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THE (RE)SHAPING OF *SOUTH PARK*'S HUMOR THROUGH LITERARY REFERENCES²

ABSTRACT. The paper examines the complex relationship between a lauded American animated sitcom *South Park* on the one side, and literature, especially satire, on the other side. Upon asserting the bond between literature and popular culture, numerous references presented in the show are pointed out, namely the stance the authors take on literature and the act of reading, the types and subtypes of humor exhibited, and topicality. Finally, using the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin, *South Park* itself is treated as literature as its type of humor is a continuation of an age-old literary tradition of laughter. The conclusion asserts this as it is revealed that *South Park* owes much of its popularity to the literary aspect of the humor exhibited in the show.

KEYWORDS: *South Park*, humor, Mikhail Bakhtin, parody, popular culture, satire.

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INTRODUCTION

A popular legend about Oscar Wilde has it that while visiting Leadville, Colorado in 1882 on his American tour, he gave a lecture at Tabor Opera House. Later in the evening, he visited a honky-tonk in which a sign stood over the piano with an inscription common in those days: "Please do not shoot the pianist; he is doing his best." Wilde famously noted that the sign was: "the only rational method of art criticism I have ever come across."³ It is precisely this kind of notice that had caught Wilde's intention that the animated sitcom for adults, *South Park*, starts with. Before the introductory sequence a black screen appears with the following jocular disclaimer:

"All characters and events in this show - even those based on real people - are entirely fictional. All celebrity voices are impersonated ... poorly. The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone."⁴

Its prime intention coincides with the one the entire series has: parody. In this case, it is the legal disclaimer that is being lampooned. However, this initial contact with *South Park* has a far deeper meaning and pretensions, namely verbal criticism. In popular culture, one could associate words with literature, and the context of the disclaimer goes in favor of such an interpretation, since the show quite openly proclaims itself to be "fictional," i.e. in literary terms it has deemed itself as fiction. The impersonated personages that converse in coarse language belong to popular culture, rather than literature, but the concluding tongue-in-cheek phrase about the intended audience, or the lack of it, falls within the scope of literary criticism since the show lays claim to the rapport with the reader/viewer in a similar manner a literary work does. The intention stated by Matt Stone and Trey Parker in the disclaimer, coincides with Fiske's view on the task popular culture has:

"So popular culture is full of puns whose meanings multiply and escape the norms of the social order and overflow their discipline; its excess offers opportunities for parody, subversion, or inversion; it is obvious and superficial, refusing to produce the deep, complexly crafted texts that narrow down their audiences and social meanings;

³ Jordison, Sam. "Oscar Wilde's West," *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Jul. 2007, Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/jul/05/oscarwildeswest> 22 Jul. 2014.

⁴ "Legal Show Disclaimer," *South Park Studios*, South Park Digital Studios, n.d. Retrieved from <http://southpark.cc.com/about/show-disclaimer> 22 Jul. 2014.

it is tasteless and vulgar, for taste is social control and class interest masquerading as a naturally finer sensibility; it is shot through with contradictions, for contradictions require the productivity of the reader to make his or her sense out of them" (1990, p. 5-6).

If we go back to Wilde's remark on art criticism made during the American tour, we find that the spatial aspect of its illocutionary act is not at all irrelevant. It is an interesting coincidence that the former silver mining town is located in Colorado, the American state in which both the fictional community of South Park and the University where the creators of the show met, are located. In addition, the town of Springfield where *The Simpsons*, another popular animated series, takes place is in Colorado as well. The southwestern state is not merely in the geographic center of the United States, but is according to Halsall the centerpiece of American satire:

"The 'quiet mountain town' of South Park is supposedly located in Colorado. As is the case with Springfield in *The Simpsons*, South Park is both every place and no place. It is a small, suburban town known as much for its 'humble folks with friendly faces' as for its 'rednecks,' a town that Parker and Stone use to project and exaggerate many of the qualities - and particularly the flaws - that they see typifying U.S. society" (2008, p. 25).

Perhaps the best touchstone of humor exhibited in the show is encompassed by the reiterating death of the character Kenny. The authors' decision to kill him in almost every single episode carries a deeper meaning than the obvious carnivalization of death, the same mechanism Francois Rabelais had used centuries before:

"*Death* is in the work of Rabelais and his folk sources presented as ambivalent, and can therefore be joyful. The image of death fixates the given (individual) body which is dying, but at the same time encompasses a part of another body, a body that is being born, a young body (although it is not directly shown nor named, the image of death contains it *implicite*)" (Bahtin, 1978, p. 426).⁵

In general, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalized literature can prove useful when it comes to determining the type and potential subtypes of humor employed by the authors of *South Park*. Firstly, however, we must determine the quantity and the significance of literary references in the show.

⁵ Translations from all of Bakhtin's books in the reference list were provided by the author.

ON LITERATURE AND READING

In the two hundred and forty-seven episodes filmed by June 2014, there exists a whole abundance of literary references. As the four main characters commonly referred to as “the boys”⁶ fulfill their mission of being funny and didactic, they make use of numerous works of literature to send their message across. However, our examination of the entire series starts with an all-about-literature episode about an English classic that does not feature any of the original cast.

