

**Perspectives on American Humor**  
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## **OVERVIEW**

Any study of American Literature would not be complete without a study of the authors who, through their writings, reveal the humorous side of the American character. American writers from Washington Irving to Woody Allen reflect an ability to amuse their audience by creating dramatic comedy, which criticize, satirize, parody, or burlesque the American scene. It is our legacy as Americans and our heritage of freedom of speech that enable us to laugh at our follies and criticize society, government and ourselves. Because a study of American literature and the American character would not be complete without the study of the lighter side of life, this unit emphasizes perspectives on American humor.

## **RATIONALE**

Peabody High School is a comprehensive public high school located in the East End neighborhood of Pittsburgh. In 1911, Peabody became the first district high school where children from East Liberty could attend high school. The school was named in honor of Dr. Benjamin H. Peabody, a local physician who had served as a surgeon in the Union Army before coming to Pittsburgh.

Over the years, Peabody has met the needs of a growing student population and underwent two major renovations, one in 1925 and other in 1975. Today, the facility houses approximately 900 students. The school serves the communities of the East End of Pittsburgh, including East Liberty, Larimer, Highland Park, Friendship, Bloomfield, Garfield, Morningside, Lawrenceville, Shadyside and Stanton Heights.

Currently, I am responsible for teaching the English 3 CAS (gifted) course. The curriculum focuses on American Literature and materials from the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Exam. The course provides enriched and specially designed instruction that continues to include an inquiry and problem solving approach to learning. One of the primary themes of the curriculum is tragedy as seen in works by Arthur Miller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Maya Angelou and others. Rarely, does the course focus on the more comedic writers of the American Literature genre.

This unit is designed to be a part of the American Literature and Communications course. As a teacher of American Literature, I have witnessed the manner in which students respond to the vast amount of tragedy within this unit of study. As the year begins there is an immense amount of interest and anticipation regarding the literature. By the end of the first semester, something unique begins to occur. Through enhanced discussion and open dialogue students begin to recognize that there is an enormous

amount of sadness, death and misery expressed thematically in this genre. Consequently, a high level of despondency towards the literature they have read begins to occur. I often applaud their efforts for recognizing this unique, and surely accurate, concept.

In contrast, this unit would examine the comedic writers of the 1900's. As the students conclude their study of the early 1920's including pieces such as, F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Arthur Miller's Death of Salesman, we will begin to explore writers who experimented with the structure of comedy. One of the primary objectives of the unit will require that students understand the structure of a tragedy and juxtapose that structure with that of a comedy. Once these two structures are observed, students will be able to draw some comparisons between these two styles of writing. An additional objective will be for students to recognize the genre of comedy. Very rarely are students able to connect to literature in such a way that it makes them laugh or even smile. My goal will be to expose students to these writings in an effort to augment the literature from the secondary English curriculum that focus on the American dream. A final objective will be encouraging the students to develop their own creative writing techniques in the area of comedy. These writing exercises will further their understanding of comedy.

It is my goal, as the instructor, to encourage students to identify key elements of humor. What is it that they find funny? How is comedy passed on from one person to another? What is it that one can decipher as humorous? As we begin to answer these questions I will share with students the following quotation:

Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it. Of course you laugh by proxy. You're really laughing at the other guys lacks, not your own. That's what makes it funny – the fact that you don't know you are laughing at yourself. Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first – because it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny. But it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your unconscious therapy.

- Langston Hughes

I found this quotation to be useful in this context for several reasons. First, the students are familiar with the works of Langston Hughes from our study of the Harlem Renaissance. As a class we examined Hughes as a poet and students responded to his words of passion with great zeal. Second, his words are rather appropriate for adolescents. His words require one to be introspective when considering comedy. It is helpful to laugh at oneself in and recognize that we are not flawless or without fault. Hughes' words help to define humor on a very critical and personal level.

Throughout the first semester students have studied several tragedies (The Crucible, Ethan Frome, The Great Gatsby and Death of a Salesman). It is still important, however to review information associated with tragedy in an effort to prepare students for the information that dissects the structure of comedy.

The definition I provide students with most often is: tragedy depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal error or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the protagonist and arousing pity and fear on the part of the audience.

