

Webster University

FLST 3160: Topics in Film Studies: Screwball Comedy

Instructor: Dr. Diane Carson, Ph.D.

Email: decarson@aol.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course focuses on classic screwball comedies from the 1930s and 40s. Films studied include *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Awful Truth*, and *The Lady Eve*. Thematic as well as technical elements will be analyzed. Actors include Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Clark Gable, and Barbara Stanwyck. Class involves lectures, discussions, written analysis, and in-class screenings.

COURSE OBJECTIVES: The purpose of this course is to analyze and inform students about the screwball comedy genre. By the end of the semester, students should have:

1. An understanding of the basic elements of screwball comedies including important elements expressed cinematically in illustrative selections from noteworthy screwball comedy directors.
2. An ability to analyze music and sound, editing (montage), performance, camera movement and angle, composition (mise-en-scene), screenwriting and directing and to understand how these technical elements contribute to the screwball comedy film under scrutiny.
3. An ability to apply various approaches to comic film analysis, including consideration of aesthetic elements, sociocultural critiques, and psychoanalytic methodology.
4. An understanding of diverse directorial styles and the effect upon the viewer.
5. An ability to analyze different kinds of screwball comedies from the earliest example in 1934 through the genre's development into the early 40s.
6. Acquaintance with several classic screwball comedies and what makes them unique.
7. An ability to think critically about responses to the screwball comedy genre and to have insight into the films under scrutiny.

We will attempt to do all this through lectures, discussions, readings, and, of course, film screenings.

You will quickly discover that film is a complex medium. Mastery demands time, thought, energy and discipline. If you like film and apply yourself, this class will be very enjoyable. Still, it is a college-level course that demands that you be conscientious in fulfilling all the requirements listed below.

EVALUATION CATEGORIES: Your grade in this class will depend on the following. If you have any questions or concerns at any time during the semester concerning your work or your grade, please feel free to talk with me during office hours or at any other agreed upon time. Please ask for any help you need in this course.

Course Requirements:

1. Regular, punctual attendance.
2. Class preparation and involvement in all discussions.
3. Completion of all reading assignments.
4. Reading and observation journal on reading assignments and films screened.
5. Two short, out-of-class critical/analytical essays.
6. Brief, in-class presentation on one of the screwball comedy films.
7. Final in-class essay from assigned topics.

1. ATTENDANCE: This is very important. You are expected to attend **ALL** classes and to be here the entire time. Our time is extremely limited and learning is cumulative, so we must take advantage of every class hour. Since this is a screening, lecture and discussion class, you miss experiences that can not be made up when you miss a session for any reason.

Your absences will affect your grade and your progress in film study. You should email me and/or talk with me as soon as possible if you miss any class. There are **NO** excused absences. When you are not present for any reason, you are absent. Should you miss class, you are responsible for missed work, information and any change in assignments. Call or see me well **BEFORE** the next class period.

If you know you will be absent, let me know in advance. I do not “excuse” absences; you are present or not, but I do consider your keeping in touch a matter of courtesy and effort on your part.

Class begins promptly. If you repeatedly come late to class, I may mark you absent.

2. & 3. CLASS PREPARATION and PARTICIPATION in DISCUSSION: You are expected to complete all the assigned readings **BEFORE** our class for the week. Be sure to ask about anything you don't understand before, during, or after class.

Because we all learn a great deal from each other, you are expected to be attentive to and involved in all discussions. You should listen carefully to the observations and insights of others and offer your own in a spirit of open discussion and investigation. If you are not polite, you will be asked to leave.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: To earn at least a C for the course, you must complete all of the following assignments. Any late work will automatically lose one full grade. Each assignment will be graded on how well it demonstrates your thoughtful insight and informed analysis.

4. READING and OBSERVATION JOURNAL on READING ASSIGNMENTS and FILMS SCREENED. For each of the first seven weeks, you must write at least one page reflecting on the reading assignments and your response to the film for the week. These entries must be analytical and insightful, NOT subjective responses. Discuss, for example, what in the reading or our discussion helped you understand the film. I will collect your journals twice during the semester with your short analytical essay Week 4 and then with the final essay at the last class session.