Episode fourteen of season four brought a novelty into the imaginary world of *South Park*, or more precisely, the lack of it. The episode entitled simply “Pip,” is a remake of Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, published in entirety in 1861, and the only episode alongside “A Million Little Fibers” that does not feature any of the characters from the original cast. The eponymous Pip is taken from Dickens’s novel, although he does appear in several *South Park* episodes, playing a minor role. The script follows the plot of the novel until the very end which is more loosely adapted (e.g. Miss Havisham commands an army of evil robot monkeys). The plot is narrated by a “British person,” who is in fact the celebrated British actor Malcolm McDowell who reads the classic against the background of a Victorian furnished study room. In the episode, blacksmith Joe offers Pip a metal orange, which serves as a reminder to McDowell’s filmography and his leading role of Alex DeLarge in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, a film adaptation of Antony Burgess’s dystopian novel bearing the same title.

Another aberration concerning this episode is that it does not feature the satirical disclaimer which appears at the beginning of every other episode. It could be argued that since the entire plot is based on a Dickens’s classic, the need for the hilarious disclaimer was obviated with, since the slightly more serious content did not require the use of an introductory text which “emphasizes the program’s satirization of celebrities and vulgarity” (Weinstock, 2008, p. 86).

Ten seasons after “Pip” had aired, in the fourteenth season, episode two was focused on literature, but this time the Great American novel was the one in the limelight. J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, is held by Mr. Garisson, as it had just been

⁶ Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, and Kenny McCormick.

taken off the banned books list. This lures the children who are not too fond of reading (CARTMAN: "Aww, books? God, I hate those!"),⁷ to read the book because of which, as Cartman asks and Mr. Garrison validates, John Lennon's killer committed his crime. But the book with "very risqué parts" and "adult themes and language" proves a disappointment to the boys since they find it not a bit offensive. Therefore, they decide to write their own shocking narrative, the title of which is the episode's name: "The Tale of Scrotie McBoogerball." The book proves a success since the readership cannot get enough of it and literally vomits after each sentence. Butters is given credit of writing the gruesome book and he even writes a sequel, which is read out loud by none other than Morgan Freeman. The entire episode is abundant with contemporary literary criticism, i.e. the parody of such criticism. In this sense, *South Park* can be regarded as contemporary, which is a crucial trait that Bakhtin assigned to carnivalized literature while tracing its Greek origins: "The first specificity of all genres from the area of seriously-comic is their ... concurrent contemporariness" (Bahtin, 2000, p. 103). Although a television show and carnivalized literature are not the same, they evidently belong to the same literary genre. The apex of the plot is reached in the town hall as the boys appear before a committee in an effort to ban the book:

STAN: "More and more of us are against this book every day! The author is cruel and offensive! And for these reasons, we demand this book be banned from all school, stores, and libraries! This book is nothing but smut and vulgarity purely for the sake of smut and vulgarity!

ASSEMBLYMAN 1: That's just because you're too young to understand the underlying themes.

CARTMAN: There are no underlying themes! We know that for a fact!

ASSEMBLYMAN 2: You just fail to understand what the author meant.

KYLE: The author meant to be as gross as possible because it was funny!

ASSEMBLYMAN 3: [chuckles] No, no, no, that's such a simplistic view.

STAN: Goddamnit, there is no deeper meaning in this book! Read it again!

...

ASSEMBLYMAN 2: Boys, this book is an important look at how liberals are hurting this country.

⁷ "The Tale of Scrotie McBoogerball," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 24 Mar. 2010.

STAN: What?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN 2: Wait, *Scrotie McBoogerballs* is the most conservative-hating liberal in literature!

ASSEMBLYMAN 2: What book did you read?

STAN: There's nothing about liberals or conservatives!"⁸

Literary criticism and particular novels or epochs have not been the series focus during the early seasons, which were more focused on the very act of reading. In the third episode of the second season entitled "Chickenlover," there exists a whole abundance of literary references since the entire episode revolves around reading, and the "magic of it." As the viewers discover that Officer Barbrady is illiterate, the driver of the mobile library, who is the subsequent Chickenlover from the title, plots a scheme to teach the upholder of the law how to read. In the very first scene, the boys read romance novels and discuss the act of reading in their characteristically bad language: (Cartman: [to Kyle] "Reading sucks ass"). Later on, the children were supposed to prepare a book report for school, and Cartman was the first to explain in his own terms the plot of a famous fantasy novel for children, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, written by C.S. Lewis and published in 1950:

CARTMAN: "For my book report, I read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It was very, very good. Have you read it, Mr. Garrison?

MR. GARRISON: No, I can't say that I have.

CARTMAN: Oh, good. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a bunch of uh, hippies, walk around and paint stuff. They eat lunch, and then they find a magical... camel... which they have to eat to stay alive. And that's pretty much it. I give it a B-minus.

MR. GARRISON: And I give you an F, Eric. Now sit down!"⁹

The humor does not cease there since Officer Barbrady is up next with an even more puerile book and its subsequent description:

OFFICER BARBRADY: "I've just finished reading the heartwarming novel, *Go, Dog. Go!* I found it a compelling and disturbing look at the canine psyche. If I may read a passage: 'Big... dog... little... dog. A red dog... on a...' Well, anyway, I'm not one to give away the ending, but I will say that it spirals toward an incredible twist-turn that parallels my own life."¹⁰

⁸ "The Tale of Scrotie McBoogerball," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 24 Mar. 2010.

