



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## The Humor of America

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Humorous writings are reflective of the universal human condition, and of the human condition in a particular cultural milieu. This makes possible the study of humor found in the literary history of the United States as illustrative of both individual lives and of the larger society, during various historical periods.

From the beginning, students can be clued into the fact that laughter is not the end production of humor, although the more frequently it occurs, the happier the activity. Nevertheless, because reactions to humor are individual, unique, and often, inexplicable, laughter should not be considered synonymous with that which is comic.

That which is found comical changes as the individual changes; and, indeed, changed as the human condition itself changed. Both Raskin (21)\* and Rourke (22) noted that the origins of laughter were found in “exultation,” in “the roar of triumph” of a long-distant jungle. From that primitive point of departure, human beings laughed at situations in which others were hurt, were ridiculed, were debased. Civilization slowly modified its laughter for those hurt, although its remnants can be seen in the amusement others express when someone slips on the traditional banana peel, or another’s face is the recipient of the unexpected cream pie.

Nevertheless, comedy transformed itself into milder incongruous situations, in which the incongruity was found in the subject’s mind and the object’s conduct. This subjective/objective duality is discussed, without closure, by almost all critics of humor. For our purposes, humorous American writings are those situations which were ludicrous in the context of American society at the time, were noted as such, and were written in such a way as to illuminate a writer’s vision of what the society and the people should be.

The happy fact is that American literature is treasure-laden with funny, perceptive writings. While it is understood the record of these experiences emanated from the oral tradition, this unit will emphasize the important prose of writers who used humor to express their personal vision of American life. An equally rich lore can be found in poetry, drama, and film; however, the unit is limited precisely because the materials in these other genres are so plentiful. In effect, each of these other genres is amenable to a unit in itself.

\*Each item of the bibliography has been numbered. Numbers in parenthesis refer to the listing. When specific pages are indicated, these will appear after the number.

Similarly, an odd aspect of American humor is noted, but not expanded because it, too, may well be a unit

unto itself. This aspect is the peculiar misogyny found in humorous writings in America:

“ . . . there is continuous masculine criticism and attack (for) . . . feminine weaknesses, fearfulness, and dissembling . . . In no period whatsoever of our comic literature is misogyny lacking or its force unclear.” (4, pp.21-1)

With the limitations noted above, the unit is conceived as a continuous study during a four-to-six week period for either an advanced Sophomore or advanced Junior English class. It may be introduced at any point during the Sophomore year. In the Junior year, it may be most useful as the ending unit of that year’s study of American literature.

The unit is designed as follows:

GOAL: To have students work toward a definition of humor.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To have students identify types of humor found in prose American literature:
  - (a) humorous characterizations which persist and serve as a connection among generations;
  - (b) contextual humor reflective of America during a particular historical era;
  - (c) humor which reflects a specific author’s vision of a better society.
2. To have students learn the vocabulary as well as to recognize the tone of each:
  - (a) hyperbole
  - (b) wit
  - (c) satire
  - (d) whimsy
  - (e) irony
  - (f) comedy
  - (g) bufoonery
  - (h) caricature
  - (i) puns
  - (j) sardonic wit
3. To have students read sufficient material so they can meet objectives 1. and 2. through familiarity and understanding of representative humorists. (These writers are included in the chronology of American humor listed below.)

STRATEGY: The unit is designed to tap three cognitive levels during the various lessons. These levels are:

1. Knowledge: specific material and/or facts which necessitate only simple recall of information.
2. Application: the use of facts in given situations.
3. Analysis: recognition of assumptions, component parts, and the relationship among the parts.

Implicit in the strategy is the necessity for each student to read, do minor research, write, discuss, and listen.

I intend to introduce the unit by asking each student to tell a joke. (Naturally, a student may pass if he or she does not wish to.) My own contribution will be these:

Groucho Marx's "If you're insulted, you can leave in a taxi. If that's not fast enough, you can leave in a huff. If that's too fast, you can leave in a minute and a huff."

