ENL 216: Comedy and Satire, Master Syllabus

(University Studies Cluster 3A)

**Course Overview**

Content

A course analyzing classic comedies and satires from Ancient Greece to the 21st Century, ENL 216 promotes understanding of formal attributes of works of prose fiction, drama or verse to observe consistent structural patterns across various time periods, authors, and genres as well as shared ethical and ideational perspectives in order to assess their ongoing relevance today.

Course work

Sample readings include Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, David Lodge's *Changing Places*, Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, Nathanael West's *The* *Day of the Locust*, and Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*. In addition, films include Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove," Woody Allen's "Play It Again, Sam," Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times," Kenneth Branagh's “Much Ado About Nothing” and Milos Forman's “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Students also attend a live performance of a comic or satiric play presented in New Bedford, Providence or Boston (most recently, David Mamet's *Boston Marriage*).

Course work includes daily quizzes on assigned readings and films viewed outside the classroom, essays analyzing examples of visual satire or comedy like cartoons, photos, paintings, film or television programs; examining what professional critics say about works read for class; and comparing or contrasting works on similar themes.

**All four outcomes of University Studies Cluster 3A: Literature are addressed by this course.**

**A.** Description

In analyzing methods of generating comedy, particular attention is paid to developing a critical vocabulary for understanding sources of verbal humor such as literalized metaphors, innuendo, word-play, exaggeration or understatement, as well as visual humor through sight gags, farce, and the like. Corresponding analytical vocabulary for satire includes terms like irony, sarcasm, vituperation, invective, hyperbole and parody.

**B**. Learning Outcomes

1. Enhance critical thinking, oral communication, and writing skills through

literary analysis.

2. Use the appropriate literary terminology to explain how various writers use

their respective genres and literary forms to produce comic and satiric

effects.

3. Enlarge an understanding of individual works by thinking about their

place in traditions of comic and satiric writings.

4. Show how respective works were informed by the cultural and historical

contexts in which they were created.

5. Experience analyzing comic and satiric themes comparatively: cross-

culturally, formally, and/or historically.

6. Gain insight into the foundations and variety of expressions of ideas about

the world and human experience.

Cluster 3A. Literature Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's)--Students will be able to:

1. Articulate how literature both reflects and helps shape culture, society and

history.

2. Explain how a text's literary form, style and content express its meanings and

using appropriate disciplinary terminology.

3. Evaluate the rhetorical and contextual elements of ideas presented by literary

texts and respond to them critically and analytically.

4. Explain the ways in which literature expresses the values that humans attach to

their experiences.

**C**. Sample Texts

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (preferably Chandler edition in campus bookshop)

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Heller, Joseph, *Catch-22*

Kesey, Ken, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Lodge, David, *Changing Places*

Moliere, *Tartuffe* (Richard Wilbur translation)

Shakespeare, William, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Swift, Jonathan, *Gulliver's Travels*

Waugh, Evelyn,*The Loved One*

West, Nathanael, *The* *Day of the Locust*

Wilde, Oscar, *Importance of Being Earnest*

Films**:**

"Dr. Strangelove"

"Play It Again, Sam"

"Modern Times"

“Much Ado About Nothing”

“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”

**D.** Example Single Assignment-From Artifact to Art (highlighting language related to University Studies SL#1, Articulate how literature both reflects and helps shape culture, society and history).

Abbreviated description of assignment:

Write a unified 4-page (1,000-word) typewritten essay on the following topic:

Discuss *The Handmaid’s Tale* with either *A Cool Million* **or** *One Flew Over the*

*Cuckoo’s Nest* as criticisms of contemporary society.

**E.** Example Multiple-part Assignment--Group Performance (highlighting language

related to University Studies SLOs @# 2,3, and 4)

1. Abbreviated description of assignment**:**

Working in groups of 5-6 students, compare and contrast the tone of *Catch-22* and

either *Lysistrata* **or** *Dr. Strangelove* as anti-war satires. Identify specific language

that conveys both the bases of criticism and methods that criticism is communicated

both verbally and visually. This assignment counts 10% toward students' grades.