⁹ "Chickenlover," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 27 May 1998.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Mr. Garrison, the idiosyncratic teacher with a puppet on his right arm, gives an A to this book report, which represents the culmination of absurdity, since the “novel” in question, *Go, Dog. Go!*, is in reality a children’s book written and illustrated by P. D. Eastman in 1961. At the very end, when the perpetrator is caught (or rather hit on the head with a nightstick), the unfavorable status of reading and books among the general populace is reinstated:

OFFICER BARBRADY: “Yes, at first, I was happy to be learning how to read. It seemed exciting and magical. But then I read this: *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand. I read every last word of this garbage, and because of this piece of shit, I’m never reading again!

KYLE: Wow! I guess reading really does suck ass!”¹¹

The book Barbrady shows during the parade organized in his honor was published in 1957, and although it may present itself challenging to someone who had just learned to read, we must give credit to South Park’s only law enforcer since the book has more than 1100 pages and he has “read every last word” of it. In terms of popular culture, “generalization” is the word that comes to mind, as Arp explains:

“Even Officer Barbrady commits the fallacy of hasty generalization ... when, after reading a copy of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, he concludes that all books must be this bad, and reading ‘totally sucks ass.’ The creators of *South Park* play on people’s hasty generalizations to make their points in episode after episode...” (2007, p. 42).

It should not come as a surprise that Matt Stone and Trey Parker have created an entire episode about the act of reading, since in the contemporary America which they wish to lampoon:

“Reading is ... situated at the point where social stratification (class relationships) and poetic operations (the practitioner’s constructions of a text) intersect: a social hierarchization seeks to make the reader conform to the ‘information’ distributed by an elite (or semi-elite); reading operations manipulate the reader by insinuating their inventiveness into the cracks in a cultural orthodoxy.” (Certeau, 1988, p. 172).

The romance novels the boys pick up at the beginning of the “Chickenlover” episode are more prominent in the fourth season. The sixth episode “Cherokee Hair Tampons” has an interesting subplot concerning Mr. Garrison, who is forced to “take a hiatus from

¹¹ Ibid.

teaching” due to “child molestation” accusations. In order to fill his free time, he writes an obscene romance novel, and offers it to a couple of publishers. The first one, “Harlequin Romance,” turns his script down, since “the book [does not] really qualify as a ‘romance novel,’” in the words of the chief editor, who dubs it as “gay.” Mr. Garrison is enraged with the publisher’s objection that “the word ‘penis’ occurs six-thousand and eighty-three times” and provides his own view of what a romance novel should be about:

MR. GARRISON: “Well, women want to read about ding-dongs! D’ you think women care about the details of female anatomy? Hell no! Women wanna read about big, powerful schlongs! Look, I’ve seen women read these things. They skim along and skim along until they get to the part about the penis! That’s what they want, so that’s what I’m giving them!”¹²

SCARY HUMOR

The parody of the very genre of Romance narrowly speaking, is obvious as there is nothing romantic in *South Park* since it “infuses the episodes with crude humor [and] dark themes” (Weinstock, 2008, p. 87). It is no surprise then that the dystopian novel *1984* made it into *South Park*. The opening episode of the seventeenth season deals with the issue of government espionage via the NSA and places Eric Cartman in the role which Edward Snowden had in real life. Just as the author of *Animal Farm* refuses to openly take sides in his novel, so do the authors of *South Park* imbibe their character with a dose of frivolity. By doing so, the banal makes its way into the literary context. Cartman complains about the lack of privacy while simultaneously loudly conversing in the school cafeteria with some of his friends over his mobile phone’s speakerphone:

CARTMAN: “I’m telling you guys, the government thinks they can do whatever they want and we don’t have any privacy anymore. Just between you and me, I think everyone is too stupid to see what this is all leading to.”

He continues so as to seemingly provide Orwell’s novel as a premonition for the future:

CARTMAN: “Did you guys read *1984*?”

But the context immediately becomes banal:

¹² “Cherokee Hair Tampons,” *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 28 Jun 2000.

THE VOICE OVER THE PHONE: "I don't think so.

CARTMAN: Yeah, I didn't read it either, but I saw the puppet show version at *Casa Bonita*."

The restaurant he mentions really exists in the suburbs of Colorado's capital Denver and is frequently described as "eatertainment."¹³ Certainly not a place where one could acquaint oneself with the plot or let alone the message of Orwell's classic. In addition, it was a puppet version that Cartman saw, so the parody is not only of literature but of popular culture as well.

The rest of the episode, entitled "Let Go, Let Gov," shifts focus towards religion, as it supplants through parody the role of God with the role of the Government. The portrayal of a consumer society with flippant beliefs could never produce state of the art espionage machinery as the one described in 1984.