To explain this definition further, we can review the following principles or general requirements for tragedy:

- **A true tragedy should evoke pity and fear on the part of the audience.** According to Aristotle, pity and fear are the natural human response to spectacles of pain and suffering--especially to the sort of suffering that can strike anybody at any time. Aristotle goes on to say that tragedy effects "the *catharsis* of these emotions"--in effect arousing pity and fear only to purge them, as when we exit a scary movie feeling relieved or exhilarated.
- **The tragic hero must be essentially admirable and good.** As Aristotle points out, the fall of a scoundrel or villain evokes applause rather than pity. Audiences cheer when the bad guy goes down. On the other hand, the downfall of an essentially good person disturbs us and stirs our compassion. As a rule, the nobler and more truly admirable a person is, the greater will be our anxiety or grief at his or her downfall.
- **In a true tragedy, the hero's demise must come as a result of some personal error or decision.** In other words, in Aristotle's view there is no such thing as an innocent *victim* of tragedy, nor can a genuinely tragic downfall ever be purely a matter of blind accident or bad luck. Instead, authentic tragedy must always be the product of some fatal choice or action, for the tragic hero must always bear at least some responsibility for his own doom.

#### Critical Terms

**Anagnorisis** (tragic recognition or insight): according to Aristotle, a moment of clairvoyant insight or understanding in the mind of the tragic hero as he suddenly comprehends the web of fate that he has entangled himself in.

**Hamartia** (tragic error): a fatal error or simple mistake on the part of the protagonist that eventually leads to the final catastrophe. A metaphor from archery, *Hamartia* literally refers to a shot that misses the bulls-eye. Hence it need not be an egregious "fatal flaw" (as the term *Hamartia* has traditionally been glossed). Instead, it can be something as basic and inescapable as a simple miscalculation or slip-up.

**Hubris** (violent transgression): the sin par excellence of the tragic or over-aspiring hero. Though it is usually translated as *pride*, *hubris* is probably better understood as a sort of insolent daring, a haughty overstepping of cultural codes or ethical boundaries.

**Nemesis** (retribution): the inevitable punishment or cosmic payback for acts of *hubris*.

**Peripeteia** (plot reversal): a pivotal or crucial action on the part of the protagonist that changes his situation from seemingly secure to vulnerable.

Prior to our first reading, I will present (with the same detail) a background information and important terms in relation to the study of comedy.

According to Aristotle (who speculates on the matter in his *Poetics*), ancient comedy originated with the *komos*, a curious and improbable spectacle in which a company of festive males apparently sang, danced, and cavorted around naked to entertain the masses.

The linking of the origins of comedy to some sort of comic ritual or festival of mirth seems both plausible and appropriate, since for most of its history--from Aristophanes to Seinfeld--comedy has involved a high-spirited celebration of human sexuality and the triumph of eros. As a rule, tragedies occur on the battlefield or in a palace's great hall; a more likely setting for comedy is the bedroom or bathroom.

On the other hand, it is not true that a film or literary work must involve sexual humor or even be funny in order to qualify as a comedy. A happy ending is all that's required. In fact, since at least as far back as Aristotle, the basic formula for comedy has had more to do with conventions and expectations of plot and character than with a requirement for lewd jokes or cartoonish pratfalls. In essence: A comedy is a story of the rise in fortune of a sympathetic central character.

## **Characters in Comedy**

### *The Comic Hero*

Of course this definition does not mean that the main character in a comedy has to be a spotless hero in the classic sense. It only means that she (or he) must display at least the minimal level of personal charm or worth of character it takes to win the audience's basic approval and support. The rise of a completely worthless person or the triumph of an utter villain is not comical. On the other hand, judging from the qualities displayed by many of literature's most popular comic heroes (e.g., Falstaff, Puck) audiences have no trouble at all pulling for a likeable rogue or fun-loving scamp.

Aristotle suggests that comic figures are mainly "average to below average" in terms of moral character, perhaps having in mind the wily servant or witty knave who was already a stock character of ancient comedy. He also suggests that only low or ignoble figures can strike us as ridiculous. However, the most ridiculous characters are often those who, although well-born, are merely pompous or self-important instead of truly noble. Similarly, the most sympathetic comic figures are frequently underdogs, young

men or women from humble or disadvantaged backgrounds who prove their real worth through various tests of character over the course of a story or play.

