

Laughing to Fit In:
Jewish American
Identity through Jewish
Humor

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Curriculum Guide
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American Jewish Identity through Jewish Humor

Rationale

As the 20th Century began, many changes occurred in American Judaism. Various denominations of Judaism were becoming stronger and ordaining their own rabbis in America. An increasing number of major national Jewish organizations were created. The tendency of Jews to live in urban areas and avoid agriculture was being mimicked by American non-Jews. Major advancements were made in technology and entertainment. American Jews were faced with a large variety of institutions and methods by which to express their Jewish identities, both religious and cultural. In short, American Judaism set out on the path that would lead to today.

This path has not been a straight or an easy one. Throughout the 20th Century, Jews as individuals and as a minority ethnic group have repeatedly had to struggle to define what it means to be an American Jew. In the introduction to *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, Lawrence J. Epstein writes, “Jewish comedians have fulfilled a special mission in American life, serving as the most important mediators between Jews and American culture. They exemplified two great themes of American Jewish life: assimilation and the search for an American Jewish identity” (xi)¹. These two ideas have been themes of American Jewish life since the inception of the country and it does not seem likely that they will lessen in importance anytime soon. Each individual and each generation of American Jews has to discover their own balance of the American and Jewish sides of their identities. By examining the evolving nature of Jewish humor in America, from the role of Jews in blackface and

¹ Epstein, Lawrence J. *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.

vaudeville through the Catskills and radio shows up to television and movies, it is possible to observe this mediation in action, to identify the different ways in which Jewish comedians have interacted with American culture on behalf of the Jewish community. It is in this interaction that Jewish humor exists, attempting to mediate the combination of American society and a genre that deals with Jewish themes, language and stereotypes.

In middle school and high school, students are struggling with forming their own identities in many ways. They are trying to figure out who they are as well as how they fit into society. This appears to be the perfect time for students to explore the struggles of American Jews to discover and create a unique Jewish American identity in the 20th Century. By the time students attending supplementary school reach this age, many are jaded and bored by Hebrew School. They have passed the age of bar and bat mitzvah, learned the prayers, and studied the holidays and traditions. Yet they have not been taught how a person goes about developing his or her Jewish identity, and they certainly have not been asked to think about the ways in which their generation of American Jews has balanced their American and Jewish identities. In this curriculum, learners will have the opportunity to examine jokes, written texts, and clips from radio, movies and television for deeper meaning about Jewish stereotypes and the interaction between Jewish and American culture. They will also be given the opportunity to reflect on what these ideas mean for their own identities, both individually and as a community.

In seeking to explore the developing American Jewish identity through American Jewish humor, this curriculum focuses on the following Enduring Understandings:

- In 20th Century America, Jews have used humor to challenge as well as to uphold American stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.

- Jews in America have balanced their desire and ability to be fully American with their desire and ability to maintain a Jewish identity in different ways throughout the 20th Century.
- The popularity and prevalence of Jewish humor has affected both Jewish identity and American culture in the 20th Century.

In the introduction to *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, it is written, “Jewish humor, in other words, has in some ways come to replace the standard sacred texts as a touchstone for the entire Jewish community. Not all Jews can read and understand a page of Talmud, but even the most assimilated tend to have a special affection for Jewish jokes.”² This curriculum is based on the belief that starting from this common ground will help high school supplementary school students develop strong and positive identities as Jewish Americans at a time when they are developmentally seeking connections and identity.

² Novak, William and Moshe Waldoks, eds. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

Overview of Unit Outcomes

Enduring Understandings

- In 20th Century America, Jews have used humor to challenge as well as to uphold American stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.
- Jews in America have balanced their desire and ability to be fully American with their desire and ability to maintain a Jewish identity in different ways throughout the 20th Century.
- The popularity and prevalence of Jewish humor has affected both Jewish identity and American culture in the 20th Century.

Unit 1 – What is Jewish Humor?

Goals

- to introduce the theme of Jewish humor
- to introduce students to the objective criticism of humor
- to explore Jewish stereotypes that are common in humor

Understandings

- There are objective criteria by which humor can be measured.
- Jewish American humor is unique, being different from and incorporating aspects of both Jewish culture and American culture.
- In 20th Century America, Jews have used humor to challenge as well as to uphold American stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.

Essential Questions

- What makes something funny?
- How do you measure how funny something is?
- What makes a piece of humor Jewish?
- When, if ever, is it appropriate or even funny to use stereotypes?

Skills

Students will be able to...

- create a working definition of Jewish humor
- critique a piece of humor objectively
- express their feelings about the use of Jewish stereotypes in humor

Unit 2 - Just Another Outgroup

Goals

- to introduce students to the way ethnicity is used in American humor
- to introduce students to methods of critiquing humor
- to explore the way in which Judaism was considered an ethnicity in the early part of the 20th Century

Understandings

-Humor can be an expression of fear of someone or something different.

-The place of Jews as outside the mainstream in America has evolved from being described as non-white to being non-Christian.

Essential Questions

-Why is ethnicity funny?

-Why did Jews, already an “outgroup,” choose to imitate other outgroups?

Skills

Students will be able to...

-identify pieces of humor that use ethnic stereotypes

-reflect on the role of ethnicity in American humor

-identify ways in which American Jews have been similar to and different from other ethnic groups in America throughout the 20th Century

Unit 3 - Entertaining Ourselves (Maintaining Isolation as an Outgroup)

Goals

-to encourage students to think about how insular the Jewish community was/is/should be

-for students to think about the ways in which a word or phrase can be understood differently depending on the speaker and audience

-to introduce some of the ways Jews were excluded and isolated themselves in America in the 1930s and 1940s

Understandings

-One response to being excluded from an institution is to create an isolationist parallel institution.

-Being laughed at by people different from yourself can feel more threatening than laughing at yourself with people similar to you.

Essential Questions

-In what circumstances are Jews forced to remain separate from mainstream society? In what circumstances do they choose to separate themselves? What are the differences between these two situations?

-Do Jews find things funny in an audience of other Jews that they would find offensive in a mixed audience? Why or why not? What kind of things?

Skills

Students will be able to...

- give two examples of concepts that Jews might laugh at in an audience of other Jews that they would find offensive in a mixed audience
- identify some of the Yiddish influences in Jewish humor
- explain their beliefs about how insular the Jewish community should be
- identify some of the factors that led to the prevalence of Jews in the Catskills in the 1930s and 1940s

Unit 4 – Pushing the Envelope, Breaking Boundaries**Goals:**

- to introduce students to the ways in which Jewish comedians have pushed the boundaries of what is politically correct
- to encourage students to think about the result of these rebellions on the Jewish identities of the comedians and on American Jewish society
- to explore the idea of when, if ever, it is appropriate to push boundaries

Understandings:

-A society can become stagnant if nobody ever challenges the norms of that society.

-Sometimes in order to gain mainstream acceptance in comedy, a person must increase the distance between themselves and that mainstream.

Essential Questions:

- How and why did Jewish comedians turn to rebellion against the politically correct?
- How was the push to enter the mainstream different for male and female Jewish comedians?
- When, if ever, is it appropriate to challenge established boundaries?

Skills:

Students will be able to...

- identify pieces of Jewish humor in which the author is attempting to push boundaries
- decide what factors make an act of rebellion more or less appropriate
- discuss some of the differences between male and female Jewish comedians

Unit 5 - Part of the Ingroup?**Goals**

- to explore Jewish humor that has made it into the American mainstream
- to encourage students to think about the effect Jewish humor has had on American culture
- to think about the role Jewish humor might play in the future of America

Understandings

- The popularity and prevalence of Jewish humor has affected both Jewish identity and American culture in the 20th Century.

Essential Questions

-Do you think Jewish humor has lost its Judaism as it moved into the mainstream? Why or why not?

-In what ways Jewish humor truly mainstream in America? In what ways is it outside the mainstream?

-How have stereotypes of Jews in America changed through the 20th Century?

Skills

Students will be able to...

-identify ways in which Jewish culture has influenced American culture

-discuss the changes in Jewish stereotypes in America over the 20th Century

-hypothesize about the role Jewish humor will play in America in the future

Note to the Teacher

Organization of Curriculum

Each unit of this curriculum begins with an overview of unit goals, understandings, essential questions, desired skills, authentic assessment, and lesson titles. This overview is followed by a series of lessons. Included with each lesson are handouts and information to be given to the students. At the end of each unit, when necessary, is additional background information for you, the teacher.

Television and Movie Clips

This curriculum is designed to include a number of television and movie clips. Depending on the amount of time available to you, you may wish to show whole television episodes and movies or the relevant clips during class. Alternatively, you may prefer to arrange several “movie nights” throughout the year to show some of the longer pieces. Although it is not suggested, if you are unable to watch these pieces with your class, it is possible to replace the viewing with a reading of the scripts.

Several of the video clips are strongly suggested, while others may be replaced at your discretion. In Unit 2, Lesson 3 you are asked to show *The Jazz Singer* from 1927 featuring scenes with Al Jolson in blackface. Unit 2, Lesson 4 utilizes clips of vaudeville acts (see annotated bibliography for relevant website). Unit 3, Lesson 2 uses the examples of Catskills humor featured in the opening scenes of *Dirty Dancing*. In these lessons it is highly recommended that you use these particular video clips which are excellent and accessible examples of their genres. Lesson 3 of Unit 5 focuses on the popularity of *Seinfeld*. Since knowledge of this television show is necessary for

participation in the following discussion, it is important to make sure all of the students have seen it. You may choose whichever clips you feel are most appropriate.

In Unit 5, Lessons 1 and 2, you are asked to show clips from television shows featuring Jewish humor. The particular scenes you choose to show are much more flexible in these lessons. Lesson 1 asks students to notice the Jewish aspects of the show. I have suggested the shows *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Mad About You*. There are also significant pieces of Jewish humor in *The Simpsons* and *The Nanny*. These too are only suggestions. Any comedy television show that uses Jewish humor will make this lesson successful. In Lesson 2 there is a similar activity referring to movies instead of television shows. Again, the movies listed are suggestions that may be replaced if you prefer to show a different clip.

Student Preparation

Please note, students are asked to bring in artifacts of current Jewish humor for use during Unit 5, Lesson 3.

Annotated Bibliography

For more information on Judaism and ethnicity in America:

Brodin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1998.

Diner, Hasia. *The Jews of the United States (1654-2000)*. Berkeley: University of California, 2004.

Prell, Riv-Ellen. *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

<http://www.bergen.org/AAST/Projects/Immigration/> - information about immigration to America throughout history

For more information on ethnic humor in America:

Boskin, Joseph and Joseph Dorinson. "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival." *What's So Funny?: Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: SR Books, 1998.

<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/2/88.02.04.x.html#top> – a curriculum from the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute about ethnic humor

For more information on the Catskills:

Levenson, Sammy. "The Mountains." *Meet the Folks: A Session of American-Jewish Humor*. New York: Citadel Press, 1958.

For more information on Jewish humor in America:

Epstein, Lawrence J. *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.

Novak, William and Moshe Waldoks, eds. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

For more information on female Jewish comedians:

Cohen, Sarah Blacher. "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers." *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*. Ed. Sarah B. Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987.

For more information on Yiddish in Jewish humor:

Berger, Arthur. "Do You Speak Yiddish?" *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997.

For more information on vaudeville:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/easton/vaudeville/vaudeville.html> - this site features information, audio, and video clips of vaudeville acts

Unit 1 – What is Jewish Humor?

