

Spring 2024

HSS 404-026: Tragicomedy Across Genres

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HSS404026-LIT SEM: TRAGICOMEDY ACROSS GENRES

Below you'll find the course policies, assignment links, and a draft schedule.

M-Th 8:30-9:50, Faculty Memorial Hall 106

Instructor: Calista McRae

Office hours: Wednesdays 9:00-9:45. I'm happy to meet other weekdays in person or by Zoom: email me to set up a time.

Email: mcrae@njit.edu

Office phone: 973-596-5726

Course Description

This course explores tragicomedy in a range of genres, among them poetry, films, short and very short stories, TV episodes, nonfiction prose and video, music, artwork, and memes. Our focus will be on how to describe and analyze complex scenes that are both very funny and very sad: we will look in detail at the *form* of such moments. Doing this analysis can help you become a better observer of the various kinds of languages—verbal, visual, cinematic—at work around you. You'll be writing frequently, mainly for a longer final essay on the style of a tragicomic work of your choice (but occasionally also shorter in-class paragraphs about tragicomic moments you yourself notice, or about the day's assignment).

Course Goals

- Describe and analyze films and texts in detail, through "[close reading](#)"
- Understand major theories of comedy and tragicomic genres
- Understand basic cinematographic techniques: why might a filmmaker might choose one approach over others, in a given moment?
- Understand basic literary techniques: how do word choices and sentence structures affect meaning?
- Make conscious decisions about your own writing style: what do the works we cover show you about effective communication?

Prerequisites

HUM 102 with a grade of C or higher, and 6 credits at the 300-level History and Humanities GER with a grade of C or higher; 3 credits at the 300-level may be taken concurrently as a co-requisite.

What you have to buy

Please make a [Newark Public Library account](#), so that you can use NPL's [Kanopy](#) and [Hoopla](#). I'd suggest not using your NJIT email address with NPL, because you'll need to access both NJIT's and NPL's Kanopy selections, and Kanopy can get confused if you use the same email address. You will also need to buy or rent a number of movies, but don't buy them far in advance: the syllabus may change.

Each day, bring your laptop to class, so that you can have the day's reading up on your screen and/or can type, if requested.

Warning!

Because of the topic of this course, we will be reading and watching quite a bit of work that may upset you. There will be obscene language, some graphically sexual scenes and references, intense violence, and many forms of tragedy. With this material, it is important that you consider your classmates; respect for one another should be a consideration at all times. Even if you're not upset by the content of a given work, keep in mind that others in your class might be. You are welcome to talk with me further about any text outside of class, at any time.

Assignments:

Optional, ungraded 'diagnostic' essay , due before class on Monday morning, Jan. 22	--
Rough plan for your essay , due Friday night, Feb. 23	10%
Proposal for your essay , due Friday night, March 8	15%
Close reading for essay , due Friday night, March 29	15%
Full essay , due Monday night, April 29	25%
Short presentation from your essay, in April	10%
Participation (<i>including discussions, in-class writing, any quizzes</i>):	25%

Participation is quite a bit of your final grade, and involves thoughtfulness on several fronts: in responding to the text/film, in interacting with your classmates, and in any doing in-class writing. A superior participation grade involves interesting, surprising insights backed up by close attention to the day's text/film -- and meaningful, encouraging responses to your classmates. When you are asked to do in-class writing, be as detailed and specific as possible (depending on the week, you'll submit the in-class writing by hand or online; I'll give you instructions each time). Punctuality also affects one's participation grade.

Grading and Revising

Work will be evaluated according to the university's grading scale. If you are concerned about a grade, contact me as soon as possible. Waiting until the end of the semester means there will be no way to improve the grade.

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*)

If you want to improve a grade you got on a formal assignment, you can revise and resubmit it any time before the last meeting of this class, April 29. Before resubmitting, you need to meet at least once with someone at the Writing Center: bring them the work, feedback, and rubric, and ask them to tell me you went. After that meeting and after you've done all the revising you think the essay needs, email me the new essay, along with a short note describing (in your own words)

what you changed and why, and I'll average out your original grade and revised grade.

If you want me to read an early draft of any assignment, we need to meet to discuss the work (in person, by Zoom, or by phone), at least two days before it's due. And for me to read a whole draft of the final essay, you'd need to turn it in by April 22. But if at the last minute you have specific questions (for instance about a particular sentence or paragraph), email me and I'll answer as quickly as possible.

Attendance Policy

You can miss two classes for any reason, without it affecting your participation grade; there is no need to tell me why you're skipping. After two missed classes, additional unexcused absences will start to bring your participation grade down. If you have an absence that NJIT might be able to 'excuse' (illness, family emergency, jury duty, a university event, etc.), please [ask the Dean of Students to review the request](#). They keep your personal information confidential and can email all your professors at once.

According to university policy, students who expect to miss classes or exams because of religious observance must send their instructors, by the end of the second week of classes, a written list of dates that will be missed.

Submitting Work

Please make a .doc file; include your name and an interesting title. Use 1-inch margins and double-space. No need for hard copies; Canvas has submission links.

Late Work and Rescheduling

With the work for the essays, extensions are usually possible, but require at least 24 hours' notice. Without an extension or a note from the DOS, the grade of late work will go down by three points per day (e.g., from an 85 to an 82). I do accept late work until the last day of classes, and as long as the work is clear about what helped you, it is literally always better to turn in work late than not at all; however, I will not give late work the same amount of feedback given timely work.

With presentations, sign up for a slot that works for you, as soon as you can; changing days without a note from the DOS will result in a slightly reduced grade. No-shows without a note from the DOS will get a zero, though depending on our schedule you can possibly make it up and I will average out the two grades.

