

American Studies 430  
American Humor  
M - Th: 3:30 - 4:50  
GHH 108  
Roger Williams University  
Fall Semester, 2010

Michael R. H. Swanson, Ph. D.  
Office: GHH 215  
Hours: M, T, W, Th, F: 11:00 - 12:00  
Or By Appointment  
Phone: 254 - 3230  
Email: amst430humor@gmail.com

## Course Introduction

On the "official" introductory syllabus, <http://amst430humor.homestead.com>, for this course are a picture of Buster Keaton, a short excerpt of a famous film in which he starred, *The General*, and a link to the full length version of the same. If technology doesn't fail us, we'll look at the excerpt together. Then I want you to look at the longer version of the film before our next class meeting. I want you to answer three questions about this film:

1. Is it "funny" or "humorous" from your point of view?.
2. What is the funniest or most humorous scene or episode in this film?
3. Is there anything in it to which someone might take offense? If so, what, and what kind of person might take offense?
4. Is there anything in the film to which you take offense personally?
5. What do your answers to these question suggest to you about American Humor and American Society?

## Books for the course:

Rourke, Constance,  
*American Humor: a Study of the National Character*  
NYRB Classics, 2004

Boskin, Joseph  
*The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*  
Wayne St. University Press, 1997

Baker, Russell  
*Russell Baker's Book of American Humor*  
W. W. Norton, 1993

Watkins, Mel  
*African American Humor*  
Lawrence Hill Books, 2002

I taught an American Humor course many years ago—before the internet existed. Lot of other things either didn't exist or were in their infancy. Personal Computers were in the future. People didn't word process: they typed. I thought it would be

fun to offer the course again as a special topic, but this time capitalizing as much as possible on the new tools available to us. So be warned, you'll be asked to spend a considerable amount of time on the Internet, and you'll be using a variety of computer based devices to submit your work for this course.

Be warned as well, that this course is likely to evolve in the course of offering it. It won't be particularly linear, and there will be a variety of changes or digressions in midstream—those of you who have taken other courses from me in the past are familiar with this characteristic of the courses I offer. There are other American Studies courses available to you if you're more comfortable with more structure.

When I taught this course last, it focused almost entirely on written humor, and most of what we investigated was historical. That had to be the case, given the tools and materials at we had available to ourselves at that time. It will still focus primarily on the written word, and still have a healthy dose of history at its core. Among the reasons for this are these: first, I like language-based humor, and second, I thought it important to introduce you to persons and ideas you were less likely to know. You're probably much more expert on Family Guy or South Park than I am. But have you heard of Widow Bedott or [Mr. Dooley](#)?

This is not to say that we'll ignore visual humor or materials from contemporary America. Through miracles of the information age we have access to incredible amounts of material. Every week, the online syllabus will contain a clip from some film or presentation by someone who made (or is making) a contribution to American Humor. There will be links to many sources as well. In some cases following these links will be required—pay close attention to that. I'm hoping that requiring a click-through is hardly necessary, and that most of the members of this class will do it out of curiosity and because they expect something enjoyable to appear when they do.

The OFFICIAL Syllabus for this course is at <http://amst430humor.homestead.com> I will very quickly stop passing out written versions. There will always be one available for downloading on line, if you like to have one to stick in a notebook (if you like to have a notebook).

## How do we study humor?

How do we study humor without destroying it in the process? When one dissects a frog, one is left with a pile of frog parts. We don't want something similar to happen in this class. "Study" connotes work, sweat, pain. So can we sneak up on humor, learn something from it, and continue along without ruining the joke, quip, fable, goof-up or whatever? I'm hoping we can. Take a look at the questions I posted at the top of this syllabus, and generalize them so that they don't refer to a specific work or media. Experience "something" then reflect on that experience in a systematic way. That's what I hope we'll be doing all semester long. We'll do this individually, but then we'll do it collectively as well. Why does something which sends me guffawing so loud my cat gets scared leave you going "ho-hum"? And, of course, vice-versa? What can we learn about ourselves by thinking of those questions.

The subjects of humor aren't "funny" or "trivial". Here's a riddle:

Q. How can you tell the difference between a skunk hit by a car and a banker hit by a car?

A. There are skid marks where the skunk was hit.

So what are we laughing (or not laughing) at here? Death. Who is likely not to find this joke particularly amusing? Besides, skunks? Hint (The hint isn't here, it's on the internet version—don't look, as it contains naughty language).

We'll look at racial and ethnic humor, at sexual humor, at political humor, at lots of other types of humor. Humor has been called an "equal-opportunity offender" I wonder if 10,000,000 people would laugh at the story [behind this link?](#) Which 10,000,000 might or might not? In short, we'll use laughter to explore differences between Americans individually and Americans as member of groups. We'll look at humor as a weapon and at humor as a shield.

We'll also look at humor as a historical marker. Some things which might have caused massive laughter two centuries ago (or two years ago) might very well lead to snores today. If we had a wayback machine we could test the reverse (are the accents in the clip below offensive?). They weren't considered so by the majority culture when Rocky and Bullwinkle first graced television screens.

What makes us [ROFL](#) today that might have caused Ben Franklin to consider us nuts?

## Work for the course

1. Two Take-home examinations (possibly one—we'll see when I get to know you better).

Two of the books for this course (Rourke and Boskin) are primarily analytical. The best way for me to assess what you've learned through reading them is through take-home examinations.

Reflective writing based on the assigned readings, and shared with your classmates. These will be short, based on the five questions at the top of the syllabus. These are not to be considered finished works—(I'm not evaluating them on style and grammatical perfection, but on faithfulness to the task and to the spirit of the task). The other two books for this course, (Baker and Watkins) are books of readings, and they will form the primary materials for the reflective writing. Additional sources representing other media will also be assigned, and these will also be included in your reflective writing as well.

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3. A Short team project. The team doesn't have to be [short](#)...heightism isn't going to be permitted. The project will be significant, but not of term paper length. I want to have you divide yourselves into groups—minimum membership two, maximum membership four, by Monday, September 20. I'd like to have each group represent difference, not similarity. Each group will investigate a different humorist (author, comic, musician, whatever), and explore the way members react to him/her. You will chose your subject collaboratively (with a little help from me). Without starting a civil war, your project will uncover what leads to different reactions to the person(s) you're investigating. The results of this project will be shared with everyone else, precisely how will be determined by the number of groups with which we end.

## Rules and Regs.

Woody Allen said that 90% of success is based on showing up. The other 25% (I'm a history guy, not a math guy) is showing up prepared.

Regardless of what the guy on the website suggests, you're wise to follow the advice of the [College statement on Academic Integrity](#). If that's too much to memorize, simplify it to "don't cheat".