

Joking Matters: Humor and Modern American Fiction

Office: FloMo 323C

M/W 2:10-3:30pm

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Are we ever “just joking”? Or rather, what underlies that dismissal of significance? And why do we make jokes in the first place? How do these quips and foolery reflect serious concerns as much as inane bemusement? This course will consider these questions by examining American media—primarily fiction, but also essays, film and academic scholarship—from across the twentieth and twenty-first century. Our objects of study will come from two historical moments—the 1910s to 1930s and the past twenty years or so.

As we analyze these cultural snapshots, we will think about how humor traffics between lighthearted play and grave assertion, idiosyncratic experience and collective expectation, and physical reality and social abstraction. We will think about how different people engage these mechanisms and how the purposes of their humor evolve over time—not just in keeping with artistic standards but with trends in science, law, and politics. At the same time, we will consider how humor expresses consistent and perhaps endemic elements of the human condition. For as much as we tell jokes, the joke, it seems, is invariably on us.

English 102 is an introduction to textual analysis designed to help you develop your critical reading and writing skills. With these aims in mind, we will hone specific strategies of close reading and devote serious attention to the writing process. In so doing, we will aim to learn both about the nature of language and communication, and the material realities these projects seek to describe. Through informed conversation and constructive questioning, we will appraise our course texts in their historical and formal contexts, as well as contemplate the larger, thematic concerns inherent in any study of what it means to be human.

Course learning outcomes

- Analyze diverse texts.
- Evaluate textual content using evidence-based analysis expressed in writing and in class-based discussion.
- Author effectively written artifacts that demonstrate an understanding of style and grammar.
- Utilize academic and non-academic resources to conduct research that demonstrates an understanding of credibility.

Required course texts

- Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927)
- Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931)
- Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998)

- Course reader

Assignments and grading

- Paper #1: Brief media analysis / 3 page minimum (15%)
- Paper #2: Less-brief media analysis / 4 page minimum (20%)
- Paper #3: Research-supported media analysis / 6 page minimum (25%)
- Final exam (5%)
- Classwork: homework assignments, reading quizzes, oral presentation (15%)
- ePortfolio (5%)
- Participation (15%)

Classwork

The required assignments for this course include weekly writing exercises, one oral presentation, and a final ePortfolio. The writing assignments will focus on specific aspects of analytical writing (e.g., thesis statements, close reading paragraphs). These exercises will function as building blocks for each of the course papers. We will work with these assignments in class on their due date, so they must exist, **typed and in hard copy**, at the start of each class period. Late homework will not receive credit, but **you must complete all class assignments to pass the course.**

The oral presentations will be done in small groups (2-3 students) and will focus on a single course text. These 8-10 minute presentations will initiate class discussion on their assigned day and thus should aim to raise questions rather than provide answers about the given work. I will deliver a sample presentation in Week 2.

I will also give infrequent reading quizzes. Quizzes will be given at the beginning of class and will feature four straightforward questions about key story elements (e.g., how does the protagonist get to and from work?). So long as you do the reading, you will pass with flying colors. If you miss a quiz on a day when you have an excused absence, your grade will be calculated without it. There will be no make-up quizzes.

The details of the ePortfolio will be discussed early in the semester.

Papers

The details of each paper will be discussed as the dates approach. Topics are always flexible (translation: if you have an exciting idea/question/hunch/puzzle, just ask!). Papers should include a well-formulated, argumentative, focused thesis statement (a.k.a. debatable claim); ample, pertinent textual support (a.k.a. close reading); and a compelling analytical structure. Papers must also be typed, double-spaced, MLA-formatted with a proper heading, margins, and Works Cited. If you have questions or concerns about this protocol (or about anything else), I'm happy to talk in office hours.

A few other guidelines: I will not answer content-related emails in the 24 hours preceding the paper deadline (trust me, this policy benefits everyone involved). **Your paper is due in hard copy at the beginning of class and must be uploaded to MOLE before you arrive that day.** Papers cannot be submitted via email. Late papers will be penalized one third of a letter grade for every day past the deadline, including weekend days. The final essay must be submitted at the final exam session; no late papers will be accepted.

Participation

The success of our seminar depends on the active participation of every student. Accordingly, participation constitutes a large portion (15%) of the final grade for the course. I will calculate it as follows: I will not keep track of the number of times you raise your hand; I will attend to the evidence that you actively, regularly engage with the material, share your insights and questions with the class, and incorporate these thoughts as well as my feedback into the course assignments.

I have a no-screens policy in class. If I see you on your phone during class, it will drastically affect your participation grade. The same rubric applies to your physical classroom presence: arrive on time; stay for the entire session; do not engage in side conversations or take bathroom breaks on your own terms. I will pause class after roughly 40 minutes to allow for a collective break, during which time you can use the restroom and catch up on all missed social media. Further behavioral guidelines appear below.

The chance to attend to one subject for 80 minutes, with a community of other people, is a rare opportunity; take advantage of it.

Absences

- Note that absences are *only* excused with medical documentation or prior approval from me (athletic absences are approved provided you contact me 48 hours beforehand.)
- 3 unexcused absences will lower your participation grade by ½ of a letter.
- 5 unexcused absences will lower your participation grade by 1 letter.
- **6 unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course.**

Late arrivals

- **Each tardy arrival will lower your participation grade by 1%.**
- If you arrive without a hard copy of an assignment due that day, that counts as a tardy arrival for the day (owing to the missed time it takes you to go print).

How to positively influence your participation grade:

- Arrive on time and stay for the entire session.
- Electronic devices remain unseen and unheard for the duration of class.
- Take notes.
- Cite course texts.
- Ask questions.
- Contribute to discussion. If you struggle with this, I encourage you to come to class each day with a question or observation from the reading.