Goals

- to introduce the theme of Jewish humor
- to introduce students to the objective criticism of humor
- to explore Jewish stereotypes that are common in humor

Understandings

- Jewish American humor is unique, being different from and incorporating aspects of both Jewish culture and American culture.
- In 20th Century America, Jews have used humor to challenge as well as to uphold American stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.

Essential Questions

- What makes something funny?
- How do you measure how funny something is?
- What makes a piece of humor Jewish?
- What is a stereotype?
- When, if ever, is it appropriate or even funny to use stereotypes?

Skills

Students will be able to...

- create a working definition of Jewish humor
- critique a piece of humor objectively
- express their feelings about the use of Jewish stereotypes in humor

Authentic Assessment

Each student will be asked to choose a piece of humor that they consider to be Jewish humor. They will then be asked to play the role of critic. Choosing between a newspaper or magazine article, radio show, or television show, each student will be asked to critique their piece of humor answering the following questions:

- How funny is it? Why?
- What makes it Jewish humor?
- What stereotypes are used?
- What makes the use of stereotypes funny or offensive?

Other Evidence of Learning

- discussions
- transformation of non-Jewish humor into Jewish humor
- stereotype creations

Lessons

1. What is Funny?
2. What Makes Humor Jewish?
3. Jewish Stereotypes in America
4. Jewish Stereotypes in Humor
5. Critiquing Jewish Humor

Lesson 1 – What is Funny?

Essential Questions

- What is funny?
- Is funny absolute or does it depend on context?
- Is humor subjective or objective?

Set Induction

Provide students with a variety of newspapers and magazines. Ask them to cut out things they think are funny. Share these with the class.

Activities

-As a whole class or in smaller groups, ask students to silently group their artifacts into categories. They may choose to categorize the artifacts by genre, topic, or any other criteria. Students should then share with each other the categories they chose and why.

-Ask each group to select their one of their artifacts. (If working with the whole class, ask them to select three artifacts.) For each artifact, make a list on the board or chart paper brainstorming characteristics of the artifact. Some questions to spark characteristics might be: Who is the artifact about? What is the point of the artifact? Are there any stereotypes used? Is the artifact realistic?

-A similar list should be generated for an artifact that is not funny, such as a serious article from one of the newspapers or magazines. This list will provide a counter-example to the example created above.

-Based on these lists and their own experience, in pairs, students should create a list of criteria that make something funny. Two pairs should then join together to combine their lists. Continue this process until the whole class has one combined list of criteria for humor. This list of criteria should be put on chart paper and displayed in the classroom for the rest of the class sessions.

-As a class, analyze how funny a few pieces of humor are according to the class criteria. These may be some of the artifacts from the beginning of class or some that you have found. Adjust the criteria if necessary.

Conclusion

Ask the class: What are your thoughts about judging humor in this way? Is it easy or difficult? Why? Do you think humor is subjective or objective?

Lesson 2 – What makes Humor Jewish?

Essential Questions

- Is humor Jewish because of the author?
- Is humor Jewish because of the content?
- Is humor Jewish because of the style?
- Who decides if humor is Jewish or not?

Set Induction

Students are given a worksheet with about 10 humor artifacts on it. The artifacts are by a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish authors and feature a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish topics. Individually or in pairs, students should label each artifact as Jewish or not Jewish.

Activities

- As a class, discuss the Jewishness of the artifacts. For each one ask: Is this Jewish humor? Why or why not? Generate a list on chart paper of criteria that make humor Jewish. This list should be displayed with the list of criteria for funniness.
- Divide the class into small groups. Each group should receive 2 or 3 pieces of humor that are clearly not Jewish (not by Jewish comedians or having anything to do with Judaism or Jewishness.) Each group should be asked to create a short performance in which they adapt those pieces of humor to make them Jewish, based on the criteria decided by the class.
- Each group will then perform their newly Jewish humor for the class.
- The students should be given the opportunity to give feedback on the performances in which they state the Jewish aspects that they noticed in their classmates' performances.

Conclusion

Ask the students to each share one way they can tell a piece of humor is Jewish.

It's Funny...but is it Jewish?

Label each joke as "Jewish" or "not Jewish"

There was a blonde driving down the road one day. She glanced to her right and noticed another blonde sitting in a nearby field, rowing a boat with no water in sight. The blonde angrily pulled her car over and yelled at the rowing blonde, "What do you think you're doing? It's things like this that give us blondes a bad name. If I could swim, I'd come out there and kick your butt!"

I asked a Jew who he was going to vote for as president. He said, "Well, the last time Jews listened to a bush, they wandered in the desert for 40 years."

There once was a man named Joe and he was talking to God and he asked, "How much is a penny worth in heaven?"

God replied, "One million dollars."

Then Joe asked, "How long is a minute in heaven?"

God said, "One million years."

So Joe asked for a penny and God said, "Sure, just wait a minute."

"I once had a leather jacket that got ruined in the rain. Why does moisture ruin leather? Aren't cows outside a lot of the time? When it's raining, do cows go up to the farmhouse, 'Let us in! We're all wearing leather! Open the door! We're going to ruin the whole outfit here!'" – Jerry Seinfeld

"An Israeli man's life was saved when he was given a Palestinian man's heart in a heart transplant operation. The guy is doing fine, but the bad news is, he can't stop throwing rocks at himself." – Jay Leno

"Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is *very* goyish." – Lenny Bruce

"In the beginning there was nothing. God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a whole lot better." – Ellen DeGeneres

Harry was walking down Regent Street and stepped into a posh gourmet food shop. An impressive salesperson in a smart morning coat with tails approached him and politely asked, "Can I help you, Sir?"

"Yes," replied Harry, "I would like to buy a pound of lox."

"No. No," responded the dignified salesperson, "You mean smoked salmon."

"OK, a pound of smoked salmon, then."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, a dozen blintzes."

"No. No. You mean crepes."

"Okay, a dozen crepes."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. A pound of chopped liver."

"No. No. You mean pate."

"Okay," said Harry, "A pound of pate then and I'd like you to deliver all of this to my house on Saturday."

"Look," retorted the indignant salesperson, "we don't schlep on Shabbos!"

An old Jewish grandfather was taking care of his two young grandchildren. One of the children asked him how old his grandfather and grandmother were. The grandfather looked at his grandson and sighed.

"We're so old that when we were your age, the Dead Sea was only sick, not dead."

"Homer: Your mother has this crazy idea that gambling is wrong. Even though they say it's okay in the Bible.

Lisa: Really? Where?

Homer: Eh, somewhere in the back." – *The Simpsons*

Non-Jewish Humor

Why did the indecisive chicken cross the road?

To get to the other side...er, no — to go shopping...no, not that either...

I called a company and asked to speak to Bob. The person who answered said, "Bob is on vacation. Would you like to hold?"

How do you know that carrots are good for your eyesight?

Have YOU ever seen a rabbit with glasses?

"If you ever start feeling like you have the goofiest, craziest, most dysfunctional family in the world, all you have to do is go to a state fair. Because five minutes at the fair, you'll be going, 'you know, we're alright. We are dang near royalty.'" – Jeff Foxworthy

"Women now have choices. They can be married, not married, have a job, not have a job, be married with children, unmarried with children. Men have the same choice we've always had: work or prison." – Tim Allen

"People say New Yorkers can't get along. Not true. I saw two New Yorkers, complete strangers, sharing a cab. One guy took the tires and the radio; the other guy took the engine." – David Letterman

Why did the blonde get so excited after she finished her jigsaw puzzle in only 6 months?
Because on the box it said "From 2-4 years."

I sent flowers to someone who was moving to Florida for a job promotion. I also sent flowers the same day to a funeral for a friend.

I found out later that the flower shop got the cards mixed up. They sent the card to the guy who was moving that said, "Deepest Condolences," and sent the card to the funeral home that said, "I know it's hot where you're going, but you deserve it."

Boy: Will you punish me for something I didn't do?

Teacher: Of course not!

Boy: Good cause I didn't do my homework!

One day, on a notice board, a message was written:

"A parker pn lost if found plz return to me" The next day, another notice was put up:

"If anybody finds an E plz add it to the spelling of PEN"

Lesson 3 – Jewish Stereotypes in America

Essential Questions

- What are common stereotypes of Jews in America?
- Who uses these stereotypes?
- How do you feel about Jewish stereotypes?

Set Induction

Ask each student to answer the question: When you hear the word Jew, what is the first thing that comes into your mind? Have them each write their answer on a small piece of paper.

Activities

-Using the small pieces of paper from the set induction, play a class game of pictictionary or charades (with one member of the class drawing or silently acting out the word while the other students try to guess what it is.) As each word or phrase is figured out, write it on the board. Without labeling the groups, as you write the words on the board, divide them between positive and negative connotations.

-When all of the words are on the board, ask the students to see if they can figure out why the words and phrases are grouped the way they are. Discuss the results. Are there more negative or positive words? Are there conflicting words? Are all of the words and phrases true for all Jews?

-Divide the class into small groups. Each group should be given a picture of a person and instructed to make a list of their assumptions about that person. Each picture and list of assumptions should be given to a different group along with some real information about the person. They should discuss: were the assumptions correct? Why do you think other students might have made that assumption? How do you think that person would feel about being stereotyped in that way? Would someone else “like” the person in the picture make those same assumptions? Would the person pictured feel the same if the assumptions were coming from someone “like” them?

-Ask students to think about a time when they felt stereotyped or stereotyped someone else. Provide students a variety of materials in order to express their thoughts and feelings about that situation. Students may choose to write prose, poetry, or drama, draw, dance, sing, or any other form you decide is appropriate.

Conclusion

Students will be encouraged to share their creations with the class. Discuss any common themes the class sees. Ask the students to think about the question: When, if ever, is it a positive thing to use a stereotype?

Lesson 4 – Jewish Stereotypes in Humor (fully scripted)

Objectives

Students should be able to...

- identify and name common Jewish stereotypes used in humor
- state whether they find the use of these stereotypes funny or offensive
- express their feelings about the use of Jewish stereotypes in humor

Essential Questions

- What Jewish stereotypes are commonly used in humor?
- Are Jewish stereotypes funny?
- Are Jewish stereotypes offensive?

Set Induction (25 min)

Review what was done in the previous lesson by asking each student to tell you something about Jewish stereotypes in America. Have a discussion about their answers to the question you asked them to think about, “When, if ever, is it a positive thing to use a stereotype?”

Important discussion points:

- Does it make a difference if the speaker is part of the group being stereotyped?
- What if the stereotype is of a positive characteristic, such as high intelligence?
- Is it different if the stereotype is used in front of a small group or publicly?

Activities

(20 min) Create a line down the middle of the classroom. Label one end “Funniest thing ever!” and the other end “Not funny at all.” Present a selection of humor artifacts that use Jewish stereotypes. For each artifact, ask students to stand at the point on the line that represents their opinion. After each artifact, ask some students to explain their opinions. Encourage students to dialogue with each other.

- (15 min) After giving the students a few minutes to think, discuss the questions:
- Were you offended by any of the artifacts? Which ones? Why?
 - Do the artifacts you found funny have anything in common? What?

(20 min) Divide the class into three groups. One group will look at the Jewish American Princess, one at the Jewish mother, and the third at the Nice Jewish Boy. Each group will be given information on their stereotype. Each group will be asked to create two statements; one explaining why their stereotype is the funniest Jewish stereotype and the other explaining why their stereotype is the most offensive Jewish stereotype.

(15 min) Each group will choose one representative and in a press conference style setup the representatives will share their statements.