An English teacher's joke: Know what Santa's helpers are called? Subordinate Clauses!

Heard this modern one? A Kindergartner tells his mother he heard a joke he didn't understand. It was about a condom found on a patio. "What's a patio?" he asks his mother.

We will first note how some students laughed at the jokes, while others did not. Some jokes generated groans, some confusion. Yet, (I am fairly certain) we will all conclude the intent of each joke was to—well—joke. Is humor then the opposite of serious?

I will ask them if there wasn't something serious underlying the condom/patio joke. (If one of their jokes makes the point more sharply, I shall use that one.) If there is a serious point, if their reactions were different, what then is humor? I will explain that it will take us a while to find a satisfactory answer to that question, and we will begin by learning some words which will help us find the answer.

If possible, we will label each joke according to its character—pun, sardonic, etc., and I will ask the students to find the definitions of each word (knowledge) and try to group the definitions under broad types (application.)

Once I feel the students are comfortable with the vocabulary, I will ask them whether Ben Franklin could have appreciated my condom/patio joke. The answer should naturally raise the notion of historical context, and I will list for them the important chronology of humor as it is found in America; i.e.,

1. Ben Franklin and Washington Irving: early national wits.
2. Davy Crockett: tall tales
3. Yankee, Negro slave, and southwestern humor
4. Mark Twain
5. George Ade: the Chicago humorists
6. The Algonquin group
7. Langston Hughes
8. Woody Allen: modern humorists

## I. Two early wits:

### A. Benjamin Franklin:

#### 1. Knowledge:

The most direct way to teach students the influence of the early national wits is to focus on the works of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), for he contributed “the most enduring American comic type—the homespun, unlettered, but shrewd man of common sense.”(5, p.54) His writings first incorporated the (dubious) proposition that a lack of education was beneficial, for then a person could use common sense. His *Poor Richard’s Almanac* , published annually between 1732 and 1758, included the following prototype: “Tim, was so learned that he could name a horse in nine languages. So ignorant, that he bought a cow to ride on.”(5, p.72)

This concept of horse sense, of good sound practical sense, became ingrained in the American psyche. It is an almost mythic belief in someone who can handle the problems he has to face. He does not have to look in a book or ask someone else. He has learned from experience. He sees the essentials of a problem, and Americans admire him as a consequence.

Ben Franklin’s close connection to Connecticut might also be useful in developing the context of his writings, as his brother published *The New England Courant*. Ben Franklin, writing in it, used names of transparent metaphor: Betty Frugal, Homespun Jack, Silence Dogwood; or even, simply A Widow.

In one of his “Silence Dogwood Papers,” for example, published in the *New England Courant* for the week June 18-25, 1722, he satirizes funeral elegies. In 1730, writing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* , he again satirizes. This time using a witch’s trial in which the accused were weighed in scales against a Bible, only to find “ . . . their lumps of mortality severally were too heavy for Moses and all the Prophets and Apostles.”(8, p.197)

Franklin’s *Autobiography* is replete with satiric comment, especially his “Rules By Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced To A Small One.” Among other suggestions, he advises the employment of tax collectors who are the most “indiscreet, ill-bred, and insolent . . . ”; the conversion of brave officers into “pimping tide-waiters”; and the suspension of belief for any grievance that is just.(8, p.221)

Students might also enjoy, as well as grow to appreciate the persisting truth of some of his homilies: “He who marries for love without money has sorry days and happy nights.”(5, p.58)

#### 2. Application:

The idea that education somehow makes a damned fool of persons persists. I intend to assign reading from Will Rogers at this point, asking students to quote from his observations to see if Franklin’s idea is repeated in his later work. I also intend to have students question their parents about Franklin’s quote about Tom, as well as find examples on their own.

#### 3. Analysis:

When we have heard each other’s material, I intend to ask the students to decide, on a scale of 1-10 just how strongly they agree with the ideal and to discuss the various degrees of agreement for as long as the discussion seems productive.

