paper. (25%)

Paper Three (3-4 pages): Over the course of the term, we will study several theories of how comedy relates to the political and social world around it. They will be covered in lecture and I will give a handout on them after paper 2. For this paper, you will choose one of these theories and analyze it in relation to a passage from *Metamorphosis*, *Modern Times*, *I Love Lucy*, or *Chewing Gum*. First, spend one paragraph explaining the theory as clearly as possible in your own words. Second, examine how the passage helps to illustrate that theory. Finally, spend some time working through how the passage challenges, adds to, or changes the theory. (25%)
Policies

Accessibility: Please let me know if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center (formerly Disability Services) in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.

Advisory: Be aware that the material we read for this course can be disturbing in its treatment of sexuality and violence, and our discussions will cover these topics. If you feel you can’t participate in discussion around a particular issue or text, let me know and I will try to design alternative work.

English Language Learners: Anyone can succeed in this class whether or not English is their primary language. You will likely have some additional challenges: readings and papers will take longer to complete, participating in class discussion may be more intimidating. If you’re having trouble with participation, you can earn points by sharing your ideas in email or office hours. If you’re struggling with readings or papers, come to office hours and we can discuss. You should know that grammar, syntax, and spelling are a relatively minor part of paper grades. As with all students, I expect you to show care with your language, but your argument is what is most important.

Formatting Papers: Your assignments must be in twelve-point font, double-spaced, and have one-inch margins. Submitting assignments electronically is acceptable, but you need to use .doc(x) or .pdf format (not .pages or .odt). You can follow either MLA or Chicago guidelines for citations, but be consistent. Great guides to either format can be found at Purdue’s OWL website (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/). You are expected to proofread your work; too many errors will result in a small penalty to your grade.

Late Assignments: I give out extensions readily, but you need to ask in advance. Exceptions may be given for emergencies and other drastic situations. Late assignments are graded down half a letter grade per day late. Assignments are due at the beginning of class unless stated otherwise; assignments turned in after that will be considered a day late. Papers will be accepted in print, by email, or by Canvas.

Plagiarism: All work must be your own and written solely for this class. Plagiarism can be unintentional, so be careful and make sure you understand the rules. If you’re not certain, ask me. If you quote, paraphrase, or borrow ideas from an article, website, editor’s note, friend, or any other outside source, you need to provide documentation. I encourage you to look at the library’s guides for citing sources and avoiding plagiarism (https://library.uoregon.edu/citing). The same link will also allow you to access the university’s official policy toward academic misconduct; you should read over the policy if you’re unclear on what counts as cheating or plagiarism.

If you’re struggling with a paper, I encourage you to contact me. It’s better to submit a paper late, unfinished, or in poor quality than risk the penalties for plagiarizing.