Conclusion

(10 min) Using the work from the two lessons on stereotypes and the chart on the wall of criteria for funniness, discuss as a class, “Is it ok to use stereotypes in the name of humor? Are stereotypes funny or offensive?”

Materials Needed

Tape/string

“Funniest thing ever!” and “Not funny at all” signs

Jewish stereotype humor selections

Information on Jewish American Princess, Jewish Mother and Nice Jewish Boy stereotypes

Chart of class criteria for funniness

Humor Artifacts using Jewish Stereotypes

1. Esther and Sadie meet on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Esther asks Sadie, “So, how is your son?”
Sadie shakes her head sadly and replies, “Awful! My poor son is married to such a woman. She has to have breakfast in bed, she has to have a mink coat...”
Then Esther asks, “And how is your daughter?”
“Wonderful!” Sadie says, beaming. “She’s married to a marvelous man who serves her breakfast in bed, and he just bought her a mink coat!”
2. A Jewish gangster escapes from a shoot-out with the police and staggers into his mother’s apartment on the lower East Side. Near death and with a gaping wound in his chest, he gasps, “Ma, I’ve been hit!”
“Eat, eat,” his mother says. “Later we’ll talk...”
3. “Listen to me, Mr. Levy,” the doctor said. “If you ever expect to cure your insomnia, you have to stop taking your trouble to bed with you.”
“I know, but I can’t,” the patient replied. “My wife refuses to sleep alone.”
4. What does a Jewish American Princess make for dinner? Reservations
5. Mrs. Goldfarb takes her little boy to the beach, and as soon as she settles under an umbrella, the routine begins:
“Alan, come here. Don’t go into the water, you’ll drown!”
“Alan, don’t play in the sand. It’ll get in your eyes.”
“Alan, come out of the sun. You’ll get sunstroke.”
“Oy vey, such a nervous child!”
6. How many Jewish American Princesses does it take to change a light bulb? Two, one to pour the Diet Coke and one to call “Daddy!”
7. How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? None, I’ll just sit here in the dark.

Jewish American Princess

Jewish American Princess or **JAP** originally refers to Jewish women with privileged backgrounds in the United States and to a lesser extent Canada. It can be taken and meant as an ethno-religious and/or sexist stereotype or slur.

The word characterizes a stereotype about young women who have been spoiled by material wealth and overbearing parenting to the point that they are self-absorbed, pampered, high-maintenance, whiny, materialistic, and snobbish. Since the slur reflects a phenomenon that is not limited to Jewish families, it has also been extended to other ethnic groups. In the American Northeast, it is frequently used as a religiously neutral term to describe any affluent, free-spending suburban woman.

As with all stereotypes, this one is often the basis for a variety of jokes and contrived but humorous scenarios. Its factual basis seems to stem from the rapid rise to affluence of Jewish families that started out in tenements of New York City, moved to residential, urban neighborhoods in the city, and then to suburbs on Long Island, Connecticut (Fairfield County), Brandeis University, northern New Jersey, Philadelphia and elsewhere in the United States. The notion is that many who are raised in the affluent environments have lost any sense of continuity with their hardworking parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. To a lesser extent, the term has been co-opted by some Jewish women as a term of affection or identity.³

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish-American_princess

Jewish American Mother

The **Jewish mother stereotype** is a common stereotype used by Jewish comedians, usually when discussing (fictionally or not) their mothers. The stereotype generally involves a nagging, overprotective, and overbearing mother, one who is often getting involved in her children's lives long after they have grown up.

Typical characteristics of a stereotypical Jewish mother include:

- Excessive pride in her children's achievements. Thus, she makes frequent references to "My son, the lawyer... ", or "My son, the doctor...". This theme was referenced by the Allan Sherman album entitled "My son the folk-singer", and subsequent albums with the same prefix.
- Conversely, she persistently nags her children if she considers them to have underachieved academically or financially, or if they remain unmarried.
- Constantly going on about religion and telling them not to do anything that would be against the Torah.
- She attempts to (s)mother her children, even when they have grown up. The effect, according to Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint*, is that "a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy until the day he (or his parents) dies."
- Usually very skilled in the kitchen, often making meals of Kosher quality in excessive proportions.
- Acts a "worrywart" towards her children and constantly fears about letting them do something as she overly exaggerates things being "dangerous".
- She often tries to set her sons up with various women she deems fit, usually of Jewish decent.
- She stresses being respected and honored by her children. Hence, the classic dismissal of Freudian theory: "Oedipus shmoedipus! A boy shouldn't love his mother?"
- Want their sons to be doctors when they grow up.
- She manipulates her child through the use of guilt, as in the old joke:
 - Q: How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?
 - A: (with mournful Yiddish accent) Don't worry about me; I'll just sit here in the dark.

Presumably this "syndrome" of a strong mother figure is in part the result of the traditional Jewish philosophy of the man running the "external" world of business and politics, and the woman running the "internal" world of family and household.⁴

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_mother_stereotype

Nice Jewish Boy

The *Nice Jewish boy* is a stereotype of Jewish masculinity which circulates within the American Jewish community, as well as in mainstream American culture which has been influenced by the Jewish minority. In Israel and the parts of the Diaspora which have received heavy exposure to the American media that deploy the representation, the stereotype has gained popular recognition to a lesser extent.

The qualities ascribed to the nice Jewish boy are derived from the Ashkenazic ideal of *edelkeit* (lit., "nobility" in Yiddish). According to Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* (University of California Press, 1997), *edelkeit* embraces the studiousness, gentleness and sensitivity said to distinguish the Talmudic scholar and make him an attractive marriage partner (23). In the relatively secular environment of America, the nice Jewish boy is less likely to concentrate on religious study but still faces high expectations to achieve educational and professional success and to behave scrupulously towards his family, community, and the wider world. These qualities are perhaps peppered with a quirkiness or gaucherie that may be endearing to others.

The stereotype unavoidably runs into conflict with the hegemonic models of masculinity found in some strains of American culture which exalt rugged individualism, emotional restraint, and physical aggression. The shegetz (non-Jewish guy) who embodies these traits may excite a combination of both admiration and contempt from American Jews torn between the imperatives of maintaining Jewish cultural tradition and of assimilating to the dominant values of the majority. Juxtaposed with the brutish but nevertheless confident sheygetz, the nice Jewish boy comes to stand for neurotic wimpishness and emasculation. He is especially vulnerable to domination and manipulation by women; these women include the possessive Jewish mother who raises the boy (or rather, keeps him in perpetual childhood) as well as the JAP whose consumption he slaves to bankroll. The nice Jewish boy, tired of these Jewish "villainesses", reacts (usually in secret) by fetishizing the blonde, blue-eyed shiksa, who may also prey on him for reasons of her own, attracted to his money and his disinclination to drink or resort to physical violence.⁵

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nice_Jewish_boy

Lesson 5 – Critiquing Jewish Humor

Essential Questions

-How do we examine Jewish humor in our society?

Set Induction

Ask students: What is the point of reviews of entertainment (such as movies, TV shows, music, etc.)?

Activities

-Each student will be asked to bring in to class a piece of humor that they consider Jewish humor. They will then be asked to play the role of critic. Choosing between a newspaper or magazine article, radio show, or television show, each student will be asked to critique their piece of humor for that genre answering the following questions:

- How funny is it? Why?
- What makes it Jewish humor?
- What stereotypes are used?
- What makes the use of stereotypes funny or offensive?
- What is your overall impression?

-Students will present their critiques to the class.

Conclusion

Do you evaluate Jewish humor you encounter in your life? Why or why not? If so, what criteria do you use? Why?

Unit 2 - Just Another Outgroup

Goals

- to introduce students to the way ethnicity is used in American humor
- to explore the way in which Judaism was considered an ethnicity in the early part of the 20th Century

Understandings

-A group that is outside the mainstream may not be held to the same standards of behavior as the mainstream.

-Judaism in America has evolved from being described as an ethnicity to being described as a religion.

Essential Questions

- Why is ethnicity funny?
- Why did Jews, already an “outgroup,” choose to imitate other outgroups?

Skills

Students will be able to...

- reflect on the role of ethnicity in American humor
- identify ways in which American Jews have been similar to and different from other ethnic groups in America throughout the 20th Century
- explain whether or not they think Judaism is an ethnicity

Performance Task

Each student will be asked to create artistic representations of the role of Jewishness as an ethnicity in the early 20th Century and today. They may use any kind of materials for this project.

Lessons

1. Immigration and Ethnicity in the Early 20th Century
2. Were Jews Just Another Ethnicity?
3. Blackface
4. Vaudeville
5. Are Jews Just Another Ethnicity Today?

Lesson 1: Immigration in the Early 20th Century

Essential Questions

- How did Jews participate in the immigrant experience?
- Was America a melting pot at the turn of the century?
- What was life like for immigrants in America at the turn of the century?

Set Induction

Think about a time when you went somewhere new. Who went with you? What did you know before you went? What made the new place unique?

Activities

-Ask students to share some of their answers. Discuss: Was there anything that made you feel more comfortable about going to the new place? What seemed the most strange or scary? Explain that these were some of the feelings of the large number of immigrants that came to America in the early 20th Century. Brainstorm some of the factors that might have made America different from the immigrants' home countries.

-Divide the class into three groups. Each group will rotate through the three stations, completing the task at each station. The stations will be based on the immigrant experience of three different ethnic groups – Polish, Jewish, Italian.

The tasks are:

Jewish – You arrive at Ellis Island speaking Yiddish and some Hebrew. You get a job in a garment factory and live with your family in a small apartment in the city. What are your dreams for your children and grandchildren? What steps might you take to help them reach those dreams?

Italian – How important is it to you to keep your Italian culture alive now that you're in America? Why? How might you go about doing this? Are there some aspects that are more important than others? Why?

Polish – Why do you think you are discriminated against? How does it make you feel? Do you regret your decision to move to America? What are some of the things you miss about Poland? What are you excited for in America?

-Discuss with students whether or not the melting pot analogy is appropriate and positive? What is the negative side of a melting pot society? Ask students to create their own analogy for the diversity of American ethnicity.

Conclusion

Share analogies.

Lesson 2 – Were Jews Just Another Ethnicity? (fully scripted)

Objectives

Students should be able to...

- define characteristics of ethnicity
- identify what characteristics people of the same ethnicity share
- state several similarities and differences between the experiences of Jews and the experiences of people of other ethnicities in the early 20th Century

Essential Questions

- What is ethnicity?
- Is Judaism an ethnicity?
- Was Judaism different from other ethnicities in America at the turn of the century?
- Who determined whether Jews were seen as an ethnicity in America?

Set Induction

(15 min) Students will be given a worksheet listing a variety of characteristics that might apply to a group of people (country of origin, current location, language, religion, etc.). Each student will be asked to mark which characteristics they think are part of an ethnicity. Students should be encouraged to add additional characteristics not on the list. As a class, discuss the characteristics, encouraging students to explain their answers and dialogue with one another. They should then be instructed to label each characteristic as to whether it is a characteristic shared by Jews or not.

Activities

- (10 min) Discuss student responses to the worksheet. Where are the answers the same? Where are they different? What does this tell us about whether or not Judaism is an ethnicity?

- (30 min) Divide the class into three groups – Japanese, African American, Jewish. Provide each group with information about the experience of their ethnic group in America in the early 20th Century. Ask each group to create and perform a skit showing their ethnic group's experience.

- (10 min) Discuss with the class- What was the same about the experiences? What was different? What do you think we can learn from these similarities and differences?