In addition, if the material is available, to incorporate this cognitive skill further into the unit, I will have students compare segments of Steele's *Spectator* with segments from Franklin's *Poor Richard* ; or his *Autobiography*; as well as Swift's *A Modest Proposal* with Franklin's *Rules*.

B. Washington Irving.

1. Knowledge:

Irving's short story *The Spectre Bridegroom* is a marvelous source for establishing characterizations which may be found in any generation. The wealthy Baron is further enriched with an abundance of poor relations, who, "one and all, possessed the affectionate disposition common to humble relatives . . . and took every possible occasion to come in swarms . . ." The Baron, himself, who had "in truths nothing exactly to do; but . . . was naturally a fumbling, bustling little man . . . (who) worried from top to bottom of the castle with an air of infinite anxiety . . ." The solicitous aunts, the blushing bride, the loving swain are all recognizably still to be found in the present.(15, p.54 ff.)

2. Application:

I will have students write character sketches of people they know who have the qualities found in *The Spectre Bridegroom*.

Further, they will be asked to cull from the "riches" of television sitcoms, the same kinds of people. I intend particularly to have students find these qualities revealed in advertisements, and to help them understand these humorous types are used to have all of us identify with the human foibles we share—foibles which the advertiser hopes will make us feel warmly enough about his product to buy it.

3. Analysis:

Comparison of Franklin's satire and Irving's whimsy may be utilized to teach recognition of tone. This aspect of writing seems to give students particular difficulty. In fact, if the student is unprepared in his/her first reading of *The Spectre Bridegroom*, he/she will often read it as a serious work.

A second approach, which will enable the student to consider the historical context of Irving's writings, might be achieved through an assignment in which the student considers why Irving used an old-world background while writing in the new.

Both Franklin's and Irving's writings merged into the growing body of stories which were to distinguish American from British, to incorporate the distinct qualities of the new world. These are known generally as the tall tales. The tales emerged, undoubtedly directly from the context of early America, from the " . . . lies that old timers told to explorers, tourists, immigrants in disgust at false claims about the new country . . ." (5, p.8)

Some lied to exorcise the horrors, others to show up strangers or to initiate them to the new areas. Some lies, of course, were told just for pleasure; but all were told to depict crude, ferocious men who would not be defeated—unless, of course, they were educated. Even Washington Irving, whose work has already been noted for its gentleness in illustrating human foibles, refers to the incidences of biting, gouging, tar and feathering and "a variety of other athletic accomplishments." (5, p.12)

One of the best of these portraits is found in an 1850 Texas ditty:

“They fit and fit  
And gouged and bit  
And struggled in the mud  
Until the ground  
For miles around  
Was kivered with their blood  
And a pile of noses, ears, and eyes  
Large and massive reached the skies.”(5, p.13)

By the time this ditty was recited, America had become a distinct country. The original anecdotes and stories, brought by the British, Spanish, French explorers, had been repeated and modified at gatherings, quilting bees, after church, at corn huskings, etc.; and as people grouped in slow-moving transportation modes in coaches, steamboats, or when they met on the trail. It is crucial students understand the lack of communication facilities with which they are familiar. Radio, movies, and television did not exist. There was not even a large enough literate group to read stories from the relatively small number of printed materials available. Stories, anecdotes, tales were circulated orally.

The oral tradition became models for storytelling, which would later be recaptured in print in the form of monologues or narrative, told, as, early as possible in colloquial speech. Rourke tells of one Uncle Zeke who met up with a stingy fellow. When Uncle Zeke’s powder horn accidentally dropped in a stream, the stingy fellow dove right in, and “There he was . . . setting right on the bottom of the river, pouring the powder out of my horn into hizen.”(22, p.32)

Uncle Zeke’s story can be matched by the man who was so tall, he had to get up on a ladder to shave himself; or by a hunter who threw a rock at a bear and moose—killing both—while the fragments of the rock killed a squirrel. The recoil knocked him into a river. He swam safely to shore, only to find his coat full of trout.