5. ANALYTICAL ESSAYS: You must write two short (two-page) papers as a response to the films we study. The topic for each critical/analytical response paper will come directly from our class discussions and readings. Each week after class I will post these topics on our class web site. You will choose your topic from those posted for the class. These essays will be more directed than your journal writing.

Your out-of-class essays are due at the latest: **Week 4: April 9th and Week 7: April 30th**
Hand in your journals with your essays.

6. IN-CLASS PRESENTATION: We will divide into seven groups of three students each. Each group will have responsibility for introducing one film over the course of our class. Each student will present one aspect of the film, speaking for approximately five minutes. Within the group, each student will address a different aspect of the film as outlined in our course objectives on page 1 of this document. These presentations will prepare the rest of the class for the film under scrutiny for that evening. You must have at least an outline or notes from which to speak. When your presentation is over, give me your notes or the outline.

7. FINAL ESSAY: We will have one final, in-class essay the last class period. You will have a choice of questions that will cover the material for the entire course. You may use your class notes for this final essay.

NOTE: PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. A student who deliberately or unintentionally submits as his or her own work anything which is in any part taken from another person without proper acknowledgement, use of quotation marks, credits, etc., is guilty of plagiarism.

Put very simply, "Writing facts, quotations, or opinions that you got from somebody else without identifying your source: or using someone else's words without putting quotation marks around them" constitutes plagiarism (Silverman, et al., Rules of Thumb 86). **Don't do it.** If you submit any plagiarized work or cheat in any way, I will give you an F for the assignment and an F for the course.

Grade Computation:	Analytical Essays:	30%
	Reading and Observation Journal:	30%
	In-Class Presentation:	20%
	Final Essay:	10%
	Attendance/ Participation:	10%

90-100 = A , 80-89 = B, 70-79 = C, 60-69 = D, Below 60 = F

Controversial Course Content: If you feel that any film we will be studying contains material you find offensive, inform me at least one week ahead of that class period. I will give you an alternative assignment. I will try to alert you to controversial films, but I can not anticipate differences of opinion from all of you. Therefore, it is your responsibility to research the upcoming films if you are concerned about their content. Material on all these films is available in book, articles, and on the web.

Classroom expectations:

1. Listen, take notes, and participate.
2. Bring your course materials to each class meeting. When we discuss a reading or writing assignment, have the materials in front of you on your desk.
3. Turn off cell phones and pagers before coming to class. Put them away and do not use them for the duration of the class period. If I hear a signal, I will ask you to leave and count you absent. Do not send or receive text messages while in class.
4. If you sleep or appear to sleep during class I will ask you to leave and count you absent.
5. No cursing, racist, sexist, or any other kind of insulting comments will be tolerated.
6. Come to class on time and prepare to leave when I direct you. Please do not leave when class is in session. It is distracting and discourteous.
7. Only one person speaks at a time. Please pay attention to the person speaking. Do not engage in private conversations not directed to the class. Unless you have something to say related to the discussion topic or the class, save it until you leave.
8. Do not talk during screenings.

Note: For a variety of reasons, course requirements and assignments may change at any time. Changes will be announced in class, so be on time and pay attention to announcements.

If any of these guidelines or requirements bothers you, please talk it over with me. Again, if you have any questions during the semester concerning your progress or the readings or if you want to make suggestions, feel free to talk with me. I am here to help you learn as much as possible about screwball comedy in the time we have. I encourage you to take advantage of any help I may provide to increase your learning.

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Week 1: March 19 *It Happened One Night* 1934 (105 min.)
d. Frank Capra w/Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert
Text: Preface, xiii-xvi & Chapter 2, "Capra and Colbert," 26-49.

