

79-346, Fall 2019
Baker 237B
Class: Tues/Thurs 10:30-11:50am
Office Hours: TuTh 8am-9am & by appt.

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AMERICAN POLITICAL HUMOR

We will laugh a lot (I hope), but more seriously this course presents a “cultural history” of the U.S. since the Civil War, with emphasis on the conflicts and controversies of the twentieth century. We will read, hear, and watch some of the smartest critics of both politicians and voters: America’s political humorists. This requires defining some difficult terms. What is humor? How does it differ from comedy or from jokes? What is politics? What counts as “political” besides government and elections? What is the relationship between politics and art?

By the end of term, you should meet these learning objectives:

- Demonstrate knowledge of how American political humor and American politics have changed over the past 150 years, with reference to key voices, unique eras, and ongoing controversies
- Demonstrate your ability to read both closely and critically, to relate different genres of writing, from different historical periods, to the ongoing questions and themes of the course;
- Improve and master the skill of writing analytically, by integrating multiple sources into formal essays that are built around your own arguments about the content, meaning, and significance of American political humor.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES:

Final grades will be based upon from attendance/participation (15%), a draft essay (10%), three short essays (15%, 15%, 20%), a final paper outline (5%), and a final essay (25%). These assignments will be submitted through CMU’s Canvas website, which triggers a plagiarism check via *turnitin.com*.

REQUIRED BOOKS:

Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (Da Capo, 2016 ed.)
Rick DesRochers, *The Comic Offense: Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy* (Bloomsbury, 2014)
Peter Robinson, [The Dance of the Comedians](#) (E-book through Hunt Library)

Additional required readings are available (PDF) at <https://canvas.cmu.edu/>.



Personal note from Scott: As I will talk about in class (and one-on-one, if you ask), I've been treated for mental illness all my life, since I was 11 years old. I will do my best to let you know me as a person and to get to know you. Please visit my office hours to talk about anything you wish (including but not limited to coursework, history, humor, the news, you, me, or anything else you can think of).

Statement of Support for Students' Health & Well-being

Take care of yourself. Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle this semester by eating well, exercising, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting enough sleep and taking some time to relax. This will help you achieve your goals and cope with stress.

All of us benefit from support during times of struggle. There are many helpful resources available on campus and an important part of the college experience is learning how to ask for help. Asking for support sooner rather than later is almost always helpful.

If you or anyone you know experiences any academic stress, difficult life events, or feelings like anxiety or depression, we strongly encourage you to seek support. Counseling and Psychological Services (CaPS) is here to help: call 412-268-2922 and visit their website at <http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/>. Consider reaching out to a friend, faculty or family member you trust for help getting connected to the support that can help.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal or in danger of self-harm, call someone immediately, day or night:

CaPS: 412-268-2922

Re:solve Crisis Network: 888-796-8226

If the situation is life threatening, call the police

On campus: CMU Police: 412-268-2323

Off campus: 911

If you have questions about this or your coursework, please let me know.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

If you have a disability and have an accommodations letter from the Disability Resources office, I encourage you to discuss your accommodations and needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect that you may have a disability and would benefit from accommodations but are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, I encourage you to contact them at access@andrew.cmu.edu.

WEEK ONE: DISSECTING THE FROG

Tues, 27 Aug: Handout: H.L. Mencken, "Historians," (1918).

Thur, 29 Aug: Canvas: E.B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor" (1941); and "Glossary of Critical Terms," from Enid Veron, ed., *Humor in America: An Anthology*.

WEEK TWO: THE GREAT AMERICAN JOKE

Tues, 3 Sep: Canvas: Gray, Jones, and Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," from *Satire TV: Politics & Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (2009); and McClennen, "Proud to Be an American Satirist," from *America According to Colbert* (2011).

Thur, 5 Sep: E-book: Peter M. Robinson, [The Dance of the Comedians](#), prologue and ch. 1; and Canvas: Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "The Great American Joke" (1973).

WEEK THREE: A PEN WARMED UP IN HELL

Tues, 10 Sep: E-book: Robinson, [Dance of the Comedians](#), ch. 2; and Canvas: Mark Twain, "Corn-Pone Opinions," "Mark Twain as a Presidential Candidate," excerpt from *Huckleberry Finn*, and "The United States of Lyncherdom."

Thur, 12 Sep: Canvas: Judith Y. Lee, "Twain's Brand and the Modern Mood," from *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* (2012); and Mark Twain, "Encounter with an Interviewer," "How to Tell a Story," "A Bombshell of Truth," and "Seventieth Birthday."

WEEK FOUR: THE CENTURY OF THE COLOR LINE

Tues, 17 Sep: Canvas: Mark Twain, "As Regards Patriotism," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic (Brought Down to Date)," and "Comments on the Killing of 600 Moros."

