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Toward a humor-enhanced classroom

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Toward a humor-enhanced classroom

by

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Dedicated to:

My parents, Ralph and Maureen Bartolotta

and

Barbara Ann (Ryan) Hoodmaker

(December 20, 1957 – April 16 2008)

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Introduction

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rims at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that. (Hamlet, V.i.171-80)

In one of the most important scenes in the play, Hamlet begins his meditation about the fragility and ephemeral nature of human life while he examines the skull of this beloved jester of his father's royal court. Hamlet remembers Yorick's jolliness in stark contrast to the remains that he has in front of him. In death, and more importantly, in decomposition, Yorick gives Hamlet a new perspective for considering his own life. Hamlet begins to realize that great men like Alexander and Caesar meet the same fate as Yorick; their bodies decompose in the ground and they become the clay of the earth.

I open with this quote because I think the fact that Hamlet looks at the skull of the court jester is extremely important. Hamlet remembers the jests and pleasant times he experienced with Yorick, and even though Yorick has been dead for some twenty-three years, Hamlet becomes caught up in nostalgia. While Yorick may not have had the legacy of Caesar or Alexander the Great, his effect on Hamlet is enormous. Hamlet, in looking at Yorick, in looking at the lips he kissed, the skull that once held the mind of the man who often made his childhood carefree and pleasant, begins to reflect not on Yorick's memorable jests, but his own mortality. As dark as this scene could otherwise be, it takes

on a new perspective; the skull that provided Hamlet with comedy in his boyhood is juxtaposed against the tragedy of his current situation.

Even though the scene itself is far from comic, it would not have the same type of resonance for either Hamlet or the audience had Yorick's skull not been present. It is in remembering the comic that Hamlet is compelled to think anew of his situation; and in thinking anew of it, he thinks beyond himself and considers how his life is no different from the lives of the great, the powerful, the comic, and ultimately, the dead. The presence of the comic in Hamlet's thinking compels him to make a decision he has dreaded since the beginning of the play.

Hamlet's elegy for Yorick and the fresh perspective it offer him connects with my purpose in writing this thesis. I hold that the comic, humor, and wit can resonate beyond a casual, ephemeral level; and, when examined in different contexts, they offer new opportunities for understanding and contemplation about the world. I go further to hold that the composition classroom is an appropriate place for this understanding to be developed; and, in turn, comic sensibility is a significant aid to composition.

For my own part, I can remember when particularly well-executed humor raised my awareness of my own learning. For example, I remember Dr. Long's ethics course in which he asked a sleepy class whether it was "morally wrong to try to run over a neighbor's cat, take it home, cook it and then eat it." While the three quarters of the class that had come alert because of this gruesome example tried to process what they just heard, Dr. Long waited a beat, and then said, "I hope to God and for the sake of my cat that none of you ever move next door to me." Having been alert the whole time and observing the reaction of the class and the subtly sarcastic tone in Dr. Long's speech, I

began to laugh hysterically. Although this happened three years ago, I can recall that the discussion of the day was about Book VII of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, specifically regarding the subject of moral weakness and brutishness. I certainly think that the pleasure I received in laughing about that situation has led to me remembering that lesson. Indeed, in recalling the experience, I realized now that humor can also be used to engage my students in composition courses.

This thesis attempts to establish a place where humor and critical thinking can not only coexist, but prosper reciprocally for the benefit of both individual students and the greater concerns of democracy. The primary concern of the thesis is to examine to what extent humor may enhance a first-year composition classroom. In response to that question, I have already suggested a space where humor and critical thinking come into contact. Yet to utilize this space, I will have to examine how humor comes into praxis through rhetoric. Through an understanding of some rhetorical dimensions of humor, I believe I can establish a sound praxis through which humor, specifically satire, can be integrated into a typical college first-year composition classroom. In brief, this thesis argues that we can move through laughter (and in some cases, tears) to examine and perhaps uncover something more telling about our teaching, our cultures, and, our own apparatus for understanding the world around us. For me, there is no more natural place for this examination to occur in the university than the composition classroom.

Is Your Culture Running? Then You Better Catch It!

Years after my experience with Dr. Long, I looked for a way to bring humor into my own classroom, my classroom being composition, not philosophy. I realized that my

task would be especially challenging. Humor does not seem to operate in a fashion that is particularly conducive to the institutional and pedagogical requirements of a composition classroom. Humor may appear to be too negative, too rooted in the non-serious to be suitable in a composition classroom. At the same time, humor can go places under the veil of being non-serious that I may otherwise shy away from as an instructor. Yet even in popular culture, the non-serious is being taken far more seriously, sometimes to the point where the lines which we use to identify seriousness and non-seriousness are dissolving. Take, for instance, the popularity of Comedy Central's The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and The Colbert Report. These television programs dole out regular criticism of the personalities and apparatus of the governing power structures of the United States under the guise of humor.

The emergence of satirical programs such as The Daily Show have piqued the interest of communications, cultural studies and media studies with respects to the overall effect the show has on its audience (McKain 421; Baym 260). Respected newscaster Bill Moyers has gone so far as to describe the show as, "A compendium of news, interviews and features, held up to a fractured mirror to reveal a greater truth." He adds, "you simply can't understand American politics in the new millennium without The Daily Show." While interviewing host Jon Stewart, Moyers confesses, "I do not know whether you are practicing an old form of parody and satire...or a new form of journalism" ("Now"). The show has received two Peabody awards, including one in 2004 with a citation reading, "Mr. Stewart, however, repeatedly reminds those viewers that his program is "fake news." Nevertheless, the program applies its satirical, sometimes caustic perspective on the issues of the day, on those engaged with the issues, and on the everyday experiences

that will be affected by them.” Indeed, the show, and by extension, other satirical media, are being embraced by some areas of the broadcasting community as a complement to traditional broadcast news. (Peabody)

While some embrace the program, others question how audiences extend credibility to satirical programs as sources of information rather than critical complements to traditional media. While covering the 2004 Democratic National Convention, news veteran Ted Koppel charged that “A lot of television viewers—more, quite frankly, than I am comfortable with—get their news from the Comedy Channel on a program called The Daily Show.” Koppel addressed Stewart directly in his charge, “They actually think they’re coming closer to the truth with your show” (de Moraes). The charge Koppel makes is that the line between journalism and entertainment has become so skewed that “a lot of television viewers” are granting credibility to a television program that at one point followed a program in which irreverent, talking puppets make prank phone calls.

I will offer a more careful consideration of the ways in which humor and satire operate in media later in this thesis. For now, the most important idea that needs to be established is that the distance between humor and seriousness is often closer than we imagine. We can see the roles taken in the debate over the comic in media like *The Daily Show* as an extension of what we may see in a debate over the comic in pedagogy. On one hand, one possible response is teachers who take Moyers’ perspective and embrace satire as a new mode of inquiry and journalism because humor can approach otherwise difficult topics. On the other hand, there may be teachers who side with Koppel fearing that the credibility of journalism will erode if it is taken less seriously because of humor.

The environment that has been set up through this conflict offers us a new opportunity to reexamine our understanding of how the comic and the serious offer unique perspectives for inquiry.

Humor in the Composition Classroom (No Joke)

For me, getting students engaged in contemporary culture is a way of getting them started as critical citizens at the same time they begin to come to terms with their adult identities. James Berlin notes how students today are constantly in contact with a culture that reinforces desires rather than reinforces an emphasis on critical citizenship. Berlin notes, “democracy will rise or fall on our ability to offer a critical response to...daily experiences” (57). Correspondingly, I make my classroom more than a space where papers are turned in and graded: my goal has been to move my students to become critics of their daily surroundings, not merely consumers. However, much scholarship in cultural-critical pedagogy neglects the comic as cultural products. This thesis documents my approach to this goal through the appeal to humor.

In the few instances in which humor is addressed in composition textbooks, it is typically framed as a consideration for delivery. In the fourth edition of Everything’s An Argument, humor is used as a means of constructing a pathetic appeal. The first sentence that introduces humor in the fourth edition is, “Humor has always played an important role in argument, sometimes as the sugar that makes the medicine go down” (56). To extend the Mary Poppins reference, the medicine is apparently the argument. The authors later to say “Humor also makes otherwise sober people suspend their judgment and even

their prejudices, perhaps because the surprise or naughtiness of wit are combusive: they provoke laughter or smiles, not reflection” (56). The idea that humor can be seen to suspend reflection is clearly identified by the authors, yet they do not connect humor to analytical understanding in the chapter. They neglect to move students to consider the reflective elements of their laughter. The next time humor appears in the text is in the third part of the book, “Style and Presentation in Arguments,” a section exclusively interested in the delivery mechanisms of humor.

I will assume that the reason humor is not covered as a form of analytical inquiry is because the authors had no vocabulary for getting students to understand the complexity of humor. I am looking for a way to connect humor to analysis. Of course, the case for an analytical approach to humor in the composition classroom is not an easy case to make. Part of the difficulty of bringing humor into composition classrooms is in determining which type of humor to consider. The physical-oriented slapstick variety of humor often found in the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin may be worthy of analysis, but that analysis may be farfetched in a composition classroom. The type of humor that I think most appropriately belongs in a composition classroom is satire. Northrop Frye offers an astute definition of satire in his Anatomy of Criticism: “Satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic: the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy” (224). Satire is intimately connected to culture and society, and, as Frye argues, offsets the world as we may know it with the fantastic and the absurd.

The operating work of satire as Frye describes is compatible with James Berlin’s socio-epistemic approach to composition pedagogy. In fact, Berlin sees the possibilities

of satire's use in the composition classroom through Jonathan Swift's satirical masterpiece Modest Proposal. Berlin writes,

While this essay rigorously employs the strategies and formal patters of Ciceronian rhetoric, it exposes the cruel ideological purposes this rational genre can be made to serve. Students must be encouraged to explore the complicated ways in which literary and rhetorical forms and genres are involved in ideological conflicts. (117)

As Berlin identifies how ideological conflicts can be explored in Swift, we can see how modern media like *The Daily Show*, are likewise engaged in a similar conflict: the genre of conventional journalism and the literary form of satire and how they bring out different ideological truths in contemporary discourse. The discussion of ideological conflicts in media is not the only point of contact that students will have in exploring and debating humor, but it is one of the more compelling. As I will explain later, there are many opportunities through which students may engage humor discursively in the composition classroom. Not only can students operate discursively in analyzing humor, but they have an opportunity to act on their knowledge by producing their own humorous works.

On the Path Toward Developing a Humor Praxis

I am alert to the unusual nature of this project. I recognize that the task I am setting out for myself is ambitious, unconventional and highly eclectic. My purpose is to make connections among humor, critical thinking, pedagogy and culture as clear and precise as possible. The organization of Chapters One and Two moves the discussion from theories of humor analysis and rhetorical praxis, to humor and philosophical hermeneutics in praxis, and finally to the praxis of a composition pedagogy informed by

the rhetorical and hermeneutical dimensions humor. In the rest of this introduction, I will outline how the rest of this thesis is organized to forecast these developments.

The next chapter will begin with the juxtaposition of humor with the serious. I intend to investigate the mechanisms of humor so I can better understand how humor operates on a basic level. Examining the ways in which thinkers have considered humor, I can identify a vocabulary that will let me develop a humor-enhanced pedagogy. I will move into an exploration of classical interpretations of humor, especially through the writings of Cicero and Quintilian. The ancients stop short of creating a praxis through which humor may be used as a critical tool. They do, however, offer a unique understanding of the rhetorical situation of humor, called the *occasio vero* which helps me begin to make some assumptions that inform my development of praxis.

The chapter takes the perspective of the ancients into an examination of modern criticism of humor. The perspective of the ancients helps me identify some points that warrant further development, particularly pertaining to the social phenomena of humor and how it interacts with the individual's facilities in discriminating humor. Consequently, the chapter continues to explore the connection between humor and individual understanding with an examination of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In this examination, I will argue that Gadamer's inquiry into the nature of understanding is central to his important writings on philosophical hermeneutics. In a sense, the chapter will serve a threefold purpose; it will help me define humor and classify groups of related concepts together so I can establish a vocabulary through which I can bring a discussion of humor into a hermeneutical framework; and, at the same time, I hope to compose a

sound praxis for framing humor as a means students can use in the process of engaging humorous texts.

The second chapter operates as my connection between using philosophical hermeneutics to address humor and pedagogy. I begin by modeling what a humor-enhanced approach to composition will look like. Further, I examine some of the possibilities of this type of inquiry. In essence, my theory will cede at this point to practical application. I will examine contemporary examples of satire, through a sketch from Dave Chappelle's variety program, Chappelle's Show. This inquiry will be brief, as it is not meant to be an exhaustive rhetorical analysis of the ways in which these examples engage satire. At the same time, the brief analysis prepares us for the rest of the chapter by exploring ways in which satire may be moved into composition classroom praxis.

The chapter moves in the next section to cover the most important extension of my praxis: its application in a first-year composition classroom. I give a sense of what my humor-enhanced classroom looks like. This classroom stands on the shoulders of the theoretical concepts I identify in Chapter One. Each day's activities are directly connected to the vocabulary I developed earlier. In this sense, humor is brought into a theoretical contact zone of student interaction through the model classroom I construct, a model complete with classroom personalities and possible issues students may encounter in this classroom.

In the final chapter, I will examine some ideas that may warrant further inquiry. These ideas are related to the pedagogical the philosophical discussions that underwrite my humor praxis. The chapter implies a challenge for further research that takes this

inquiry into critical and writing across the curriculum pedagogy, play theory, the ethics of rhetorical criticism, and literary studies.

My goal throughout the thesis is to introduce humor and satire as an educational praxis with particular promise for composition studies. Humor is taken seriously throughout this thesis as a mode of understanding. My continuing mantra in this inquiry is that humor is only as telling as we allow it to be, and how much we allow it to be an effective form of inquiry is directly related to how seriously we engage in our exploration of its potentially reflective mechanisms. Humor is, and always has been, a powerful tool for awakening critical awareness. It can do so in the composition classroom as well.

I. Providing a theoretical vocabulary for the humor-enhanced classroom

For me, the most effective way to consider humor in connection to hermeneutics and then to college composition is to first investigate the history of humor studies from a rhetorical and philosophical perspective. When we examine the history of humor, particularly as it pertains to rhetoric, we will notice that its definition is necessarily complicated and changes through time. However, the rhetorical approach to humor by itself will not yield an analytical praxis of humor that can be taken into a classroom. For the purposes of this thesis, philosophy complements rhetorical theory and fills out the effort to create a comprehensive theoretical framework. Consequently, this chapter will begin by investigating the classical considerations of humor in the rhetorical tradition. The chapter will then move into a consideration of how the rhetoric of humor coincides with the philosophic tradition and the study of humor. Contemporary and classical philosophy, and in particular the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, can augment the rhetorical approach to humor with analytical concepts that are transferable to the composition classroom.

