

History 100: History through Humor and Satire

Fall 2025 / M 1:20-3:15

Helen C. White 7115



"Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it.
Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by
helplessly while everyone else repeats it."

Cartoon source: *Litro*, June 25, 2012

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Student Hours: Wednesday 12pm-2pm in Mosse 5123 or by appointment

Humor makes us laugh, it connects us to each other. But what people find funny also tells us a lot about *them*, and about the world around them. Satire, especially, mocks the absurdities of the social order that produces it. Because of this, satire can be an excellent source for historians trying to understand how people in the past thought differently than we do today. If you can make sense of what made people laugh, especially if it seems strange to you, you will have a key to understanding that society. This class is designed to teach us to think about history through satire and humor. Using examples from different times and places—some very different from our own—we will learn to use comedy to as a tool for analyzing society. At the end of the course, we will turn that lens back on ourselves by studying Madison's own *The Onion* as a historical object.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Course objectives include supporting students to:

- Use primary and secondary sources as historians do, to construct knowledge about the past;
- Demonstrate skill at using humor and satire as primary sources to understand the societies that produced them;
- Research and identify relevant sources to answer questions about the past;
- Refine skills in reading, writing, and analyzing that will support success throughout your college career;
- Develop and improve communication skills in oral and written forms.

COURSE INFORMATION

This course can satisfy either a humanities or a social science requirement. It has no prerequisites and is considered an “elementary” level course. It is honors optional. If you plan to do the honors version, please talk to me early in the semester. The main requirement will be a significant increase in the complexity of the final project.

The course counts for three credits. UW-Madison’s credit standard is that this represents a total of nine hours of work per week. The course meets for two hours each week and has some additional time engagements outside of class. But, in general, you should expect to spend about six hours per week studying, reading, writing, and researching outside of class, as described in the syllabus. I have done my best to make the workload even over the course of the semester.

BOOKS

Reading on paper is more focused than reading on a multi-purpose distraction machine. And reading a book, by a human author, remains one of the best ways to engage with ideas and learn new things. So, where possible, I encourage you to get some books. These books, in particular:

- Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, Yale University Press, 2022, ISBN-13 978-0300255027, \$15.
- Percival Everett, *James*, Doubleday, 2024, 978-0385550369, \$28 [but this book will be supplied to you for free through the Go Big Read program].
- Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: A Cultural History of Communism*, Pegasus, 2010, 978-1605981260, \$20.
- Recommended: Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, tr. David Mulroy, University of Wisconsin Press, 2020, 978-0299329846, \$12.95.

CONTENT NOTE

Some things about humor change over time; some don't. In this class you will encounter jokes about body functions, jokes about intimate situations, jokes about ethnic groups, sexist jokes, and jokes about religion. You will encounter language that is today considered highly offensive. We can't study the history of humor without running into things like this. It's fine to be offended or not to be. My goal as an instructor is not to introduce any of this content gratuitously. But we do need to be able to analyze it! So please be forewarned and remember that inclusion on the syllabus is not an endorsement of the moral universe that the content creates or reflects.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UW-Madison's community of scholars in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the highest academic integrity standards. Academic misconduct compromises the integrity of the university. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these acts are examples of academic misconduct, which can result in disciplinary action. This includes but is not limited to failure on the assignment/course, disciplinary probation, or suspension. Substantial or repeated cases of misconduct will be forwarded to the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards for additional review. For more information, refer to studentconduct.wiscweb.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/.

AI USE

The most complicated questions of academic integrity arise because of the widespread availability of large language models like ChatGPT. Considerable evidence shows that use of these models to substitute for reading and writing leads to worse understanding and school performance. The technologies are also not reliable producers of historical information. On the first day of class, we will develop a class AI use policy together that will govern our practices this semester.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty [me] of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

<http://mcburney.wisc.edu/facstaffother/faculty/syllabus.php>

Even if you don't have a McBurney visa, if there is some modification to the class that would improve your ability to learn and succeed, please let me know and I will do my best.

[CENSORED]

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

<https://diversity.wisc.edu/>

HISTORY LAB

The History Lab is a resource center where experts (PhD students) will assist you with your history papers. No matter your stage in the writing process – choosing a topic, conducting research, composing a thesis, outlining your argument, revising your drafts – the History Lab staff can help you sharpen your skills and become a more successful writer. Schedule a one-on-one consultation at <http://go.wisc.edu/hlab> or drop by Humanities 4255. This isn't cheating! This is highly encouraged!! You'll get feedback that makes your work better!!! That's the purpose of education!!!!

