SOCIALY CORRECTIVE HUMOR IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

A Thesis

by

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DEDICATION

For Seester.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I found my passion for humor studies in the very first class I took upon transferring to Chico State. Under the guidance of the ever-enthusiastic Chris Fosen, I first started exploring the role humor plays in group identity. It was in his class that I first recognized my agency as a student and the academic merits of my own interests. All these years later, I am grateful for Professor Fosen’s steadfast support. I found my academic voice in Geoff Baker’s comparative literature class: a class that pushed me to new understandings of intellectual citizenship, academic rigor, and sleep deprivation—and I had never been so proud of the work I produced than I was for the writing I did in his class. He has had a profound impact on the standards to which I hold myself as a member of the academic community. I owe many thanks to the Graduate Equity Fellowship Program giving me the opportunity to work closely with Matthew Brown. What I found under his mentorship I don’t think I will ever be able to adequately express. He has helped me turn my scatter-brained inklings into a thesis I can be proud of. He has modeled a passion for his work and his students that I aspire to emulate. His patience and compassion has seen me through many an existential crisis, and there were times he had more faith in my work than I did. For his influence I will forever be indebted.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Rights</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

I. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

II. Boundary Maintenance in Early American Humor .............................................. 13

III. Missing the Mark ................................................................................................. 31

IV. “Inappropriate” Humor .......................................................................................... 46

Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 57
ABSTRACT

SOCIALLY CORRECTIVE HUMOR IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

by

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This thesis argues that, in key nineteenth century texts, humor is a means of fostering group identity and a mode of social critique. The chapter “Boundary Maintenance in Early American Humor” looks at humor as a form of boundary maintenance in both Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s “Character of a Native Georgian” (1835) and Mark Twain’s The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894). In “The Character of a Native Georgian,” humor is primarily an inclusive force, as it is used to promote solidarity within the group and promote assimilation without, while in Pudd’nhead Wilson humor is an exclusive force used to strengthen divides among groups by lending itself to the maintenance of the rigid structures in place that limit social mobility. “Missing the Mark” explores the consequences of humor that fails in some way by looking at two recent, comedic television shows: the Fox News Channel’s news program parody The Half Hour News Hour (2007) and Comedy Central’s sketch comedy program Chappelle’s Show (2003-2006). Both shows had difficulties controlling their audiences’ reaction to their attempts at humor. “‘Inappropriate’ Humor” considers the potential benefits of “inappropriate” humor by looking at an episode of Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s South Park entitled “Death”
(1997). There appears to be value in offending audiences, as it invites discussion. The chapter also considers the role satirists play in disrupting the status quo and giving voice to marginalized viewpoints.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind—the humorous. I will talk mainly about that one.*

— Mark Twain, “How to Tell a Story”

If I have gathered anything from my foray into Humor Studies, it’s that it is customary to open a text on the subject with an apology to the readers for its lack of humor. This suggests that the humor scholar recognizes the appeal of her work—people like funny—while also being aware that professional standards deem a humorous tone inappropriate for serious discourse. So while the scholar may feel an affinity to those drawn to her work—as she was likely drawn to the field for similar reasons—in order to get her peers to take humor seriously, she must treat humor gravely. And so, to avoid misleading the seekers of humor, she inserts an early disclaimer—though it feels somewhat counterproductive to construct an argument focused on the merits of humor being used to address serious social issues, all the while refraining from the use of humor as a legitimate mode of serious discourse.

I think the view of humor as inappropriate for serious discourse is rooted in a tradition that reaches back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Tragedy was reserved for the serious, important, and worthy, while comedy dealt with the unworthy and laughable. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle claimed that “the graver spirits tended to imitate noble actions and noble persons performing them, and the more frivolous poets the doings of baser persons” (48). This speaks to the idea that for moral authority one was to look to tragedy, for debauchery, comedy. Built into this view is the idea that
comedy lacks the credibility to speak to serious issues. Aristotle later elaborates on this idea, saying: “Comedy, as we have said, is an imitation of persons worse than the average. Their badness, however, does not extend to the point of utter depravity; rather, ridiculousness is a particular form of the shameful and may be described as the kind of error and unseemliness that is not painful or destructive” (49). From this, we are to gather that comedy was the realm of ridicule and shame—something beneath the average person. However, he is careful to point out that there is a line. Comedy isn’t so depraved as to be offensive, nor does it cause any serious pain—as pain is the realm of tragedy. In the article “Aristotle on Comedy” Leon Golden cites George Duckworth’s “comprehensive survey of classical and medieval theories of comedy [in which he] suggests that the explanatory principal of superiority, incongruity, or some combination of the two are at the heart of all comic theory” (283). While Golden goes on to explain that this theory doesn’t adequately explain all ancient and medieval comedy, it does highlight an important consensus in comedic theory—the perceived antipathetic nature of early humor. This may account for why Aristotle, in his Poetics, relegated comedy to the realm of the ignoble as only the debased would ridicule their fellow man.

While a section in Poetics focusing on comedy was never recovered, Golden looked at references to comedy throughout Poetics to piece together an Aristotelian theory of comedy to complement the theory of tragedy. While Golden was able to find explicit references to comedy to build the majority of the theory, Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy included two elements for which there were not complementing references for comedy: the type of emotions evoked by the piece, and the concept of catharsis. Aristotle claimed that tragedy should evoke the pity and fear of its audience (Aristotle 56). Assuming that comedy sat at the opposite end of the spectrum, Golden looked at references in Poetics and Rhetoric to establish Aristotle’s views on what
constituted the opposite of pity and fear, settling on the concept of *nemesan* or “indignation” (Golden 287). Aristotle saw this as generated by unjustified good fortune as well as the inappropriate and incongruous (287). In terms of comic catharsis, Golden relies on his interpretation of catharsis as a moment of learning to reason that comic catharsis would result in the “clarification of the ‘indignation’ we feel in regard to those instances of unjustified good fortune and those examples of inappropriate and incongruous behavior in human existence that do not cause pain” (288). The audience’s pleasure stems from their displeasure in the inappropriate and incongruous. Aristotle uses the example of the deformed mask of comedy that is “unseemly and distorted but expresses no pain” (49). In this sense, the audience takes pleasure in laughing *at* a subject they consider other or beneath them.

I think it’s important to mention that of the elements of comedy and tragedy, only the aforementioned three differed between the two genres (ignoble speaker, evocation of indignation, provocation of laughter in face of indignation). The remaining elements were explicitly stated to be the same: *mimesis*, complete action with magnitude, adorned language, and dramatic nature (286). Comedy, then, was also to imitate or represent the real world and involve complete actions carrying some sort of magnitude. This is important in that it shows the potential for comedy to speak to real, significant issues, should the characters ever be seen as credible moral authorities. The primary reason Aristotle relegates tragedy to the realm of noble men is that only they were in the position to speak to moral matters. What was required was a cultural shift in the perception of the common man.

In his book, *The Sense of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Daniel Wickberg details how the term “humor” evolved from signifying a physiological disorder (Medieval humors) to mode of perception and character trait (*sense* of humor): “as humor
became less identified with an objective way of being, and more with a subjective way of seeing, it was abstracted from character and moved into the discourse by which character was represented” (35). This shift in signification parallels a cultural shift. Wickberg explains that the concept of a sense of humor developed alongside the concept of selfhood and, with it, the sympathetic imagination. He explains that, in Renaissance literature, “What was important in defining the person was less the feature that identified him with the type he represented, and more the feature that distinguished him from the type” (20). There was a cultural shift, wherein a person was not merely defined by his or her affiliations, but instead was defined by individual character. Wickberg explains, that “this change in meaning—from the physical to the psychical, from exterior to interior, from objective to subjective—can be seen for what it is, a fundamental revolution of what it is to be a person” (26). This is significant in that with the recognition of the individual comes the recognition of the individualism of others; it opened the door for empathy.

Humor became an opportunity to relate to a common humanity. Aristotelian comedy laughed at that which was deemed distorted, unseemly, or otherwise out of the norm. However, if that which set us apart was a positive quality, being outside of the norm was no longer automatically laughable. What started drawing focus were the absurdities of everyday existence as an individual—a plight that fostered “‘fellow-feeling’ of the sympathetic imagination” (Wickberg 65). Humor went from being antipathetic in nature (laughing at someone) to sympathetic (laughing with someone). It transformed laughter into a show of solidarity, instead of a show of cruelty. This opened the door for comic figures to be moral authorities, able to speak credibly to societal issues.

Humor can be seen as more than just a means to discussion, but a worthwhile contributor to change. Dramatist Nikolai Gogol felt “those who claim that laughter causes mere indignation
alone are unjust” as he saw significance in “the kind [of laughter] which arises from the radiant nature of humanity and does so because it is fed by an ever-flowing spring” (quoted in Bakhtin 43). In his essay on Gogol, “Rabelais and Gogol: The Art of Discourse and the Popular Culture of Laughter,” Mikhail Bakhtin illustrates the merits of popular culture, as it is the living culture that fuels creation. He recognizes that not all meaningful works can be fully appreciated through the lens of official culture alone, but must include a consideration of popular culture as well (38). Considering Gogol’s work, Bakhtin recognizes humor’s potential to serve as a disruption of routine that “releases life from its everyday rut and makes the impossible possible” (39). In this sense, humor can serve as a means by which individuals can cast off social constraints that would otherwise obscure the sense of a common humanity. Humor, then, can be seen as a reprieve from societal stressors and, in some ways, a means of empowering the individual to address those stressors. Bakhtin’s theory holds that, “By parodying, abusing, and degrading the lofty truth, by bringing it down ‘to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity,’ the participants in carnival are restored to life” (Bakhtin 35-36). Humor is presented as a response to powers beyond one’s control—a moment of comedic reprieve to help one cope. However, this moment is not devoid of hope, but rather speaks to an underlying hope of change. Bakhtin sees humor as a moment in which life is restored. In this sense, there is significance in bringing the “lofty” down to the level of the common man because “It is only that which is material—or has been degraded to the material—that has access to regeneration” (Bakhtin 36). That which we cannot access is in turn not accessed—it is left to stagnate and die. A point of access affords the means to assess, question, renegotiate—to evolve and remain relevant. Bakhtin explains that “Only memory and not oblivion can move forward. Memory returns to the beginning and renews it. … Such a return signifies the restoration of the active
accumulating memory” (45). To the credit of the common man, he houses this “active accumulating memory.” That which remains in our collective consciousness lives on to fuel the creation of the generations that follow. In this light, humor is a viable approach to serious issues, as well as a means to social change.

It is my aim to show that not only is humor an appropriate mode of serious discourse, but that it can have significant impact as a socially corrective force within American society. Specifically, I will be focusing on the rhetorical function of humor in social critique—its contributions to fostering group identity, its impact on an audience’s acceptance of a speaker, and its impact on the effectiveness of a speaker’s message. In her article, “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance” Moira Smith explains the importance of a sense of humor in American culture as it impacts group dynamics. Smith notes that “in modern American culture, possession of a sense of humor has become not just a highly desirable characteristic but an essential one” (157). She describes this as “much more than a person’s proclivity for laughing,” as it includes the ability to laugh at oneself (158). Smith explains that humor is seen “as part of a well-adjusted personality” because it “is able to mediate between the paradoxes inherent in the contemporary ideas of selfhood and the conflicting demands of psychological versus social modes of being.” She adds that Americans generally embrace sympathetic humor and that “the preferred model of humor is described as ‘laughing with’ someone, not ‘laughing at’ someone”—that sympathetic humor is considered socially acceptable, while antipathetic is not since it is akin to bullying (162). This wasn’t always the case. In the early days of settling the territory, humor was used to exploit the differences of groups. Nancy Walker explains that “Much of the humor of the colonial period dealt with such dissection between groups of people—religious factions, nationalities, men and women—and thus turned upon stereotypes that
we may find disquieting today” (18). However, as we developed a sense of nationhood, we
developed a mode of humor marked by the character of America.

As observed by Aristotle and those that followed, incongruity is an important element of
humor. American humor is marked by the incongruities of our cultural history. Most prevalent is
the disparity between the American ideal and the lived reality. This is seen in the reports of early
settlers of the New World’s plenty and privations. For example, in “The Requisites for American
Humor,” Walter Blair identifies Captain John Smith as an “unconscious creator of comedy” in
light of the gross exaggerations of his experience in America (94). Blair, states that “When that
blustering, mustachioed Elizabethan soldier of fortune retold his tale of captivity, the numbers
and ferocity of his Indian captors provide comedy of exaggeration not unlike that in Falstaff’s
famous yarn to Prince Hal” (94). However, throughout his essay, Blair stresses the importance of
distance in space and time from the harsh realities of survival in the New World before people
were detached enough to make light of their situations—at which point, American humor
flourished.

Exaggeration was also seen in the reports of the wild and violent nature of Americans by
more civilized European travelers, such as that by Mrs. Frances Trollope. In “No End of Jokes”
Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill explain that Trollope’s 1832 Domestic Manners of the Americans,
“irked” many Americans because “it held that they had no manners, domestic or any other sort”
(127). However, Blair and Hill explain that very often “Americans did their best to deceive
strangers and then eagerly watched for the printed repetitions of their windies” (126). In the case
of Trollope, her accounts seem to be riddled with such windies—the majority of which went over
her head. This might be in part due to a common mode of delivery. In “How to Tell a Story,”
Twain shares his opinions on the defining characteristics of American humor in story-telling:
“The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects there is anything funny about it” (156). Adopting the persona of a straight man would easily contribute to an outsider’s confusion. What’s interesting is that these wild accounts were embraced and inspired exaggeration to be an important element of American storytelling. In his book *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale*, Henry B. Wonham explains that “Tall humor grew up both in response to Europe’s uninformed critique of life on the frontier and in response to the frontier itself” (18). Tall tales serve a few specific rhetorical functions. For one, by appropriating and exaggerating criticism to absurd degrees, the speaker is able to deflate that criticism (Wonham 18). What’s more, tall tales lend themselves to highlighting disparities. Southern frontiersmen were able to poke fun at the significant inconsistencies between the American ideal and the American reality they were living, particularly the, at times, unbearably harsh living conditions at the fringes of the country (Wonham 18).

As seen with Bakhtin, humor serves as a reprieve from social constraints. This creates the opportunity for humor to serve as forms of boundary maintenance. This is seen in the tradition of the tall tales, as most tall tales are rooted in the local environment and shared local experience. If a listener dismisses the tale, he is marking himself as an outsider, as he is clearly not accustomed to the underlying truth being mocked (Wonham 23-24). However, if the listener accepts the tale at face value, in addition to being marked as an outsider he is marked as a fool—which only adds to the amusements of the insiders (Wonham 23-24). The “correct” response is to play along (Wonham 23). This is consistent with Moira Smith’s concept of boundary maintenance. Humor can be used to mark social boundaries by “emphasizing not only what people inside the group have in common but also the differences that distinguish them from others” (Smith 159). In this way, humor can be either an inclusive force that fosters solidarity or an exclusive force that
strengthens social divides. As a result, it can have a tremendous impact on group identity. This means that humor can be used to bolster the ingroup by breaking down divides among people. Smith explains that “shared laughter enhances solidarity, and accompanying unlaughter from those who are outsiders or marginal only magnifies this effect” (161). In this sense, laughing at a common enemy makes the bond between the allies stronger. At the same time, it can also be used to strengthen divides by highlighting the differences among groups. In her article, Smith works off Michael Billig’s idea of “unlaughter” which he defines as “a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded” (quoted in Smith, 150). It is generally accepted to be an accidental occurrence—the unfortunate result of unsuccessful humor. However, Smith argues that “unlaughter is not always just a regrettable accident but may be used deliberately by both joke instigators and members of joke audiences to highlight the supposed differences and so heighten exclusionary social boundaries” (151). In this way, by intentionally provoking the unlaughter of the outgroup through ridicule, humor can be used to enforce boundaries.

This thesis looks at humor as a means to fostering group identity as well as a mode of social critique. Chapter II, “Boundary Maintenance in Early American Humor,” is intended to provide a look at the roots of American humor, specifically the use of humor as a form of boundary maintenance. To do this, I focus on two early works of Southern humor: the short story “Character of a Native Georgian” from Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes* (1835) and Mark Twain’s novel *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). In both stories humor can be seen to maintain boundaries that divide groups, though to different effect. In “The Character of a Native Georgian,” humor is primarily an inclusive force, as it is used to promote solidarity within the group and promote assimilation without. The humor works to critique the
displacement of the traditional cultural values by for French affectations and customs. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* humor is an exclusive force used to strengthen divides among groups by lending itself to the maintenance of the rigid structures in place that limit social mobility. The humor works to critique the incongruities present in a culture founded on the principle of individual freedom and equality, all the while practicing slavery.

Chapter III, “Missing the Mark,” explores the consequences of humor that fails in some way by looking at two recent, comedic television shows: the Fox News Channel’s news program parody *The Half Hour News Hour* (2007) and Comedy Central’s sketch comedy program *Chappelle’s Show* (2003-2006). Both shows had difficulties controlling their audiences’ reaction to their attempts at humor. The humor in *The Half Hour News Hour* was working towards fostering solidarity among conservatives while distancing themselves from liberals. However, while the show successfully alienated the outgroup, it failed to gain approval and support from its ingroup. The humor of *Chappelle’s Show* did not play towards group boundaries, but rather worked to disrupt social boundaries and was widely accepted and praised by its intended audience. However, the show’s brand of humor allowed it to be easily misappropriated by a portion of the audience that coopted the humor to reinforce the social boundaries the show was attempting to break down.

Chapter IV, “‘Inappropriate’ Humor” considers the potential benefits of socially “inappropriate” humor by looking at an episode of Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s *South Park* entitled “Death” (1997). The episode pairs a conversation about censorship with a conversation about assisted suicide. The humor in this episode works to disrupt the silence that surrounds controversial issues, as only through discussion will controversial issues reach resolution. In line
with the function of a satirists, Stone and Parker work to disrupt the status quo by giving marginalized viewpoints entry into the discussion.
CHAPTER II

EARLY AMERICAN HUMOR

In 1861, Twain ventured west in search of gold— and/or silver: really anything that would set him up for life. However, as would be true throughout his life, Twain’s get-rich-quick schemes proved disappointing in gold country. Upon failing miserably as a prospector, he tried his hand at writing by working for Virginia City’s *Territorial Enterprise* in 1862 (Fatout 6). While the *Territorial Enterprise* was considered “one of the best papers in the West, and one of the best known Western papers in the East” the work environment at the paper was unique in that editor Joe Goodman “allowed [his] staff more freedom than any journalist except the most pampered columnist could expect today” (Fatout 30, 32). This was fortunate, as Twain “was not a routine reporter amenable to the humdrum chore of factual newsgathering” but rather “enjoyed spinning a yarn entirely out of his own imagination” (Fatout 15-16). As it was, Twain thrived. In line with his later literary stylings, as a reporter he was prone to hoax, burlesque, and shameless exaggeration—which, as it turned out, was in keeping with the group dynamic.

Virginia City also afforded Twain exposure to an interesting cohort of spirited wits that gathered at a local bar to wax intellectual, entertain visiting entertainers—and drink. This group called itself “The Visigoths” (though originally “Companions of the Jug”). Among them were Goodman and local item reporter Dan De Quille. De Quille started working for the *Territorial Enterprise* shortly before Twain’s arrival. De Quille was a few years older, and had already established a reportorial presence in the territory. For this reason, the “relationship of the two men began almost as that of master and novice” (Loomis 336). In this way, De Quille served as
an early model for Twain—particularly in terms of humor writing. In his time, De Quille was a celebrated humorist, though his approach was markedly different from Twain’s:

Because he was shy, gentle, loath to offend, [De Quille’s] humorous pieces, which he called ‘quaints,’ were droll, whimsical, puckish, sometimes mildly sentimental . . .

[Twain], on the other hand, was audacious, impulsive, erratic and haphazard. Given to outrageous eruptions of temper and flagrant personalities, he was neither gentle nor inoffensive. (33)

It’s interesting to note that, at the time, De Quille was the one hailed as the “wittiest writer in [the] territory” and considered the more likely of the two to succeed (Fatout 125). While De Quille’s approach to humor reflected the preferences of audiences at the time, Twain’s seemed to have broader, long-lasting appeal. It could be that his willingness to offend allowed him to tackle topics that, though potentially controversial, were so because they ran deeper than polite “quaints.” As such, they remained relevant to the human condition, as they weren’t necessarily dependent on topical trends.

One of the traveling visitors entertained by the Visigoths was the famed humorist, Artemus Ward. Ward was a celebrated platform lecturer known for his deadpan, common-man persona. In this sense, he was an important influence on Twain. Ward’s writing had already influenced Twain’s, but the opportunity to see Ward lecture proved significant to Twain’s development as a writer. What Ward brought to the stage, Twain attempted (successfully) to bring to the page: “Ward had brought the deadpan manner to the lecture platform. In time, Twain would adapt it in various ways to the written page—with revolutionary effect upon his literary development” (Rodgers 279). More than this, Ward encouraged Twain’s writing, “urging [him] to leave ‘sage-brush obscurity’” and reach out to an eastern audience (Loomis 278). In fact,
Ward was so impressed with Twain’s work that he wished to include a piece in a collection he was preparing for publication. Unfortunately, Twain did not submit the piece in time for publication; however, it was passed along to the editors of New York’s Saturday Press, resulting in Twain’s first national success: “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” (1865).

Obviously, Twain had contemporaries who, at the time, were considered accomplished humorists. So why is it that Twain has endured, while important literary figures of the time, such as De Quille and Ward, are recalled today mostly for their association with Twain? What is it about his work that has a lasting impact? In his article, “Artemus Ward, Mark Twain and the Limburger Cheese,” James C. Austin identifies a key difference in Ward and Twain’s humorous stylings as the difference between the Yankee anecdote (relying on wit) and the Southern yarn (relying on humor) (71). As Twain himself explains in his “essay,” “How to Tell a Story,” “the humorous story depends for its effect on the manner of the telling” (155). So if it’s manner over matter, and what is said isn’t as important as how it’s said, then humor is setting itself up to have greater staying power. What is said can be dependent on the dominant culture for its humor—some things may get lost with time. The humor in how something is said, however, depends on an understanding of the character as it is presented, which is something that can be relevant to audiences in general. So it’s possible that, though what Twain found in the West was pivotal to his success, so too was what he brought with him from the Old South—the traditions of Southern humor.

Georgia Scenes (1835) by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet was a successful early work of Southwestern humor, and, as such, was an important influence on humorists that followed, such as Twain. Like Twain, Longstreet didn’t set out to be a writer. Unlike Twain, his various occupational aspirations proved successful more often than not. After attending top schools, he
spent seven years as a circuit lawyer before being appointed Superior Court Judge of Omalgee District in 1822. An avid advocate of states’ rights, he also served in the Georgia State Assembly, and might have served in congress as well had he not withdrawn from the 1824 race at the death of his son. In 1838, Longstreet left law and became a Methodist minister and was integral in the 1844 division of the church over perspectives on the institution of slavery. From the 1840’s to the beginning of the Civil War, he presided over various colleges. And then there was his writing career. During his time at Yale, he entertained others with his stories of the characters back home. In the 1830s he began publishing these stories and other political musings in papers—and at one point was actually the owner of the States’ Rights Sentinel. In 1835, his stories were collected in Georgia Scenes. Longstreet saw himself as a historian of sorts, preserving and celebrating the characteristics and antics of common Georgian folk.

In both Longstreet’s “Character of a Native Georgian” and Twain’s The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson, humor can be seen to foster group identity as well as maintain boundaries that divide groups; however, in each, humor is used to different effect. In his article “The Borders of Southern Humor,” Scott Romine looks at the “thickness of border spaces that are not merely lines of cultural separation, but dynamic terrains where cultural differences are contested or mediated” (1). He sees the divides between social groups as vast playing spaces which serve as “not only the site of cultural negotiation, but of cultural reaction as well.” They are spaces in which the differences between groups can be explored and presented for consideration. In this way, they lend themselves to expressions of either inclusive or exclusive humor depending entirely on the motives of the speaker. The differences can be celebrated and accepted, or ridiculed and rejected. In “The Character of a Native Georgian,” humor is primarily an inclusive force as it is used to promote solidarity within the group and promote assimilation without. The
story follows the antics of native Ned Brace. Brace is presented essentially as a compulsive humorist who cannot help but mess with those around him. The story recounts a trip he and the narrator once took to Savannah, where Brace took full advantage of their being unknown in those parts. Brace assumes a false identity and acts bizarrely in order to get a rise out of people. More than that, his humor can be seen as a call for a return to the traditional cultural values he sees being abandoned for French affectations. While Brace does laugh at many who are not in on the joke he does so in a way that communicates cultural values thereby inviting entry into the group of insiders. In this sense he is trying to train people how to be in on the joke.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, on the other hand, humor is an exclusive force used to strengthen divides among groups by lending itself to the maintenance of the rigid structures in place that limit social mobility. We see this in the use of humor to put perceived inferior people in their place.

For example, the inhabitants of Dawson’s Landing are smitten by a pair of visiting European twins. When the twins call on Wilson, Tom Driscoll—son of prominent community member Judge Driscoll—makes fun of Wilson’s career situation:

> “Well, how does the law come on? Had a case yet?”

Wilson bit his lip, but answered, “No—not yet,” with as much indifference as he could assume. … Young Tom laughed pleasantly, and said:

> “Wilson’s a lawyer, gentlemen, but he doesn’t practice now.”

The sarcasm bit, but Wilson kept himself under control…” (124)

Due to a misunderstanding upon his arrival to Dawson’s Landing, Wilson had been labeled a “pudd’nhead” and wasn’t taken seriously by most of the town. By ridiculing Wilson in front of the visitors, Tom reminds Wilson of his outsider status while also inviting the twins to play along
with the insiders. These insiders—primarily those who feel themselves superior—laugh at the expense of others in order to maintain the social hierarchy. They are communicating their values, but they are not inviting entry into their group to those deemed unworthy—in fact, they want the opposite. In her essay, “Laughing Matters: Ethnic and Southern Humor from a Cultural Lens,” Diane Williams explains that “it can be harmful when it (humor) is expressed as an attack, or when a particular group is mentioned and they’re left on the outside of the joke” (88). It hurts the dynamic between groups as “no one wants to bear the brunt of jokes presented by their peers or enemies” (88). Though the insiders may derive pleasure out of laughing at the expense of the outsiders, and while their group may benefit from the solidarity brought by shared experience, the outsiders will harbor resentment and further separate themselves from the insiders. We see this in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The insiders want the outsiders to stay outsiders in order to maintain the social hierarchy in place. The outsiders are to remain outside of the joke in order for the insiders to remain superior. We see this with Wilson. Upon arrival, he buys a “small house on the extreme western verge of the town’ (61). He had originally secured an office in town, but “the deadly remark had ruined his chance—at least in the law.” Since the community refuses to embrace him, he removes himself from the center of the community and, instead, works from home as a surveyor and accountant. His life on the outskirts of the town mirrors his position as social outsider. Both stories demonstrate that humor can be either a beneficial social force, breaking down boundaries and promoting acceptance; or it can be a detrimental social force, strengthening divides and limiting social mobility. In either case, humor has a significant influence on group dynamics as it lends itself to the effort to solidify group identity.

The title of each work communicates the cultural significance placed on the main character. For example, it isn’t called “The Character of Ned Brace” but rather “The Character of
a Native Georgian.” In so titling the story, Ned Brace becomes a symbol—a representative of the “native” Georgian. As such, he can be seen as a gauge for the cultural values of a native—or authentic—Georgian. Brace admits that “humor has been [his] besetting sin from [his] youth up” (37). The role humor plays within the cultural group he belongs to is seen in his actions. He is said to “live only to amuse himself with his fellow beings” and that the “beau in the presence of his mistress, the fop, the pedant, the purse-proud, the over-fastidious and sensitive, were Ned’s favourite game” (23). His choice of targets is interesting in that they all carry with them an air of self-importance: the beau with his mistress will likely be grandiose in his bid for his lady’s affections; a fop is characteristically vain about his appearance; the pedant about his academic achievements; the purse-proud can be expected to be condescending or materialistic; the over-fastidious potentially cruel and lacking compassion; the sensitive can be so emotionally delicate that he must be handled as fragile. All of these types demand a special level of attention from the others around them—this extra level of attention seems to be a play for superiority, be it of mind, body or emotional state. In targeting these individuals Brace seems to be rejecting their game and the implied superiority.

The significance of David Wilson in Twain’s novel can be seen in its full title of the novel: *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Twain sets Wilson up to be a tragic hero, implying that he is a great man who will suffer a fall from that greatness. As the novel serves as a meditation of the ethical implications of slavery, Wilson can be seen to represent America’s fall from greatness—or rather, its failure to live up to its claims of greatness. American identity is founded on the principle of individual freedom and equality; however, by practicing slavery, these principles lack foundation. “Pudd’nhead” is the name given to him by those in the wrong ethically. For him to embrace this name, he is submitting to the town’s value system. By
compromising his principles and successfully assimilating into the culture of Dawson’s Landing, Wilson tumbles from his ethical high-ground. While Ned Brace serves as a model for becoming an insider, Wilson serves as a challenge to the reader to remain an outsider. This is difficult since the reader is initially set up to sympathize with *David Wilson*: the reader sees the humor in the remark that leads to his outsider status and, hopefully, sees the problematic elements in the value system of the insiders of Dawson’s Landing. Since the title of the novel offers a way to read the character, were we to remain aligned with him, it seems more likely that Wilson would be referred to as David instead of Pudd’nhead in the title. Since it is not, it seems to indicate that the novel does not recount the story of David’s story, but of a pudd’nhead. In the beginning, it is made clear that Wilson is an intelligent, college-educated man. He even got the endorsement of Judge Discoll who “claimed that he had a mind above average,” though the rest of the town didn’t accept this (86). Due to a failure of the townsfolk to recognize humor, he was wrongly declared a pudd’nhead; and yet, though the townsfolk are presented and accepted as the pudd’nheads for this misunderstanding, by assimilating into society Wilson is becoming a true pudd’nhead for he is aligning himself with pudd’nheads. Thus the nickname *becomes* appropriate—and a kind of authorial punishment.

In each story humor is used to achieve different ends. In “The Character of a Native Georgian,” humor is at the forefront as Brace engages in a series of pranks at the expense of the inhabitants of a small town tavern. Through these pranks Brace seems to be criticizing a break from cultural traditions while encouraging a return to those traditions. For example, at the dinner table, Brace takes an assortment of breads and proceeds to mash them all together (26). Afterwards, he “reduced his mess to the consistency of a hard poultice, he packed it all up to one side of his plate in the form of a terrapin” (27). In sculpting a turtle from mashed bread, Brace is
poking fun at the ceremony associated with fine dining. While it may be visually pleasing, the effort is still ridiculous as food is meant to be eaten, not observed. In taking the practice to an absurd degree, Brace offers himself up as a subject of ridicule that highlights the absurdity—and those who respond too seriously to Brace share in that absurdity. Humor is used to maintain cultural boundaries; you are either in on the joke or the joke is on you. The ability to laugh at the joke establishes one within the cultural group; failure to do so reinforces the barrier between the individual and that cultural group. In this sense, humor plays a significant role in the storytelling process. In his article “Negotiating Community in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s Georgia Scenes,” Scott Romine notes that “exchange constitutes an important trope. Throughout the work we find horses, money, promises, oaths, curses, blows, insults, and so on being exchanged, often after a period of literal negotiation.” He goes on to argue that these “exchanges provide the opportunity for the negotiation of communal norms.” The humorous exchanges in “The Character of a Native Georgian” serve this function. In addition to their entertainment value they afford an opportunity to negotiate cultural values, foster solidarity, and communicate cultural values to individuals outside of the cultural group—should they be open to assimilation.

Brace uses humor to maintain cultural boundaries, which creates tension between the insiders and the outsiders. For those not in on the joke, Brace’s antics can be interpreted as odd or even frustrating; however for those in on the joke his actions are joyfully amusing. While Brace’s dining table antics may have amused the narrator, they annoy many of the others, including the landlord. His antics in the tavern push the landlord to the edge of composure and yet they do not end up exchanging blows—quite the opposite; when he reveals his pranks, instead of getting mad, Mr. and Mrs. Blank “laugh heartily” (38). They are not offended or humiliated but instead are “two more to enjoy his humor with him and [the narrator]” (38). By
accepting his humor they are “with” him and in return receive amusement and solidarity. On the other hand, Brace succeeds in driving away one of the lodgers from the dining table. From this we can see Brace using humor to reinforce a barrier between the affected and the “native.” We are introduced to a “waspish little gentleman, who had been watching him with increasing torments from the first to the last movement of Ned’s knife. His tortures were visible to blinder eyes than Ned’s, and, doubtless, had been seen by him in their earliest paroxysms” (27). It is made clear that Brace recognizes the gentleman’s disgust and then seems to intentionally push his button until he “[leaves] the room, cursing Ned from the very inmost chamber of his soul” (27). This man seems to be the type Brace usually targets—a self-important individual who, in this case, puts style over substance at the dinner table. Brace is able to use his prank to push him out of the room. We also see this in his dealings with the Frenchman (30-32). Brace unleashes a heap of foolishness in this encounter so that when he runs into him at the tavern the Frenchman instantly takes his flight from “La diable” (36). It is interesting that in both cases his approach is not to exclude them—to ridicule them or openly mock them. Rather, he includes them in his games and forces them to exclude themselves by leaving. This approach leaves room for the possibility that they could play along. It is possible to suppose either or both could have turned out to be good sports. In that case maybe they would have been let in on the joke. As it is, his prank weeds them out while fostering solidarity among those in on the joke.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, humor is not as prominent a force within the world of the story itself, though it is also used to maintain group boundaries; however, while Longstreet is trying to promote solidarity, the humor in *Pudd’nhead* attempts to strengthen divisions. Wilson’s exclusion from Dawson’s Landing’s social group under accusations of being a Pudd’nhead is only one example of this. It is also seen in an exchange between Roxy and Jasper in chapter two.
Jasper teases her, saying: “I’s gwine to come a-court’n’ you bimeby, Roxy” (63). The exchange is described as a “friendly duel,” but though they laughed with each other, it is clear that Roxy is asserting her superiority over Jasper. Even though they are both slaves, Roxy is “as white as anybody” and refuses Jasper’s advances, stating: “You is, you black mud-cat! … I got somep’n’ better to do den ‘sociat’n’ wid niggers as black as you is” (63-64). In terms of social hierarchy, both Roxy and Jasper are equally on the bottom—and yet, Roxie still tries to position herself above Jasper. Humor is thus used to distinguish two individuals as socially divided. It serves as a means for Roxy to put Jasper in his place—even though she appears to be fighting over the bottom. This exchange is similar to the time Tom Driscoll ridicules Wilson in front of the European twins. In doing so, he asserts Wilson’s social inferiority in order to communicate Wilson’s place in the social hierarchy for the newcomers. It is a way to reinforce the boundary between Wilson and the others as well as an attempt to limit his social mobility through an association with the twins. Socially, the Twins, Luigi and Angelo Capello, hold a lot of clout. Even before arrival, their appeal for lodging leaves the landlady’s daughter, Rowena Cooper, in raptures: “Italians! How romantic! … Think—they’ve been in Europe and everywhere! There’s never been a traveler in this town before. Ma, I shouldn’t wonder if they’ve seen kings!” When it is revealed during their initial meeting that they were of Florentine nobility, “Rowena’s heart gave a great bound, her nostrils expanded, and a fine light played in her eyes” (90-91). The Coopers see the twins as a means to cultural capital. Their association with Europe makes them exotic and sophisticated—because Europe is “everywhere” and all Europeans mingle with kings. Their esteem for the twins is shared by the rest of the town almost immediately. Therefore, for Tom Driscoll to ridicule Wilson in front of them could result in a lost opportunity for social mobility. The use of humor as a means of exclusion reflects the general atmosphere of division.
Dawson’s Landing is a rigidly divided community. One’s family line, class, race, etc, can make or break an individual. These are elements that the individual has very little control over, so these imposed divisions cultivate an environment where social mobility is nearly impossible. As a result, everyone fights to defend his or her rung in the ladder and humor is just one of the weapons in their arsenal.

In his essay “How to Tell a Story,” Twain shares his opinions on the defining characteristics of American humor in story-telling: “The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects there is anything funny about it” (156). This depiction of American humor fairly describes the humor of both Ned Brace and David Wilson. In fact, they tell virtually the same joke in their respective stories—though with radically different results. During his antics, Brace “beset[s] an old negro woman to sell him half of a living chicken” (35). He makes the request in earnest, much to the confusion of the poor woman. He doesn’t let on for a minute that he is playing with her. Similarly, in one of Wilson’s initial interactions with the townsfolk of Dawson’s Landing, Wilson makes the following attempt at humor when responding to a barking dog:

“I wish I owned half of that dog.”

“Why?” somebody asked.

“Because I would kill my half.”

“The group searched [Wilson’s] face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as something uncanny.” (25)

Wilson remained true to the manner of American humor in his presentation of the joke and didn’t break character for a moment. In essence, these jokes are the same. They employ the same
imagery (half of a live/dead being) and employ Twain’s dead-pan approach. They even speak to the same concern over social practices that directly contradict social values. A being can’t be half-alive or half-dead—it’s an all or nothing circumstance. Each version of the joke has the same underlying concern over practices that conflict with values that underwrite American cultural identity. Longstreet is reacting to the French affectations diluting the American culture during his time. How can one be wholly American while putting on the airs of another culture? Twain is reacting to the practice of slavery in a country founded on the principle of individual freedom. How can America be the land of the free when it works said land with slave labor? Given the similarities of the jokes, it is interesting that in “Character of a Native Georgian” Brace’s humor succeeds, while in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Wilson’s humor fails. In Moira Smith’s explores the idea of boundary maintenance. She explains that humor can either break down boundaries and bring people together or reinforce boundaries and further drive people apart (Smith 161). When humor is successful—meaning the audience accepts it—it builds solidarity within an audience. However, when it is unsuccessful—meaning the audience rejects it—it can punctuate and even expand boundaries between members of the audience. This idea lends itself to the analysis of each joke’s respective audiences as well as the differences in authorial intent.

In “Character of a Native Georgian,” both Brace’s fellow Georgians within the story and Longstreet’s reader without are “in” on the joke. Brace’s antics throughout the story are intended to remind the other characters what it means to be a Georgian. Given that egos are involved, one would expect Brace to provoke the wrath of many of his targets; however, the narrator makes a point of mentioning that Ned “never involved himself in a personal reencounter with anyone” due to his “adroitness in the management of his projects of fun” (23). This speaks to his motives; he isn’t trying to be mean, he is trying to be a reminder of what it means to be a Georgian and in
that way bring people together. There is something about Brace’s approach that “render[s] it impossible for anyone to call him to account without violating all rules of decency, politeness and chivalry at once.” He accomplishes this by playing the fool. Instead of openly ridiculing others he provokes the ridicule of others. Because he structures his antics this way one has to be on the inside to fully understand the joke. On the outside, he may seem like a crazy man trying to buy half a live chicken; for one on the inside, he is bringing light to the folly of living in a fractured culture (35). While many of his targets find amusement in laughing at him, his accomplices find even more so in laughing with him. An ironic sense of humor seems to be at the heart of his “adroitness”—and as he is standing in for all native Georgians, it implies that this sense of humor speaks to the values of the cultural group. In this way, Brace’s antics communicate cultural values as well as inform the readers how to become insiders.

As seen with the half-chicken episode, Brace uses humor to critique the break from cultural traditions. For example, his odd display of appetite at the tavern dinner table puts a lot of the others on edge: “During this operation the landlady frowned and pouted, the servants giggled, and the boarders were variously affected” (26). With a closer look one can see that he is critiquing the French-affected spectacle involved in refined dining. Mashing up of the different kind of breads without regard for the appropriateness of the mixture, he is commenting on the careless mixture of French and Georgian cultures. By then shaping that mixture into the form of a turtle, he is poking fun at the spectacle involved—the priority of style over substance. However, Brace admits that “[his] stomach several times threatened to expose [his] tricks to the whole company, by downright open rebellion” (30). The fact that this prank havocked his innards seems to support his critique, since despite the fancy presentation the careless mixture wasn’t palatable. This indigestion seems to comment on the dangers of introducing a foreign
culture to an unprepared system—that though it may seem interesting it can have unintended and detrimental consequences.

Throughout the story, Longstreet uses humor to train the reader—an outsider—how to understand the values of the culture by showing what they find funny and why. For example, we see Brace take his dinner spectacle to an absurd extreme in order to poke fun of the arrogance of the waspish gentleman’s preference for French-affected customs. We also see him reward the humility of Mrs. Blank by including her and her husband in his joke. Mrs. Blank agrees to allow Brace to take his meals in his room and takes it upon herself to prepare his plate herself—honoring his odd proclivities—explaining that she does not “wish to see a man of his delicate sensibilities ridiculed and insulted at [her] table” (33). She does not reject Brace, but rather works to include him. This inclusive behavior is rewarded by inclusion into the joke. In his choice of target, we see him communicate his objection to the French customs encroaching on the tradition of native Georgians. He drives away the waspish gentleman and the Frenchman and brings the Blanks closer to him. The Blanks serve as a model for how to become an insider. They don’t let his joke wound their pride. Mr. Blank may have been getting cranky, but Mrs. Blank didn’t take herself so seriously as to take Brace’s oddities personally. Though this leaves her wide open to his games, when she is let in on the joke she is a good sport about it; and Mr. Blank doesn’t let it bother him that Brace makes a scene at his dinner table and gets the lady of the house to personally wait on him. In spite of it all, they both laugh. This seems to be the most important cultural value Longstreet is trying to communicate to outsiders—don’t take yourself so seriously that you miss out on the joke.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the subject of audience is a little more complex. The people of Dawson’s Landing may claim American cultural identity, but, as with Longstreet’s Georgians,
they have adopted the affectations of other cultures. This is made very clear by the opening of the novel. While Dawson’s Landing is in Missouri, the citizens take the prestige of the “First Families of Virginia” very seriously. It has great influence on the social hierarchy of the various families. The First Families of Virginia were proud British loyalists. This serves as an indication that what may be in line with the American identity may not be in line with the cultural identity of the people of Dawson’s Landing. In this sense, it is possible that the accepted mode of humor may be different than Wilson expects. As the inhabitants are affected by European customs, they may not subscribe to the Southern model of humor marked by exaggeration and dead-pan, but rather a European model built on ostentatious cleverness. This leads to an even more important point than genres of humor: in terms of group boundaries, Wilson is an outsider. He is not from Dawson’s Landing and hasn’t been there long enough to have a well-informed understanding of their cultural values. Regardless, he tells his half-a-dog joke as though he were an insider, and the humor fails as a result. His blunder is rooted in his trying to force his way into the inside — assuming he already knows the values of the group. It is possible that, were the same joke told by an insider, the humor may have been successful. As it plays out, not only do the citizens of Dawson’s Landing reject Wilson’s humor, they reject his attempted entry into the group.

Adding to the complexity of this exchange, however, is the fact that Twain’s intended audience, the reader, does accept Wilson’s humor. For one, we don’t take him seriously like the townsfolk do. We know he knows you can’t have half a living being. We recognize it as a commentary on the inconsistencies between social practice and social values. While the townsfolk see him as a fool, the reader sees the townsfolk are fools for missing the joke. In this way, the reader is lured into sympathizing with Wilson. The joke serves as a commentary on the existence of conflicting truths—a free country practicing slavery. The cultural values of
Dawson’s Landing allow for this conflict. An ethical man should see this as problematic. Twain creates a group of insiders unified by that ethical high-ground. However, Twain presents this story as a tragedy. By the end of the novel, Wilson is embraces as an insider by the other townsfolk. The tragedy lies in Wilson’s fall from his ethical high-ground as he successfully assimilates into the Dawson’s Landing culture—and, potentially, the reader’s fall from the ethical high-ground should they continue to sympathize with him.

In “The Character of a Native Georgian” and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, we see humor impact social divides as well as play a part in communicating cultural values and promoting solidarity. In “The Character of a Native Georgian,” humor is used to celebrate Georgian culture and advocate a return to traditional values. It communicates values both to the characters within the play and to the reader without, inviting entry into the cultural group. In this way, “The Character of a Native Georgian” is an example of how humor can be used as an inclusive force. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, humor is used to maintain the social hierarchy and promote strict adherence to the societal norms. It is used not only to communicate cultural values but to impose them. Humor is used to ridicule and alienate others in order to ensure they stay in their place. In this way, humor is used as an exclusive force used not to break down barriers between groups but to solidify them. Thus humor limits social mobility and allows the power structure in place to thrive. This contributes to the story’s presentation as a tragedy. The social structure needs to be broken down to rectify the conflict in values. The hypocrisy of a slave-owning free country confuses America’s sense of identity and detracts from the credibility of its principles. The humor in “The Character of a Native Georgian” speaks to a similar hypocrisy; Georgians were adopting French affectations, all the while identifying as Georgians and Americans. Unlike *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, “Native Georgian” doesn’t use humor to impose values; it merely uses it to
highlight an inconsistency in values and offer a solution. Though humor does, at times, chase away someone who doesn’t appreciate the humor, that person leaves of his own accord—not because society shuts him out. His mobility isn’t hindered and he is endowed with the power to opt in or out of the social group. Thus humor is seen to be a versatile tool. Whether used to benefit society or to hurt it, humor can have a significant impact on group dynamics.
CHAPTER III

MISSING THE MARK

As seen with Longstreet and Twain, successful humor has the potential to foster group identity. But not every attempt at humor is successful. What happens when humor misses its mark? This concept can be explored when looking at two recent, comedic television shows: the Fox News Channel’s news program parody *The Half Hour News Hour* and Comedy Central’s sketch comedy program *Chappelle’s Show*. Both shows had difficulties controlling their audiences’ reaction to their attempts at humor. *The Half Hour News Hour* used humor to play to group boundaries—which created a clearly defined group of insiders (or, ingroup) as well as a clearly defined group of outsiders (or, outgroup). They were attempting to use humor bring conservatives together while driving away liberals. However, while the show successfully alienated the outgroup, it failed to gain approval and support from its ingroup. *Chappelle’s Show* did not play to group boundaries; in fact, it used humor to disrupt social boundaries and was widely accepted and praised by its intended audience. However, the show’s brand of humor allowed it to be easily misappropriated, inadvertently creating another unintended quasi ingroup that coopted the humor to reinforce the social boundaries the show was attempting to break down.

*The Half Hour News Hour* was the Fox News Channel’s “conservative alternative” to what were considered liberal news parodies, such as those seen on *Saturday Night Live’s* “Weekend Update” segment, or on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. These are all shows that tackle topical issues through a form of social satire that actively disrupts the status quo. However, “Weekend Update” has been a regular segment on
Saturday Night Live since its inception in 1975, The Daily Show has been running on Comedy Central since 1996, and The Colbert Report ran on Comedy Central from 2005 to 2014. The Half Hour News Hour, on the other hand, only survived seventeen episodes. While it aspired to compete with established news parodies, the show didn’t seem to understand what made those shows work: being funny.

While that may be a harsh judgment on my part, from the beginning, the show made it clear that ideology, and not entertainment, was the first priority. Creators Manny Coto and Joel Surnow (both most known for being producers for 24 on Fox) felt there was a need for “a satirical voice that skews right as opposed to left” (Battaglio). In terms of ideology, then, the Fox News Channel was a good fit for the show—in terms of entertainment, it really wasn’t. Ned Rice, one of the show’s writers, explained that “the Fox News Channel was not an entertainment channel, so it was very difficult to get them to understand what we were trying to do. Almost without exception the best material we wrote was rejected by the network because it was considered too controversial” (Dagnes 205). The result was a show with a restrictive approach to humor on a network with a limited understanding of entertainment.

As promised, the show was skewed dramatically to the right—it just failed to come through with a satirical voice. The promotional advertisement firmly establishes the show’s stance, as a voiceover issues a general warning that the show:

May offend the following: the left, the far left, anyone standing to the left, gay penguins, lawyers, the ACLU, anyone with ‘a,’ ‘c,’ ‘l,’ ‘u’ in their name, Democrats, people who voted for democrats, people who know democrats, gay penguins, illegal aliens, space aliens, and Tom Cruise. Finally there’s a show for the rest of us. The ½ Hour News Hour, an equal opportunity offender. (“Half Hour News Hour Promo”)
If the purpose of a promotional advertisement is to communicate the tone of the show, then this one was successful. First, it explicitly establishes the left as the unquestioned butt of the show’s jokes while implicitly establishing the right (or, the “rest of us”) as off-limits by avoiding equal comedic treatment. As such, the show is establishing the boundary that it intends to maintain. This is a show not focused on bringing people together, but, rather, on further solidifying a preexisting divide. Secondly, the promo aligns humor with offensiveness. This is an outdated perspective of humor that saw the audience laughing at and not with the subject. It suggests that the show’s the brand of humor will be antipathetic—as opposed to sympathetic, a brand of humor generally embraced by western audiences (Smith 162). Lastly, and probably most detrimental to the show’s success, the writing falls flat in large part due to the show’s inability to trust its audience to get a complex or controversial joke. In order to avoid controversy, the show dumbed-down the humor. Unable to take risks for fear of being too controversial, the humor was essentially limited to name-calling. If the purpose of the show was simply to deliver partisan blows in the guise of a news show, this wouldn’t have been a problem as that’s kind of what the Fox News Channel does—and its audience expects as much. However, this was sold as entertainment, meaning that ideology alone wouldn’t be enough to compensate for a dearth of artistry.

Another element working against the show is its inability to establish its own sense of humor. In his review of the pilot for the Washington Post, Tom Shales notices this and points out that “the question ‘Can the right laugh at itself?’ is neither addressed nor answered.” Moira Smith highlights the cultural significance of being able to laugh at oneself as an indication of the “capacity for self-objectification, the ability to perceive the incongruity between our subjective and objective selves, between our interior estimation of ourselves and the way we appear to
others” (158). Essentially, the ability to laugh at oneself is a sign that one’s ego is in check. To point out that which is laughable in others without acknowledging the laughable in oneself is not only hypocritical, it also can come across as mean-spirited. In his article “Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor,” Berys Gaut highlights the importance of establishing that one does not actually hold ethically bad attitudes before engaging in humor that manifests ethically bad attitudes (53-54). He explains that “Humor has often been used as an instrument of oppression, as a way of expressing contempt towards those outside the privileged group, a way of keeping outsiders in their place” (51). Whether or not the right wishes to admit it, it is a privileged group. In terms of political representation, it is primarily old, white, and male. Gaut continues, explaining that “Humor is subject to the demands of justice: joking must be just joking” (51). Essentially, the balance of power, needs to be acknowledged. When a group with power laughs at a group with less power the humor works to maintain that power gap. By not laughing at itself, the show successfully maintained its power, but did so at the cost of its credibility. It made it really difficult for its audience to determine what its intentions were when it laughed at someone or something; it was hard to see it as anything but mean-spirited. As a result, they came across as bullies, especially when they would target a marginalized, underrepresented group—or an organization that speaks out for marginalized, underrepresented groups as the ACLU does.

While the show may not have explicitly addressed whether or not it can laugh at itself, it established implicitly that it can’t. Or, more accurately, that it won’t. In the sixth episode, during the opening sketch, Rush Limbaugh disguises himself as an agent and subjects the unwitting anchors to a “loyalty test.” Limbaugh tries to convince the anchors to be “more balanced” and poke fun at a few Republicans from time to time. He warns them he is hearing negative feedback from the “community” (in this case “studio executives, agents, and [his] kabbalah group”)
because of the show’s liberal targets and that their association with it could jeopardize their careers. Anchor Kurt McNally explains that that’s “not really what the show is about.” Which begs the question: What is the show about?

In an interview with TVGuide.com, Surnow explain his motivation behind creating the show:

You can turn on any comedy satire show on TV and you're going to hear 10 Bush jokes, 10 Cheney jokes, but you'll never hear a Hillary Clinton joke or a global-warming send-up. It's just not out there. Let's face it, people are funny on both sides of the aisle.

(Battaglio)

Surnow’s remarks demonstrate either ignorance of the state of comedic performance, or a blatant disregard thereof. Neither bodes well for his foray into it. For one thing, the prevalence of Bush and Cheney in news parodies could be explained by the Republicans’ prevalence in the news. At the time of the show’s premiere, February 2007, Bush had been president for six years, and Republicans had only just lost control of Congress for the first time since 1995. It makes sense that their political presence would be relevant in the news—and, thus, fuel for news parodies, as topical humor is just that: topical. As such, during times when Hillary Clinton was in the political spotlight as first lady, member of Congress, presidential hopeful, and Secretary of State, she was often the butt of jokes. On Saturday Night Live alone she has been parodied by numerous cast members, most notably Jan Hooks, Anna Gasteyer, and Amy Poehler (“Hillary Rodham Clinton”). In this sense, there were many instances in which one could turn on a comedy satire show and hear a Hillary Clinton joke.

What’s more, there are and have been many tremendously successful comedians who identify as Republican—Bob Hope, Joan Rivers, Adam Sandler, Jeff Foxworthy, and Jeff
Dunham to name a few. However, they aren’t successful comedians because of their ideology; they are successful comedians because they were funny. Yes, their ideology informed their humor, but it doesn’t overshadow it. Jeff Foxworthy is a good example of this. Foxworthy is a Grammy Award-winning comedian, with several successful comedy tours, books, and television shows under his belt. He is best known for his “you might be a redneck” jokes and his Blue Collar Comedy Tour. He identifies with—and is enthusiastically embraced by—his “blue collar” audience. His humor speaks mostly to rural living and purportedly conservative family values. While his humor tends to imply conservative values, his ideology is not explicit. Whereas *Half Hour News Hour* engages in exclusive humor, singling out the outgroup and enforcing boundaries, Foxworthy’s humor is inclusive, focusing on coming together to laugh at common experiences. As such, though his intended audience may be better able to relate to his experiences, since his brand of humor is approachable, those outside of his intended audience may still enjoy it. Most importantly, Foxworthy is not above laughing at himself. While he may poke fun at his community, he does so through examples pulled from his own life, firmly establishing himself as one of them. In so doing, he communicates that his intentions are sympathetic. He establishes that he doesn’t hold ethically bad attitudes towards the subjects of his humor and is laughing *with* them instead of *at* them.

Unlike Foxworthy, *The Half Hour News Hour* wasn’t able to establish that it didn’t hold ethically bad attitudes. In targeting and laughing *at* the left it held itself above its subject. Returning to the “loyalty test,” when anchor Jennifer Lange is pressed to ask the writers to bring things to the center of the political realm, she said she “wouldn’t ask them to do that,” as if doing so would be unfair to them. This echoes Surnow’s stance that the political right is unfairly targeted in popular culture. The writers of *Half Hour News Hour*, then, aren’t just writing a
comedy show; they are righting a perceived systemic wrong. However, it’s somewhat difficult to accept the idea of the right being the underdog in this scenario, given their political might. When the anchors “hold firm,” Limbaugh reveals his true identity and gives them his stamp of approval and telling them they passed the test “with flying colors: red, white, and blue.” This sketch may be considered successful in appeasing the ingroup: it ridicules the alleged liberal bias in the media, while lauding the anchors’ conviction in the face of adversity. The “red, white, and blue” flourish even suggests that they are the real patriots—as opposed to people who laugh at Bush jokes. However, their choice to be serious about who they don’t laugh at, makes their choice about who they do laugh at serious. By refusing to laugh at themselves, they make their attempt to laugh at others appear mean-spirited. If ridiculing the right is reprehensible, how is laughing at the left any less so? This is further complicated by their appropriation of the rhetoric of underdogs, while targeting and ridiculing actual marginalized groups.

The show’s insensitivity to marginalized group can be seen in another segment, in which the anchors have correspondent Jordanna Ryan fill them in on “what’s new in the sordid underworld of sexual harassment.” Her report is on the increase in cases of men reporting sexual harassment in the workplace. Male anchor Kurt McNally clarifies that these are cases where “men are actually accusing women of harassing them”—the “actually” marking it as odd. Ryan confirms and then explains that the verbal harassment often escalates to the physical—to which, McNally asks: “How would that work?” Ryan then uses him as a prop in demonstrating the forms sexual harassment can take—rubbing his back, playing with his hair, pulling him into her chest, sitting in his lap—while explaining the emotional toll such actions have on its victims. Since it is difficult to determine the intentions behind the show’s brand of humor, it’s difficult to see what this segment is poking fun at.
Initially, it seems to be making fun of men who complain about female attention. McNally is presented as enjoying the attentions, half-heartedly feigning indignation to keep the demonstration going. This is problematic because it suggests that men secretly don’t mind being sexually harassed. Diminishing the seriousness of men being sexually harassed plays into gender roles that deny the possibility of men being sexually objectified or victimized. It down-grades harassment to flirting. However, the sketch doesn’t actually address how McNally would respond to unwanted attention—which leads to another reason that the sketch is problematic: it suggests that sexual harassment, in general, isn’t an issue if the aggressor is attractive. This belittles the experiences of both male and female victims of sexual harassment, suggesting that they wouldn’t be complaining if they found the aggressor attractive. The closest it gets to taking sexual harassment seriously comes when McNally asks Ryan to demonstrate what it would look like if a woman harassed another woman. This time female anchor Jennifer Lange was the “prop” and was instantly visibly uncomfortable—though this could just be because she doesn’t find her aggressor attractive. As the segment opens with sexual harassment “becoming” a men’s issue, it closes with it returning to the realm of women’s issues. The show seems to being playing into the victimization of women as Lange becomes the object and her discomfort is offered as a source of humor.

Ultimately, The Half Hour News Hour failed because it was a comedy show that wasn’t funny. Both conservative and liberal critics alike were not impressed with the final product. Alessandra Stanley of the New York Times felt “most of the punch lines [were] silly, and the material too skimpy and narrow in range,” and took issue with the blatant partisanship, saying, “humor is by definition unfair and unbalanced, but it is most effective when it is more evenly and broadly spread,” (Stanley). The show didn’t fare better rom the right. Before the show premiered,
John Hawkins of RightWingNews.com issued an article entitled “Give The ‘1/2 Hour Comedy Hour’ A Chance,” in response to the negative “left-wing” reviews, basically asking people to judge the show for themselves rather than depend on reviews for guidance. However, after the premiere he wrote his own review, saying, “this show was not timely at all and at times you felt like their first priority was getting across a message, not making people laugh. Perhaps more importantly, this may be the least edgy show made since Leave it to Beaver,” (Hawkins). The kindest review came from the Tom Shales and his glowing, “it isn't terrible.” The show had an opportunity to regain some control over how the right was depicted in popular culture, but chose instead to purposefully avoid depictions of the right and instead offer weak jabs at the left. But by not laughing at themselves, they came off as bullies and alienated most of their potential audience. Shows whose primary focus is humor—and actually entertaining their audiences—fail all the time. It seems like this show made the mistake of assuming humor was the easy part and focused on promoting their ideology. In reality, they chose one of the more difficult forms of humor for their show—satire. Satire is a complex, subversive art form that “assumes a norm that needs to be opposed” (Savage 200). However, conservative ideology generally embraces the adherence to norms rooted in tradition. Essentially, it is an ideology that calls for a certain level of conformity. In this light it makes sense that the show attempted to use humor to foster solidarity within the group as this mentality was in line with the ideology it was promoting. What’s more, the show didn’t invite discussion. It had room for one viewpoint and one viewpoint only. In “The State of Satire, the Satire of the State,” it’s explained that “to satirize is to scrutinize, and therefore to encourage one’s audience to scrutinize as well” (Gray 11). Not only did the show refrain from scrutinizing its own ideology, it didn’t really scrutinize that of the left wing either. Its humor amounted to little more than name-calling. They didn’t offer a critique
of sexual harassment reform, they ridiculed those who take it seriously. In opposing the status quo, satire offers an opposing voice and in so doing creates a discussion. However, *Half Hour News Hour*, though reinforcing the voice of conservatives, did little to add to any conversation.

Like *The Half Hour News Hour*, *Chappelle’s Show* was short lived, but, unlike *The Half Hour News Hour*, it was funny. The show was accepted by a diverse audience, received critical acclaim, and was a major success for its network. It premiered on Comedy Central in January of 2003 and ran until July 2006, when Dave Chappelle quit the show at the beginning of filming for the third season. *Chappelle’s Show* mostly featured pre-recorded sketch comedy. It had the freedom and inclination to address controversial topics and often took advantage of this opportunity to subvert racial stereotypes prevalent in popular culture. Chappelle served as an actor, M.C., writer, and executive producer, and as such, exerted a lot of influence on the tone of the show. Chappelle’s brand of humor has been described as a “blend of the sophisticated, the sophomoric, and the subversive” (Haggins 190). At times, the show was all of these things at once, resulting in humor that was approachable on many levels. This translated into a show with broad appeal, as there was something for everyone—everything from biting social criticism to poop jokes. However, one downside to being this approachable was that it was difficult for the show to anticipate its audience. The show intended to appeal primarily to those savvy to hip hop culture, but due to the quality of the show, it ended up meeting a considerable larger audience—a portion of which misread the humor to potential harmful effect.

One of the show’s more famous sketches is its parody of *Training Day* featuring Wayne Brady. *Training Day* is a 2001 crime thriller in which a rookie officer rides along with an experienced narcotics officer, Alonzo Harris, for a day in Los Angeles, only to witness the corrupt nature of Harris—as well as a faction of the police force. The *Chappelle’s Show* parody
uses the premise of a ride along to highlight the problematic elements of racial stereotypes prominent in the media. This is achieved through the contrast of the primary characters. Brady’s character channels Harris in his corrupt, violent nature. Adding to this, his character embodies an exaggerated version of the racial stereotype of the black male aggressor—a dominant stereotype in popular culture. For example, he is seen carrying out a drive-by shooting, threatening to abuse a prostitute he pimps, and murdering a cop. Chappelle’s character serves as an alternative to the stereotype. Where Brady is hot tempered and quick to lash out, Chappelle is calm and rational. This is seen in his reaction to Brady’s drive-by shooting in front of a club. Initially, he is vocal in his moral outrage at the situation. However, this is soon quelled in the face of Brady’s implied violence should Chappelle “snitch.” When Chappelle realizes he is in legitimate danger, he changes his approach, talking Brady down while becoming visibly disturbed. This reaction is significant as it serves as a gauge for the audience, signaling the inappropriateness of Brady’s behavior and actions.

Even were viewers unfamiliar with *Training Day*, the sketch creates humor in the high-tension fish-out-of-water scenario, as a horrified Chappelle tries to make it to the end of the ride-along in one piece. However, the culturally savvy viewer familiar with the heavy, gritty nature of the source material, will likely find more enjoyment recognizing the absurdity to which the original scenario is pushed. Those familiar with the personalities involved in the parody will also find something extra. *Training Day* garnered significant critical acclaim for Denzel Washington, who broke from his usual “good guy” roles to play the villain, Harris. In this light, the casting of Wayne Brady to parody Harris was very smart. Brady’s stint on family programming and daytime television marked him as a “good guy.” Viewers familiar with Brady’s public persona will find humor in the incongruity between the expectation of a tame Brady and the delivered horrific
villain. What’s more, the humor achieves an even greater level of sophistication for those who recognize the parallel between Brady and Washington breaking out of the expected “good guy” roles to play villains.

In playing against type, however, they run the risk of playing toward stereotypes. In *Training Day*, Washington is played opposite Ethan Hawke, whose character serves as an ethical gauge. This creates the potential for some audiences to read the film as a commentary on race—especially with the legitimacy an actor of Washington’s stature brings to the role. In *Chappelle Show’s* response, however, Chappelle fills Hawke’s place, thereby offering an alternate representation of the black community. Chappelle is presented as calm, rational, savvy, and, most importantly, nonviolent. Next to Chappelle, Brady’s antics come across as not only inappropriate, but uncommon. Whereas in the film industry depictions of black males as overly aggressive is commonplace, Chappelle’s reaction to the situation marks it as shocking and out of place with the established norm.

Despite its work to subvert stereotypes, there emerged a portion of *Chappelle’s Show’s* audience that found humor in the stereotypes—a portion laughing at the black community instead of with it. This resulted in the humor being misappropriated and used to reinforce stereotypes. An example of how the humor was misappropriated can be seen in the response Brady received after the sketch. In 2012, on Aisha Tyler’s podcast, *Girl on Guy*, Brady openly discusses his frustrations with the criticism he receives for not being “black enough.” He cites a comment Paul Mooney made on *Chappelle’s Show* in season two, in which it is joked that white people like Brady so much because “he makes Bryant Gumbel look like Malcom X” (Tyler). This joke has had lasting cultural impact, reaching the point where referring to Brady’s persona has become shorthand for someone not “really” being black—a shorthand notably used by
comedian Bill Mahar when taking shots at President Obama’s lack of “real” blackness (Tyler). Brady takes issue with criticism of this nature as it both reinforces the idea that there is only one black experience and perpetuates the racial stereotype of the black male aggressor (Tyler). Part of the *Training Day* sketch’s humor draws on the inappropriateness of this stereotype, as well as the narrow-minded assumptions of Brady’s critics. However, Brady told Tyler that after the sketch’s success, he received positive feedback for being “more black,” which only exasperated his frustration as the substance behind the sketch seemed to have been lost on some of the viewers (Tyler). That’s not to say that Brady doesn’t see good in the sketch or the experience. He maintains that “it's way better for people to remember you for something good and positive that was good work, than to be remembered for something infamous like a sex tape or something. So I live with it, it's cool” (Ketchum). Although the humor was misappropriated by some of the audience, Brady still sees the work as positive.

For Chappelle, the misappropriation of his humor triggered a well-publicized crisis of faith in which he questioned the merits of his work and began to fear that his depictions of the black community were doing more harm than good. During filming for the third season, Chappelle became uncomfortable with the response he was getting for the now infamous “Pixie” sketch in which pixies embodying cultural stereotypes appear when someone is about to play into a specific stereotype. During part of the sketch, Chappelle is on a flight and is approached by a flight attendant who asks about his preference for his inflight meal: chicken or fish. Immediately, a pixie in blackface appears and begins to play into the stereotype of black people loving chicken, while trying to convince Chappelle to give in to it. Chappelle becomes self-conscious and intentionally acts against the stereotype—even though he really wants chicken. During filming, a member of the crew seem to be laughing at the stereotype, which made
Chappelle uncomfortable. In an interview with Oprah, he explained that “somebody on the set [who] was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person?” (Chappelle). This crewmember made Chappelle confront the unintended audience misappropriating his work. While Brady was frustrated that people were misreading the sketch he was in, Chappelle became horrified that he was creating these easily misread images. It was this moment that forced Chappelle to reassess the work he was doing, ultimately leading to his decision to quit the show.

Chappelle’s case is frustrating in that, in order to subvert the stereotypes perpetuated within our culture, he had to engage those stereotypes, and in so doing, left himself open to misappropriation. When read deeply, his satiric treatments worked to challenge the underpinnings of detrimental depictions of black culture. However, Chappelle started seeing legitimate harm in the misappropriation of his humor was having on the depiction of the black community. During his interview with Oprah, he felt that he “was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible” (Chappelle). He went on to explain his reasoning saying: “That concerned me…I don't want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that [message] out there. ... It's a complete moral dilemma” (Chappelle). Ideally, if an artist had any responsibility to society—particularly one whose medium is social satire—it would be to draw focus to a worthy discussion. In many respect, Chappelle’s Show’s humor was very successful in focusing that discussion. At its best, it was a sophisticated critique of detrimental social practices and assumptions. With a socially savvy audience, Chappelle’s Show’s humor did a lot to break down boundaries and foster solidarity. However, were one to gloss over the complexities of Chappelle’s humor, it is possible to see it as contributing to those stereotypes instead of
subverting them. Read shallowly, the “Pixie” sketch could promote the idea that the stereotypes presented are funny because they are true. However, when read deeply, the sketch addresses the toll stereotypes take on an individual and the potential for fostering insecurities and self-hate. In this case, the deeper reading can be undercut by the shallow reading.

*The Half Hour News Hour* failed because it wasn’t funny; *Chappelle’s Show* ultimately failed because it was too funny for its own good. *The Half Hour News Hour* failed to achieve broad appeal—because it specifically set out not to. While its exclusive humor did appeal to a specific kind of audience (bullies), it also appealed to a specific sized audience (small). It was a show that didn’t take risks, and as such the only real consequence of their failure was cancelation. But that was not the case for Chappelle. His show did take on controversial topics in order to subvert racial stereotypes. There was more at stake with his humor, meaning the consequences for failure were greater. However, it’s arguable that even when his humor missed the mark, it was valuable. Chappelle is a greatly talented, highly intelligent satirist whose voice was contributing substantially to important discussions concerning race in America. As problematic as Chappelle’s humor could be, at least it contributed to keeping the discussion open. That in and of itself is valuable. In 2013, Joan Rivers was criticized for making a joke about the Holocaust on her show *Fashion Police*. The Anti-Defamation League went so far as to demand an apology. However, Rivers refused, saying that “I have always made it a point to remind people of the Holocaust through humor” (Sieczkowski). She sees value in this as “half the people don’t know, don’t even believe, it happened” (Sieczkowski). Rivers has a point: the controversy started a discussion. The issue was all over the media and people were discussing the importance of remembering the Holocaust and honoring those who died. Parallels can be made to Chappelle’s situation. He ended up on Oprah’s show, talking about serious issues concerning
the representation of the black community in popular culture. While it may not have been the response he intended, it still managed to do some good.
CHAPTER IV

IRRESPONSIBLE HUMOR

In 2006, Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s South Park was awarded a Peabody. The show began its run on Comedy Central on August 13, 1997, and has never been one to shy away from a controversial issue. While there are those who praise its thematic daring, South Park is exceptionally sophomoric, often using crude language and vulgar imagery. Many critics take issue with its excessive violence, and scatological humor, as well as its representation of race, gender, sexuality, religion, politics, celebrity, among other things. However, once viewers get beyond the crude language, its treatment of weighty subject matter is sophisticated and offers valuable critiques of societal ills. Peabody awards director Horace Newcomb explained, “the judges felt that it was a bold program that probably offends just about everyone at some point and in doing so reminds us that we need to be tolerant” (quoted in Thompson 246). This seems to be in line with Rivers’ stance that actual good can come from being offended. Considering that comedic catharsis is rooted in indignation, it makes sense that there is a relationship between being funny and being offensive. Whereas the intended response is laughter in the face of the indignant and incongruous, it’s very possible that an audience feel indignation without laughter. However, I don’t think this is the same unlaughter that The Half Hour News Hour experienced, as that was rooted in the antipathetic nature of the humor—they were intentionally putting the other group down. I think this brand of unlaughter is rooted in a belief that certain words and subjects are inappropriate for general audiences. This was exactly what motivated the response to Rivers’ Holocaust joke. The Anti-Defamation League stated that “there are certain things about the Holocaust that should be taboo” (Sieczkowski). They found it even more offensive that
Rivers would cross the line as she was Jewish herself and should “know better” (Sieczkowski). However, Rivers felt it was more important to keep the discussion open than to silence it for fear of offending.

This tension between the Anti-Defamation League and Rivers reflects the relationship between censors and satirists. Critic William J. Savage Jr. explains that censors and satirists are essentially at cross purposes. Censors work under the assumption that “there is a norm against which certain things in art are opposed, and so consumption of those aesthetic objects must be controlled or prevented in order to preserve that norm” (200). In this sense, a censor sees herself as protecting an otherwise vulnerable audience. Satirists work to disrupt the status quo, working under the assumption that “there is a norm that must be opposed and so [she] artistically exaggerates things as they are in order to have political effect” (200). A key difference in the approach of the satirist is her view of audience. Savage explains that “Satire, like any serious genre, depends upon the existence of multiple levels of signification and the reader’s willingness to participate in serious interpretive behavior, to read deeply” (200). In order to truly appreciate satire, the audience must be able to read deeply: in this sense, a satirist isn’t trying to protect her audience, but to incite it. She is trusting her audience to read deeply and recognize the intent driving the exaggeration. However, because of this reliance on exaggeration, it’s easy to see how critics often times accuse the artist of going too far. The artist is attempting to shock her audience into awareness through indignation—and in that she succeeds, just not to her desired effect. This is in part due to the extent to which people are emotionally invested in controversial issues. Audiences get upset because they are close to the issue. The satirist serves as a means of disrupting the silence that surrounds these issues, as discussion is the only way to reach resolution.
South Park’s sixth episode, “Death,” speaks to the need to disrupt silence. The episode pairs a conversation about censorship with a conversation about assisted suicide. Pairing these discussions is interesting in that both the issue of censorship and the issue assisted suicide share the characteristic of acting on behalf of someone else for his or her own wellbeing. The show exaggerates the issues to magnify the benefits and detriments of each issue. While the show offers its stance on assisted suicide and censorship what really stands out is its stance on the subject of silence—the futility of silencing profanity in entertainment, the frustration resulting from the silence surrounding pressing issues, and the harm in a parent-child relationship marked by silence. In raising the issues, the show is doing more than giving itself a platform for its own viewpoint: by inviting a response it is commenting upon the nature of the show itself.

One of the story lines follows the parents of South Park as they boycott a crude television show. Mrs. Broflovski walks in on her son, Kyle, watching his favorite show, Terrance and Philip—a stand-in for South Park—and is outraged upon witnessing toilet humor and crude antics. Mrs. Broflovski’s motivations are in line with those of a censor; as a parent, she is invested in the wellbeing of her child and, as such, wishes to protect him from objectionable material. Her objection to toilet humor and crude behavior is also in line with the objections most often levied by censors—because those elements are easy to police. It is a lot easier to designate a specific word or gesture as taboo than it is to dissect an abstract concept. It also ties into how censors expect audiences to read texts. Savage explains that censors “assume that audiences are monoliths and will read one way and one way only” (201). Mrs. Broflovski’s indignation is rooted in the television show’s inappropriate representation of reality. However, since she holds the belief that children shouldn’t be exposed to such representations, she responds without laughter. She seems to fear that her son will read the show shallowly and take this representation
seriously. Mrs. Broflovski bans Kyle from watching the show as it is little more than “immature toilet humor” (“Death”).

Then again, how mature is a third grader supposed to be? Kyle defends his show claiming that “everyone watches Terrence and Philip” indicating that he and his peers are all on the same page—they are all at the stage of maturity that finds enjoyment in fart jokes. What’s confusing is that Mrs. Broflovski simultaneously dismisses the show as trivial, but considers its effects as serious and damaging. In general, the assumption is that audiences don’t take popular texts seriously. Savage explains that audiences tend to approach popular texts with a shallower depth of field than they do texts seen as “serious” (197). This makes sense, as most audiences turn to popular texts for entertainment, not enlightenment. This is especially true with an animated series, as there is an even greater expectation that audiences know it’s unrealistic: people don’t age, there is a lag in the effects of gravity, and injury (even death) is temporary. In a way, this episode can be read as Stone and Parker telling their critics to calm down and trust that audiences possess enough discernment to recognize that though they are watching a cartoon about children, it is intended for adults.

Mrs. Broflovski doesn’t stop at just banning her own son from watching the show. As her outrage festers, she extends her reach, moving from calling all the parents, to organizing an emergency meeting of the P.T.A., to staging a protest in front of the studio—all the way in New York. It makes sense that, as a parent, Mrs. Broflovski is concerned about her child’s wellbeing; however, South Park mocks her decision to impose on those outside of her home by pushing the protest to absurd degrees. In an effort to pressure the studio to take them seriously, the parents start hurling their bodies at the building by means of a giant sling shot. Their willingness to die
over fart jokes is seen as overkill—especially as the show works to undercut the parents’ moral high-ground with the other forces at work in the episode.

When lecturing the boys on the demerits of toilet humor, their teacher, Mr. Garrison, explains that *Terrence and Philip* “isn’t based on reality” (“Death”). However, while the protest is underway, the parents are havocked by a stomach flu. The parents are seen ardently speaking out against the use of toilet humor, all the while laughing light-heartedly at their collective struggle with diarrhea—Mrs. Broflovski included. They are willing to die to prevent their children from being exposed to a show that engages in scatological humor, yet are considerably more lax in the standards governing their own use of it. Their bodily functions are not only accepted as real—certainly not something to hurl yourself at a building over—but as a source of humor. This story line challenges Mr. Garrison’s claim that the show “isn’t based on reality.” In so doing, it amplifies the hypocrisy of the situation: the parents of South Park are objecting to the representation of a reality with which they otherwise have no problem. They are able to laugh at themselves privately, but not publically, all the while scolding those who do.

The parents’ cause is further undercut and the story gains complexity by the episode’s second main storyline. The episode opens with Stan’s family celebrating Grandpa turning 102. Throughout the celebration, Grandpa keeps talking about wanting to die. However, Stan’s parents laugh it off as him being “silly” (“Death”). However, in glossing over his comments, they missed an opportunity to inform Stan’s understanding of assisted suicide—which it turns out Stan needs, as Grandpa ends up spending most of the episode trying to convince Stan and the boys to help him die. Unsure as to what the “right” thing to do would be, the boys desperately seek guidance from the adults. However, throughout their attempt to understand this issue, the boys are only met with silence. Looking again at Mr. Garrison’s lecture to the boys, he closes
advising them that they should be “spending [their] time enlightening [their] minds” (“Death”). Immediately following this statement, Stan asks him about the ethical implications of assisted suicide. Mr. Garrison replies that “[he isn’t] touching that one with a twenty foot pole” (“Death”). The adults worry the children aren’t engaging in substantial pursuits, yet Stan is asking a substantial question. Mr. Garrison has the opportunity to disrupt television’s influence on the children by taking an active role in their “enlightenment.” But instead, he opts out of the discussion. Considering his endorsement of more intellectual pursuits, his silence is confusing.

Then again, it may speak to a larger issue: that it’s not his place to guide them. Mr. Garrison is the first of three adults the boys seek out for help. As their teacher, he can be read as a source of intellectual guidance. The boys go to Chef next, who is usually presented as the voice of reason. Throughout the series, the boys go to Chef whenever they need someone to be straight with them about how the world works. Even when other adults dismiss them, Chef usually takes them seriously. He usually draws from his own life and as such can be read as a source of experiential guidance. However, this time he disappoints them by also choosing not to engage the topic. Desperate to make sense of the issue, the boys phone in to Jesus and Pals and asks Jesus to provide moral guidance. However, the results are the same. Jesus declines to weigh in and hangs up on them. Though the boys do desperately need guidance, the adults they approach do not have a stake in their personal lives. As such, providing guidance on such a controversial issue could over-step their bounds. Considering how upset the parents get over toilet humor, it’s reasonable to assume they wouldn’t appreciate some other adult influencing their child’s understanding of a controversial topic—especially if they haven’t addressed it with their children first.
Interestingly, the boys don’t approach their parents for guidance. Ideally, parents would serve as a synthesis of intellectual, experiential, and moral guidance. What’s more, the parents have a stake in their personal development so it would be appropriate for them to engage in meaningful discussions with the kids. However, the parents decided to camp out in front of Cartoon Central, so they aren’t there to ask. But even if they were, it’s not clear how supportive they’d actually be. Eventually, Grandpa is able to communicate how miserable he is to Stan. Not wanting him to suffer, Stan and the boys agree to help him. However, just as they are about to drop a cow on Grandpa, Death appears and starts chasing the boys. In a panic, they call their parents in New York for help. Even with the boys claiming to be in danger, they don’t seem to hear them. His mother responds with: “Stanley, honey, you need to leave mommy alone, I’m doing something very, very important for your little wellbeing” (“Death”). She then hands the phone to his dad who reminds him to turn the heater down before hanging up on him (“Death”). If this interaction is representative of their relationship, it may provide insights into why the boys didn’t seek their parents’ advice earlier. Their parents don’t engage them in discussion. The adults of South Park claim to be acting for their children’s wellbeing, but don’t include the boys in the discussion of what that means. The boys don’t get to voice their needs or ask questions. Their frustration with their parents’ priorities can be seen in the following exchange:

STAN: You know, I think that if parents would spend less time worrying about what their kids watch on TV and more time worrying about what’s going on in their kids’ lives, this world would be a much better place.

KYLE: Yeah. I think that parents only get so offended by television because they rely on it as a babysitter and sole educator of their kids. (“Death”)
While Kyle’s statement may be a bit harsh, it may provide some insights as to why the parents didn’t stop at just turning off the television. When the parents marched on Cartoon Central they demanded “more quality programing, like *Full House*” (“Death”). While it’s true *Full House* is easily described as “wholesome,” what’s interesting is how it presents the dynamic between adults and children—they communicate. Whenever one of the children is confused, upset, or acts out, one of the adults sits the child down and discusses the issue, helping her distinguish right from wrong. In this sense, the show could serve as a babysitter of sorts. However, a show with a strong parent-child relationship doesn’t take the place of one in real life. Were the boys to take entertainment as seriously as the parents seem to want them to, and were they to look to *Full House* as a model—a model where parents are actively involved in their children’s lives—there is a chance that they will start looking to their parents for the same level of involvement. The adults seem to want the children to walk away from their entertainment with something substantial, but are the parents ready to do the same? The adults have been so wrapped up in protecting their children from fart jokes that they don’t have time to provide parental guidance. They technically abandon their children in Colorado to protest in New York, when, really, all they needed to do was turn off the television.

Their absence from *South Park* mirrors their silence on the issue of assisted suicide. The boys reach out to them, but they are literally and figurative not there for them. The issue of assisted suicide has far more at stake than the issue of profanity on a television screen. Still, the parents allow themselves to be distracted by their outrage over a comparatively minor issue, allowing a serious issue to be ignored. The closest the boys get to serious guidance concerning assisted suicide comes from Grandpa, who feels a person shouldn’t be left to suffer. However, he definitely has his own agenda and is guiding the children without really thinking about their
wellbeing. It takes the disembodied spirit of Grandpa’s grandpa to call him out on his selfishness stating: “You’re so obsessed with ending your own life, you’re not thinking about what you’re doing to his” (“Death”). The show thus presents an alternative to Grandpa’s perspective on assisted suicide that depicts assisted suicide as an inappropriate burden to place on another being—or at the very least, on an eight-year-old. The advice is directed to Grandpa, implying that it falls on the individual to police himself. The show presents a similar stance on the issue of censorship: it isn’t an outsider’s place to raise one’s children. It doesn’t fall to the teachers, religious figures, community members, or television. When Cartoon Central gave in to the parents’ demands, they replaced Terrence and Philip with reruns of She’s the Sheriff featuring Suzanne Sommers. Initially, the parents are appeased—until they actually see an episode and discover it uses objectionable language too. This seems to be a commentary on the futility of the parents’ quest. There are always going to be shows parents don’t like. If they relinquish control of monitoring content to an outside entity, they are going to have to accept that it’s not going to live up to each individual parent’s standards every time. However, if the parents took the time to police the issue themselves—if they took the time to see what their children are watching and open a discussion about what is and is not appropriate television—it is far more likely that the parents will be more satisfied.

What’s more, it the parents took Stan’s advice and worried more about what was happening in their children’s lives, they would have a better opportunity to inform their children’s discernment and they may end up having more faith in their children’s decision making. Without parental guidance the boys are left to their own devices. Without Terrence and Philip the boys try to think of other things to do for entertainment:

STAN: We could start breathing gas fumes.
CARTMAN: My uncle says that smoking crack is kinda cool.

KYLE: Hey, why don’t we watch one of those porno movie thingies? (“Death”)

This exchange works to put things in perspective. The parents got upset over immature toilet humor, without stopping to consider that their children are immature eight-year-olds. And considering the parents themselves are amused by toilet humor, they are holding their children to an unfair double standard. In reality, their children could be doing much worse than fart jokes. The adults may think the children are too young to discuss serious issues with them, but their age didn’t shield them from being exposed to the issue of assisted suicide—which, granted, is a heavy issue for a third grader. Even still, by not helping the boys make sense of the issue, they were left to their own devices and almost killed Grandpa—something that could have a serious impact on the psyche of eight-year-olds. That’s not the only serious trouble the boys can get into.

If the parent weren’t eager to speak to the boys about assisted suicide, it’s likely they won’t discuss drug use and pornography either since they are arguably too young for that as well. While it’s a lot easier to ban bad words than to talk about controversial issues, parents shouldn’t assume that someone else is going to have that uncomfortable talk for them. If they want their children to be more mature, they are going to have to model it. If they want them to be more enlightened, they are going to have to be willing to be the source of enlightenment instead of a source of silence. It might be uncomfortable, but it has to be worth it. While the issue of assisted suicide is uncomfortable, it’s only ever going to remain so if avoided—and left to fester, the discomfort will only increase becoming even more intimidating. The only hope of resolving controversial issues is by keeping the discussion open—which is what Stone and Parker are attempting to do through their use of humor.
Like Rivers, Stone and Parker see more value in offending people and keeping the discussion open, than appeasing critics and letting the discussions die. In pushing the bounds of propriety, the show runs the risk *Chappelle’s Show* did of having its message misread or misappropriated. In the article “Stupid Inc,” *New York Times Magazine* writer Jonathan Van Meter asks:

“Does everyone get it? Are some of the ‘South Park’ fans simply laughing at Jew jokes or goofy Chinese accents or gay stereotypes, without the layers of irony that exist at the point of creation? Probably. As with all comedy that dares to articulate the things that people don’t for fear of sounding mean or hateful, there’s always a chance that it might be dangerously misinterpreted—or misused” (quoted in Savage 220).

When read shallowly, *South Park* is at risk of being “misused” by its audience. The show’s creators are putting an image out into the world that could be misappropriated by racists, anti-Semites, and homophobes to name a few. However, it’s arguably just as harmful if the “fear of sounding mean and hateful” silences necessary discussions. To Van Meter’s warning that *South Park*’s humor could be “dangerously misinterpreted,” Savage responds, “So what? The same could be said of any work of art in any medium . . . The danger of misinterpretation inheres in any utterance complicated enough to be worth discussing” (220). Stone and Parker uses their art to address the silences that surround “worthy” issues. As satirists, they work to disrupt the status quo and in so doing give voice to marginalized viewpoints. By inviting response, they remind us that discussions aren’t one-sided—even if that response is angry. In this case, humor lends itself well to serious discourse as it thrives on complexity, controversy, and ambiguity—all the markers of a discussion worth having.
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