Using this combination of rhetorical and philosophical theory, I identify three concepts that underwrite my approach to the humor-enhanced classroom. These concepts are as follows:

1. Humor is intimately dependent upon the conditions surrounding the humor of our remark; i.e., the *occasio vero* will determine if the joke will succeed or fail.
2. Humor is a part of social phenomena and the individual's facility for discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social group(s).

3. The use of philosophical hermeneutics provides a workable practice for interrogating not only the topics that humor addresses but also the procedures by which humor itself operates.

The rest of this chapter works to discover and explicate these guiding concepts.

Ultimately, these concepts will help me to develop an approach to humor that will facilitate the goals of my humor-enhanced pedagogy.

No Dinner Until You Clean Your Plato

Exploring the history of humor not only helps establish a praxis for humor and composition pedagogy for my thesis, but it also situates the ancient conception of humor in context. Humor and wit were common in the oratory of classical Greece and Rome. Quintilian recognizes that Demosthenes used jokes in his oratory but generally failed in using them effectively (Bk. XI, 65). Further evidence suggests that humor was not only used in oratory, but it was collected and anthologized in volumes that included examples of humor from all over the ancient world. In Cicero's De Oratore, Caesar mentions Greek books called On Jests, which collected some of the "laughable and witty sayings of the Greeks, Sicilians, Rhodians, Byzantines and Atticans" (144). Quintilian also comments that Cicero had remarkable prowess with humor (Bk. XI 65). Although an obvious appreciation of humor exists for the Romans, Aristotle offers the earliest concentrated theoretical scholarship we have on humor.

Although Aristotle is not exhaustive in his exploration of the subject, he briefly discusses humor as wit in Book IV of his Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle generally observes wit as a median between buffoonery (i.e., trying to be funny "at any costs") and

boorishness (the quality of those who “cannot say anything funny”). However, he warns his reader that wit can obscure one’s ability to understand the true character of a person. He states, “One need not go too far afield to find something to laugh about, and since most people enjoy fun and joking more than they should, even buffoons often pass as cultivated and are called witty” (107). Aristotle recognizes that wit may not reflect the true character of the orator but still influence how an audience judges the observable persona of that orator. The distinction will be important later in this section, but it is perhaps more important to first offer a context for how Aristotle is using the word “wit”.

When Aristotle discusses wit, he uses the term *eutrapelos*. The word does not only reference a person’s ability to make others laugh; *eutrapelos*—witty—means literally “turning well.” The metaphor is here explained by reference to *eutropos*, “versatile,” a word used apparently to describe bodily nimbleness (107). For Aristotle, wit is a display of the nimbleness of the mind exhibited by a man who is able to turn good metaphors, similes and puns in his speaking style. While this definition is not necessarily wit and humor in the way that a 21st century audience might identify it, and while exhibitions of these traits did not necessarily lead to laughter from the audience, observing the versatility of a “witty” speaker still would have been an exciting sight to behold in ancient Greece. The difference in the definition of wit or humor between ancient and modern theorists is not so vast that it compels me to dismiss one word or the other. Rather, I believe the differences we observe in the definitions of ancient wit and modern humor helps theorists today come to a richer understanding of how the rhetorical appeal of humor and wit is related to particular places in time.

Indeed, understanding of the context of “wit” in Aristotle’s time would explain why, in his Rhetoric, Aristotle does not address “humor” in style so much as “wit” in style. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle presents different practices of wit and claims that these practices are good stylistic choices for an orator to use because they share new information in a way that would bring pleasure to the audience. Implicit in this exploration of style is an understanding that audiences can and should be swayed through the pleasure experienced in the orator’s style (395-7). For Aristotle, the use of wit in speaking is an appeal to pleasure and thus an appeal to emotions.

Through the two works cited that address the theoretical concerns related to wit (the Rhetoric and the Nicomachean Ethics), Aristotle appears to give different directions to orators and audiences. Orators should use wit as a means of delivering a message in a way that will be pleasurable to the audience and audiences should be discriminating and not make immediate judgments regarding an orator just because he or she displays a versatile wit. However, Aristotle’s charges come without an analytical framework with which orators or audiences can begin to consider how they use or interpret humor appropriately. In an effort to develop an analytical framework in approaching the conduct of humor, I turn to the Romans, particularly Cicero and Quintilian, and uncover how their discussions regarding opportunity (or “*occasio vero*,” as Quintilian will name it in dealing with humor specifically) identify concepts that will shape my humor-enhanced classroom.

Enter the hero: the *occasio vero*

Drawing from Aristotle’s theoretical consideration of wit and humor, the Romans both expand and deepen inquiry into humor theory. One of the first comprehensive explorations of the use of humor in oratory comes in Cicero’s *De Oratore*. In Book II Chapter LIV, Suplicius, who had just explained how emotion could be used to sway an audience, mentions how “a jocose manner . . . and strokes of wit, give pleasure to an audience and are often a great advantage to the speaker.” At this point, Suplicius offers the floor of the discussion to Caesar who, we are told, “far excels all other men” at using humor (144). Caesar picks up the discussion by corroborating the notion that humor can aid an orator. After pointing out particular cases in which he feels humor assisted an orator, he then offers categories of certain types of humor and discusses when they should and should not be used in oratory.

Again we must pause to consider the meaning of wit and humor in context. Romans certainly would have appreciated the dexterity with wordplay that Aristotle addresses in his discussion of wit. Robert S. Miola recognizes the popularity and influence of wit amongst playwrights of Roman comedy when he says, “Roman comedy, especially Plautus, bequeathed to later writer’s interests in wordplay, puns, dialect, and comic neologisms” (20). Anthony Corbeill offers further contextualization of how Cicero interprets humor:

A cursory reading of any of Cicero’s invective texts—the *Verrines* or *Philippics*, for example—leads one to suspect that humor in Rome serves as a mechanism for public humiliation. An examination of the only extant treatise on oratorical humor from this period—Caesar Strabo’s discussion in the second book of Cicero’s *On the Orator*—confirms that suspicion. (4)

For Cicero, humor becomes a way for the orator to cast himself as superior to the person or idea he is arguing against. Quintilian echoes this notion of humor in his definition of the subject: “. . . a joke is commonly untrue, often deliberately distorted, and moreover [always undignified and] never complimentary” (Bk. IX 67). Indeed, this definition offers a substantial contrast from Aristotle’s definition of wit. Historian H. Bennett asks the we also consider the fact that in Roman culture, humor,

. . . born and reared as it was in the atmosphere of the law courts, became in its nature especially personal and abusive. Roman legal procedure seems to have been particularly indulgent toward entertaining counsel, and many a verdict was won by diverting attention of the jury from the facts of the case to the amusing idiosyncrasies of the opposing litigant or his advocate. (194)

Needless to say, there are notable distinctions between the Greek and Roman approaches to humor. Romans primarily viewed humor as a form of abuse elevating some by demeaning the cases and the character of others. However, there are also continuities between Greek and Roman approaches to humor that serve the goal of my inquiry. Among the more important continuities is the central rhetorical notion of opportunity, (*pros to kairon*).

Quintilian offers the first real consideration of humor as it pertains to opportunity. Quintilian believes that the proper execution of humor “mainly depends on nature and on opportunity.” With regard to nature, Quintilian observes,

The effect of nature is not only that one person is more acute or inventive than another (this of course, could be developed by teaching), but that some people have a particular grace of bearing or countenance, so that the same remarks made by others seem less witty. (Bk. IX 69)

The discussion of the “grace of bearing or countenance” is probably a reference to Caesar in De Oratore. Caesar says that the speaker must have “personal qualifications, so that his

very look may adapt itself to every species of the ridiculous; and the graver and more serious such a person is...so much more humorous do the sayings which fall from him generally appear” (145). In this context, the natural talent Quintilian is addressing appears to be most directly associated with one’s personality and not necessarily with the rhetor’s natural facilities for invention.

If we return to the topic of opportunity, then this passage suggests that invention of humor is something that can indeed be “developed by teaching.” While Quintilian does not create his own exercises for training in humor, he does tacitly offer some observations through which a teacher might construct a lesson for students in practicing humor. Aside from nature (which the Romans considered to have more to do with the personality of the orator than his natural abilities for inventing humor), Quintilian also suggests that “opportunity” is just as important for the orator wishing to use humor. Quintilian defines “opportunity” as depending “both on situations and on what a previous speaker has said” (Bk. IX 69). “Opportunity” in this context is written in Latin as “*occasio vero*”, which literally translates to “truly the right time.” This phrase bears a striking resemblance to the Greek concept of *kairos*.

In order to connect *occasio vero* and *kairos* properly, we should first consider the definition of *kairos*. Sharon Crowley presents a definition and exploration of *kairos* that clearly has Quintilian in mind:

The Greeks had two concepts of time. They used the term *chronos* to refer to linear, measurable time, the kind with which we are most familiar, that we track with watches and calendars. But the ancients used *kairos* to suggest a more situational kind of time, something close to what we call “opportunity.”...the temporal dimension of *kairos* is not about duration but rather about a certain *kind* of time. (37)

Crowley goes on to explain that in Latin at the time of Quintilian, the word *opportunitas* was used in a manner very much like *kairos*. Although it is interesting to observe that Quintilian writes *occasio vero* rather than *opportunitas*, Crowley’s definition seems to sufficiently conflate these related words—occasion, opportunity, appropriateness—into a common concept. Before I explicate how this one concept would complement a praxis for analyzing humor, it is first important to revisit how Quintilian addresses *kairos* in his Institutes of Oratory.

Quintilian’s Institutes of Oratory (XI, i) explores kairotic theory when it explicitly deals with the “appropriateness” of speaking. Quintilian remarks, “Cicero expounds this (appropriateness) as the fourth virtue of Elocution; in my personal judgment it is the most essential” (XI, 9). Later, Quintilian reasserts this point, “Cicero touches on this subject in the third book of De Oratore, briefly but without seeming to have left out any essential feature: “A single style of oratory,” he says, “is not suited for every Cause, every audience, every speaker, or every occasion.” Cicero says the same in the Orator, almost as concisely (XI 11). Quintilian, who is using this quote at the end of his own writing, is showing that he shares his opinion with Cicero, who had himself specifically referenced the topic of *kairos* near the end of his own treatise on rhetoric. Despite being “most essential,” Quintilian addresses it in the second to last book of the Institutes. Why would he consider something so important so late in his pedagogy? Perhaps it is because by this point in the discourse, students should have learned about proofs, argumentation and eloquence; consequently, understanding “appropriateness” is the capstone of their education before they go out to participate in the forum.

I think a fair analogy for the point I am trying to make could be reflected in the training of a carpenter's apprentice. Before he crafts something on his own, he must learn how to use the tools in the workshop appropriately. He may do small tasks such as hammering and sawing for his master in the interim on a variety of projects, ranging in sizes from a small boat to a footstool, but he is not allowed to build his own project until his master is satisfied that he can work competently with the tools. Once the master is confident in his apprentice's ability, he may grant the apprentice permission to construct a small chair. Up to this point, the apprentice has certainly learned how to work with tools for projects that are far more complicated than a small chair. The apprentice, in an attempt to impress his master, may use techniques that would be better suited for building a boat. The master will judge that the skills the apprentice uses are unnecessary, and inform the apprentice to use the simpler techniques that work most effectively. Even though the apprentice has picked up ornaments of style and technique in his craft that he wishes to utilize, the apprentice must realize the small chair was neither the time nor the place for using those techniques.

Quintilian expresses something similar about oratory;

What is the use of good Latin, meaningful, elegant, and even embellished, unless they accord with the views towards which we wish the judge to be guided and influenced? What use is it to apply a lofty style to trivial Causes, a concise and refined one to momentous ones; a cheerful manner to gloomy themes, a smooth one to harsh; a threatening tone when we plead for mercy..." (Bk XI).

Just as the carpenter's apprentice may have learned the advanced techniques necessary for building a boat, he must realize the same techniques are not appropriate when making a small chair. He must realize that modest chairs do not offer the *occasio vera* for an

approach that makes use of complex skills. Like oratory, carpentry is not confined to a single style. In naming *occasio vero* as an essential part of properly executed humor, Quintilian is making a clear distinction in how kairotic theory is connected to the effective use of humor. The whole discussion of “appropriateness” reasserts that there must be adjustments to circumstance made in order to use the most effective style and ornaments (such as humor) in accordance with each situation.

Quintilian’s insight into the *occasio vero* serves as the first concept in my approach to my praxis: *humor is intimately dependent upon the conditions surrounding our remark; the “occasio vero” will determine if the joke will succeed or fail.* In making this assumption, I am moving toward the praxis that is the goal of this chapter. For now, I return to Quintilian, who provides further insight into the *occasio vero* and how it informs the social component of humor.

***Occasio vero* and the social constructs of humor**

So let us now return specifically to humor, which Quintilian has already established as being dependent upon two considerations: the personality of the orator (nature), and the *occasio vero* (opportunity) that the orator has chosen as appropriate to the execution of humor. Quintilian suggests that an *occasio vero* for humor already exists outside of speech oratory. He writes, “Many people therefore display their wit at dinner parties and in conversation, because we may progress in this by daily practice, whereas specifically oratorical wit is rare, for it does not come from any special skill, but is borrowed from this everyday habit” (69-71). In this case, Quintilian is making the distinction that, for the most part, wit that is used in oratory is rarely a skill confined only

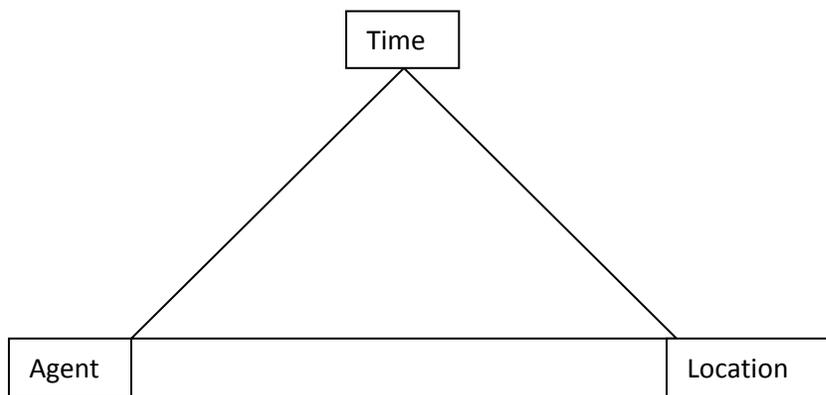
to oratory, but is borrowed from the everyday conversations of people through social interactions. For Quintilian, a student of rhetoric would be assumed to have come to the classroom already experimenting and polishing their practice of humor and wit outside the classroom. The charge that Quintilian is making implicitly in this distinction is that humor can occur in a variety of sites in a spatial sense. Much as *occasio vero* deals with the proper *kairos* for humor by distinguishing between the oratorical and the “everyday habit,” Quintilian is making a statement that complicates our idea of *location* in the practice and honing of oratorical wit.