GRADES

The purpose of a grade is to measure your learning in a course and your ability to demonstrate mastery of the course objectives. Over time, the meaning of grades has become distorted. It can feel like a judgment on personal character, or a hoop to jump through as the syllabus increasingly comes to resemble a contract. You should push such thoughts away and do work because you value the learning that you're doing. At the end of the semester, I am contractually obligated to reduce that learning to a symbol. I will use the following measures to do so:

Participation in class discussion (15%): First, you need to be in class to learn. Attendance is not optional. You can miss one class session without an effect on your grade. Second, you need to participate in class to learn. Class discussion works best when everyone contributes. This class will have about twenty students, which is large for a seminar. Don't feel like you have to participate the *most* to get a good grade. Good participation sometimes means making room for others. But do try to share at least one idea each week. If you are very uncomfortable speaking in front of groups, talk to me early in the semester to work out a plan for what you can do.

Participation in Percival Everett events (5%): You should attend Everett's Go Big Read lecture and the special lunch event that will be hosted for students in FIGs who read his book. If some unavoidable scheduling conflict prevents this, contact me to work out an alternative.

Meetings with professor outside of class (5%): You should meet with me outside of class twice during the semester. This could be during my regular office hours or during the special office hours that I set up early and late in the semester. One of these times has to be in the first three weeks of class. The other is flexible, but you are encouraged to meet with me about your final project.

Weekly response papers: (20%): Most weeks, you can write an approximately 500-word response paper. The paper should be both *personal* and *analytical*. In other words, it should describe your personal response to the reading. It should also analyze the reading. If it does both of these things thoughtfully, it will receive full credit. These papers can raise unresolved questions, explore interesting angles, describe challenges, etc. They can reflect thoughts in process, and don't have to be highly polished pieces of writing. Bring these to class, on paper. You can skip *two* of these without an effect on your grade. Think about which weeks are going to be particularly demanding in your other classes and plan accordingly. You should still do the readings every week, however.

In-class activities (10%): Throughout the semester, we will do some written activities in class. If I suspect that reading isn't getting done, these could have a brief "quiz" component to them. But it is more likely they will involve workshopping and analyzing ideas and refining techniques and skills.

Mid-semester essay (15%): In week seven, you will turn in a relatively short essay (1000-1250 words). This essay will either begin or end with a question that you want to ask Percival Everett at the author event. You can draw from your previous three short writings about *James*. Consider them early drafts: if there are parts that you want to use from them, that is encouraged. If you want to rework passages from them based on insights you gained from class discussion, so much the better. The essay should make reference to both *Huck Finn* and *James*, which you should properly quote and cite. You should also refer to at least one idea from Terry Eagleton's book about the purpose of humor. Do your best to answer the question you have posed or explain why you think the question matters. You should consider the books as cultural products in history: that is, creations of individuals at particular moments in time, whose creation reflects the experiences, social conditions, and concerns of their authors. Submit via canvas.

Final project (30%): For your final project, you are going to choose an article from *The Onion* that you find intriguing, mysterious, puzzling, or particularly amusing. You are going to analyze its use of satire as a point of entry to discuss the society that produced it. To do so, you will need to include another non-satirical primary source (or multiple primary sources), such as newspaper or magazine articles, that are commenting on the phenomenon that *The Onion* is describing. Finally, you need to read at least one chapter from a history book that describes something about the deeper history of the phenomenon you are examining. Write an essay (1750-2000) that includes embedded photos of the *Onion* article and the primary sources you are examining. The goal of your essay should be to situate the satire in history. Yes, I realize that I am asking you to explain the joke. Submit via canvas.

If you have another idea for a final project, including potentially a creative project, pitch away! But do clear it with me before getting started.

The grade system at the University of Wisconsin is a bit odd:

A: 94 or greater

AB: greater than 88, less than 94

B: greater than 83, less than 88

BC: greater than 78, less than 83

C: between 70 and 78

D: between 60 and 70

COURSE PLAN

Part I: Introductions

Week 1: September 8

Introduction to the Course

Reading: Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, Chapter 1

Week 2: September 15

Key questions: How does humor work? What is satire?