### *Ordinary People*

*Traditionally, comedy has to do with the concerns and exploits of ordinary people. The characters of comedy therefore tend to be plain, everyday figures (lower or middle-income husbands and wives, students and teachers, children and parents, etc.) instead of the kings, queens, heroes, and heads of state who form the dramatis personae of tragedy. Comic plots, accordingly, tend to be about the kind of problems that ordinary people are typically involved with: winning a new boyfriend (or reclaiming an old one), succeeding at a job, passing an exam, getting the money needed to pay for a medical operation, or simply coping with a bad day. Again, the true hallmark of comedy is not always laughter. More often, it is the simple satisfaction we feel when we witness deserving people succeeds.*

### Types of Comedies

Comedies can be separated into at least three categories or sub-genres--identified and briefly characterized as follows:

- **Farce** - The identifying features of farce are zaniness, slapstick humor, and hilarious improbability. The characters of farce are typically fantastic or absurd and usually far more ridiculous than those in other forms of comedy. At the same time, farcical plots are often full of wild coincidences and seemingly endless twists and complications. Elaborate comic intrigues involving deception, disguise, and mistaken identity are the rule. Examples of the genre include Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, the "Pink Panther" movies, and the films of the Marx Brothers and Three Stooges.
- **Romantic Comedy** - Perhaps the most popular of all comic forms--both on stage and on screen--is the romantic comedy. In this genre the primary distinguishing feature is a love plot in which two sympathetic and well-matched lovers are united or reconciled. In a typical romantic comedy the two lovers tend to be young, likeable, and apparently meant for each other, yet they are kept apart by some complicating circumstance (e.g., class differences, parental interference; a previous girlfriend or boyfriend) until, surmounting all obstacles, they are finally wed. A wedding-bells, fairy-tale-style happy ending is practically mandatory. Examples: *Much Ado about Nothing*, Walt Disney's *Cinderella*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Sleepless in Seattle*.
- **Satirical Comedy** - The subject of satire is human vice and folly. Its characters include con-artists, criminals, tricksters, deceivers, wheeler-dealers, two-timers, hypocrites, and fortune-seekers and the gullible dupes, knaves, goofs, and cuckolds who serve as their all-too-willing victims. Satirical comedies resemble other types of comedy in that they trace the rising fortune of a central character. However, in this case, the central character (like virtually everybody else in the play or story) is likely to be cynical, foolish, or morally corrupt. In its most extreme forms (movies like *Fargo* and *Pulp Fiction*), satirical comedy spills over into so-called Black Comedy –

where we are invited to laugh at events that are mortifying or grotesque (*Something about Mary and American Pie*).

Once this information is disseminated to students, I will reiterate the differences between comedy and tragedy. Here are five distinctions between these two genres that I will encourage students to discover through discussion. First, Aristotle declared that comedy deals with people lower than we are, tragedy with people higher. We look down on the former; we admire the latter. Second, Dante observed that a comedy begins in a bad situation and ends in a good one. A tragedy does just the opposite. Third, the modern critic Northrop Frye thought that comedy integrates a whole society at the end of the work whereas tragedy focuses on and isolates the tragic hero. Fourth, comedy has non-incremental repetition; tragedy has incremental repetition. Fifth, tragedy affirms responsibility whereas comedy ignores responsibility.

## **OBJECTIVES**

In an effort to adhere to my school district's literacy initiative, it is crucial for me, as a teacher, to create lessons and strategies that capture the interest of my students. It is my role to help students witness that literature need not be the study of literary classics, analysis of the grammatical structure of sentences and style or what they perceive as the arduous writing of structured essays. Literacy is a vital part of their lives and there are ways for them to relate to the works they study in English class. I see humor as a key connector between literacy and student response.

The primary objective of this unit will require that student familiarize themselves with the history of comedy dating back to the Greek structure. Because students are familiar with the structure of tragedy in literature, they will be able to juxtapose these two structures. Once these two structures are observed, students will be able to draw some comparisons between these two styles of writing.

An additional objective will be for students to recognize the genre of comedy by identifying elements of humor in the various selections we study. For example, when we are studying Woody Allen's essay "My Speech to the Graduates" the concept will be parody and satire. In addition to Allen's work, Erma Bombeck employs an immense amount of satire in her work as it relates to the American dream.