At the same time Quintilian is identifying the concept of practice, he is also constructing a new approach for understanding the formation of humor in the speaker. That is, the same qualities of humor are apparently transferable from one space (the everyday) into another, assumedly more formal, oratorical space. In this case, the practice of witcraft is homework for his student, so to speak. Everyday conversation is far more forgiving than formal oratory—the practice of using humor in daily life is seemingly spontaneous, immersed in the moment and more open to the immediate condition of the audience. In formal oratory, the audience is not as dynamically connected the orator, and the orator has less room to adjust the oratory. What both locations have in common is that each failure and each success the speaker experiences in using humor, and the conditions of the audience at the time of the joke is recorded in the mind of an effective rhetor in considering a joke’s future use at an alternative venue.

What is noticeable about this idea is that Quintilian is suggesting that wit is not confined to anywhere in particular. Indeed, theoretically, one’s facility for humor and wit can be refined in many places besides the classroom. Students and speakers alike are able

to use humor in their everyday conversations with friends and neighbors for purposes that may not be overtly persuasive. Moreover, Quintilian gives us no reason to assume that the two essential components of humor, “nature and opportunity,” are inoperative merely because the humor is conversational and not oratorical. On the contrary, I think he invites us to make a logical extension of these components to conversation. By recognizing the role of conversation to humor, Quintilian identifies a social component to humor.

As overt as the persuasiveness of a friendly interchange may or may not be, conversational discourse is still deeply rhetorical. What Quintilian has done in identifying dinner parties as possible sites of humor is articulate in theory what most people already recognize: the site for humor is extremely dynamic. And finally, when he identifies the qualities of the speaker, (the speaker’s natural disposition) as changing in response to location and time, the *occasio vero* is cast in yet another dynamic dimension. Analyzing humor through the theoretical perspective of *occasio vero* leads me to create a triad of causes of the *occasio vero*, which I will sketch here:



The time and location dimensions of the triad compose the *occasio vero* Quintilian speaks of. The dimension of the agent reflects Quintilian’s concern for the disposition or

character of the orator. This triad exposes the root forces that cultivate humorous discourse. However, there still is an important element missing. Rhetoricians will quickly realize that element as “the audience.” Placing the audience anywhere in this triad is a challenge in itself. We cannot create an audience that is connected with just one of the components of the triad. Where the audience is seated during the delivery—in a forum, a church or a classroom—each change affects the *occasio vero* for humor to some extent. The location of the audience at a certain time—either in bed both the morning after a good night’s rest or retiring for the evening—obviously effects the “timing” of humor. Of course, the agent whose invention is necessary to create the humor in the first place can be effected because in considering the space and time of the *occasio vero*, the agent also calls upon the social relationships that will make the utterance funny or not. Humor, in this sense, is always merely potential until it reaches the audience. Just like every other analytical component in the Aristotelian study of rhetoric, the reality of humor depends upon how the audience responds to the intricate network of conditions that surround rhetorical expression.

The *occasio vero* offers us a portion of the vocabulary necessary to analyze humor. However, as I indicated earlier, we need to enrich our vocabulary further, especially if the goal is to eventually apply this vocabulary in composition pedagogy. Exploring the *occasio vero* has clarified the social component in humor. I turn now to modern philosophy, especially the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in an effort to add a second and third component to the theoretical framework I have begun.

The philosophical tradition and the study of humor

A review of early modern approaches to humor

Before I address the topic of philosophical hermeneutics as it pertains to humor, I think it is necessary to foreground the topic in the larger philosophical tradition of humor. Theories of understanding how individuals process humor are not new and, as might be expected, they are notably diverse. In his *An Anatomy of Humor*, Arthur Asa Berger opens the volume by positing theoretical approaches to analyzing humor based on the philosophical tradition. First, Berger cites Hobbes as putting forth the idea that laughter is at its root *schadenfreude*. In short, *schadenfreude* is the pleasure in superiority one takes in seeing someone else (sometimes, even the former self) suffering. Hobbes states in *Leviathan*, “(laughter) is caused by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (38). Hobbes, therefore, asserts a Superiority theory of laughter; the individual’s elevation over the buffoonish acts or words of someone or something else.

In his article, “A new theory of laughter,” John Morreall challenges Hobbes by pointing out how some common instances of laughter, such as an infant laughing, or laughter at the clever use of puns, does not involve feelings of superiority at all. For Morreall, the Superiority theory does not qualify as a general theory of humor (244). Morreall proposes a second theory, a theory that Berger identifies as “the most important and widely accepted of the explanations of humor;” namely, an *Incongruity theory*. Berger identifies Incongruity theory as dependent on the faculties of the intellect and explains, “We have to recognize an incongruity before we can laugh at one (though this

recognition process takes place very quickly and is probably done subconsciously)” (3). Here, Hobbes’ theory is not dismissed; one may choose to assert a sense of superiority as a response to dealing with incongruity. Further, compared to Incongruity theory, Hobbes’ theory takes the individual’s response to incongruity beyond a humorous response and into judgment. For our purposes, theories of judgment stray too far from considering the philosophical tradition of humor analysis, but identifying the primary difference between the Incongruity and Superiority theories does help us further understand the mechanisms that make humor work.

The third approach to humor Berger identifies involves psychoanalysis. Made popular by Freud in his Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious (“Wit” is sometimes replaced by “Jokes”), psychoanalytic theory posits humor as a masked outlet of aggression. In this case, jokes act in service to the subconscious to satisfy instincts that may otherwise be socially taboo. Included in this psychoanalytic analysis is Freud’s writing on witty self-criticism. Of particular interest to Freud is Jewish self-criticism. Freud writes,

The Jewish jokes made up by non-Jews are nearly all brutal buffooneries in which the wit is spared by the fact that the Jew appears as a comic figure to a stranger. The Jewish jokes which originate with Jews admit this, but they know their real shortcomings as well as their merits and the interest of the person himself in the thing to be criticized produces the subjective determination of the wit-work which would otherwise be difficult to bring about. (166)

For Freud, the use of wit to criticize one’s self is an exercise in reflective thinking. To criticize one’s own community is a socially reflective act. As Berger comments, such thinking is hardly ephemeral; rather, it offers individuals within the same social group a

valuable understanding of “social and political matters” (4) through humor. In Freud, we see movement in the philosophical theory of humor toward a position encompassing social as well as self-reflective undertones.

This interest in social identity will prove to be of paramount importance in understanding the philosophical approach to humor. Henri Bergson writes about the necessity of recognizing the social constructs of humor;

However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity with other laughers, even complicity, with other languages, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group! (7)

Bergson believes that laughter’s natural environment is society. Theologian Peter Berger points out that “knowing when and at what to laugh is an important part of the process by which the outsider is, so to speak, naturalized within the in-group and vicariously internalizes its history” (68). In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin identifies a similar social mechanism as “laughter of the marketplace;” he goes on to explain, “the people’s ambivalent laughter...expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it” (12). Bakhtin’s position resonates closely with the ideas of Bergson; and while Bakhtin is writing about medieval peasant culture, the “whole world” does create a group that joins together in perpetuating its history. Bergson would affirm this sense of belonging to the group as a necessary condition for the expression of humor.

The consideration of a strong social component in the philosophy of humor brings us to the second assumption of my own developing concept for a praxis of humor; i.e., *humor is a social phenomena and the individual’s facility for discriminating humor is*

shaped by his or her social group(s). The social group that laughs at the same joke is an audience, no doubt. But as an audience, the group becomes much more powerful. Social groups not only laugh together, but in laughing together the members perpetuate a code of what is acceptable. Ideas or opinions that appear incongruous in the context of this code can become the object of humor.

To take this position somewhat further, if incongruity can be described as the realization that expectations have been disordered, then it follows that individuals possess a conception of an ordered expectation that is *a priori* to the utterance of a joke. This *a priori* set of principles is shaped by the individual's society. For example, if I ask a skilled cartographer, "Where can you find China?" an expected response would probably be "in Asia." If, instead, he answered "on a map," the initial expectation would be unfulfilled and the response would most likely elicit humor. Our respective positions shape our expectations; and those positions, whether as the reader of a thesis or as a cartographer, shapes how we approach our texts. These *a priori*, socially-established positions operate as prejudices in that we pre-judge what we expect to take away from a text, but these are often legitimate prejudices.

The two concepts I have outlined so far contribute to a theoretical foundation from which we can analyze humor. These concepts can be summarized as follows:

1. Humor is intimately dependent upon the conditions surrounding its expression; consequently, the *occasio vero* will determine if a joke will succeed or fail.
2. Humor is a social phenomena, and the individual's facility for discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social group(s).

In the classroom, I hope to prompt students to reflect on their own understanding of what is and is not funny by clarifying the social/individual concept outlined in concept 2 above. However, I also want to coax students to discover a broader perspective that allows them to understand how another individual may find something humorous. To address this goal, I must posit another question for research; how do we come to grips with the social assumptions manifest in the individual? As a theoretical aid to this awareness, I turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's work in philosophical hermeneutics. With the addition of hermeneutics, the two concepts that constitute my theory of humor to date—the *occasio vero* and social context—are transformed from ideas about the function of humor into a praxis suitable for pedagogical application in the composition classroom.

The contribution of Gadamer to humor studies

Born in 1900, Hans-Georg Gadamer was a philosopher who taught in Germany from the early 1920's until his death in 2002. He worked closely with Martin Heidegger, who was both his mentor and department chairman at different times. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer had no affiliation or sympathy with the Nazi party. Fifteen years after the Second World War ended, Gadamer published his magnum opus, Truth and Method (1960), a volume in which he attempts to uncover the nature of human understanding. In this book, Gadamer develops his inquiry into human understanding through a topic Heidegger covered briefly in Being and Time (1927), philosophical hermeneutics.

At its root, philosophical hermeneutics deals with the nature and practices of interpretation. For Gadamer, the authority of tradition in which the interpreter is

immersed is particularly important to interpretation of a text because one's tradition dictates a certain kind of understanding. The hermeneutic approach seeks to question and perhaps, to understand the authority of traditions as a part of interpretation. Gadamer explains, "it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy—i.e. the origin and validity—of the fore-meanings dwelling within him" (270). Gadamer is interested in the nature of understanding, and he observes how the understanding of texts and, in some cases, experience itself, is not able to reveal itself fully because of the "fore-meanings" (or, as he later calls them, "prejudices") implicit in the authority individuals grant to tradition.

Although rooted in Heidegger's work, Gadamer's approach to philosophical hermeneutics is noticeably different from Heidegger's. Gadamer explains, "Heidegger entered into the problems of historical hermeneutics and critique only in order to explicate the fore-structure of understanding for the purposes of ontology. Our question, by contrast, is how hermeneutics once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding" (368). It is Gadamer who identifies opportunities for praxis implicit in hermeneutics and carries the theory toward practical application.

For Gadamer, what becomes necessary is a hermeneutical approach wherein the interpreter is made aware of his or her own biases. In reaching this awareness, the interpreter prepares to accept the truth that is within the text, regardless of whether or not it complies with the interpreter's own pre-judgments of the topic (271-2). In Back to the Rough Ground, Joseph Dunne remarks that Gadamer experiences a similar hermeneutical

problem when dealing with the work of Aristotle. That is, in exploring Aristotle's conception of *phronesis*, Gadamer cannot "escape his own hermeneutical situation," which requires him to deal with the prejudices and anticipation he brings to his own analysis of Aristotle (126). The expression of this hermeneutical problem in Gadamer or anyone's interpretive response is often subconscious, because it is immersed in the traditions of one's area of research and the socialization that marks one's engagement in that tradition. To connect this hermeneutical attention to socialized fore-knowledge with the exercise of humor, we should all recognize that we carry with us prejudices that inform our interpretive practices before hearing a joke and these prejudices shape the worldview that conditions our reception of any joke.

In sum, Gadamer argues in favor of justified prejudice, prejudice that is "productive of knowledge" (280). The problem of prejudices becomes more difficult when an individual cedes his or her own judgment to some authority. At this point, the authority becomes the arbiter of knowledge because the individual assumes the prejudices of his or her "tradition" (278-82). For Gadamer, tradition perpetuates its own understanding of knowledge, and so the individual immersed in a tradition is in turn shaped by the prejudices that distinguish that tradition.

In the context of this immersion in tradition, a reflective approach that examines and makes conscious the workings of tradition becomes crucial to our capacity for understanding. Gadamer calls this movement to understand our own traditions "openness" (271). Openness is possible through a historical consciousness in which the individual is aware of how he or she is situated within tradition. In turn, this consciousness makes the freedom of knowledge possible because the individual becomes

alert to the existence of “others” both inside and out of one’s own frame of reference. Gadamer states, “Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me even though no one else forces me to do so” (354-5). As Jean Grondin explains, Gadamer felt that true experience that leads to valid understanding is negative in the sense of not reinforcing previously held understandings. The insight that comes from having one’s understandings (shaped by tradition) challenged leads to a renewed openness to new experiences (44).

Gadamer's effort to accommodate "the other" (i.e., that which lies outside one's own frame of reference) into the practice of philosophical hermeneutics becomes a particularly helpful contribution to a contemporary theory of humor. Humor is itself fundamentally concerned with "otherness." That is, humor addresses the unexpected and the incongruent in ways that incorporate “the other” into a context where it can be comprehended, perhaps even appreciated. The theoretical ability of philosophical hermeneutics to appraise alternatives, no matter how distant they may be from conventional understandings, brings me to the third and final concept that informs my praxis: *the use of philosophical hermeneutics provides a workable practice for interrogating not only the topics that humor addresses but also the procedures by which humor itself operates.* Consequently, when approached from a Gadamerian perspective, humor analysis becomes a dialogic tool for use in investigating issues, both social and personal, about which humor provides unique insight.

What this rhetorical and philosophical examination has yielded is a collection of concepts through which we acquire the vocabulary necessary to transform humor theory into pedagogical practice. The concepts together look like this:

1. Humor is intimately dependent upon the conditions surrounding the humor of our remark; the *occasio vero* will determine if the joke will succeed or fail.
2. Humor is a part of social phenomena and the individual's facility for discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social group(s).
3. The use of philosophical hermeneutics provides a workable practice for interrogating not only the topics that humor addresses but also the procedures by which humor itself operates.