2. Related University Studies learning outcomes

The group presentation project concerns Outcomes # 2,3, and 4 (See "Artifacts"

below for indication of how its components *address these learning outcomes*

*individually*):

2. Explain how a text's literary form, style and content express its meaning using

appropriate disciplinary terminology.

3. Evaluate the rhetorical and contextual elements of ideas presented by literary

texts and respond to them critically and analytically.

4. Explain the ways in which literature expresses the values that humans attach

to their experiences.

3. Artifact generated by the assignment that can be sued to measure student

learning:

Essays: 20% each:

Write a unified 6-page (1,500-word) typewritten essay on the following topic. Be sure to include acontrolling thesis and concrete supporting evidence drawn from *The Handmaid’s Tale* OR *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and one other work discussed this semester as criticisms of society. Direct quotation should mainly be limited to illustrations of style, but regardless do not count toward the word and page requirements: this essay should include at least 1,500 words.

Write a unified 6-page (1,500-word) typewritten essay on the following topic. Be sure to include acontrolling thesis and concrete supporting evidence drawn from *The Handmaid’s Tale* OR *Catch-22* and one other work read this semester as in discussing how nonlinear chronology (flashbacks, foreshadowing, stream of consciousness) affects their tone.

Evaluative criteria:

Essays significantly shorter or longer than 1,000 words (4 typewritten pages) or padded with unanalyzed quotations will be penalized proportionately.

Ignoring instructions outlined on the format sheet entitled, "Manuscript Format" will result in a full letter-grade penalty. Remember to include a title that encapsulates your thesis.

A full letter-grade will be deducted for recurring errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc., or generally careless appearance.

Unless your essay has a thesis and concrete supporting evidence the highest grade

it will receive is C-.

Simply re-telling the "plot," stringing together various quotations, or listing various

"objects of ridicule" will likewise earn no higher than a C-.

You may use class notes and 'outside sources'—so long as you document the latter.

Organize your essay in any fashion you wish, but make sure it does have some recognizable principle of organization.

**F**. Examinations (20% each):

Exam Advisory

Armed with the following information, a reasonably conscientious student should do reasonably well on the First Hour Exam if

(1) she or he reviews these materials carefully; and

*(2) he or she studies intelligently, practicing responses to hypothetical excerpts*

*by writing out sample essays. Reviewing for 4-5 concentrated hours should*

*be sufficient if you have kept up with the reading.*

INSTRUCTIONS: This exam is in 3 parts: 10 minutes, 25 minutes and 25 minutes--so budget your time accordingly, *skipping over excerpts* *you can't*

*immediately identify.*

PART I(10 points): Identify the following 10 excerpts by title and author.

*Advice*: *With only 10 minutes for this part, you must either know the works/authors immediately or skip past those you don't know. Excerpts are neither embarrassingly obvious nor unfairly obscure.*

PART II (60 points): Discuss the significance (i.e., *meaning* and *importance*) of 3

correctly identified excerpts supplied on the exam, in relation to the larger works from which they come. The more concrete references you make both to the given excerpt and its larger context, the more credit you are likely to receive.

*Advice*: *Sometimes what depresses both the exam results and the individuals who produced them is simply ignoring directions—especially by discussing more than one passage by the same author. Thus, if you mistakenly discuss 2 Chaucerian excerpts you will automatically forfeit 20 points.*

*Beyond that, the problem is usually either not preparing well enough or else ignoring the basic requirement to discuss the SIGNIFICANCE of a given passage in relation both to its immediate context and relevant features elsewhere in the work.*

*This entails far more than just summarizing the specific passage, much less simply ‘retelling the story.’ It means finding thematic, structural and stylistic 'connections' between the given excerpt and other parts of the larger work. For the Canterbury Tales, start by making those connections to the specific tale or prologue before moving outward to the framework narrative as a whole. Responses should be in the range of 150-250 words each, writing fluency is a definite asset--but no substitute for thoughtfulness*

PART III (30 points): Write a reasonably well-organized essay on 1 of the following 3 topics comparing and contrasting a film we have discussed with a written work we have discussed. I will supply the specific topics in advance.

