

### **Unit of Study: Finding the Funny in Young Adult Lit**

Over two thousand years ago, the Greeks and Romans were producing and performing plays for a vast and varied audience. There were tragedies, there were comedies, and smack dab between the two was a line too thick and high to straddle. Ancient playwrights focused on a singular mood to shroud their plays and blanket the audience. The genres were separate entities, never mixing nor merging. Imagine a world where television consisted of only two channels. The first channel solely plays reruns of *Days of Our Lives*; the second channel only shows reruns of *The Three Stooges*. This adhesion to emotional extremes is rather limiting, is it not? Thankfully, genre restriction has changed over the years, and now we live in a world that opts for far more variation. Yes, we still have the stories focusing on the extremes, but now we also have many shades of grey residing in between.

Hundreds of thousands of novels, short stories, plays, poems, and films are easily accessible to the public. There's a spectrum of genres available to experience, yet for some reason many scholars hold the works that are associated with drama in the highest esteem. Those arts that have an emphasis on humor are, for the most part, still treated as second-rate works. This is especially so in the high school classroom. Often as not, teachers choose Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth* over *The Taming of the Shrew*, the works of Hawthorne and Poe over that of Twain and Swift. And why is this? Comedy is a fundamental component of the human experience. To leave comedy out of the classroom is a great injustice to the students.

I propose a curriculum that focuses on humor, and the analysis of comedy in literature. The aim of this curriculum would not be to have students learn how to tell jokes, but rather to understand them, identify their functionality in art, and to create discourse of the author's intentions for taking the comedic route. This Unit of Study would center on the canonical novel of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five*. This is a novel that is already taught in many classrooms across the nation and is widely considered by critics to be a masterpiece. It's dark, it's gritty, and a very honest piece of literature. It also, despite being very dark in subject matter, is quite funny. It's a great piece to introduce to students to show just how serious humor can be.

#### Beginning the Unit:

Before diving right into *Slaughterhouse-five*, have your students discuss all the different types of humor they are familiar with via the entertainment they are exposed to. Many teenagers, as we all know, are experts on sarcasm, but having them discuss the shows, the books, the movies they find funny can help them begin to identify *why* they find it funny. After the short class room discussion, read the following passage from *Man without a Country* (the following quote is taken from pages 19-20):

“So I went to a friend's house—Bernie O'Hare, who'd been my pal. And we were trying to remember funny stuff about our time as prisoners of war in Dresden, tough talk and all that, stuff that would make a nifty war movie. And his wife, Mary O'Hare, blew her stack. She said, 'You were nothing but babies then.'”

And that is true of soldiers. They are in fact babies. They are not movie stars. They are not Duke Wayne. And realizing that was the key, I was finally free to tell the truth. We were children and the subtitle of *Slaughterhouse Five* became *The Children's Crusade*.

Why had it taken my twenty-three years to write about what I had experienced in Dresden? We all came home with stories, and we all wanted to cash in, one way or another. And what Mary O'Hare was saying, in effect, was, 'Why don't you tell the truth for a change?'

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story after the First World War called "A Soldier's Home" about how it was very rude to ask a soldier what he'd seen when he got back home. I think a lot of people, including me, clammed up when a civilian asked about battle, about war. It was fashionable. One of the most impressive ways to tell your war story is to refuse to tell it, you know. Civilians would then have to imagine all kinds of deeds of derring-do.

But I think the Vietnam War freed me and other writers, because it made our leadership and our motives seem so scruffy and essentially stupid. We could finally talk about something bad that we did to the worst people imaginable, the Nazis. And what I saw, and I had to report, made war look so ugly. You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff. You're not expecting it. Of course, another reason not to talk about war is that it's unspeakable."

After the class soaks this in, read the following quotes aloud and have the students write a short response. Their response should include an account of a past experience where the use of humor offered a moment of enlightenment or was used as a mechanism for coping with life's tragedies.

*"Humor is something that thrives between man's aspirations and his limitations. There is more logic in humor than in anything else. Because, you see, humor is truth." - Victor Borge*

*"Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it." - Bill Cosby*

*"Humor is perhaps a sense of intellectual perspective: an awareness that some things are really important, others not; and that the two kinds are most oddly jumbled in everyday affairs." - Christopher Morley*

Reading the Novel:

Slaughterhouse-five is a book that asks the reader a very serious question multiple times throughout its entirety, and that question is: would you like to laugh or would you rather cry? And that's the difficulty with analyzing something that is brutally honest. There is a fundamental *truth* that must be acknowledged and recognized.

Ideas:

\*Have the students read the book aloud. *Slaughterhouse-five* is a series of vignettes that push the narrative forward at a quick pace. It's a sequence of short steps that are perfect for a cycle of student readers. Vonnegut's narrator has a strong voice in this story, and much of the humor found in the story is delivered through pacing of the narration. Having students vocalizing the narrative will help others *hear* this delivery.