Obviously, I have to address the exact manner in which hermeneutics functions to illuminate humor theory. In Chapter Two, I will deal with translating the theory I have covered here into pedagogy explicitly. In the process of this translation, I hope to develop the instructional utility of the three concepts I developed in this chapter. Moreover, I examine how a person can consciously explore humor by employing hermeneutical practice in examining particular texts. This examination will not only invoke much of what is covered in the theoretical discussions in the present chapter, it will also consider how the intersection of humor and hermeneutics might ultimately inform the composition classroom. In other words, the praxis I seek to establish has as its goal not just an understanding of humor as a rhetorical process but, more importantly, an invocation of humor as an especially valuable resource to enhance the rhetorical classroom.

II. Imagining the Humor-Enhanced Classroom

In this chapter, I attempt to imagine bringing theory and practice together with the goal of producing a pedagogical approach to humor. The chapter involves four sections. First, I examine the utility of philosophical hermeneutics in the classroom as it has been posited by other scholars. Second, I reflect on the potential of philosophical hermeneutics as a classroom practice by offering my own interpretation of an artifact from popular culture, an interpretation that invokes each of the three principles outlined in chapter one. Third, I speculate on the adaptation of this hermeneutical praxis to the composition classroom by positing a composition unit on humor based on hermeneutical interpretation. I imagine this unit lasting three weeks, and I include daily readings and lesson plans for each class session. Finally, I examine the potential outcomes of this humor-enhance unit and consider difficulties students may have in coming to grips with the hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of humor. In sum, I attempt in this chapter to pragmatize the hermeneutical theory of humor developed in the previous chapter by considering how such a theory would operate as a praxis and how that praxis can be adapted to the needs of the composition classroom.

Hermeneutics in the Composition Classroom

Hermeneutics is not a new approach to composition studies. Mariolina Salvatori proposed hermeneutics as a praxis for prompting students to write texts that enact conversations with their readers. Salvatori considers *writing* as derivative from the

process of *reading*; in turn, reading requires us all to interact (or converse) with the text or risk missing its content. Consequently, she identifies hermeneutical conversation (the interaction of an interpreter with the text) as an approach to reading and writing that promotes critical questions not only about the nature of a specific text but more generally about the interpretation of meaning and the process of “knowledge formation” (440). In brief, when students read and write from a hermeneutical perspective, they have an opportunity to consider not only what texts try to argue but *how* arguments in general operate to create meaning.

Salvatori acknowledges that making students aware of how an argument functions is easier said than done. She contends that bringing students to a hermeneutical perspective in their work requires instructors to teach them an introspective approach to reading. Donna Qualley identifies this same type of hermeneutical reading as “essayistic reading.” She explains, “to read essayistically, then, the reader’s judgment must remain tentative, open to the possibility of elaboration, modification, or revision through further dialogue and ongoing reflection on the text...” (65). Essayistic reading needs to be taught to students sometimes by asking them to unlearn critical approaches (which carry prejudices) to reading that they bring to the text in the first place. Qualley insists that students can best engage a hermeneutical approach to reading through a “dialogic or conversational” relationship to a text (65). Likewise, Gadamer himself believed in the power of conversational approaches to texts, particularly through asking questions in the pursuit of a dialectic discourse with text. To Gadamer, the means of engaging in this open dialog requires a nimbleness of the mind that constantly questions one’s interlocutor—in the spirit of Socratic and Platonic dialogic—as if the reader were a participant in the

byplay of personal conversation rather than a passive observer who is mute before the authority of the written word (356-60). Qualley's description of "essayistic reading" is fully compatible with my third theoretical concept from the previous chapter: philosophical hermeneutics as a practice for interrogating the procedures of humor.

In its pedagogical context, the praxis of dialogue and understanding precedes the praxis of hermeneutics and humor because dialogue establishes a pattern for how students can approach the interpretation of humor. Dialogue helps us understand more fully the aims of discursive partners and inclines us to become more open to new understanding in the future. By asking questions about humorous texts, students engage in a dialogue with rhetorical artifacts and can begin to become aware of the prejudices and understandings they bring to the text. Just as Gadamer saw dialogue as a way to uncover prejudices, so can students—when pressed to engage hermeneutical inquiry—use dialogue to reveal their own unnamed assumptions. Ultimately, this awareness becomes manifest through a wider critical sensibility in their reading and writing.

Dialogue is not only valued by Gadamer, Qualley and Salvatore, but also plays an important role in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. More specifically, Freire sees dialogue as an essential component to critical inquiry.

Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them...Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants (88-9)

Dialogue here is a liberating concept. For an individual to learn, he or she must have the right and ability to ask critical questions. In pedagogy, one role of teachers is to prepare students to ask those questions. In considering the praxis of hermeneutics and humor, the act of dialogue enables the student to understand humor with greater complexity. The act of dialogue grants humor substantive authority by extending the reader's response to humor beyond the merely sensual experience. Through dialogue, humorous texts can *speak* to the reader; and because humor itself questions standard assumptions, the interaction with humor's inherently critical position can liberate the reader from positions previously accepted without question. But this liberatory function depends upon the willingness to engage the artifact hermeneutically, through dialogue, which listens and attempts to understand.

In theory, dialogue and "essayistic reading" are pedagogically attractive, but the practical demand of composition pedagogy requires us to consider how such an approach is likely to work in practice: what does "essayistic reading" look like? Donna Qualley's work presents an interesting experiment in the application of hermeneutics to composition. Qualley had her students write papers several pages in length in which they responded to text in conversation. Of course, the word "respond" implies a dialogue in its own right, but the assignment she describes also places importance on students assuming a *temporal distance* (a term I will define in the next sentence) so they could examine the text from multiple perspectives, avoiding an uncritical rush to judgment, and to think about the text in a different context than they might initially (66-9). Gadamer also speaks at length about what I am calling *temporal distance* when he argues that when we as readers remove ourselves from and reflect upon a text, we can "foreground what has

previously remained peripheral” (294-297). Qualley’s approach to pedagogy—especially her notions of dialogue with, and reflection on, this dialogue—have deeply influences the type of inquiry I want to encourage in my own students.

Through hermeneutics, I believe students can learn to conceive of humor in a new perspective. Through the essayistic reading of humor, students can become conscious of their own interactions with, and assumptions about, humor in general, as well as the specific topics with which a particular theoretical artifact deals. As I will explain in the next section, hermeneutics also offers students a social context for their individual understandings of humor, thus engaging the second theoretical concept from chapter one: humor is a part of social phenomena and the individual’s facilities or discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social group(s).

The Hermeneutical Approach Applied

I have already explained philosophical hermeneutics as a fitting approach to composition pedagogy. Now I move to demonstrate a practical application of this approach. To demonstrate this application, I choose an artifact from popular culture that I believe my students have seen. The objective in examining this artifact is not only to understand what the artifact says, but ultimately to understand my own understanding; to see where the work of the humor and prejudices come into contact through laughter. The approach to analysis I perform here will utilize all three of the theoretical concepts I covered in the first chapter. The approach I demonstrate in the next few pages will operate as a model for the type of inquiry into humor that I hope to inspire in my students.

The artifact I use is a sketch from David Chappelle's popular Comedy Central program, Chappelle's Show. On the premier episode, the audience is introduced to Clayton Bigsby, a prolific white supremacist, played by Chappelle. The sketch situates itself as a segment on Frontline as the reporter explains that he is going in search of the reclusive Bigsby for a rare interview. The reporter is astonished as he arrives to meet Bigsby to discover that Bigsby is in fact a blind black man. Bigsby was born in the south and told when he was young that he is white so "it would be easier on him" at his all-blind school. As an adult, he becomes a prominent yet reclusive author of white supremacist literature and a leader in the white supremacy movement.

Throughout the sketch, Bigsby uses many racial epithets and recites many racial stereotypes that one might expect to hear from white supremacists. When the reporter suggests to Bigsby that he may in fact be black, Bigsby replies, "I am in no shape or form involved in any niggerdom!" The rest of the sketch involves much of the same discourse from Bigsby as he prepares to give a speech (while dressed in a Ku Klux Klan uniform) and the subsequent fallout after he is revealed at his speech as a black man. Chappelle offers a complex view of racism that is so deep and engrained in this character that at the end, after Bigsby discovers he is indeed black, we are told he divorces his wife for being a "nigger-lover."

This sketch strikes a chord first as an absurd representation of the white supremacist movement in America. But many viewers still laugh, even those who may not completely grasp the full scope of the humor. I might begin my hermeneutical approach to the text by asking: "how does this sketch *work*?" Borrowing from the theoretical vocabulary of humor I established in chapter one, I could suppose that the

humor “works” on one level because it works with incongruities, particularly the incongruity that a white supremacist is black. To return to Berger’s incongruity theory, the code I am accustomed to (that white supremacists are white) is violated in the sketch. The humor of the sketch as a whole plays against the codes most viewers would assumedly expect.

As a critical “reader,” I recognize the incongruity only in relationship to my prejudice of the world “as it is” which has been socially reinforced elsewhere. Although I was lucky enough to have not dealt with white supremacists very often as I grew up, I did develop a presumption that a white supremacist was in all circumstances white, a notion I have granted authority to. This prejudice was confirmed by film, news, comic books as well as through my friends and family (not to suggest that anyone in my family is a white supremacist, but we never entertained the possibility of a black white supremacist). All of these social agents reinforced my prejudice to the point that it made up my worldview. I believe that if I was asked to describe a white supremacist I would immediately identify that individual as white.

Even though I admit that my understanding of the humor is filtered through years of prejudice that racial bigotry was related to race (that white supremacists were white), I realize that through the Bigsby sketch my prejudice is being confronted. Is it reasonable to me that a black man could be a white supremacist? Through the conditions that Bigsby was raised, it does seem possible to me now. I realize now that while race may be one characteristic of an individual asserting racial supremacy, it is not the only characteristic. Chappelle’s sketch illuminates the social realities of racism: that it is often perpetuated not simply by racial identification, but by an upbringing that values ideology over reality.

The ideology of racial supremacy is never questioned in the character of Bigsby despite the reality of his own racial identity.

Returning to the original hermeneutical question, “How does this sketch work?” I have already explained one way in which the question elicits a uniquely hermeneutical response. However, there are other possible responses viewers may have. One viewer may respond that the sketch works because he or she finds the character’s use of racial epithets humorous, as the use of some words challenges his or her notions of what vocabulary is and is not taboo in contemporary society. Nonetheless, understanding *how* the humor operates within the individual is an important step in understanding the prejudices that the individual brings to the humor.

The prejudices that an individual brings to a humorous text tells only part of the story of *how* the humor works. Questioning the text and moving toward self-reflection is important, but so is the actual mechanism of how the humor was presented. To illuminate this, I return to the first concept I listed in the previous chapter: humor is intimately dependent upon the conditions surrounding the humor of our remark; i.e., the *occasio vero* will determine if the joke will succeed or fail. The particular *occasio vero* of the sketch is on a prime-time basic cable television program. Television programs have become a venue for serious inquiry into the state of race relations, but this same type of sketch delivered in a different medium or at a different time or on network television could elicit a different response from the viewer. One way of augmenting the initial question in order to explore this dynamic would be to ask, “Why do I find this sketch funny *now*?” In this instance, the hermeneutical and the rhetorical come into contact with each other. With television, the participation of the audience is wholly voluntary.

Someone who is afraid that he or she may be offended by or may disagree with the topics Chappelle discusses can simply change the channel. To this end, we may come to realize that the audience for Chappelle's program, while large due to the medium, is particular; the viewers already have some expectation to laugh although they may not be sure of what. Depending on the viewer's interest in approaching Chappell's program critically, the subtle socially-critical undertones of the message may be lost in the laughter. To an audience with a prejudice that the show is mainly composed of scatological humor and wordplay (which is sometimes the case in some episodes), the show may not seem to be the proper *occasio vero* for social critique. On the other hand, if the audience is open to a complex variety of humor that may include social critique, then the Bigsby sketch may be immersed in a rhetorical *occasio vero* where the humor is more critically considered.

The preceding analysis is by no means exhaustive; but my intention is to present a praxis through which humor can be used to elicit serious rhetorical reflection. What was once laughed at as pleasant on a purely sensual level can, I am convinced, become an important inquiry into an individual's own understanding of the world. Through rhetorical reflection, the authority of those prejudices that inform a joke is called into question, and the individual is moved to reexamine the assumptions that make up his or her response to the humor.

My brief analysis of the sketch from Chappelle's Show is intended to indicate the viability of my rhetorical praxis with one artifact. In the next section of this chapter, I attempt to adapt this praxis to the demands of the composition classroom. In this adaptation, I will again draw on all three of the theoretical concepts I identified in the first chapter. Furthermore, the trajectory of the lesson plan I imagine takes my students

beyond the dialogical analysis of existing artifacts and provides them with a theoretical framework for experimenting with the production of their own humorous texts.

What the Humor Enhanced Classroom Looks Like

The lesson I imagine here is situated in a three week unit on humor in a 200-level composition course. The course sessions are held twice each week lasting 80 minutes each session. The unit I describe is situated at the end of the semester when students have assumedly both read and written rhetorical analyses, documented arguments, multiple summaries and shorter in-class writing. Students at this point in the semester are expected to have some fore-grounding in basic rhetorical concepts. While students may have been presented some humorous texts in the course of the semester as readings or viewings for class discussion to this point, those humorous texts have not been given the analytical consideration that will distinguish the lesson plan I outline here.

The final project for this unit will also serve as a capstone assignment of the semester. Students will draw upon humor, rhetoric, and essayistic reading and writing to produce a minimum 1000-word humorous text and an accompanying reflective letter in which they explain how they composed their own humorous text based on the theoretical concepts of humor covered in the unit. The final project is due at the beginning of the 4th week after the unit begins.

I will follow a particular structure in explaining the daily lesson plans for this unit. First, I will explain the goals of the class session. Second, I will use an in-depth narrative that explains the particular classroom strategies the instructor could use to move students toward that goal. These strategies will include particular readings and questions

to facilitate discussion in both small-groups and the whole class. The third component of the lesson plan posits the reading and writing assigned for the next class session. The fourth and final portion of the daily lesson plan will describe the anticipated outcomes that should result from the classroom strategies described in the narrative.

Week 1 Day 1

Purpose: The purpose of the first class session in the unit is to initiate a cursory theoretical understanding of humor through the rhetorical concept of rhetorical situation (in my vocabulary, the *occasio vero*.) By the end of class, students will be able to understand and identify the *occasio vero* and see its practical application to understanding humor. The rest of this section will describe how I intend to achieve my stated purpose.

