



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume II: Immigrants and American Identity

Ethnic Humor

Curriculum Unit 88.02.04
by Ruth Schwartz

The energizing effects and sheer pleasure one experiences through humor is an aspect of humanity not only to be cherished, but an aspect which can be enriched through further understandings. The written and verbal record of humorous materials presents the possibility of a meaningful and enjoyable unit for the high school classroom. It incorporates in a natural manner the use of vocabulary, readings, analysis of the different criteria for various genre, and opens the possibility of creative writing as its culmination.

Because these factors are integrated into a unit which provides amusement, it carries with it easy motivation for student exploration. These qualities were, in fact, recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English which devoted its 1988 Spring Conference to an exchange of methods and materials which would “Make Time for Laughter,” in English classrooms.

In effect, a unit devoted to humor makes attainable the standard objectives of any unit for a high school English class. Additionally, ethnic humor, by its specialized characteristics, makes it productively relevant to a classroom composed of several ethnic groups, such as is typical in the New Haven school system. The appended *New Haven Neighborhoods Celebrate! 1988 Calendar* fully attests to this situation with its Irish Festival day, Santa Maria Maddalena Feast, Fiesta de Loiza, Greek Festival, etc.

By focusing on ethnic humor in particular, I hope to use the opportunities to enhance a positive self-image for one group, while stimulating understanding of other groups. This objective is invaluable in its potential for the growth of student pride, as well as comprehension of the cultural pluralism which is uniquely American. Furthermore, this aspect is extremely important to the adolescent student who is in the developmental stage during which human beings begin the long articulation toward identity—an identity which ultimately must be self-defined both as an individual and as a member of a group.

The members of the advanced sophomore class to which I intend to teach this unit are, in fact, at that point of articulation. During my years of teaching, students have variously expressed their confusion as to their role—the atheistic student who struggled with her parents’ orthodoxy, the black student who was conflicted by his peers’ characterization of him as an “oreo,” the Irish student who reported he read only secretly so his gang would not think him queer, the Italian student who said he was the only one of his group who would complete high school.

I think the literary record of humorous materials can aid these students work out their roles. To keep the focus, as well as to make the unit manageable, I will bypass definitions of humor, and the mass of materials

available analyzing its basis and function in human experience. Rather, I will select materials to meet these objectives:

- to stress that ethnic humor reflects the concerns and feelings of a particular group;
- that these concerns are common to all groups, although the expression may be different;
- to have students sensitive to intensification of stereotyping from partial truths;
- to have students assess the influence of the immigrant experience on their self-perceptions;
- to have students familiar with specific authors and literary materials in various genre;
- to structure the writing process for a specific opportunity to enhance a positive self-image.

The unit's strategies includes:

1. opportunities for students to consider definitions of ethnicity offered by the teacher;
2. the reading of material exemplifying the difference between an ethnic writer, and a writer who happens to belong to a particular group;
3. knowledge of and evaluation of the significance of the role played by the immigrant experience in group identification;
4. a structure whereby the student may reveal understandings through his/her own written work.

Obviously, there are various ways in which these strategies may be implemented. One may approach the issues historically, tracing a particular ethnic group's progress from the 1800's to the present. This might be quite effective for a humanities course. Another approach might be to study a group which tended to be presented in a caricatural fashion (Swedes, for example) as opposed to another which tended to be presented with derision (Italians, for example.)

For the purposes of the advanced sophomore English class for which this particular unit is intended, I intend to raise these questions:

1. What is ethnicity?
2. What does ethnic humor reveal about the group?
3. Where is the humor found?
4. How does it relate to the student's experience?

In effect, my overall strategy is to raise questions and present materials which will allow students to focus on

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the issues reflected in the objectives outlined above.

From the start, however, one cannot emphasize sufficiently the durability of the idealized Anglo-Saxon heritage in this country. The some 35,000,000 immigrants who came to the United States between the 1600's and 1920's modified the culture slightly with foods, a few words, some heroes—but the English language remained the dominant channel through which assimilation took place and to be “Americanized” meant to speak English, to read in English, to enjoy the various forms of media in English—and to look English.

The students' perception of this can be fairly easily established. Ask them to describe the All-American Boy and the All-American Girl. Who is taller? What is the color of their hair, eyes? What do they eat for dinner? How many children will they have? Do they attend church on Sunday?

