How Comedy Works

Comedy does serious stuff. All genres offer a "set of interpretations, of ’frames’ or ’fixes’ on the world”—ways of seeing and understanding reality. In this tutorial, we will ask how comedy interprets the world and what forms of thought and action are made possible within a comic worldview. The tutorial will proceed by working through major comic works of drama, opera, film, and prose, as well as key theoretical texts on genre, comedy, and humor. As we become familiar with the key conventions and traditions of the genre, we work to address the serious questions it poses: How do we think differently inside a comedy? What view of the world does comedy assume? What kinds of action or values are possible only within the artificial, hypothetical space of comedy? Asking these questions about comedy, perhaps the most self-consciously generic of genres, will also help us understand how genres operate in general, from tragedies to tabloids.

The main academic goal of the tutorial is to prepare you to write the Junior Essay, a 20-25 pp. piece of critical writing demonstrating mastery both of literary works and of methods of research and criticism. Our secondary literature will introduce you to key modes of analysis, including formal, structural, anthropological, philosophic, psychoanalytic, feminist, and reader-response criticism. Two class presentations on critical works, as well as required meetings with your tutor, Research Librarian, and Departmental Writing Fellow, will also prepare you for the essay.

Each week we will focus on one or more primary works and several secondary works of criticism. One student will be responsible for presenting on the week’s criticism. I will adapt the syllabus and recommend further reading as students’ interests develop.

Required Texts

- William Shakespeare, As You Like It
- Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair
- Jane Austen, Emma or Northanger Abbey (as chosen by students)
- Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

All other texts will be made available online by the instructor
Course Requirements & Grading Breakdown

• Regular attendance (including at all required meetings) and active, thoughtful participation (including responses to a weekly prompt and 5-minute paper on your research to be presented at the Junior Tutorial Conference): 25%
• Short (5-6 pp.) paper: 10%
• Two in-class presentations on a critical work: 10%
• In-class acting assignment: 5%
• Annotated bibliography and 2-page prospectus: 15%
• Full draft of essay: 10%
• 20-25 pp. Junior Essay: 25% (required for passing grade)

Required Meetings & Due Dates

• Meeting with Research Librarian – within first three weeks
• Required Tutorial-Wide Meeting #1 – Tuesday, February 16, 4-5pm, Barker 133
• Short paper – Week 4
• Individual student conference – following submission of short paper in Week 4
• Annotated bibliography and 2-page prospectus – Week 6
• Required Tutorial-Wide Meeting #2 – Tuesday, March 22, 4-5pm, Barker 133
• Drafts Due (to tutor only) – Tuesday, April 12
• Final Essays Due (to department and to tutor) – Tuesday, May 3
• Junior Tutorial Conference – Tuesday, May 3 or Wednesday, May 4, 4-6:30pm
Week 1  Introduction to a Genre
1/25
Primary: John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (selections)
Jane Austen, *Emma* (film clip)
*Arrested Development* and *The Office* (TV clips)
E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation, "The Concept of Genre"

Week 2  Comic Cosmos
2/1
Primary: Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (selections)
Secondary: Patrick Downey, *Serious Comedy* (selections)
Rosalie Colie, *Resources of Kind,* "Genre-Systems and the Functions of Literature"

Week 3  Comic Space: The Green World
2/8
Primary: William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*
Secondary: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* Mythos of Spring: Comedy
Barbara Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms,* "Georgic and Comedic Modes in Eden"

Week 4  Dialogue, Hypothesis, Irony
2/15
Primary (selections from each): Plato, *Euthyphro*
Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*
Galileo, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*
David Hume, *Dialogue on Natural Religion*
Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room*
Secondary: Joel Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind,* "The Moral Cultivation of Ambivalence"
Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality"

Short paper due; Tutorial Meeting 2/16

Week 5  Comic Space: The Lower World
2/22
Primary: Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*
Secondary: Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Image of the Body"
C.L. Barber, "Misrule as Comedy, Comedy as Misrule"

Week 6  What You Will
2/29
Primary: Renaissance or Restoration comedy chosen by students with scenes to be acted out by students in class
(Dekker, Moliere, Congreve, Goldsmith, Wycherley, Sheridan...)
Andy Mousley, *Renaissance Drama and Contemporary Literary Theory* (selections)

Prospectus & Bibliography Due
Week 7
Genre Across Media
Primary: W.A. Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Le Nozze di Figaro*
(We will have a class screening of a film version of the opera – students should begin reading Austen)

Week 8
Enter the Narrator
Tutorial Meeting 3/22
Primary: Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (selections)
(Students should continue reading Austen)
Secondary: Wolfgang Iser, "The Role of the Reader in Fielding's Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones"

Week 9
Perception and Judgment
Primary: Jane Austen, *Emma* or *Northanger Abbey* (students' choice)
Secondary: Lionel Trilling, "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen" 
D.W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred"

Week 10
Satire, Parody, Pleasure
Primary: Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock"
Secondary: Cleanth Brooks, "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor"
John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (selections)

Week 11
Comedy on the Big Screen – in-class film viewing
Essay Drafts Due 4/12
Primary: 20th century film comedy as recommended by students
(*Showboat, Some Like It Hot, The Philadelphia Story* ...)
Secondary options include: Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*
Geoff King, *Film Comedy*
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*
Patricia Erens, *Issues in Feminist Film Studies*
Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*

Week 12
Comedy Our Contemporary
Primary: Contemporary comic pieces as recommended by students
(*Seinfeld, Chappelle's Show, SNL, The Colbert Report*, etc.)
Secondary options include: Freud, *The Joke and Relation to the Unconscious*
Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*
Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In*
Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*

Final essay due May 3
5-minute final conference paper to be delivered May 3 or May 4