Lesson Narrative: On the first day of the unit, the instructor elicits a definition of *occasio vero* from the students through a discussion of how they encounter the *occasio vero* in their everyday lives. To facilitate the discussion, the instructor may pose to students the simple question of why they do not write an essay in an English course in the same way they write a research paper in a Physics course. The obvious reply will be that the two courses are distinctly different, and that it is necessary to conform to the conventions of one or the other in order to be most clearly understood by the respective instructors. From this question and others like it, the instructor and students builds a communal understanding of *occasio vero*. The instructor can now move on to integrating humor as a topic, with a special emphasis on the complex relationship of humor to the *occasio vero*.

The instructor, who now has students considering the *occasio vero*, moves the classroom discussion to the topic of humor by telling a joke that the instructor knows will fail to rouse laughter from the students. A potential joke for this example could be; a Johnny Carson joke from 1985 or an “in” joke geared towards English scholars regarding Joyce, Woolf and Wordsworth entering a bar and the antics that ensue, or a joke that can be attributed to the character Elmo on Sesame Street. These are just some examples, but any joke that is obviously not made with a classroom of young adults in mind should suffice. The only laughter that should occur after this joke is uttered by the instructor should be from students who find humor in the instructor’s failure to elicit laughter in the first place (a type of *schadenfreude* for those students). If the joke is successfully unsuccessful, the instructor begins a discussion regarding why the joke failed. Some students may charge that joke simply is not funny. The instructor must move the students to give specific reasons for the joke’s failure rather than a qualitative assessment of the joke. Eventually, variations on the answers “We did not get it,” or, “That joke is for children” (or some other audience) should come up. These answers help situate the joke as being immersed in a particular *occasio vero* in which the joke could be effective, despite the fact that it was not in this classroom instance.

The discussion of the joke’s failure should segue into a larger discussion regarding the opportune time for different types of humor. The instructor then asks students to consider a time when they have tried to explained a humorous event to person who was not present when the event occurred, and how when that communication fails to arouse laughter, the student was stuck saying, “I guess you just needed to be there.” This response will help students understand the significance of the *occasio vero* in their own

lives. This time would also be an appropriate opportunity to point of the example of the French concept “*l’esprit de l’escalier*,” or, “staircase wit.” The concept comes from the experience of a person leaving a room and then thinking of a saying that would have been witty earlier, but now the time has passed and the joke cannot be used. Again, students should be able to identify with a similar experience in their own lives when they suffered from “*l’esprit de l’escalier*.” Both “needing to be there” and “*l’esprit de l’escalier*” are demonstrations of humor failing to be effective because the speaker attempted to execute the humor outside the *occasio vero*.

At this point, the instructor shows the students a video recording of satirist Stephen Colbert’s 2006 address to the White House Press Correspondent’s Dinner, in which Colbert often outright mocked the President of the United State of America who was sitting just feet from him. The instructor asks the students to respond to Colbert’s act with regards to the *occasio vero* alone, moving students who give qualitative judgments about the humor to grant greater gravity in their consideration to the rhetorical situation of Colbert’s address.

Assignment: At the end of the class period, the instructor gives students an assignment sheet that explains the next major assignment. The instructor also verbally outlines some specific points of the assignment for students to note. The instructor also assigns Kurt Vonnegut’s short essay “Cold Turkey” for reading to be discussed in the next class session. The instructor asks students to come to class prepared to discuss the *occasio vero* of the text, paying attention not only to the time frame in which it was written, but the medium in which it was first published (In These Times magazine). The instructor also assigns the students to keep individual journals for one day recording ten

statements they find funny. Included in this journal should not only be the humorous remark, but also a record of who said it and a brief account of the circumstances in which it was said (Was it told in class? at dinner? Who else was present?).

Anticipated Outcomes: The anticipated outcome for students in the first class is that they should be able to identify and discuss the *occasio vero* as a rhetorical concept. Moreover, students should also have some familiarity with the concept as it pertains to humor and be prepared to identify the concept in their assigned reading so they can come to the next class session prepared to competently discuss the *occasio vero* and humor at length.

Week 1 Day 2

Purpose: After the previous class session, most students will probably see humor analysis as relative to a particular *occasio vero*. While at this point the *occasio vero* may seem the most apparent feature of humor analysis, the student's analysis can be extended so they do not confine their understanding of humor to *occasio vero* alone. The objective of the second class session in the unit will be to prompt students to engage humor by questioning the texts they prepare in their humor journals and to encourage them to use their questioning skills to develop comprehensive, specific proposals for their unit assignment. In questioning the texts, they begin to experience the utility of the third theoretical concept I cover in chapter one pertaining to philosophical hermeneutics.

Narrative: This second class session will begin with the students breaking up into small groups of four to five students and considering two questions pertaining to the

Kurt Vonnegut essay, “Cold Turkey” which was assigned at the end of the previous class.

The two questions the groups will consider are:

1. *Why* does the humor work or fail in the essay? And,
2. *How* does the humor work or fail in the essay?

After allowing the groups to spend five to ten minutes with these questions, the instructor asks the students to summarize their small group discussion for the large group so all the groups who worked individually are now in dialogue with each other.

Kurt Vonnegut’s “Cold Turkey” was published in May 2004 as a commentary piece in the liberal-leaning magazine In These Times. The essay lambasts the Bush administration as well as what Vonnegut sees as a degenerating contemporary culture with an addiction to violence and fossil fuels. The title of the essay is an allusion to trying to quit an addiction abruptly, something Vonnegut believes American society will have to deal with soon as fossil fuels become scarcer. The essay encompasses many components of Vonnegut’s non-fiction style, including historical, literary and biblical allusions and metaphors as well as his often macabre wit. Published in May of 2004, a few months before the 2004 presidential elections, the essay provides students with an opportunity to examine the *occasio vero* of the essay.

The instructor should prompt students not only to consider the rhetorical dimensions of the essay beyond the merely confrontational attitude toward the then-current administration, but to see if the humor ends up advocating anything in particular. Vonnegut seems to be interested in complicating how individuals view political allegiances when he writes,

If you want to take my guns away from me, and you're all for murdering fetuses, and love it when homosexuals marry each other, and want to give them kitchen appliances at their showers, and you're for the poor, you're a liberal.

If you are against those perversions and for the rich, you're a conservative.

What could be simpler?

This reduction of political ideology is part of his wit: he abstracts the topic in an effort to parody the simplifications of political ideology in the media. The quote is a reference to his belief that, “. . . thanks to TV and for the convenience of TV, you can only be one of two kinds of human beings, either a liberal or a conservative.” The instructor should prompt students to consider this passage, especially as it pertains to the time of the presentation of the essay (before a presidential election), the place in which the piece exists (a liberal-leaning magazine), and the agent who composed it (a well-known American writer). These considerations mirror the considerations of *occasio vero* I outlined in chapter one and should give students a comprehensive/practical starting-point for engaging the text.

Due to the political nature of Vonnegut's essay, some students may not see any humor in the text whatsoever. Again, the discussion in the classroom must shy away from a qualitative analysis of the humor and focus on rhetorical questions. That is, according to the theory laid out in the previous chapter, the students' new task is to reexamine the rhetorical properties Vonnegut's humor. A student may not find the essay humorous personally, but that student should at least be encouraged to observe how a different audience may find the essay humorous. Such observation will enable students to realize the analytical value of *occasio vero* by themselves.

As noted, the Vonnegut essay may not move some students to laugh even though the same students may find the text generally humorous. For this reason, the teacher should preface the large-group discussion with the proviso that wit and humor are not necessarily accompanied by laughter. The instructor may wish to illustrate this point by presenting examples of dry wit that may not draw laughs but may be generally recognized as humorous (such as what we may find in passages from William Thackeray or Laurence Sterne). Examples that will probably be most palatable for students would be from film. Because film clips can often offer a context for jokes through the course of the narrative, they can, in turn, make *occasio vero* recognizable and discussable in the classroom, even though his humor may not elicit laughter. Although his work may not be well known by students in a 200-level composition course, Woody Allen's films could work especially well at illustrating this point. One example from Woody Allen that an instructor could use in class is a scene in Sleeper in which Miles Monroe (played by Allen) wakes up 200 years after checking into a hospital and sees a McDonalds' sign that boasts, "Over 795,000 Served." Students will naturally understand the humorous allusion to McDonalds' current claim to "Billions and Billions Served," but may not be moved by exaggeration to actually laugh. Nonetheless, they are likely to respond that they understand why the humor works (they "get" the joke).

The instructor can use this discussion of non-verbalized laughter to initiate a discussion regarding the humor journals the students were asked to keep after the first day of the class. In small groups, they can collectively analyze the *occasio vero* of each

remark they recorded and how the wit of each is related to the opportunity presented to the person who said it. The groups can then exchange some of the utterances the group members recorded with each other and consider how different utterances with different contexts illuminate the importance of context to humor.

In all likelihood, students who share stories with their peers may be disappointed to find that recounting the entries will not result in the same response they experienced when they first witnessed the event or joke they recount. There will be necessary gaps the observer must fill in that respond to their classmates' potential questions. In an effort to begin understanding essayistic reading (cf. 35-37), the instructor prompts the groups to develop questions for each other about the humor of the utterances. Although the questions may not represent a uniquely hermeneutical approach, the questions still give students the opportunity to reflect and interpret the assumptions that promote humor. Fragments from the daily conversations of students are a no less an appropriate place to begin this type of inquiry than an essay by the most celebrated humorist. Students can begin formulating questions in response to points they do not understand regarding the humorous aspect of the entry. If humor rests in incongruity, then there needs to be an a priori understanding of the situation so the audience can recognize the mechanisms of the incongruity. In the case of the student entries, students will have to fill out the context of their incidents to indicate the nature of the humor.

As the student who recorded the entries explains these details to their peers, the other students should begin to realize why the event originally seemed humorous. Their questions to each other about these surrounding details can also prompt them to

reevaluate what specifically made the event humorous. Such questions have the potential to lead to introspective reflection with regards to the *occurio vero*.

All of the students in the small group should record and keep these questions—however tentative and incomplete they may be—for a later date, as those questions will become important to their upcoming hermeneutical approach to humor. The questions are a preview that will remind them of the sort of questions that can begin a discussion about humor, especially when they have difficulty beginning to grasp the interpretation of humor. This exercise in the analysis of humor should provide an appropriate introduction to the composition of humor by the students themselves.

Assignment: At the end of the class session, students are told to bring topic proposals for their satirical works to the next meeting. These proposals should be brief, including the topic the individual student wishes to discuss in the text and the questions they hope to pose through their writing. For example, one student might propose writing an essay recalling his or her experiences moving into a dormitory and the impact of leaving a few items at home. In this case, their humor-related questions would involve issues such as the presence of the audience in the essay: would the only people who could understand the humor of the essay be others who have had to move into dormitories at some point in their lives? Furthermore, how is the student's experience moving into a dormitory in 2008 different from someone who moved in 1958? Student should ask questions that attempt to compensate for these concerns before they begin writing, and the next class period is the perfect venue for this preliminary analysis.

Students are also assigned Jonathan Swift's essay, "A Modest Proposal" and are instructed to bring two questions that they have about the text for class discussion the

following week. If the lesson is beginning to alert students to the rhetorical features that distinguish humor, their questions about Swift's famous mock-essay might involve such issues as audience, particularly the distinction between the possible audience of the British aristocracy and the Irish poor. Students who have some familiarity with the essay (and some may) could ask questions about the moral dilemma of the essay: What if people did take the mock-essay seriously? To what extent is Swift responsible for people misunderstanding his overall argument due to his vivid prose?

Anticipated Outcomes: By the end of the class session, students should be comfortable and confident discussing the concept of the *occasio vero* with any text. By dealing with the Vonnegut essay, "Cold Turkey," students will be able to see how humor is situated in a distinguishable *occasio vero*, and they should also begin to anticipate some of the motives and rhetorical choices Vonnegut made in crafting his essay. Students will also begin to complicate their understanding of humor by acknowledging that some humor may be "effective" but still not lead to laughter. "Cold Turkey" may do this task, but the dry wit in the scene from Sleeper will likely make the point more compelling. By understanding effective humor that may not move an individual to laughter, students begin to situate themselves as analysts of humor. They are able to grant some text humorous authority even though the students themselves may not agree with the degree to which a text is humorous. They can "see how someone else finds it funny," so-to-speak. This recognition of audience differences is essential as the students begin in the next class session to seriously analyze the social phenomena of humor (taken from the second theoretical concept covered in chapter one) as it is presented in both Swift and more contemporary humorous texts.

Most importantly, by the end of this class session students will be able to start drafting questions about humor through their discussion of their humor notebook entries. The best questions students will draft in that exercise will be ones that look for gaps in understanding on the part of the reader. Students will engage each other in an effort to clarify the facts of the event and the opinions of the reporter to develop a more complex understanding of the text than what was previously available. By asking these questions, they not only start to set up their own hermeneutical inquiry into humor, they may also start to think reflexively about their own text as they prepare for their own written assignment.

Week 2 Day 1

Purpose: Students once again engage the *occasio vero* in the classroom but are now moved to consider how their own understanding influences their individual conceptions of the *occasio vero*. Students begin to use the *occasio vero* to engage in the hermeneutical questioning of texts alluded to by Salvatori and Qualley. The bulk of the class session will be organized to stimulate in students an awareness of the social phenomena of humor in their audiences and themselves through hermeneutical inquiry.

Narrative: The class period begins with small group discussions of “A Modest Proposal.” Students will then gather in a large group to have a similar discussion to the one they had the previous week about Vonnegut’s “Cold Turkey.” Students pose questions and work through possible responses to those questions (the “why” and “how” of the essay) as well as generate further questions. The discussion will lead, no doubt, to some social considerations of the text, asking which potential audiences may find “A

Modest Proposal” satirical and which groups may not. Here students can refine their questions about *occasio vero* and audience; how would a poor Irish audience respond to the text compared to a wealthy English audience? In identifying how particular audiences may be expected to respond to the text, students can now be prompted to explain the basis of the opinions they just formed. The discussion should move away from the students examining their expectations of how an audience might react to a satirical text and toward students questioning their own prejudices about these particular audiences. These prejudices, both rational and irrational, shape how students believe the audience would respond to the text and, undoubtedly, reinforce the student’s previously-held prejudices. The discussion moves students from the rhetorical considerations of the author to a hermeneutical reflection of how they conceive of audience in the first place.

Before students have completed their in-class small-group discussions of their proposals, the instructor briefly lectures on the mechanisms of humor, explaining incongruity theory in lay terms through brief audio-visual clips from television. To this point, the texts the students have read for class have been written solely by white men. The instructor should seek to represent a broad spectrum of humor in the brief lecture. For instance, the instructor should use television programs such as Roseanne or Seinfeld in which working-class female or Jewish New-Yorker identity plays a prominent role in understanding the mechanisms of the humor presented. The episode presented is not particularly important, as the focus is not so much on the effectiveness of particular jokes in the episode so much as the overall presentation of individuals in a particular social group. By using identities that are often underrepresented in television and written texts,

students can be prompted to ask questions about audience, *occasio vero* and the social components of the humor.