A final objective will be to encourage students to develop their own creative writing techniques in the area of comedy. Following each reading selection, students will be asked to draw from the humor of the piece and develop a piece of writing in an effort to emulate style, structure, plot, character or setting.

## **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

Core Readings

- “The Kugelmass Episode” Woody Allen
- “My Speech to the Graduates” Woody Allen
- The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank Erma Bombeck (selected passages)
- “The Devil and Daniel Webster” Stephen Vincent Benet
- “The Devil and Tom Walker” Washington Irving
- “I Ought to be in Pictures” Neil Simon

#### Additional Readings

- “The Late Benjamin Franklin” Mark Twain
- “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” James Thurber
- To be Young Gifted and Black Lorraine Hansbury
- “The Diary of Adam and Eve” Mark Twain
- The Best of Simple by Langston Hughes

## Lesson 1 – Introducing Humor

One of the great challenges of teaching comedy is for students to first understand what is humor and, more importantly, what makes something humorous. Before I disseminate the notes that identify key elements of humor I want to pose the following question: *What makes something funny?*

This require students to examine what makes them laugh. What is it that evokes laughter? This query is best presented as a journal writing exercise in which students are given 10 minutes at the start of class to respond to the question. It is best if students respond with a list. Because humor is such a powerful emotion, it is a good idea to understand (if that is possible), the psychological basis of humor. More specifically, what makes laughter and the humorous situation plausible.

I will ask students to share their lists and record all responses on the board. After sharing, I will ask students to choose one item from their list and write an explanation as to why that particular idea/situation was funny. In essence, they will be asked to explain the humor. This will require them to

dissect the situation and prepare a written explanation of what caused humor. This is difficult but it will force the students to examine the critical elements of humor.

Following this exercise I will begin to provide students with some fundamental concepts/terms associated with comedy, key character types in comedies and the three types of comedies (see Rationale).

For homework, students will be asked to pay close attention to when they hear people laugh. Then, ask, "Why did they laugh"? Record the incident in double entry format. The left entry should describe the incident and the right side should explain the humor as it pertains to the characteristic we reviewed in class. Keep this journal for one week or 25 entries (which ever comes first). This attention will sharpen their skills at recognizing humor and help you get a feeling for what makes humor work.

## **Lesson 2 – “The Kugelmass Episode” Woody Allen**

### *Synopsis*

*Kugelmass, a professor of humanities who is suffering from boredom, decides that he needs romance. When cautioned by his psychiatrist to express his feelings rather than act them out, Kugelmass decides he needs a magician rather than an analyst. Shortly thereafter, he receives a phone call from a magician who promises to provide excitement for him by projecting him into a novel. Kugelmass, skeptical at first, finally chooses Madame Bovary and is projected into the novel, there to act out his fantasies. This feat works successfully several times, until he takes Emma Bovary to New York for the weekend. Unable to have Emma returned to the novel, he is faced with the reality of living out a fantasy and affirms that he has learned his lesson. Three weeks later, however, he has forgotten his promise and returns to the magician to once again act out a fantasy. This time, however, he is projected into a textbook of remedial Spanish where he is pursued by the ver “tener.” Replete with irony, this story mirrors the author’s humorous reflections on the human condition in modern times.*

### *Objectives*

- Students will identify elements of humor in this story.
- Students will define irony and satire.
- Students will relate this story to the human condition in modern times.

## *Activities*

1. Review the following vocabulary with students prior to the reading of the piece. These words will become a part of the student's, already existing, vocabulary notebooks.
  - coy
  - quips
  - troglodyte
  - lackluster
  - ogled
  - shamus
2. After students have read "The Kugelmass Episode", as a class, we will analyze the story with reference to the following questions:
  - Describe the state of Kugelmass' life.
  - Explain the significance of Kugelmass being a professor of the humanities?
  - How does the episode with the psychiatrist add to the humor of the story?
  - Describe Persky's plan for Kugelmass. How does it work?
  - What realization does Kugelmass come to when he is unable to return Emma Bovary to the novel?
  - Why does he later change his mind about the difficulty of living out a fantasy?
  - Discuss the significance of being pursued at the end of the story by the Spanish verb "tener" (to have).
  - What is being satirized in this story?
3. After we discuss the various responses to the discussion questions, students will be assigned to write a monologue in which a character reflects on a specific fantasy. The assignment will require the use of vivid imagery, active verb usage and irony.

