

American Humor

AMS 243-8821
Fall 2009, CSI/CUNY
Sat 9:00-12:20 PM 2N/110

Professor Catherine Lavender, PhD
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Office hours (2N-203): Th 4:00-6:00, and by appt.

About the Course:

Humor in America shares some characteristics found in all cultures, past and present, and sometimes has seemed peculiarly "native." This course traces the variety and development of American humor from colonial days to the present through literature, drama, art, cartoons, and film. We will examine humor as psychological phenomenon, as philosophical outlook, and as intellectual history.

Also, I warn you ahead of time that "humor" is highly individual; what you think is funny may not be what others think is funny. But we will strive to laugh while we are doing serious research and analysis. Don't be discouraged if you don't find everything we read or watch hilarious; instead, try to understand why it's "humorous" – how it includes elements of humor as a genre. And also, try to understand why it's funny to certain people and not to others.

We will start off by reading some critical work about humor before we move on to reading examples of American humor itself, an exercise one might liken to "reading cake recipes but never getting to eat any cake." Don't be dispirited: there *will* be cake. The remainder of the course – the "cake-eating" part – will examine a number of American humorous archetypes as identified by key scholars in the field, especially Constance Rourke, Don L. F. Nilsen, and Nancy A. Walker. In this section we will be looking at literature, drama, art, cartoons, and film.

Course Requirements:

All students are required to attend class meetings, take part in discussions, and submit all written work on time; late papers will not be accepted without prior arrangement with the professor. As per CSI-CUNY regulations, no student with more than two unexcused absences will receive credit for the course. Finally, plagiarism and other forms of intellectual dishonesty or sloth will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the assignment and/or course, at the discretion of the professor. For further information about City University of New York policies on academic dishonesty, refer to the CUNY website at www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/2004/policies/image/policy.pdf.

Assignments:

- Assignments and Quizzes (ongoing): 50% of course grade total
- Class Participation: 10% of course grade
- Midterm Examination (10/17): 20% of course grade total
- Final Examination (12/19): 20% of course grade

Contacting the Professor:

My contact information and office hours are listed above. Course materials may be downloaded via www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/389/.

Required Texts (please purchase the Thurber and Vonnegut):

- Course Reader (Readings will also be available via Course Website)
- James Thurber, *My Life and Hard Times* (any edition)
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* (any edition)

CLASS MEETING SCHEDULE:

Sa 8/29	Introduction to Course
Sa 9/5	The Formal Elements of Humor, or, “How to Make a Joke Unfunny”
Sa 9/12	What is “American” About American Humor?
Sa 9/19	No CSI Classes – NO CLASS MEETING
Sa 9/26	Hucksters
Sa 10/3	Liars
Sa 10/10	Hicks
Sa 10/17	Midterm Examination
Sa 10/24	Suckers (and discussion of Thurber’s <i>My Life and Hard Times</i>)
Sa 10/31	Minstrels
Sa 11/7	Schmucks
Sa 11/14	Fakes
Sa 11/21	Dames
Sa 11/28	CSI Closed – NO CLASS MEETING
Sa 12/5	Tricksters
Sa 12/12	Discussion of Vonnegut’ <i>Breakfast of Champions</i> (a novel full of hucksters, liars, hicks, suckers, minstrels, schmucks, fakes, dames, and tricksters).
Sa 12/19	FINAL EXAMINATION