(The tall tales tell us about the endless natural resources found by the early settlers; and suggest the possibility of a tangential assignment contrasting the background of the tall tales with our modern background of acid rain and pollution.)

The dominant characters which emerged from this “magnified overflow” of the new land were Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, and John Henry. (It should be noted Paul Bunyan was a much later development; actually the brainchild of H. L. Mencken in the early 1900’s.)

Mike Fink is an example of a character “heroic” only in the context of a specific historical era. By today’s standards, he is a cruel sexist who enjoys shooting Indians in cold blood and torturing his wife. Davy Crockett, however, in both life and legend provides a better opportunity to relish the humor of emerging America.

## II. Tall Tales:

### A. Davy Crockett.

1. Knowledge: Davy Crockett is a man of gumption portrayed through American speech. He was born in a log cabin in Tennessee and grew in legend to a “superhuman backwoodsman who hangs his powder horn on the crescent moon or jauntily climbs aboard the sun.”(4, p.18) His infant teeth were used to build a fireplace. He took hailstones for medicine. He could fan himself with a hurricane. He can plant seed in a rocky soil by shooting it into the crevices.

Thus, Davy Crockett, the legend, licks the physical world. This is the point I intend to have student see, as well as understand the critical nature of his real skills tracking and hunting in the America of the 1830’s.

Davy Crockett, the man, emerged from hardship, poverty, and ignorance to become a politician, who, true to Franklin’s observation, took pride in his lack of education. As a district judge, Crockett noted his judgments were never appealed because they were based on common sense rather than on learning the law. Although basically illiterate, he ran for the legislature in 1821, and was elected.

2. Application: I intend to have students read “Crockett’s Morning Hunt,” in Lynn, Kenneth S. *The Comic Tradition in America* ,(N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.,) c. 1958, pp. 153-4, as well as a biographical article in an encyclopedia. We will then discuss the hyperbole used in the tall tale and the effect of that exaggeration on what was, in fact, quite a dramatic life. The point to our discussion will be to understand the importance of the historical context in the tall tales.

3. Analysis: I will have students write a story about life in space, encouraging them to imagine situations as far out as they can. (Yes, pun intended.) I am confident their stories will include men with extraordinary powers—Superman, if you will—and I will help them understand they, too, do not think ordinary men can conquer new frontiers. I hope to argue that idea with them.

### III. Yankee, Negro Slave, and southwestern humor:

Seba Smith, Josh Billings, Artemus Ward, and Joel Chandler Harris are representative authors of this aspect of American humor. Unfortunately, the material is difficult for students as so much of it is written in dialect. Therefore, I intend to discuss it only as part of knowledge.

If a recording of any one of the stories is available in school, I will use it. If any students think they can read some of the passages aloud to the class, from any one of the authors, I will give them the opportunity. Both Bier (4) and Hertzberg (12) contain selections which might be used. Tidwell (29, p.368) includes “No Brainer,” a one paragraph example which could easily be xeroxed for class use. Lynn (19, pp.239-91) includes an Uncle Remus episode which might also be easily xeroxed for class use.

From either oral readings or teacher presentation, I will stress that in all these anecdotes and stories, the principle is almost identical: if might does not make right, guile does. The wily Yankee Peddler and the clever Brer Rabbit share the ability to outwit those who are stronger and/or those who oppress.

In addition, I intend to inform students that the so-called southwestern humor was, in fact, the humor of the antebellum southeastern states during the 1840’s and 1850’s. Stylistically, it was characterized by a rambling, sometimes pointless monologue. The monologues told of outdoor athletic pranks and contests and more frequently than not, with startling sadism. Bier comments about one author that “. . . cruel violence is so

manifestly enjoyed for its own sake and so easily eruptive at any given moment that we can only marvel . . . "(4, p.59) If students insist on an example, that of a man who hit the ground so hard, it jarred his nose off, will have to suffice.