When I have asked students these questions (in a unit relating to the effects of advertising) I occasionally found they responded with a white All-American and a black All-American; but except for color, there was no difference in the perception of the roles, or the language used.

For the purposes of this unit, I might expect them to characterize Chita Rivera as talented but not the All-American girl, and Jackie Mason, Broadway star notwithstanding, as probably not one's idea of the All-American boy. It is too early in the unit to press students as to why such people do not qualify as All-American, but I think the unanswered implications will serve to initiate their thinking about ethnicity in America.

What is Ethnicity?

A joke, which differentiates between one told by a member of an ethnic group, in contrast to an ethnic joke, enables the unit's material to be extended. For example, George Jessel, obviously Jewish, once described Romanoff's as the place where a man can take his family and have a lovely seven-course dinner for \$3,400. (29, p.229) In effect, this joke could be representative of any group.

On the other hand, Harry Golden (10) tells a joke which is ethnically based. Two black porters work at a Catskill (Jewish) resort. They are overjoyed at the tips they will collect because, everyone knows, the Jews have all the money. When they receive none the first week, they agree all Jews are Shylocks; by the third tipless week, they agree the Jews killed Christ. When, on Labor Day, they receive lavish tips for the entire summer (as is the custom) one porter says, “We were wrong. The Jews didn't kill Christ. They just worried him to death.”

This joke reveal several aspects of ethnicity: it reflects the Jewish understanding that the outside (Gentile) world views Jews as money-laden, killers of Christ, and vacation-takers. It also reveals the menial role of the black, in this joke neutrally accepted as a given.

I plan to engender sufficient discussion so that this joke can be understood by students as humor revealing ethnic feelings, for that is the core differentiation between this type of humor and other types. It might also be noted that I am initiating the discussion with my own ethnic group, for it is the group with which I am most comfortable. I would suggest that teachers select, as the introductory material, the group toward which they either feel neutral, or most confident.

Once I am satisfied that students are clued into the essential nature of an ethnic joke, I will offer Mindel's (20)

definition of an ethnic group. He characterizes such a group as a national, cultural, religious and racial identification and membership of people who do not set the dominant style of life or control the privileges and power in any given society. It is a group which “consists of those who share a unique social and cultural heritage that is passed on from generation to generation.” (20, p.5.)

Mindel differentiates between a minority group as a shared status relationship within the larger society, whereas an ethnic membership shares—and draws attention to—a cultural and historical particularity. Thus, coal mining families of West Virginia may be viewed as a minority; Native Americans may be viewed as an ethnic group. It is clear ethnic groups may also function as minority groupings, particularly in political struggles, but the key to the curriculum’s objective is the ethnic expression as it is found in humor.

Ethnic is an adjective, connoting at least common interests; the noun it describes may be group, subnation, or, more generally, culture. One attempts to break the grouping into elements such as race, religion, language. In America, the important distinction seems to stem from this: “the English forebears have been regarded as the core population with which others have been compared.”(22, p.10.) Ethnic humor flows from the “others”.

However, the situation is complicated by the capricious nature with which “others” are distinguished. While some American whites are divided by nationalities, others are divided by religion, and all Americans of a single race are considered one entity. Yet within the black community a southerner is distinguished from a West Indian, in the Catholic community, an Irish Catholic from an Italian Catholic. So, within the ethnic group, there are groupings perceived which are other than outside the group. It will be necessary to elicit the students’ feelings and ideas about this aspect. In effect, they will have to become cognizant they may recognize differences within their own group, but fail to appreciate differences within other groups.

To complicate matters further, many students may believe that recognition of ethnic and racial differentiation is synonymous with discrimination. Historically, so many people believed this, that in 1960, the American Civil Liberties Union tried to have race deleted from the census. New Jersey even omitted such identification for at least a year from birth certificates. Employment and college applications avoided direct ethnic identification. (20, p.15.) Before students can enjoy ethnic humor, their feelings about singling out a group will also have to be explored.

In part, their feelings will depend on where they are in the immigrant ladder. Marcus Lee Hanson suggested the children of immigrants had difficulties due to their dualism between two heritages—those of their parents and those of the United States—but their children could, and did, enjoy the cultural heritage of their grandparents. Therefore, the growing Asian student population might not as readily appreciate the value of ethnic humor as Jewish students, for example, who are (as a rule) now third generation Americans in New Haven.

