

Deconstructing *Proper Condom Use* as an Introduction to Literary Analysis¹

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture figures in television, movies, comics, and video games have captured the imaginations of young people. The themes and characters of shows students watch regularly help shape their views on contemporary issues, especially as they compare their personal experiences with those portrayed on their favorite shows. This paper examines how *Proper Condom Use*, an episode of *South Park*, one of the most popular shows among young viewers, can be used as a springboard for in-class discussion of tools for literary analysis through an exposition of this episode's visual and aural humor, themes, characters, audience, and genre.

Our experience in exploring this episode with adult students confirms it is an excellent way of generating lively feedback, while also introducing students to concepts relevant literary analysis, including imagery, character, theme, genre, and audience.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Visual Culture; Media Studies; *South Park*; Literary Analysis; First Generation Students

Popular culture figures in television, movies, comics, video games and online videos have captured the imaginations of young people. The themes and characters of shows students watch regularly help shape their views on contemporary issues, especially as they compare their experiences with those portrayed on their favorite shows (Duff, 2002). Lisa Patel Stevens (2001) points out that it helps to create student engagement to use non-print materials as pedagogical artifacts as students regularly engage in dynamic multiliteracies through their personal media choices, the content of which constitutes part of their conversations with fellow students.

This paper demonstrates how we organize a class employing an episode from *South Park, Proper Condom Use*, (Parker & Stone, 2001) to introduce topics relevant to literary analysis as a platform for using similar frames in analyzing more complex media, in this case, classic short stories. Specifically, it describes an early in-class exercise designed to generate class discussion in weekend and evening classes at a Midwestern college.

These classes are populated largely by diverse adult students in their late twenties or early thirties, typically parents, pursuing associate degrees on a part time basis, including many who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. Some are enrolled in this class because it is a degree requirement, not out of a desire to read literature, which is perceived as an elite activity with little relevance to their own lives and aspirations.

Our challenge is to bridge that gap—to show students that the tools of literary analysis are accessible to them by introducing analytical literary frames in a novel way. In a sense, we begin with what Dwight McDonald (1962) would characterize as a “mass culture” artifact, an episode of *South Park*, as a bridge to more “high culture” short stories traditionally explored in literature classes. We especially focus demonstrating the importance of providing specific textual evidence to support arguments in analyzing short stories.

Our experience in exploring this episode with adult students--nearly all of whom report having seen one or more episodes of *South Park*, Comedy Central's most watched show—especially popular among the 18-49 age group, confirms it is an excellent way of generating lively feedback, while also introducing students to literary analysis tools, including imagery, character, theme, genre, and audience. (See Hull (2003); Stewart (2007); Vasudevan (2010). This exercise takes 60 - 75 minutes to complete, including showing the 22-minute episode.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

To stimulate discussion and establish a premise for later class analysis, prior to viewing the video, we ask students to recall the content and student reactions to sex education classes offered them in junior and senior high school. We then introduce the conflict at the center of *Proper Condom Use* (Parker & Stone, 2001), which concerns how, when, and through what agents sex education should take place. We tell students they will be analyzing *Proper Condom Use* as a literary text. To do so, we pause at intervals to ask them to answer questions about each segment that specifically highlight a means of examining literary texts in ways they will be using in analyzing the short stories we have assigned for subsequent analysis.

In this paper we summarize the plot of the episode, including representative dialogue, show where we stop the video, what questions we raise, and how we use this experience to prepare students for making similar analyses of the short stories they will be reading during the semester.

VISUAL AND AURAL HUMOR

We begin by asking students to identify visual and aural elements, the sights, sounds, colors, vocal inflections and actions (Nixon, 1999) that are key to *South Park's* comedy. In the opening scene Stan and Kyle

are burning a Jennifer Lopez doll with a magnifying glass, during which Stan yells, “Scream for me bitch.” Cartman, the most controversial of the main characters, then shows them how to “milk a dog,” a technique taught to him by mischievous fifth graders.

In-class question: Specifically describe the sensory elements—what you saw and heard--central this scene. Explain how they highlight the transgressive nature of the children’s behavior. As you watch the rest of the episode, consider how the opening scene foreshadows the children’s subsequent actions.

Parallel analysis: Read the first four paragraphs of both London’s “To Build a Fire” and Crane’s “The Open Boat” and explain how the description of colors, weather, and the environment reinforces the naturalistic themes of each story.

CHARACTER

We next introduce the concept of character, or persona, with definitions of protagonist and antagonist, which drive *South Park* stories. We ask students to identify traits of their favorite character and explain the role that character typically plays, including what makes that character interesting. We also ask whether this character is flat, displaying little change within or throughout episodes, or evolving, demonstrating growth and understanding. Students highlight that within the cartoon format of *South Park* characters typically remain largely flat, though they also point out that some characters admit to seeing the error of their ways at a particular episode’s end.