- (15 min) Ask each student to write a paragraph defining ethnicity. Trade the paragraphs so that each student has someone else's. Ask students to decide whether Judaism is an ethnicity based on the definition they have been given.

Conclusion

(10 min) Ask some students to share the paragraph they have been given and their decision about whether or not Judaism fits into that definition of ethnicity. Discuss as a class: How easy or difficult is it to define ethnicity? Why? How easy or difficult is it to label Judaism as an ethnicity? Why?

Materials Needed

“What Characteristics are Shared by People of the Same Ethnicity” worksheet
Information about the Japanese experience in the early 20th Century
Information about the African American experience in the early 20th Century
Information about the Jewish experience in the early 20th Century
Paper
Pens

Which of These Characteristics are Shared by People of the Same Ethnicity?

Country of origin

Faith

Current location

Career

Language

Religion

Holidays

Education

Clothing

Ritual objects

Gender

Others:

Japanese Experience in America

The boom of the Hawaiian sugar industry in the 1870s and 1880s, in contrast to Japan's painful transition to a modern economy that produced large-scale unemployment, bankruptcies, and civil disorders, contributed to a much larger portion of Japanese emigrants moving to Hawaii. Thus as of 1900, the majority of half of all the Japanese immigrants in the world living in the U.S. lived in Hawaii. From 1885 through 1894, over 28,000 Japanese migrated to Hawaii, the vast majority being single men. Opposed to the first Japanese from Yokohama, these Japanese were farmers and farm laborers, immigrating as sojourners rather than settlers. Initially, around three-quarters of them returned to Japan, though as years passed, this figure declined to only one-quarter. Anticipating the legislation of American laws against contract labor to Hawaii in 1900, after the American takeover of the islands, Hawaiian plantation owners imported more than 26,000 contract laborers from Japan in 1899, in order to beat the ban- the largest number ever admitted in a single year. The contracts were then voided under American laws; however, leaving thousands of Japanese free to migrate to the U.S mainland. But Hawaii remained the principle area of concentration for Japanese in the U.S. for many years. Even up to 1910, four times as many Japanese lived in Hawaii than on the mainland. Among other reasons, race relations were better in Hawaii. The difference was significant enough for the government of Japan to cease issuing passports for Japanese to go to the U.S mainland, while continuing to authorize passports for Hawaii. However ineffective it was at controlling the ultimate destinations of Japanese emigrants, the policy at least demonstrated that differences in the treatment of Japanese had become known back in Japan.

At a time when such people were virtually non-existent on the mainland, a small but significant group of native-born Japanese ancestry arose in the nineteenth-century Hawaii. By 1910, the native born were about one-third as numerous as the foreign-born among the Japanese in Hawaii, while remaining less than 7 percent on the mainland. By 1930, native-born Japanese Americans exceeded those born in Japan by 80 percent. Back on the mainland, the number of native-born still hadn't caught up to those born in Japan. As years passed, the regional distribution of the Japanese shifted from two-thirds of the 85,000 Japanese in the U.S. living in Hawaii at the turn of the century, to just over half of the 220,000 Japanese living on the mainland in 1920.

The Japanese relations with the larger society were to some extent shaped by the fact that they followed in the wake of the Chinese. Both in Hawaii and on the mainland, the Chinese had started as unskilled laborers and many had worked their way up to become small businessmen- and were resented and rejected for their advancement and competition. The Japanese began in the same fashion, and were initially welcomed as substitutes for the Chinese as coolie labor. Their rising advancement and success, however, soon lumped them together with the Chinese as the "Yellow Peril" that threatened the living standard of American workers, businessmen, and American society in general. Though the reaction was more prominent in the mainland, it was still present in even Hawaii. Laws were passed in Hawaii to block the movement of Japanese into skilled occupations, and on the mainland to stop their purchase of land in California.

When they first arrived, the Japanese gained their initial foothold in agriculture by working as agricultural laborers for lower wages than whites, and then acquiring farms by paying more than whites for the land. Once established, it became clear that they were formidable competitors. On farms where laborers were paid by the amount they collected (half were), the Japanese earned substantially more through harder work and longer hours. As their reputation spread, the hourly pay of Japanese rose, and soon overtook that of the whites.

- <http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Japanese.html>

African American Experience

In the spring of 1916, the attention of the American press and public was focused on the Great War in Europe. Few noticed the tiny stream of Southern black men brought north by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company to work on the rail lines. But following this experiment between 1916 and 1918 alone, nearly 400,000 African Americans - five hundred each day - took what they hoped was a journey into freedom.

The migration was a watershed in the history of African Americans. It lessened their overwhelming concentration in the South, opened up industrial jobs to people who had up to then been mostly farmers, and gave the first significant impetus to their urbanization. In 1910, seven million of the nation's eight million African Americans resided below the Cotton Curtain. But over the next fifteen years, more than one-tenth of the country's black population would voluntarily move north. The Great Migration, which lasted until 1930, was the first step in the full nationalization of the African-American population.

The migration years saw the emergence of service organizations to provide aid and support to the newcomers, such as the National Urban League, founded in 1911 in New York. The Chicago Urban League opened its doors in 1917, and in its first two years some fifty-five thousand migrants sought assistance in finding jobs and housing. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and similar organizations provided a needed lifeline for incoming migrants.

Besides the white-black competition for employment in the cities, there was also white-black competition for living space. Prior to the migration, African Americans were often dispersed in small clusters in several city neighborhoods, where they lived in relative obscurity and invisibility. But soon white opposition effectively closed the market to newcomers, thereby creating ghettos. Whites also fled the areas where black migrants concentrated "as if from a plague." City government, banks, and realtors conspired to keep African Americans' residential opportunities constricted.

On a single day in Chicago, real-estate brokers had over six hundred black families applying for housing, with only fifty-three units available. When the migrants did find housing accommodations, they were usually dilapidated and barely habitable. Landlords maximized their profits by dividing larger units, with no alterations, into several tiny flats. Black neighborhoods became seriously overcrowded as a result. In Cleveland, the population density in black areas was thirty-five to forty persons per acre, while citywide it was only half that.

[-http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=8&topic=7&tab=image](http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=8&topic=7&tab=image)

Jewish Experience in America

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of American Jewry on the world Jewish scene. As the century opened, the United States, with about one million Jews, was the third largest Jewish population center in the world, following Russia and Austria-Hungary. About half of the country's Jews lived in New York City alone, making it the world's most populous Jewish community by far, more than twice as large as its nearest rival, Warsaw, Poland. By contrast, just half a century earlier, the United States had been home to barely 50,000 Jews and New York's Jewish population had stood at about 16,000.

Immigration provided the principal fuel behind this extraordinary American Jewish population boom. In 1900, more than 40 percent of America's Jews were newcomers, with ten years or less in the country, and the largest immigration wave still lay ahead. Between 1900 and 1924, another 1.75 million Jews would immigrate to America's shores, the bulk from Eastern Europe. Where before 1900, American Jews never amounted even to 1 percent of America's total population, by 1930 Jews formed about 3½ percent. There were more Jews in America by then than there were Episcopalians or Presbyterians.

This massive population transfer radically transformed the character of the American Jewish community. It reshaped its composition and geographical distribution, resulting in a heavy concentration of Jews in East Coast cities, including some (like Boston) where Jews had never lived in great numbers before. It also realigned American Jewry's politics and priorities, injecting new elements of tradition, nationalism, and socialism into Jewish communal life, and seasoning its culture with liberal dashes of East European Jewish folkways. Although the American Jewish community retained significant elements from its German and Sephardic pasts (Sephardic Jews having originated in Spain and Portugal), the traditions of East European Jews and their descendants dominated the community. With their numbers and through their achievements, they raised its status both nationally and internationally.

World War I confirmed American Jewry's new status in world Jewish affairs. America itself assumed greater international responsibilities at this time, and Jews followed suit.

As early as 1914, the American Jewish community mobilized its resources to assist the victims of the European war. Cooperating to a degree not previously seen, the various factions of the American Jewish community—native-born and immigrant, Reform, Orthodox, secular, and socialist—coalesced to form what eventually became known as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. All told, American Jews raised 63 million dollars in relief funds during the war years and became more immersed in European Jewish affairs than ever before. They even joined in representing Jewish interests at the Paris Peace Conference after the war. Also, American Jews continued their intense involvement in Zionism—the movement to create a Jewish state in the Middle East (now Israel)—which further reflected their burgeoning sense of responsibility for the fate of Jews around the world.

World War I ended the era of mass Jewish immigration to the United States, as wartime conditions and then restrictive quotas stemmed the human tide. Soon, for the first time in many decades, the majority of American Jews would be native born. Where the central focus of American Jewish life had been concentrated on problems of immigration and absorption, American Jewry now entered a period of stable consolidation. The children of immigrants moved up into the middle class and out to more fashionable neighborhoods, creating new institutions—synagogue-centers, progressive Hebrew schools, and the like—as they went. History had proved that East European Jews would Americanize with a vengeance. The question now was whether, as Americans, they would still remain Jews. Programs designed to ensure that they would become high community priorities.

With stability and the rise of a new generation came a growing commitment to communal unity. Descendants of earlier Central European Jews and the more recent East European Jews had been drawing closer together in America even before World War I. After the war, with the growth of anti-Semitism at home and abroad as well as the economic and social challenges posed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, this process accelerated. Anti-Semitism peaked in America in the interwar years, and was practiced in different ways by even highly respected individuals and institutions. Private schools, camps, colleges, resorts, and places of employment all imposed restrictions and quotas against Jews, often quite blatantly. Leading Americans, including Henry Ford and the widely listened-to radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin, engaged in public attacks upon Jews, impugning their character and patriotism. In several major cities, Jews also faced physical danger; attacks on young Jews were commonplace. When coupled with the economic wrought by the Great Depression, it is no surprise that Jews during these years sought to bury their differences and stress their interdependence. Leaving old world divisions behind, they began to coalesce into an avowedly *American* Jewish community—a community that could attempt, at least on some issues, to unite in self-defense.

The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Anti-Semitism and Assimilation

Jonathan D. Sarna and Jonathan Golden

<http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/jewishexp.htm>

Lesson 3 – Blackface

Essential Questions

- Why did Jews choose to imitate another ethnicity?
- Why did Jews work in an art form that “white” Americans would not?
- What is blackface?
- Is blackface Jewish? Is blackface funny?

Set Induction

Have you ever seen someone try to act like they are a different ethnicity than they are? Why would someone do that? Were they successful? How did it make you feel?

Activities

-Show a clip (including Al Jolsen in blackface) or all of *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Provide students with a plot summary of the movie. Discuss with students: What do you think about a Jewish man wearing blackface? Why do you think Al Jolsen did this? Do you think a non-Jew would have agreed to play this role? Why do you think there is blackface in a movie with such a Jewish plot?

-Discuss with students- Were there any parts of the movie you thought were funny? Why? (Refer to chart of humor criteria) Do you think people at the time might have thought it was funny? Why or why not?

Conclusion

Ask students to respond in writing to the following questions- To what extent is blackface funny? To what extent is blackface Jewish?

The Jazz Singer (1927)

Cantor Rabinowitz (Warner Oland) wishes his son to continue in the five-generation family tradition and become a cantor at the synagogue in the Jewish ghetto of Manhattan's Lower East Side. But thirteen-year-old Jakie Rabinowitz (Bobby Gordon) has a taste for show business. Inside Muller's beer garden, young Jakie sings contemporary popular songs, establishing a conflict between his familial responsibilities and his deep love for worldly jazz music.

