Teaching Humor in 20th-Century French Literature in the 21st-Century Classroom

Jennifer Willging
The Ohio State University

In this essay I reflect on the anxiety-raising practice of teaching humor in what can seem like an increasingly humorless time, and university. It has its origins in a conference presentation at the 2024 20th and 21st-century French and Francophone Studies Colloquium, for which I organized a panel titled "Are Literary Studies Fit for Safe Spaces?" Panelists discussed the hazards of teaching and producing scholarship in French and Francophone Studies, and literature in general, in the contemporary American university, where it has become more and more difficult not to offend. Free speech has in theory been a hallmark of both the French and US republics for over two centuries. Recently in the US, however, forces on both the right and the left appear intent on limiting the speech of those they perceive to be on the other side. This is not a new phenomenon, but these kinds of efforts have become more common with increased political polarization in this country, and with the increased facility with which everyday citizens can use the internet to express their opinions and try to influence others. In our limited context of teaching literature, participants in our panel asked questions such as, how does a scholar teach or write about a sexist, racist, and Islamophobic author (who also happens to be France's most important contemporary writer) without incurring suspicion in the best case, cancellation in the worst? How does a scholar who does not share the racial, ethnic, sexual, or other personal identity traits of the authors whose work they study and teach do so without risking the charge of cultural appropriation or an incapacity to truly understand their subject? More generally, how can faculty prepare their students to be informed, broad-minded, and critically acute citizens if they are deemed, and indeed see themselves as, too fragile to be safely exposed to the breadth of human thought?

When I mentioned to the organizer of the conference that I was in the midst of teaching a course on humor in 20th-century French literature, he told me (despite being a very witty guy himself) that he would rather have all his teeth pulled by a novice dentist than have to explain to other people why something is funny (to which I replied that I felt the same way about organizing an academic conference). His comment called to mind the remark by E.B. White (author of *Charlotte's Web*) that humor can be dissected like a frog, but that, regrettably, it always dies in the process. I myself am not averse to discussing with students why and how something might be considered funny—I just hoped I wouldn't have to explain first that it was funny, or at least that it was intended to be funny. I often did, however; but this isn't surprising, given that French was not these students' first language and that

the comprehension and appreciation of humor usually depends on not only linguistic but cultural and historical knowledge as well. It also depends on context and individual tastes and sensibilities, among other factors; humor's success depends on so many variables, in fact, that it's a wonder anyone attempts it all. Yet humanity has done so for millennia. As neuroscience has discovered, the laughter that successful humor induces helps rid our blood of the stress hormone cortisol in exchange for feel-good chemicals like dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins (Mobbs et al.). The hit, it would seem, is worth the risk.

One of the reasons for which I wanted to teach an entire course on humor in literature was to focus with students on a number of rhetorical devices and figures that lend themselves to humor, like parody, pastiche, antiphrasis, hyperbole, understatement, and the like. I consider it essential that they be able to recognize these and other figurative uses of language if they are to be truly literate, and so that they can avoid being the dupes of the verbal irony such figures often generate. I also wanted to have fun. Yet while I have taught French literature for almost thirty years, I have never experienced as much angst while selecting reading material as I have in the last several, not just for this course but for all my literature courses. It so happens that some of the most humorous writers in French literary history have also been among the most troubling or controversial, still—or especially—today: Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Diderot, Flaubert, Céline, Beckett, Despentes, Beigbeder, Houellebecq (the polemic-generating author to whom I make reference above), to name a few.