In-class question: With which character in *Proper Condom Use* do you most identify? What traits in this character’s persona make them likeable, funny, or annoying? Describe actions and words from the episode that support your characterization.

Parallel analysis: Describe Miss Brill’s persona at the opening of the story and contrast it with her persona at the end. Cite specific passages that help explain the dramatic change in how she sees the world.

THEMES

Experience vs. Expertise

We show subsequent scenes and ask students to analyze how elements of plot, motivation, tone, and values highlight specific themes within the episode, all of which can be identified in one or another of the short stories we analyze in subsequent classes. For example, a major theme of *South Park* is parodying the reliance on expertise rather than trusting personal experience. When Stan “milks” the dog, and when Randy and Sharon, his parents, observe his behavior, they say they will ground him for 10 months. Yet they cannot bear to speak with Stan about sex: their notions about childhood innocence destroyed, they do not provide age-appropriate information. Instead, they call a PTA meeting, assuming sex education at school is a “safe space” between their children, their children’s friends, and MTV--and that with comprehensive sex education, the children will subsequently engage in sexually responsible ways, and not in behaviors that lead to pregnancy and STDs.

Principal Victoria: *Okay, parents. I know a lot of you want a chance to speak, but we have to talk one at a time.*

Sharon: *Look, our kids are learning sexual things on the street and on television. There's no way we can stop it. The schools have to teach them sexual education at a younger age.*

Principal Victoria: *School policy has been to teach sexual education later. In fifth grade.*

Mr. Tweek: *It isn't soon enough!*

Stuart: *Yeah. Why, just this afternoon our son was caught beating off our dog.*

Chef: *Look, parents. Do you really want your children learning about sex? Part of the fun of being a kid is being naïve! Let them be kids for a while.*

Ms. Choksondik: *Naïve at what cost, Chef? Parents, we have to face facts: Children in America are having sex at younger and younger ages. STD's are affecting younger and younger kids all the time. The only way we can combat that is by educating children before they have sex.*

Chef: *The first thing that kids learn about sex shouldn't be some bitch-scare tactic about STD's.*

Sheila: *No, she's right! With all the teen pregnancies that are out today, I think my boy does need to know about sexual education. From the school. (Parker & Stone, 2001),*

Students point out that this dialogue represents support for the view that common sense and experience lead to better decision-making than its opposite: relying on so-called experts. The parents forfeit their traditional roles of teaching their children about sex themselves based on their knowledge of their own children's readiness for such information and naively assume the *South Park* school teachers are better agents for this education.

Students volunteer that this proves to be a false assumption. Miss Choksondik, an advocate for teaching sex education to the fourth grade children whom parents may presume has been licensed by the state as an expert in the subject matters she teaches, admits she has had little sexual experience. Chef, who represents the voice of experience and a character who has a reputation for having sex with many women, serves as a foil to this groupthink, asserting, unsuccessfully at this point in the episode, that sex education should not be taught in schools, especially to 8-10 year-old children.

In-class questions: Can you relate to the experience the *South Park* children have when you look back at your reactions to sex education classes you took during your elementary and secondary education? Recall a specific conversation you had with a fellow student about one of your lessons. How did what you learned in the classroom compare with what you had learned from other sources? What were the differences?

Parallel analysis: Explore how the theme of experience vs. expertise is developed in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Why does John fail to understand the impact of his wife's postpartum depression on her feelings, thoughts, and behavior? How does his medical expertise inhibit his ability to come up with a more effective treatment plan? Explore the theme of experience vs. education in Walker's "Everyday Use." Identify the differences in how the mother and her well-educated daughter view the mother's possessions?

Scare tactics and unintended consequences

Another theme students highlight is the ineffectiveness of fear as a way of changing behavior. For example, when Wendy and Bebe indicate they believe the lessons will be fun, Miss Choksondick, responds with “scared straight” rhetoric. *“Fun, you think this is going to be fun! Well, let’s start with our first lesson then, shall we? She writes SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES on the blackboard, asserting, That’s right, because unless you get boys to wear condoms you can and will get a sexually transmitted disease from them! ...Gonorrhoea, herpes, chlamydia, HPV, syphilis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, the list goes on and on (Parker & Stone, 2001).*

This scene satirizes sex education classes. The lessons are inappropriate for this age group: the scare tactics about negative consequences lead to fear of sex rather than a lifelong commitment to responsible sexual behavior, the program’s stated purpose. This scene allows for a conversation on the effectiveness of fear appeals in reducing harmful behavior. Many students report having experienced similar fear appeals in high school about sex education, and about smoking, driving and texting, and drug use as well (Stewart, 2007).

A related theme is the role of unintended consequences. In her second presentation on sex education, Miss Choksondik stresses the traumas of pregnancy.

