

Comedy – The Humor of the Mind

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Overview

Adolescents love to laugh. They laugh at themselves, at the faults of others, when a teacher makes a mistake, when their friend trips and falls, at bodily functions, at dumb blonde jokes, and at a wide range of sit com television shows and movies. Can the subjects of their laughter be used as a jumping off point to a study of the structure of classic comedy? This unit attempts to do just that. Students will be fascinated to know that the same kinds of human situations that make them laugh now also brought laughter to the masses in Greece in 400 BC or in London in 1800. Although designed for the gifted seventh and eighth grade students that I teach, the readings in this unit and the suggested discussions and writings are definitely appropriate for high school students. The unit includes Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, a Shakesperian comedy, *Midsummer's Night Dream*; *A School for Wives* by Moliere; Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the viewing of a current television comedy such as *The Simpsons*.

As a part of this curriculum students will not only read the comic works, but also read excerpts from widely respected critical essays on comedy. Guidelines and suggestions for classroom discussions are offered. The final section of the curriculum directs students to write response papers which include connecting the critical essays read to the literature examined.

Students will also investigate the difference between comedy as a dramatic structure and humor. They will differentiate among satire, wit, irony, parody, and farce.

Rationale

There are many reasons for exposing students to a study of comedy. I was first attracted to the idea simply because of the interest my students have demonstrated in comedy. When given a choice of what they want to write in the genres of fiction and poetry, often my students attempt to be funny. As a teacher in these situations, I have always tried to be as knowledgeable as possible so that I can support my students in paths they choose. However, as I studied comedy more closely in a seminar sponsored by the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute called *Comedy: From Aristophanes to the Present*, led by Dr. Alan Kennedy, I began to see many more benefits from this study.

One important and significant reason for presenting comedy in the manner this curriculum prescribes is that it is a "way in to" the classics. Our students need a rich background in classical literature and teachers of literature are constantly seeking techniques to make this study more appealing to their students. It just may be that this approach, always encouraging students to connect the classics to popular culture that they find funny, may work.

Throughout history comedy was often written to not only entertain, but often to criticize aspects of society and government. Reading comedy from a particular time period can be a way to study what was going on in society during that point in history and to examine societies carefully. Comedy often asks its readers and viewers to look at the world with a critical eye and to understand what is wrong. As George Meredith said in 1877 in his *An Essay on Comedy*, "...comedy teaches the world to understand what ails it..." (Meredith, p. 13) and "comedy is the fountain of sound sense..." (p. 14)

Laughter vs Comedy

When I asked my seventh and eighth graders to define comedy, most of them responded with statements like, "comedy is something that makes people laugh," or "comedy is something that entertains, amuses, or is intended to make one laugh". Very few differentiated between comedy and laughter, comedy and humor, or comedy and any of the various terms that are related to humor. One student stated that, "comedy is a humorous art form, whether written or oral". She came closest to understanding that comedy might relate to a very specific dramatic form.

Over my career of 20 years as a teacher of middle school students, I'm afraid I never tried to clarify these differences. I often told my students that the ability to be funny is one of the highest forms of intelligence. I know now that what I was really referring to in those statements was the ability to be "witty". I failed to help students gain a full and deep understanding of comedy because I myself did not tune into the subtleties of these terms.

Laughter and comedy are two different entities and the differences need to be discussed with students before much else is presented to them. Walter Sorell, in his book *Facets of Comedy*, states that, "Laughter is a psychological and physiological phenomenon, comedy the creative act of one man's humorous capacity." (Sorell, p. 13) For the purposes of this curriculum comedy will be thought of as a dramatic structure.

Susan Langer, in the chapter titled, "The Comic Rhythm," from her book, *Feeling and Form*, discusses the differences between comedy, humor, and laughter extensively. (Langer, pp. 338-341) She points out that laughter is physical, and can occur when one is tickled. Humor is simply "one of the causes of laughter". She also stresses that, "humor has its home in comic drama. Laughter springs from its very structure" and "Humor is not the essence of comedy, but only one of its most useful and natural elements". (p. 346)

As students view and read literary comedy they can explore the question of what makes a certain play successful; the wit within the play, or the dramatic structure of the piece. When I read *The Importance of Being Earnest* this question seemed especially relevant, and I came to believe that the clever lines within the play were much more important to its success than the structure. However, I came to see that because of the comedic structure, Wilde's witticisms were more successful than if they had been delivered, say, by a stand up comedian, or sent over the internet as a chain letter e-mail.

The Humor of the Mind

The concept of comedy being a sophisticated level of drama requiring a high level of thought, both for the writer of comedy and for the reader or viewer of comedy, is one that students can grasp without reading the various texts that I recommend later in the curriculum. Although when I asked my students what was funny to them, their first responses overwhelmingly dealt with low forms of humor such as accidents and blunders, I think that with a little prodding from the teacher, they could easily cite examples of humor that reflect a higher level of cognitive activity. Most have studied political cartoons, they have viewed sarcasm and parody as delivered by stand up comedians on tv, and they are familiar with Matt Groening's sophisticated form of satire and wit in the Simpsons and in his cartoon books like *School Is Hell*. By discussing these associations that students already have to higher levels of humor, the door can be opened to the primary goal of this unit, that is to consider comedy as a complex literary form.