We are all likely aware of the rapid rise in attempts in the US to ban books outright at the primary and secondary education levels, this mostly on the political right; and of efforts, on the left, to remove books from university syllabuses because of the unsavory ideologies of their authors (sexism, racism, antisemitism, colonialism), or else to have them labeled with trigger warnings for content that risks upsetting the reader.[1] There is also the recent phenomenon of state legislatures proposing bills that restrict in one way or another the teaching of so-called divisive or controversial concepts in higher education, such as climate change, gender fluidity, and critical race theory. As of 2025, eleven Republican-majority state legislatures have successfully passed such bills. Departments as diverse as Biology, Environmental Sciences, and Women's and Gender Studies increasingly have to worry about presenting research that challenges or contradicts the deeply held

[1] The American Library Association compiles each year a list of the "Top Ten Most Challenged Books," and in 2023 they documented reports of 4,240 books targeted for censorship in one way or another (by parents, teachers, administrators, or various organizations), which constituted a 65% increase over 2022 (https://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10). In his 2024 *Triggered Literature: Cancellation, Stealth Censorship and Cultural Warfare*, British professor of English John Sutherland traces the idea of putting trigger warnings on printed material (which he dates to 2010) and discusses its explosion in the sphere of higher education since 2014 (10-12).

beliefs of some of their students (or at least their state legislators), such as that creationism explains the origins of the universe or that climate change is a hoax. On the other hand, faculty must also be concerned about the prevalence of what has been named cancel culture, especially on the left, which holds that faculty whose research challenges certain progressive ideas, such as that sexual differences are purely social constructions or that pay gaps among demographic groups are always the result of systemic racism or sexism, must be denounced, publicly humiliated, and/or fired.[2]

In the Arts and Humanities, faculty members have to think more and more carefully about the content of the cultural and artistic creations they plan to present to their students. That most literature instructors today reflect more than ever on diversity and inclusivity when choosing authors and works is certainly a positive and welcome change from an earlier era. At the same time, it strikes me as quite impossible to come up with a list of materials that risk offending no one. No matter who has produced it, in whatever historical-cultural context, good literature, for one, is not a non-contact sport. It does not seek first to comfort or confirm but to challenge, contradict, provoke, and sometimes shock.

So how does an instructor approach the misogyny, racism, antisemitism, anti-clericalism, homophobia, Orientalism, Islamophobia, anti-Americanism, and other sorts of nastiness so often found in important literature? French authors have no monopoly on these and other bigotries, but many are gifted at expressing them in good literary style, and very often with humor. Throughout history the French public has also been more tolerant, indeed more desirous, of scandalous literature than American society, for various reasons, including the influence of puritanism on this latter; the value the French have long placed on *esprit* (wit), which a touch of malice only makes better; and the less idealist (Americans would say cynical) lens through which the French tend to view the world. While an early-in-the-semester discussion of these and other factors that determine the kinds of discourse various cultures tolerate and even find funny can help prepare the terrain, it can still feel to many instructors, to appropriate a contemporary catchword, unsafe to teach literature in the contemporary American university. Not without reason. As many commentators on campus culture have noted, there has been a spate of incidents over especially the last ten to twelve years in which faculty members, administrators, or students have been censored or cancelled because of things they

[2] On cancel culture, see, for example, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, who argue we are now living in what they call victimhood culture; Adrian Daub, who traces the American origins and global spread of cancel culture; Greg Lukianoff, who maintains that cancel culture obviates the need for sound argumentation, a skill we must revive; John Sutherland, who catalogues instances of academic cancellation since 2014; and Deborah Appleman, who raises alarms about the removal of a growing number of authors and books from secondary-school reading lists.

said.[3] An unwitting English professor meets such a fate in the 2021 HBO series *The Chair* after he is filmed making a Hitler salute in class and the video, without context, goes viral. This plot line was apparently based on a real case of faculty cancellation at the Manhattan high school attended by the show's co-creator, actor and producer Amanda Peet (Sarbib). Incidentally (or ironically?), *The Chair* was cancelled after only one season.

In doing research for this article, I discovered to my surprise that there exist numerous step-by-step guides for teachers who want, despite the perceived peril, to inject humor into their teaching. I cannot help but be skeptical of the efficacity of such guides, one of which concludes by making the suggestion to the reader that if their students groan and roll their eyes when they tell a joke, their best bet might be to "refrain from using humor in [their] classroom in the future" (Appleby). But for the brave or the reckless who scoff at such caution, in what follows I offer a few examples of the ways in which I have used humor in my courses and the ends to which I have done so.