\*Every week, have the students read two chapters. Have them highlight particular spots they thought were funny, that they thought were sad, that they weren't sure if they were supposed to be funny or sad... Each class period the students should report their findings. As a class, the students should try to analyze the *why* of the humor, *the why* of the sadness, and the *reasoning* behind the ambiguity.

\*Along with reading *Slaughterhouse-five*, students should be asked to read a book of their own choosing. Having a book pass during class would be a great way for students to witness the plethora of young adult novels that are available and this would allow them the time needed to be able to choose one that seems to suit their particular tastes. Upon reading their "new" book, students should report back to the class *how* their book uses comedy. Some of the young adult books that I recommend are:

**Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak***

**Anderson tells the story of Melinda, a young teenager with a nightmare of a past. Melinda narrates the story and has strong, sarcastic voice that absolutely pours off the page. Students could analyze the reasoning behind Anderson's creation of a character that has such a powerful narrative voice, yet practically no verbal communication with other characters in the novel. Students can discuss how humor can coincide with such a dark topic.**

**William Goldman's *The Princess Bride***

**Many students will be acquainted with the movie, but the book (as is often the case) is much better, and much funnier. The lovely narrator of the novel takes no credit for the story and instead confesses that this is the *abridged* version of another author's longer**

work. This gives the narrator ample time to reveal all of the bits and pieces of the fictional *cut* parts of the story. It's also a great introduction to meta-fiction.

### **Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle***

This book is a great companion novel to *Slaughterhouse-five*. The story centers on a researcher who wishes to write about an event that occurred during World War II. However, his inquiries lead him on a journey to the fictional country of San Lorenzo, the poorest nation in the world. There, he is introduced to Bokononism, a strange religion that points a shaming finger at the human condition. This book is far removed from the horrors of war, but Vonnegut still has much to say about the complexity of life and the idiotic tendencies of mankind to rattle the fragile gifts that life presents us.

### **Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man without a Country***

In this non-fictional book, Vonnegut is just as cynical and funny as he is in his fiction. Students can compare and contrast the bluntness of Vonnegut's perceptions. *Man without a Country* is a look into one of America's finest minds. Because this is a volume that was published decades after *Slaughterhouse-five* and *Cat's Cradle*, students can discuss whether or not Vonnegut changed his authorial stance at this point in his life, or is he still very much Vonnegut?

### **Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy***

Students may be interested to see how humor is created in a genre that is normally reserved for an emphasis on science. The possibilities for comedy are as numerous as there

are stars. Adams' story, told over a series of five books, follows the seemingly hapless Arthur Dent, a man who is about to have his house demolished to make room for a freeway. Unfortunately, Arthur's day is about to get much worse. This story will take the reader on a hilarious journey across space and ultimately reveal the answer to life, the universe, and, well, everything.

### Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*

The year is 1985 and, like every summer, Benji Cooper is spending vacation with his family in the small community of Sag Harbor. But this year is different; Benji and his fellow Sag Harbor retreaters are on the cusp of adulthood – which means that it is their turn to rule the streets. Whitehead paints a very real world with his prose, one that's honest and full of friction. This is a coming of age story, and it's one that showcases the growth of maturity through trial and error, discovery and consequence, and the time spent hanging with friends during the waning months of adolescence.

There should also be a final project at the conclusion of the novel. Possible options are:

- 1) Writing a short story (3-5 pages) that uses comedy in an appropriate way: meaning that the humor supports the narrative of the story and the intended thematic elements.
- 2) Write a one to two page true story of an experience in the past that was either sad or somber. Then, in contrast, write a one to two page fictional version of that same story by inserting comedic elements. See how much the voice can change the tone of the story.

- 3) Write a paper comparing the comedic elements of *Slaughterhouse-five* to that of the book of the student's own choosing. Explain the differences in the author's approach to humor. How do you feel the comedic elements are (or are not) successful?

## Works Cited

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**COULD YOU HUMOR ME FOR  
'TEN-ISH MINUTES?'**

A Pitch to Introduce Humor to the High School  
English Curriculum

# TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

Greek and Roman Plays

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### PURE DRAMA



# TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

Greek and Roman Plays

PURE DRAMA



[tvequals.com](http://tvequals.com)

PURE SLAPSTICK



[midatlanticnostalgiaconvention.com](http://midatlanticnostalgiaconvention.com)

## HUMOR: IT'S PERSONAL

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Discourse

\*Does the author succeed? Is the comedy too much, too little?\*

## QUOTES ON HUMOR

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*SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*

Based off Vonnegut's experience during World War II

\*Should you laugh, or should you cry? / Highlight / Report\*

Vignettes serve as stepping stones

\*Good for reading aloud in class\*

Comparison to other Young Adult Books

\*Book Pass\*

## BOOK TALK

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