How to negatively influence your participation grade:

- Miss class.
- Arrive late.
- Use an electronic device.
- Fail to bring class materials (books, course reader, notebooks, writing implements).

- Have items other than class materials and food or drink on the seminar tables (e.g., bags, headphones).
- Hold side conversations (this is disruptive, even if it's about course material: share these observations with the class).
- Zone out in class.

Academic Integrity

Menlo College faculty are committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity for the students of the College. Menlo College expects that students will do their own work and that their quizzes, tests, examinations, laboratory work, research papers, essays, projects, internships, and all other assignments honestly reflect their own learning and knowledge. Academic dishonesty in the forms of cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, and plagiarism, as defined below, are violations of the Academic Integrity Policy and are prohibited. Academic dishonesty in all its variations is a violation of this policy.

A. *Cheating*: Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, study aids or submitting another person's written work product (whether "borrowed" or purchased) in any academic course or exercise.

B. *Fabrication*: Falsification or invention of any information or citation in any course or exercise.

C. *Facilitating Academic Misconduct*: Knowingly helping or attempting to help another student to engage in academic dishonesty, including, but not limited to, writing a paper or take-home exam for another student, doing the research and/or citations for any other student's academic exercise.

D. *Plagiarism*: Using the words or ideas of another and representing them as one's own in any academic course or exercise, including, but not limited to:

- Failure to use quotes when using the words of another author or provide the proper citation
- Paraphrasing another author's words (or website) without attribution and citation, whether one or multiple other authors
- Presenting or promulgating the ideas of another author as one's own without attribution citation, even when using your own words.

Students found in violation of the Academic Integrity Policy are given a failing grade on the assignment. In any one course, repeat offenders will be given a failing grade for that course. In addition, students found in violation of the Academic Integrity Policy during a final examination, final project, or related final evaluation or assignment, will be given a failing grade for the course. Any student who fails a course as a result of violating the Academic Integrity Policy will not be allowed to withdraw from that course. All violations of the Academic Integrity Policy will be recorded through the Office of Academic Affairs. Repeat offenders across courses will be subject to disciplinary action as determined by the Academic Dean or the Dean's designee. Penalties can include suspension, and if the situation warrants expulsion.

Resources

On campus:

- The Writing and Oral Communication Center:

- **All students are required to visit the Writing Center to workshop the first course paper.** Written confirmation of this appointment must be attached to your final hard copy submission.
- Students who make additional appointments at the Writing Center over the course of the term and who document these sessions with written confirmation from the Center will receive a 24-hour extension on the assignment due date, up to one week from the original due date.
- Students who make use of the Oral Communication Center for their in-class presentation and who document this session with written confirmation from the Center will increase their presentation grade by 1/3 of a letter.
- Bowman Library:
 - We will visit Bowman for a research workshop on Wednesday of Week 13. This workshop will facilitate your independent research for the third course paper, which must integrate one historical and one scholarly source into its analysis of a course text. I encourage you to make use of this excellent resource throughout the term.
- Academic Success Center (ASC):
 - The ASC is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm. Students may drop in for assistance at any time, but appointments are recommended.

Online:

Be wary of online sources, especially Wikipedia. Always consult more than one source and look for consistency. Here are a few reputable sites for cross-checking purposes:

- CCTC's Grammar Site: cctc.commnet.edu/grammar/index
- Purdue University's Online Writing Lab: owl.english.purdue.edu
 - Includes MLA and APA formatting and style guides
- Google Scholar: scholar.google.com
 - Features a variety of critical commentary (books, journal articles)

Weekly schedule

Except where noted with an * below, all texts should be read *prior* to class.

Week 1-2: Introductions

W 8/21: Course introduction

M 8/26: Nielsen and Nielsen, excerpts from *The Language of Humor* (2018)

* Writing diagnostic: Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" (1988)

Weeks 2-10: Joking Matters in the Jazz Age

W 8/28: Bourne, "The Life of Irony" (1913)

W 9/4: Fitzgerald, "The Offshore Pirate" (1920)

M 9/9: Parker, "The Waltz" (1933)

W 9/11: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end of Ch. 3 (pg. 38)

M 9/16: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end of Ch. 9 (pg. 101)

W 9/18: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end of Ch. 12 (pg. 137)

M 9/23: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end of Ch. 19 (pg. 206)

W 9/25: Rough draft paper #1 due; final due Wednesday 10/2
M 9/30: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end of Ch. 25 (pg. 278)
W 10/2: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) to end
M 10/7: Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931) to end of Ch. 3 (pg. 40)
W 10/9: Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931) to end of Ch. 6 (pg. 78)
M 10/14: Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931) to end of Ch. 10 (pg. 138)
W 10/16: Rough draft paper #2 due; final due Wednesday 10/23
M 10/21: Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931) to end
W 10/23: Comedy on screen: Charlie Chaplin excerpt from *City Lights* (1931) &
Betty Boop's *Stopping the Show* (1932)

Weeks 11-15: Joking Matters in the Present

M 10/28: Saunders, "Winky" (2001)
W 10/30: Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998) to page 33
M 11/4: Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998) to page 86
W 11/6: Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998) to page 127
M 11/11: Research workshop @ Bowman Library
W 11/13: Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998) to page 196
M 11/18: Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998) to end
W 11/20: Gadsby, *Nanette* (2018)
M 12/2: Paper #3 presentations / ePortfolio reflection letter workshop
W 12/4: Course wrap-up

Saturday December 7: Paper #3 due and final exam at 10am