Students can also begin to examine how their own conceptions of humor are constructed by their social identities. Some students will be able to identify more with Roseanne than Seinfeld. Those students should be prompted to consider why they identify more with one than the other. One student may say he or she grew up in a similar situation to the one presented on Roseanne (perhaps both parents worked blue-collar jobs) and find the incongruities in the humor to be reflective of her experiences growing up. Another student who grew up in a similar situation may see the incongruities as unfair oversimplifications of working-class life.

In discussing how social identities help construct humor, students should be prompted to make a list of media they find funny. Some students will be indifferent to television, so in examining media those students may be more inclined to list humorous films or books they have encountered instead. The whole class will then be surveyed and the instructor will write the names of the different media on the chalkboard as students report their lists. Some titles will be duplicated, possibly repeated by much of the class. The instructor should try to write enough of their titles to cover much of the chalkboard. This list offers students a sense of the diversity (or in some cases, the lack thereof) of the tastes in humor others in the classroom have. The instructor will then ask the students which titles appeared multiple times on different individual lists. These titles should be circled for distinction and may include cult television programs such as Family Guy or

The Daily Show or films such as Wedding Crashers and Old School.¹ Seeing these recurring popular texts should prompt a discussion about their popularity, especially among so many students in the same classroom. This discussion will no doubt illuminate the social component of humor for students on a personal level. The instructor should prompt student discussion with questions such as “Why do you think these films/television programs are so popular?” or, “Why do you consider these films/television programs so funny?” Some students will point to the edginess of the media, that some of the irreverence and rebellion of the main characters against contemporary society is humorous to them. Other students may point to The Daily Show as popular because it reduces a seemingly monolithic structure (the American political system) to its childish absurdities. Students should be able to identify common threads between their own social identities and the media they enjoy. By identifying the importance of social identity and humor tastes, students once again come into contact with my second theoretical concept. At the end of class, the instructor charges the students to stop for a minute next time they laugh at a television program or movie and consider *why* they find humor in the medium. While this is not an assignment, some students will take the charge to heart and seriously reflect on humor outside the classroom.

With a newly complicated conception of audience and *occasio vero*, students are asked to write a short reflection on their conceptions of their audiences for their own humorous projects. Some students may have already considered audience at length in their proposals. The preceding discussion should prompt these students to expand upon

¹ I did not choose these titles randomly. These titles are taken from popularity statistics at Iowa State University on the student social networking website Facebook.

what they wrote in their proposals by making their reflections more specific with regards to audience. Students will then exchange their proposals with others in their small groups and discuss some of their concerns about audience and *occasio vero* with their groups. The instructor will direct group members to pose questions about the audiences the writer has in mind, especially in an effort to complicate the writer's conception of audience identities. Each student-writer will share his or her proposal to his or her group and take notes of what the group members say on a separate piece of paper. These notes will be used by the students to further refine their texts.

The questions the group members help pose will not only engage the hermeneutic approach to reading and writing that is essential to the assignment, but also help the writer identify some of the incongruities necessary for a humorous text, particularly in how the text's audience will recognize the incongruities. Here, students begin to shape a more comprehensive understanding of the social components of humor (concept number two in the first chapter) as well as the *occasio vero* for their own texts. The student who wrote about moving into the dormitories may feel compelled to leave out some of the incongruities actually experienced from the text so a more general audience could participate in the humor. For example, that student may choose to write about forgetting his or her backpack at home (which is inconveniently 400 miles away) and focus on the ramifications of that unexpected event rather than dwelling on his or her new roommate who seems to do nothing more than eat Eazy Mac, play Halo on Xbox and play the guitar. The student may make this choice because the experience of forgetting something important is more palatable to a wider audience than writing about dealing with a stereotypical college slacker. Of course, some students may choose to write about the

roommate anyway in the hopes of writing about the experience lucidly enough to attract a large audience, or situating the text in a context that dictates a particular audience (i.e. readers of the school newspaper) that may have shared a similar experience.

Students turn in their proposals to the instructor, who will later screen the proposals for appropriateness (nothing that violates the rights and dignity of other students in the classroom) and adherence to the basic instructions of the assignment. If necessary, the instructor will make comments directing individual students to refine their topics to meet the criteria of the assignment.

Assignment: For the next class, students are instructed to read the essay “See You Again Yesterday,” by David Sedaris from his essay collection Me Talk Pretty One Day. Students are instructed to come to class with a list of episodes or quotes from the text that they find confusing or would like to discuss further. Students are also instructed to bring in the first three-hundred words of their humorous essays to class for an in-class mini-peer response.

Anticipated Outcomes: By the end of this class session, students are beginning to frame their discussions with a hermeneutical approach to texts, further complicating the *occasio vero* and the social implications of different texts, including their own.

While students engage “A Modest Proposal” with each other, they are not only asking questions pertaining to the rhetorical situation of the text itself, but also how the students themselves conceive of the audiences in that rhetorical situation. By complicating and questioning the prejudices they approach the text with (mainly pertaining to how they envision 18th century British and Irish readers), they can begin to examine the authority of those prejudices. Most students will find that the authority of

their prejudices rest in history and in secondary texts that provide greater context for understanding Swift's world. As students move into examining their own proposals, they are faced with audience prejudices that are formed through personal encounters or through the authority of someone close to them (i.e. friends, parents, grandparents, ministers, or teachers).

Once students begin to reconsider the authority with which they conceive of their audiences, they are, in essence, being prompted to explore their own critical understandings as they pertain to texts. They will become increasingly more aware of the role of their social identities in their own conception of humor through the presentation of incongruity theory, and they will recognize those social identities as the root sources of the incongruities they have identified. These discussions should help them revise their conceptions of audience as they begin working on their humorous essays.

Week 2 Day 2

Purpose: Make students aware of their hermeneutical lines of questioning, and further refine their ability to practice “essayistic reading” as an approach to understanding the mechanisms of humor. They will also begin to initiate hermeneutical approaches to reading and responding to the writings of fellow students.

Narrative: Like the previous two class periods, students begin the class by discussing the readings in small groups. I suggest David Sedaris' “See You Again Yesterday” particularly because it lends itself well to a variety of discussion topics. Most of the essay deals with Sedaris' often failed attempts to half-heartedly assimilate to French culture when he visits Normandy with his boyfriend, Hugh. Sedaris casts himself

as the “other” in this situation; he is a stranger in a strange land and he discusses in the essay how his preconception of the French is complicated by his new experience. Sedaris also briefly mentions his homosexuality as he humorously recounts how he first met Hugh. With few exceptions throughout his literary corpus, the subject of Sedaris’ sexuality is only dealt with marginally if it is mentioned at all. The text not only represents a multitude of identities that shape Sedaris (male, homosexual, American, cigarette smoker to name a few) but also offers brief opportunities for experimenting with a hermeneutic approach can illuminate a humorous text and invite readers to engage in their own hermeneutical inquiry.

To begin the discussion, students will be asked the same questions the teacher posed at the end of the last class session: “Why do you find this text funny?” Like the Vonnegut texts, some students may not find the text funny in its own right; but by now, they should be able to identify why another audience may find the text funny. Students should respond in a similar way to their answer to the question in the previous class session; i.e., their response should have something to do with the text affronting common cultural expectations and its incongruities in relationship to social norms.

The instructor should prompt students to write a brief reflection in which they identify their own social positions, a response that helps them deal with understanding the Sedaris essay. While many students will not identify with Sedaris’ homosexuality, they should be able to relate to being the same type of “other” that Sedaris is through many parts of the essay. Some students will identify with being single, or, like Sedaris (and his mother), they will understand having to go somewhere exotic because of a significant other. Still, some students may identify with Sedaris as a traveler challenged by the

customs of a foreign culture. For some students, that foreign culture exists within another country. Some other students will relate to the situation of simply being a new student trying to fit in with his or her college culture.

The instructor asks if any students want to volunteer to discuss the identities they wrote about and how they interact with the text. Some students may not be comfortable sharing their reflections, so the large group discussion should be completely voluntary. The instructor should have his or her own reflection available to share in an effort to spur a wider discussion should students be non-responsive. While some students may make holistic observations about identity in response to the text, most students will point to specific passages in their reflections, some of which may be in their prepared notes for class. Should these quotes and episodes be mentioned in the large-group discussion about identities, the discussion can then move into analyzing specific passages in the text. If the quotes and episodes are not discussed in the large group discussion, the instructor can eventually ask the students to take out the questions or quotes they identified for further discussion and voluntarily present those to the large group.

At this point, the instructor and the larger class discussion will encourage students who had not already done so to develop specific questions about how Sedaris' observations pertain to particular social identities. Moreover, students should now be able to identify points in the text where their own social identities come into contact with some component of Sedaris'. For example, some students may discuss their own encounters with the French, and how those encounters have shaped the conception of the French they bring to their reading of the text. One interesting discussion may occur if multiple students have had different experiences with the French (both the culture and

individuals). The students can look at what about their experiences were unique from other students. Through these types of discussions, students should begin to see how Sedaris' essay helps them form question about their own preconceived understanding of encountering a society that is alien to them.

Furthermore, the fact that Sedaris is specific about the place where he first seriously encounters French citizens (Normandy) further complicates his conception of "Frenchness," in that what he identified as French does not necessarily encompass all of France, just one small area. This helps clarify Sedaris' prejudice of France as a monochromatic culture before he visits, but something more diverse and complex as he spends more time there. Here, students begin to see the rudiments of writing hermeneutically. Sedaris identifies himself as the "other," and rather than confront his new situation with his own cultural values, he examines how his values are different and uses that experience to reassess the inherent prejudice of those values. He may not be asking questions in the text itself, but in his reflection he opens himself to the possibility of a new way of understanding.

Sedaris' essay, written in the first person, is necessarily reflective. The genre of creative nonfiction makes the refinement of understanding in the author's experience transparent. Students now need to be pushed slightly out of the comfortable relationship with the text wherein they experience the text through the author-as-hermeneutical guide. Students need to see how hermeneutical reflection can occur in a text in which the audience is not as easily guided by the voice of a reflecting narrator. To accomplish this, the instructor should show the students the Clayton Bigsby sketch from Chappelle's Show (cf. 39-42). The instructor prefaces the viewing by first alerting students to the

strong language and crudely gratuitous (albeit absurd) ethnic stereotyping that is presented in the sketch. The instructor asks students to again take notes as to why they find the sketch humorous as well and to reflect upon how they think Chappelle, like Sedaris, is composing the sketch to be humorous. The instructor can also call attention to how these artifacts prompt the audience to form their own questions about the sketch at the same time.

Like much of my own reflection on the sketch, students should be able to identify some points in the sketch that they find funny and be able to discuss those points maturely. Students may not be able to identify with any of the social identities in the sketch as they did with Sedaris in his essay, but the students will still laugh. At this point, students will have to consider what about their own social identities is fulfilling the “status quo” that sets up the presented incongruities (namely, a black white-supremacist) that make the sketch funny. Students will likely identify the absurdity of a black white supremacist, but they should recognize that in making that distinction, they have generated a prejudice of what the racial identity of a white supremacist may and may not be. Particularly, students should realize that they are assuming that the race of the white supremacist dictates his or her views. By approaching the sketch hermeneutically, they should identify the seemingly valid prejudices that have infused in their own social upbringing as it influences how they have engaged with the sketch.

At this point, some other students will be able to identify the complexity Chappelle’s sketch illuminates: that racial bigotry may not be exclusively tied to one’s own race, but how he or she has been socially conditioned to view another race. This is a complex proposition, so some students may not understand it immediately, but a large-

group discussion should prompt students to discuss and clarify these complexities with each other.

With twenty to thirty minutes of class time remaining, students gather into their small groups and exchange the three-hundred words of their own assignments with each other for a focused peer response session. The peer response will involve a questionnaire in which the readers are asked to focus on how the writer is inviting the reader to engage the audience in responding to the essay. Because the texts will only be in their early stages, the responses will have to deal specifically with how the introduction sets up some of the characteristics that will be important for the rest of the text. Some topics the readers may be prompted to consider include the following: the identities the author is establishing early in the text; some sense of how the whole of the essay will be driven by important incongruities; how the topic of the essay fits the *occasio vero*; whether or not the language of the text is palatable to the immediate audience.

As students are participating in peer response, the instructor returns the proposals that were collected at the previous class session. If any of the proposals contained large-scale issues (such as a topic that openly disrespects other members of the class), the instructor should contact the student before class to discuss these issues.

Assignment: At the end of class, students are assigned to extend their assignment texts to 800 words over the weekend for the next class. At the next class, students will participate in a similar peer response on that work-to-date with new small groups. Students are also assigned the essay “The Pony Problem” from I Was Told There’d Be Cake by Sloane Crosley. As with the previous reading assignments, students must come to class with questions and quotes for discussion.

Anticipated Outcomes: By the end of this class (Week 2, Day 2) students have begin to cultivate an ability to engage humorous texts through a hermeneutic approach. Students should also be able to witness how a text, exemplified in Sedaris' essay, can elicit "essayistic reading" from the audience. By this point, students should be well aware of the ways in which social identity plays an integral role in humor (hence engaging the second theoretical concept I identified in chapter one). The Sedaris essay prompts students to consider the social identity of the "other," and how Sedaris uses that identity to come to a greater understanding of his own situation in France. Students discover that they do not necessarily need to be in the same social group as the writer to find the text humorous, but can simply empathize with a common social experience as the writer (in the Sedaris essay, the experience of the "other.>"). Students observe through Sedaris that by reflecting on the (often humorous) distinctions between the expectations he carries from his own culture and the new experiences he has in France, Sedaris and his readers come to a more clear understanding of his own prejudices. Furthermore, the essay demonstrates how those prejudices operate not only to humorous effect, but move the audience to approach the text hermeneutically. Students at this point are engaging my third theoretical concept in chapter one; that philosophical hermeneutics provides a workable practice for interrogating not only the topics the humor addresses but also the procedures by which humor itself operates.

As students examine the Chappelle sketch, they engage an opportunity to witness the intersection of the culture they are used to (i.e., how they identify white supremacists) and the culture they are confronted with in the sketch, and question those discrepancies to come to an awareness of their prejudices about white supremacists. More important than

just examining prejudices, students experience the act of essayistic reading without the presence of a narrator (as they had in Sedaris' essay) who guides the reader to an enlightening conclusion. Students experience the practice of "essayistic reading" through individual inquiry, thus preparing them to bring the same approach to humor in new sorts of texts and media.