George Meredith, in his "Essay on Comedy," makes the point that "a society of cultivated men and women" and a "moderate degree of intellectual activity" are necessary to appreciate comedy. (p. 3) As discussed earlier, Meredith is referring to comedy as a dramatic form, and differentiates it from the folly and jokes presented by lesser writers than Aristophanes, Voltaire, and Moliere. Meredith suggests that society might need training to be able to appreciate the comic dramatists. "But the comic differs from them (the joksters) in addressing the wits for laughter; and the sluggish wits want some training to respond to it. (p. 34) Finally, Meredith praises the citizen who does appreciate the dramatic comic. "A perception of the Comic Spirit gives high fellowship. You become a citizen of the selecter world, the highest we know of it in connection with our world..." (p. 49)

Walter Sorell begins his book *Facets of Comedy*, by paraphrasing Dr. Samuel Johnson. "Comedy defies definitions because it is so infinitely more complex than tragedy. This must be one of the main reasons so many minds are challenged by the seeming inextricability and intricacy of the comic in man and life." (Sorell, p. 3)

Another way to characterize comedy as the humor of the mind is to consider the importance of language in the creation of comedy. Only writers who have a well developed command of language are able to add the "elegance of wit and give to it the power of precision." (Sorell, p. 6)

Many theorists believe that human maturity is revealed through a true sense of humor. Humans are different from animals because they can reason, but humans can also confront themselves in a detached manner through humor.

Terms Associated With Comedy

An understanding of various terms associated with humor and comedy is important for the teacher as well as for the students. Some of these terms include satire, irony, farce, parody, and wit. George Meredith spoke of many of these terms and contrasted them to his view of true comedy. Meredith views comedy as a higher form than any of its relations. It is worth looking at his remarks in addition to traditional definitions.

Satire

Satire is a literary work that holds up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn. Satire is often used to improve human institutions or society. Webster's says that satire "applies to writing that exposes or ridicules conduct, doctrines, or institutions either by direct criticism or more often through irony, parody, or caricature." Meredith says satire is "like the beak of the vulture". (Meredith, p. 14) He also calls the laughter of satire "a blow in the back or the face". (p. 47)

Irony

Irony, whether it be verbal, dramatic, or irony of a situation, always involves some sort of discrepancy or incongruity. Verbal irony is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning. In dramatic irony, there is a contrast between what a character says and what the reader knows is true. In situational irony there is a discrepancy between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate. Says Sorell, "Irony has always been the satirist's most subtle and reliable weapon. The ironist sends off his remarks barbed with indignation but never without deeper meaning and social connotation". (p. 6) George Meredith says that, "Irony is the humor of satire; it may be savage, as in Swift, with a moral object, or sedate, as in Gibbon, with a maliciousness." (p. 44)

Wit

Wit produces laughter through sharp verbal felicity and swift perception. Walter Sorell claims that no writer of comedy can get along without wit. Farce is basic to comedy in a physical sense and wit is indispensable as the verbal counterpart to it. (p. 23, Sorell) Meredith compares the wit of Congreve to that of Moliere. "Contrast the wit of Congreve with Moliere's. That of the first is a Toledo blade, sharp, and wonderfully supple for steel; cast for dueling, restless in the scabbard, being so pretty when out of it. To shine, it must have an adversary. Moliere's wit is like a running brook, with innumerable fresh

lights on it at every turn of the wood through which tis business is to find a way..." (p. 18, Meredith) Wit has great "intellectual and emotional power" according to Bruce Michelson, the author of a relatively new book called *Literary Wit*. He says that literary wit "is one of those human achievements that can keep us awake, afloat, moving and spiritually alive".

Henri Bergson, in "Laughter", says that "...wit is a gift for dashing off comic scenes in a few strokes – dashing them off, however, so subtly, delicately and rapidly, that all is over as soon as we begin to notice them." (p. 130)

Parody

Parody imitates or exaggerates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work or the distinctive style of a particular author. According to Walter Sorell, most parodies are written out of admiration rather than contempt for an author. (p. 23)

Farce

Farce is sometimes considered a low form of comedy. It is aimed at arousing explosive laughter using practical jokes, possibly violent conflicts, stereotypes and stock characters, and coarse wit. Farce is closely connected with folklore. Just as melodrama is an extreme of the tragic, then farce is an extreme of the comedy. Walter Sorell, in his book *Facets of Comedy*, explains that farce can be highly sophisticated when employed by a dramatist like Oscar Wilde. He uses an example from *The Importance of Being Earnest* to illustrate:

LADY BRACKNELL: ... I am quite ready to enter your name (into the list of eligible suitors for Gwendolen's hand) should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

JACK: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is.

Lady Bracknell's answer to her own question in this interchange is pure intellectual slapstick. (p. 85, Sorell)

Theories of Humor

What makes humans laugh? Psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, literary critics, and stand up comedians have examined this question and tried to categorize their observations. I think that students can begin and end their study of comedy with a similar attempt to create their own theories of why people laugh. I will present here some of the most common theories put forth by academics.