This aspect is explored at length by Winokur (30) who demonstrates how the Marx Brothers, second generation Americans, reflected the immigrant dilemma of choosing between their parents and the culture into which the children found themselves. He suggested that all such children were (are) concerned with their immigrant’s parents dress, environment, and speech. By mocking the dominant culture—Groucho’s extraordinary tuxedos, and passes at a very proper Lady—Groucho made fun of, but in no way tried to change the essentially WASP culture. As such, “...the brothers walk a precarious middle way...as the immigrant found himself trying to walk between two cultures.” (30, p.170)

Yet, all students suffer from the increasing impersonal bureaucracy in the larger high schools of New Haven.

This leads to a greater need for an individual emotional connection. Alienation might be the consequence of growing technology were ethnic roots not available to an individual for personal identification. Within this context, the unit should be presented as a positive, and perhaps, helpful study on a purely humanistic level.

If one accepts that ethnicity is a “baffling reality,” as Novak suggests in his monograph (22 p.29) then clearly humor is one way to clarify that reality.

What Does Ethnic Humor Reveal About the Group?

One of the best way to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh... In humor, life is refined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a people’s collective psyche and values than do years of research. (10 p.11)

In effect, humor seems to serve a number of functions: it “produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders” (19, p.440.) More importantly for the classroom, it also helps “to dispel animosity by bringing cultures together, using shared human failings as a common denominator.” (19, p.442.) It is this latter aspect which I think should be consistently stressed to meet the objectives of the unit.

By emphasizing the variety of ethnic feelings, as it is found in humor, I can demonstrate the necessity and advantages of developing an openness to others, for I totally agree that “the notion of a wholly closed form of ethnic belonging—entirely inward-turning and wholly resistant to others—... (is) seriously flawed.” (22, p.42) The democratic ideal implies not tribalism, but cultural pluralism.

All citizens share major American experiences—the state of our economy, election rhetoric, attendance in a public school, etc. These are common experiences no matter what the ethnic group to which one belongs. In addition, there is the specific, personalized experience of those same citizens to certain holidays, foods, religious precepts, etc. These are the ethnic experiences of an individual’s cultural identity. The combination of two aspects becomes the basis for cultural pluralism.

In this sense, I do not share Israel Zangwill’s concept of America as a melting pot, as exemplified in such movies as *Full Metal Jacket* in which the Marine squadron consisted of The Italian, The Jew, The Irish, The black (“The Nigger behind the trigger,” the hero of one scene said, as he, alone, searched out the enemy,) all united and accepting of each other as they fight for freedom. Rather, I share the Common Council for American Unity’s statement, which called for “appreciation of the contributions of each group, of diversity, for the creation of an American culture truly representative of an American culture.” (22, pp.112-113)

With this primary strategy, I would introduce Langston Hughes’ *Ennui* (12, p. 422) as expressing any American’s feeling that:

It’s such a
Bore
Being always
Poor.

while his *Bad Morning* (12, p.421) incorporates a dialectical tinge to express a particular ethnic's feeling:

Here I sit
With my shoes mismatched
Lawdy-mercy!
I's frustrated.

Thus, from the very onset of the unit, in which the separation of humor which derives from the American experience, and humor which derives from an ethnic American experience, is emphasized, it is understood it is a difficult point for students to comprehend. Yet, I believe it is well worth the investment of teaching time, for if it is not understood, the ecumenical objective of the unit cannot be fulfilled, and students may become as Archie Bunker—blind to the significance of their own ideas:

What's in a name anyway?...When I was a kid, we didn't have no race trouble—an' you know why? Nobody called themselves Chinamen or Mexican-American or Afro-American. *We was all Americans*. Then after that...it was his business if he wanted to cling with his own kind. Which most of them did. That's how you get your Harlem and your Chinatown and your Little Italy. (31, p.183)

In a recent study (27, p.54) researchers struggled with this same question. Recognizing that ethnic and racial images on television have a powerful impact on the way adolescents perceive ethnicity and race in the real world, they felt a character, such as Bill Cosby's Cliff Huxtable on *The Cosby Show* became extremely likable, and an implicit model, for his viewers. However, others argue that the show denies the context of the black experience, identifying Cosby, somewhat contemptuously, as the *Father Knows Best* of the 1980's; or an overly-idealized parental character who could not possibly exist in the real world.