If *South Park* could joke with such a dismal totalitarian society that Orwell envisioned, then parodying the works of the Gothic genre would seem as a walk in the park for the authors. This is precisely the case with the fourth episode of the most recent seventeenth season, which deals with another 19th century American literary giant: Edgar Allan Poe. While the episode's main topic is the social status of emos, Goth and Vamp children, the champion of the macabre is featured prominently, as in the initial scene where the Gothic girl Henrietta reads a pseudo poem by Poe:

HENRIETTA: "So I cast my body into the trails of blood.

The knife pierces deep, deep into my lonely eyes.

So I can see this black world ... no more."¹⁴

The last line is clear reference to Poe's lauded poem the "The Raven," in which he reiterates the word "nevermore" at the end of each stanza. Further into the plot, the children summon the writer's spirit who instantly blends into the jovial *South Park* atmosphere. He deems himself "the original Goth" and endeavors to impose such a statement to his companions as they drive to their destination. The exchange is typical of the show, abundant with labels:

¹³ Casa Bonita," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casa_Bonita 22 Jul. 2014. The Mexican-themed restaurant was featured in the eponymous eleventh episode of the seventh season of *South Park*.

¹⁴ "Goth Kids 3: Dawn of the Posers," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 23 Oct. 2013.

POE: "God, you guys are so lame! And if you want my help, you'd better all stop calling me Edgar.

BLACK VAMPIRE: Well that's your name, isn't it?

POE: That's the name my stupid parents gave me! I like to be called by my Goth name: NightPain.

ALL: God...

POE: What? You guys are posers!"¹⁵

Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic name, "NightPain," based on the gaming experience of the author of this text, resembles a nickname in a video game that a teenager would take on, and his vocabulary is in accordance with his title: he churlishly accuses everyone of being "posers," a clear enough reference to the title and the main social topic of the episode.

Since the average airing time of an episode is c. 22 minutes, the authors almost always put in their best effort to convey messages through the inanimate background, like the Alien characters which they have "hidden" throughout several episodes.¹⁶ In the library scene, the place where Poe's spirit hovers is not randomly chosen: he levitates between the "LITERATURE" sign on the left and the "SCIENCE" sign on the right. The subliminal message would be that his stories, surreal and gruesome as they might appear, are still topical, although the episode's plot instructs us that the literary and cultural context had completely changed.

Horror and terror are the main topic of the eleventh episode of the ninth season, entitled "Ginger Kids," in which Cartman rounds up ginger children to kill all other children. While his minions roam the streets and abduct children, three of them appear before a window, hovering in air, in the very same form a vampire child does in the 1979 adaptation for television of Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot*. Even children's books are parodied, as the hall in Airport Hilton in which Cartman holds his religious-like sermons is reminiscent of the one shown in Roald Dahl's movie version of *The Witches*. Perhaps the scariest thing we learn from this episode is the confirmation that literary works are an undercurrent of motion pictures when it comes to references outside *South Park*. The number of references to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Visitors," *South Park Archives*, Wikia, n.d. Retrieved from <http://southpark.wikia.com/wiki/Visitors> 22 Jul. 2014.

books simply cannot measure up to the number of references to films in the seventeen seasons produced thus far.

A MORE THAN A CASUAL REFERENCE

Several *South Park* episodes do not deal with literary texts or their criticism, but are nevertheless modeled on several popular stories or novels, referring to them indirectly. The usual place for such a reference is the title of the episode. For instance, in season fifteen, episode nine, the boys plays Mexicans and Texas border patrol. Butters, aka Mantequilla, gets lost and after much peripeteia finally manages to cross the border (which has gone from imaginary to the real-life) and reach base effectively winning the game. The whole odyssey is wonderfully summarized in the title of the episode which is an alternation of James Fenimore Cooper's famous historical novel: *The Last of the Mohicans*. Instead of merely substituting the word "Mohicans" with "Mexicans," the authors have opted for a more oblique version: "The Last of the Meheecans." Although it lacks any clear references to the 1826 novel, the episode is in fact brimming with betrayals, quests and battle scenes, much like the ones depicted by James Fenimore Cooper. The frontier is present as well, but it has acquired a more topical form, namely the main issue the episode tackles is the immigration problem at the USA-Mexico border. For Ewing, the issue is in close connection to the writings of Karl Marx:

"The Last of the Meheecans' hilariously illustrates the connection between race, ethnicity, and nation, on the one hand, and class and labor power, on the other. It does this in the very way that Marx's labor theory of value connects to his thoughts on nationalities and races. And it leaves us with but one conclusion: Meheecans of the World Unite!" (2013, p. 151).

Another episode bears a title similar to the one of a 19th century American literary classic. Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* published in 1895, became on the eve of 24 November 1999: "The Red Badge of Gayness." The Civil War takes central stage in both the war novel and the animated show, and history gets revised as a drunken mob from South Park takes a reenactment of a battle to a greater level, jeopardizing the victory of Union forces.