For maximum credit, be sure to have a THESIS and concrete SUPPORTING EVIDENCE from the works--the more, the better (within reason).

*Advice: Make an outline ahead of time, focusing on two works you understood best, and then decide which of the possible approaches best suits the materials you have selected. If you care to run some ideas by me either in person or via e-mail, by all means feel free to do so.* Just remember*: neither work used in this part of the exam may also be discussed under Part II.*

Sample past student responses to hour exams:

These sample mid-term responses provide a model for better understanding both the works discussed and a successful way of discussing them.

PART II:

# Excerpt #1: ‘When the soldier returns from the wars, even though he has white hair, he very soon finds a young wife. But a woman has only one summer; if she does not make hay while the sun shines...’

This is a woman’s complaint from *Lysistrata*, by all means an expression for the female frustration with the social sterilization that wars bring about, chiefly for women alone. That said, it can be further surmised that the criticism against war is valid on the terms of the work, in that war is initiated by men, but it is the women who lose their sons, their husbands, and effectively the prime of their life. Such a dynamic is portrayed well in the instance where a woman hides a soldier’s helmet underneath her clothing to feign pregnancy; the entanglement between sex and death, and the resulting cultural and social stagnancy, becomes undeniable in the context of the imagery. As a whole, the work equally criticizes women as lazy, gluttonous, lustful and essentially socially inept (all exemplified in their late meeting and “sacrifice of the wine bowl.”). But the comic tone of the play eclipses the aggression, and portrays them as a product of social factors rather than a malignant, conscious fault.

COMMENT: Covers all the bases quite well, but could add something about the Regenerative resolution at the end, tied in with the complaint in this passage about war’s effect on fertility. 19/20

## Excerpt #2: 'It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.'

That it would be a “terrible thing” for a man to find he has been telling the truth all his life is clearly a use of comic inversion, a statement exactly the opposite of what an audience would expect to hear. But Jack’s (or “Ernest’s”) assessment is at the same time ironically true, since it is terrible that he’s been telling the truth unbeknownst to him. Oscar Wilde’s play is mainly consisting of wordplay like this, using understatement and anti-climax to set a primarily verbal comic tone, though sight-gags are not altogether shunned. The reduction or understatement of death is apparent when Jack enters wearing mourning clothes (in honor of no one, of course) and Algernon’s perpetual consumption contributes to the broadest sense of the work, a commentary on the shallow nature of aristocracy, which finally winds up as a web of coincidence. Therefore, one assumes that the piece is a celebration of contrivance, that Jack’s birth from a handbag, brotherhood to Algernon, etc. display a quality of optimism in regards to artifice as a way of overcoming social faults and fallibility.

COMMENT: Perhaps could explicitly tie in the verbal inversion with the plot contrivances, but manages to convey the connection indirectly nevertheless. 20/20

Excerpt #3: '*I see I've slipped unconsciously into the past tense, I suppose because I can't conceive of returning to that kind of relationship. Which is not to say that I want to divorce or separate, but simply that if we are going to go on together it will have to be on a new basis. Life, after all, should go forwards, not backwards.'*

Philip’s mental letter to Hillary proves unnecessary in the end when it all comes out on the air, but its literary purpose works in the context of the story. Displacement of the characters (Philip and Morris) effects change in each of them, on a variety of levels; “Life, after all, should go forwards, not backwards” is not something Philip would have uttered or ascertained so definitively before his American interlude (his best business usually involved questions). Nor would Morris have passed up the chance to sleep with the Irish scivvy. The question remains, how much location determines identity, but Lodge seems to satisfy it in saying, “where “one’s heart dwells is his homeland” (or something to that effect). Lodge uses visual and verbal humor to create a ridiculous social comedy about academia, American and British life, using incidents like Morris’s plane ride, the paternoster chase scene, and Philip’s penis assessment, for the visuals, and name-play (Zapp, Swallow) and such for verbal humor. Also, his gimmicks (the letters, headlines, and screenplay) result in an essential self-consciousness so the work overall is a celebration of contrivance and coincidence, and he provides an ending that coalesces well with the interactive vision of his comic endeavor.

