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JSP/REL 239; meets with ETS 230-2
Office Hour: Thursdays, 2-3 p.m.

Jewish Humor and Satire (*Ethnic Literary Traditions*)

An exploration into Jewish humor and satire. What are its characteristics? What does it mean? How does it work? What does it say about Jewish identity? We begin with Freudian theory and then focus on Yiddish satire and American humor. Class sessions will analyze literary works (e.g., by S. Y. Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem, Leo Rosten, and Philip Roth), American Jewish stand-up comedy routines (e.g., by Lennie Bruce and Allan Sherman), early Yiddish movies (e.g., *Yidl mitn fidl*) and American films (e.g., by the Marx Brothers, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen). There will be weekly short writing assignments, to be posted on Blackboard and submitted in hard copy. Bring your own Jewish film clips and jokes to class. *No prerequisites—no prior knowledge of Jewish culture is assumed.*

- Jan. 17th Introduction: Humor and Satire
What makes something funny? Is Jewish humor different?
Formalistic vs. thematic approaches.
*“The Wise Men of Chelm” from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*
In class: screening of documentary, *When Jews Were Funny* (Dir. Alan Zweig, 2013)
- Jan. 19th “Jewish sensibility” and Jewish ethnic stereotypes.
Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, Introduction
In class: screening of documentary, *When Jews Were Funny* (Dir. Alan Zweig, 2013)
- Jan. 24th Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*,
chapter 2, “The Technique of Jokes,” sections 1-6
Watch for Freud’s rewriting of the “dream work” in different forms of
condensation and displacement.
*Discussion Forum Question #1: Refer to one aspect of Freud’s theory of humor (a
“technique” of jokes) and analyze how a Jewish joke illustrates it. Read other students’
prior posts and avoid repeating their analyses and examples. Post by 10 a.m. on the day of class.*
- Jan. 26th Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*,
chapter 2, “The Technique of Jokes,” sections 7-12
Humor and ethnicity: In class screening of scenes from the Marx
Brothers, the bed showroom in *The Big Store* (1941) and others.

- Jan. 31st Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, chapter 3, "The Purposes of Jokes"
Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 9.
Analyze one of Telushkin's Jewish jokes from a Freudian perspective.
- Feb. 2nd Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, chapter 4, "The Mechanism of Pleasure"
Harpo's swordfight against Kurt in *A Night in Casablanca* (1946).
[available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_pDsPu_r6c]
- Feb. 7th Satire of Jews, Money, and Power
S. Y. Abramovitsh, "The Little Man," in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
Analyze a humorous moment in Abramovitsh's satire from a Freudian perspective
- Feb. 9th Jews and Money. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 3
**"Groucho and Chico Make a Deal," from the Marx Brothers, *A Night at the Opera* (1935), from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*
Sholem Aleichem, "A Business with a Greenhorn," from the *Monologues*, in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
- Feb. 14th Jews and Family. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 1
Sholem Aleichem, "Hodel," from *Tevye the Dairyman*, in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
In class: Film clips from the Yiddish film *Tevye* (1939)
and from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971)
Analyze Sholem Aleichem's humor in his use of language. How does it work? What does it mean? How would Freud interpret it?
- Feb. 16th Sholem Aleichem, "Chava," from *Tevye the Dairyman*, in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
- Feb. 21st Sholem Aleichem, from the *Monologues*: "Holiday Dainties" and "Advice," in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
How does the use of first-person narrative play a role in Sholem Aleichem's humor?
In class: Film clips from *Yidl mitn fidl* (Poland, 1936)
- Feb. 23rd I. L. Peretz, "The Shtrayml," in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
Humorous clip in Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969) excerpt when Virgil Starkwell agrees to be inoculated with an experimental vaccine

- Feb. 28th Jews and Rabbis. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 7
I. L. Peretz, “Kabbalists” and “If Not Higher,” in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
What do jokes about rabbis and religion express about Jews and Jewish life?
- Mar. 2nd I. L. Peretz, from the Hasidic Stories: “The Rebbe’s Pipe”
in *Classic Yiddish Stories*
*Lennie Bruce, “God Talk”
In class: selections from Lennie Bruce’s Carnegie Hall Concert
- Mar. 7th *S. Y. Abramovitsh, “The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third”
(digitized file on Blackboard), chapters 1-8
What is Abramovitsh’s most important method of social satire? Analyze one passage, considering also what Freud calls the “Purpose” of humor.
- Mar. 9th Abramovitsh, “The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third,” continued
(digitized file on Blackboard), chapters 9-14
- [SPRING BREAK: Don’t forget to read *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*]
- Mar. 21st Jews, Immigration, and Yiddish
Leo Rosten, *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* , pp. 3-75
Analyze Rosten’s use of linguistic humor. What is funny?
- Mar. 23rd Leo Rosten, *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* (continued).
pp. 76-144.
- Mar. 28th *Osip Dymov, “Bronx Express,” from *God, Man, and Devil* (digitized file)
What is the object of Dymov’s harshest satire? Give examples and explore technique.
- Mar. 30th Jews and Assimilation. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 6
*Osip Dymov, “Bronx Express,” continued
Scenes from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977)
- April 4th Jews, Immigration, and Yiddish (continued).
*Grace Paley, “Goodbye and Good Luck” (digitized file on Blackboard)
How does Paley develop the oral style of Sholem Aleichem? Why is it funny?
Scenes from Mel Brooks, *The Producers* (1968), *Blazing Saddles* (1974)
- April 6th Jews, Logic, and the Absurd. Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 2
*Lennie Bruce, “God Talk”

