ENGLISH 4344 – TOPICS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
American Humor in Literature and Cinema
Spring 2020

Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the
innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.
E.B. White, Some Remarks on Humor

The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in
Heaven.
Mark Twain, Following the Equator

Gorillas prefer American humor.
Steve Allen (qtd. in What's So Funny?)

Instructor: Chris Ellery
Office: A021B
Office Hours: 10-11 MWF, 3:30-4:30 MW, 8:30-9:30 TR, and 2-3 TR
Phone: 486-6142
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Catalog Description

A study of one or more topics in American literature.

Course Description

American Humor in Literature and Cinema will explore the theory, techniques, and history of
American humor as it relates to culture, values, and the national identity. By studying works by
some of America’s most popular storytellers in literature and film, the class will examine the
diverse social and political functions of humor and comedy in America.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

• understand important literary terms related to American humor (humor, wit, comedy,
  irony, satire, dark humor, the grotesque) and apply them to close reading and
  interpretation of literary and cinematic texts in various genres;
• apply a broad range of critical approaches (expressive, objective, mimetic, and
  pragmatic) to the analysis and evaluation of literature and cinema;
• understand the types and roles of laughter and humor as related to American culture and
  identity, including the subversive use of humor to expose the dark side of the American
  dream;
• understand the conventions of comedy as a genre and recognize and analyze comic
  character types; and
• research, propose, plan, and carry out an independent scholarly or creative project.
Required Texts

Books

Some additional required readings (see syllabus) will be available online or provided by handout.

Movies
Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*
Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*
Preston Sturges, *Sullivan’s Travels*
Amy Sherman-Palladino, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Pilot

Some Useful Resources:
Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (reserve)
Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America’s Humor from Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (reserve)
Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (reserve)
*Studies in American Humor* (periodical)

Grading

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Work</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exams</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>50%</td>
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</tbody>
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- *Daily work* includes frequent reading quizzes, response papers and short essays, oral presentations, group work, a project proposal and progress report, and other assignments.
- The two *exams* will be a mix of objective and essay questions covering issues, concepts, terms, and works discussed throughout the semester.
- Shaped by student interest, the *project* can be scholarly or creative in nature.

Departmental Policy on Academic Honesty

Angelo State University expects its students to maintain complete honesty and integrity in their academic pursuits. Students are responsible for understanding the Academic Honor Code, which is contained in both print and web versions ([www.angelo.edu/forms/pdf/honorcode5.pdf](http://www.angelo.edu/forms/pdf/honorcode5.pdf)) of the *Student Handbook.*
Personal Conduct and Responsibilities

In this and all college courses, you should conduct yourself with professionalism and collegiality, and you should take responsibility for your own learning and performance. You will improve your chances of succeeding in this class by following these rules:

- **Stay focused.** Attend class and be actively involved. Pay attention and participate in discussions. Ask questions when you have them and consult your professor when you have concerns.
- **Be prepared every day.** Critically read all assignments. Conscientiously complete homework and class activities. Keep up with your work.
- **Follow instructions carefully,** especially those on assignment prompts, and prepare assignments according to the guidelines provided.
- **Encourage learning and collaborate** with classmates and support the instructor in the goal of learning.
- **Be courteous.** To avoid distracting others, arrive on time and leave when class is dismissed.
- **Avoid talking in class except when appropriate.** While it is sometimes acceptable and even desirable to question opinions and even facts offered by others (including the teacher), you should do so respectfully and thoughtfully, with learning goals in mind.
- **Silence and put away cell phones.** Do not use any personal electronic devices unless invited to do so as part of the class.
- **Take good care of your body and mind.** Keep yourself nourished and rested.

Attendance and Make-up Policy

The following policy is consistent with ASU OP 10.04 (“Academic Regulations Concerning Student Performance”).

- **This is a face-to-face class.** Regular attendance is essential for success in the class. Attendance will be taken daily at the beginning of the period. Students who arrive late or do not answer the roll should see the instructor after class to be sure they are counted present. Students who enter during a quiz will not be given extra time to complete it.
- **Be prepared for class each day.** An absence does not excuse the student from being prepared for the next class. Thus, students who miss class should contact a classmate or the instructor to be sure of the assignment for the next class.
- **All assignments are due when called for.** Being permitted to submit work after the deadline gives students an advantage over those who turn work in on time; thus late work will be accepted without penalty only in the case of excused absences. The penalty for an unexcused late submission is one-half letter grade for each day late.
- **Students must present credible documentation to receive an excused absence.** Absences are excused for school travel, illness, or personal or family emergency. Contact the instructor as soon as possible (before a school trip or personal travel) to excuse the absence and arrange make-up work.
- **Daily grades for quizzes and other in-class activities cannot be made up.** Two daily grades will be dropped at the end of the term.
- **E-mailed assignments will be accepted only at the request of the instructor.**
**Title IX at Angelo State University**

Angelo State University is committed to providing and strengthening an educational, working, and living environment where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from sex discrimination of any kind. Sex discrimination, sexual misconduct, public indecency, interpersonal violence, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, and stalking are not tolerated at ASU. As a faculty member, I am a Responsible Employee meaning that I will report any allegations I am notified of to the Office of Title IX Compliance in order to connect students with resources and options in addressing the allegations reported. You are encouraged to report any incidents to ASU’s Office of Title IX Compliance and the Director of Title IX Compliance/Title IX Coordinator. You may do so by contacting:

**Michelle Boone, J.D.**  
*Director of Title IX Compliance/Title IX Coordinator*  
Mayer Administration Building, Room 200  
325-942-2022  
michelle.boone@angelo.edu

You may also file a report online 24/7 at [www.angelo.edu/incident-form](http://www.angelo.edu/incident-form).