In 2012, in a course not on literature but on literary and cultural theory for graduate students, I showed two clips from *Saturday Night Live* in a unit on gender and queer theories. One was an iteration of the early 1990s' recurring skit "It's Pat," in which colleagues in an office desperately seek to determine the gender of the eponymous character, played by Julia Sweeney. The other was an installment of the recurring superhero cartoon "The Ambiguously Gay Duo" (which aired between 1996 and 2011) in which those working both with and against the duo are driven to distraction trying to determine the duo's sexual orientation.[4] My point in showing these clips was to demonstrate, in a humorous way, I hoped, that we humans tend to believe that if we cannot identify these two facets of an individual's identity—their gender and their sexual orientation—we face an epistemological black hole from which we may never emerge. This is precisely because not knowing this information prevents us from making the cascade of assumptions about the individual that we are unfortunately, sometimes tragically, programmed to make. Are these skits offensive? They may be to some, but in discussing them with my students, we were able to discern quite clearly that the targets of the jokes were not Pat or the duo. The targets were those around them who are crippled by the absence of what they believe to be a crucial piece of knowledge. The villains in "The Ambiguously Gay Duo" are so preoccupied by the enigma that they can't concentrate on and so can't attain their goal of world domination (which suggests that one of the duo's superpowers is precisely their sexual ambiguity). Pat's co-

[3] For an account of a number of such incidents, see Lukianoff and Haidt.

[4] Interestingly, one of the protagonists in *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* is voiced by Steven Colbert, avowed liberal and host of the *Late Show*, which is scheduled for cancellation in May 2026 largely for being, some argue, critical of the Trump administration. See Molly Jong-Fast's guest essay for *The New York Times* for an example of such an assessment.

workers' repeated attempts to elicit a clue about Pat's gender are foiled at every turn, as when one of them asks Pat if they are married. Pat responds that they were once engaged but that unfortunately things fell apart before the wedding. The fiancé(e?)'s name? Chris. The reactions of my students (of various sexual orientations and gender identities) to this discussion appeared to be what I had hoped it would be, which was 1) a recognition of the outsized and misguided importance we place on fixing gender and sexual orientation, 2) a greater understanding of humanity's obsessive and often destructive insistence on epistemological certainty in general in a maddeningly ambiguous world, and 3) amusement. I have not had the opportunity to teach this course since 2012; if I did I am not sure I would show those clips now. I don't know if my apprehensions are justified, but it feels as if the stakes of making a mistake in this forum are too high to be willing to find out.

That students today, a dozen years later, are more sensitive to discussions of gender, for example, was anecdotally confirmed in a third-year survey of French literature course I taught last year. I asked students to write a short analysis of their choice of two La Fontaine fables that we hadn't yet discussed in class. In one of them, "La Femme noyée" 'The Drowned Woman,' a man's wife drowns in a river. The sorrowful man walks along the bank looking for villagers who may have seen her body. He comes upon two men who had known his wife, and while they tell him they haven't seen the body, they each offer him advice. One suggests he look downstream, as the body surely will have floated in that direction. The other, however, tells the man that, given his wife's contrariness while alive, he would do well to look upstream.

A male student turned in a very earnest essay about how sexist the man's joke was, and also how tasteless it was of him to make any joke at all, much less a sexist one, to a man in such a state of bereavement. I have to admit that both the fable and the student's essay made me chuckle. I couldn't help but wonder if the student would have written such a feminist analysis of the fable if I weren't a female professor, before whom he might have felt he would be remiss not to point out the sexism of the joke. But perhaps he would have, perhaps this was another sign that this generation of students has been carefully trained to call out anything that might be perceived as offensive to anyone, even to a fictional, 17th-century, white, heterosexual man. At the same time, I recognize that as someone who identifies as a woman, I likely believe myself more allowed to enjoy what could be labeled misogynist humor than those who identify as male likely do. Yet I am also able to laugh at the cleverness of the villager in the fable without subscribing to the idea that women are by nature contrary.[5] That ostensibly the student didn't find the fable funny reinforced to me, however, the extent to which humor is, in the end, in the