Students have also had the opportunity in this class session to have a small part of their own writing responded to by their classmates. The brief peer response results in three important outcomes. First, it assures the instructor that students are in fact working on the paper. Second, in writing the introduction to the essay more than a week before the final peer response and almost two weeks before the essay is due, students are afforded the opportunity to go over that section again for revision as they work on the rest of the text. Third, and most importantly, students get an opportunity to measure the effectiveness of the humor of the text and the ways in which the audience responds to the text. In dealing with these topics early, students who are struggling to make the text operate in the way they want can elicit the help of the instructor early in the writing process.

Week 3 Day 1

Purpose: Students will further refine their practice of "essayistic reading" by looking at a new text and generating questions about the text independent of the instructor. Students will use the text to generate questions that they would pose in dialog with the text and use those same skills later in the class session as they again respond to each other's essays in small groups. In this context, students will again utilize the third

theoretical concept I outlined in chapter one (philosophical hermeneutics as a workable practice for engaging humor) with each other's texts.

Narrative: Students will begin class working in small groups discussing "The Pony Problem" by Sloane Crosley. The instructor should not give the students the same type of instructions about the group discussion he or she has in the past. Rather, the instructor should inform the students that they are expected to be able to generate their own questions and respond to each other in their small groups. Sloane Crosley's essay is written in the same type of reflective style as Sedaris' essay, so struggling students should be able to easily draw upon the discussion of Sedaris' essay in the previous class session as a model for their discussions as they consider Crosley's.

Students will probably begin their small-group discussion by relating to the presence of social identities (again engaging my second theoretical component of humor) and how those identities influence the humor of the essay. Crosley's essay will be a departure from many of the texts the students have engaged to date. Most noticeably, Crosley's essay is the first text students will deal with that is written by a woman in her mid-twenties. Some students may be able to identify more closely with Crosley than any of the other writers so far because of her gender, youth or both. The essay is also the first the class has read that deals almost exclusively with romantic relationships. Of course, these three categories are far too broad to encompass the type of social identification that is necessary for my second theoretical concept of humor (humor is a part of social phenomena and the individual's facilities for discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social group[s]). While Crosley's youth, gender and subject matter may make her

stand out as they first start to read the essay, her actions in the essay will be more compelling and should sustain the bulk of the student's interest.

While students may be able to use the discussion of other first-person narrator essays as a model for how they wish to discuss the essay by Crosley, they will have to come up with a relatively novel approach to understanding the text. A few students may be able to identify with Crosley's main conflict in the essay: the act of disposing of totems from failed past relationships (in Crosley's case, miniature ponies), although some students probably will not.

At the same time, some students will likely settle on some discussion of gender roles in the essay. For instance, students may find how Crosley acquired the ponies to be humorous, as she was able to get seven different men to give them to her in much the same situation: "I have something for you," a guy will usually say on our first date. "Is it a pony?" No. It's usually a movie ticket or his cell phone number or a slobbery tongue kiss. But on our second date, if I ask again, I'm usually pretty sure I'm getting a pony" (3). Students may see this as a humorous manipulation of gender roles in which a the guy feels compelled to fulfill some small, quirky request of a potential mate while in the pursuit of courtship, even though, as Crosley says earlier, "I don't even like ponies. If I made one of my throwaway equine requests and someone produced an actual pony, Juan Valdez-style, I would run very fast the other way." Rather, Crosley makes the point that she just likes the abstract concept of ponies and that ponies have just become an "unintentionally tangled" component of her personality through her lifetime (3).

There will be students who find humor in Crosley's request for ponies alone. Some students will relate to Crosley because they too have seemingly odd phrases or

actions they say or do that have become a part of their personality. These characteristics may even be the focus of their final essays. The request for ponies is the centerpiece of Crosley's predicament in the same way some students may have an equally odd fascination with presidential assassinations² or pirates, for example. Students who address such concerns will come to understand that the source of the humor in these situations is directly related to when the little and often charming quirks that ornament one's character might pose some sort of challenge to that individual's daily life. In essence, this discussion operates in such a way as to emphasize the importance of social phenomena in humor, an emphasis I address in my second theoretical concept in chapter one.

Another point that the students may discuss is Crosley's neuroticism in disposing of the ponies. She considers giving the ponies to the Salvation Army, but fears some poor little girl would inherit the "bad karma" each of the ponies represents. She also fears just leaving the ponies in a bag on the subway out of the fear that in doing so she may cause the New York City public transit system to shut down because of a suspicious bag detected on a Queen-bound train. At the same time, she cannot simply throw the ponies out because they "deserve better" (7). Students may find Crosley's indecisiveness humorous, especially considering how minor the problem seems to be. As they discuss the topic further, though, they may also come to realize that from Crosley's point of view the problem is justifiably complex. Students may come to remember small trinkets in their own lives they had trouble parting with, and recognize the complexity of an

² Writer Sarah Vowell admits having this problem, so much so that she vacations at presidential assassination landmarks which she describes in her book [Assassination Vacation](#).

individual's relationship with sentimental object, even if they represent failed relationships.

The instructor will ask students to bring some of their questions and observations to the larger class and share what they have discussed in small groups. Because the students have not been guided by the instructor, they may feel compelled to discuss the conclusions they reached about the meaning of the text. The instructor must be sure to reaffirm that the interest is not so much in conclusions or the judgments that they students made as it is in the process the students went through. The instructor will be more interested in asking about the process so the whole class is reminded of the training in essayistic reading they have already undertaken. Namely, that they had to generate questions in dialogue with the text in order to spur their small-group discussions in the first place (in essence, utilizing philosophical hermeneutics as their workable practice in dealing with the text). As students reassess their thinking back to their processes in group inquiry, they prepare themselves to discuss each other's essays in peer response.

The second half of class will involve another peer response. Unlike the rest of the unit, when students have been consistently working in assigned small groups, students are moved away from the people with whom they may be comfortable with working on the project and placed in temporary new groups. The role of these groups remains the same: students respond to each other with questions about content. The experience with new groups will not only cast a new set of eyes on the text but will also move students to reconsider whether or not their texts are written at the proper *occasio vero* with a new audience.

Assignment: For the next class meeting, students are instructed to come with a completed draft for a final peer response session. Students are also instructed to read “Teacher's Sense of Humor Comes Through in Multiple-Choice Tests,” an article from the satirical newspaper The Onion on the newspaper’s website. Students should come to class prepared with some notes about the text that engage the essayistic reading skills they have honed in class today.

Anticipated Outcomes: The most important outcome of this day is that students will have gone through the process of discussing their essayistic reading of the text without the guidance of the instructor. This event will hopefully not only reinforce the ability of the students to utilize this approach with other texts, but will also help them review their own writings reflectively, and as such reconsider how their texts, like the essays they have already read, prompt reader to engage in a dialogue with the text. In successfully approaching the text hermeneutically, the students engage the third theoretical component of humor I posed in chapter one. By approaching their texts through philosophical hermeneutics, students are still suspending their immediate judgments of the text in an effort to seriously consider themselves in a conversation with the text. The approach of philosophical hermeneutics will not only help them interrogate the topics and procedures of humor but may be extended beyond humorous texts for use in all sorts of reading situations.

On this day, students also engage my second theoretical concept in considering humor: humor as a part of social phenomena and the individual’s facility for discriminating humor is shaped by his or her social groups. Students not only use this concept to approach Crosley’s text, they use it in approaching each other’s texts. Some

students may “get” the humor of another student’s text, and some may not. Both readers and writers will experience the opportunity to gauge the effectiveness and mechanisms of the texts they work with in relationship to social phenomena firsthand in the peer response session.

Part of the mechanism that helps students reevaluate their own writings is the switched-up groups. By working with new people, students have an opportunity to experience their texts anew: they get fresh opinions and advice from people who are not accustomed to their way of thinking. In this context, the writings exist in a new *occasio vero* (important in my first theoretical concept of humor in Chapter One) and may need to be adjusted to meet these new conditions.

Week 3 Day 2

Purpose: The purpose of this, the last class meeting before the essay is due, is twofold. First, students will take a brief exercise in writing a reflective letter in which they attempt to explain how some of the text they read made an effort to engage the audience in essayistic reading by facilitating a dialogue with the audience. Second, students will engage in their last peer response session before they turn in their essays. Students have to this point been using the three theoretical concepts that informed my approach to this unit throughout the past three weeks. While students may not list each of these concepts on their peer’s writing and describe how the text addresses each concept individually, the concepts should be prominently in their minds as they respond to each other.

Narrative: The class begins by students breaking into small groups and discussing the Onion article they have read for class. While students have at this point become accustomed to a daily drill of working in small groups to develop good questions about the texts they have read and how they believe the authors of those texts have worked to facilitate such questions, The Onion article is the first time they experience humor in the journalism genre. The presence of a new genre, especially a genre that is generally granted a fair degree of credibility through its stylistic properties alone should compel students to briefly reassess my first theoretical component of humor: the *occasio vero*. In reassessing the *occasio vero* of their own texts, they are once again made conscious of its importance in humor. While students will probably not enter into a discussion of the genres of humor versus the genres of journalism, they should still consider how “voice” of journalism enhanced or detracts from the overall humor of the text.

Additionally, students encounter an online text for the first time. Not only do online texts represent a different and often dynamic conception of the *occasio vero*, they also represent a new conception of social phenomena because these texts have to be accessed by the reader. One question students may pose is: what does this type of social dynamic tell us about the reader and the author? This line of questioning should lead students to an interesting consideration of the role of digital media in their general consideration of humor. Students will also likely begin to discuss web 2.0 (Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, MiGente, etc...) and how online social networks can create their own humorous codes. These topics should generate some interesting discussion about the *occasio vero*, prejudices and exploring how the text invites dialogue with the reader, but

the instructor must keep this necessarily short, as the students should be more attentive to preparing their own texts to be turned in.

One important part of the final project is a reflective essay in which the student offers commentary of how he or she used the concepts about humor discussed in class to compose the essay. In the last class of the unit, students first place themselves in the role of the author of the text by using their hermeneutical approach, the presence of the *occasio vero* and social analysis of the Onion text to compose a brief reflective letter outlining some of the rhetorical decisions they made in composing the text. Some students will identify the questions they think the author of the article wanted to raise through essayistic reading and thus, philosophical hermeneutics.

Of course, this is how they will compose their own reflective letters. However, the same type of inquiry into understanding *why* the author chose to write in a certain way would hopefully rub off onto their peer response work for the day. This exercise is a primer in how I hope they approach each other's texts.

Students spend the rest of the time reading and discussing each other's work. The students work in the same groups they worked with before Week 3 (their original groups), who have now presumably not seen the text for a week. Students no longer work with a questionnaire; they make free responses to each other depending on the needs of each essay. At this point, the students should be comfortable enough with their work and the principles they have been working with in analyzing the components of humor to encounter few problems with engaging the texts with little guidance from the instructor. The instructor, instead, roams around the classroom to handle any other questions that

come up before students leave for the weekend and complete the assignment to be turned in early the following week.

Assignment: Completed unit-ending essay along with a short reflective letter explaining the student's rhetorical choices in crafting the essays.

Anticipated Outcomes: At this point students should be very comfortable identifying and analyzing the different theoretical components of humor. Students will be able to easily recognize the importance of the *occasio vero* in the successes and failures of different jokes in different contexts. Students will also be able to identify how social phenomena, especially social phenomena with which they have very little familiarity, play an integral role in how members of the audience interpret humor. In writing the reflective letter for the Onion text, they also experience the act of exploring the dialogic possibilities of the texts they deal with, particularly how those texts can illuminate topics and humorous mechanisms through philosophical hermeneutics. The overall experience will give students practice in reflecting upon their own cognitive process in trying to produce humor and should carry over into their own essays.

Students should also be comfortable with their ability to use the analytical work they have been doing with humor to comment on the writing of their peers. The peer response on this day is designed to be self-directive so students will feel empowered through the skills they have developed through the course of the unit.

Limits and Benefits

By the end of the three-week humor unit in this hypothetical composition course, students will have dealt with humor in a variety of media; television, canonical writing, online newspapers, essays and film. When students consider humor as a social phenomenon, as well as situated in a particular *occasio vero*, they become more sensitive to how all their texts, humorous and non-humorous alike, are situated in similar rhetorical contexts. By using the approach of philosophical hermeneutics, students not only learn and hone practices that will help them facilitate questions about texts in the classroom but about discourse in numerous other settings as well.

In writing the actual assignment outlined above, undoubtedly students will find that while some classmates write effective satire, others will not. This situation may seem difficult for students who have put a lot of time and effort into their compositions and whose work has not fully succeeded in eliciting laughter from other students, but the experience should also reinforce the complex nature of humor in general and of the production of discourse in general.

It may be that some students will not find the hermeneutical approach useful in understanding humor. Some students may retreat to relativistic positions (“it depends on the context”) while some may start to take a subjectivist stance (“it depends on who you are”). The subjectivist approach is perhaps the most dangerous as it may lead the student to dismiss the need to respond to the texts at all. Most students, however, should come to a reasonable understanding of the utility of hermeneutic questions Why? and How? That is, how do both context and individual interpretation operate in humor because they are now more familiar with the operations of *occasio vero*, dialogue, and interpretive bias.

The goal is to deepen the rhetorical understanding and capacity of all students by providing them with the experience of applying rhetorical principles to materials that are likely to engage their interests.

While sustained practice in hermeneutical inquiry for students is important, it is possible that the length and intensity of this unit may lead to what I call “hermeneutic fatigue.” To avoid this, I have chosen a variety of texts from different media. Furthermore, students are constantly working in large and small groups in class and on their own before and after class. These diverse activities are designed to keep the inquiry both fresh and varied so students do not succumb to feelings of analytical redundancy. Inquiry by using philosophical hermeneutics (“essayistic reading”), *occasio vero*, and the social phenomena of humor is framed as an approach that transcends media and applies to all sorts of writers. The diversity of the texts employed to provide exposure to the theoretical concepts creates an opportunity for students to see the line of inquiry presented by the instructor as diverse and multiform.

It should be added that the focus on humor is likely to engage students in their coursework because the materials themselves are pleasurable. Each student has something to offer to this unit. The humor of one student may not resonate with every student in the classroom, but it may work with many, as well as with others outside the classroom.

While many components of the unit are theoretically complex and potentially demanding, the path the student takes through the unit is a path marked with laughter shared with classmates and the instructor. There is no other place in the university where this sort of experience can occur in a foundation level course than in the composition

classroom, and I believe it behooves composition theorists to consider the possibilities of a humor-enhanced classroom. The classroom I have imagined here has posited the complex critical approach of philosophical hermeneutics in a pedagogical approach that should be manageable for first-year students. The lesson plan I have imagined through the philosophical concepts I identified in the first chapter holds the potential to also elicit pleasure and excitement in students, which is a potential to also engage students in learning in a way they may never have experienced before.