## *Evaluation*

By the conclusion of the lesson students will have

- identified the key elements of humor in a selected passage.
- write a humorous monologue.
- Write a critique of “The Kugelmass Episode” pointing out successful elements of humor

## **Lesson 3 – “My Speech to the Graduates” Woody Allen**

### *Synopsis*

In this essay, addressed to any contemporary graduating class, Woody Allen parodies the traditional graduation speech and satirizes the terminology used by people in modern times to explain their plight. He treats weighty philosophical subjects – the role of science, the passing of religious beliefs, the god of technology, the role of politics, an violence – in a humorous fashion which makes us laugh at our own seriousness of these matters.

### Objectives

- Students will define the terms parody and satire.
- Students will identify elements of satire in this essay.
- Students will analyze the structure of the speech.
- Students will evaluate the elements of humor depicted in Allen’s work.

### *Activities*

1. Allen employs some challenging vocabulary words in this piece. It is important for students to familiarize themselves with the definition of these terms prior to the reading of the essay.
  - blithely
  - benevolent
  - totalitarianism
  - wantonly

- fascism
  - exacerbate
  - rampant
2. Prior to reading this piece, we will discuss the composition of a “typical” graduation speech. I will ask students to generate a list on the board of specific characteristics as well as typical vocabulary that might be found in a graduation-type speech. I will then ask students to examine this list and determine which elements might most easily lend themselves to ridicule.
  3. After students have read “My speech to the Graduates” we will analyze specific elements of Allen’s humor using specific questions to guide the discussion.
    - What typical devices of a graduation speech are ridiculed here? How does this essay compare to ones you have heard, given the list we developed?
    - What serious aspects of society are dealt with in a humorous way?
    - What is Allen’s purpose for writing this piece? Is it merely to satirize aspects of human existence, or is he simply creating a parody of the traditional graduation speech?
    - Discuss the specific lines of this piece that strike you as exceptionally funny.
  4. In an effort to reinforce the concept of a parody, students will generate a list of topics that would be suitable for the writing of a parody. Students will then choose a topic and write a humorous parody.

### *Evaluation*

As a result of this unit, students will

- Identify elements of humor in a quiz on the Allen essay.
- Create an original parody.

### **Lesson 4 The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank Erma Bombeck**

Selections to be studied:

“Staking Out a Claim”

“Barbie and Ken”

“Ya, Got Trouble”

“Wanda Wentworth, School Bus Driver”

### *Synopsis*

Erma Bombeck was a well-known humorist who wrote for over 600 newspapers until her death in 1996. In this collection of essays, the American dream of owning a home in the suburbs is satirized. In the particular sections chosen, other aspects of the American dream – the ideas of family, the concept of physical beauty, and material possessions – are also satirized.

### Objectives

- Students will begin to appreciate the genre of humor is a variety of writings.
- Students will recognize the shortcomings of the American dream.
- Students will understand the concepts of satire.

### Activities

1. To begin this unit, I will share with students the definition of satire through modern day examples.
2. After students have read the essays, the class will engage in a discussion based on the following responses:
  - What elements of American life are satirized in Bombeck’s writing? In what ways is life satirized?
  - Which problems are ones that still cause difficulties today?
  - What, if any, are the “new frontiers” in the year 2002?
  - Discuss some of the ideals that Erma Bombeck values.
  - Are the concepts Bombeck discusses set in stone? Is anything changeable?
3. Students will be asked to discuss, comparatively, the manner in which Bombeck views the American Dream and the way Miller and Fitzgerald have illustrated this idea.

## Evaluation

As a result of this unit, students will

- articulate their own attitudes about the American dream.
- create a paper of comparison analyzing the perspectives of the American dream from different writers.

## **Lesson 5 - “The Devil and Tom Walker” Washington Irving and**

### **“The Devil and Daniel Webster” Stephen Vincent Benet**

## Synopsis

These stories have similar elements. Both make use of dialect, use the devil as the embodiment of evil, stress the importance of the New England setting, and the show the devil involved with the life of the whole community. This concept will not be new to students because of their study of The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne and The Crucible by Arthur Miller. There are both humorous selections, but each has an underlying seriousness demonstrated through the use of irony, satire and criticism.