Cosby thus epitomizes the dilemma: as Huxtable, he is the American ideal of fatherhood; that he is a black father is incidental, rather than critical to the various situations. In one sense, he contributes to an intensification of an American myth of the loving head of a family; in another, he dilutes an American reality which needs articulation.

The problem rests with the negative images which persist in the American consciousness as a consequence of early examples of ethnic humor. These first appeared at the turn of the century when mass printing and increased newspaper and magazine reading grew during the very period of mass immigration waves into the United States. These examples reflected the larger society's view of the new immigrants. Their ethnicity was depicted stereotypically—and harshly—in cartoons and essay.

Harper's Magazine announces ruefully that "some of the worst humor that ever reached print" (7 p.xiii) appeared in it. Early humorists were devoted to dialect stories, mispronunciations and peculiar syntaxes used by the lower classes—and the lower ignorant were "cowboys, waitresses, 'darkies,' Irishmen, farmers, and new-rich businessmen." On the evidence of their jokes, Harper's introduction concludes, our great grandparents took savage enjoyment in the embarrassments of the poor and handicapped. They not only shouted their racial and religious prejudice through so-called jokes, they were proud of it.

Ethnic groups were thus presented with the problems of accepting the stereotypes, which found its way in self-deprecatory humor; and in combating it by printing its own material. Rudolph Fisher, for example, wrote, in 1928, of the Southern rustic who migrates North. The humor of his stories range from slapstick to satire to word play, within dialect.

Seems lak . . . our boy has been smote sho’

nuff, though, don’t it?

Smit, corrected Jinx.

Smote.

Smit...D’word is smit...

Listen squirrel fodder. When you get a letter in yo’ mail what somebody write y’, it’s wrote, ain’t it?

You listen Oscar. When you get a hole in yo’ hiney where some dog bite y’, you *bit*, ain’t y’? (5, p.133)

A famed example of the problem was analyzed on PBS, May 14, 1988. (I have included a tape of this program for use with this unit.) Entitled *Amos and Andy; the anatomy of a controversy*, black comics, notably Redd Fox explored the program. Amos and Andy were initially portrayed on radio by white characters who spoke “black”. This language was dialectically-tinged primarily by grammatical errors, rather than structurally consistent with non-standard language. Thus, the use of the verb *to be*— as in “I be sick,” was not included. Instead, illiteracies—as in “I is,” were used to convey the comic, quasi-criminal activities of the characters. More importantly, the language revealed the same mangling of the English language which was considered so comical by the American forebears of all immigrant groups: “I ’se re-gusted,” “Sprain dat to me.” (11, p.65)

When the radio show, which started in 1928, transformed to a television show in 1951, black actors were used. Because Andy was a solid, family man, his role was diminished in favor of the Kingfish, a wheeler-dealer whose cheating ways inevitably backfired. The NAACP objected to the program as incorporating black stereotypes—blacks as fools and buffoons.

Redd Fox pointed out the program provided the only opportunity for black actors in the 1950’s to be other than servants on white shows. He sees the program as typical situation-comedy of the time. However, because it was the sole program featuring black life, it provided no spectrum for comparison. “Everyone,” he says on the tape, “knows a Kingfish.” The problem was American television provided knowledge of no other blacks people might know. Ultimately, the NAACP succeeded in having the show cancelled.

The irony is that this first situation-comedy contained many of the ingredients that were to remain in all situation comedies which followed. The characters remain essentially unchanging; certain phrases become routine (“One of these days...one of these days, Alice...pow! right in the kisser!” from *The Honeymooners* “ Hello, honey, I’m home!” from almost any show;) the characters are always a part of a family, or an extended family. They are never alone, nor are they ever unaccepting.

“The students . . . in *Welcome Back Kotter* pal around together—an Italian, a black, a Puerto Rican Jew...in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Brooklyn where, in reality, racial polarization has been at a flash point for a decade or more.” (11, p.72)

Leo Rosten also co-opted stereotypes to emphasize positive ideas in relating the education of the immortal Hyman Kaplan (23 p.72.) Rosten creates a class of earnest immigrant scholars. Mr. Parkhill attempts to teach them English, but is taken aback by Mrs. Yonoff's revelation that Mary's little lamb had fleas as white as snow. Mr. Matsoukas, another student, is not surprised. New York snow is not white after all. Mr. Parkhill extends the lesson to the problem of homonyms in the English language, only to be greeted with a chorus of "Ah's" and "Ooh's." He is interrupted by the late arrival of Mr. Kaplan who presents him with a surprise birthday gift from the class. Mr. Parkhill does not know what to say. Stanilaus Wilkomirski (another student) tells him not to say, but enjoy. After Mr. Kaplan's long-winded presentation speech, other students are enjoined to speak as well. When one cannot, Rosten goes pun-crazy: "She got stage fried." "She swallowed her tong."