In addition, this episode, the fourth of the third season, has a skillful imitation of the epistolary form. Cartman, acting as the Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, sends two letters from the

battlefields back home to South Park. The first is meant for his friends Stan and Kyle, written in an archaic style: "Words cannot express..." merely to convey a banality: "...how much I hate you guys."¹⁷ The second letter he sends to Kenny's mother, informing her of her loss: "It is with a very heavy heart that I must inform you that your son Kenny was killed in battle on the morning of November 18, at Ruby Hills Funland in Chattanooga."¹⁸ As if the place of death was not funny enough, the mockery continues: "This war has taken something from all of us, and, although your son seems to be the only casualty so far, know that we all share your pain."¹⁹

If we take into account that the letters sent by the government indeed took such form, it is not hard to see the parody of the whole process, as Cartman's sepia image appears in the upper-right corner of the screen as the letters are being read, accompanied by army music. Walt Whitman, who worked during the Civil War in hospitals in and around Washington, used to send his own letters to families of deceased soldiers whom he had come to meet during his service. Such letters would arrive only a couple of days after the official notice of death. The mockery of such letters and the prolonged mass madness are nothing new to *South Park*. Nearly half a century earlier, "Bakhtin noted the anarchical possibilities of the carnival. Carnivals crowned fools and, in doing so, they symbolically replaced the current leaders – the carnival festivities upset the normal hierarchy" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. 203). Military garmented Cartman is neither an official authority, nor a compassionate human being as America's favorite Good Grey Poet. What is more upsetting than the nation-wide looting spree of drunken South Park residents who are cajoled by a ten year old boy, is the fact that the historic truth promulgated by Kyle, Stan and Stan's grandfather is shunned.

At the very end of the episode which takes place in front of the White House in Washington D.C., Bill Clinton, the acting American president at the time, makes an appearance. He utters a truth which Stan and Kyle are, due to the context, not too grateful for:

BILL CLINTON: "Eh, he's right, boys. Slavery is illegal and immoral, partially in thanks to the North winning the Civil War.

STAN: Aw, the hell with it. Let's go home. Thanks a lot, Bill Clinton!

KYLE: Yeah. Thanks, dick!"²⁰

¹⁷ "The Red Badge of Gayness," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 24 Nov. 1999.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The lashing out amplified by a reference to a lower body part is no coincidence, as Johnson-Woods explains on Swift's example: "Scatology and political satire have long been bedfellows. Consider Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, wherein a scholar of the Academy of Lagado is able to detect a man's involvement in plots against the government by examining his bowel movements" (2007, p. 203). The show's vigorous humor does away with the need for literature to be the main critic of the politics of a given era.

Another literary reference that is scaled down to a single remark in whisper is to Herman Melville's 19th century classic *Moby-Dick*. In the fifth episode of the second season, the boys travel to a dodgeball tournament in China with Chef, the school cafeteria cook, as their coach. During the bus ride, he gives a motivational speech to encourage them to go for glory regardless of the cost. At the peak of his tirade, Cartman interjects in whisper: "So, Captain Ahab has to get his whale, huh?"²¹ The remark is barely audible which renders it more sinister. The following short exchange between Kyle and Cartman perfectly depicts the cunningness of the authors and their marvelous ability to parody the literary reference uttered just a few seconds ago:

KYLE: "Dude, what does that mean?"

CARTMAN: I dunno."²²

The latter exchange serves as an excellent example of the relation between the parodied image of the novel and the original, since parody works best if the viewer is familiar with the original, since even literary laymen have heard of Captain Ahab's zeal to catch the illusive white whale and are aware of the gravity of the statement in the context of the novel's plot. By placing it in an utterly different context, the line is deprived of its original solemnity. Failing to make the connection, the audience would still find "this *South Park* episode ... amusing ... it just loses its parodic value," a fact that Johnson-Woods deems true for nearly every episode (2007, p. 97).

The sixth episode of the twelfth season stays in the American cultural background, but moves more "inland," as the Marsh family moves westward to California in search of internet. The black and white scene serves as a clear reference to the Great Depression dur-

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Conjoined Fetus Lady," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 3 Jun. 1998.

²² Ibid.

ing the 1930s in America and John Steinback's famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. When they do arrive, the allusion turns back to the most parodied artistic form in *South Park*: the movies, as Randy Marsh drives into the apocalyptic-like "Internet Refugee Camp," enclosed by barb wire and protected by the National Guard.

The list of these minor (to the point of *mise en scène*) references to literature and reading seems to run endlessly through the entire series, but they are almost always indicators of a far greater issue at hand, one that the original work had not fully answered. For instance, in season twelve, episode three, Cartman keeps a picture of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his attic as he orders one of the cats he is hiding to "write a diary," alluding to the Anne Frank's wartime diary. However, the resolution is once again missing, as the feline benefactor, i.e. Cartman, is powerless to draw a clear historical parallel to the pogrom of Jews during World War II:

CARTMAN: "But you know, we've all learned something, you guys. We can never persecute living beings and force them into hiding. It's wrong.

KYLE: And you don't see any parallel between that and anything else in history?

CARTMAN: Mmm... nope. I have no idea what you're talking about, Kyle."²³

It ought to be noted that Kyle and his family are Jews. The connection Cartman intentionally misses does not elude the audience as "the comedy derives from the way that the one signifier can have two signifieds" (Hartley, 2003, p. 124). Johnson-Woods takes a famous literary example to show how such duality should be read in any satirical work:

"To read *South Park* 'straight' is to misread the show. Sure, it *might* be possible to accept Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' as a straight piece, but that is not how it was intended to be read ... [*South Park*] turns political correctness on its head with carnivalesque humor" (2007, p. 220).