Incongruity

Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French scientist and philosopher, is often credited with formulating this theory, although James Beattie in 1776 and Soren Kierkegaard, in the early 1800's also wrote about humor in terms of incongruity. These theorists all noted that humor centers on surprising, illogical or unexpected juxtaposition of ideas and situations. Incongruity can include situations in which there is a surprising disproportion between what we expect and what we experience. An appreciation of incongruity makes demands on cognitive processing as well as an awareness of cultural and personal information. Incongruous situations can also produce disgust, confusion, and fear.

Dr. Kennedy explained that elephant jokes are funny because they present incongruous ideas. The mind plays with the notion that things don't fit.

Establishment of Superiority

Much literature credits Thomas Hobbes with forwarding this theory in the 1600's. This theory argues that humor derives from others' weakness, deformity or failures. Usually, the less friendly we are towards particular groups, the more that these groups will become the butts of jokes. We are amused when someone else looks bad. Laughter resulting from feelings of superiority occurs in almost all human cultures.

Marcel Pagnol, in his book *Notes sur le rire*, holds that "we laugh at characters directly: our pleasure in the comic theatre lies in watching people to whom we feel superior." Susan Langer explains Pagnol's reasoning by stating that, "we feel our own superiority in detecting the irrational element; more particularly we feel superior to those who perform mechanical actions, introduce absurdities, or make confusions." (p. 340)

Sociologists have theorized that disparagement humor fosters a sense of belonging to a group, of group identity.

Repetition

Repetition is probably one of the most obvious elements that causes laughter and is mentioned by almost all theorists. It is also an element that students can easily identify when reading and viewing comedy and is probably one of the most often used elements provoking laughter in many of the tv sitcoms and feature films they love. All middle school students have witnessed Kenny being killed in each episode of *South Park*. They also notice the humor in repetition in their daily lives.

All of the major theorists address repetition when they discuss what makes humans laugh and what is funny. Northrup Frye notes that, "In a tragedy...repetition leads logically to catastrophe. Repetition overdone or not going anywhere belongs to comedy." (p. 168)

Bergson discusses repetition both in relationship to his theory of mechanical aspects of human behavior, and as “a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life”.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Freud, in 1905, stated that wit and humor are socially acceptable outlets for repressed sexual and aggressive desires. Freud also believed that making others comic through mimicry, disguise, unmasking, caricature, parody, and travesty is a highly aggressive act. According to Martin Grotjahn, in his book, *Beyond Laughter*, published in 1957, “Freud’s thesis is simple and straightforward: Laughter occurs when repressed energy is freed from its static function of keeping something forbidden under repression and away from consciousness. A witticism starts with an aggressive tendency or intent—an insult like, shocking thought. This has to be repressed and disappears into the unconscious like a train into a mountain tunnel...it later reappears and becomes acceptable, and the energy originally activated to keep the hostility under repression is freed into laughter.”

Biological

There are actually several ways of considering a biological theory of comedy. An anthropological view lets us think about humor as man developed. It can also be looked at in terms of physical functions of the body. Susan Langer’s thoughts offer a third dimension of the biological theory. All of the biological theories can be considered along with other theories and do not have to be looked at as exclusive.

Some feel that laughter itself is an ancestor of our more primitive, pre-linguistic period when laugh like sounds were used to signal good news such as the winning of a battle. Donald M. Johnson, in his book *The Psychology of Humor and Wit*, paraphrases the research of evolutionary psychologists when he states, “most anthropologists believe that humor originated during the Pleistocene epoch, 5,000,000 to 20,000,000 years ago, when language was developing, families were being organized and male-female association, child-rearing techniques, and hunting and gathering of food were being developed. The role of humor in the protective function of the arousal-and-relaxation mechanism became important at this time.” (p. 43)

Physiologically speaking, laughter and humor are built into the nervous system and serve an adaptive function. Laughter and humor are good for the body because they stabilize blood pressure, oxygenate the blood, massage vital organs, stimulate circulation, help digestion, relax the system and produce a feeling of well being probably related to endorphin release.

Susan Langer’s thinking on the biological connection with comedy is, as mentioned above, a bit more abstract. Her theory is partly metaphoric, because she compares the structure of comedy to an organic structure of life. She states that “(Comedy) expresses the elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature, the animal drives that persist even in human nature, the delight man takes in his special mental gifts that make him the lord of creation; it is an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence.”(p. 331) She goes on to say “Because comedy abstracts, and reincarnates for our perception, the motion and rhythm of living, it enhances our vital feeling...” (p. 344)

Word Play

Bergson makes the point that there is almost something artificial in making a special category for the comic in words, since most of the theories and classifications of comedy that we have already mentioned are produced through the medium of language. He makes the distinction, however, between the comic expressed and the comic created by language. Laughter that is the result of word play owes its humor to the structure of the sentence or to the choice of words. (p. 127-128)

Several of my students, when asked to describe a real life situation that recently made them laugh, described plays on words. Some of the jokes they offered also consisted of plays on words. Although puns are sometimes considered the lowest rung of the humorous ladder (Sorell, p. 21), puns can also be highly sophisticated.