The rogue flourished in southwestern literature. He was a figure of superlative deceit for "the truth (was) too small for him." (4, p.66) Yet the objective of such humor, essentially satiric, was a critique of society. In an ironic, historical twist, many southern readers came to view the rogue as a model, as the prototype of the good 'ol boy.

One author, however, distilled the satire, gave the monologue a point, removed the sadism, intensified the comic complication, and made clear his critique of society. This author was Mark Twain. If I can convey this section of Yankee, Negro slave, and southwestern humor as an introductory context for the students' study of Twain, I will consider it sufficient application of knowledge.

#### IV. Mark Twain

Although the discussion of Mark Twain is planned at this point in the unit, I will have one week before I initiate the entire unit, assigned *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* for students to read at home. Thus, students will be familiar with Twain's work and should be prepared for the discussions and assignments involving them.

1. Knowledge: *Huckleberry Finn* was written over a period of years, from 1876 to 1883. Huck, the 13-year old boy of the town drunkard, decides to run away from the efforts of good women to civilize him as well as his sadistic father. He meets a runaway slave, Jim. They find a raft and set off for freedom. They do not go up the Ohio River to the free city of Cairo, but search for Cairo along the Mississippi. This route was undoubtedly decided upon by Twain as he knew the Mississippi, but not the Ohio. It also probably contributed to the length of time it took him to write the story. How, after all, can one be expected to find a free city when going southward?

Twain's answer to this geographical dilemma encapsules the theme of the book: freedom is found in the middle of the river. Only the raft is their true home. It connotes "freedom, security, happiness, and harmony with physical nature," while the city—any city—represents "the society of the towns along the shore, connoting vulgarity and malice and fraud and greed and violence." (30, p.xi) The plot development in which Miss Watson's will sets Jim free is weak in comparison to the lyrical passages in which Twain describes the beauty and freedom Huck and Jim experience on the river.

Secondly, I know of no other sequence where irony can be taught so directly as through the passages in which Huck debates whether or not to turn in Jim. "There was the Sunday school,' . . . "he thinks, in a marvelous transliteration of the oral tradition to print, "and if you'd 'a' done it they'd a, learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.' " (32, pp.450-451) Huck, of course, accepts he must go to hell, for he cannot turn in his friend. He is touched to know he is the only friend Jim has. It is in keeping with Huck's context that he cannot doubt the validity of the law despite the fact that he finds he cannot obey it. It is equally within our context that Huck's lack of obedience suggests the concept of a higher law, and reflects for us Twain's intuitive understanding of that concept in his criticism of his society.

Thirdly, I intend to elicit from students the episode—or episodes—they found funniest: was it Huck's deviousness in stopping the slavehunters from getting to the raft? the chicanery of the King and the Duke? - Jim's logic in solving the mystery of French speakers? (For the student who says he she found nothing funny, I



will simply ask the person to choose the one Twain probably intended as funny.)

We will, in discussing the episodes, attempt to characterize the humor of them, for they present excellent examples of both caricature and bufoonery.

In contrast, a similar assignment for *Pudd'nhead Wilson* should lead to witty, less satirical examples and a clearer perception, of comic situations.

Application: Because Mark Twain is the most important prose writer in American humor, I intend to give students a formal test on the two books they have read by him.

In addition to the objective part of the test, I intend to have them write an essay on what a run for freedom might involve for them and use those essays as a later discussion under Analysis.

Finally, I will ask them to explain the analogy between *Huck Finn* and this anecdote:

When Lutie Belle left for the big city  
she was ugly, scrawny, and ragged. About  
a year after she departed, a church sister  
meets her, but at first does not recognize Lutie.  
"Is you Lutie Belle?"  
"Yes ma'am."  
"Well, child, you sure look elegant."  
"Yes, ma'am . . . I been ruint."(14, p.17)

3. Analysis: I think students have to grapple with the myriad human traits revealed in both books. I will ask them not only to identify some of the traits, but to decide if those traits are still found.

Bier points out Twain's use of nouns and verbs, without adjectives, for simple and direct prose. I will xerox a passage from either of the books written by Twain, and ask students to add adjectives to the passage. I will discuss with them their agreement or disagreement with Bier's point.

