

# Senior Seminar: Humor in American Literature

Professor Joe Coulombe

CRN 23402, ENGL 02.499.1

Friday, 9:30-12:15 AM

Spring 2020

Humor is sometimes dismissed in academia as stylistic window-dressing, a pleasant but somewhat frivolous by-product of unserious writers. In this seminar, however, we will treat humor as a purposeful aesthetic strategy with multiple dynamic functions.

Humor can be used to attack or to bond; it can signal bias or alliance; it can expose ignorance or demonstrate intelligence. These functions begin with something as seemingly benign as how humor informs the way that characters interact with each other within a novel, and they extend to how texts and readers interact with each other to create meaning and shape cultural attitudes.

In this course, we will utilize multiple theories of humor, including the incongruity theory, which posits that humor disrupts readers' expectations and unsettles the familiar. Thus, humor compels a "cognitive shift" in readers that invites them to consider alternative ways of thinking. We will look at the following texts to determine how humor moves readers toward this cognitive shift.

- Tales from the old southwestern humorists, including Augustus Longstreet, George Washington Harris, and T.B. Thorpe
- Various works by Mark Twain
- *The House of Mirth*, a novel by Edith Wharton
- Collected stories and poetry of Dorothy Parker
- *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth
- *Flight* by Sherman Alexie
- *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* by Percival Everett



Analyzing humor