

## TENTATIVE SYLLABUS: COMIC FICTION Fall 2011

Professor: David Madden                      Office: Calaveras 156  
Telephone: 278-5623                      Office hours: MW 10:00-11:00; MW 2:00-230  
web site: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/maddendw>  
email: [maddendw@csus.edu](mailto:maddendw@csus.edu)

### Description

The purpose of this seminar is to introduce students to the remarkable development in comic fiction in America after the Second World War. In his book The Last Laugh, Ronald Wallace discusses the fact that "the characteristic form of the contemporary American novel [is] a comedy that incorporates the violence and chaos of modern life." Wallace convincingly demonstrates that for better or worse the tragic perspective is simply not the typical mode of artistic response in this period; instead, comedy, used as a potent weapon against defeat and despair, is the response writer after writer employs in shaping their visions of the modern era. The class will be not only to introduce students to major voices in this period--Vonnegut, Berger, Nabokov--but also to examine classical and contemporary theories of comic literature. Students will read primary texts as well as selected secondary materials that represent a spectrum of critical theories, thus gaining an understanding of individual novels and writers, theories of comedy, and an aesthetic spirit of the period.

### Schedule of Assignments

M--8/29--Introduction

W--8/31--OVERVIEW: "*from* An Essay on Comedy," Meredith; "*from* Laughter," Bergson; & "*Comedy and the Comic Spirit*," Corrigan

M--9/5--HOLIDAY

W--9/7--*CATCH-22*; "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," Frye

M--9/12-- "

W--9/14-- "

M--9/19-- "

W--9/21--*CAT'S CRADLE* (1963); "The Comic Rhythm," Langer

M--9/26-- "

W--9/28-- "

M--10/3-- "

W--10/5--*THE FEUD* (1984); "A Defintion of Comedy," Grawe

M--10/10-- "  
W--10/12-- "

### **RESEARCH TUTORIAL**

M--10/17-- "  
W--10/19--**MIDTERM**

M--10/24--*LOLITA* (1958); "The Range and Limits of Comedy," Grawe  
W--10/26-- "**WORKING THESIS DUE**

M--11/1-- "  
W--11/3-- "  
F--11/5-- "

M--10/31--*THE KID* (1972); "The Subject Matter of Comedy," Potts  
W--11/12-- "**DRAFT OF PAPER DUE**

M--11/14-- "  
W--11/16-- "**PAPER DUE**

M--11/21--*THE FUNERAL MAKERS* (1986); essay to be announced  
W--11/23--HOLIDAY

M--11/28--*FUNERAL MAKERS*  
W--11/30-- "

M--12/5-- "  
W--12/7--**TAKE HOME FINAL DUE**

### **EXPECTATIONS**

\*Complete all reading assignments by dates assigned

\*Participate in class discussions

\*Regular class attendance

Since this is not a correspondence course, attendance is **mandatory**. A student will be allowed no more than **TWO** (2) **unexcused absence** (and no more than TWO excused absences). Those who have more than 3 hours of unexcused absences will have **one full grade** deducted from the final grade for each additional hour. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. If a student arrives after attendance has been taken, it is his/her responsibility to see that s/he is recorded as being present. Excused absences will be granted only for extenuating circumstances (neither general malaise nor an assignment in another class will do) and must be cleared no later than the next class period. It is your responsibility to check your attendance; my records are final.

I recommend you date your class notes in order to demonstrate your attendance should there be a conflict in records. Be prepared to show those notes at the time that you inquire about your absences.

Class begins on the hour; students arriving consistently late by more than 5 minutes will be considered absent for any time missed. The time missed will be calculated as absences which will affect the final grade as explained above.

### GRADING

The final course grade will be based on;

1 essay midterm--20% final grade (bring blue book)  
 1 essay--50% final grade  
 1 essay final exam--30% final grade (bring blue book)  
 exercises—to be determined  
 class participation & improvement--swing factors

\*To miss any of the assignments above will result in an automatic failure of the course.  
 NO EXCEPTIONS.

### GRADING STANDARDS

Grading standards are identical to those defined by the university in the Catalog.