Alright girls. Yesterday we went over the myriad of diseases you can get from boys, but today we’re going to talk about the most horrible thing they can give you of all. Pregnancy! That’s right, since you girls have decided to be sexually active; teen-pregnancy is at an all-time high! You seem to think it’s gonna be fun and neat to have a baby, well let’s watch a little video shall we? (Parker & Stone, 2001).

During a video a narrator intones, *“...later the contractions are happening closer together. Mom sure is in a lot of pain. Now we can see the crown of the baby’s head, stretching the vaginal walls in ways never before thought possible by Mom. Finally, the miracle happens, and the baby is born. But mom’s not done yet! She still has some afterbirth to push out of her” (Parker & Stone, 2001).* This terrifies the girls who later run away from the boys when they meet in the cafeteria.

Students observe the children have too little relevant experience to understand the materials being shared. Having learned about STDs and AIDS, fear replaces friendship, and their reaction is to reject the boys unless they wear condoms.

Wendy: *Stay away from me Stan!*

Stan: *Why?*

Wendy: *Are you wearing a condom?*

Stan: *A what!?!?*

Girls: *[all screaming loudly] AAAAAAAGGGHHHHHHH!*

Bebe: *Do any of you have your condoms on?*

Kyle: *No.*

Girls: *AAAAAAGGGHHHHHHHHH!*

Wendy: *Don’t you know that without wearing a condom you could get a disease?*

Kyle: *Nun. Uh.*

Bebe: *yeah huh. If you don’t wear a condom, you’re gonna get AIDS!*

Wendy: *You guys have to wear condoms. Now, please, just, just go away. We don't want your AIDS.* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

The girls are terrified of having sex--and of boys in general. In response, the boys attempt to buy condoms at a drugstore. While the older pharmacist is hesitant to fulfil this request, his assistant explains, "Kids are going to do what they do, and it's up to us to make sure they're protected. We just got in the new *Gladiators for kids*. 'Lil Mini's. They're specially designed for kids under 10, and they're only \$5.95 for a box of fifty" (Parker & Stone, 2001)." When the boys attempt to wear the condoms, Butters supplies rubber bands to make the condoms "stay on." He exclaims, "there isn't nothing' that's getting' in my wiener through this thing! And it's even got a little reservoir at the end so you can pee in it!" (Parker & Stone, 2001).

The teachers find out about the condom purchases and almost gleefully agree to start teaching sex ed. to kindergarten students--oblivious to their part in motivating the girls to fear sex and pregnancy and then insisting that the boys purchase condoms.

These scenes are used to generate conversation about experiences students have had when they believe their voices were not heard at home or in the classroom. Students point out that the children do not seek these remedies. It is the parents who abdicate their responsibility to assess their children's readiness to talk about sex, ask them questions about their experience, or see if the children have questions for them.

Students laugh at the unintended consequences of the sex education program: This spoof of the promotion of sex education from kindergarten through high school results in the boys and girls coming into conflict, each believing the other to be responsible for spreading disease. They skirmish, with the girls protecting themselves behind a steel fortress and the boys, riding in battery operated cars, on the attack, using water guns to break through this defense. In this battle, Kenny, hiding in his jacket, dies, a *South Park* plot convention, when struck by a boomerang. His death shows that the children are not the idealized innocents of their parents' imaginations, another fruitful area for class discussion.

Nonetheless, while ignorant of carnal knowledge, the *South Park* children can be cruel and can experience fear, regret, anxiety, and especially in Kenny's case, be subject to repeated extreme violence—and students can reflect on bullying they experienced in school and the emotional stress it created.

Similarly, some students report that like the *South Park* parents, their parents seemed only dimly aware their children were experiencing negative emotions. This recognition serves as a source of the parents' feelings of inadequacy, resulting in their histrionic outrage and grief over evidence that their children are leaving the Garden and facing uncertain and terrifying consequences which the parents cannot control.

In-class questions: Recall how fear appeals were used in school programs about sex, drugs, tobacco, and driving? As you remember student reactions to them, do you recall any unintended consequences, such as students mocking the presenter or the presentation? What did they say and what was the reaction to their comments?

As a series, *South Park* suggests that parents don't really understand what's going on in their children's lives. Do you agree? Explain your answer with reference to your own school experiences, including bullying and being excluded from favored groups.

Parallel analysis: Identify symbols in Jackson's "The Lottery" that contribute to the imagery the story uses to develop the atmosphere of fear that builds until the story's shocking resolution.

What are the unintended consequences of the grandmother's actions in O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*? Identify text from the story that supports your analysis.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is another prominent theme of *Proper Condom Use*. When Miss Choksondik and Mr. Mackey have unprotected sex, they are transgressing the lessons they promoted in the classroom. In fact, Miss Choksondik is so desperate for sexual contact, she offers Mr. Mackey a drink, strips naked, lowers her head off-screen, and is later portrayed with disheveled hair. Students point out that this illustrates the limitation of education as a predictor of behavior: while the teachers tell parents that sex education will lead their children to make responsible decisions, the teachers themselves fail to practice what they preach.

