

UNIV 241: DARK COMEDY
Winter 2016
Drexel University



Instructors

Dr. Melinda Lewis (mml332@drexel.edu)
Office Hours: Wednesdays 300 – 530pm
Library Basement (Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry)

Kathleen Volk Miller (kathleen.r.volkmilller@drexel.edu)
Office Hours:
5036 MacAlister

Course Description

Comedy's major resource is often tragedy and pain. Whether used to dissect large-scale issues like racism or to share personal tragedies like Tig Notaro's battle with Cancer and mother's death in *Live*, humor can communicate truths about the pain present in our lived experience. Sometimes texts considered "comedies" are perplexing as they provoke us differently, causing us not to laugh but to be disgusted, afraid, and uncertain about our cultural context. This course explores and analyzes the thin line between comedy and tragedy. Throughout the quarter, we will address the ways in which comedy is used to communicate with audiences and discuss why authors would choose to flirt with tragedy while writing comedy texts. Resources will include work regarding humor, audience, and narrative. Works analyzed will include short stories, stand-up, television, and film. By the end of the quarter, students should be able to address questions regarding the utility of dark comedy as a form and strategy through an analytical or creative project.

Learning Outcomes

1. Identify and differentiate different forms of humor
2. Analyze comedic texts using theory
3. Analyze and discuss the ways in which humor is used to magnify cultural issues and ideologies
4. Identify and analyze the different ways in which texts incorporate and use “dark” humor
5. Explain the ways in which social factors influence how films are made, as well as how audiences watch and interpret films.
6. Write pieces that analyze, address/incorporate theory, text, and humor.

Required Texts

- Volk Miller and Wrenn. *Humor: A Reader for Writers*. Oxford University Press. 2014.
- *Painted Brides Quarterly*
- Various articles and chapters that will be posted on Blackboard

Course Policies

Course Structure

The course will meet once a week (Wednesdays at 6pm). Each class will consist of a lecture, a break, and breakout discussion. The lecture will be provided by the instructors and guest speakers and will be tailored to provide theoretical, cultural, industrial, or historical context to the texts and issues discussed in class. Breakouts will consist of small group discussions and workshops. Students are expected to be active participants in discussions and question/answer periods.

Content Advisory

Dark humor is DARK. Humor is often connected to pain and is often used as a form of catharsis or as a means to force audience reflection. Texts for this class include content about violence, sexual assault and rape, pedophilia, aggressive language, racism, homophobia, sexism, and other difficult topics. **It is suggested that prior before continuing with this course students look up plot summaries and reviews. Students will not be allowed to skip watching or discussing texts due to content.** Part of the goal of this course is to examine and analyze how humor is used to elaborate on difficult topics, which means dealing with them head on in course texts, lectures, and discussions.

Conduct

Throughout the term we will be discussing difficult topics as well as workshopping our own ideas and material. It is important that we maintain a positive work environment – this includes being PRESENT (technology should be used only for the needs of the class), MINDFUL

(placing yourself in the position of others), and CONSIDERATE (negotiate and be constructive in criticism).

Attendance is mandatory!

Class time is crucial in this course and cannot be replicated by notes from others. Every absence is a detriment to your progress in the class. Missing two classes **lowers your final grade one full letter**. Leaving town for work, having a busy week, etc. are not excused. It will be your responsibility to ensure that I receive a hard copy of any absence documentation, and determining the validity of the absence will be up to my discretion.

Course Requirements and Grading Procedures

Assignments will be Submitted on Blackboard

Weekly Reflections	180 pts (9x20)
Workshops	180 pts (minimum 6)
Live Event Response	40 pts
In-Class Participation (Reading Questions)	100 pts
<u>Final Project</u>	<u>500 pts</u>
TOTAL	1000 pts

Weekly Reflections

Each week you will turn in a reflection on the assignments, lecture, and discussion. This is an opportunity to consider the issues, concepts, theories, and texts assigned for the week and brought in by your colleagues. Reflections should incorporate specific references to the readings and points made in lecture/discussion. Excellent reflections will be those that not reference all weekly course materials, but also add analysis and perspective. Average responses will provide perspective, but does not make connections to all materials. Below average responses are those that summarize one or two items and offer little analysis.