Implications for Future Research

What I have described in these past few pages is a unit through which students can work with philosophical hermeneutics and humor in praxis. The introduction of such a unit into a foundation-level composition curriculum, whether the emphasis of that curriculum is on multi-modal communication or great books, would not need to replace any major objectives of the existing class. Rather, humor enhances the experience of learning. By producing texts that students themselves find pleasurable to read, they have an opportunity to experience composing at its most delightful. Students who are fortunate enough to produce texts that make their fellow students laugh or take note of their wit will have a uniquely rewarding experience. But these assignments are not meant to boost egos; they are meant to bring students into a critical awareness of their traditions and prejudices through humor. At the same time, the pleasure students may experience in this unit may make critical thinking and writing seem more accessible. Students may experience a boost in confidence as writers and thinkers if they experience the act of asking questions about the how and why of texts as generally pleasant.

There are undoubtedly other ways in which instructors can use humor in their classrooms. In this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I have tried to argue in behalf of a creative approach to pedagogy that uses humor as a springboard for growth in fundamental, diverse, sometimes complex issues of rhetoric and composition. I trust that this chapter has at least affirmed the notion that humor *can* support important pedagogical purposes. And I hope that this approach promotes additional inquiry into the humor-enhanced classrooms as an aid to composition pedagogy.

Indeed, in the process of developing my own humor-based pedagogy, numerous issues related to, but not central to the topic of this chapter have arisen. In the next chapter, I look forward to the practical possibilities and theoretical implications that have come up in the course of my own researches. The opportunities available to rhetoricians, philosophers and social commentators interested in humor, especially in humor and its relation to pedagogy are considerable. In the next chapter, I will identify some of the potential lines of inquiry that I would personally like to pursue.

III. Further Research in the Philosophy and Pedagogy of Humor

The possibilities for additional research in the relationship between humor and hermeneutics are extensive not only in composition pedagogy but also in philosophical and rhetorical theory. In this chapter, I explore the potential implications of the praxis developed in this thesis both in and beyond the composition classroom. The ideas that follow are a sample of these potential lines of inquiry. These ideas are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are they arranged according to any principle other than general categories of related topics. This chapter does, however, represent both the future directions of my research interests and the expansive options available to the rhetorical investigation of humor.

Humor-Enhanced Pedagogy in an Actual Classroom

The one thing missing from this thesis that I regret I was not able to complete is a report of how the unit I described in Chapter Two operated in a real classroom. Naturally, theory must always cede to the practicalities of the classroom. Although the unit and lesson plan was developed from careful field notes, as a plan alone it cannot reflect the same serendipitous spirit of being realized with students. Consequently, it is my intention to put the theory and pedagogy outlined in this thesis into operation at the first available opportunity. After I experiment with the lesson plan in a real classroom, I can begin to collect qualitative data describing how students respond to the assignments I have proposed.

I am also interested in the possibility of using the unit I have described to gauge how students view humor before and after the course. I would like to believe that such an intense immersion in the topic would make the students savvier to the complex mechanisms of humor. For example, I could organize a questionnaire in which I record student attitudes toward humor at the beginning and end of the semester and examine those results. I imagine most students would notice some change, but what I would be truly interested in is how they approach humor critically: do they see philosophical hermeneutics as a viable approach to understanding humor?

One interesting (albeit ambitious) possibility for research would involve longitudinal study of student attitudes toward humor tracked years after the course is completed. There could also be a “control” group of students who read similar texts and were immersed in essayistic reading but did not have the same intensity of immersion in humor, so researchers could try to gauge the relative value of a humor-enhanced classroom to a non-humor-enhanced classroom.

This research may be too ambitious for one person from one discipline to explore. Humor is still a deeply complex topic with interested parties in many other disciplines who might be able to offer me a more refined approach to examining my pedagogy. I could extend an invitation to cognitive and developmental psychologists to research with me. Cognitive psychology has a long history of interest in humor and may offer approaches I have never considered in engaging this topic. In this sense, I open my inquiry to a cross-disciplinary investigation.

Humor-Enhanced (non-Composition) Classrooms

One of the most promising results of the pedagogical approach I have described is that it has practical application in a variety of classrooms. A hermeneutic approach to humor can operate in an English course focused solely on particular writers or periods. The lesson plan I have imagined, composed largely of 20th and 21st century texts, could be easily translated into a course studying popular culture. Components of the hermeneutical approach to humor could also complement cultural studies courses that focus on marginalized or non-contemporary cultures, eliciting students to think critically about prejudice and social influences that dictate a society's humorous codes. The pedagogical approach to humor imagined in this text could be used in the same way in a course studying 17th century British theater and another focused on 21st century queer non-fiction.

Courses that could utilize the humor-enhanced pedagogy I describe in this text would not necessarily be limited to humanities alone. Even courses in other disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology and perhaps even the sciences could begin to experiment with humor or use humor as a way of stimulating hermeneutical sensibility. A course surveying the presence of blackness in the media may examine Chappelle's Show at some point and use the approach of philosophical hermeneutics to spur the critical sensibilities of the student, while also pressing students to consider the *occasio vero* that permits Chappelle's sketches to be effective in the first place. Furthermore, the concept of social phenomena could prompt students to raise further questions about the audiences Chappelle is seeking to reach in his program. As I have already stated, the humor-enhanced classroom does not seek to replace regular classroom standards, but, as my

example points out, it may have the ability to encourage discussions and questions (the how and why) that may otherwise have difficulty being raised.

Humor and WAC

The integrated praxis of humor and hermeneutics also has the possibility to extend the interests of composition and rhetoric instruction beyond the confines of the foundation courses and into Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) curricula. Indeed, students who are practicing the writing of their disciplines could use the cultural experiences they have in that process to compose humorous texts, demonstrating their assimilation into the humor codes of that group. I have personally witnessed aerospace engineers make jokes about the DC-9 (a commercial aircraft) and computer engineers draw humorous flow-charts demonstrating how to humorously handle common technical questions from naïve laymen. The pedagogical praxis I have described in this thesis has the possibility of being used as a teaching technique in writing courses across the curriculum.

The most important lesson for students to learn here is the insular nature of these humorous texts and remarks. There is specific *occasio vero* (that is, within the discipline) to be recognized with each of these humorous statements. The average air-traveler would likely not see humor in a joke about the DC-9 made by professionals who work with those planes every day. In the absence of a context, a joke may appear to be an example of negligence or a lack of confidence in the structural integrity of the craft on the part of the engineers. Likewise, the same layman who calls technical support with a question

about his or her computer might find a joke about his or her lack of knowledge about the computer to be an example of an arrogant technician rather than a friendly joke. There are real rhetorical implications for humor in both of these instances, rhetorical implications that, when framed through WAC, can offer students in the disciplines a clearer understanding of the rhetorical implications of their joking.

Humor and Decorum

The joking aerospace engineers and computer technicians are just a few examples of many instances when communications decorum may lead to a greater discussion of humor and professional responsibility. My friend whom I recall having dinner with in the introduction is now a medical intern who jokes with her colleagues about bureaucracy in the health care industry and the amounts of money spent on the advertising of pharmaceuticals. But she shared with me recently that she would be offended if she discovered a doctor humorously ridiculing a patient. For students, the opportunity to discuss the levels of appropriateness of using humor in their disciplines before they enter those disciplines may prevent them from making embarrassing errors of judgment.

When we look forward to the opportunity to consider judgment in relationship to humor, we open up a discussion on the ethical considerations of humor. Humor is powerful. As I described in Chapter One, in connecting humor with social phenomena an individual telling a joke may reinforce oppressive prejudices within a social group, thus potentially perpetuating damaging mischaracterizations and stereotypes. Students could consider the ethical implications of jokes in their discipline and can reassert the

responsibility of the humorist to make sure his or her intentions in the joke as lucid as possible.

Theoretical research on Humor and Philosophical Hermeneutics

In the first chapter, I identify some contemporary schools of theoretical thinking and how they approach humor. Perhaps the most notable theoretical frames for further study are incongruity theory (cf. 25) and psychoanalysis (cf. 26), both of which I hope to pursue in greater detail in the future. These two theoretical schools in particular informed my second theoretical component of humor (humor as a social phenomena shaped by the individual's group identitie[s]). However, my investigation of this component has to-date limited itself to the theoretical schools mainly connected to multiculturalism, post-structuralism and socio-epistemic theory. In the future, I would like to explore the connection between humor, philosophical hermeneutics and other theoretical frameworks that seem compatible with philosophical hermeneutics. Some possibilities for further theoretical exploration would include: humor and religion, most notably studied by theologian Peter Berger, or research in play theory, such as Johan Huizinga in his book Homo Ludens.

The limitations of the *occasio vero*

One interesting item for future analysis is the possibility that in analyzing the *occasio vero* theorists may assume too much about audiences who interact with humor.

The way an audience responds to humor can be analyzed through understanding the *occasio vero* of a joke. For example, we could analyze how the *occasio vero* assists the understanding of Malcolm X's "Message to the Grass Roots." In this case, we could rhetorically analyze this line from the text, "And you sure don't catch hell 'cause you're an American; 'cause if you was an American, you wouldn't catch no hell," and suppose a possible appeal to the values of the audience, knowing that Malcolm X was speaking to a dominantly black audience in Detroit. Thanks to audio recordings that provide evidence that the audience was laughing, we could continue our analysis by using the *occasio vero* to attempt to understand why the audience found the comment funny.

But here we come to a limitation of the *occasio vero*: we could not deduce that the statement made by Malcolm X would have automatically struck the audience as humorous because the statement does not have the turns we might expect from a joke. Moreover, in explicating the sentiments of many black Americans in Detroit, we might be inclined to think of this statement as upsetting rather than funny. Yet an audio recording of the speech provides evidence that people are clearly laughing after the statement. Knowing that the statement was seen as humorous changes the context in which we consider the statement. In this case, common rhetorical assumptions are called into question in the face of access to the audience's recorded response.

Postmodernism and the *occasio vero*

Some scholars attempt to take a postmodern approach to humor, looking at the text itself to find clues that indicate instances of humor. Hans-Jurgen Diller attempts to

theorize humor by adopting Bakhtin's "culture of laughter" as a lens for looking at medieval English drama. His attempt is compelling when he considers the performance, including pre-production, as a text, as he does when he examines the York mystery cycle plays (3). The plays in the York cycle have far more documentation than other mystery plays; so when records of the production suggest that the masons of York ask "to be relieved of their pageant because it caused more laughter and clamor than devotion" (4), we can reasonably deduce that the audience's laughter was potently present, even if undesired by the producers of the play.

We can establish that the *occasio vero* in which humor exists is rhetorical because of its relationship to the response of the audience, but trying to gauge that response is difficult without some record of the response. We have reached a limitation in analyzing humor through the *occasio vero*: the response of the audience may be certain only through some recorded response. But if we return to the audience, what we need to develop is some way of analyzing response—we need some way of telling *why* the audience thought a particular utterance was funny.

Guessing the intention of the playwright does not show us when the audience finds something humorous. We could rely on actual recordings, whether written or recorded on audio or video, to tell us when an audience laughed. These recordings may be helpful, but a recording is not immune to corruption.

When we realize that even the apparatus for determining laughter is not immune from fabrication or embellishment, we might worry that nothing can give us an accurate measure of what is and is not funny to even the most specific audience. I may seem overly scrupulous in demanding that the apparatus that tells us when an audience laughs

be put under scrutiny. However, the fact that some laughter is synthetic (as in “canned laughter” on television) should also demonstrate to us that laughter is also a valued commodity. Critics who assume humor without any evidence that an audience found a text’s rhetoric to be humorous exercise a very broad conception of the text’s audience. Just because a critic finds a statement humorous does not mean the intended audience agrees.

Satire

Another interesting aspect of humor that I believe warrants closer consideration is the particular type of humor found in satire. Throughout this thesis I have shied away from identifying how particular types of humor ought to be approached. Still, I could augment my praxis to respond to particular types of humor, particularly satire. Satire, of course has contemporary implications, but its practice can be charted back to the plays of Aristophanes. Throughout the history of satire, however, there still exists an interesting and particular quality about satire in its immediate political implications. The praxis of satire and philosophical hermeneutics could address that topic.

As we examine the hermeneutical approaches to humor, we cannot lose sight of the importance of power in the relationship among the one producing the satire, the audience, and the object of the satire. The fact that individuals hold power over others implies a persistent perpetuation of particular traditions and prejudices within the individual. In some cases, those who hold power consider humor to be an affront to those prejudices and traditions. Just as the satire of Ovid was censored in ancient Rome, so

have Kurt Vonnegut's satirical works been banned in schools around the country, as have some works by Mark Twain. In philosophical hermeneutics, we have the opportunity to examine the rationale for the censorship of satire. We may have to explore the act of understanding as a political act by examining why satire resonates with audiences, ourselves included. This exploration may lead us to understand how we position ourselves in society: as forces of resistance or conservation, as we come to understand what we recognize as funny in a broader social context.

As I reflect upon the work of this thesis, in establishing the praxis between humor and hermeneutics, I cannot help but believe that in some cases, especially in cases in which those in power seek to marginalize alternative viewpoints, satire is even more necessary. I would like to investigate satirical programs like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. Yet the extension of a hermeneutical inquiry, a reflexive examination of *how* and *why* a text is funny ought to cast some light on the hidden authorities of our contemporary traditions as well as our deeply rooted traditions.

Hermeneutics could become a tool of resistance when the individual who examines his or her prejudices acts in response to them. The response could be the act of liberation from those prejudices if the individual thinks those prejudices conflict with reason, or one could act to conserve them if reason dictates that those prejudices are substantiated. The new hermeneutical problem is not simply one of understanding; it is also one of practice, of what we do with that understanding. This line of inquiry approaches the topic of *phronesis*, how we act on our practical understanding. Gadamer wrote extensively on this subject, but the reach of his inquiry went far beyond what I felt I could justly cover in the space of this thesis.

Gadamer writes:

Let us next consider how hermeneutics goes about its work. What consequences for understanding follow from the fact that belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics? We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has transferred it to the art of understanding. It is a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole. (291)

When Gadamer writes about the relationship between the whole and its parts in relation to rhetoric and hermeneutics, I cannot help but try to identify my own critical position as I explore humor. This thesis has been an investigation into an important and substantial part of a whole that I may not have a full grasp of quite yet. This chapter operates to identify some future directions I can take to other parts of the whole. For me, the work of understanding this whole is already well underway, and I believe I have made substantial progress in theoretical considerations and practical applications of humor and hermeneutics. However, I recognize that I must proceed humbly toward the other parts before I can claim to have explored the full potential of a rhetoric and pedagogy of humor.

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