If you are wishing to speak to someone about an incident in confidence you may contact the University Health Clinic and Counseling Center at 325-942-2173 or the ASU Crisis Helpline at 325-486-6345.

The Office of Title IX Compliance also provides accommodations related to pregnancy (such as communicating with your professors regarding medically necessary absences, modifications required because of pregnancy, etc.). If you are pregnant and need assistance or accommodations, please contact the Office of Title IX Compliance utilizing the information above.

For more information about Title IX in general you may visit [www.angelo.edu/title-ix](http://www.angelo.edu/title-ix).

**Student Accommodation**

Angelo State University is committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the university, or be subjected to discrimination by the university, as provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA), and subsequent legislation. All students at Angelo State University must have the capacity and ambition to undertake, with reasonable accommodation from the faculty and administration, the academic challenges necessary to fulfill the academic requirements for the degree or certification programs which they are pursuing. Persons with conditions that warrant accommodations must contact the Student Life Office, Room 112 University Center, to request such accommodations. You are encouraged to make this request early in the semester.
Observance of Religious Holy Days

“Students who intend to be absent from class to observe a religious ‘holy day’ (as defined in ASU OP 10.19) must inform the instructor in writing prior to the absence and make up any scheduled assignments within an appropriate timeframe as determined by the professor. While the absence will not be penalized, failure to complete the make-up assignment within the specified timeframe will result in penalties consistent with other absences and assignments.”

Senior Portfolios

Candidates for the Bachelor of Arts in English are required to complete a portfolio to be eligible for graduation. Students may submit this portfolio after completing all major requirements or in the semester immediately prior to graduation. The portfolio grade will not affect GPA, but will be part of the student’s record.

Tentative Schedule

Following is a schedule of readings for the semester.

- All Mark Twain selections are from *Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain*, ed. by Walter Blair.
- “[Barreca]” after a work indicates that it is in *American Humor: A Comprehensive Collection*, ed. by Regina Berreca.
- “[Bb]” refers to a work available on Blackboard.
- “TOP” is an acronym for “Topic for Discussion.”

Week 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M 1/13</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F 1/17</td>
<td>Benjamin Franklin, “On Selecting a Mistress” [Barreca]</td>
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<td>“The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” [Bb]</td>
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<td>TOP: Satire</td>
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Week 2

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<tr>
<th>M 1/20</th>
<th>Holiday</th>
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<tr>
<td>W 1/22</td>
<td>Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” [Bb]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOP: Irony</td>
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<tr>
<td>F 1/24</td>
<td>Thomas Bangs Thorpe, <em>Big Bear of Arkansas</em> [Bb]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOP: Old Southwest Humor</td>
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Week 3

| M 1/27 | Mark Twain, “How to Tell a Story” and “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” |
|        | TOP: The Humorous Story |
| W 1/29 | Mark Twain, “Jim Blaine and His Grandfather’s Old Ram” |
|        | “The Whittier Birthday Dinner Speech” |
|        | TOP: Humor and the Genteel Tradition |
F 1/31  
Twain, *Old Times on the Mississippi*, pp. 64-98  
TOP: *Eiron* and *Alazon*: Comic Character Types

**Week 4**

M 2/3  
*Old Times on the Mississippi*, pp. 98-130

W 3/5  
*Old Times on the Mississippi*

F 2/7  
Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*, pp. 306-343  
TOP: American Naturalism and Dark Humor

**Week 5**

M 2/10  
*The Mysterious Stranger*, pp. 344-388

W 2/12  
O. Henry, “The Ransom of Red Chief” [Barreca]

F 2/14  
Dorothy Parker, “The Garter” and “The Little Hours” [Barreca]  
TOP: Women’s Humor

**Week 6**

M 2/17  
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Chs. 1-6  
TOP: African American Humor

W 2/19  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Chs. 7-14

F 2/21  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Chs. 15-20

**Week 7**

M 2/24  
**Project Proposals Due**

W 2/26  
Preston Sturges, *Sullivan’s Travels*  
TOP: Screwball Comedy

F 2/28  
*Sullivan’s Travels*

**Week 8**

M 3/2  
Review

W 3/4  
**Midterm**

F 3/6  
ASU Writers Conference in Honor of Elmer Kelton

**3/9-3/13**  
**Spring Break**

**Week 9**

M 3/16  
Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People” [Bb]  
TOP: The Southern Grotesque

W 3/18  
Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*

F 3/20  
*Dr. Strangelove*

**Week 10**

M 3/23  
Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Chs. 1-4

W 3/25  
*Slaughterhouse-Five*, Chs. 5-6

F 3/27  
*Slaughterhouse-Five*, Chs. 7-10
**Week 11**
M 3/30  Luis Valdez, “Los Vendidos” [Bb]
       TOP: Humor and Agitprop
W 4/1   Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*
F 4/3   *Blazing Saddles*

**Week 12**
M 4/6   August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Act One
W 4/8   *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, `Act Two
F 4/10  Holiday

**Week 13**
       TOP: Native American Humor of Survival
W 4/15  “What You Pawn, I Will Redeem”
F 4/17  Workshop

**Week 14**
M 4/20  **Project Due**
W 4/22  *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* “Pilot”
F 4/24  Presentations

**Week 15**
M 4/27  Presentations
W 4/29  Presentations
F 5/1   Recapitulation and Review

**Finals Week**
W 5/6   **Exam 3**
       8-10 a.m.