<< *Twain draft essay by 11:59 p.m. at <https://canvas.cmu.edu/>*>>

Thur, 19 Sep: Rick DesRochers, *The Comic Offense: Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy*, preface and ch. 5 (NOTE: chapter *five*, not chapter *one*)
Canvas: W.E.B. Du Bois, "Forethought," from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "America, 1908," and "Ten Phrases" (1922).

WEEK FIVE: BOOBS AND THE BOOBOISIE

Tues, 24 Sep: Canvas: Nancy Walker and Rita Dresner, "Women's Humor in America," (1998); Anne Bradstreet, "An Author to Her Book" (1650); Marietta Holley, "On the Tuckerin' Nature of Pedestals" (1913); Alice Duer Miller, "Why We Oppose Votes for Men" and "Lines to Mr. Bowdle of Ohio" from *Are Women People?* (1915); and Alice Duer Miller, "An Unauthorized Interview Between the Suffragists and the Statue of Liberty," from *Women Are People!* (1917)

Thur, 26 Sep: Canvas: Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "If Only Mencken Were Alive" (1973); Gore Vidal, "The Essential Mencken" (1991); and 4 of these 7 Mencken essays, *In Defense of Women* (1918, excerpt); "Gamalielese" (1931); "The Mind of the Slave" (1924); "The Libido for the Ugly" (1927); "Cal as Literatus" (1928); "A Time to Be Wary" (1933); and "A More Abundant Dialectic" (1936).

WEEK SIX: VAUDEVILLE TO HOLLYWOOD TO HOME

Tues, 1 Oct: DesRochers, *Comic Offense*, ch. 1

Thur, 3 Oct: DesRochers, *Comic Offense*, ch. 2

<< Twain revision due by 11:59 p.m. at <https://canvas.cmu.edu/>>>

WEEK SEVEN: THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA, PART I

Tues, 8 Oct: DesRochers, *Comic Offense*, ch. 4;
E-book: Robinson, [The Dance of the Comedians](#), ch. 3; and
Canvas: "To an Enduring Wit, Election Day Was More Fun Than Halloween," *New York Times* (1996).

Thur, 10 Oct: Canvas: Lary May, "'My Ancestors Did Not Come Over on the Mayflower': Will Rogers and the Radicalism of Tradition," (2000); and Will Rogers newspaper columns, "Address to Traffic Chiefs" (1922), "Congress at Work" (1923), "Whooping It Up for Wall Street" (1929), "Radio Speech Introducing President Hoover" (1931) and "The Congressional Record" (1935).

WEEK EIGHT: BAD TASTE

Tues, 15 Oct: Canvas: T.J. Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society" (1989).

Tues, 17 Oct: Canvas: Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb" (1988); Walt "Pogo" Kelly, "Upon Atom," (1951) and "Who Stole the Tarts?" (1954); and Herbert "Herblock" Block, selected editorial cartoons.

WEEK NINE: MAD MEN

Tues, 22 Oct: E-book: Robinson, [*Dance of the Comedians*](#), ch. 4; and Canvas: Oliver Jensen, "The Gettysburg Address in Eisenhowerese" (1957); Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Address" (1961).

Thur, 24 Oct: E-book: Robinson, [*Dance of the Comedians*](#), ch. 5; and Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, preface by Lewis Black, Foreword by Howard Reich, and chapters 1-2

<< **Second essay due by 11:59 p.m. at <https://canvas.cmu.edu/>**>>

WEEK TEN: THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA: PART II

Tues, 29 Oct: Canvas: Gerald Nachman, "The Elvis of Stand-up," from *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (2004); and Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, chapters 3-16

Thur, 31 Oct: Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, chapters 17-28 (end)

WEEK ELEVEN: THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA: PARTS III & IV

Tues, 5 Nov: Canvas: Gerald Nachman, "Curing the Body Politic: Dick Gregory," from *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (2004); and short excerpt from Dick Gregory, *N****r: An Autobiography* (1964)

Thur, 7 Nov: DesRochers, *Comic Offense*, epilogue; E-book: Robinson, [*Dance of the Comedians*](#), ch. 6; and Canvas: Christine Acham, "That N****r's Crazy: The Rise and Demise of the Richard Pryor Show" (2004).

WEEK TWELVE: DANGEROUS WOMEN (FINALLY!)

Tues, 12 Nov: DesRochers, *Comic Offense*, ch. 3; Canvas: Nora Ephron, "A Few Words About Breasts" (1972) and "Dealing with the, Uh, Problem" (1973); and Gloria Steinem, "If Men Could Menstruate," *Ms. Magazine* (1973).

Thur, 14 Nov: Canvas: Joan L. Connors, "She's Not Laughing: Political Humor and Hillary Clinton's Campaign for President" (2009); Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair* (January 2007); and Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" *Vanity Fair* (April 2008).

WEEK THIRTEEN: POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS, RIGHT AND LEFT

Tues, 19 Nov: Canvas: Alison Dagnes, "Who Brings the Funny?" from *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (2012); and Greg Gutfield, *The Joy of Hate: How to Triumph over Whiners in the Age of Phony Outrage* (2012), excerpts.