It is no wonder then that Cartman can harbor profound disgust towards minority ethnic groups in the final episode of the thirteenth season. The episode which parodies Steven Spielberg's thriller *Jaws*,²⁴ has Cartman briefly imagine a world in which "minorities" rule America. His image of the future, which presents

²³ "Major Boobage," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 26 Mar. 2008.

an inverted reality, opens with a book report on *Treasure Island*, the famous adventure novel by Robert Louis Stevenson. The authors of *South Park* clearly state the medium through which Cartman acquaints himself with the 19th century classic: "I read *Treasure Island*, because I was so happy when I saw that movie."²⁵ Instead of reading the book, Cartman had opted to watch the movie, and his "book report" is in fact a report on the movie version of the book. The adventurous journey into history of literature (in this case British) serves to remind us not only of Spielberg's lauded movie franchise, but of the topicality that is pivotal to the entire show.

KEEPING UP TO DATE

South Park's need to give somber social commentary on developing events applies to literature as well, as is the case with the fifth episode of the tenth season that aired on Comedy Central. In addition, this episode reiterates an important segment of the "Pip" narrative, since it does not feature the four boys in main roles. The protagonist is a towel, named accordingly: Towelie, and the title, "A Million Little Fibers," is a clear reference to James Frey's novel *A Million Little Pieces* that came out in 2003. The plot loosely follows the controversy that surrounded Frey's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the subsequent revelation that his alleged memoirs were mostly fictional.²⁶ In addition to the plot's topicality, lower body parts are not merely referred to in this episode, but they become personified as main characters (humorously named Mingie and Gary), and even expire at the end, by being shot.

While writing on the issue of celebrity responses, Johnson-Woods comments that "those celebrities who manage to make it onto the *South Park* ontological map are surprisingly grateful. Rather like Oscar Wilde, many would much rather be lampooned than ignored" (2007, p. 193). One such celebrity was Britney Spears, whose character was featured prominently in the eponymous episode "Britney's New Look," the second episode of the twelfth season. The pop singer is persecuted by the media and the public up to the point that the

²⁴ The original 1975 movie was based on Peter Benchley's eponymous novel published a year earlier.

²⁵ "Pee," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 18 Nov. 2009.

²⁶ Memmott, Carol. "Oprah confronts Frey about disputed memoir," *USA Today*, 25 Jan. 2006, Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-01-25-frey-oprah_x.htm 22 Jul. 2014.

entire narrative takes on a form of a horror story whose plot has been taken from one of the most popular American short stories: Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," published in *The New Yorker* in 1948. The story is made contemporary as stoning to death transforms itself into being "photographed with flashes" to death. The reference to the original story is a linguistic transformation of a proverb "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon," which becomes: "Sacrifice in March, corn have plenty starch," as one of the paparazzi formulates it the final field scene.²⁷ The open ground is a perfect representation of the carnivalesque element in literature, as Bakhtin writes: "The primary arena of carnival games was the town square...", but does not exclude the field in Colorado since "universal carnival symbolism is not afraid of any naturalism" (2000, p. 122).

In other cases, the references in the show are related to more recent literary works. A year before the bestselling memoir of Elizabeth Gilbert, entitled *Eat, Pray, Love*, was filmed, *South Park* parodied the title. The 2006 book became "Eat, Pray, Queef," as episode four of season thirteen features an abundance of references to lower body parts, but this time women's. The decision by the authors of the show to parody novels which have recently been published stands testimony to the concurrency of the series and its wish to be topical. By not letting these literary works stand the test of time, the show veers to popular culture rather than serious literature.

Since there exists such an abundance of motion picture references throughout the entire show, many of them indirectly deal with works of literature as well, since their synopses were based on various books. The most prominent example would be the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, written by J.R.R. Tolkien during the 1940s, and adapted for film by Peter Jackson more than half a century later. *South Park* parodies all three Peter Jackson's movies²⁸ in the very title of their theme based ninety-second overall episode entitled: "The Return of the Fellowship of the Ring to the Two Towers." The boys play Lord of the Rings and attain new characters (e.g. Stan is Legolas, Kyle is Aragorn, Butters is Sméagol etc.), as they embark upon a quest, but not as noble as the original one: their goal is to return a pornographic film to the video store. Furthermore, in one short scene they interact with another group of children who enact Harry Pot-

²⁷ "Britney's New Look," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 19 Mar. 2008.

²⁸ *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003).

ter, another famous literary and movie franchise, started by J. K. Rowling in 1997. The authors relish the opportunity to offer astringent literary criticism through Cartman's profane voice:

KYLE: "Hey, what are you guys doing?

CHILD: We're playing Harry Potter.

CARTMAN: Ha! Fags!"²⁹

By a single cuss word the authors delve into more profound meditation on occult subculture groups because "occultism is everywhere in pop culture, as evidenced by the popularity of horoscopes and movies such as the Harry Potter ones" (Danesi, 2009, p. 73).

In the end, we go back to the beginning and the second episode ever that aired in August 1997 in which Cartman had cheated his way into winning a national essay competition, and Wendy is out to prove it. She addresses the South Park community:

WENDY: "You don't deserve to win Cartman. And you know it. [Into microphone] I'm holding Cartman's award winning paper. It's actually nothing more than *Walden*, with Henry David Thoreau's name crossed out, and Cartman's name written in its place.

