I. Course Objectives

This course has three objectives, described below.

A. Analyzing humor, laughter, joking

Scholarship has offered various ways for understanding humor and laughter: from physiology and anthropology to psychology, sociology and even morality and ethics. Literary humor has generated another body of explanation among Westerners beginning with the examination of the plays of the classical Athenian playwrights Aristophanes and Menander, the Roman comedies of Terrance and Plautus and the satires of Juvenal and extending to the revival of comedic production in the Renaissance with Machiavelli and most of all with Shakespeare. The rise of the popular press beginning in the eighteenth century spawned the production of new types of visual humor and new forms of literary comedy, not least of all political cartoons. The class texts explore some of these theoretical explanations, and our written work and class discussions will test these theories.

The first object of this course this semester, then, will be to examine the theoretical explanations of humor. If always looking towards our own explanations, we will read four books that answer some of the following questions: What makes people laugh? How universal is laughter? In what ways is laughter place-bound or culture bound? What is the difference between male and female sources of humor? What is the significance of national expressions of humor? In what ways does laughter define who we are as groups, tribes, and nations? What does laughing mean? What are the different expressions of humor? What, if anything, bind them together, what separates them? What is the relationship between tragedy or horror on the one hand, to laughter on the other?

B. Using humor to understand authority, values, and aesthetics

While dealing most directly with the nature of humor, its sources and implications, the course also aims to understand laughter in the context of the third year theme. Some of the concerns from theories of laughter apply to this part of the course as well. Gendered humor will provide one way of understanding authority and values, for example. Thus, if males and females laugh at different things in different ways, how is this a reflection of gender authority? What would become of this classic source of laughing (gender differences) in a society freed from sexual differentiation? Is there any natural authority that governs why we laugh and smile? How does laughter violate social values about respect for all peoples? Is it wrong to laugh those who fail to fit standard values of size, shape, dress, and deportment? What does it signify to smile at a transsexual cross-dresser? A man missing a front tooth? An old guy wearing bow ties and earrings? By extension, what counter values are suggested at the failure of laughter at such circumstances?

The course asks a series of questions about these categories, among them the following: Is it possible to define an aesthetics of comedy? What are standards for judging for comedy? Is there any such thing as the "perfect comedy" or the "perfect joke"? Are there any objective, aesthetic standards for judging a comedic production bad or good? Good, better, or best? Successful or unsuccessful? What, in short, is Comic Beauty? Aristotle devoted much thought to tragedy, little to comedy. The bias persists. Why do comedies never win Academy Awards? Indeed, the paucity of our own generalizations here relate both to the difficulty of such questions, and the absence of theoretic work in this area. We will, however, rate the subjects we examine always looking towards formulating an aesthetics of humor.

"Values" generates another category of questions. What is the relationship between comedy and "values"? How does comedy reflect social values? Does comedy sustain or challenge those values? How does it effect moral values? Is comedy moral, amoral, or immoral? In truth, "values" has merited greater examination than aesthetics, with one school of thought arguing that comedy and humor reflect essential moral values by mocking wrong-doing. From another perspective comedy and laughter reflect social values, and define difference from one social order to another. It also suggests values within an individual society. Why was opera a standard subject of humor in the 1930s (from Bugs Bunny cartoons to the Marx brothers) but is no longer? What does this shift suggest about class or cultural values in our own country?
Authority represents another critical element in the exploration of humor. How does comedy challenge or affirm social or political authority? What is the relationship between social or political authority and comedy? What does it mean for almost all cultures to joke about sex and religion? How does this suggest a kind of natural authority about these subjects?

C. Improving skills of analysis and conceptualization

Besides these content objectives, the course also emphasizes conceptualizing and thinking but also expression - both literary and oral. As a seminar, it demands active discussion and participation. It involves considerable written work as well and improving both forms of expression constitute a critical component of this course. It also aims to improve both forms of expression, especially writing and argumentation. Both play an a critical role in determining student grades.

II. Texts

NOTE: With the exception of the Cohen book, all these books are out of print. You have a couple of choices for finding them: the library, on-line, or Amazon.com (or the like). I will have copies (at cost of reproduction) for you as well in the first weeks of class before the readings are due.

1. Apte, Mehadev, Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach
3. Jacobson, Howard, Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime
4. Cohen, Ted, Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters
5. In-class handouts. You will receive these periodically and you will be responsible for reading them, too.

III. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

All Writing assignments should follow the general guidelines defined in the course style sheet. You will be allowed to redraft your book reports and the Mid-term if you want to improve your style and grade.

A. Book Reports
   You will submit a formal 750-word (3 page) book report/review on all the books required in the semester.
   You must follow proper forms for a review.