Moisha Yudelson (Otto Lederer), "rigidly orthodox and a power in the affairs of the Ghetto," spots the young Jewish boy singing, and runs to tell Jakie's father, who is irate at the news. He heads to the beer garden, where he hauls the boy forcefully off the stage, dragging him home by the collar. Jakie clings on to his mother, Sara (Eugenie Besserer), as his father declares, "I'll teach him better than to debase the voice God gave him!" Sarah tries to reason with him: "But Papa — our boy, he does not think like we do." Papa insists on teaching the child a lesson: "First he will get a whipping!"

Jakie's father removes his belt in preparation for the whipping, despite Sara's protests. Jakie threatens: "If you whip me again, I'll run away — and *never come back!*" Outside the bedroom door, Sara reacts in horror to the sounds of her beloved son's violent punishment. After the whipping concludes, Jakie kisses his mother goodbye and carries through on his word, running away from home. Despite the loss of his son, Cantor Rabinowitz prepares for the evening's service, even as Sara grieves: "Our boy has gone, and he is never coming back."

At the Yom Kippur service, Rabinowitz mournfully tells one of his fellow celebrants, "My son was to stand at my side and sing tonight — but now I have no son." As the sacred Kol Nidre is sung, Jakie sneaks back into his home and retrieves a picture of his loving mother.

Approximately ten years later, Jakie has changed his name to the more assimilated Jack Robin (Al Jolson). Jack is called up from his table at a cabaret to perform on stage: "Jack Robin will sing 'Dirty Hands, Dirty Face.' They say he's good — we shall see." Jack tells his tablemate, "Wish me luck, Pal — I'll certainly need it."

He belts out "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," a song detailing the trials and more-than-compensatory joys of being parent to a young son. The crowd responds enthusiastically. Jack wows the crowd with his energized performance of the song, including that remarkable bird-whistle chorus. Afterward, Jack is introduced to the beautiful Mary Dale (May McAvoy), a musical theater dancer who has been admiring his performance. He tells her, "I caught your act in Salt Lake, Miss Dale — I think you're wonderful." She responds, "There are lots of jazz singers, but *you* have a tear in your voice." "I'm glad *you* think so — ," he replies. She offers to help him with his still-budding career.

Back at the family home Jack abandoned long ago, Cantor Rabinowitz instructs a young student in the traditional cantorial art. Jack's visibly aged mother receives a letter that Yudleson reads to her:

Dear Mama: I'm getting along great, making \$250.00 a week. A wonderful girl, Mary Dale, got me my big chance. Write me c/o State Theatre in Chicago. Last time you forgot and addressed me Jackie Rabinowitz. *Jack Robin* is my name now. Your loving son, Jakie.

His mother wonders if he has become romantically involved with a gentile, another step away his religious roots: "Maybe he's fallen in love with a *shiksa*." Yudleson cautions her against jumping to conclusions: "Maybe not — you know Rosie Levy on the theayter is Rosemarie Lee." When Sara shows her husband the letter, he is furious: "I told you never to open his letters — *we have no son!*" Sara weeps.

As it happens, both Jack and Mary are in Chicago. With her help, he's gained a place on the vaudeville circuit and is now constantly traveling around the country: Portland, Seattle, Salt Lake, Denver, Omaha. For one glorious week, their paths have crossed and they're appearing on the same bill. Now, however, they must part for an indefinite period as Mary has won a lead role in a Broadway show.

While in Chicago, Jack attends a concert of sacred songs performed by renowned cantor Jossele Rosenblatt (playing himself). Jack is reminded poignantly of his own father. About to board a train for the next stop on the circuit, Jack is told that his booking has been terminated. Far from being canned however, he's won a shot at the big time: a spot in a Broadway revue, which will bring him close to both Mary and his treasured mother, whom he's not seen in ages.

It is Cantor Rabinowitz's sixtieth birthday. Presents arrive from relatives and friends, including a chicken of questionable vitality, a large jug of homemade wine, and three virtually identical gifts—prayer shawls. "Just what he needs," says Sara. It is also the day of Jack's return.

At the Rabinowitz home, Jack is greeted warmly by his mother after his long absence. He surprises her with an expensive gift, a necklace with a diamond-encrusted medallion. At his father's piano, he sings and plays Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" for her, one of the tunes he will try out in the Broadway show. Then, as Jack continues to tinkle on the piano with his left hand throughout, comes the first true dialogue sequence ever heard in a feature-length film (Sara's lines, for the most part, are not fully enunciated, and at times are difficult to understand amid her frequent giggling):

Having performed a relatively straightforward version of the song, Jack now demonstrates for his mother the energetic method with which he plans to perform it on Broadway. In the middle of the song, he interjects, referring to his flamboyant piano style,

In the middle of the song, Jack's father enters and watches Jack perform for a few moments. Stunned and still not fully comprehending, he shouts the last recorded line of speech in the movie:

Jack tries to explain his modern point of view, but the traditionalist cantor is appalled by his disrespectful son. Jack is banished once again: "Leave my house! I never want to see you again — you *jazz singer!*" Jack makes a prediction as he departs: "I came home with a heart full of love, but you don't want to understand. Some day you'll understand, the same as Mama does." Sara fears Jack will never return: "He came back once, Papa, but — he'll never come back again." The cantor slumps defeatedly.

Two weeks after Jack's expulsion from the family home and twenty-four hours before opening night of *April Follies* on Broadway, Jack's father becomes gravely ill. Jack is asked to choose between the show and duty to his family and faith: in order to sing the Kol Nidre at temple in his sick father's place for Yom Kippur the following night, he will have to miss the big premiere.



 Mary (May McAvoy) and Jack, in his first blackface scene

Dress rehearsal is at one o'clock the next day. Jack is told, "Come full of pep!" That evening, the eve of Yom Kippur, Yudleson tells the Jewish elders, "For the first time, we have no Cantor on the Day of Atonement." Pale and emaciated lying in his bed, Cantor Rabinowitz tells Sara in his bedroom that he cannot perform on the most sacred of holy days: "My heart is breaking, Mama. I cannot sing. My son came to me in my dreams — he sang Kol Nidre so beautifully. If he would only sing like that tonight — surely he would be forgiven."

As Jack prepares for rehearsal by applying blackface makeup, he and Mary have a heated discussion about his career aspirations and the familial conflicts that they agree must not be allowed to interfere. Sara and Yudleson comes to Jack's dressing room to plea for him to come to his father and sing in his stead. Jack is torn. He delivers his blackface performance at the rehearsal, as Sara and Yudleson, along with Mary, watch from the wings. Sara, seeing her son onstage for the first time, has a tearful revelation: "Here he belongs. If God wanted him in His house, He would have kept him there. He's not *my* boy anymore — he belongs to the whole world now."

Jack returns to the Rabinowitz home after the rehearsal. He kneels at his father's bedside and the two converse fondly: "My son—I love you—." Yudleson assumes that he has come to replace Cantor Rabinowitz in the synagogue for Yom Kippur: "I knew you'd come. The choir is waiting." Sara encourages him as a way to heal his father: "Maybe if you sing — your Papa will get well —." But just then, the producer and Mary arrive to urge him to return with them to the *April Follies* premiere. Mary asks him, "You're not thinking of quitting us, are you, Jack?" The producer warns him of the consequences for his career if he fails to appear on opening night: "You'll queer yourself on Broadway — you'll never get another job."

Jack recognizes the import of the decision he must make: "It's a choice between giving up the biggest chance of my life — and breaking my mother's heart — I have no right to do either!" Mary reminds him of his former words: "Were you lying when you said your career came before *everything*?" Yudleson pressures him too: "You *must* sing tonight." Jack is unsure if he even can: "I haven't sung Kol Nidre since I was a little boy." Yudleson assures him, "What a little boy learns — he never forgets." The producer warns, "Don't be a fool, Jack!" Jack turns to his mother, who tells him, "Do what is in your heart, Jakie — if you sing and God is not in your voice — your father will know." The producer reminds Jack of his career: "You're a *jazz singer* at heart!"

At the theater, the opening night audience is told, "Ladies and Gentlemen, there will be no performance this evening—." Jack sings the Kol Nidre in the synagogue in his father's place. His father listens from his deathbed to the nearby ceremony. Now that his son is reconciled to the old world's values and to the family, Cantor Rabinowitz's speaks his last, forgiving words: "Mama, we have our son again." The spirit of Jack's father is shown at his side in the synagogue. Mary has come to listen. She sees how Jack has reconciled the division in his soul: "a jazz singer — singing to his God."

"The season passes — and time heals — the show goes on." Jack, as "The Jazz Singer," is now appearing at the Winter Garden theater, apparently as the featured performer opening for a show called *Back Room*. In the film's final scene, his beloved mother sits alongside Yudleson in the front row of the packed theater. In blackface, Jack performs the song "My Mammy" for her and for the world.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_\(1927_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_(1927_film))

Lesson 4 – Vaudeville

Essential Questions

- What is vaudeville?
- How did Jews get involved in vaudeville?
- Is vaudeville Jewish?

Set Induction

Ask students to brainstorm jobs that are stereotypically Jewish. (Examples: lawyer, doctor, teacher, banker)

Activities

-Explain to students that Jews began working in some of those careers because non-Jews didn't want them. For example, in history, Jews became moneylenders because it was against Christian law. Jews also chose some of these careers because non-Jews in those professions wouldn't work for Jews. For example, teachers were needed in Jewish schools. A lot of Jews went into vaudeville because it was considered "beneath" Christians.

-Read information about vaudeville and watch video clips of vaudeville performances ("Levi and Cohen: The Irish Comedians" and "A Gesture Fight on Hester Street") watching for Jewishness. Discuss with students- What was Jewish about these clips? How might they have been different if they were about other ethnicities?

-Divide the class into small groups. Each group should create their own Jewish vaudeville sketch. The groups should then perform their skits.

Conclusion

Discuss- What made the students' skits Jewish? Was it hard to make vaudeville specifically Jewish? Why or why not? Was vaudeville Jewish at all?

Vaudeville

What Was a Vaudeville Act?

An act could be darn near anything that was inoffensive and entertaining. A performer's gender, race and appearance were no barrier to success, and nothing was too eccentric if it gave an audience ten to fifteen minutes of diversion. While singers and dancers were part of every bill, the specialty acts set vaudeville apart –mind readers, instrumentalists, escape artists - Houdini and his many imitators, flash acts - any "showy" act boasting its own lavish set, a large chorus, special effects, etc., high divers, quick-change artists, strong men, living statuary, contortionists, balancing acts, freak acts - anyone acting crazy or silly - eccentric dancers, etc., regurgitators - these individuals (drank liquids and regurgitated to fill fish tanks, etc. – Hadji Ali would swallow water & kerosene, then spew kerosene onto open flames, followed by the water to put the flames out. Not pretty, but audiences were fascinated.

Acrobats, ice and roller skaters, cyclists and other non-talkers were known as "dumb acts." A few of these went on to stardom when they added humorous repartee to their routines, including juggler W.C. Fields and rope trickster Will Rogers. A few unique acts defied definition. Think-a-Drink Hoffman came onstage with an empty cocktail shaker and somehow made it pour forth any alcoholic concoction audience members called for.

Celebrities from other fields were also popular. Helen Keller, Carrie Nation, Babe Ruth, movie star Douglas Fairbanks and the scandalous beauty Evelyn Nesbitt all received thousands of dollars a week for personal appearance tours in vaudeville. Limited talents like Ms. Nesbitt started in the big time and worked their way down – the reverse of the path taken by those who achieved lasting stardom.

