

THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF THE COMIC HERO

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by
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May 2014

Major: English
Women's and Gender Studies

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ABSTRACT

The Educational Potential of the Comic Hero. (May 2014)

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My project intends to analyze the education potential of comic heroes for the humanities in the development of a democratic citizenry. Drawing on critiques of certain Enlightenment conceptions of an individual autonomous self, the limitations of the negative freedom of classic liberalism, and the tragic metanarrative that largely informs the current American sociopolitical landscape, I propose comedy and, specifically, the locus of this comic vision, the comic hero, as a more comprehensive way into liberation that aligns more closely with our necessarily social lives, and foregrounds equality and solidarity. Using classic and contemporary comic and sociopolitical theory, Foucauldian discourse analysis, as well as case studies of comic heroes from a variety of sources, I intend to form progressive comic heroes or point to those already in existence and search out the areas that the study of the comic hero can be implemented in order to enact the most change and to additionally see how this increased study will alter the specific areas and mediums of transmission.

DEDICATION

To my mother, my father, my sisters, my nephew, and my friends, for always making me laugh.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Program for this opportunity. I would also like to thank the Melbern G. Glasscock for Humanities Research for their funding and continual help. I would especially like to thank Dr. Claire Katz for her continued support and encouragement. From the beginning it has been very clear that this project would not be possible without her instruction and dedication.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Film Studies lecturer Lisa Trahair observes that there is a “residual anxiety that lingers in the work of many theorists of the comic regarding the seriousness of their object of study.”

Historically, the discipline of philosophy has foregone serious study of the comic. Philosophers did reference comedy, but mostly in passing and largely disparagingly. In the early twentieth century various theorists (such as S. Freud, A. Schopenhauer, H. Bergson, G. Bataille, et al.) more thoroughly studied the comic, while others (such as B. Russell, L. Wittgenstein, et al.) expressed an affinity towards the comic discourse. The postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers of the later twentieth century (J. Baudrillard, J. Derrida, J. Lyotard, et al.) appropriated comic language in their discourse, which legitimated a more serious study of the comic. Until then the study of comedy had been piecemeal and used for multiple purposes without much investigation of the direct relationship between comedy and meaning. I situate my project in the current search for the relation between meaning and the comic discourse, as well as continuing an application of comedy, specifically a sociopolitical one.

Though the focused study of comedy and its relationship to meaning is relatively recent (Willett, Trahair, Morreall, et al.), the use of comedy as a political act dates back to Plato in the form of satire. Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” is a famous example and satire is popular today in the form of news sources *The Onion* or Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*. Satire, as a form – enacting ridicule in an ironic mood – operates only rhetorically. It appeals primarily to the mental faculties, privileges reason, and ignores lived experience. Though satire plays a role in

liberation, it alone cannot provide the narrative restructuring necessary for a more emancipatory view of freedom possible in the context of the United States.

Our examination of comedy is aided by first looking at tragedy. Tragedy privileges the individual autonomous self and suggests independence and self-sufficiency. This idea of negative freedom, which is understood as freedom from external forces – such as other people and their wills – is the standard of American liberal thinking; negative freedom is freedom *from*. However when considering the social nature of daily existence, “an ontological commitment to the existence of separate individuals” (Nussbaum) is incoherent. Tragedy and its attendant values of militarism, tradition, individualism, hierarchy, vengeance, social isolation, etc., (Morreall) align with classic liberalism to become the American metanarrative. Comedy though, as a vision, a metanarrative, and a “superordinate source of meaning” (Palmer 112) privileges the libidinal intersubjective organic whole rather than the rational individual. In her book *Irony in the Age of Empire*, Cynthia Willett calls this alternative vision of freedom, “home,” a vision that foregrounds connection and freedom through equality and solidarity.

By proposing a replacement of the tragic “superordinate source of meaning,” with a comic one, then the social implications of a comic metaphysics should be implemented. If comedy is primarily about “wish-fulfillment, fantasy gratification, and the realization of a broad gamut of human potentialities” – as leading comic theorist Maurice Charney insists – then the comic hero borne out of this abstracted reality acts as the vehicle for these forces within the comic universe. Drawing on Cynthia Willett’s sociopolitical approach to comedy in her formation of a new

vision of freedom, I want to propose a concentrated study on the locus of the vision of freedom Willett proposes, the comic hero.

I intend to use the comic hero as the locus from which a more comprehensive and authentic vision of freedom can develop. I expect that a concentrated view of the comic hero will illustrate the comic hero's education potential in helping form a democratic citizenry, but also will produce the means for implementation of this potential.

I will continue my reading of classic and contemporary comic and sociopolitical theory, to deepen my knowledge on these two disciplines that are the foundation for my project. I will also read Foucauldian discourse analysis to understand the structural power relationships that limit and oppress, to see how the tragic metanarrative works with prevailing power structures, and to find areas of best implementation for the emancipatory potential of comic heroes. I will then survey a variety of comic heroes in literature and film to better understand their educational potential.

CHAPTER II

THE COMIC HERO

I will work through the development of my thought. But I should first present the various areas of thought that my topic resides within. Broadly, my research is attempting to work within discussions of comedy and its transgressive and socio-political progressive potential, and using the classroom as the site of this potential. I want to see the ways in which critical pedagogy can tap into comedy as a source to enhance or bolster a consciousness of freedom. I am specifically interested in the educational potential of the comic hero to guide us into ways of freedom.

The roots of the project can be traced back to the two week seminar with Dr. Katz. The concept that intrigued me the most during the first week of the seminar was the problem of the public/private split, and the attendant concept of man as man versus man as citizen. How can man best flourish? To what vision of freedom do we aspire? The following week I read theories that see the humanities as a recuperation of the enlightenment, such as Martha Nussbaum's 2010 *Not for Profit*, where she makes the case that the humanities are central in maintaining a healthy democracy and producing a good citizenry.

Freedom is at the core of my project and is what directed me first to comedy. I know that I generalize when I say that most people enjoy a good laugh and that laughter is central in maintaining social bonds between individuals (as much as it has divisive possibility and the ability to reinscribe systems of domination and oppression). Yet my interest in comedy extends past this casual appreciation. I actively pursue comedy, in literature, through a constant stream

on the internet, or through stand-up acts, television or movies. Beyond the experience of pleasure of comedy through these various mediums, there has been something I have sensed in comedy that I use to cope with my lived reality. In comedy, there smacks something of freedom. In a lived reality that is primarily social, the antics of my favorite comic heroes flounder in following our social codes and transgress various discourses that underlie these codes. Through their missteps and transgressions they illuminated the sociopolitical forces and institutions that reinforce various oppressions weighing upon our day-to-day life unseen. I envied their ease at moving through the world. There are of course the comic heroes that move through the world unaware of their transgressions, but there are also characters acutely aware to the awkward and painful instances of transgression. Yet conscious or unconscious of their transgression, the comic mode translates this situation, this material, into a source of possibility and pleasure.

Many of my personal observations on comedy seemed to straddle the issues of the enlightenment. And with Dr. Katz's insistence that we choose a topic that could sustain our interest over a year of research, I chose comedy. I began my research concentrating on comic theory to flesh out and correct my current understanding of the comic mode. To assist my research, Dr. Katz began an open correspondence with her colleague Dr. Cynthia Willett who studies comedy from the approach of philosophy. Dr. Willett sent me a portion from her 2008 book *Irony in the Age of Empire*. In my reading of Willett's book, I found a cohesion of many of the ideas that I had not been able to connect. In her book, Willett critiques the views of freedom that produced by the Enlightenment, and she proposes that comedy offers a vision of freedom that more closely aligns to our libidinal and necessarily social lives than the views of positive/negative freedom of classic liberalism that inform our current American socio-/political

environment. Our core need is recognition from the other, not freedom from them, an aspiration towards equality and solidarity. She sets comedy in opposition to the values of tragedy, the comic vision against ideas of disembodied reasoning, and the comic hero against the privileging of the individual autonomous self. Her book provides me a point of departure for my own project, something solid to react to and expand on by proposing a concentrated study on the locus of the vision of freedom Willett proposes, the comic hero.

But what exactly is the comic hero? For this hero is not just a funny protagonist in a funny story. In my research I came across a list of seven features of the comic hero in Maurice Charney's *Comedy High and Low*. Why exactly seven? Charney explains, there's seven, because there aren't eight. Clearly there is disagreement as to what the comic hero is or is not, and many aspects appear as contradictory impulses. If comedy is primarily about wish-fulfillment, fantasy gratification, and the realization of a broad gamut of human potentialities, then the comic hero borne out of this abstracted reality acts as the vehicle for these forces within the comic universe. The following is a list of characteristics chosen for their consistent impulses and their adherence to the comedic metaphysics. The comic hero is static, not dynamic. The comic hero is single-minded. The comic hero is not self-aware, and if even slightly conscious of his impact or presentation, it is not sufficient. The comic hero is a trickster. The comic hero imagines herself to be invulnerable and omnipotent. The comic hero indulges in the pleasures of the body. of food and sex, and sometimes this expressed with a grossness of corporeality. The private self-contained universe within the comic hero projected out does not cohere with the public social and material world; there is an incongruity. An example of the nuanced difference between a funny character and a comic hero is Woody Allen versus Larry David. Michael Scott versus Jim

Halpert. It is of course not dichotomous, but rather operates more along a spectrum. Yet this incongruity only points to the absurdity of lived experience.

As various media, like film, television, or even books, are easily swayed by motivations that do not necessarily align with a vision of freedom that means a resistance against various systems of domination, I found myself returning to the classroom as a stable and productive site for the transmission and education that centers on freedom. Advancing this discussion, bell hooks book *Teaching to Transgress*, illuminates what was difficult to find in other resources. This work provides an effective introduction to critical pedagogy, which she based on the work of Paulo Freire, who centralizes a consciousness of freedom oriented around praxis, or the connection between knowledge and its action. The set of essays in bell hooks's work proposes radical pedagogy that rejects conservative models of education, where the primary relationship is between the teacher and the individual student, ignoring other students as possible sources of knowledge. She instead proffers a classroom where every individual becomes responsible for dynamics. Like comedy, this pedagogy privileges community and the other, recognizing each other's voice, rather than on the individual and her ability to store knowledge into a bank. As hooks notes, this often can give rise to conflict and hostility, especially one is to use the race, class, and gender to uncover. As noted, comedy, according to the dominant theories, superiority, relief, and incongruity, operates through tension and its resolution, or tension and the settlement upon absurdity as the reigning condition of our reality.

Her book, which takes up a radical pedagogy, enables me to see how comedy can work in this liberatory process of education: I see comedy in the dialectical process and in the limitations of this process. I see the transgressive potential of comedy. I see the educational potential of comedy. I see the pleasure in comedy. I see the reinforcement of social bonds in comedy. I see the ways in which tragedy forecloses transcendence and freedom and the way that comedy opens this up and is more equipped to deal with finitude. I see how comedy sits across knowledge in its dominant theories of relief or incongruity. I see how comedy pushes against various discourses. I see how comedy appreciates community, the Other, and our necessarily social lives. I see how it pushes against the separation from the body and the mind and how it works between the knowing and the doing. I see how comedy and comic heroes point to the realm of possibility and the future.

CHAPTER III

HEGEL AND THE COMIC HERO

To begin to understand comedy, the comic universe and the comic hero, I must illustrate the overarching philosophical undergirding of the comic mode. To assist in this illustration, I use Mark Roche's overview of Hegel's theorization on comedy. I specifically use Hegel for his dialectical understanding of comedy, specifically the "importance of subjectivity and particularity as the dominant categories of the genre and recognition of comedy as the negation of negativity or the mockery of an untenable position" (Roche 3). To quote the philosopher directly, Hegel states that "what is comical [...] is the subjectivity that makes its own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing" (3); comedy is an "imminent negation" (7).

Whenever Hegel uses the word subjectivity in this context, he means the contradiction that arises when the comic self directs his focus inwardly to his own desires and concerns, elevating the self and self-consciousness and his particularity (2), directing his focus to the "territory of wish fulfillment and fantasy gratification" (Charney 4), against objectivity and intersubjectivity.

By objectivity, Roche means, "naive adherence to the traditional norms of society" (2), and by intersubjectivity, Roche means, "the spheres of friendship, love, and community" (2). Through the comic hero's focus on her concerns, she ignores objectivity and intersubjectivity, the means to which one can self-reflect. By looking outward, one can compare oneself to an objectivity or other people through intersubjectivity. Yet when one merely concentrates on one's internal atmosphere, without external mediation, no critical self-awareness can take place; this

subjectivity is not self-conscious or self-aware in any substantial way. The comic hero though does not remain in this state once he enters into a dialectical relationship.

Roche notes that Hegel's theorization on comedy in his *Aesthetics* is not fully developed, yet later theorists extend much of his work. Hegelian Heinrich Theodor Rotscher accomplishes one important development of Hegel's prioritizing of subjectivity and particularity against objectivity and intersubjectivity, by finding that comedy inculcates the "development of a subjectivity that reasons and questions and thereby dissolves the objectivity and stability of tradition and state [driven by] the private and arbitrary desires of the self" (5).

To state these comic processes dialectically, I start with the subjectivity that privileges its own self through concentrating internally on its own desires. The comic work takes this positioning of this subjectivity seriously. Yet when this subjectivity encounters objectivity, the subjectivity's position "reveals its own absurdity and so destroys itself" (7). Yet in this process of "imminent negation" of the subjectivity, the objectivity itself is put into question, whether this objectivity be morals, mores, traditions, or reasoning behind certain authority, be it religious, social, or political. A brief overview will make Hegel's complex theories more comprehensible.

In *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy*, Maurice Charney makes explicit the connection between jokes and dreams, stating "Comedy may be anchored in ordinary, daily experience – what is usually lumped together under the concerns of realism – but the comic effects depend upon forays into the unexplored territory of wish fulfillment and fantasy gratification [...] This is the area where dreams and comedy work together to realize a

broad gamut of human potentialities” (4). Or, to make the connection between comedy and dreams even clearer, Charney states that the “basic mechanism of dreams and of comedy is wish-fulfillment” (152). Dreams are the fabric and material that form the comic universe.

To connect Charney’s more general survey on the conventions of the comic mode to Hegel’s more foundational theorization, the dream as a central operating mechanism is the internal world of desire and wish fulfillment that the subjectivity focuses on, privileging her subjectivity in relation to objectivity or intersubjectivity in the earlier stage of the dialectic.

If the process of dreaming is the mechanism driving comedy, then one must also recognize the basic assumption of dreams and poetry: irony. As Maurice Charney describes irony in comedy, we must recognize that “everything can also mean its opposite. Comedy trains us to expect the pie in the face [...] the ironist is a sly man who is constantly repeating: the only thing I know is that I know nothing” (7). To greater emphasize the centrality of irony, he states, “irony lies at the heart of comic technique. All comedy is a manipulation of deceptive appearances. The most triumphantly ironic act is to pretend to be stupid” (10).

The ironist is the subjectivity in imminent negation. In stating, “the only thing I know is that I know nothing,” one becomes that subjectivity that, through his contradictory actions or statements, “brings them to nothing” and “destroys itself” (Roche 3)

Now understanding dreams and irony to be integral to comedy and the comic universe in narrative form, what do the inhabitants of this place look like? How do they operate in this

territory of “wish fulfillment and fantasy gratification” (7)? I term the locus of the metaphysics and assumptions of the comic universe, comic heroes.

If dreaming and irony are the central forces of comedy, the comic hero borne out of this abstracted reality acts as the vehicle for these forces within the comic universe. The comic hero is the dreamer and ironist. As the tragic hero is the figure that yields the weight of destiny in the tragedy, the comic hero functions as the locus through which the forces of comedy act. On the foundational level, the comic hero is the subjectivity in imminent negation placed in a dialectical relationship to the concerns of objectivity and intersubjectivity.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMIC HERO AND THE CLASS

To move into the implementation of the comic hero into the class, I will briefly retrace the comic mode. Comedy and tragedy are not so neatly dichotomous, but again, they are variations of the tragic mode, but it is at its essence about the foreclosure of possibility – it dwells on death. It is about decisiveness, yes, but it is about the individual and destiny and the final end. There are also cosmic forces that have some sort of intent or purpose, which does not cohere with reality as I conceive of it, one that is inert in meaning until my presence. Comedy on the other hand is about potentiality and the constant approaching, nimble levity that continues without death or foreclosure in mind. It is Charlie Chaplin spectacularly avoiding death, the invulnerability of Tom and Jerry and Coyote and Roadrunner. It is not an illusion of immortality but is proceeding as a being-towards-death never considering its weight. It is levity at the bite of death. Yes, there is dark comedy that revolves around death but that is a variation and an addition to comedy pure, purity suggesting a narrative mode that lays bare the operations of our constitutive state. Though it is brusque to say, the tragic mode is incorrect and the comic mode is correct in its coherence with existentiality and dialectical processes.

The comic hero's importance in education is her overlap in the characteristics and purposes of education. Three purposes of education are to read and resolve incongruity – or to critically engage and pay attention – allow for imagination and dreaming as an end, and to resist and play in the Derridian sense with ordering structures and institutions through engagement with the critical edge and imagination. The character of education is that one of identifying and reading

logical incongruity and attempting to resolve it. The comic hero though teaches one how to gain pleasure from this process and also patience and joy and other positive affects when one realizes that incongruity enumerates. Imagination and possibility and ever approaching are the fabric of the comic hero as understood through Hegel and this maps onto the purpose of education.

The very site of education, the body, is also worshipped through the comic mode and the comic hero. Knowledge through the body, through experience via the site of the body, is prioritized in comedy. Many comic heroes have excessive corporeality as a way to indicate fuller embodiment and presence. Working through James and Dewey, knowledge starts through the body and experience. The tragic works through the separation of the body and mind, whereas comedy embraces and prioritizes sensation and cognition through the body.

Through the emphasis of the body as the site for education and the comic hero's overlap with criticism at incongruity, imagination, and resistance, the comic hero has untapped potential needing exploration. This project is not focused on the implementation, but rather the explanation of and pointing towards the comic hero's liberatory potential.

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