...

WENDY: Hey, where are you all going! [aside] They don't even know what *Walden* is. [Into microphone] I bet if *Walden* was a sitcom you'd all know what it was.

STAN: Come on Wendy, Kyle's mom will make us tuna fish sandwiches.

WENDY: Ah, what the hell."³⁰

Not only does the scene contain a reference to Henry David Thoreau's 1854 essay *Walden: or, Life in the woods*, which Cartman had so blatantly aped, but is quintessential of the relationship *South Park* had established with literature. In the process of instructing the audience on it, it had inadvertently introduced its own medium of television, alternating both, as the kind of humor promulgated by the show became nothing less than a successor to a well established literary tradition. The antique books of the past get converted into the sitcoms of the present, or to paraphrase the character of Wendy Testaburger, *South Park* transforms literature into sitcom material and serves it as such to the unsuspecting audience who is merely in

²⁹ "Pee," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 18 Nov. 2009.

³⁰ "Weight Gain 4000," *South Park*, Comedy Central, [television] New York, 20 Aug. 1997.

search of a good laugh. In doing so, the series overgrows its original format arguably becoming literature itself, at least when it comes to the genre of pulp fiction.

BOOK REPORT ON *SOUTH PARK*

For Fiske, “popular culture is the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination” (1990, p. 7). The key word of his definition is “culture,” for its affirmation as a value system of a group of people renders it suitable for an interaction with literature, which is in Bakhtin’s definition: “an inseparable part of culture and could not be understood beyond the whole concept of an entire culture of a given epoch.” Both are influenced by the same “factors which impact culture in its entirety, and exclusively through and together with it influence literature” (2013, p. 200).

The relation between *South Park* and the contemporary American society it satirizes seems to fit exactly into Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing. While writing a definition for the encyclopedic entry “satire,” the Russian wrote the following third possible meaning of the word: “A well established (mostly-negative) relation the creator assumes towards the object of his creation (i.e. the reality he wishes to portray), determines the array of tools of artistic portrayal and the general traits of the characters” (Bahtin 2013, p. 108). In the case of the American television show, the word “medium” could be added, since the colorful animated images play a major part in the overall parody mechanism.

In addition, *South Park* exhibits another subtype of humor which falls under satire, and is meant for the masses, much in the way Shakespeare’s plays could make the ordinary folk attending a show in the 17th century laugh. Toilet humor is, as Johnson-Woods describes it, “the mantle *South Park* will forever wear” (2007, p. 257). However, the same author deems that such a low-based form of humor does little to detract from the show’s appeal; quite the contrary, it represents the authors’ ticket into the world of famous literati, for “*South Park*’s situations, obscenities, and observations echo Aristophanes, Juvenal, Erasmus, Rabelais, Swift, and other great satirists, people who farted on societies hypocrisies” (Ibid.).

The kind of humor exhibited in *South Park* can be traced back to Antiquity, namely to the writings of Aristophanes, of whose poetry Bakhtin writes the following: “Aristophanes comedy was even then completely mature and potent social-political satire.” He continues

by providing its folk origin: "But it too had stemmed from folk festivities of mockery and derision" (2013, p. 107).

However, Danesi points that such laughter exhibited in TV sitcoms such as *South Park* can be quite contradictory, as he demonstrates on the example of punk musicians:

"The laughter that they generate is designed to mock the emptiness of society. As in traditional carnival spectacles, sitcom laughter ends up paradoxically validating and even celebrating that very emptiness. Similarly, contemporary mockers such as punk musicians, who scorn everything that is perceived as belonging to the mainstream culture through their dress, demeanor, language, and overall attitude, nevertheless accept payment from the members of that very same culture" (2009, p. 13).

The authors of the show could not care less how their animated masterpiece would be dubbed, but the treacherous duality Danesi writes of can be perfectly summarized in the boundary between parody and satire: "Parody's first cousin is satire. While the essence of parody is humor, satire can be tragic" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. 97).

Furthermore, another subtype of humor: scatological, is associated to Aristophanes and his European successors:

"*South Park* embraces its toilet humor – fart and shit jokes abound. Scatological references are nothing new. Aristophanes' *The Cloud* (423 BC) opens with fart jokes. Jonathan Swift raised scatological standards to an art form in his writings. Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua* describes at lengths his experiments to find 'a means to wipe my bum' and composes wee rhymes about such activities..." (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. 91).

In the earlier mentioned episode "Pee," there is an abundance of urination over human beings and monkeys, and even drinking and swimming in urine. Although the scale is much larger, the episode continues a literary tradition practiced by Rabelais in the 16th century, in whose work "showering in and bathing in urine feature a prominent role. Let us mention a famous episode from the first book of the novel [*The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*] (chapter XVII) in which Gargantua urinates on the inquisitive Parisians who gathered around him" (Bahtin, 1978, p. 162). The lower body parts feature prominently throughout the entire show: feces sing and dance, a coat can be made from testicles etc.