In class: selections from Lennie Bruce's Carnegie Hall Concert

- April 11th NO CLASS—First Day of Passover
Read *Simcha Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21st Century* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade, 2008), chapter 5.
- April 13th Jews and Self-Mockery. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 4
Larry David, selections from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*:
“Ski Lift” (season 5, ep. 8); “Palestinian Chicken” (season 8, ep. 3)
*Woody Allen, “The Scrolls” and “Hassidic Tales” (digitized file)
Film clips from Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977)
- Apr. 18-20th Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*
Show with examples how Roth combines humor and social satire.
Scene from *New York Stories* (1989):
Woody Allen's Omniscient Mother Segment in “Oedipus Wrecks”
*Dan Greenburg, “How to Be a Jewish Mother”
- Apr. 25-27th Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, continued
Excerpts from television, such as *The Simpsons*, Season 15, Episode 6,
“Today I am a Clown,” written by Joel H. Cohen (Dec. 7, 2003)
Clips screened by students from suitable television sources, such as
Saturday Night Live, *Seinfeld*, *South Park* (?), *Family Guy* (?), etc.
- May 2nd Jews and Anti-Semitism. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, chapter 5.
Sacha Baron Cohen, *Borat* (2006)
How does Cohen turn anti-Semitic comments into humor?
Compare Sarah Silverman, “Jesus is Magic”
What's so funny about that? Conclusion

Required Texts (in order of appearance):

- Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. New York: William Morrow, 1992.
- Classic Yiddish Stories of S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz*. Ed. Ken Frieden. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004.
- Leonard Q. Ross [Leo Rosten], *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* New York: Harvest Harcourt, 1965.

Roth, Philip. *Portnoy's Complaint*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

***Digitized files Available on Blackboard:**

- *"Groucho and Chico Make a Deal," from the Marx Brothers, *A Night at the Opera* (1935); and *Lennie Bruce, "God Talk," both from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
- *S. Y. Abramovitsh, "The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third"
- *Osip Dymov, "Bronx Express," from *God, Man, and Devil*
- *Grace Paley, "Goodbye and Good Luck," from *The Collected Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
- *Lennie Bruce, "God Talk," from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*
- *Simcha Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21st Century* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade, 2008), chapter 5.
- *Woody Allen, "The Scrolls" and "Hassidic Tales," from *Without Feathers* (New York: Ballantine, 1983), and *Getting Even* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
- *Dan Greenburg, "How to Be a Jewish Mother," from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*.
- * **Please print out these digitized files from Blackboard and bring them to class.**

Goals: While learning about Jewish literature and ethnic literary traditions, students should develop skills such as close reading and rhetorical analysis, critical thinking, scholarly writing, and public speaking.

Papers will be 300-word analyses, posted on Blackboard by 10 a.m., focusing on the techniques of Jewish humor, emphasizing rhetorical qualities and language. The topics are listed on the syllabus for every Tuesday class; give examples from our readings with page references. *Do not repeat other students' analyses.*

Requirements and Grading: At least 12 one-page (no more than 300-word) papers (60% of grade); careful preparation of readings, regular attendance, and class participation (30% of grade); oral presentation (10% of grade).

Oral Presentation: Each student should choose a text or film to present in class. You may give a PowerPoint presentation about an author; raise questions for discussion; screen film clips illustrating Jewish humor and satire.

Extra Credit: There will be opportunities for you to earn extra credit by attending pertinent lectures on Jewish Studies outside of class. After you go to an event of this kind, submit a one-paragraph synopsis to receive credit.

Plagiarism: Always acknowledge your sources, because plagiarism is a serious offense. Don't even think of taking anything off the web without using quotation marks. It's unethical, as easy for professors to catch as it is for students to steal, and the consequence is a failing grade. In other words:

"The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort." Further information at <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Attendance: Your final grade will be adversely affected if you miss more than two classes. Save these permissible absences for when you really need them!

Cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices may not be used in class unless approved by Ken Frieden or Mitchell Moreau. If a student uses an electronic device in class, that student will be marked absent, because in this class we study texts. "Text is not a verb!"

FAITH TRADITION OBSERVANCES

Syracuse University does not set aside days for any religious holiday. Students must notify instructors by the end of the second week of classes for regular session classes and by the submission deadline for flexibly formatted classes when they will be observing their religious holiday. Students will have access to an online notification form through MySlice for two weeks, beginning on the first day of class. SU's religious observances policy, found at

http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm, recognizes the diversity of faiths represented in the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their tradition. Under the policy, students should have an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors no later than the end of the second week of classes. Student deadlines are posted in MySlice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.

DISABILITY SYLLABUS STATEMENT

It is our mutual obligation among faculty and staff to ensure that students with disabilities are aware of the services provided by the University and how to access those services.

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>, located at 804 University Avenue, room 309, or call 315-443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue "Accommodation Authorization Letters" to students as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.