COMMENT: Again, excellent insights into how the excerpt relates to characters and incidents from the book as a whole. 20/20

PART III- Write a reasonably well-organized essay on 1 of the following topics comparing/ contrasting films and written works. For maximum credit, be sure to have a THESIS and concrete SUPPORTING EVIDENCE from the works--the more, the better (within reason).

Surely “Dr. Strangelove” and *The Loved One* are the most moral works that we’ve read to date. The former deals with nuclear weaponry, the latter with cemeteries, but both convey a biting satire involving the crucial elements of life in American society and our perversion of them in modern life.

Both works view mechanization as something sterile and fruitless, and therefore deem it harmful. Strangelove’s opening scene is corny love music over copulating jet planes—a romance that certainly shall never be able to conceive. Likewise, Waugh’s depiction of Nature in Whispering Glades is just as critical. The bees drone mechanically, the lake is nothing but a puddle dug by man, and

Kaiser’s peaches are pitiless and disgusting (according to Barlow). While both show a sense of sterilization, however, they use of a different means to get there.

Waugh’s attempt to portray this is through the removal of a definitive flaw; that is, a peach is not truly a peach unless it has a pit and can reproduce, nor a dugout with water a like if it is lifeless, or a noisy red light that cannot sting people. In

“Strangelove,” the fallibility is found in humanity itself, as those to be saved will meet certain requirements for “attractiveness and reproductive purposes, weeding out the flaws of society. The irony is the Nazi victory as a result of the nuclear culmination of the Cold War, but the message is that after destroying ourselves with the zenith of our own technology, we will root out all humanity that remains through “genetic engineering” of sorts. Hence, the “flaw” in both works can be recognized as a necessary defining function, but in Waugh it results in sterile, while in “Strangelove” the mode is corrupted fertility.

What is interesting is that “Strangelove” was produced by the shallow, vicious Hollywood world that *The Loved One* criticizes. The novel reads in the same tone as the movie, and even seems to visualize as black and white. Its view of society as a producer of falsehoods and marketer of emotions is undoubtedly intended to make some moral statement. Whispering Glades views death as a commodity; Mr. Joyboy views it as a greeting card; and Aimee as an “ephemeral” work of art. On a sort of parallel plane, Strangelove makes the effort to display the hideously ludicrous state of government affairs and the essentially inhuman element that is embedded in the “untouchability” of decision-making institutions, and the resulting sterility and/or corruption of our essence by our refusal to recognize our flaws. General Ripper, in fact, has lots in common with Kaiser’s peaches, in that neither of their stones seems to be working properly. Though Kaiser’s peach does not initiate nuclear war over its impotency, it stands just as good an emblem of a society obsessed with masking death, covering sweat glands, and homogenizing the human race.

COMMENT: Wow! This is a truly impressive synthesis of these works, incorporating specific examples in support of a mature understanding of the topic—and even adding a dollop of wit (the “stones” reference!). 30/30

Sample past student sample essay: "Rushmore"

"Rushmore" is the story of a fifteen year old boy, Max Fisher, and a forty-five year old man, Herman Blume, two recently formed friends who fall in love with the same woman. A vicious battle ensues between Blume, a graduate of Rushmore, and Max, who has been expelled from Rushmore, over Rosemarie Cross, a Rushmore teacher. The comic energy of the film derives from its use of humor when addressing the reoccurring issue of death, which has impacted each of the three main characters. Transcendence of death is achieved and we are lead to believe that regeneration may occur, again emphasizing the comic tone of the film.