- A Exemplary achievement of the course objectives. In addition to being clearly and significantly above the requirements, the work exhibited is of an independent, creative, contributory nature.
- B Superior achievement of the course objectives. The performance is clearly and significantly above the satisfactory fulfillment of course requirements.
- C Satisfactory achievement of the course objectives. The student is now prepared for advanced work or study.
- D Unsatisfactory achievement toward the course objectives, yet achievement of a sufficient proportion of the objectives so that it is not necessary to repeat the course unless required to do so by the academic department.
- F Ineffective achievement toward the course objectives. The student has made no clearly significant progress.

**NB: I do not negotiate grades.** If you have questions, I will be glad to explain, but I will not barter a grade up or down. If you wish to discuss a paper, you may not do so on the day it is returned to you; see me at my next office hour. No exceptions.

## **GENERAL POLICIES**

**LATE PAPERS**--in this class they do not exist; the date an assignment is due is the date the assignment is due. If there is some clear and compelling reason for a late paper (not great powder at one's favorite ski resort, general malaise, or an assignment in any other class), see or call me in advance of submission. All papers must be submitted in class on date due, not some time that day.

**TYPING**--mandatory for all papers and out-of-class exercises or assignments. Papers should be neat and free of extreme typographical errors. Double-space, use 1" margins, and use *only* a 12 pt font. Number pages, beginning with second page, in upper right hand corner, and secure pages only with a staple in the upper left hand corner. On a cover page center the title and put in the lower right hand corner your name, the date the assignment is due, the topic number you are addressing, and my name.

**PLAGIARISM**—Plagiarism is the false assumption of authorship, and, as the *MLA Handbook* notes, it constitutes the “use of another person’s ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person’s work. . . . Passing off another person’s ideas, information, or expressions as your own to get a better grade or gain some other advantage constitutes fraud.” Simply put, if you didn’t think of it, didn’t say it, or didn’t write it, you must give full attribution in the form of proper citation. I will not tolerate plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional, and I will fail anyone I catch cheating and report that student to the Dean of Students. For information on the university’s policy concerning plagiarism and academic honesty, see <http://www.csus.edu/umannual/student/UMA00150.htm>.

**BEHAVIOR**---recently a professor in another department did a survey of standards of behavior, and the results suggested there is some confusion about what is (and is not) acceptable in university classes. She has advised that professors define their standards, so here are mine: certain fundamental standards of behavior must be observed in this class. Common courtesy and respect is demanded of all enrolled in this class. Therefore you are not to read the newspaper or a textbook for another course once the class meeting has begun. **Turn off your cell phones**; no one is to take or make a call during class; the same goes for texting, don’t send or view any during class. **Turn off the laptops**; no one may use a laptop during class. Likewise, no one is to work on assignments for another course in this class. Do not talk or otherwise interrupt me or another student who is speaking, and under no condition will anyone be permitted to sleep during class lectures or discussions. Those who cannot or will not follow these obvious rules of behavior will be counted as absent for that class period and may be subject to dismissal from the course.

**MISCELLANEOUS**--Students must keep abreast of assignments; I will not accept the excuse that because someone misses a class s/he did not know there was a change in the syllabus or an assignment. If there are any changes in the syllabus, they will be announced in class, and students are then responsible for these on dates announced.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: COMIC THEORY**

#### **"from An Essay on Comedy," George Meredith (1877)**

- 1.) Given that this is only an excerpt, what is the general idea of the essay; what thesis or fundamental concept is Meredith advancing?
- 2.) What does Meredith suggest that comedy does; how does it operate?

#### **"from Laughter," Henri Bergson (1900)**

- 1.) What is the point or central idea of this essay (or portion thereof)?
- 2.) On p. 474, Bergson offers a crucial distinction that other theorists have debated often--the idea of "something mechanical encrusted on the living." What is the significance of this phrase and its implications?
- 3.) Compare Meredith and Bergson; do they differ in any significant ways?

#### **"Comedy and the Comic Spirit," Robert W. Corrigan (1965)**

- 1.) What is the comic spirit that Corrigan cites in his title?
- 2.) W/ this notion of the comic spirit in mind, what is comic about the anecdote quoted from the newspaper?
- 3.) What is the point of quoting and then discussing Aristotle?
- 4.) For centuries critics and readers have contended that there are certain subjects that are inherently tragic and others comic; what does Corrigan have to say on this subject?

