

## AMERICAN HUMOR IRP, Spring 2015, Syllabus

Coordinator: Tom Grant

“Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand”—Mark Twain

“Society is sick, and I’m the doctor”—Lenny Bruce

“Sacred cows makes the tastiest hamburger”—Abbie Hoffman

This course examines the evolution of American literary humor---highfalutin’, lowfalutin’, regional, ethnic, Feminist, Black (and even blue)—from its origins in the emergence of an indigenous American popular culture that spread westward following the rise of Andrew Jackson, our first president from beyond the Appalachian frontier and professed “Man of the People.” At its best, American humor expertly exposes our foibles, but also strips away our pretensions and hypocrisies, often driven by moral imperatives, and collectively comprises an important, but often trivialized, *subversive* tradition in American literature. “Great humor,” declared Malcolm Muggeridge, “is always in bad taste.” We will sample many different writers from across many decades and concentrate on representative writings of the major figures, such as Mark Twain, Marietta Holley, Ring Lardner, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber and Woody Allen.

Texts: *The Signet Classic Book of Mark Twain’s Stories*, Justin Kaplan, ed. (Signet Classics, 2006, ISBN 0451530160; \$7.95);

*The Portable Dorothy Parker*, Marion Meade, ed. (Penguin Classic Deluxe Edition, 2006, ISBN 0143039539; \$22);

Schuyler, George S., *Black No More* (Dover Publications, 2011, ISBN 0486480402; \$17.95)

A Coursepack

Tentative Syllabus

Eating People is Most Nourishing: English Satire vs American Humor Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal”

Mark Twain, “Cannibalism in the Cars”; “How to Tell a Story”

The Triumph of American English: the Colloquial Tradition Ring Lardner, “Haircut” & “A Caddie’s Diary”

The Tall Tale Tradition: Humor of the Antebellum South  
Johnson Hooper, George Longstreet, Davy Crockett, others

The Other Gold Rush: Striking the Vein in Humor  
Western Stories by the newly-minted "Mark Twain"

"The Sagebrush Bohemian " Among the Connecticut Yankees  
Sam Clemens Hartford middle years as "Mark Twain"

The Damned Human Race: The Making of a Misanthrope Stories & Fantasies  
from Twain's Twilight Years

6. Slipping the Yoke, Savoring the Joke: Tradition & Innovation in "Negro Humor"

West African Folktales(Uncle Remus), Charles Chesnutt, Titanic Toasts, Langston  
Hughes, Jesse B. Simple stories, Zora Hurston

Inverting Racial Stereotypes Schuyler, Black No More

The Funny Ladies: A Feminist Tradition (newly discovered)  
"Fanny Fern," Marietta Holley, Anita Loos, Frances Guy Seabury, others

A Woman's Wit...and Its Perils Dorothy Parker, selections

Beds of Neuroses: The Humor Beat at The New Yorker  
James Thurber, selections; E.B. White, Mark Singer, others

Jewish Wry: Survival Humor in a Gentile World Woody Allen, selections; other  
writers

Undermining the Post-War "Liberal" Consensus: Cold War Satire  
Vonnegut, Barthelme, Feiffer, Cartoonists