Over the years, the show has applied so many various kinds of laughter and subtypes of humor that can be safely argued it has become "an aggressive pastiche. It is part comedy, part satirical

observation, served with lashings of music, parody, irony and self-mocking awareness” (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. 258). By doing so, *South Park* becomes part of that “large amount of television comedy which directs quite telling parodies at television itself” (Hartley, 2003, p. 159). The pastiche technique at work in the show falls perfectly into Bakhtin’s definition of carnivalized literature, for which it is common to “have several tones in the story, a mixture of sublime and mundane, the serious and the comic, to widely use genres they have access to...” (Bahtin, 2000, p. 103). So as to finish Johnson-Woods’s thought: “Its mission is to attack everything, keeping nothing sacred, even itself. *South Park* demonstrates how little the world changes and how much hypocrisy, bigotry, and folly remain embedded in the human psyche” (2007, p. 259).

Another strong trait common to literature is present in *South Park*: intertextuality. Johnson-Woods paraphrases Julia Kristeva, stating that “each text, whether written, sung, painted, or performed, is influenced by that which has gone before: no text is unique” (2007, p. 104). He proceeds to widen the scope of intertextuality to the TV show, diagnosing the main source of parody:

“Whether it be the printed word, a musical score, or a visual image, *South Park* melds texts from a variety of sources but is perhaps best known for its references to the most pervasive medium of the 1990s – film” (ibid.).

This is in perfect accord with the role Fiske assigns to popular culture in a modern consumer society, one that *South Park* brimming with all kinds of reference, especially to movies, acts out completely:

“Popular texts are inadequate in themselves – they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings (as some will argue highbrow texts to be), they are provokers of meanings and pleasure, they are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture. The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries” (1990, p. 6).

Having placed *South Park* in the long procession of the humorous literary works, the conclusion coincides with the one Johnson-Woods makes in his book: “Perhaps the most astonishing aspect ... had been the revelation of how little humor has changed” (2007, p. 257).

It is no chance that the authors of *South Park* opted to give children leading roles and in that sense, Matt Stone and Trey Parker stand shoulder to shoulder with William Golding and his dystopian novel *Lord of the Flies*. The cruelty is evident, especially Cartman's, but the reason behind choosing children is much more practical, since "children's emotional and mental immaturity and undeveloped impulse-control allow them to speak the unspeakable and act out the forbidden behavior" (Tueth, 2005, p. 31). Although Golding uses children as protagonists for a different purpose altogether, the actions of Jack Merridew and Eric Cartman are all but childish.

CONCLUSION Since the first episode aired in 1997, the animated TV show, "a prime-time cartoon for adults," (Weinstock, 2008, p. 88) has been stirring controversy with its audacious choice of topics and the view it offered on them. Parker and Stone had given parody a new dimension, as *South Park* took its place in the pantheon of American sitcom, robbing the audience of laughter much in the way *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* did and still do. Popular culture seems to be an inexhaustible well of inspiration for the authors who parody numerous celebrities and especially movies, which are by far the most aped form of art throughout the show. Second place is assumed by literature which takes central stage in several episodes and is referred to in many others. But *South Park's* dialogue with the written form does not end there, since the show perceived as a whole can be read (literally in the form of script) as a continuation of the long tradition of laughter started by Aristophanes in Antiquity. The scatological humor is on par with Swift's or Rabelais's, and stems directly from it.

The colorful images from which the world of *South Park* spawns into life can at first glance trick the adult viewer into thinking he or she is watching a children's show, but more importantly, it has the possibility to open numerous avenues for interpretation because "the adults to whom the program is ostensibly targeted are presumed to understand and enjoy the irony and satire, but such a viewer reaction cannot be guaranteed. One viewer's satire may be another viewer's secret truths" (Tueth, 2005, p. 31).

It is precisely this function of multifaceted catharsis that *South Park* owes its popularity to, since it cracks open the inconvenient social truths under the cover of laughter, in the same manner literature has been doing since the beginning of Greek tragedy.

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СТЕФАН П. ПАЈОВИЋ

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У НОВОМ САДУ,
ФИЛОЗОФСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

САЖЕТАК

(ПРЕ)ОБЛИКОВАЊЕ ХУМОРА У САУТ ПАРКУ
КРОЗ ПОМИЊАЊЕ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ

Рад испитује сложени однос између хваљеног америчког ани-мираног ситкома *Саут Парк* с једне, и књижевности, нарочито сатире, с друге стране. Након успостављања везе између књижевности и популарне културе, истичу се бројне референце из серије, превасходно став аутора према књижевности и самом чину читања. Након тога се проматрају врсте и подврсте хумора које су заступљене у серији, на примеру пародије жанра хорора. Проматра се и интертекстуалност серије као и њена мултимедијалност, пре свега у односу на књижевност. Важан део представља и праћење токова савремене америчке културе, тј. актуелност самих спомињања књижевних дела. На послетку, служећи се делима Михаила Бахтина, *Саут Парк* се проматра као књижевност, пошто је тип смеха присутан у њему наставак вековне традиције смеха. Ово је предмет закључка у коме се открива у којој мери *Саут Парк* дугује своју популарност књижевном аспект свога хумора.

Кључне речи: *Саут Парк*, хумор, Михаил Бахтин, пародија, популарна култура, сатира.