During this discussion of style, I will raise the issue of Twain's use of the word *nigger* and, in discussion, determine, with the students whether, given Twain's context, he could have used any other word. If they do not already know of the history of objections to the book as a consequence of his use of *nigger*, I will tell them about it. We will, I hope, reach some consensus as to whether or not the book should be banned.

I will assign a rereading of the opening description of Dawson's Landing in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and ask

students if Dawson's Landing is our dream of what a town should look like, or, if, in fact, such towns did exist. I would like this composition to be as personal as possible in that I will wonder if the students know of such a town presently in existence. I hope this discussion will lead to the issue of urbanization, which I intend to use as the bridge to the next several sections of the unit.

To insure that this occurs clearly enough for the students to understand, I intend to read them at least one segment from *Letters From the Earth*. That segment begins "Our wonderful civilization?" (31, p. 7)

Twain's works incorporate all elements of this unit. In his writings, one finds humor which derives from the time in which he lived, as well as humor which derives from the human condition. His style reveals the elements of tall tales and southwestern humor. His characters embody the uneducated wise and the wily Yankee. Within his comic complications, students can discern the use of sardonic wit, bufoonery, whimsy, etc.

(I do not know how helpful it will be to students to inform them of Twain's influence on later writers. If I feel the class is sufficiently advanced, I intend to try to show them that influence with a passage from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*; such as the rambling story, conversationally related in Chapter 5 of the book.)

In effect, I consider the study of Twain crucial for meeting the objectives of this unit. If I may draw an analogy to a developmental lesson plan, Twain is the mid-summary. Ideas flowed *toward* him, and additional ideas flow *from* him.

The next sequential idea is found in George Ade's *Fables in Slang*. Parts of this work will be studied as representative of the Chicago group which published at the turn of the century. The *Fables* reflect a comic, but cynical, realism.

Knowledge: The Fable of Sister Mae, for example, Who Did as Well As Could Be Expected (1, pp.135-142) is about Luella, a Lumpy Dresser who had a good Heart; and her sister Mary, who became Marie, and finished as Mae. Short on Intellect, but long on Shape, Mary/Marie/Mae is attracted to Vain Pleasures of the World. A good marriage brings her Prosperity. Does she forget her sister? No, indeed. She takes Luella from her \$3.00 a week job in a hat factory and makes her a \$5.00 a week Assistant Cook.

The Fable presumably teaches that Industry and Perseverance bring a sure Reward. It actually teaches us latter-day readers the problems—and aspirations—of the immigrant population as it flowed into the Chicago of the early 1900's. Thus, the *Fables* are reflective of a particular historical context in America, and I think a modernization of the earlier Tall Tales.

Application: I will ask students to consider what skills the very early pioneers needed to survive, and what skills the later immigrants needed to survive. I intend to do this through discussion, rather than writing, as I am uncertain just how knowledgeable students are about our turn-of-the-century immigrants. I suspect they do not know very much about the period, and will need to give them background.

After reading some *Fables*, and discussing the meaning(s), I will ask them to write a funny fable about The Way Grandmother Found Just the Right Recipe to Capture Grandfather's Heart. The moral is Love and Noodles Equal Marriage.

Analysis: The material generated by the students will form the basis for drawing analogies between their imagination and Ade's imagination. I intend to have students work in groups of four, so they may read each other's fable and identify the comic techniques they find in each fable.

I will use basically the same strategies for Dorothy Parker and James Thurber who are representative of the Algonquin group. This was an informal group which customarily met in the Algonquin Hotel at 43rd Street in New York City. These were witty writers, whose works were predominantly published in the *New Yorker* during the 1920's and early 1930's. Many of the members of this group went on to become scriptwriters in Hollywood, where they continued to meet and impress each other with their witticisms.