[5] And if we are, it's only because men are so often wrong.

eye of the beholder. What "is" funny depends not just on the linguistic, social, cultural, and historical competence of the receiver but on context and on their individual experiences, beliefs, and judgement. This is why using humor is a risky business, with potential for both resounding success and embarrassing failure. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai put it in their special journal issue on the topic, "Comedy has issues." "As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life," they write, "[humor's] action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure" (233).

In thinking more about what kinds of humor (aside from misogynist) I am less nervous about sharing with students, I realized that I feel little anxiety about exposing them, for example, to Voltaire's frequently scathing jokes about Jesuits or followers of Leibnitz. The flimsy reasons I use to justify this are that a) I doubt there have been any Jesuit priests or followers of Leibnitz in my public university classrooms; b) I'll bet that most of my students don't know any Jesuits or followers of Leibnitz personally; and 3) I suspect that few know what either one is. Note that I realize these are not good reasons, they are just my reasons; how might I feel about teaching Voltaire at Loyola or Georgetown? As you may suspect, I tread much more carefully around Voltaire's antisemitic and racist humor, because in these cases none of my three suppositions above is likely true. If teaching Voltaire is worthwhile, which I believe it is (despite efforts even in France to cancel him), in doing so I ensure that we recognize antisemitic and racist humor as such, and that we discuss the historical context in which the work was written, as well as the seemingly contradictory nature of an imperfect man's beliefs (his condemnation of slavery and religious intolerance while endorsing a hierarchy of races) ("Paris Statues of Voltaire"; Braun).

In the course I taught specifically on humor in twentieth-century French literature, I tried to bookend the dark and critical humor of Céline, Eugène Ionesco, Paule Constant, and Houellebecq with the generally gentler humor of Proust and Amélie Nothomb (although those on the lookout for classism will raise an eyebrow at Proust's portrayals of the foibles of the beloved servant Françoise). Yet since even the short snippets of Proust offered and glossed in Laure Hilleran's *Proust pour le rire* ('Proust for Laughter') were impenetrable to many of the students, really that left just Nothomb's novel. In what follows I will give examples of how we analyzed potentially disturbing passages from three of the texts we studied in the course: Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*) (1932), Paule Constant's *Balta* (*Balta*) (1986), and Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (*Whatever*) (1998). All three novels offer multiple humorous but dicey passages from which to choose, whether the sensitive subject matter in question be war, colonialism, race relations, feminism, or other.

In approaching Céline's *Voyage*, I start by informing students of the controversial nature of the author's life: the virulent antisemitism of especially his 1930s pamphlets, his half-hearted collaboration with the Germans during the Occupation, his misogyny, his flight to Germany and subsequent condemnation in French courts following the war. I encourage students to suspend judgement of the author and concentrate on the work in order to find out if there is anything in it they might find worthwhile. I tell them about a comparative literature course I took as an undergraduate in which we read Rousseau's *Confessions*. I wrote an essay for the course in which I opined that it was hard to take lessons in morality from a man who abandoned five of his own children in succession. The very wise professor suggested in her comments that while that may be true, surely there were still some useful nuggets in his writings. She was essentially saying—to use a particularly appropriate metaphor here—that we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. In all my courses, I make certain students know that they don't have to agree with all or even any of the ideas presented in a text we study for it to still be worth their time to read and understand it.

One of the passages in *Voyage* we analyze together takes place near the beginning of the novel, when the young and naïve protagonist Ferdinand Bardamu finds himself on the battlefield, having been swept to the enlistment office by a patriotic parade in 1914 Paris. A soldier arrives with a message for the colonel who is leading Bardamu and his fellow troops. "Le maréchal des logis Barousse vient d'être tué, mon colonel, qu'il dit tout d'un trait" 'The staff sergeant has just been killed, colonel, he exclaimed,' Bardamu recounts in his first-person narrative.