Week 2: March 26 *My Man Godfrey* 1936 (90 min.)
d. Gregory LaCava w/Carole Lombard, William Powell
Text: Chapter 3, "Romantic Comedy Settles In," 50-65 and
Chapter 7, "La Cava and Lombard," 134-155

Week 3: April 2 *The Awful Truth* 1937 (92 min.)
d. Leo McCarey w/Irene Dunne, Cary Grant
Text: Chapter 9, "McCarey and Dunne," 182-209.

Week 4: April 9 *Nothing Sacred* 1937 (75 min.)
d. William Wellman w/Carole Lombard, Fredric March

Week 5: April 16 *Bringing Up Baby* 1938 (100 min.)
d. Howard Hawks w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

Week 6: April 23 *Holiday* (1938) (95 min.)
d. George Cukor w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

Week 7: April 30 *His Girl Friday* 1940 (95 min.)
d. Howard Hawks w/Rosalind Russell, Cary Grant

Week 8: May 7 *The Lady Eve* 1941 (97 min.)

d. Preston Sturges w/Barbara Stanwyck, Henry Fonda
Text: Chapter 11, "Sturges, Stanwyck, and Colbert," 234-261 & Conclusion, 263-264.

Topics and Class Issues for Discussion

It Happened One Night 1934 d. Frank Capra w/Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert

- Spoiled heiress, working class journalist, working class values endorsed

My Man Godfrey 1936 d. Gregory LaCava w/Carole Lombard, William Powell

- Wealthy class and forgotten, unemployed men of the Depression
- All a man needs is a job!

The Awful Truth 1937 d. Leo McCarey w/Irene Dunne, Cary Grant

- Wealthy—established and newly rich, sophisticated vs. less refined
- Mocking of unsophisticated singer

Nothing Sacred 1937 d. William Wellman w/Carole Lombard, Fredric March

- No one extremely wealthy
- Cynicism about journalists and society at large—everyone included/satire

Bringing Up Baby 1938 d. Howard Hawks w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

- Wealthy, main issue \$1 m needed for museum
- No sensible, rational central character

Holiday 1938 d. George Cukor w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

- Money as the corruption of free spirited, joyous individuals
- Surrendering to capitalist job/milieu sacrifices artistic self and leads to escape into alcoholism, ennui, and power trips—deciding what others should do

His Girl Friday 1940 d. Howard Hawks w/Rosalind Russell, Cary Grant

- Working journalists, cynicism about their ethics
- Political corruption and gullible public

**And consider: The Production Code and the Depression +
Screwball Wit and Physical Antics, Satire, Farce, and the Carnavalesque**

Comedies of Equality: Gender Equality/Inequality and Stereotyping

It Happened One Night 1934 d. Frank Capra w/Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert

- Ellie: Spoiled heiress lacks common sense, self indulgent and self important, a “brat,” spanked but spunky, goodhearted but stubborn, romantic
- Peter: Reporter with working class values and sense, resourceful, clever, but overconfident, thinks Ellie needs someone “to take a sock at her once a day whether she has it coming to her or not,” patriarchal, scolds and lectures Ellie

My Man Godfrey 1936 d. Gregory LaCava w/Carole Lombard, William Powell

- Irene: Wealthy, eccentric, overly histrionic but good hearted and honest
- Godfrey: In despair at the beginning, disillusioned, intelligent, clever
- Cornelia: Deceptive, spiteful, insensitive, calculating
- Mr. Bullock: Sensible but ignored, ineffective, asserts self and reclaims patriarchy at end
- Mrs. Bullock: Loony, unproductive, uncomprehending

The Awful Truth 1937 d. Leo McCarey w/Irene Dunne, Cary Grant

- Lucy: Clever, intelligent, playful, articulate but cheats to get Mr. Smith, humiliated on the dance floor and embarrassed elsewhere, verbally adept
- Jerry: Lies, deceptive, proud (doesn't want to lose face), enjoys Lucy's humiliation, articulate, clever

Nothing Sacred 1937 d. William Wellman w/Carole Lombard, Fredric March

- Hazel: Selfish, gold-digger, emotional, romantic, ineffective fighter
- Wally: Good journalist but easily duped, will lie and cheat, resourceful, knocks Hazel out cold as they spar to continue their charade of Hazel's illness