B. Mid-term Essay Due November 14 - 5 pages

C. Final Assignment, Due December 11, 10 pages

IV. "Presentations" and "Final Assignment"

Your final writing assignment will also be the basis of your class presentation in condensed form. You will take some project of humor - films, cartoons, television programs, comedy shows or some still more original project like analyzing dorm humor, gym humor, your family's laughter or the like - and write an analysis using the theoretical framework provided by the course texts. The presentations should be 15 minutes each and they should follow all the good rules of oral performance, delivered from notes, not read, and well-rehearsed before hand.

V. Schedule of Class Meetings - SUBJECT TO REVISION. Given class size in particular, we might have to expand the "presentations" part at the end and double up some of the text readings from this list. Be prepared for such changes.

Aug  29  Introduction: The Syllabus
       31  The Subject of Laughter

Sept  5  Laughter and the Human Condition
       7  Laughter and the Human Condition, Part 2
       12  Apte, Chapt 1 - Joking Relationships
       14  Apte, Chapt 2 - Sexual Inequality
       19  Apte, Chapt 3 - Children
       21  Apte, Chapt 4 - Ethnicity
       26  Apte, Chapt 5 - Religion
       28  Apte, Chapt 6 - Language
       3  Apte, Chapt 7 - The Trickster
       5  Apte, Chapt 8 - Biosocial Elements
       10  On Writing: Lecture
       12  Summarizing Apte
          Apte Reviews Due
17  Mulkay, Chaps 1-3 (to p. 56)
19  Mulkay, Chaps 4-6 (pp.57-119)
24  Mulkay, Chaps 7-9 (pp. 120-177)
26  Mulkay, Chaps 10-12 (pp. 178-223)
31  Summarizing Mulkay
    Mulkay Reviews Due
Nov  2  Jacobson, Chaps 1-2 (pp. 1-67)
  7  Jacobson, Chaps 3-4 (pp. 68-102)
  9  Jacobson, Chaps 5-6 (pp. 103-185)
 14  Jacobson, Chaps 7-8 (pp. 186 -209)
    MID-TERM ESSAY DUE
 16  Jacobson, Chaps 9-10 (pp. 210- 242)
 21  Cohen,
    Jacobson Reviews Due
 28  Cohen,
 30  Presentations
  5  Presentations
  7  Presentations

VI. QUIZZES
   Every time you have an assigned reading, you will be tested with a short objective quiz. Such quizzes are
   assigned in order to encourage you to 1) keep up with the material, 2) read the material on time, 3) prepare you to
   discuss the reading matter with some care in class on the assigned dates, and 4) guarantee your attendance.
   Discussion accompanies each reading, and you should be prepared to discuss any of the material assigned on the
   proper date. Failure to take the quiz on the assigned date merits a zero. Do not expect make-up quizzes except in
   the case of grave emergency, and advance warning to the professor.
   In the circumstance of emergency make-up quizzes, you must make up within a week of the missed test.

VII. GRADING
   Quizzes and Participation. . . . .1/3
   Essays. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 2/3
   The quizzes constitute a significant portion of your grade. Given the seminar-dialogue nature of the course,
   you will also be graded on your active participation in discussion.

VIII. ATTENDANCE
   You are expected to attend every class meeting and to come on time. You will be allowed one absence;
   otherwise your grade will drop with each session missed. If you must miss class unavoidably, you should confirm
   with your professor about taking your quizzes. Note, too: On every occasion of a reading assignment, the professor
   will quiz you on the material you read. Do not count on make-up quizzes unless you make prior arrangements with
   the professor.

IX. ACADEMIC HONESTY
   You will be quizzed almost daily on the material assigned; do not cheat or crib on these quizzes. In
   addition, if you turn in any papers that or not your own work, you will get an F. You should not consult anyone
   else's paper who has taken the course previously. Note, too, the person who assists another in plagiarizing is as
   culpable as the receiver. If you study with someone or let someone read your essay and they crib from it, you, too,
   will be charged with cheating. If you have doubts about the assignments, speak with the teacher.

X. GOOD MANNERS
   Never chew gum in class; never eat crunchy food or soft food that comes in crinkly packages. Never
   whisper or mutter to your classmates or pass notes. Barring emergencies, don't leave class early and expect to
   escape unscathed. If you read newspapers, magazines, or other material in class, the professor will ask you to
   excuse yourself and give you a zero for the day's work.
XI. WORK AND COURSE SCHEDULE

This course requires considerable reading and writing. It also demands something of a critical mass of time for conceptualizing and thinking. Especially as most students - even smart Honors students - are not used to critical reading and formal writing, you must allow yourself plenty of time to study if you want to pass or to pass well.

In addition, you should be very especially cautious about your course schedule in relation to your employment. As a rule of thumb, consider every 10 hours of employment the equivalent of an additional regular session class. The math is clear: twenty hours of work plus four courses equals about a 60-hour work week or a six course load. Because you have been able to work and take a full load in the past means nothing. Be prepar