—Et alors ? [demands the colonel]
—Il a été tué en allant chercher le fourgon à pain sur la route des Étapes, mon colonel !
—Et alors ?
—Il a été éclaté par un obus ! —Et alors, nom de Dieu !
—Et voilà, mon colonel . . .
—C'est tout ?
—Oui, c'est tout, mon colonel.
—Et le pain ? demanda le colonel. (16-17)

—So what?
—He was on his way to meet the bread wagon on the Étapes road, colonel.
—So what?
—He was blown up by a shell! —So what, dammit!
—That's it, colonel …
—Is that all?
—Yes, sir, that's all, colonel.

—What about the bread? demanded the colonel.[6]

Before the messenger has a chance to reveal the fate of the bread, however, another shell hits the three men, and the colonel is killed instantly.

At the beginning of the course, students are introduced to the three main theories of humor, the most commonly agreed upon being that of incongruity—that is, that most humor arises from an incongruous juxtaposition and a consequent overturning of expectations.[7] In the passage above, the incongruity is between the reactions of two characters, the colonel and the young messenger, to the news of the grisly death of the staff sergeant. For the latter, this information is newsworthy, but for the veteran colonel, it quite clearly is not. What is especially amusing is how long it takes the obviously inexperienced messenger to figure out (if he ever does) what it is the colonel really cares about: the fate not of the soldier but of the bread he was going to fetch. Readers are invited to ask whose attitude is the most rational in this situation; some may come to the conclusion that whereas under normal circumstances it would be the soldier's, in the context of war it is not. Such shock would be a luxury the colonel cannot afford since his primary duty is to keep as many other soldiers alive as long as possible (hence his preoccupation with the bread) so as to go on fighting, even if in the end they all serve as cannon fodder. An additional element of the black humor in this passage is the fate of the colonel, which ironically ends up being the same as that of the sergeant whose life he considered cheaper than bread. This fate too could be interpreted in various ways by readers, as poetic justice for so callous a man for some, as just another casualty in the nonsensical carnage of war for others.

Some readers might also conclude (as we might surmise the author himself did) that a situation, like war, in which a violent death does not shock is a travesty of all human values and therefore should be prevented at all costs. This pacifist message would certainly have appealed to many French readers at the time of the novel's publication, most of whom had lived through if not fought in the First World War and were still (on the eve of the rise of Hitler) clinging to the hope that it would be the one to end them all. And most of those readers would not have batted an eyelash at the misogyny, antisemitism, or racism in the novel, as its instant success attests: it just missed the Goncourt Prize, not because of these elements but because the jury felt it was just too depressing (one assessment of the novel, at least, with which most of today's students would agree). Whether today's reader finds *Voyage* funny or not, at the very least it still provokes, as it did in 1932, reflection on some of life's most complex questions.

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[6] All translations are my own.

[7] The other two are superiority theory and relief theory. For a summary of the three theories, see, for example, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/).

Paule Constant is a contemporary French writer who published her first of nine novels in 1980 and who won the Prix Goncourt for her seventh, *Confidence pour confidence* (*Trading Secrets*) (1998). Unlike *Confidence*, most of her novels take place in the French colonies or former colonies. Her work, like Céline's, is patently anti-colonial, but also like his it is often politically incorrect (Willging). Also as in Céline's fictional universe, the vast majority of the characters in Constant's, whatever the color of their skin, are deeply flawed at best, and despicable in many cases. In one of the two main storylines in *Balta*, which takes place in a fictional postcolonial African nation in the 1970s or early '80s, French and African literary scholars meet at an academic conference, where relations between the two groups, predictably, quickly go south. What starts out as "un grand Colloque de la Culture franco-africaine" 'a great Colloquium on Franco-African Culture' (67) becomes, after the White participants have sufficiently irked the Black participants, a "Colloque d'études négro-africaines" 'Colloquium on Negro-African Studies' (215), despite being funded by the French government. There is plenty of racism to go around within both groups of characters, and the pomposity, grandstanding, and petty rivalries for which academics are well known are exercised in about equal measure by both. The watchword of the conference is "authenticity"; in this spirit, the heterodiegetic narrator informs us that,