Bringing Up Baby 1938 d. Howard Hawks w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

- Susan: Zany, outrageous behavior, verbally literate but quick witted, physically athletic, anarchic
- David: Intellectual, ineffective, easily exasperated, can't cope with Susan's screwball antics but strives to keep up, professorial

Holiday 1938 d. George Cukor w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant

- Linda: Sensible, clear sense of self, refuses to be bossed around, not compromised by greed or capitalist culture, direct and honest, athletic, playful, highly ethical
- Johnny: Tries to compromise, capitalist success but not motivated by \$\$, values independence, athletic, good friend to Potters, playful

His Girl Friday 1940 d. Howard Hawks w/Rosalind Russell, Cary Grant

- Hildy: Terrific journalist with feminine touch, verbally proficient, will deceive and bribe (Earl in jail) but some ethical backbone as well, cries
- Walter: untrustworthy, clever, deceitful, lies easily, manipulative, puts the story (journalism) before personal relationships, self-centered

Other central details and emphasized ideas:

It Happened One Night 1934 d. Frank Capra w/Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert
The Depression, hunger—physical and emotional,

My Man Godfrey 1936 d. Gregory LaCava w/Carole Lombard, William Powell
No admirable woman, Godfrey sensible but Bullocks unhinged, sibling rivalry
Irene poses, throws fits, succumbs to spells and sobs, hysteria

The Awful Truth 1937 d. Leo McCarey w/Irene Dunne, Cary Grant
Undermines legal system, law enforcement, & language; fairly even match

Nothing Sacred 1937 d. William Wellman w/Carole Lombard, Fredric March
Satirical indictment of society, culture of corruption and gullibility, misanthropic,
pessimistic

Bringing Up Baby 1938 d. Howard Hawks w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant
Farce, not gender reversal but destruction of convention and order.
Zany screwball plot, psychiatrist says, “All people who behave strangely are not insane.”
Susan’s actions all to catch David. Carnival spirit.

Holiday 1938 d. George Cukor w/Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant
Indictment of wealth, treatise on values.

His Girl Friday 1940 d. Howard Hawks w/Rosalind Russell, Cary Grant
Career vs. romance instead of just romantic entanglements, corrupt society

Tension between prescribed social roles and being and finding one’s true self.

Locations: Cities, on the road, bums’ Hooverville, nightclubs, woods, cottage away from
“civilization”

Technical style: Conventional Hollywood shot/reverse shot dialogue scenes, seamless
editing that doesn’t call attention to itself, three point lighting, unobtrusive music and
sound

Questions:

Is the happy resolution of marriage ever in doubt? Is it ever rejected or seriously
questioned?

FLST: 3160 Screwball Comedy

Dr. Diane Carson/A Reading Log/Journal.

You are to write at least one page *on each week's film/reading selections*.

I will collect your journal with your analytical essays Week 4: April 9th and Week 7: April 30th. However, present your journal entry for Week 7 (*His Girl Friday*) the last week of class, Week 8.

At the top of each entry, include your last name, the date, the film's title and a 2-3 sentence summary of the film. The remainder of your journal entry is an analytical reaction/commentary about the film.

Keep this as a file you can send to me as an e-mail attachment with your last name and Journal in the subject line. If you create a separate file for each entry, I ask that you compile them into a single file to send as a single attachment rather than a number of attachments. When you save, save it as a Word document, and send it to me in that form. My experience is that I have less trouble opening such attachments.

Note that the entry has two distinct parts—a summary and a commentary or reflection on the film.

Sample Journal Entry Summary:

Carson/March 19, 2008

It Happened One Night: This film follows heiress Ellie Andrews fleeing her father, taking a bus from Miami to New York, and hoping to unite there with her husband King Westley. Just-fired reporter Peter Warne learns her identity, needs the story to regain his job, and shepherds Ellie on her flight to New York. Along the way, they engage in witty banter, playful antics, and fall in love.