Vaudeville audiences were not passive observers. They were vocal and sometimes physical participants in performances. Their cheers, jeers or painful silences would make or break an act. At New York's Palace, the reaction of the show biz pros attending a Monday matinee affected an act's bookings and pay for months to come. But a bad reaction in any vaudeville theatre could ruin an act's reputation. If a local manager decided to fire an act due to audience displeasure or disinterest, a damning report was sent back to the United Booking Office. So it is no exaggeration to say that from Broadway to Boise, audiences had tremendous influence in shaping vaudeville.

Who's On the Bill?

To cut down on squabbles among performers, theater owners came up with the idea of advertising acts in order of appearance, rather than order of importance. This is how all handbill ads for vaudeville houses were printed -- and the lineup came to be known as a vaudeville bill. A bill consisted of approximately eight acts, but could be longer or shorter in certain theatres. Most bills followed this basic format –

1. The "Opening" was a "silent act" that would not be ruined by the bustle of an audience settling in. Acrobats or animal acts were ideal. For any other kind of act, getting booked in this spot was the ultimate insult.
2. Usually a "singing sister" or "dancing brother" act – in which the performers were not necessarily relatives. The youngest of the singing Gumm Sisters went on to fame after changing her name to Judy Garland, and the tap dancing Nicholas Brothers played this spot before becoming headliners
3. A comedy sketch or one-act play. These could be old melodramas with unknown casts or new works featuring top Broadway stars. Sarah Bernhart, Ethel Barrymore, Walter Hampden, Nazimova and Helen Hayes toured in vaudeville. Alfred Lunt got his first big break touring with the infamous actress Lillie Langtry in a vaude one-act. Some of the finest professional writers provided sketches and one-act plays for vaudeville use, including J.M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle, David Belasco, Jack London, George M. Cohan and W.S. Gilbert.
4. A novelty act or eccentric dance act was thrown into the fourth spot to liven things up.
5. This spot was reserved for rising stars or falling ones, to close out the first half of the program with a solid crowd pleaser.
6. After intermission came a "big" act involving a large set – choirs, novelty orchestras and top animal acts were typical choices for this slot.
7. "Next to closing" was the star spot reserved for the headliner – usually a vocalist or comedian. Jack Benny, Sophie Tucker, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Marie Dressler, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor were among the few headliners whose fame outlived vaudeville. Singer Kate Smith (best remembered for introducing Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" on radio) was held over at the Palace by popular demand for eight weeks – making her the longest-running headliner that house ever had.
8. The "closing" spot was reserved for short films -- or annoying acts that might encourage patrons to leave before the next show. A clunky one-man band or a grating singer were typical closers.

Placement on a bill was a vital issue. Performers considered the opening or closing slots humiliating, since audiences were too busy settling in or filing out to pay serious attention.

- <http://www.musicals101.com/vaude2.htm>

Lesson 5 – Are Jews Just Another Ethnicity Today?

Essential Questions

- Is Judaism an ethnicity in America today?
- How is Judaism the same as/different from other ethnicities in America today?
- Who decides if Judaism is seen as an ethnicity?

Set Induction

Ask each student to state what their ethnicity is. Student answers may include Jewish, American or some other ethnicity. Ask students to discuss why they characterize themselves in that way.

Activities

- Brainstorm on the board a list of the characteristics that Jews have in common in America. List may include: some knowledge of Hebrew, prayer, connection to Israel, holidays, food

-Compare brainstorm list to list of ethnicity characteristics from Lesson 1. Based on these lists, does Judaism seem to be an ethnicity? If not, what is missing?

-Discuss with the class: Who decides whether a group is an ethnicity or not? The members of the group? People in power? Has the characterization of Judaism as an ethnicity changed over time? Why do you think it has or has not? Do you think this is a positive or negative change? Do you think it is possible to change it back?

-Discuss with the class: Is Judaism an ethnicity? In what ways? Explain to the class that the answer to this question may not be yes or no, but that there may be times when Judaism seems like an ethnicity, and times when it does not.

-Provide students with a variety of materials and ask them to create an artistic answer to the question: Is Judaism an ethnicity? Answers should include depictions of the ways in which Judaism is like other ethnicities as well as the points at which Judaism differs from other ethnicities.

Conclusion

Invite students to look at the work of their classmates and to present their own work to the class if they choose to.

Unit 3 - Maintaining Isolation as an Outgroup

Goals

-for students to think about the ways in which a word or phrase can be understood differently depending on the speaker and audience

-to introduce some of the ways Jews were excluded and isolated themselves in America in the 1930s and 1940s

Understandings

-In 20th Century America, Jews have used humor to challenge as well as to uphold American stereotypes about Jews and Judaism.

-Jews in America have balanced their desire and ability to be fully American with their desire and ability to maintain a Jewish identity in different ways throughout the 20th Century.

Essential Questions

-In what circumstances are Jews forced to remain separate from mainstream society? In what circumstances do they choose to separate themselves? What are the differences between these two situations?

-Do Jews find things funny in an audience of other Jews that they would find offensive in a mixed audience? Why or why not? What kind of things?

Skills

Students will be able to...

-state whether or not they think Jewish humor is different for a completely Jewish audience

-identify some of the Yiddish influences in Jewish humor

-identify some of the factors that led to the prevalence of Jews in the Catskills in the 1930s and 1940s

Authentic Assessments/Performance Tasks

Using pictures (in graphic novel style) or words, students will be asked to tell a story about a future America in which Jews are separate from the rest of America. How did they become separated? In what ways are they separate? What are the consequences of the separation?

Other Evidence of Learning

-discussion

Lessons

1. Yiddish
2. The Catskills
3. Humor in the Catskills
4. Audience
5. Excluded or Exclusive?

Lesson 1 – Yiddish

Essential Questions

- What was the role of Yiddish in America?
- How has Yiddish impacted our lives today?
- Do you think Yiddish isolated American Jews in the 1930s and 1940s? Why or why not?

Set Induction

Ask students to discuss: How many languages do you know? Are there times when you use different kinds of English? When?

Activities

-Ask students to brainstorm and write down all of the Yiddish words and phrases they know. They should then label the words and phrases that they think a non-Jew would not know. Each student will then share a word or phrase until everyone's lists have been exhausted.

-Introduce students to the development of Yiddish with a brief lecture. They will be asked to discuss why the Jews might have continued to use Yiddish in America. What might non-Jews have thought about this reluctance to use English? Why do they think fluency in Yiddish is so rare today?

-Using the earlier brainstormed lists of Yiddish words the students know, ask if they can see any general themes? Are they words associated with a feeling? Are most of the words a particular part of speech? What might this say about the role of Yiddish in America?

-Read "Colloquial Uses in English of Yiddish Linguistic Devices" from *The New Joys of Yiddish* by Leo Rosten. Divide students into small groups and give each group one of the linguistic devices. Each group of students should see how many modern examples of that linguistic device they can think of.

Conclusion

Ask students to discuss: Do you think the use of Yiddish in America affected Jewish identity? Did it keep Jews isolated from the rest of American society? Why or why not?

Lesson 2 – The Catskills

Essential Questions

- Where are the Catskills?
- What were the Catskills resorts like?
- Why did Jews go there?
- Why did these resorts decline in popularity?

Set Induction

Think about the things that your family does together. Are any of them specifically American? Are any of them specifically Jewish?

Activities

- Introduce idea of Catskills resorts with a brief lecture. Show location on map. Ask students why they think this was a popular vacation spot for Jews?
- Show scenes from *Dirty Dancing*. What do you notice? Is anything specifically Jewish? Is anything specifically American?
- Divide the class into small groups. Ask students to imagine that they are the owners of a Catskills resort. They have 100 Jewish families on vacation at their resort. Ask each group to create a day-long schedule of events for the families, including menus. Each group should create a brochure for their resort highlighting these aspects.
- Each group will present their resort to the class. Ask students to pay attention to what is Jewish about each resort and what is American. After each presentation discuss these answers. Ask the students to comment on whether the resorts they created tended to be more Jewish or more American. Why do they think that is?

Conclusion

Do you think you would have had fun at a Catskills resort? Why or why not?

Lesson 3 – Humor in the Catskills (fully scripted)

Objectives

Students should be able to...

- explain why there was so much humor in the Catskills
- critique whether or not a piece of humor is funny
- state what, if anything, made Catskills humor Jewish

Essential Questions

- Why was there so much humor in this setting?
- What made the humor funny?
- What, if anything, made this humor Jewish?

Set Induction

(20 min) Brainstorm on a whiteboard what the students remember about the Catskills from the last class. Looking at the list, ask the class to discuss why they think so many Jewish comedians began their careers in the Catskills. (Answers might include people wanted to be entertained on vacation, people wanted distraction from all their time with their families, the Jewish comedians preferred a Jewish audience, the Jewish comedians could not get jobs in other places.)

Activities:

(30 min) Each student is given a piece of paper with a piece of Catskills humor written at the top. They write a short critique of it – why is it funny or not funny? Then they pass it on to the next person. The last person to comment on each piece of humor reads all of the comments and summarizes them. Each student reads his/her piece of humor and summary of comments aloud. (Alternatively, the quotes could be written on large pieces of chart paper and hung around the room so students can move around the room and comment.)

(15 min) Discuss as a class – What themes did you notice about what was and was not funny? Can you think of a context in which some of them might have been funny?

(10 min) Give each student a handout of all of the Catskills quotes. In small groups, ask them to determine what makes this humor Jewish.

(20 min) Hold a debate to determine whether the Catskills humor was specifically Jewish humor. If small groups have been somewhat evenly distributed in their opinions, students can fight for the answer they believe. If not, students can draw slips of paper out of a hat to determine which side they will participate on.

Closure:

(10 min) Ask each student to write a short statement about why they think the humor of the Catskills is considered Jewish humor. Have some students share these statements as time permits. Answers may include: because the comedians were Jewish, because the audiences were Jewish, they used Yiddish, the jokes were about the role of Jews in America.

Materials Needed

Whiteboard and markers

Quotes of Catskills humor on regular sheets of paper or chart paper

Handout of all the quotes of Catskills humor

Humor From and About the Catskills

1. “My daughter Becky is spending her junior year in London. Queen Elizabeth wants her advice about how to deal with Princess Diana. When I asked why, Queen Elizabeth said, ‘Well, Diana’s only been a princess for NINE YEARS...’”
-Freddie Roman
2. “When I went into show business, my entire family changed their name to Kirshenbaum.” –Freddie Roman
3. “In the Catskills, everyone is wearing a warm-up suit. Have you seen the shape of some of these people? What kind of sport are they warming up for?” –Mal Z. Lawrence
4. “After the meals, you see all these women wrapping danish in napkins—‘for later. These are for later.’ When is this later? ‘We’ll have these with coffee on November 23rd.’” –Mal Z. Lawrence
5. “Jews are a difficult audience. When Italians hear music, they dance. They sing. When Jews hear music, they say ‘It’s so LOUD here!’” –Dick Capri
6. “I’m beginning to feel Jewish, being in this show. In my next life I want to be Jewish...you get more holidays.” –Dick Capri
7. “This enticing ‘ad’ for a summer place appeared in the Spring. Just the thing you were looking for:

‘For Rent...Colossal, Spacious, Luxurious Bungalowette, with Kitchenette, Parlurette, Porchette, Garagette, and Out-house-ette.’”

8. “Renter: ‘Is there a pleasant view from the bungalow?’