Classic Comic Structure

The most often quoted and referenced authority on comic structure seems to be Northrup Frye, a structuralist who wrote his famous essay, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," in the 1950s. It is important to note that Frye, as well as many other essayists, most often uses the genre of drama, not fiction, to illustrate classic comic structure. Frye claims that the plot structure of comic drama originated in Greek New Comedy, from the works of Plautus and Terence. This basic form is still seen in current comic cinema and I think is easily recognizable for students. Frye summarizes the plot in its most simplistic form: that a young man desires a female and that this desire is obstructed in one or more ways, often by a paternal figure. Near the end of the drama something occurs to allow the man to obtain the object of his desires. Often the play then ends in a party or festive ritual. With this basic structure, the comedy is often developed with emphasis on the blocking character, and not on the hero or heroine.

Along with this simple scenario come several more generalities. The movement of comedy also includes a change in the society. Often this change represents a youthful point of view winning over the status quo of the elders. Another characteristic of the classic comedy structure is that it is inclusive. All problematic characters are reincluded into society in the end.

Classic Comic Characters

Frye also categorizes typical character types into four basic groups: the imposters, self-deprecators, buffoons, and churls. The imposters are most often the characters who thwart the hero in his attempt to win the female. The raging father, played by Robert DeNiro in *Meet the Parents*, fits this category.

Several sub-categories can fill the self-deprecator role. The hero, or young male in the classic structure, fits into this group. Secondly, the character who helps the hero to scheme is also usually a

self-deprecator and can be termed a vice. Puck, from Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream*, is the example that quickly comes to mind. The third type of self-deprecator is the retreating paternal figure.

The buffoon, because he is usually outside of the plot and merely serves to increase the merriment, is probably the easiest type to spot. Fools and clowns certainly fit into this category of buffoon. A clown can be touchingly human and a clumsy acrobat at the same time. Sorell calls the fool an "intellectualized clown". (Sorell, p. 21) In *Seinfeld*, Kramer is a buffoon. This type of character developed from the Greek Chorus.

The final character type discussed by Frye is the Churl. In vaudeville this type was identified as the "straight man". The churl can be miserly, snobbish, or a killjoy.

Historical Timeline

To understand the history of western comedy and the relationship of the critical essays to the literary works, it was helpful for me to construct a timeline. This may be helpful for students as well, to either construct their own or have one on hand as they work their way through the unit.

423 BC	Aristophanes, Greek Comedy, <i>The Clouds</i>
1600	William Shakespeare <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
1651	Thomas Hobbes <i>Humane Nature</i>
1666	Moliere (stage name of Jean Baptiste Poquelin), <i>The School for Wives</i>
1877	George Meredith, " <i>An Essay on Comedy</i> "
1895	Oscar Wilde, <i>Importance of Being Earnest</i>
1900	Henri Bergson " <i>Laughter</i> "
1905	Sigmund Freud <i>Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious</i>
1953	Susanne Langer " <i>The Comic Rhythm</i> "
1966	Northrup Frye " <i>The Mythos of Spring: Comedy</i> "
1974	Walter Sorell, <i>Facets of Comedy</i>
1980	<i>The Simpsons</i>

Objectives

This curriculum unit meets many objectives, some of which were revealed to me as I wrote it. The objectives include exposing students to classic literature, asking students to examine the structure of classic comedy and current comedy, helping students to make sense of difficult theoretical and critical texts, encouraging students to make connections and comparisons among a variety of comedic genres, and challenging students to think and write critically about literature.

Middle school students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools have had little exposure to “the classics”. Because of this, and because Greek comedy laid the foundation for a comic structure that has developed over the history of western literature, students will read and view a video of one Greek comedy. Shakespeare, too, must be included in this introduction to comedy; since his works are among the most well known classic works in the western canon. The work of Moliere and Wilde are included as well because of the frequency of their comedies being listed as examples of great literary pieces.

Along with reading and viewing the literature, students will read widely respected critical and analytic essays about comedy. The students I teach need to begin to move beyond the simplified textbooks they are used to and encouraged to tackle more sophisticated texts.

The discussion and writing assignments that are a part of this curriculum unit will ask students to articulate important and complex ideas and themes, engage in making meaning from narrative and expository texts, paraphrase to articulate and confirm understandings, and make connections among ideas within and across texts.

This curriculum unit addresses three of the district’s content standards for the area of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. These standards are, all students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade, in all subject areas. Two standards from the Arts and Humanities list are also addressed in this curriculum unit; describing the meanings found in literature and evaluating and responding critically to literature. From the Science and Technology standards, this unit supports basic computer literacy.

Strategies

Many strategies that have been successful in my classroom for the last 20 years can be modified and adapted to fit the goals and content of this unit. These strategies include connecting to the knowledge base that students currently possess, using a reader response method to help children make sense of difficult text, using classroom discussion as a method of prewriting, and using a variety of techniques to help students write critical essays.

Connecting to Students' Knowledge Base

Because, as I stated in the overview of this unit, adolescents love to laugh, they have quite a bit of knowledge about what is funny. They may not have spent much time or intellectual energy analyzing or categorizing what seems funny to them, but the raw knowledge is there. A survey can be given to the children with questions like, name the two or three funniest tv shows that you watch. Name the funniest movie you've seen in the past three years. Write down a funny joke you've heard lately. Have you read any really humorous books? Name them. Describe a real life situation that has recently made you laugh. The answers to these questions can be discussed in class and the teacher can lead the discussion toward an analysis of the humor. Students can be encouraged to categorize funny situations and begin to make their own theories about what makes human beings laugh. These lists and theories can be examined at the end of the unit. Students can rework their original lists in light of what they have learned in the unit.