You should aim for papers to be 500 – 750 words (12 point font, Times New Roman, Double Spaced, 1-inch margins). Reflections will be due every week before the next class meeting and **turned in via Blackboard.**

Workshops

This class is incredibly interactive. You will be expected to find your own examples of dark comedy, as well as produce your own content. These examples should be posted onto the appropriate Discussion Thread on the Blackboard site. Throughout the term you will be also expected to provide constructive feedback for colleagues. You will be expected to provide

constructive feedback for AT LEAST SIX projects posted on the discussion board. These assignments will be graded based on completion, consistency/quality of critique, and that you provided feedback for several people (as opposed to just working with the same person throughout the time).

Your participation in workshops is FUNDAMENTAL. Feedback should be constructive and timely.

Live Event Response

Expand the walls of the classroom! This assignment asks you to attend a live event of your choice and use the concepts, theories, and terms discussed in class to evaluate/reflect upon the performance. Reflections should be 500 words. **All responses should be turned in by our final class meeting.**

In-Class Participation and Attendance

As noted above, attendance and participation is vital to your success in this course. Students will lose points for non-attendance. It is also important to remember that if you are not in class, you cannot participate, nor will you be able to fulfill your obligation for the reflection – by missing class you miss points across the board.

Active participation is vital to student learning. Engaging in discussions with colleagues is vital. **Students will be graded on their level of participation** – this includes asking questions, referencing texts, bringing up examples, and answering instructors' prompts. While we will note those who are taking notes and are "present," it is important for students to find and use their voices within the context of class! This class is about developing analytical skills AS WELL as forming, asserting, and defending arguments. Active engagement is the best way to practice.

Some weeks you will be expected to turn in a reading question. Questions will be focused, yet also open up discussion as opposed to easily answered (avoid "yes or no" and "what page..." type questions). These questions will not be counted for points, but will be accounted for in your participation grade as these assignments will be used in our group discussions. The dates when questions are due will be marked with the readings.

Final Project

By the end of the term you will be expected to produce one of two options

1. An Analytical Project (Case Study) – Analyzing a text using the theories and concepts discussed in class
2. An Creative Project – Producing an original work influenced by the theories and concepts discussed in class

You will have freedom to select your option and the content, but topics must be approved by the instructor (when you're ready to propose talk with your instructor). **The deadline to propose**

work will be WEEK SEVEN (so get thinking!!!). Works will be presented the final week of class.

Research oriented essays should be approximately 5-7 pages. Creative choices should be AT LEAST 5 pages. Both should be written in 12 pt, double spaced, Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins. Academic papers should also adhere to the MLA guidelines.

Late Work

Assignments must be submitted on time. 10 points will be deducted for each day an assignment is overdue. Responses to your peers must be submitted on time, otherwise we will all consider you selfish and lazy

Plagiarism

All students should be in compliance with the University's Academic Honesty Policy. Those who try to pass off work that is not their own will be reported to the College of Arts and Sciences and will be the subject of a judicial review. Be sure to know what constitutes as plagiarism and Academic Honesty by looking at Drexel's Academic Dishonesty Policy

http://drexel.edu/provost/policies/academic_dishonesty/

Plagiarism includes: copying and pasting from online sources, using nothing but citations to make your arguments, turning in somebody else's work as your own, and turning in the same paper/project multiple times (either in the same class or different classes). Do not try to pass off others' work as your own, be careful if collaborating on projects with others that your work is truly your own (in cases where papers being copied are suspected, both names are sent to the College), and be sure to cite all of your sources. **If you have specific questions about citations or your work ask us!**

If plagiarism is found, students will receive a 0 on the assignment and may lead to other consequences as per the discretion of the instructor.