## Objectives

- Students will understand the concepts of irony, satire and caricature.
- Students will realize the importance of dialect in each selection.
- Students will analyze and discuss the concept of decision and free choice.
- Students will relate historical events to the selections.

## Activities

Prior to reading each selection, students will be exposed to the most taxing vocabulary words. These words and their definitions will be documented in their vocabulary journals.

“The Devil and Tom Walker”

“The Devil and Daniel Webster”

meager	mastiff
miserly	anthracite
forlorn	gimlets
balked	catamount
termagant	vexed
askance	denunciation
quagmire	reviling
precarious	
hewn	
avarice	
sullen	
slough	
superfluous	
piety	
coffers	

1. Students will investigate (in groups) and report about the real Daniel Webster to draw connections to the piece and historical fact.
2. Students may list the historical references and American traditions found in “The Devil and Daniel Webster.”
3. Compare, in a discussion, the use of the devil in these selections, to the Puritan concept of the devil and to modern ideas as well.
4. Students can compare and contrast the use of dialect in each passage.
5. Students will discuss whether Tom and Jabe should have made their pact with the devil.

## Evaluation

As a result of this unit, students will

- write an essay in which they compare the two selections.
- identify three specific examples each of satire, irony and dialect from the passages on an exam.

## Lesson 6 – I Ought to Be in Pictures Neil Simon

### Synopsis

Libby Tucker, a high-spirited adolescent, travels across the country from New York City to Los Angeles under the guise that she would like to be in film. Her real desire, however, is to meet her father, Herb Tucker, who left the family sixteen years prior. Libby has always idolized her father, somewhat secretly. When she arrives in LA she finds her father to be a less than successful Hollywood writer. This is a play about uncommitted individuals who move towards commitment through the eventual understanding and realization of unique and rare relationships.

### Objectives

- Students will identify the characteristics of comedy found in Neil Simon's play.
- Students will evaluate the relationships as portrayed in this drama.
- Students will recognize the play as a statement of the contemporary human condition.
- Students will define the elements of humor, irony, sarcasm, and apply this knowledge to a discussion of the play.

### Activities

1. It is important for students to be active participants in the study of this piece. Therefore, students will be asked to read this play aloud. This will also help to share the humor of the play.
2. In small groups, students will be asked to select a particular scene to memorize and dramatize before the class.
3. Students will engage in a class discussion based on the following questions;

- Explain why Libby travels to LA to find her father. What does this trek tell you about this character?
  - Discuss Libby's life prior to leaving for the West Coast.
  - Describe Herb's existence.
  - What role does Steffy play in this drama?
  - How and why does the relationship between Herb and Libby develop?
  - Explain the reason(s) for Libby's return to New York.
  - Discuss the evolution of each character through the play.
  - Discuss the elements of humor that Simon incorporates in this piece.
4. To bring closure to the study of Simon's work, students will be asked to read an additional piece by the playwright. It will be their task to develop a presentation in which they use excerpts from these two plays to demonstrate a commonality in Simon's work.
5. If time permits, we will view the film "Ought to be in Pictures."

#### Evaluation

As a result of this unit, students will:

- prepare a dramatization of a particular scene from the play.
- Understand and express through writing a commonality that exists in Simon's work that displays the dilemmas of modern man.

#### RESOURCES

##### Works Cited/ Teacher Reading List

Allen, Woody. Side Effects. Jacksonville, IL: Perma-Bound, Hertzberg New Method, Inc. This book contains several Allen essays including "The Kugelmass Episode" and "My Speech to the Graduates". There is also an outstanding biography and Allen writes the introduction.

American Humor. Greenhaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genres. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2000.

This compilation includes several essays written by American writers during the Great Depression.

Audrieth, Anthony L. The Art of Using Humor. <http://www.squaresail.com/auh.html>

This website is devoted to the art of using humor in public speaking but contains some interesting perspectives on the philosophy of humor. The author provides an immense amount of information regarding the history of humor as well.

Aristotle. Poetics. Ed. D. W. Lucas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.