<< **Third essay due by 11:59 p.m. at <https://canvas.cmu.edu/>**>>

Thur, 21 Nov: Canvas: Caitlin Flanagan, "That's Not Funny! Today's College Students Can't Seem to Take a Joke," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 2015); and Caitlin Flanagan, "How Late Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2017).

WEEK FOURTEEN: TURKEY JOKES

Tues, 27 Nov: NO CLASS

Thur, 29 Nov: NO CLASS

WEEK FIFTEEN: TWO BEINGS GO INTO A PLACE

Tues, 4 Dec: E-book: Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians*, epilogue; and Canvas: Rob Rogers, "I Was Fired for Making Fun of Trump," *New York Times*, June 15, 2018; and Lizz Winstead, "Michelle Wolf Tells Us Why She Hates Trump Jokes," *BUST Magazine* (August/September 2018).

<< **Final paper outline due (on paper) in class at 10:30 a.m.** >>

Thur, 6 Dec: Canvas: Andrew Ferguson, "A Republic Too Fractured to Be Funny," *Atlantic* (April 2019).

Student Name Printed: _____

**Note: An e-copy of this cover sheet MUST be uploaded with all required essays.
Check boxes to indicate that your paper meets all of the following requirements:**

Yes No

- My paper addresses all parts of the prompt.
- My paper develops a *challengeable* argument in **boldface type**.
- My paper does not begin "According to Webster's..." or "Blah blah blah is very interesting..."

Yes No

- I make an argument clearly in the first paragraph.
- Each subsequent paragraph advances my main argument.
- Each paragraph begins with a "topic sentence" and keeps my main argument somehow in view.
- My paper interprets and quotes from course readings to help support my argument and insights.

Yes No

- I have proofread my paper with my eyeballs, not relying only on computer spell-checking.
- My paper has a title conveying or relating to my argument.

Yes No

- The pages of my essay are numbered.
- I understand that uploading to Canvas triggers a plagiarism check by www.turnitin.com.
- The words and ideas of others are clearly identified as such in my paper, by the use of quotation marks and citations of the sources of ideas, quotations, and paraphrases.
- My paper includes a page entitled "Sources Consulted" (*not "Works Cited"*), disclosing all sources consulted (not just those actually quoted) including libraries, internet, friends, parents, GCC, etc.

Yes No

- I have read the plagiarism warning on page 8 of the syllabus and I accept the definitions and penalties explained there and discussed in class.
- This paper is entirely my own work and meets the CMU honor code and policies on page 8.

Signature

Date

**Your One and Only Warning:
Zero Tolerance of Cheating & Plagiarism**

Plagiarism means using words, ideas, or arguments from another person or source without acknowledgment. Cite all sources consulted to any extent (including material from the internet), whether or not assigned and whether or not quoted directly. For quotations, four or more words used in sequence must be set off in quotation marks *and* the source must be identified by both a citation within the paper and on a separate page identifying all "Sources Consulted" -- *not* "Works Cited" (notice the distinction?).

Any form of cheating on assignments will immediately earn you an 'R' grade for *the entire course*. **By choosing to remain enrolled in my course, you consent to this policy.**

In addition, I will seek the harshest official penalties under CMU's cheating, plagiarism, and unauthorized assistance policies at:

<https://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/ocsi/academic-integrity/index.html>

and

<https://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/ocsi/academic-integrity/statement-AI.html>

and

<http://www.cmu.edu/policies/student-and-student-life/academic-integrity.html>

and

<https://cms-staging.andrew.cmu.edu/theword/academic/standards-for-academic-and-creative-life.html>

Many students are surprised that CMU's definition of cheating encompasses a wide range of actions that you might not expect to be prohibited. *One example is unauthorized collaboration with others.*

If you have never taken time to read these guidelines on these CMU webpages, it is in your best interest to do so today. Save us both a lot of time and grief, OK?

STUDENT INFORMATION

Name: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____ Major(s): _____

Class year: _____ Hometown: _____

Who makes you laugh? _____

Favorite book(s): _____

Disabilities or special needs: _____

Anything else I need to know? _____

RECORD OF SCORES AND GRADES

Twain draft essay: _____ out of 10 points

Twain revised essay: _____ out of 15 points

MID-SEM LETTER GRADE: _____

Second essay: _____ out of 15 points

Third essay: _____ out of 15 points

Final paper thesis paragraph/outline: _____ out of 5 points

Final paper: _____ out of 25 points

Attendance/participation/quizzes: _____ out of 15 points

TOTAL OF ALL ABOVE: _____ OUT OF 100 POINTS

Comments on Participation: _____

Quiz scores: _____

Dates absent: _____ Total Absences: _____

FINAL SEMESTER LETTER GRADE: _____