Disability Accommodations

If you have a documented disability that requires accommodation in order to participate in this course, please contact me via email so that we can make arrangements for such accommodation to be made (in all cases, documentation must be provided in order for reasonable accommodations to be considered). Also, please note that the University has a Disability Resource Center. Their office is located at 3201 Arch Street, Suite 210 and their phone number is 215-895-1401 if you need further information about their services.

Course Schedule

Week 1: January 6

Course Overview

1. Course expectations: source material, discussions, and projects
2. Why Comedy is Important and What Do We Mean by Dark?
3. Breakout sections
 Story of your name exercise and game

First Section – Writing it Out

Week 2: January 13 – Humor Starter

Readings for Class:

- Berger, “Humor, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies”
- Dan O’Shannon; Steve Almond; Anna Wierzbicka; Zadie Smith; David Foster Wallace; Christopher Hitchens “Cheap Laughs”; Lizz Winstead essays in *Humor Book*
- **Bring Question to Class!**

Lecturer: Lewis

Homework: Initial Reflection about Humor and Culture (**remember to post on Blackboard before class, 500-750 words**)

Week 3: January 20 – Dark Comedy Specific

Readings for Class:

- “Black Comedy,” *Encyclopedia of American Humor*
- “Camus, Albert,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (link posted online)
- “An Absurd Reasoning,” Camus from *The Myth of Sisyphus*
- “On Friday Night Drinks: Workplace Affects in the Age of the Cubicle,” Melissa Gregg
- **Bring Question to Class!**

Guest Lecturer: Lewis

Homework: Reflection: What value does the absurd play in every day life and does Gregg’s “snark” qualify?

Week 4: January 27 – Absurdity

Readings for Class:

- Simon Rich; Katie Brinkworth; David Sedaris; George Saunders essays in *Humor Book*
- Benjamin Weissman excerpt

Guest Lecturer: Lewis

Homework: Analysis or Creative (Non) Fiction and Reflection on the subject of Dark Humor in Literature

Second Section: Humor and Speech and Performance

Week 5: February 3 – Standing Up

Readings for Class:

- Limon, “Image: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up”
- Weiner; Logan; Dunn; Hitchens; Finnigan from *Humor* book

Guest Lecturer: Eric Thomas

Homework: Reflection – Written and Performance as the Same and Not the Same
*Post your own found humor from an online magazine by Friday, 2/5.

Week 6: February 10 – Comedy and Pain

Readings for Class:

- MacRury, “Social Dreaming”
- Read the posts from your group and be prepared to discuss
- **Bring Question to Class!**

Lecturer: Lewis

Homework: Choose your favorite found piece and write 3-5 sentences of why it “worked for you.” (Submit in Found Thread) and Reflection

Week 7: February 17 – Examples and Workshop

Readings for Class:

- Links Before Class
- Watch an episode of *Reno 911*, *The Office* (British or American), or *Fargo* and discuss why it might be considered “Dark”
- **Bring Question to Class!**

Lecturer: Volk Miller

Homework: Analysis or Reflection on the Nature of Dark Comedy and Performance

Section 3 Mediated Fictions

Week 8: February 24 - Politics

Readings for Class:

- Gourneles and Greene, “Popular Culture and Post-911 Politics,”
- Gray, Jones, and Thompson, “The State of Satire, the Satire of State”
- Listen to: Amir Baghdadchi on “The Moth” podcast
- Watch Ted Talk website on [“Axis of Evil Comedy Tour”](#)

Screening: “The National Anthem,” *Black Mirror*

Guest Lecturer: Steven Rea

Homework: Reflection about the Role of Satire in Television and Film

Week 9: March 2 – Identity Politics

Readings for Class:

- Excerpt from *Gender and Humor*
- Ephron; Knox; Garghibition; Cunningham from *Humor*
- **Bring Question to Class!**

Screening: “Pilot,” *Lizzie and Sarah*

Lecturer: Lewis

Homework: Identity and Humor Reflection

Week 10: March 9 - Film

Readings for Class:

- Swift, *A Modest Proposal*
- Stewart, *Pictures of Naked People*

Screening: TBD

Lecturer: TBD

Homework:

Week 11: January 16

Final Projects