HSS 403 (001 and H01): THE ELEMENTS OF COMEDY

Tuesday & Thursday 11:30-12:50
Classroom: CKB 315
Office Hours: By appointment (email me)

Instructor: Calista McRae
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0. Course Description

This seminar will investigate the dynamics of modern comedy through a range of poems, stories, and films. Our questions will include: what comic theories explain some of what we laugh at? How can we describe what amuses us without ruining the joke? What can laughter do? What subjects does modern comedy draw on, and how does each artist change make certain topics their own? How can we characterize the comedy of our own time?

Our focus will be on getting beyond the “what” to the “how” and “why”; analyzing comedy can be a good way to become a better observer of the languages, people, and cultures around you. Accordingly, written work will focus on looking in depth and in detail at the form of a comic moment—not just what it says, but how it says it.

1. Course Goals

- Be able to describe our major theories of comedy, and to apply them to a range of situations
- Strengthen observational skills through close reading a variety of genres
- Describe the style, tone, and subject of a complicated text, both accurately and expressively
- Practice writing as a process by using various brainstorming, revision, and editing strategies
- Propose and complete an in-depth research paper

2. Prerequisites

HUM 102 and one from among HUM 211, HUM 212 and HIST 213 or their equivalents, all with a grade of C or better. Completion of either the Lit/Hist/Phil/STS or the Open Elective in Humanities and Social Science, with a grade of C or better.

3. There Are No Required Texts, But:

You will be asked to rent or buy Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*, and are responsible for 1) reading all material in advance and 2) for having it on your laptop (or for printing it out) in class. If laptops become distracting, I will make printing work mandatory, but would prefer to spare some trees.

4. Assignments

*Diagnostic essay*, due Sept. 10 (1-2 pp.) .................................................................
*Statement for final paper*, due Oct. 4, (4-5 sentences on your topic).................... 5%
*Proposal (and for Honors credit, a bibliography)*, due Oct. 11 (500 words/five items) 15%
*Midterm Essay*, due on film, Nov. 5, or on poem, Nov. 12 ............................... 15%
*Oral, multimedia presentation on the idea of your final paper* (5 minutes) .......... 15%
*Final paper*, due in portfolio form on December 12, 11:30 PM (10-12 pages) ..... 25%
*Participation* ............................................................................................................. 25%

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The **final paper** will have several steps: 1) a few sentences on what you’re going to investigate (due about six weeks before the final paper), 2) a 500-word proposal, explaining in more detail what question you’re going to pursue; if you’re taking the class for Honors, it should have a list of secondary sources that you think may be helpful, 3) a final draft of about ten to twelve pages, or 3500-4000 words. The essay can be on any work covered in the term, or any other comic work of interest to you (check with me about it early to make sure it seems viable). I am glad to discuss your work in office hours until the end of term.

The **final presentation** will be a five-minute adaptation of your final paper. It should involve some multimedia component (prezi, powerpoint, etc). A grading rubric is up at the Google Site.; if your research involves poss. offensive/upsetting material, talk with CM by Oct. 16.

The **midterm essay**: for details, see the Google Site.

**Participation** includes: attending, informal writing, showing up on time, speaking up regularly in discussion, and responding to your colleagues’ presentations. If you are uncomfortable talking in class, you’re welcome to submit short (150 words) responses before the day’s class, instead (this would be in addition to any other informal out-of-class writing). Contact me if you want this option. Participation grades will go up on Moodle approximately every three weeks.

**For any student taking HSS 403 as an Honors course**: Participation also includes a more significant informal written component, the extracurricular log. This log is a record of humor you notice in your day-to-day life—e.g. in advertisements, graffiti, tweets, conversations overheard, emails received, animal behavior, etc. Aim to add a note every day or so, reaching 3000 words over the course of the semester. Describe each instance as vividly as possible, and, to whatever extent possible, start to note why you found something funny. A good journal will be detailed, imaginative, adventurous (more adventurous than you might be in class), and thoughtful; it will cover a variety of genres, not just verbal humor (e.g., you might try to describe what makes an image or a song funny). It might include your own photos or screenshots, or mp3s or gifs; it can use hyperlinks or embed material. An A journal will also be a comic document in its own right. Keep it in whatever form you prefer (google doc, blog, Word doc), but do be ready to include it in your final portfolio.