Rosten, thus, as Redd Fox feels *Amos and Andy* did, transforms the earlier derisive humor to warm humor, using likeable characters, who endear themselves to the laughing reader or viewer. Rosten further makes evident that beneath the hilarity of mispronounced words is the deepest reverence for education, and the heroic struggle of the immigrant to achieve it. By having his class composed of both Jews and gentiles, he conveys their more generalized unwavering search to be Americanized through language, using dialect to make his point.

What was true of the blacks and Jews, was also true of the Irish. Actually, the history of the Irish in America is founded on a paradox: a rural people in Ireland, they became city people in the United States. They were depicted on stage as sassy despite their ragged clothes. They were "immortalized" by Dunne's Mr. Dooley, a saloon keeper and his patron, Hennessey; and found in the comic strip "Maggie and Jiggs."

The best available parody pinpointing the brilliance of Irish humor is Breslin's "In Which Erin Goes Blaaah," (3, pp.193-211) Quoting from Brendan Behan so the readers may have a small idea of the motion and lilt that are typical of Irish writers, Breslin imitates that very lilt to make his ironic points. He (sardonically) finds "fine, lyrical" Irish poetry in a typical clause of an insurance policy or in the more than 8,000 tickets written by the New York Police Department.

Breslin is doing here what the Harlem Renaissance writers did a decade earlier. Their writing, like his, is characterized by a lack of embarrassment concerning stereotypes. (5 p.127) They are, in effect, using the stereotype to make clear its nonsensical basis. The master of this, is, of course, Langston Hughes' *Simple* whose philosophical comments, from the barstool, whose problems with poverty, a wife and a girlfriend, as well as racism, speak simultaneously for the human condition and the black person.

Ethnic humor, then, is the use of "... comedy as a means of facing fear, dread, and anguish...while affirming the self and its absurd aspiration. (28, p.21.) It reveals that the stereotypes, emanating from the larger society, are not only understood by the ethnic group, but provide a channel for combatting those negative views.

All such revelations assist in aiding students to understand ethnicity, and to consider whether they want a melting pot into an amorphous America presumably derived from our original English settlers, or whether "we want people to remember who they are and what they are and to be tolerant of everybody else, but never to forget who they are. (Koch, May 20, 1988.)

There is a second, more subtle aspect to what ethnic humor reveals about groups. This has to do with the intensification of stereotypes, which are found acceptable by some members of the in-group as well as by more members of other groups. Pedagogically, these types of jokes are best used as a springboard to answer the question, "Can't you take a joke?" to that asked by Lewis (18), "Where does a joke take you?" Thus,

“jokes”, such as:

Q: What is black and blue and floats down the river?

A: A Jew who tells Italian jokes

or

Q: How do Polish dogs get bumps on their heads?

A: From chasing parked cars

easily lend themselves to having students face their own prejudices. Without the laughter, or their own contributions of this type of joke—and they know many—I would expect only lip-service about some joke not being “nice”. Students resist exploring where this kind of joke takes them. For this reason, I would not introduce this aspect unless I knew the class well, and was certain of fairly positive rapport. Even then, it is a difficult, albeit necessary, aspect of ethnic humor to handle with sophomores.

Where is the Humor Found?

Almost all the references listed in the BIBLIOGRAPHY include some stories, poems, anecdotes, or jokes which are reflective of various ethnic groups. In addition, I plan to supplement the material whenever I teach the unit with the most recent examples I can find.

Cartoons and/or comic strips can be used. By maintaining a collection, students can be asked to select one which represents them, and to write a caption they would consider appropriate. The procedure could be reversed by having them choose a cartoon which is not representative of them and having them write a caption which makes that point as ironically as possible.