The original, Aristotle's short study of storytelling, written in the fourth century B.C., is the world's first critical book about the laws of literature. The text contains information that is useful to students when examining critical terms associated with comedy and tragedy.

Bombeck, Erma. The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank. Jacksonville, IL: Perma-Bound, Hertzberg New Method, Inc. 1968.

This timeless classic still evokes humor. Though some things have changed, many of Bombeck's witty remarks and satirical perspectives are timeless. This compilation contains "Staking Out a Claim", "Barbie and Ken", "Ya, Got Trouble" and "Wanda Wentworth, School Bus Driver".

Eastman, Max. Enjoyment of Laughter. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1936

A piece describing the psychological effects of humor as they pertain to stand-up comedians.

Epstein, Lawrence J. (Lawrence Jeffrey). The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2001.

This piece contains a series of biographical sketches about Jewish comedians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most interesting and applicable is the section detailing the rise of Woody Allen and Neil Simon.

Esar, Evan. Comic Dictionary. New York: Horizon Press. 1951

As a dictionary of terms, this text provides a vast amount of information regarding critical terms associated with comedy.

Hansbury, Lorraine. To Be Young, Gifted and Black. New York, NY: Signet Classics, New American Library, Inc., 1975.

In her autobiography, Hansbury details the story of her life as an African American women playwright. The unique style of narration provides a comic interlude for the reader.

Hughes, Langston. The Best of Simple. New York, NY: Hill and Weng, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961.

Hughes provides a comic tale of a character named Simple and his strange but oddly common sense philosophies about just about everything from feet to cops to women.

Simon, Neil. I Ought to Be in Pictures. New York: Random House, 1981

This play is a coming of age tale about a young girl and her trek from New York City to Los Angeles in search of her absentee father.

Twain, Mark. The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain. New York, NY: Bantam Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958.

A collection of essays, short stories and prose demonstrating Twain's use of satire, parody, farce and comedy.

O'Daniel, Therman B. *Langston Hughes, Black Genius: A Critical Evaluation*. For the College Language Association. New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1971, 65 ff. p 171. p. 180.

This essay provides information in an effort to better understand Hughes as a comedic writer. So often familiarity with this writer only exists in reference to his poetry. This essay examines the writer as a true comic genius.

Watkins, Melvin. *On the Read Side: A History of African American Comedy*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books. 1999.

This piece provides a detailed lineage of African American comedic performers. Profiles are provided for characters of film, stand-up and television. This piece is useful to reproduce and distribute to students.

West, Michael. Transcendental Word Play: American's Romantic Pundsters and the Search for the Language of Nature. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.

An excellent resource for teaching students about farce parody in language.

### **Works Cited/ Student Reading List**

Allen, Woody. Side Effects. Jacksonville, IL: Perma-Bound, Hertzberg New Method, Inc.

This book contains several Allen essays including "The Kugelmass Episode" and "My Speech to the Graduates". There is also an outstanding biography and Allen writes the introduction.

Bombeck, Erma. The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank. Jacksonville, IL: Perma-Bound, Hertzberg New Method, Inc. 1968.

This timeless classic still evokes humor. Though some things have changed, many of Bombeck's witty remarks and satirical perspectives are timeless. This compilation contains "Staking Out a Claim", "Barbie and Ken", "Ya, Got Trouble" and "Wanda Wentworth, School Bus Driver".

Hansbury, Lorraine. To Be Young, Gifted and Black. New York, NY: Signet Classics, New American Library, Inc., 1975.

In her autobiography, Hansbury details the story of her life as an African American women playwright. The unique style of narration provides a comic interlude for the reader.

Hughes, Langston. *The Best of Simple*. New York, NY: Hill and Weng, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961.

Hughes provides a comic tale of a character named Simple and his strange but oddly common sense philosophies about just about everything from feet to cops to women.

Simon, Neil. I Ought to Be in Pictures. New York: Random House, 1981

This play is a coming of age tale about a young girl and her trek from New York City to Los Angeles in search of her absentee father.

Twain, Mark. The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain. New York, NY: Bantam Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958.

A collection of essays, short stories and prose demonstrating Twain's use of satire, parody, farce and comedy.

## **Appendix A**

Pennsylvania Content Standards for Communications:

Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
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 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.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.
9. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations