

The Institute for the Humanities

At

Montclair State University

PRESENTS

HUMANITIES IN THE SCHOOLS DAY

“The Power of Laughter: The Satirical Spirit”

A half-day conference for high school students and their teachers

Thursday, December 6, 2007

9:00 AM to 12:30 PM

What makes us laugh? Laughter seems to be a purely knee-jerk reaction, yet philosophers since Aristotle have pondered on what exactly constitutes humor, and it is well known that humor varies from one culture to the next and evolves over time. Laughing is not necessarily a purely frivolous activity either. Showing and seeing the ridiculous is the essence of satire, which Alexander Pope described as “[a] sacred Weapon! left for Truth’s defence,/ Sole Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence.” This Humanities in the Schools Day will examine the power of laughter and the satirical spirit as it has expressed itself in literature, art, and drama as well as music and political caricature.

The Program:

- **8:30 AM to 9:00 AM** Sign-in for schools and breakfast buffet, Ballrooms (lobby level)
- **9:00 AM to 9:15 AM** Opening remarks and logistical information, Ballrooms (lobby level)

- **9:30 AM to 10:20 AM**

SESSION A

“Sarcasm and the American Voice: The Development of the Smart Aleck”

Though the American satirical voice has reached its apex (or valley) in the late 20th century, it is a strain that has existed since colonial days. This session will take a brief look at the aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin, the drollness of Washington Irving, the witticisms of Mark Twain, and the black humor of Ambrose Bierce, before examining how sarcasm invades even our children’s literature of today.

Speaker: *Jim Nicosia, Department of English, Berkeley College*

“Satire and the Early Modern French Writers: To What Purpose?”

We will examine how many medieval and early modern French writers used various forms of satire and parody to provoke strong emotional responses on the part of the audience. The goal was not merely laughter for its own sake, but very often political and social change. Why did they use humorous literature to effect these changes, instead of more unequivocally subversive discourse?

Speaker: *Katherine Loysen, Department of Modern Languages, Montclair State University*

“Humor and Power: Laughing at Yourself (and others) Across Cultures

Humor is culturally embedded. It is subtle and powerful, nuanced and, sometimes, ridiculous. We will use film clips from a variety of cultures to talk about the power of humor, particularly in situations of powerlessness and oppression.

Speaker: *Rhoda Halperin, Department of Anthropology, Montclair State University*

“The More You Learn, the More You Laugh”

Laughing is fun, but it can also be connected to our learning. We don’t laugh at a joke unless we understand the punchline—after all, humor is not just cultural, but intellectual on some level. And the smarter the joke, the harder we laugh when we’re in the know. Why are really intelligent jokes funny, and how does humor help build on our knowledge? This session looks at how and why comedy can be intelligent and intelligence can be comical. (And you’ll learn some philosophy along the way!)

Speaker: *Dorothy Rogers, Department of Philosophy & Religion, Montclair State University*

- **10:30 AM — 11:20 AM**

SESSION B

“Laughing to Keep from Crying: The Function of Humor in Latin American and Caribbean Cultures”

From the horror of the conquest of Latin America and the Caribbean on, the peoples of the region have used humor, often biting, ironic humor, as a defense mechanism, a kind of self-protecting buffer. Strong humor threads its way through five hundred years of Latin American culture, both high and low. It is contained within the jokes Cubans tell each other to get through the prolonged economic crisis with their spirits intact, it can be found in the literary texts of the likes of Franco-Argentine Julio Cortázar and the absurdist narratives of Uruguayn Mario Benedetti. This talk will highlight the uses of humor across the spectrum of Latin American and Caribbean culture.

Speaker: *Pamela M. Smorkaloff, Department of Spanish and Latin American/Latino Studies, Montclair State University*

Modest Proposals: Jonathan Swift, the Onion, Jon Stewart and Political Satire

There was no more innovative a policy proposal to address the famine in Ireland than Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal” which suggested eating children as a way of relieving famine. Similarly innovative was when the Onion reported that the White House was considering “revoking [Iran’s] membership in the axis of evil” as a means of discouraging Iran from developing its

nuclear program. Innovative though they may be, no one realistically expected either policy to be considered. So why put so much effort into the reports? Political satire aims to go beyond simple humor but also to present the absurd as real to highlight how absurd the real is. What is particularly interesting about recent political satire in the United States is its presentation as 'news.' While this is not new, per se, what is new is that regular satirical venues (the Daily Show) can serve as a source (sometimes a primary one) of information and politicization for many people.

Speaker: *Anthony Spanakos, Department of Political Science, Montclair State University*

“Laughing with Cervantes: Humor and Irony in *Don Quixote*”

Written more than 400 years ago, Cervantes’s masterpiece, *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), continues to delight its readers with its funny, poignant, and complex view of the human condition. This talk examines various examples of the novel’s abundance of humor and irony derived from slapstick-like scenarios, contrasts between illusion and reality, picaresque interludes, and interactions between Don Quixote and his squire, Sancho.

Speaker: *Linda Gould Levine, Department of Spanish & Italian, Montclair State University*

“One Must Have a Heart of Stone to Read the *Death of Little Nell* without Laughing: The Comedy of Cruelty”

Looking at examples from both literature and life, we will ask how, when, and why some people find comedy in the unhappiness, pain, or death of others.

Speaker: *Jonathan Greenberg, Department of English, Montclair State University*

● 11:30 AM —12:20 PM

SESSION C

"Limericks and Nonsense Poetry"

Limericks and nonsense poetry have been called silly, dumb, or deranged art forms, sometimes with good reason. They can also be brilliant, radical, and gloriously profane. We'll explore the history of both of these forms by looking at two Victorian writers, Edward Lear (the self-described "poet laureate of nonsense") and Lewis Carroll (author of *Alice in Wonderland*).

Speaker: *Lee Behlman, Department of English, Montclair State University*

“Musical Comedies: The Humor of Broadway Musical Theatre”

This workshop explores the various forms of comedy found in Broadway musicals, including slapstick, farce, satire, and visual sight gags. It also explores the role of music and lyrics in contributing to the humor and comic elements of musical theatre.

Speaker: *Eric Diamond, Department of Theater and Dance, Montclair State University*

“Aristophanic Humor in Contemporary American Society”

At the dramatic festivals of fifth-century Athens, large crowds gathered not just to hear the immortal words of the great tragedians but also to witness the spectacles of Aristophanes and the other comic poets. Comedy in Athens was fiercely satirical, highly attuned to the social, political, and cultural events of the moment. The Athenians believed that it provided an democratic opportunity for the city to examine the concerns of its citizenship and to expose the foibles of its most prominent and influential members. This session will explore whether or not American society values political and social satire as vital to the democratic process in our country.

Speaker: *Mary English, Department of Classics & General Humanities, Montclair State University*

“Odd Relationship: Laughter and Horror”

Laughter and horror seem to be on opposite sides of an emotional continuum, yet are often closely related: think of laughing at a funeral for example. In this lecture we will look at the strange connection between laughter and horror in real life as well as on film.

Speaker: *Karl Nussbaum, Department of Art & Design, Montclair State University*

Registration and Contact Information: (Registration Deadline, Monday, Nov. 26th)

Pre-registration is required for all of our programs. **After we receive your request we will send you an e-mail confirmation, along with directions to the campus and parking.**

The registration fee for this program is **\$13.00** per student or teacher.* Registrations will be accepted on a first come, first served basis. Pre-register your school group by returning the enclosed form. Mail your check and registration form to **Montclair State University, Institute for the Humanities, Room 105 Dickson Hall, Montclair, NJ 07043**, no later than **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26th**. Make checks payable to: *Institute for the Humanities/MSU*. Registrations may be faxed to our office (973-655-7207) and check mailed under separate cover. Our office should receive all registration materials by the deadline date.

***The Institute for the Humanities is an approved provider of the State mandated professional development hours. Teachers who would like to receive (3) three hours of credit for this program, add \$10.00 to the registration fee (see form).**

We do not bill schools for payment. **PLEASE SEND A COPY OF THE REGISTRATION FORM TO US AND A COPY TO YOUR SCHOOL'S BUSINESS OFFICE TO ACT AS AN INVOICE.**

For program updates and information about upcoming programs, visit our web site:

<http://chss2.montclair.edu/instituteforthehumanities>.

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