Dialect and non-standard language can be utilized to express humor without becoming derogatory. *Functions of Language in the Classroom* (N.Y., Teachers College Press, 1972) includes a long discussion, with many examples, of rapping, the dozens, signifying, etc. In addition, almost every modern English grammar includes a section on the use of standard and nonstandard speech.

Television programs can be monitored for new material. For example, since I started to work on this unit, I realized Sophia of *The Golden Girls* represents an elderly Italian woman. She uses no accent, but frequently begins her stories with “Picture this: Sicily, 1922. A young peasant girl...” Students might be asked to describe an elderly Italian woman. When they have written their descriptions (which I suspect would incorporate a fat woman, cooking spaghetti, possibly while dressed in black, etc.) I would introduce Sophia’s character and appearance, and ask the students whether she is as representative as their imaginary one.

Movies offer a plethora of humorous ethnic material. One of the funniest sequences is a movie with Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor in which Pryor convinces Wilder to act black so they can escape the law. He rehearses how Wilder is to walk for his new role. I would tape just that one sequence and show it to the class if it ever is available on a rentable video. In the interim, there are sequences from *Beverly Hills Cop* in which Eddie Murphy portrays a model of a black—or does he? This is what students must decide, stating their reasons either through discussion or writing.

Finally, one's own experiences offer material for understanding the role of one's ethnic background. My grandfather was brought to the United States when he was three years of age. As a consequence, he was educated in New Jersey's public schools and spoke with no accent. My grandmother, who came to the United States as a young adult was inordinately proud of this fact, as well as the fact that all her children were born in America. She was fond of saying, "Vat you tink? Ve're Yenkees!" with no awareness of the humor she engendered by so saying.

I hope students will laugh when I tell them about my grandmother, but I will listen most closely, as well, to the responses they offer when I ask the question, "Was she right or wrong?" In many ways, that question and the students' answers are what this unit is all about.

Note: These lessons may take more than one day each.

LESSON 1:

OBJECTIVE Prewriting

MATERIALS *Comic strips and cartoons relating to the family.*

METHOD Brainstorming

Display strips, permitting students to have sufficient time to enjoy them. Then wonder aloud how the artist thought of the idea—how anyone gets an idea.

Introduce concept of brainstorming; i.e., jotting down anything that comes to mind on a certain subject, without censoring or criticizing one's own thoughts.

Have students jot down memories of comical situations involving their family. Stimulate them by reminding them of:

- birthdays (when Morgan, the dog, ate the birthday cake;)
- Father's Day (when Dad received bottles of after-shave lotion he did not like from each of his children;)
- Mother's Day (when Mom was taken to a double-header;)
- Holidays (when the Matzo balls soaked up all the soup.)

Focus on the celebration of holidays—the decorations, rituals—as reflective of a particular culture, as opposed to the first three days which are reflective of America, generally. Discuss at length.

Aid each student, extend his/her idea, after the discussion, by embellishing the "plot" with details:

- what foods were served?
- what were people wearing?
- was the TV on; if so, what were people watching? What did it sound like? How were they sitting as they watched? What were they doing with their hands? their legs?
- were other relatives or friends part of the celebration? Who were they? How does the student feel about them?
- how does the student feel about the younger person he/she was at the time of the memory?

Have students review their prewriting notes. Without changing anything, ask them to check they have included notes recalling the use of their senses—a smell, sound, sight, touch, taste, feeling.

Finally, have them try to develop a question about the memory—a question which involves some problem.

Collect their notes, or be certain they will retain them in their notebooks and have them in class the following day.

LESSON 2:

OBJECTIVE Structuring the prewriting.

MATERIAL Sequences from Ossie Davis' "Purlie Victorious" (in *I/You—We/They: Literature By and About Ethnic Groups*, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1976, pp.337-390.)

METHOD Reading, discussing, and drawing conclusions.

1. Distribute a sequence such as this:

“(Gitlow sits, unfolds comic section and reads.)

Missy: Where’s Lutiebelle, Gitlow?

Gitlow: ‘The history of the War Between the States will be continued next week.’ That sure is a good story—I wonder how that’s gonna come out?

Missy: Grown man, deacon in the church, reading the funny-paper. And your shirt. You sneaked outta here this morning in your clean white shirt, after I told you time and time again I was saving it!

Gitlow: Saving it for what?

Missy: It's the only decent thing you got to get buried in! (Exits side door.)"