Agent: ‘Well...From the front porch there is an exquisite view of Grossinger’s...Otherwise there is nothing but blue lakes and snow-capped mountain peaks.’”

9. “We received this letter in answer to an inquiry about hotel accommodations:

‘Dear Sir:

We regret to inform you that all the worthwhile accommodations are already taken. We have nothing left but ‘Luxury Lodge!’”

10. “You’ve never seen so much sour cream. There are waves of sour cream breaking over our heads.” –Mal Z. Lawrence

-Levenson, Sammy. “The Mountains,” *Meet the Folks: A Session of American Jewish Humor*. New York: Citadel Press, 1958.

-*Catskills on Broadway*. Jokes from videotaped Broadway show.

Lesson 4 – Audience

Essential Questions

- Will Jews laugh at different things if the audience is Jewish than if the audience is mixed?
- How is humor affected by the audience?

Set Induction

Ask the students to think of a particularly memorable moment in their lives. They should write two descriptions of this event, one to share with a friend, and one to share with the principal/head of school.

Activities

-Discuss as a class – What were the differences between your two descriptions? Why were they different? What would be the reactions if you switched the descriptions (gave the friend one to the principal and vice versa)?

-Ask the class to create a theory: What do you think humor intended for a completely Jewish audience would sound like? What topics would be covered? What kind of stereotypes would be used? Write these ideas on the board.

-Read or watch some of the comedy from the Catskills. What audience do you think this was intended for? How can you tell? Were the theories right? What do you think might have changed if the audience was different?

- Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to create a “mini-culture:” they should create a few words and a stereotype of what members of their culture are like. Based on this imaginary mini-culture, each group should create a joke, a cartoon and an idea for a comedy television show. Ask each group to present their work to the class. Discuss: Was the material funnier to the group that created it or the other groups? What did it feel like to not be able to understand some words and ideas? What did it feel like to present to people who might not understand you?

Conclusion

Do you think Jews or non-Jews were more responsible for the development of the Catskills resorts? How do you think a completely Jewish environment affected the vacation experience of the Jews who went there?

Lesson 5 – Excluded or Exclusive?

Essential Questions

-Are Jews today as separate from mainstream America as they were in the 1930s and 1940s?

-Did Jews create their own institutions because they wanted to or because they were excluded from American institutions? Does it make a difference?

Set Induction

Think about a time when you were excluded from something. What did it feel like? How did you react? Think about a time when you chose not to be included in something. What did that feel like? Why did you make that decision? What was the same about the two situations? What was different?

Activities

-Ask students to brainstorm American institutions that are important for them to be included in. Answers may include colleges, public school, library, sports teams, etc. What would happen if you were excluded from those institutions? What do you think you would feel like? How would you respond?

-Explain to students that being excluded from other resorts was one reason that Jewish resorts were developed in the Catskills. Brandeis University, Jewish country clubs, and some Jewish day schools were also created as parallel institutions for Jews who were excluded from American institutions. Does this make you see the Catskills resorts in a different light? How might they have been different if Jews were choosing not to be included in mainstream American institutions? How might they have felt different?

-Using pictures (in graphic novel style) or words, students will be asked to tell a story about a future America in which Jews are separate from the rest of America. How did they become separated? In what ways are they separate? What are the consequences of the separation?

Conclusion

Share fictional future stories.

The Yiddish Language

Yiddish was at one time the international language of Ashkenazic Jews (the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe and their descendants). A hybrid of Hebrew and medieval German, Yiddish takes about three-quarters of its vocabulary from German, but borrows words liberally from Hebrew and many other languages from the many lands where Ashkenazic Jews have lived. It has a grammatical structure all its own, and is written in an alphabet based on Hebrew characters. Scholars and universities classify Yiddish as a Germanic language, though some have questioned that classification.

Yiddish was never a part of Sephardic Jewish culture (the culture of the Jews of Spain, Portugal, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East). They had their own international language known as Ladino or Judesmo, which is a hybrid of medieval Spanish and Hebrew in much the same way that Yiddish combines German and Hebrew.

At its height less than a century ago, Yiddish was understood by an estimated 11 million of the world's 18 million Jews, and many of them spoke Yiddish as their primary language. Yiddish has fallen on hard times, a victim of both assimilation and murder. Today, less than a quarter of a million people in the United States speak Yiddish, about half of them in New York. Most Jews know only a smattering of Yiddish words, and most of those words are unsuitable for polite company. But in recent years, Yiddish has experienced a resurgence and is now being taught at many universities. There are even Yiddish Studies departments at Harvard, Columbia and Oxford, among others, and many Jewish communities provide classes to learn Yiddish. Many Jews today want to regain touch with their heritage through this nearly-lost language.

Yiddish is referred to as "mame loshn" ("loshn" rhymes with "caution"), which means "mother tongue," although it is not entirely clear whether this is a term of affection or derision. Mame loshn was the language of women and children, to be contrasted with loshn koydesh, the holy tongue of Hebrew that was studied only by men. (And before the feminists start grinding their axes, let me point out that most gentile women and many gentile men in that time and place could not read or write at all, while most Jewish women could at least read and write Yiddish).

The word "Yiddish" is the Yiddish word for "Jewish," so it is technically correct to refer to the Yiddish language as "Jewish" (though it is never correct to refer to Hebrew as "Jewish"). At the turn of the century, American Jews routinely referred to the Yiddish language as "Jewish," and one of my elderly aunts continues to do so. However, that usage has become unfashionable in recent years and people are likely to think you are either ignorant or bigoted if you refer to any language as "Jewish." Likewise, the Yiddish word "Yid" simply means "Jew" and is not offensive if used while speaking Yiddish or in a conversation liberally sprinkled with Yiddish terms, but I wouldn't recommend using the word in English because it has been used as an offensive term for far too long.

The History of Yiddish

It is generally believed that Yiddish became a language of its own some time between 900 and 1100 C.E., but it is difficult to be certain because in its early days, Yiddish was primarily a spoken language rather than a written language. It is clear, however, that at this time even great biblical scholars like Rashi were using words from local languages written in Hebrew letters to fill in the gaps when the Hebrew language lacked a suitable term or when the reader might not be familiar with the Hebrew term. For example, in his commentary on Gen. 19:28, when Rashi comes across the Hebrew word *qiytor* (a word that is not used anywhere else in the Bible), he explains the word by writing, in Hebrew letters, "torche b'la-az" (that is, "*torche* in French").

It is believed that Yiddish began similarly, by writing the local languages in the Hebrew characters that were more familiar to Yiddish speakers, just as Americans today often write Hebrew in Roman characters (the letters used in English).

The Yiddish language thrived for many centuries and grew farther away from German, developing its own unique rules and pronunciations. Yiddish also developed a rich vocabulary of terms for the human condition, expressing our strengths and frailties, our hopes and fears and longings. Many of these terms have found their way into English, because there is no English word that can convey the depth and precision of meaning that the Yiddish word can. Yiddish is a language full of humor and irony, expressing subtle distinctions of human character that other cultures barely recognize let alone put into words. What other language distinguishes between a *shlemiel* (a person who suffers due to his own poor choices or actions), a *shlimazl* (a person who suffers through no fault of his own) and a *nebech* (a person who suffers because he makes other people's problems his own). An old joke explains the distinction: a *shlemiel* spills his soup, it falls on the *shlimazl*, and the *nebech* cleans it up!

As Jews became assimilated into the local culture, particularly in Germany in the late 1700s and 1800s, the Yiddish language was criticized as a barbarous, mutilated ghetto jargon that was a barrier to Jewish acceptance in German society and would have to be abandoned if we hoped for emancipation. Yiddish was viewed in much the same way that people today view Ebonics (in fact, I have heard Yiddish jokingly referred to as "Hebonics"), with one significant difference: Ebonics is criticized mostly by outsiders; Yiddish was criticized mostly by Jews who had spoken it as their native language. Thus the criticism of Yiddish was largely a manifestation of Jewish self-hatred rather than antisemitism.

Alef-Beyz: The Yiddish Alphabet

Yiddish is written with Hebrew letters, but the letters are used somewhat differently than in Hebrew. In fact, the first time I saw the familiar Yiddish phrase "oy vey" written in Yiddish letters, I thought the spelling must be a mistake!

The Yiddish alphabet is called the alef-beyz for its first two letters.

The biggest difference between the Hebrew alefbet and the Yiddish alef-beyz is in the use of vowels: in Hebrew, vowels and other pronunciation aids are ordinarily not written, and when they are written, they are dots and dashes added to the text in ways that do not affect the physical length of the text. In Yiddish, however, many of the Hebrew letters have been adapted to serve as vowels and the pronunciation aids in Hebrew are reflected in the consonants. Vowels and other pronunciation aids are always written unless the Yiddish word comes from Hebrew, in which case the Yiddish word is written as it is in Hebrew, without the vowel points but with the dagesh (dot in the middle).

When a Hebrew word is combined with a Yiddish suffix, the Hebrew part is spelled as in Hebrew and the Yiddish part as in Yiddish. For example, the Yiddish word "shabbesdik" (for the Sabbath; festive) combines the Hebrew word shabbat (sabbath), spelled as in Hebrew, with the Yiddish adjective suffix "-dik" (set aside for, suitable for, in the mood for, "-ish"), spelled as in Yiddish.

In addition, some of the most common Hebrew letters are rarely used in Yiddish, being used only if the Yiddish word comes from Hebrew. These rarely-used letters all have the same sound as another Hebrew letter, and reducing their use simplifies spelling when bringing words in from languages that weren't originally written using these letters. For example, there are three different Hebrew letters that make the sound "s": Samekh, Sin and the soft sound of Tav (according to Ashkenazic pronunciation). Which one do you use? It depends on the origin of the word. Words brought in from Hebrew use the original Hebrew spelling, which may be any of these three letters, but words brought in from other language will always use Samekh. The word vaser (water, from the German wasser) is spelled with a Samekh, but the word simkhah (celebration, from Hebrew) is spelled with a Sin and the word shabbes (sabbath, from Hebrew) ends with a Sof.

- <http://www.jewfaq.org/yiddish.htm>

Catskills Resorts

The Catskills region is America's first wilderness and was once its largest resort area. Engulfing over 6000 square miles of rolling countryside, valleys, and mountain peaks (many above 3500 feet) it's always attracted hunters, trappers, and fishermen. Its Borscht Belt area (in Sullivan & Ulster counties) once contained the highest concentration of guest lodgings in the U.S. with more than 1000 hotels and 2000 bungalow colonies. While most were modest, many offered all-inclusive packages, extensive activities, and ultra-luxurious accommodations. The largest and most famous were the *Avon Lodge*, *Brickman's*, *Brown's*, the *Campbell Inn*, the *Columbia*, the *Concord*, the *Eldorado*, the *Evans*, the *Fallsview*, the *Flagler*, *Gilberts*, the *Granit*, the *Green Acres*, *Grossinger's*, the *Heiden*, the *Homowack*, *Klein's Hillside*, *Kutsher's*, the *Laurels*, the *Nemerson*, the *Nevele*, the *New Brighton*, the *New Roxy*, the *Olympic*, the *Paramount*, the *Parkston*, the *Pines*, the *Pioneer*, the *Plaza*, the *President*, the *Raleigh*, the *Saxony*, the *Sha-Wan-Ga Lodge*, *Schenk's*, *Shagrin's*, the *Stevensville*, the *Sunnylands*, the *Tamarack*, the *Tansville*, the *Waldmere*, the *Wayside Inn*, the *White Roe Inn*, the *Windsor*, and the *Young's Gap*. Sadly, while the *Nevele Grand* (the *Nevele & Fallsview*), the *Hudson Valley Resort* (the *Granit*), and *Kutsher's* are the only survivors, *Kutsher's* remains family owned & operated (but is up for sale, however).