Academic Integrity

Here is NJIT's statement on academic integrity:

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found at: <http://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf>.

Please note that it is my professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary

action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

When I encounter writing that for any reason seems (a) as if it may be using other people's work (including AI work) and (b) is not clear about that use, I send it to the DOS for them to look into what happened. To avoid this, make sure you understand the following:

- What counts as plagiarism varies between fields. The standards for biology or physics are different from those of an English literature class. For this class—where work is graded on its ideas and about how clearly you're conveying your ideas—you need to be very clear in a fine-grained way. You can use MLA or APA or whatever other citation style you prefer, but be consistent and clear.

- If anything you're writing uses an idea or language (even a few words!) of any other person, make that use clear to your reader. *In the essay itself, right at the moment you use an idea or quote, you need to signal the particular use. That is, there needs to be a signal right at the end of the sentence that used somebody else's fact or idea or wording. And if you borrow somebody's wording, put it in quotation marks.* Here is a very short overview of the main problem I see in HSS seminars, [accidental plagiarism](#).

- When it comes to citations, do not trust Grammarly. Definitely do not use Grammarly's AI to try to make your writing more sophisticated—it almost always makes it less clear and more pretentious (bad things!). If you want to improve your writing on the level of the sentence, ask me for suggestions and plan to go to the Writing Center as often as possible.

- When in doubt, err on the side of being overly clear. For instance, if you use Google Translate (though I recommend that you do not do this!), show that use. Similarly, make sure you also show where you got any photos, screenshots, artwork, etc.

Accessibility/Accommodations

If you think you may have any difficulties related to the format or materials of this course, or if you would like to discuss any accommodations that might be helpful, please contact me at the start of the semester. If you have a documented disability, or if you think you might have a disability, you should also be in touch with [OARS](#) (Office of Accessibility Resources and Services) either to request an official accommodation or to discuss requesting one.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center (G17 Central King) is available for 45-minute remote or in-person appointments with writing tutors, who can help with planning, structuring, or refining essays. You can make an appointment [here](#). When you go, please bring any rubrics/handouts, so the consultant can see how you'll be graded. And please ask the writing tutor to fill out a Writing Center report and send it to me, so that I know you are going and give you credit for making that effort.

Schedule

Note: The readings and assignments may change; email announcements take precedence over deadlines here.

1. **Introduction**

Thurs., Jan. 18. Nothing in advance of class except to read the syllabus (this page). In class, read and discuss excerpts from the juror selection process for the Martin Shkreli trial

2. **Looking closely at prose**

Mon., Jan. 22. Teju Cole, *small fates* ; this short handout on close reading.

Thurs., Jan. 25. Lydia Davis, very short stories: "Wife One in Country," "Passing Wind," "The Dog Hair," "Letter to a Funeral Parlor." Syllabus quiz.

3. **Looking closely at film**

Mon., Jan. 29. Corrigan, introductory chapter on film.

Thurs., Feb. 1. Truffaut, *The 400 Blows*.

4. **Comic theory**

Mon., Feb. 5: *Jojo Rabbit*. (if that link doesn't work, see the options at JustWatch).

Thurs., Feb. 8: Bordwell on cinematography.

5. **Comic theory, continued**

Mon., Feb. 12: *Everything Everywhere All At Once*: on Hoopla, or see also JustWatch

Thurs., Feb. 15: Bordwell on editing.

6. **Beginning the final essay**

Mon., Feb. 19: Bordwell on sound (skim for the bits that interest/help you); Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove* (or consult JustWatch).

Thurs., Feb. 22. In class: discuss and work on the rough plan for your essay. Intellectual honesty, day 1.

Due Friday, Feb. 23: rough plan for your essay

7. **Comedies, documentaries, horror**

Mon., Feb. 26. Peele, *Get Out*

Thurs., Feb. 29. In class: discuss and work on the proposal for your essay. Intellectual honesty, day 2.

8. **The range of satire**

Mon., Mar. 4. Bong, *Parasite*. Look at JustWatch for ways to view

Thurs., Mar. 7. Flannery O'Connor, "A Late Encounter with the Enemy."

Friday, March 8: Proposal for the essay due.

Mon., Mar. 11 SPRING BREAK

Thurs., Mar. 14 SPRING BREAK

9. **Standup?**

Mon., Mar. 18. TBD. Possibly Richard Pryor, *Live on the Sunset Strip*.

Thurs., Mar. 21. TBD. Possibly Bo Burnham, *Inside*.

From here on out the syllabus is increasingly likely to change depending on how the class is going.

10. Close reading for the final essay

Mon., Mar. 25. TBD. McDonagh, *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

Thurs., Mar. 28. TBD. Close readings for the paper. Or Stevie Smith and Berryman.

Friday, March 29: Close reading for essay due.

11. Starting presentations

Mon., Apr. 1. *Visual art, photographs, memes: selections from the class (and presentation trial runs)*

Thurs., Apr. 4. Presentations 1-5

12. Quoting, summarizing, paraphrasing

Mon., Apr. 8. TBD. Possibly [James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"](#)

Thurs., Apr. 11. Presentations 6-10. TBD.

13. Mon., Apr. 15. [Aleksandar Hemon, "Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls."](#)

Thurs., Apr. 18. Presentations 11-15. TBD.

14. Mon., Apr. 22. Langston Hughes, "Life is Fine." Terrance Hayes, "Carp Poem." Other poems TBD. Last day to submit a whole draft for early feedback.

Thurs., Apr. 25. Presentations 16-20. TBD.

15. Mon., Apr. 29. Final workshop on essay; final essay due

This class has no exams.