Readings: Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, Chapter 3, pp. 67-93

Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*

For your short response this week, you should bring your copy of *A Modest Proposal* back to class. As you read it, I want you to identify at least five things that you think the text reveals about the society that created it. Note these in the margins, along with an estimate of your confidence in your claim. (Are you 99% sure? Are you 50% sure?) Then, write a final paragraph briefly your reasoning for two of your claims.

Week 3: September 22

Key questions: How do historians understand the past? How have historians used humor to better understand cultural differences?

Readings: Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, pp. 74-104

Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, Chapter 4, pp. 94-135

Short writing: approximately 500 words describing your reaction to *The Great Cat Massacre*. Do you think the author got it right? What more would you like to know? How do Eagleton's theories of humor explain the events in question?

Part II: Satire and Social Critique in American History

Week 4: September 29

Readings: Twain, *Huck Finn*, Chapters 1, 2, 8

Everett, *James*, 1-99

Short writing: approximately 500 words describing your reaction to *Huck Finn* and *James*. Consider how the two authors treat their subjects differently. Why does it matter? Use at least one example from the texts.

Week 5: October 6

Readings: *Huck Finn*, Chapters 14, 15

Everett, *James*, 100-200

Short writing: approximately 500 words describing your reaction to these middle sections of *Huck Finn* and *James*. Pick out a passage from one of the books. For example: how do the two authors treat the “fog” scene differently? Why?

Week 6: October 13

Readings: *Huck Finn*, Chapters, 31, 42

Everett, *James*, 200-302

Short writing: approximately 400-500 words describing your reaction to the final sections of *Huck Finn* and *James*. Now that you have finished, what questions are you left with? Why? Refer directly to the texts.

Part III: Satire and Social Critique at a Distance

Week 7: October 20

Reading: Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

Short writing: describe your reaction to *Lysistrata*. What can you learn about ancient Greek society from it? What parts feel distant, and what parts feel contemporary? (Note: you may wish to use one of your short writing skips this week, because of the mid-semester essay. But the option is still there for you, if this week interests you. The reading is shorter this week to make space for your essay.)

Mid-semester essay due: (1000-1250 words). This essay will either begin or end with a question that you want to ask Percival Everett at the author event. The assignment is described in detail in the grades section of the syllabus.

Week 8: October 27

Reading: Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle*, 1-146

Short writing: describe your reaction to the first part of *Hammer and Tickle*. Does comedy have a different kind of power in different forms of social organization? What role did it have in the Soviet Union? What joke best illustrates that relationship?

Week 9: November 3

Reading: Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle*, 147-312

Short writing: describe your reaction to the second part of *Hammer and Tickle*. Do you agree with Lewis's conclusions about the role of comedy in the downfall of the Soviet Union? Why or why not?

Week 10: November 10

Readings: Isabella Cosse, *Mafalda*, ch 2., pp. 54-101

Nicanor Parra, selections

Short writing: describe your reaction to these different forms of comedy and satire from Cold War South America. What information do they give you about the societies that produced them? How do they suggest different social problems than the Soviet humor produced in a similar period?

Part IV: Our Satire, Ourselves

Week 11: November 17

Reading: The Onion, *Our Front Pages, 21 Years of Greatness, Virtue, and Moral Rectitude from America's Finest News Source* [selections]

This week we are going to head to Steenbock Library to learn about archival research using the files of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, which was founded in Madison.

Short writing: In what way does the satire of *The Onion* reflect the society and culture of the University of Wisconsin, the city of Madison, the state of Wisconsin, or the country of the United States in which it was produced?

Week 12: November 24 [Thanksgiving Week]

Reading: spend more time in the archive of *The Onion* looking for the piece that will be the foundation for your final

Short writing: describe the *Onion* article that you chose as the centerpiece for your final. Why did you choose it? What kind of historical investigation will you be carrying out to add to our understanding through it?

This week we are going to be talking about the places you can find primary and secondary sources that will help you research your topic. We will be visiting Memorial Library.

Week 13: December 1

Readings: none (work on your final)!

This class will be a workshop focused on preparing your final.

Week 14: December 8

Readings: none (work on your final)!

This class will be a workshop focused on helping you finish your final. You should have a draft ready to share.

Exam week: Dec. 12- Dec. 18. This course has no final exam. Please submit your final project on canvas by December 15 at midnight.