Max and Blume may very well be in love with Ms. Cross, but what they seem to be attracted to is their ability to live vicariously through her, or hold on to a past they long for. It's about the lack of ability to accept life as it is and move on. Max does not want to leave behind the society he has forced himself to just about fit in. While attending Rushmore he is able to escape the reality of his world. He is able to live as someone else other than a "barber's son", and he is able to escape the reminder of his mothers death if just for a little while. Blume is trying to regain a kind of youthfulness or innocence that he was stripped of when he was sent to fight in Vietnam. The hardening experience of war has turned him into a man incredibly dissatisfied with the choices he

has made in his life. After both have lost Ms. Cross because of their childish feuding Blume says, "She was my Rushmore, Max." Max replies, "Yeah, she was mine too"

Max, Blume and Ms. Cross share a common bond in having all had traumatic experiences involving death. Each is forced in one way or another to face their past at some point in the film, thus enabling them to move on. Ms. Cross is a widow. She lost her husband, Edward Appleby, a graduate of Rushmore as well, a few years back. Blume, as did many men his age, fought in the Vietnam War where he witnessed countless gruesome deaths. The images of war continuously haunt the men who lived through them. Max lost his mother to cancer when he was a child, a very difficult undergoing for any child.

Beyond the actual deaths aforementioned is the implication of death behind Max and Blume's lethal battles. It is easy to miss the serious implications because of the slapstick element in each prank that they pull on each other. However, the attacks made are in fact quite serious and life threatening. The two go back and forth for a while probably not realizing what long term effects their attacks can cause, but a revelation will come, a change will take place, and hope for the future makes this a true comic work.

Death, repeatedly in this film, is dealt with and addressed in a comedic way. It is handled bluntly and insensitively, reducing its grim undertones. One example would be when Ms. Cross is comparing Edward Appleby to Blume she says to Max, "He has more character in one fingernail than Herman Blume has in his entire body!" To this Max replies, "Yes, one dead fingernail." Again the sobriety of death is undermined by comedy when Max cuts Blume's breaks and Blume is lucky enough to stop right before he crushes a man into a wall. There is truly nothing humorous about either of these examples when put into the context of real life; yet, humor is often used to transcend death. The ability to find humor in and gain knowledge from such experiences is the key to overcoming them.

Humor has been used, now all that is left is for knowledge to come.

Max does gain the necessary knowledge that will enable a turning point. In

a graveyard next to the grave of his dead mother, he comes to the realization that all this fighting between him Blume and Ms. Cross is not worth losing someone over. As he looks around at himself and others he sees the pain and sorrow death has already inflicted on them, he wants to end it. Seated next to his mother's grave he says to Blume, "I was going to have that tree fall on you but I figured what's the point." This is the actual turning point for Max. He is ready to move on and we see a positive transformation from here on out in his attitude towards building and maintaining relationships with others.

Before moving on Max first preserves all three of their experiences

in time by producing a play. Max invites and includes past enemies, which symbolizes peace making, an important aspect of any comic work. The play is based on Vietnam, which is a dedication to Blume. Max also dedicates the play to his mother and Edward Appleby. Here again we some slapstick elements but the play is actually quite meaningful, especially for Blume.

The film ends on a note of affirmation, which of course reaffirms the comic tone. As aforementioned Max has made peace with his enemies and at the cast party we witness various unions of characters. Max father nuzzles up with his teacher from Grover Cleveland High School. Max and Margaret is an unusual newly formed couple both on and off stage. Most importantly Blume and Ms. Cross seem to have a promising future together.

At the close of the film Ms. Cross says to Max, "Nobody got hurt that bad except you." To this Max answers, "No, I didn't get hurt that bad." They all had been hurt, but with the help of each other they will be able to go forth in life. The new couples go off and dance, which is another common aspect of comedies, to a song with the appropriate lyrics, "I wish that I knew what I know now when I was younger." We are left to assume, and hope, this newly formed reconciliation will lead to regeneration.