#### **"The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," Northrop Frye (1957)**

- 1.) What is Frye's thesis or central point?
- 2.) Frye defines four basic character types in comedy; what are these and what are their dominant traits?

3.) Frye also defines the basic plots or structures of comedies; what are these and what are their defining traits?

### **"The Comic Rhythm," Susanne Langer (1953)**

- 1.) What is this essay's thesis or central point?
- 2.) What is Langer suggesting w/ her discussion of Destiny and Fortune?
- 3.) What does Langer have to say about **humor** and comedy?
- 4.) What is the point of her extended discussion of the buffoon figure?

### **"A Definition of Comedy" Paul Grawe (1983)**

- 1.) Once again we have a scholar discussing Aristotle; what is Grawe's point and where does he go with this reference?
- 2.) What then is his idea of comedy; how does he define it?
- 3.) What are the key elements of this definition which Grawe examines as "key principles of comedy?"

### **"The Range and Limits of Comedy"--Paul Grawe (1983)**

- 1.) Grawe identifies six phases or plot types of comedy; what are these and what are their salient characteristics?
- 2.) What unites all of these phases or types; what is the consistent element in each?
- 3.) Once again Grawe mentions the idea of patterning; to what end? What is the point of the idea of patterning; how is it significant to the issues he discusses in this essay?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: COMIC NOVELS**

### **CATCH-22**

- 1.) Who is the narrator and what is his/her point of view? To what extent can we trust this narrator?

- 2.) Explain the significance of the novel's confusing time sequence? Why do you suppose events are presented in such a scrambled fashion?
- 3.) Why does the action gradually narrow until, near the end, events are narrated in a straightforward manner? Where does this narrowing begin to take place?
- 4.) What is the significance of Yossarian's journey into the street of Rome in Chap. 39?
- 5.) Explain the significance of the novel's title. What does this term suggest; how might it be important, or do you suppose it is strictly random?
- 6.) Describe the novel's comic elements. More specifically, what do you think makes this a comic novel?

### **CAT'S CRADLE**

- 1.) Analyze the narrative point of view. What kind of narrator is this; who is this person? How does this narrator affect the reader's perceptions?
- 2.) Compare Dr. Hoenikker and Bokkonon. What does each of these figures represent? How do they advance any of the novel's themes?
- 3.) Explain the significance of the Bokkonon-Earl McCabe feud. In what ways is their opposition to one another important?
- 4.) Explain the novel's title?
- 5.) Analyze the novel's comic elements. What are these and how do they operate?

### **THE FEUD**

- 1.) What is the importance of setting in the novel? How does it operate; what do we come to know about these places?
- 2.) Why are there so many reversals in the action and characterizations? Does Berger know what he's doing; is there a method to the apparent madness?
- 3.) Who is the hero of this work and why?
- 4.) Often traditional comedies will reveal characters dominated by a particular humor or distinguishing trait. Is there a dominant trait discernible in these figures? In other words, what animates and drives them?
- 5.) Analyze the comic elements. Is this a comedy; if so, why?

## **LOLITA**

- 1.) What is the point of the many references to Annabel Lee?
- 2.) Explain the significance of the many foreign phrases and sentences.
- 3.) Analyze the importance of the many scenes of Humbert and Lolita on the road.
- 4.) Does Humbert Humbert change over the course of time and as a result of his experience? Explain.
- 5.) Analyze the novel's style; is it overwritten; if so how do you account for this feature?
- 6.) Analyze the novel's major points or themes.
- 7.) Discuss the novel's comic features.

## **THE KID**

- 1.) Who is the narrator; is he reliable/ What is his contribution to the narrative?
- 2.) What conventions of the traditional western novel is Seelye working with?
- 3.) Explain the significance of the novel's epigraphs (the Virgil quote is translated as "the days of the Kid should be observed by us").
- 4.) In Chapter III the reader learns that the Kid's "bible" is a book penned by a man named Brisbin. Explain the significance of his work for the Kid and for the novel at large.
- 5.) Explain the novel's comic elements.

## **THE FUNERAL MAKERS**

- 1.) Analyze the Introduction and other prefatory material. How are these important and what bearing do they have on the novel?
- 2.) Analyze the novel's comic elements.