2. Ask students to consider the pro's and con's of the form Ossie Davis chose:

- a play permits visualization and the sound of the language used, but prevents free-flowing external and internal description by the author;
- if he had written the sequence as a poem, he would have been restricted by meter and image;
- if he had decided to use the incident as a story, he would have had to introduce stronger conflict, and built up to a resolution of whether Gitlow should continue to wear the shirt or not.
- if he had written it as a letter, relating the incident, it would have been only in Missy's or Gitlow's voice and would have been directed to one audience.
- if it were a journal entry, it would have been confined to one speaker with an amorphous audience.

After sufficient discussion, have students take out their brainstorming notes of the previous 3.. day. Ask them to consider what form might be best suited to the anecdote upon which they had decided. Discuss their decisions.

Remind them that in writing comic situations, the humor may lie in the event itself (as in the Matzo ball soup) or in reversing the reader's expectations. Point out the first paragraphs establish certain reasonable expectations. The sons planning the Mother's Day celebration, for example, might consider giving their mother perfume, flowers, or serving her breakfast in bed. The final decision (to take her to a baseball game) is a reversal of the reader's expectation; and, as such, serves as a source of humor.

4. Have students write the family situation upon which they had decided in the form they feel would express it best.

- for the student who is “stuck,” this might be tried: at the dinner table, a daughter reaches across her mother to get the salt. “Use your tongue,” her mother says, feeling the daughter is rude. “My arm is longer,” the daughter answers, practically.
- ask the student what his/her mother might say in that situation?

5. Offer whatever assistance you can, as the students are writing, to have them include details which emphasize the ethnicity of the holiday situation about which they are writing.

LESSON 3:

OBJECTIVE *Revision*

MATERIAL *Student's first draft*

METHOD *Peer work, shared oral readings, writing.*

- Have students exchange first drafts. Tell them to check first for paragraphing, spelling,
1. sentence structure, clarity of ideas. Permit students to confer with one another by moving chairs appropriately.
 2. Have students read aloud material they particularly liked, which the other student had written.
 3. Point out, as possible, the ethnic variation. Ask the class members what they think it reflects.
 3. Discuss the degree of significance they think it should be given.

It is, of course, crucial that the teacher be non-judgmental at this point, striving only to emphasize for the students' edification the language used, the foods described, the relationships expressed within the situation, the importance of the situation to the family.

4. Make whatever suggestions will aid students to feel happy and comfortable with their identity.
5. Have students write final copy.
6. Grade first in terms of content; secondly in terms of writing skills.
7. Consider displaying the papers with appropriate illustrations, graphics, and/or photographs.

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Writings of non-ethnic American humorists.

5. DANCE, D.C. *Wit and Humor in Black American Literature*. (Doctoral Thesis: University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.) 1971.

Includes a number of examples of literary works as opposed to those found in folklore.

6. EASTMAN, Max. *Enjoyment of Laughter*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1936.

A general discussion of humor, incorporating sources of Americana (rather than ethnic Americana) in a psychological, philosophical context, to determine the nature of humor.

7. FISCHER, John and DONALDSON, Lucy (Eds.) *Humor from Harper's*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961.

Most useful for its introduction.

8. GLAZER, Nathan. *Ethnic Dilemmas, 1964-1982*. Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1983.

Excellent background for understanding students' sensitivities as concepts are first introduced.

9. GOLD, Mike. *Jews Without Money*. New York: Avon, 1965.

A semi-humorous autobiographical novel in which a young man transforms an antisemitic teenage gang's attack on him into a vision of himself in America's wild west of yore.

10. GOLDEN, Harry. *The Golden Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.

A discussion, as well as a collection, of Jewish humor.

11. GREENFIELD, Jeff. *Television: The First Fifty Years*. New York: Crescent Books, 1981.

Two sections are of particular relevance for the unit: "The Impact: What Television has Done to America, pp.9Ð27 and "Situation Comedy: The Family Way," pp.65-105.

The photographs may be particularly helpful to students, if it is possible for the teacher to make clear copies.

12. HARMON, Wm. (Ed.) *The Oxford Book of American Light Verse*. New York: Oxford U. Press, 1980.

13. HUGHES, Langston (Ed.) *The Book of Negro Humor*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1966.

Bits of material from various authors and poets that demonstrates the heart of Negro humor as "laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it...when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first—before it boomerangs."