In-class prompts: Did you observe teachers or administrators practicing some of the actions the school discouraged in students, such as speeding or smoking? Did this affect your perception of the credibility of what was being taught?

Parallel analysis: Identify scenes in “Young Goodman Brown” where the protagonist increasingly grows disillusioned when he discovers the hypocrisy of adults he has known and trusted.

GENRE

We point out that this *South Park* episode, a monolog, which we teach is a convention of satire and burlesque, lampoons the idea that if evil influences are not headed off early, a social apocalypse will occur—and the naive hope that experts can fix all issues children face. The monolog is delivered by Chef, the voice of experience, in which he calls for rationality and truthfulness from parents.

Chef: *Schools are teaching condom use to younger students each day. But sex isn't something that should be taught in textbooks and diagrams. Sex is emotional and spiritual. It needs to be taught by family. I know it can be hard, parents, but if you leave it up to the schools to teach sex, you don't know who they're learning it from. It could be from someone who doesn't know, someone who has a bad opinion of it, or even a complete pervert.*

Miss Choksondik: *He's right. I never knew how special and personal sex was until just recently.*

Sharon: *This whole mess started because we couldn't talk to our boys ourselves.*

Sheila: *It's easier just to leave it up to the school, but it's just not a school subject.*

Principal Victoria: *Then it's decided: no more condom classes in grade school.*

Stan: *But Chef, when is the right age for us to start having sex?*

Chef: *It's very simple, children. The right time to start having sex is...seventeen.*

Kyle: *Seventeen?*

Sheila: *So you mean seventeen as long as you're in love?*

Chef: *Nope, just seventeen.*

Gerald: *But what if you're not ready at seventeen?*

Chef: *Seventeen! You're ready!*

Stan: *Well, I guess we got a while to wait before we have to worry about sex and diseases, huh?* (Parker & Stone, 2001).

When the parents see the error of their ways, they show they can reflect on their actions and learn from experience. We point out viewers sympathize with them because they realize their behavior springs from a positive motive to protect their children from future harm, in Kenneth Burke's words, "a comic corrective" which serves as a relief valve from the tensions of the war between the girls and boys.

Consistent with *South Park's* transgressive nature, the episode ends with Cartman again "milking" the dog, indifferent to what he now knows is objectionable to the parents, as he finds it personally gratifying. Students point out this is another indication of a self-absorption and "will to power" that defines his character.

Discussion Prompt: What purpose does the ending monologue, a convention of burlesque and of *South Park*, serve in this episode?

Parallel analysis: Identify specific passages in Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" that reveal to the reader that the story is actually satire.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

After students have viewed the entire episode, we address the issue of audience analysis, asking students to identify what they find compelling in this episode and also how they see it appealing to other viewers (Duff, 2002). Students identify plot elements that support differing value sets. The scriptwriters present a traditional perspective of morality—that parents, not schools, be the primary sex education teachers. Yet they mock conventional moral values by showing characters in highly degrading situations that stretch the limits of what is acceptable on television. Chef presents a secular world view declaring the age seventeen is the right age to have sex--outside of love and marriage. Finally, they reflect a populist perspective that implies gaining carnal knowledge from older adolescents during puberty is preferable to teaching it to elementary school children before they have the experience or physical maturity to understand its role in human society.

In-class prompt: Why do you believe *South Park* resonates so strongly with a young and primarily male audience? What plot elements and devices did you observe in *Proper Condom Use* that this demographic might find particularly amusing?

Parallel analysis: Why do you believe "The Things They Carried" resonates so strongly with military combat veterans? What plot elements and devices did you observe that this demographic might find particularly compelling? Justify your reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Within *South Park's* ecosystem, the children remain ageless, indulging in the pleasures of childhood immaturity. They serve as outsiders, spectators to the futility of parents and others who try to impose adult burdens on them. Students laugh as they learn to identify specific evidence to support their analysis of the unintended consequences of the adults' decisions and share similar stories from their own experience.

Our students report that they like this way of introducing them to basic literary concepts. They also enjoy it because it offers them the opportunity to reflect within a familiar learning space on something they have experienced in their own lives: the use of fear appeals and worst case thinking intended to change young

adult behavior--whether it be warnings about underage and unprotected sex, as in *Proper Condom Use*, or tobacco, alcohol and marijuana abuse as in *South Park* episodes *Butt Out* and *My Future Self 'N' Me*. In short, this exercise allows students to reflect thoughtfully as they share stories about their own school experiences with fear appeals while teachers can introduce literary concepts and how to document claims with specific evidence in an easily understood and relatable format.

ENDNOTE

[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 2017.

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