In the process of writing this unit, I surveyed 65 seventh and eighth graders about what they think is funny. In their major area of expertise, TV, these 65 students listed over 45 different TV shows when they were asked to name the funniest TV shows they watched. Likewise, when asked about funny movies, they named 40 different titles. My students were also experts when asked to describe a real life situation that has recently produced laughter. These situations mostly fell into the categories of falls and accidents to others, falls and accidents to themselves, embarrassment, imitation, making fun of others, and word slips or misuse of words. When asked about funny books, the students had little to comment on, and surprisingly, not even half of them had a joke they felt was worthy of sharing. Students can take this raw information and form some beginning theories relating to comedy and laughter.

Using Quotes From Critical Texts

Another technique I have often used with my students is to begin a new unit of study by offering a wide range of "quotable quotes" as a way of introducing concepts and ideas that will be addressed in the unit. Because I feel it is important for students to think about ideas independently before participating in a class discussion, I present the quotes on a handout, give students at least 30 minutes to jot down in writing their interpretations of the quotes, and then open them up to class discussion.

These quotes can be revisited at the end of the unit when the students have a much wider experience with comedy. If the teacher is interested in an evaluation or examination, the quotes can be used in that manner as well. Following are my choices for "quotable quotes" concerning comedy:

- Comedy teaches the world what ails it. (George Meredith, p. 13)
- Comedy and laughter are two separate notions, not necessarily interdependent. Laughter is a psychological and physiological phenomenon, comedy the product of a creative act of one human's humorous capacity. (Sorell, p. 13)

- Philosopher and comic poet are of a cousinship in the eye they cast on life. - (Meredith, p. 15)
- To love comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good. (Meredith, p. 24)
- There never will be civilization where comedy is not possible... (Meredith, p. 32)
- The laughter of comedy is impersonal and of unrivaled politeness, nearer a smile-often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humor of the mind.
- We know the degree of refinement in men by the matter they will laugh at, and the ring of the laugh; but we know likewise that the larger natures are distinguished by the great breadth of their power of laughter...(Meredith, p. 50)
- Comedy is the thinking person's response to experience; tragedy records the reactions of the person with feelings. (Charles B. Hands, from internet)
- Comedy is the fountain of sound sense. (Meredith, p.14)

Reader Response

Using a form of reader response method has proven to be a non-threatening way to encourage students to connect to both literary texts and nonfiction texts in my classroom. The method I use is basically one of giving students a list of questions that encourages them to explore their own meaning of the text, keeping in mind that they must be able to back up their interpretations with the words of the author. Students usually have one set of questions to answer while they read independently. I have included a sample of a reader response guide in appendix 2. Some typical questions include: What was puzzling? What did the piece make you think of? What words, sentences and sections immediately stand out? What did you like about it? What was the author trying to say?

A classroom discussion then ensues using those questions as a starting point. To encourage participation of all students, I often ask them, "What question do you want to start with?" This allows students to talk about something, and even choose the question they feel most comfortable with. I think that with each successful comment in a class discussion, the student is more willing to verbalize again. After the class discussion, there is a second list of questions that ask the students to think more deeply about their early responses in light of the discussion.

Reading and Making Sense of Complex Texts

Pittsburgh Public School students, as well as urban students across the country, tend to score lowest on standardized tests on reading and analyzing difficult texts. As stated earlier in the Objectives section of this curriculum, my district supervisors are looking for evidence in classrooms that students articulate important and complex ideas and themes, make connections among ideas and events within and across texts, engage in making meaning from narrative and expository texts, and paraphrase to articulate and confirm understandings.

If students read the selections suggested here, not only will they make progress toward achieving these district goals, but they will begin to create a structure which they can then use to analyze the comic texts they will view, listen to, and read. These passages can be handled in various ways within the classroom. My own preference is that students would read them silently first, respond in writing to some prompts from a reader response guide (see appendix 2), and then discuss them with teacher direction.

The page numbers referenced here from George Meredith and Henri Bergson come from the essays reprinted in *Comedy*, edited by Wylie Sypher. The page references for Northrup Frye and Susanne Langer refer to these essays as reprinted in *Comedy, Meaning and Form*, by Robert W. Corrigan.

The first series of excerpts I hope to present to students has to do with what comedy is, what purposes comedy serves for humans, and comedy as a thinking person's entertainment.

George Meredith, on the first page of his "Essay On Comedy," talks about why a society of cultivated men and women is required to produce and appreciate comedy. (Meredith in Sypher, p. 3)

Meredith also presents a good argument relating to the role of women in a society where good comedy is produced. There are two passages that should be examined relating to the feminine spirit in comedy. On page 32 he talks about how necessary civilization is to the production of comedy and that civilization is not possible without some degree of social equality of the sexes. There is then a much longer passage on page 15 that details his point of view on the role of women in comedy. (Meredith in Sypher, pp. 15 and 32)

A clearly stated and relatively short excerpt that emphasizes the humanness of comedy can be found on the second page of Henri Bergson's essay "Laughter". (Bergson in Sypher, p. 62)

Susan Langer, in the chapter titled "The Comic Rhythm," from her book *Feeling and Form*, does an excellent job of differentiating between humor and comedy and also discussing the role of humor within comedy. (Langer in Corrigan, pp. 130, 133)

To introduce students to an important difference between the views of Bergson and Frye regarding the role of comedy, I have found a short excerpt in the essay of each. Bergson believed that

comedy is socially regulating and Frye believed that comedy is socially radicalizing. (Bergson in Sypher, p. 117) (Frye in Corrigan, p. 141 and p. 169)

I also include here some excerpts from critical essays that relate more to structure, character types, and specific effects that cause laughter.