5. **Grading**

Work will be evaluated according to the university’s grading scale. If you are concerned about a grade, **come see me in office hours as soon as possible.** (If it’s not too late in the semester, rewrites are possible—I will average out your original grade & the new grade—but essays would need to show a lot of improvement. If you want to revise an essay, you need to make at least one appointment with the Writing Center, to discuss revisions, before you submit the rewrite.)

A = 100-90 (superior)       B = 86-80 (very good)       C = 76-70 (acceptable)       F = 59-0 (inadequate)
B+ = 89-87 (excellent)      C+ = 79-77 (good)           D = 69-60 (minimum)

6. **Attendance/Lateness Policies**

You may miss up to two classes without penalty. Every subsequent unexcused absence will reduce your participation grade. According to university policy, students who expect to miss classes because of religious observance must submit to their instructors, by the end of the second week of classes, a written list of dates that will be missed. Similarly, athletes should submit a list of events. If you cannot make a section due to illness, an academic commitment, or a major extracurricular event, and
if you wish to have the absence excused, ask the Dean of Students (Campus Center, Room 255) to review the request.

If you miss a section, please contact a classmate to find out what was covered.

Occasional lateness is completely understandable but frequent lateness will start to be treated as half an absence.

7. Submitting Work
Submit your essays as both 1) hard copies at the start of class, and 2) through Moodle. Please include your name, and use reasonable margins & spacing, so that I have room to write comments.

8. Late Work
If you know in advance that you are having trouble completing an assignment, please see me as soon as possible. Extensions are possible, but require 24 hours’ notice. Otherwise, the grades of late work will go down by five points per day (e.g., from a 90 to an 85). Please back up your work frequently.

9. Plagiarism
The NJIT honor code defines plagiarism “as using or attempting to use written, oral, or graphic work which was authored or prepared by another and submitting it as one’s own.” The full text of the University Code can be found at https://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf. If your work uses the idea or language of any other person, make that use clear to your reader by citing clearly and thoroughly. Plagiarism is a form of cheating, and essays that involve plagiarized portions usually get a 0, but I will let the Dean of Students determine this.

In addition: do not use student essays found online as sources, and do not use Shmoop, Sparknotes, Cliff Notes, genius.com, or Wikipedia as sources in papers (Wikipedia can be a great starting place but you need to track down the original source of whatever useful material you find there). Shmoop and similar sites are often dead wrong, boring, or prone to oversimplifying.

10. Special Needs
If you are a student with a documented disability, please see me at the beginning of the semester to discuss accommodations. You can also contact Student Disability Services at (973) 596-3420.

11. The Writing Center
The Writing Center (downstairs in CKB) is available for forty-minute individual and group appointments with writing center staff. The writing center staff can help with planning assignments, improving your writing, refining an essay or multimedia project, or other communication-based needs. See https://njit.mywconline.com/.

I may require you to visit the Writing Center repeatedly. If so, please ask the writing tutor (aka writing consultant) to fill out a Writing Center report and send it to me, so that I know you are going and give you credit.

12. Cautions...
First: we will encounter potentially crude or upsetting course materials: addiction, racist language, sexual themes, domestic violence, blasphemy, nuclear war, dementia, etc. There will be some foul language, although foul language itself isn’t the point. In Sorry to Bother You, there will be nudity. We will analyze these materials from an academic, neutral perspective.
Second: with this frequently controversial material, it will be important that you consider your classmates’ reactions before introducing potentially offensive material (explaining why you’re introducing something and why the material is valuable, is important). Respect for one another should be your first consideration. If you are unsure if something might be suitable for class, please contact me outside of class. Be tactful in references to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and politics: keep in mind that a subject you personally find harmless may be painful to a classmate, and handle the subject thoughtfully. Feel free to email me before any class if you have questions. The views of these texts/films are not necessarily those of the instructor.

Your final paper may well examine offensive material, which is completely fine, but if so, be in touch early about how to handle your final presentation.