14. JOHNSON, Harry A. *Ethnic American Minorities: a guide to media and materials*. New York: R.R. Bowker & Co., 1976.

An excellent resource for materials available before the copyright date. Includes addresses and all necessary pertinent information so teachers may obtain material.

15. JOHNSON, James E. *The Irish in America*. Minnesota: Lerner Publication Co., 1976.

16. KAUFMAN, Gloria and BLAKELY, Mary Kay. *Pulling our Own Strings*. Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1980.

Articles, jokes, cartoons, poems, skits presenting a strong feminist view, including a long section on her story. Includes some obscene language.

17. KOCH, Edward. *New Haven Register* , May 20, 1988, Op. Ed. page.

18. Lewis, Paul, "Joke and Anti-Joke: Three Jews and a Blindfold," in *Journal of Popular Culture* , Summer '87, pp.63-73.

An extremely useful discussion which makes clear the underlying seriousness of humor when it is used to reinforce stereotypes. Lewis answers the question "Can't you take a joke?" by indicating where a "joke" can take the person.

19. LOWE, John. "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How To Enter Laughing," in *American Quarterly* , Vol. 38, No.3, 1986, pp.439-460.

A major introductory article to the role, significance, and concepts of ethnic humor. Includes an extensive bibliography.

20. MINDEL, Charles H. and Habenstein, Robert W. *Ethnic Families in America; Patterns and Variations*; 2nd ed., New York: Elsevier, 1981.

Invaluable background material for teacher-introduced discussion of the issues.

21. PAPASHVILY, George and Helen. *Anything Can Happen* . New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1944. Two voices of "irrepressible and rollicking joy" record George's experiences as a Russian immigrant to the United States in the years following World War I.

22. PETERSON, William, et. al. *Concepts of Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1982.

A collection of monographs by various writers exploring significant issues of the topic.

23. ROSTEN, Leo. *The Many Worlds of Leo Rosten*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

Bits and pieces of his writings, including *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*.

24. SELLER, Maxine S. *Ethnic Theatre in the United States* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983.

An excellent historical study of the situation, theatrically, before and after the 1960's.

25. SHEFFEY, Ruthe T. and Collier, Eugenia (Eds.) *Impressions in Asphalt: Images of Urban America in Literature*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.

"Realizing the Joy of Laughter," pp.141-197 includes sections of humorous books and poetry, written by, and about, various ethnic groups.

26. SOLLORS, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity; consent and descent in American culture*. N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1986.

A long analysis of the problems, with particular focus—and therefore value for this unit—on Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* .

27. THE NEW YORK TIMES. "Study Urges a Rethinking of Ethnic Images on TV." April 30, 1988, p.54.

28. WALLACE, Ronald. *God Be With the Clown: Humor in American Poetry*. Columbia: U. of Mo. Press, 1984.

29. WILKS, Max. *The Wit and Wisdom of Hollywood*. New York: Atheneum Press, 1971.

Probably could be best used in the classroom as a model for updating Hollywood's contribution to confusion, or understanding, about humor regarding ethnic situations.

30. WINOKUR, M. "Smile Stranger" Aspects of Immigrant Humor in the Marx Brothers Humor." *Literature Film Quarterly* , Vol. 13, No. 3, 1985, pp.161-171.

Clarifies the problem of the second generation's conflict between the immigrant parents' culture and the demands of the American culture into which the second generation is born.

See also Herberg, Will. *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960,

which discusses the roles not only of the second generation, but of the third. Herberg concludes religious affiliation has remained the aspect of the “old country,” which immigrants’ children never abandoned; although the nature of the religion transformed into a more secular commitment, having to do with belonging to a group rather, perhaps, than devotion to God.

31. WIT and Wisdom of Archie Bunker. New York: Popular Library, 1971.

Quotations from the various writers for “All in the Family,” the first show to confront attitudes and feelings about various ethnic groups in modern America.

See also McCrohan, Donna. *Archie & Edith, Mike & Gloria* N.Y.: Workman Publishing, c.1987, which explores the genesis, character development, and impact of “All in the Family.”

Addendum

Advertisement: New Haven Neighborhoods Celebrate! 1988 Calendar.

“Amos and Andy; Anatomy of a Controversy,” PBS, May 14, 1988; tape, 60 min.

(figure available in printed form)

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