Northrup Frye's analysis of classic plot structure in his essay "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," is important for students to read and they can use this as a basis to examine the structures of all of the comedies they read and view during the unit. Paragraphs one and two of the essay make a good excerpt. (Frye in Corrigan, pp. 141-142)

Another important excerpt from Frye is his categorizing of typical characters of comedy. This is a four page section of his essay and each teacher can decide how much to share with her students. (Frye in Corrigan, pp. 149-154)

In *Facets of Comedy*, Walter Sorell offers a list of "fundamental points that have served the comic and comedy well..." (Sorell, pp. 16-17)

Bergson also spends a great deal of time discussing the same comic effects offered by Sorell, such as repetition, inversion, reciprocal interference of series and verbal wit. (Berson in Sypher, pp. 119-145)

Choosing the Literature

Choosing literature appropriate for middle school students has always been a problem. Many of my students have outgrown adolescent fiction and explore on their own adult fiction that is filled with sex and profane language. However, in the classroom I have always been careful to choose literary works that avoid all of the above. Parents and supervisors can be very vigilant in monitoring what is presented in the classroom to students in this age group. Therefore, many of the classic comedic texts that might otherwise be perfect for this curriculum cannot be used.

Choosing a Greek comedy was perhaps the most difficult task. However, I felt that it was important it include. One of the strongest memories I have of my own literary schooling is of a film version I watched of Antigone. I wanted to give my students the same experience of being awed by the power of Greek drama. George Meredith spends several pages in his *Essay on Comedy* explaining the importance of Aristophanes. "This laughing bald-pate, as he calls himself, ...used laughter for his political weapon...He was primed with wit...a lyrical poet of aerial delicacy. He is not to be revived; but, if his method were studied, some of the fire in him would come to us, and we might be revived." (p. 39) *Clouds* seemed to be the most approachable of Aristophanes' comedies for sophisticated seventh and eighth graders. It is an attack on Socrates in particular and philosophers in general. The conflict between poets and philosophers became increasingly sharp during the fifth century, when the

philosophers more and more took on the role of teacher, a role earlier held by the poets. The attack on Socrates is thus not only a personal lampoon, but an indictment of the philosophers' attempts to value only logic and science.

Because Shakespeare's comedies hold such an important place in our literary history, it seems important to include one in this unit. Says Meredith, "Shakespeare is a well-spring of characters which are saturated with the comic spirit; with more of what we will call blood-life than is to be found anywhere outside of Shakespeare." (p. 11) I decided to use *Midsummer Night's Dream* as the Shakespearian Comedy because I have already had experience with middle school students and this work. Many years ago I took a class of middle school students to view the 1930's version starring Mickey Rooney. The children responded well to this comedy and I know that using this version or the 1999 version directed by Michael Hoffman and starring Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania will still be appealing to students. I think students will be able to make many connections between that critical essays and this rollicking and wild drama.

The inclusion of Moliere came about for several reasons. Moliere is often mentioned in critical essays about comedy and his work is widely accepted as being an important part of the comedy canon. Sorell characterizes Moliere's work by stating, "Moliere held out little hope for change in human nature, but did not give up exhorting his fellow man to apply reason to social actions and moderation to his personal attitudes." (Sorell, p. 138) Meredith says "He seized his characters firmly for the central purpose of the play, stamped them in the idea, and, by slightly raising and softening the object of study, generalized upon it so as to make it permanently human." (p. 10)

It seems to me that all of Moliere's characters are easily transferable to 2002, be they hypocrites, misanthropes, or misers. A few years before the seminar I had been reacquainted with his work when I saw a production of *The Bungler* and enjoyed it immensely. In the PTI seminar we read *The Misanthrope* and again I was thoroughly entertained. While browsing at the local library I came across an audio version of *School For Wives* produced by the L.A. Theatre Works in 1999. This wonderful production seemed perfect for my students. The tape is extremely well done; lively and easy to follow. The play's theme of an older man attempting to force marriage on a young woman will hold the interest especially of my female students. Many of my students have read young adult novels on this theme and have attempted to write stories about forced marriages.

The Importance of Being Earnest, by Oscar Wilde, is another piece that I have seen used successfully with middle school students and so I am confident that it will work well in this unit. The Middle School for Performing Arts in my school district puts on a "classic" play each year. Two years ago they produced *Earnest*. I viewed the delightful production and also discussed the play with many of the children involved in it. They seemed to grasp much of the humor and related to it quite well. As stated by Sorell, "The notion of making light of the commonplace and of topsyturvying a world of cliché's was raised by Oscar Wilde to a sophisticated level." (p. 7, Sorell) Bright middle school students are capable of appreciating this aspect of Wilde's work.

A new Miramax production of the play is currently in theatres and should soon be available for rent on video. The movie stars Reese Witherspoon and Judi Dench star in this production that should be appealing to students.