> Pour clou du spectacle, le comité d'organisation du Colloque avait ménagé une surprise aux participants. Ils exhumèrent un petit vieux qui se tenait au fond de l'amphi. […] Sa longue robe, son énorme turban donnaient à sa silhouette un air religieux. Il était conteur […], il allait dire un conte. La voix douce de l'honorable invité surprit la salle qui n'avait jusque-là entendu que des discours fermement assenés. Elle ne se rendit pas compte que le vieillard s'exprimait dans son dialecte. C'est après avoir réclamé que le son fût poussé que les auditeurs se rendirent à l'évidence, le son n'y était pour rien, ils ne comprenaient pas. […] Le conte se déroulait interminablement. Exclus, les spectateurs gardaient un silence poli. (221-22)
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> For the highlight of the show, the organizing committee had planned a surprise for the participants. They disinterred a little old man who was standing in the back of the lecture hall. […] His long robe and enormous turban gave him the air of a religious figure. He was a storyteller […], he was going to tell a story. The quiet voice of the honorable guest surprised the audience, who had to this point only heard very hard-hitting talks. They didn't realize that the old man was speaking in his dialect. It was only after asking that the volume be turned up that they realized the volume had

> nothing to do with it; they understood nothing. […] The story seemed to go on forever. Excluded, the spectators maintained a polite silence.

It's only when the five or six of the several hundred attendees who actually understand the storyteller's language begin to clap that the others, Black and White, realize he has finished. They join in enthusiastically, grateful that this exercise in absurdity is finally over, even throwing in a few hearty "bravos!" for the record (222).

Here again, the source of the comedy is largely incongruity, that of a key presenter at a nominally important conference giving a long speech in a language almost none of the attendees understand. His dialect nevertheless serves a purpose for the conference organizers: it is an index of the authenticity of the conference and therefore of their own authenticity as individuals and scholars. They can bask in their status as stalwarts against French hegemony, and only at the expense of nearly all the conference-goers. Also incongruous is the vigorous applause for what could have been the reading of a washing-machine manual for all the audience members know. An analysis of this passage could also attend to the narrator's use of free indirect discourse, of which Constant is a virtuoso, and its contribution to the humor through its mimicry and ambiguity. The instructor can ask students whose point of view they think is being expressed in each line of the passage. It is the narrator who speaks, but the point of view seems to shift, perhaps from that of the organizers (to whom we might attribute vocabulary such as "clou du spectacle," "surprise," and "honorable invité"), to that of audience members (who might utter such words as "le vieillard," "le son n'y était pour rien," and "interminablement"). We can also ask students whose side they think the narrator is on; or if they think she is poking fun at both groups, at the pompous disregard of the organizers and the hypocritical deference of the audience. It's interesting to note that Constant's portrayal of this conference may have its roots in a personal experience given that she is an academic as well as a novelist, and that other experiences of her characters echo some of her own, whether as the child of a colonial physician or as an academic. Whatever the case, Constant does not hesitate to expose, in this and the rest of her work, the hypocrisy, egotism, and cowardice that lurk in all our hearts, regardless of race. Her humor, however, likely found a more receptive audience in 1980s France than it might in an American university in the 2020s, where many students are vigilantly on the lookout for all manner of -isms. Of these there are plenty in Constant's work. Yet in learning about the mechanisms and effects of free indirect discourse, which gives us access to multiple and often contradictory points of view but invites us to hold them all at arms' length, students can consider how subjective and partial our perception of the world is and how susceptible we all are to prejudice and misunderstanding.

