

History 103B.006 & 103D.008: Jewish Humor and History – Fall 2006

Jarrold Tanny

About the Instructor

Instructor : Jarrod Tanny
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I encourage you either to drop by my office or to get in touch with me by phone or Email as often as you like. I am ready to help you with any problems or questions that you may have pertaining to the course. If there are other personal or academic related problems that may be affecting your performance or your attendance, do not hesitate to contact me. I am here to help you learn.

About this Course

Why are the Jews so funny? What is unique about Jewish humor? Why are so many comedians, satirical novelists, and film directors Jewish?

In this course we will seek to answer these questions by tracing the history of Jewish humor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will begin with the birth of Jewish humor in the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, where Sholem Aleichem and other writers brought schlemiels, schlimazels, and schnorrers to life through their colorful stories. We will then track the evolution and migration of Jewish humor across the European continent and on to America, where the Jewish funnyman (and woman) have transformed the cultural landscape. During the twentieth century, a “Yiddishization” of popular humor took place in both the United States and the Soviet Union. Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Jerry Seinfeld have made American humor Jewish, and Jewish humor American. In the USSR the “Jewish anecdote” was used as a means to critique the shortcomings and absurdities of the Soviet system. We will compare the place of Jewish humor in these two very different societies through novels, movies, music, and stand up comedy.

It has often been said that humor has helped sustain the Jews as a people during times of suffering. We will look at how the Jews have used laughter as both a coping mechanism and an instrument of self-defense against pogroms, forced migrations, and even the Holocaust.

Ever since Freud, many scholars have attempted to analyze the uniqueness of Jewish humor. We will also read some of these sociologists, historians, and Rabbis who have sought to explain why the Jews were “born to kvetch” and why such kvetching has had so much resonance in Russia, Europe, and America in modern times.

Course Readings

<p align="center">History 103B.006 & 103D.008: Jewish Humor and History – Fall 2006 Jarrold Tanny</p>

All assigned book are available at the University bookstore and at Ned's. The course **Reader** is available for purchase from **University Copy Service** (2425 Channing Way). Most films are on reserve at Moffitt Library in the Audio/Visual Center.

Course Requirements

Readings and participation:

Students are expected to read all the required reading each week before our class. Students are expected to actively participate in our weekly discussions. This is not a lecture course; participation will be an important component in tallying final grades.

Written assignments:

Students are required to write a few short review essays based on the weekly readings over the course of the semester (2-3 pages).

There will also be a final research paper (12-15) pages due at the end of the semester.

Leading the Discussions:

Rather than give oral presentations, each student will get the opportunity to be the discussion leader over the course of the semester.

Due dates:

Consultation with instructor about paper topic – by October 15

Term paper outline – November 8

Final term paper – December 13

Week 1 – August 30 – Introduction: defining “Jewish humor”

Week 2 – September 6 – Yiddishkeit and Jewish consciousness

Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch*

Sarah Cohen, “The Varieties of Jewish Humor” (**Reader**)

Week 3 – September 13 – Theorizing Jewish humor

Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor : What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*

Emanuel S. Goldsmith, “Sholem Aleichem’s humor of Affirmation and Survival” (**Reader**)

Christie Davies, “Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor” (**Reader**)

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Richard Raskin, “The Origins and Evolution of a Classic Jewish Joke” **(Reader)**

Week 4 – September 20 – The Shtetl

Sholem Aleichem, the Tevye Stories, in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*

Film: Fiddler on the Roof

Stephen J. Zipperstein, “Shtetls There and Here” **(Reader)**

Week 5 – September 27 – Schlemiels, Schlimazels, Fools, and Tricksters

Solomon Simon, *The Wise Men of Helm and Their Merry Tales*

Mendele Mokher Sforim, *The Travels of Benjamin III* **(Reader)**

The tales of Hersheleh Ostropoler **(Reader)**

Jay Boyer, “The Schlemiezel: Black Humor and the *Shtetl* Tradition” **(Reader)**

Week 6 – October 4 – Traveling, in Old Worlds and in New Ones

Sholem Aleichem, The Railroad Stories, in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*

Film: The Frisco Kid

Week 7 – October 11 – The Jewish Musician and Entertainer as Deviant

Aleksandr Kuprin, “Gambrinus” **(Reader)**

Film: Yidl mitn Fidl (Yiddish with English subtitles)

TV episode: The Simpsons, “Like Father, Like Clown”

Week 8 – October 18 – The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism

Film: Life is Beautiful

Paul Lewis, “Three Jews and a Blindfold: The Politics of Gallows Humor” **(Reader)**

Bernard Saper, “Since When is Jewish Humor not Anti-Semitic” **(Reader)**

Soviet Jewish Anecdotes **(Reader)**

Week 9 – October 25 – New Homes in the New World

Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint*

Alan Cooper, “The Jewish Sit-Down Comedy of Philip Roth” **(Reader)**

Film: Brighton Beach Memoirs

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Week 10 – November 1 – Working the system: America and the Soviet Union

Il’f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs*

Film: The Producers (1968 **Note** – the original film, not the remake)

TV Episode: Curb Your Enthusiasm, “The Ski Lift”

Week 11 – November 8 – The comic 2: Woody Allen’s universe

Film: Annie Hall

Film Clip: New York Stories

Gerold Mast, “Woody Allen: The Neurotic Jew as American Clown” **(Reader)**

Richard Freadman, “Love among the Stereotypes, or Why Woody’s Women Leave” **(Reader)**

Sam B. Girgus, “Philip Roth and Woody Allen: Freud and the Humor of the Repressed” **(Reader)**

Week 12 – November 15 – Becoming Jewish; Leaving Judaism

Film: The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob

Film: I Love you Alice B. Tokelas!

TV Episode: Curb Your Enthusiasm, “The End”

TV Episode: Seinfeld, “The Yada Yada”

Week 13 – November 22 – Thanksgiving – NO CLASS

Week 14 – November 29 – More Deviant Jews: Canadians & Tough Jews

Mordechai Richler, *Barney’s Version*

Michael Charney, “Mordechai Richler and Jewish-Canadian Humor” **(Reader)**

Film: The Hebrew Hammer

Week 15 – December 6 – The Jewish Comic II: Lenny Bruce and Jerry Seinfeld

Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

Sanford Pinsker, “Lenny Bruce: *Shpritzing the Goyim*/Shocking the Jews” **(Reader)**

TV Episodes: Seinfeld, “The Fatigues,” “The Andrea Doria,” “The Pen,” “The Serenity Now”

TV Episodes: Curb Your Enthusiasm, “The Special Section,” “The Baptism”