The main criteria I used in choosing a contemporary TV comedy was the survey I conducted among my students. *The Simpsons* was named as the funniest tv show by the largest number of students. *Who's Line Is It Anyway?* came in a close second, but because that show is not really a drama, it seemed that the *Simpsons* would fit the needs of this curriculum better. TV shows being shorter than feature films, it seemed wiser to go with that medium. Also, the choices my students made about funny feature films covered a much broader territory. The only contemporary movie that received a significant number of votes was *Scary Movie*. In choosing the contemporary piece, the teacher and students could negotiate and make this choice together. Or, the analysis of contemporary popular comedy could take place outside of the classroom, each student choosing her own show or movie to analyze.

I rented several video collections of *Simpsons* tv episodes, trying to choose a single one that might work best for this unit. I was unable to make a decision, and now think it might be better to allow students to choose a favorite episode. Most of the rentable episodes were quite old.

Helping Students Write Critical Essays

Middle school students have not had much experience writing critical essays, but need to begin practicing to do so, because much of their high school English courses will consist of this type of writing. Also, this is the type of writing in which students score lowest on standardized exams. My experience has shown me that using reader response questions during initial readings, using classroom discussion as a form of pre-writing, and using criteria lists and rubrics all help students find success in the writing of critical essays.

I have already discussed the use of the reader response method in an earlier section of this curriculum. When both the teacher and student think of these response questions as a way of getting ideas for future writing projects, students begin to see that they can formulate ideas, theories and responses for writing.

Before classroom discussions begin, students should be aware of the type of writing they will be required to do. They can then be more tuned in and connected to the discussion, and use class discussions as a way to experiment with ideas and practice articulating their responses. In addition, I often use a two stage reader response paper. Students initially respond independently to the questions. After a class discussion centering on the questions, students are required to revisit the questions and respond again and possibly more in depth, using new insights acquired in the discussion.

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools teachers are encouraged to use criteria lists to help students in their writing and the criteria usually relates to the rubric that will be used to evaluate the essay. These lists spell out for students exactly what the teacher is looking for in the essay. The students I teach have found criteria lists to be very helpful. Although they sometimes seem “dependent” on the lists, I think in actuality they are internalizing many attributes of good writing.

There are many essays a teacher might assign in relationship to this curriculum. Students might pick just one aspect of what is funny and write about all of the literary works and how that aspect is employed in each. For instance, they could discuss the use of repetition or incongruity in each comedy read. Students could compare two or more of the comedies, discussing technique, character, and style. Another possibility would be to choose only one piece of literature and analyze all of the things that are “funny”. A challenging task might be to discuss how each comedy follows or does not follow Northrup Frye’s classic comic structure. Frye’s classic characters would also work well for this type of an essay. When I teach this unit I plan to give the students a choice of essay topics.

Classroom Activities

This curriculum was written with the idea of presenting it in 18 one hour class sessions. I will offer here a summary of what might occur in those fifteen sessions.

Day 1

Hold a discussion of what students find funny and attempts to categorize lists. View with the students an episode of *The Simpsons* and then revise the class list. As a homework assignment students can watch another tv sitcom or movie. They might also ask family members for favorite jokes.

Day 2

Use “quotable quotes” taken from essays on comedy as a basis for class discussion. Some suggestions for quotes are given in the strategies section of this curriculum. This activity introduces students to some well known and interesting ideas about comedies. The purpose of the activity is to “stretch” the students’ thinking about comedy from the previous day.

Day 3/4

Presentation of theories of comedy, humor and laughter. Under the section “Reading and Making Sense of Complex Text” in the Strategies section of this curriculum are suggestions for passages that students can read that relate to classic structure, theories of what is funny, classic characters, and other points of view concerning comedy.

Day 5,6,7

Read and discuss *The Clouds* by Aristophanes.

Days 8,9, 10

View and discuss *Midsummer Night's Dream*, by William Shakespeare.

Day 11,12,13

Listen to audio tape, read and discuss Moliere's *School For Wives*.

Days 14, 15, 16

View, read, and discuss Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Days 16

View a second episode of *The Simpsons* or other contemporary tv show or movie chosen by class.

Days 17 & 18

Students write in response to class readings and viewing. Suggestions for topics are given in the Strategies section under Helping Students Write Critical Essays.

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Bergson, Henri, "Laughter." 1900. Fred Rothwell, tr. In *Comedy*, Wylie Sypher, ed. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1956.

This is an often quoted essay and an important piece in the body of critical writing on comedy. Parts of this essay are suggested for student readings.

Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: New Perspective*. New York: New York Literary Forum, 1978.

Charney, Maurice, *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Corrigan, Robert W., ed., *Comedy/Meaning and Form*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965.

This collection of writings on comedy was the most comprehensive that I found. Included in the 33

essays are Northrup Frye's *The Mythos of Spring: Comedy*; Wyle Sypher's *The Meanings of Comedy*; Susanne Langer's *The Comic Rhythm*; Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and the Comic*; George Meredith's *An Essay on Comedy*; and Henri Bergson's *Laughter*, Martin Grotjahn's *Beyond Laughter: A Summing Up*. Although the book is out of print, many copies were available on-line at the various used book centers like Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

Finney, Gail, ed. *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*. Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994. This collection of contemporary essays that relate to gender issues and comedy could assist the teacher who wishes to add female writers of comedy to the literature presented to students.

Frye, Northrup, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957. pp. 163-186.

An important and often quoted essay on comedy, this essay can also be found in Robert Corrigan's *Comedy: Meaning and Form*.

Grotjahn, Martin, "Beyond Laughter: A Summing Up," in *Beyond Laughter*, 1957. McGraw-Hill. Pp. 255-264

Hobbes, Thomas, *Humane Nature*, 1651.

Johnson, Donald M., *The Psychology of Humor and Wit: From Banana Peels to Viagra Jokes*. Santa Barbara: Fithian Press, 1999.

This very short book (52 pages) gives a concise summary of theories of laughter, then goes on to discuss humor production and techniques for writing jokes. This is a very useful book for teachers who hope to help their students write comedy.

Langer, Susan, "The Comic Rhythm," in *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953. Several quotes from this chapter are included in the list of excerpts for students to read. The chapter is also included in Corrigan's book, *Comedy*.

Meredith, George, "An Essay on Comedy," 1877. Collected works first published by Chapman & Hall, 1885-1895.

The page numbers within this curriculum that refer to this essay relate to the pages in *Comedy*, edited by Wylie Sypher.

Michaelson, Bruce, *Literary Wit*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

Although I didn't read this book in its entirety, it might provide the teacher with an updated view of how comedy and wit have changed in the last 100 years. He says, "So much has changed since Bergson and Freud made the rules – we really need to liberate and modernize our conversation about wit and humor."

Morreall, J., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

Neale, Stephen, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London & New York: Routledge, 1990.

Sorell, Walter, *The Facets of Comedy*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972.

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Wallace, Ronald, *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Comic Novel*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979.

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Barnet, Sylvan, Berman, Morton, Burto, William, ed. *Eight Great Comedies*. New York: Signet Classics, The New American Library, Inc. 1996. ISBN: 0452011701

This terrific paperback includes *The Clouds*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Langer's "The Comic Rhythm" and Frye's "The Structure of Comedy" as well as six other comedies and two other essays.

Importance of Being Earnest. Dir. Oliver Parker. Perf. Judy Dench, Colin Firth, Frances O'Connor, and Reese Witherspoon. Miramax, 2002

Midsummer Night's Dream. Dir. Michael Hoffman. Perf. Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Calista Flockhart. 1999.

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Moliere, *School For Wives*.

School For Wives, trans. Richard Wilbur, audio-cassette. Dir. Nick Bowling. Perf. William Brown, Wellesley Chapman, Dev Kennedy and Joe Damour. dL.A. Theatre Works, 1999.

Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. New York: New American Library: 1985.

Appendix 1 Content Standards

The following content standards for the Pittsburgh Public Schools have been addressed in this unit.

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.

Arts and Humanities

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.

Appendix 2 Reader Response Guide

READER RESPONSE - COMEDY

TITLE _____ AUTHOR _____

STUDENT NAME _____

1. JOT DOWN FIRST IMPRESSIONS, OBSERVATIONS, REACTIONS, FEELINGS, THOUGHTS, IDEAS, QUESTIONS, ASSOCIATIONS

1. What struck you as funny in this piece?

2. What sentences, phrases, paragraphs, sections, stand out?

3. What did you like about the comedy?

4. What don't you like?

5. How do you feel about the characters (in general or specific ones?)

6. What was surprising or unexpected about the comedy?

7. What was puzzling?

8. How did the comedy make you feel?

9. What did the comedy make you think of?

10. What stood out the most: comedic structure, word play, plot, setting, author's style, etc.?

II. READ THROUGH YOUR FIRST ANSWERS AND JOT DOWN RESPONSES TO THESE QUESTIONS CONCERNING SECOND THOUGHTS, INTERPRETATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND CONNECTIONS.:

1. How can you relate these “funny” parts to what we have learned about comedy and humor?

2. Why do these sections stand out?

3/4. Why did you like or dislike these parts? (be specific)

5. Why did you react as you did to the character(s)? Were the characters real to you? Why or why not?

6/7. Why were certain elements puzzling or surprising?

8/9. What made you feel or think as you did about the story? (Something in the story or something from your experience or knowledge?)

10. Why did certain elements stand out?

Appendix 3 Criteria Sheet for Student Essay

___ Has achieved a thorough understanding of the text

___ Presents multiple layers of deeper levels of understanding, synthesizing all elements into a coherent, discerning interpretation.

___ Understands and accommodates complexities, subtleties, ironies, and ambiguities in the text

___ Makes responsible assertions about the text. Supports interpretations with convincing textual and extra-textual evidence.

___ Makes and supports inferences about content, events, characters, settings, theme, and style

___ Interprets the effect of figurative language, dialogue, description, symbolism, point of view

___ Shows an awareness of author's purpose and its relationship to the form of the text; may express aesthetic appreciation of some aspect of the text; may challenge author's conclusions by citing weak arguments in the text

___ Papers at this point go beyond the expectations of the response questions.

___ Shows invention or creativity

___ Presents insightful ideas

___ Uses sophisticated sentence structure & vocabulary

___ Writing shows virtual mastery of conventions