Michel Houellebecq is arguably the most controversial French writer of the last thirty years, objectively one of the best-selling, and certainly the one who has generated the most activity among literary scholars and critics. He burst onto the international literary scene with 1998's *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Elementary Particles*), which chronicles the decline of Western civilization over the last two decades of the twentieth century through the story of two half-brothers who, though strikingly different in personality, resemble each other and the majority of Houellebecq's male protagonists in their gradual fall into debilitating depression. Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lute* (*Whatever*), is much shorter than *Particules* and therefore a more approachable assignment for undergraduate students. It also already lays out one of the author's most fundamental contentions, clear throughout his work, that the rejection of traditional institutions (marriage, family, religion, nation) and the sexual revolution of May '68 bequeathed to contemporary France an apathetic, anomic, and pathologically individualist society in which a person's value depends first and foremost on their worth on the sexual free market.

At one point in *Extension*, the unnamed, homodiegetic, and requisitely depressive male narrator takes a moment to recount the anecdote of the suicide of a mid-level administrator his ex-girlfriend had known. The man had spent several months, without success, shopping for a new bed before his death, and his coworkers joked that this may have been what precipitated his suicide. Instead of poohpoohing such a seemingly farfetched supposition, the narrator goes on, at great length, to demonstrate its perfect rationality (apologies for the length of the following passage, which is nevertheless quite abbreviated compared to the original).

> [L]'achat d'un lit, de nos jours, présente effectivement des difficultés considérables, et il y a bien de quoi vous mener au suicide. D'abord il faut prévoir la livraison, et donc en général prendre une demi-journée de congé, avec tous les problèmes que ça pose. […] Ces difficultés se reproduisent pour tous les meubles et les appareils ménagers […]. Mais le lit, entre tous les meubles, pose un problème spécialement, éminemment douloureux. Si l'on veut garder la considération du vendeur on est obligé d'acheter un lit à deux places, qu'on en ait ou non l'utilité, qu'on ait ou non la place de le mettre. Acheter un lit à une place c'est avouer publiquement qu'on n'a pas de vie sexuelle et qu'on n'envisage pas d'en avoir dans un avenir rapproché ni même lointain (car les lits durent longtemps de nos jours […] en moyenne bien plus longtemps que les mariages, on ne le sait que trop bien). […] Même l'achat d'un lit de 140 vous fait passer pour un petit-bourgeois mesquin et étriqué; aux yeux des vendeurs, le lit de 160 est le seul qui vaille

> vraiment d'être acheté; là vous avez le droit à leur respect, à leur considération, voire à un léger sourire complice. (101-02)
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> Today, the purchase of a bed in fact presents considerable difficulties, and there's plenty about it that could lead you to suicide. First you have to schedule the delivery, which generally requires you to take a half-day off work, with all the problems that entails. […] These are the same difficulties for all furniture and appliances […]. But the bed, among all furniture, poses a particularly and eminently painful problem. If you want to maintain the salesman's respect you have to buy a queen size bed, whether or not you have the need or the space. Buying a simple double bed is admitting publicly that you don't have a sex life and that you don't plan on having one anytime soon, or even farther into the future (because beds last a long time nowadays, […] on average a lot longer than most marriages, as we know only too well). Even buying a double bed makes you seem like a cheap petty bourgeois; a queen size bed is the only one really worth buying; with that you deserve the salesman's respect, his consideration, even a little smile of complicity.

The principal source of humor in this passage is once again incongruity, that between the seemingly banal and innocuous act of buying a bed and two things: the length and the elevated register of the discussion of this act; and, more importantly, the relatively rare and tremendously consequential effect it supposedly precipitated in this instance. The narrator meticulously lays out his reasoning, yet he is aware that his first explanation—that logistical complications could be to blame—does little to lessen the skeptical reader's reservations, for in that case purchasing a refrigerator would be equally hazardous to one's health. He therefore advances to the real meat of his argument: while a consumer may only need a double bed, social pressure compels him to buy a bigger one in order not to appear publicly as what would be termed today an incel, an involuntary celibate. If he cannot do so (say for reasons of budget or space), suicide might indeed seem like a reasonable way out of the impasse. By the conclusion of this passage, logic that appears specious at first turns out to be quite sound. What the narrator is suggesting, in the end, is that it was loneliness and a lack of self-esteem, two rational and well documented causes of suicide, that sealed the man's fate. Yet, the reader might wonder, is the narrator taking his own arguments seriously here? Or is he being ironic? Or if he is serious, is the author being ironic? This ambiguity only adds to the comic effect, as helping to alleviate the discomfort of contradiction and ambiguity, inevitable complications of human life, is one of humor's hallmarks.[8]

[8] For a discussion of how humor helps us to cope with an uncertain and complex world, see, for example, Scott Weems.