Their works are characterized by sardonic wit, a more profound cynicism than Ade's, and verbal wordplay. I plan to emphasize, during the discussions eliciting these characteristics, the alienation which resulted from increased technology, and the fierce competition which resulted from mass media. The cloak of sophistication covered social disillusionment and, in Parker's case, personal disappointment I will see if students can comprehend Huck's feelings about society with these writers' attitudes.

I will, also, during the discussions following the readings, use Thurber's works to reinforce the note about misogyny in American humor.

The specific application for this section will be to have the boys write "The Waltz" (20) from the male point of view; and have the girls write "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," (28) from the wife's point of view.

Langston Hughes used humor specifically to criticize Jim Crow. His deceptively-named *Simple* is reminiscent of Franklin's characters. Simple's characterization itself is closely related to Washington's gentle satire of human foibles, as well as Twain's "immoral" Huck who somehow manages to act morally.

Specific teaching approaches to Langston Hughes are incorporated in the three detailed lesson plans, which are appended to this unit.

I plan to complete the chronology with Woody Allen's playlet, "Death Knocks," (2, pp.37-46) because it so clearly demonstrates how zany comedy can be utilized to make a serious point; that is, man's desire to defeat death.

Students will have two final assignments:

(a) to bring to class a humorous column from the daily newspaper. The student will read the column aloud to the class. Class members will be asked to make some attempt to identify the type of humor and to articulate the purpose for which the humor was used;

(b) to write an essay in which they—finally—define humor. To aid them in this closing activity, I will share with them the criteria by which I intend to grade the essays. (This will be the grade for content. I give a separate grade for correctness of sentence structure, spelling, etc.)

i. Does the student understand the difference between what he/she finds funny, and the author's tone and intent? 10 points.

ii. Can the student characterize the tone (s) of the examples(s) he/she uses by applying words such as *satire* , *hyperbole* , *caricature* , etc? 5 points

Can the student characterize the form(s) of the example(s) he/she uses as from the oral tradition, as a tall tale, as an anecdote, etc.? 5 points.

iii. Does the student reflect upon the historical context in which the material was written? Does he/she

understand some ideas are illustrative of the issues of a certain time, and other ideas could not be expected to be raised during that time?' 10 points.

iv. Can the student generalize by indicating he/she sees certain human foibles persist from the past to the present?' 10 points.

v. Does the student reveal familiarity, and appreciation, of at least two authors' works? 10 points.

vi. What factors did the student emphasize in summary to write his/her definition? 50 points.

To aid students with their last summary, I intend to give them a copy of this quote from Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*:

"(Human beings) see the comic side of a thousand low-grade and trivial things—broad incongruities, mainly; grotesqueries, absurdities, evokers of the horse-laugh. The ten thousand high-grade comicalities which exist in the world are sealed from their dull vision. Will a day come when the race will detect the funniness of the juvenilities and laugh at them—and by laughing at them destroy them . . . Only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."(32, pp.736-737)

Ultimately, I hope to have students agree with me that humor is a serious thing.

## **LESSON 1 :**

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**OBJECTIVE:** to have students recognize a type which persisted in the American tradition of humor.

**STRATEGY :** knowledge

**MATERIAL :** a class set of Langston Hughes' *The Best of Simple* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1961)

Step 1:

Students will need to know the following words:

- a) pun—a play on words of the same sound but with different meaning or application;
- b) anecdote—a brief narrative of an interesting, often amusing incident or event;
- c) metaphor—a figure of speech in which an idea literally denoting one situation is used in place of another to draw an unstated analogy;
- d) the dozens—witty repartee whose origin is attributed to the Black culture; similar to the modern "rapping."
- e) "cracker-barrel" philosophy—ideas which ordinary folks expressed while sitting around a general store.

## Step 2.

- a) Read the foreword aloud, "Who is Simple?" p.vii-viii;
- b) Read the explanation of his name (Jess B. Semple.)p.18;
- c) Discuss by raising the following questions:
  - do the students like the pun inherent in his name?
  - where else in this unit of study have they noted "simple" people as the hero of an anecdote?

In addition to the obvious references from Franklin, Twain, Rogers, *et al* , this short sequence might be introduced. It is from Josh Billings, whose wisdom is presumably concealed under misspelling:

"A hen is a darn phool, they was born so bi natur.

"When natur undertakes tew make a phool, she hits the mark the first time.

"Most of the animile krittters have instinkt, which is wuth more to them than reason would be, for instinkt don't make enny blunders.

"If the animiles had reason, they would akt just as ridikilus as we men folks do."(12, p.13)

-Do students know a "Simple? Give them plenty of time at this point to remember and reminsce.

-What cranks do they crank without knowing why they do?

Step 3: Assign two students to read the dialogue aloud in "Feet Live Their Own Life," pp. 1-3. (The teacher should read the short section which is not in dialogue form)

After the reading point out:

- (a) the tone of the dialogue, noting particularly that Simple ends with a dozen while denying it;
- (b) the difference in speech patterns between Hughes (the character "I") and Simple. Remind students Hughes is creating both characters.  
What is the effect of the language switching on the characterization of the two men in the dialogue?
- (c) what metaphor is embedded in the anecdote? Reinforce with Simple's comment in the foreword that "white folks don't tell colored folks what cranks crank."

How do students feel about this idea? Relate it, if possible, to their earlier answers about their own unknown crankings.

Step 4: Assign for homework:

(a) Read "Present for Joyce," pp.173-176.

Write an objective presentation of Hughes' view.

Write an objective presentation of Simple' view.

(b) Look up the origin of Jim Crow

## LESSON TWO:

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**OBJECTIVE:** To have students recognize contextual humor, reflective of America during a particular historical period.

**STRATEGY:** Application

**MATERIALS:**

1. Students' written homework.

2. In-class reading of the following pages. Each is concerned with the problem of Jim Crow and race relations. Pages 9, 22, 201, second half p.223.

Step 1: Using the material students have written for homework, and notes taken during the in-class reading, assign one student to take Hughes' point of view and one student to take Simple's point of view.

Have the students debate the issues formally before the class.

Do not discuss after debate is completed, but . . .

Step 2: Have students write to what extent they find issues still valid; and to what extent they find them invalid. Encourage students to be as honest as they wish.

Step 3: If time permits, have students read their written opinions. In any case, their writing should, at this point, be graded only for clarity of thought and not in any manner for the opinion they express.

Step 4: Assign for homework:

Readings: "A Veteran Falls," p.52; "Last Whipping," p.74; "What Can a Man Say?" p.100 and "A Dog Named Trilby," p.202.

## LESSON THREE:

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OBJECTIVE: To have students recognize the personal vision of the author.

STRATEGY: Analysis

MATERIAL: Homework reading.

Step 1: Remind students Hughes said in his foreword that Simple evolved as a character who wondered and laughed at the numerous problems of white folks, colored folks, and just folks.

Does Hughes live up to this statement? Have students cite the anecdotes they have read for homework as proof of their position.

Step 2: Read "Simple on Indian Blood," p.17, and the paragraph beginning, " 'Because I hates, if threatened, not to be a lady,' said Minnie . . . ," p.236.

How does Hughes reveal his attitude toward women in these dialogues?

Step 3: Ask students if they feel Hughes qualifies as a humorous philosopher. Discuss as preparation for homework (b) indicated below.

Step 4: Assign for homework:

(a) List examples of wordplay. Set students started by pointing out some, which are:

"Someone is always trying to take disadvantage of me . . . " p.12.

"I have been underfed, underpaid, undernourished, and everything but *undertaken* ." p.60

" *Resolving ain't solving* ." p.80

"It's a wonder you are not rocking and reeling."

"Rocky, but not really . . . "p.112

" . . . I don't *make* money. I *earns* it. p.171

(b) Have students write a brief composition proving Hughes is a humorous philosopher because (a) he uses a comical tone to discuss serious issues of race; (b) he writes of human foibles true of most people, regardless of race; and (c) he integrates wordplay into his dialogues.

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