However, like that in the Céline passage above, the humor in this passage is rather morbid and possibly disturbing for some (as instructors know well, references to suicide in a book or film now often provoke demands for a trigger warning). Yet suicide, like war and racism, while certainly tragic, is an element of life our species has not yet been able to eradicate. That all three of these plagues appear frequently in literature (and in film, and in television, and in video games, and on the news, etc.) is thus in no way surprising. Pretending that they do not exist does not fool students, nor does it do them any service. A key part of our job as educators is to prepare young people not just or even principally for a profession, which is largely learned on the job, but for life. In children's fairy tales, after all, dangers of all kinds lurk around every corner, attesting to our forbearers' belief that it was best to expose children to the negative side of life early.[9] This said, Houellebecq's humor is not for everyone, and disliking it does not (necessarily) make one—as some of his most ardent supporters might suggest—a prude, a feminazi, a fundamentalist, a fanatical social-justice warrior, humorless, or dense. Appreciating his humor is certainly not required in my classroom. Understanding how, why, and for whom it is intended to be funny is, however, for this can only make students more astute readers.

As for the end-of-semester student evaluations of this course on humor, unfortunately only a handful of students filled them out, as is now often the case with online forms. Of these I was pleasantly surprised that only one took issue with some of the humor in the texts we read, contending that "misogynist humor is never funny." This comment reminds me of similarly categorical pronouncements about humor I have come across, such as the idea that humor with a target is never funny. When I read such an assertion I have to assume that, 1) the person saying it has never read *Candide*, and/or 2) the person is speaking in a perlocutionary rather than locutionary manner. They don't really think that humor with a target is never funny but are hoping to convince others or themselves that humor with a target shouldn't be funny. I do agree that if we are talking about a teacher who wants to crack jokes in their classroom, humor with a target other than themselves is not always the best approach, most certainly if that target is their students. We have faculty conference rooms for that. But in all seriousness, there is a power dynamic in a classroom, and in any case jokes that punch up are usually more appreciated than those that punch down. As for other such categorical pronouncements about humor, those who have even a mild interest in how humor works know that nothing is ever always funny to everyone, and nothing is ever never funny to anyone.

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[9] Or at least such dangers used to characterize fairytales. According to the conservative British newspaper the *Telegraph*, which reported in 2023 in what reads a bit like an exposé that Ladybird, an imprint of Penguin Press that publishes children's literature, employs sensitivity readers to flag, in view of perhaps altering, passages that could be offensive to some (Simpson).

I want to conclude by making the case that, as research clearly shows and as intuition suggests, humor in the classroom—in both the material being studied and the way in which it is presented—can help keep students interested and engaged and therefore enhance their learning.[10] Research also demonstrates that "humor can help to undermine cognitive biases, identify faulty logic, and detect mistaken reasoning," worthy educational goals by any standard (Lynch, referencing Hurley et al.). In the literary studies classroom in particular, teaching students about how talented writers produce humor, what kinds, and to what ends is essential for them to become truly literate readers, which I believe to be the primary objective of my profession. I also think that exposing students to all kinds of humor, including that which will surely offend someone, can help them cope with the inevitable antagonisms they will encounter in life, sharpen their own defenses, and use their own humor to fight back.

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[10] See, for example, R. L. Garner for a brief review of the literature on the effects of humor in teaching and a summary of his own study suggesting that humor in pedagogy can enhance learning and retention.

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