"The Mountains", as the Catskills are often referred to by loyal visitors, are also America's oldest resort area and were first publicized during the late 1700s by artists from the Hudson River School. By the early 1800s the region's beauty and vast open spaces had inspired Washington Irving's classic short story "Rip Van Winkle" as well as America's first environmental movement (pioneered by James Fenimore Cooper). In 1824, wealthy Americans began flocking to the Catskills when one of America's first grand hotels, the *Catskill Mountain House*, began providing world class hospitality and sweeping mountain vistas to its guests. By the 1850s, the Catskills "Silver Age" had begun as many other majestic hotels were built; the largest and most famous of which included the *Laurel House* (1852), the *Mohonk Mountain House* (1869), the *Overlook Mountain House* (1871), the *Tremper Inn* (1878), the *Grand Hotel* (1881), the *Hotel Kaaterskill* (1881), and the *Hotel Wawonda* (1891) among many others. Of these, only the spectacular *Mohonk Mountain House* survives today and is thriving as a premiere destination resort. In addition, several medicinal spa resorts were constructed throughout the region during this period; the most famous of which was the (now defunct) *White Sulphur Springs House*.

By the late 1800s, the middle classes had discovered the area and the region's distinctive *Catskills Fly Fishing* technique had been perfected. Germans and Irishmen preferred the taller terrain of the northern Catskills, Italians favored the Tuscany-like central and western Catskills, and Eastern Europeans preferred the hills and valleys of the southern and eastern Catskills. A shortage of accommodations throughout the region prompted many area land owners to convert their homesteads into guest houses and lodges. Poor growing conditions (especially in the southern and eastern Catskills) prompted desperate farmers to convert their homes into boarding houses by luring guests with free meals. The new "cottage" industry became an instant success. Two of the earliest Catskills resort towns, Hunter and Windham (in northern Greene County), are among the region's most popular today largely due to the construction of ski resorts.

Also during the 1880s, the completion of the Ontario & Western Railway through the area enabled millions of New York City immigrants to escape the summer heat. Discrimination against Eastern European Jewish immigrants encouraged the establishment of Jewish boarding houses, most of which were located throughout Sullivan and Ulster counties (in the southern Catskills). Praised for their hospitality and strictly kosher cuisine, the Jewish boarding houses prospered as word spread among New York City's ever-increasing Jewish population.

By offering unlimited portions of food, exclusive activities, and unique amenities, most Jewish establishments became full-service secular resorts and began dominating the Catskills tourist trade. Sullivan & Ulster counties soon became known as the Borscht Belt because Borscht (a cold red soup made from beets) was (and still is) frequently served. In the decades that followed, these secular Jewish resorts played a vital role in assimilating millions of Jewish immigrants into American society. Eventually, three types of Borscht Belt accommodations evolved: communal self-service *kuchaleyns*, semi-communal *bungalow colonies*, and all-inclusive *hotels*.

Kuchaleyn accommodations offered no amenities. Guests were poor families (each sharing one room or several rooms in a boarding house). Its most prominent feature was a communal kitchen. *Kuchaleyns* gained notorious reputations, however, as territorial fighting among women was commonplace (especially in the kitchen).

Bungalows (small private cottages) were popular among the middle class. Guests often shared dining facilities and other common indoor recreational areas. While many colonies featured lakes, pools, playing fields, and organized daily activities, most did not. Teen-age and college-age guests often took part-time jobs in the area. More bungalows survive today than any other type of Catskills lodging and many colonies have been converted into cooperative communities.

Hotels were frequented by middle class and affluent guests and were the most financially successful type of Borscht Belt resort. While middle class guests preferred smaller hotels, the wealthy (and wannabe) preferred more expansive accommodations. Large hotels offered every state-of-the-art amenity available at the time and were constantly expanding their facilities.

Most Borscht Belt lodgings were rented for the entire summer season. Husbands and fathers would return to the city during the week and re-join their wives and families each weekend. As a result, it was not uncommon for lonely wives to seek romance with local men. It was also not uncommon for male resort employees (especially younger men) to seek romance with lonely wives.

In the 1910s, stage celebrities such as Boris Thomashevsky (founder of the *Yiddish-American Theater* in New York City) began performing in the area and created a market for professional entertainment in the region. In the decades that followed, legendary Catskills headliners & circuit performers have included Joey Adams, Peter Allen, Woody Allen, Morey Amsterdam, Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon, Harry Belafonte, Richard Belzer, Tony Bennett, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Shelley Berman, Sandra Bernhard, Al Bernie, Elaine Boosler, Tubby Boots, Fanny Brice, Mel Brooks, Lenny Bruce, George Burns, Cuban Pete & Millie, Red Buttons, Sid Caesar, Charlie Callas, Eddie Cantor, Dick Capri, Johnny Carson, Jack Carter, Ray Charles, Maurice Chevalier, Andrew Dice Clay, Judy Collins, Pat Cooper, Norm Crosby, Billy Crystal, Tony Darrow, Vic Damone, Bill Dana, Rodney Dangerfield, Bobby Darin, Larry David, Sammy Davis

Jr., Dom DeLuise, Phyllis Diller, Gloria Estefan, Fabian, The Fabulous Baker Sisters, Totie Fields, Eddie Fisher, Sergio Franchi, Connie Francis, Judy Garland, Mitzi Gaynor, Gilbert Gottfried, Robert Goulet, Eydie Gourmet, Shecky Greene, Robert Gillaume, Buddy Hackett, Moss Hart, Hines Hines & Dad, Lena Horne, Bob Hope, Julio Iglesias, Kevin James, Georgie Jessel, Tom Jones, Mickey Katz, Andy Kauffman, Danny Kaye, Alan King, Robert Klein, Steve Landesburg, Carol Lawrence, Mal Z. Lawrence, Steve Lawrence, Abbe Lane, Jay Leno, Jack E. Leonard, David Letterman, Jerry Lewis, Richard Lewis, Rich Little, Trini Lopez, Melissa Manchester, Dean Martin, Tony Martin, Jackie Mason, Johnny Mathis, Marilyn McCoo, Robert Merrill, Liza Minnelli, Jane Morgan, Zero Mostel, Willie Nelson, Wayne Newton, Jan Peerce, Richard Pryor, Tito Puente, Carl Reiner, Don Rickles, Chita Rivera, Joan Rivers, Freddie Roman, Ray Romano, Diana Ross, Neil Sedaka, Jerry Seinfeld, Dinah Shore, Phil Silvers, Neil Simon, Barbra Streisand, Richard Tucker, Jerry Vale, Jackie Vernon, Bobby Vinton, Jonathan Winters, and Henny Youngman. The Catskills continue to launch careers for many performers and top entertainers continue to perform there.

By the end of WWII, the Catskills "Golden Age" was well underway as over a million people (including almost 25% of New York City's Jewish population) headed to Sullivan & Ulster counties each summer for sun, fun, and headline entertainment. While many resorts were attracting specific Jewish ethnic groups (for example, the 90 room *Valley View House* in Kenoza Park attracted Polish Jews), the larger establishments such as *Grossinger's* and the *Concord* were attracting non-Jews as well with their famous nightclub acts. In 1949 construction began on one of America's first high-speed superhighways (through the heart of the Borscht Belt) to eliminate congestion and reduce accidents along the infamous "old" Route 17 (the region's main artery). The "new" Route 17 was dubbed the Quickway and quickly gained fame for hundreds of unique billboards that lined it promoting the larger resorts. It also provided a direct link between New York City and Binghamton, NY and enabled day-trippers to explore the Catskills while spurring the development of golf clubs, ski areas, camping facilities, and children's summer camps. Fishing and hunting facilities also became more accessible.

In the early 1960s, many big Borscht Belt resorts began attracting younger crowds to the area by featuring the era's top pop, jazz, and R&B acts (not on the regular Catskills circuit). The *Concord* (in Kiamesha Lake) presented James Brown; *The Pines* (in South Fallsburg) presented the Byrds and Frankie Avalon; the *Raleigh* (in South Fallsburg) presented the Byrds and Sam Cooke; the *Laurels* (in Monticello) presented Sam Cooke; the *New Roxy* (in Loch Sheldrake) presented Little Richard; the *Eldorado* (in South Fallsburg) presented *the Drifters*, *Jay & the Americans*, *Little Anthony & the Imperials*, *the Shirelles*, and *Ben E. King* (among many others). By the late 1960s, the region was firmly established as an entertainment mecca for all ages. In August 1969, most Catskills resources were crippled when over half a million concert-goers flooded the Borscht Belt for the *Woodstock Music and Arts Fair* in Bethel.

The star-studded Catskills era passed its peak in the early 1970s. The Borscht Belt had created the year-round "destination resort" and the "all-inclusive vacation" and introduced many of today's standard resort amenities. Two of its most famous resorts, *Grossinger's* and *The Concord*, were among the world's largest and most luxurious. Not surprisingly, though, air-conditioning and the jet-age added to the decline of the region when warmer and more exotic destinations became affordable. Attempts to revitalize the

declining Borscht Belt included empty promises of casino gambling. Many resorts spent millions of dollars on upgrades and renovations preparing for casinos, but to no avail. A domino affect soon took hold as more and more resorts closed, causing other Catskills businesses and industries to suffer severely. Among the hardest hit businesses (that never recovered) were hundreds of farms, whose biggest customers were the resorts. By 1990 it was widely accepted that the Borscht Belt resorts would never recuperate.

Today (throughout the Catskills region) many business district storefronts remain boarded up, a high percentage of residents receive government assistance, the dairy industry has all but disappeared, and an expanding prison industry employs & houses more people than the resorts. In addition, the area is currently experiencing a dramatic influx of non-secular Hasidic Jews who establish, operate, and take up residence in tax-free religious retreats which are located in (and around) many of the former resort properties. As their numbers increase, the tax burden on local residents and businesses increases as well. Resentment of this burden and a misunderstanding of the orthodox Jewish and Hasidic lifestyle result in incidents of anti-Semitism every now and then.

- <http://www.catskills.homestead.com>

Where Are the Catskills?

Locating Defunct Catskills Resorts:

Most Sullivan County resorts were/are located along or just off present-day state highway routes 17, 17B, 42, 52, 52A, 55, 55A, 97, and 206. Please visit Sullivan County Roads for an interesting history of Sullivan County's road system. Most Ulster County resorts are/were located along or just off present-day routes 52, 55, and 209. Most of the original Catskills resorts have either been razed, destroyed by fire, or abandoned. Many others await the wrecking ball or have been converted for other uses. It's easy to spot defunct Catskills resorts, whether abandoned or inhabited. Many were built close to the road while others contrast with the surroundings. Roads and resorts often shared names and ruined swimming pools and handball courts dot the landscape. Former Catskills resorts currently serve as inns, bed and breakfasts, educational institutions, prisons, rehabilitation centers, and spiritual or religious retreats.

Unit 4 – Pushing the Envelope, Breaking Boundaries

Goals:

- to introduce students to the ways in which Jewish comedians have pushed the boundaries of what is politically correct
- to encourage students to think about the result of these rebellions on the Jewish identities of the comedians and on American Jewish society
- to explore the idea of when, if ever, it is appropriate to push boundaries

Understandings:

- A society can become stagnant if nobody ever challenges the norms of that society.
- Sometimes in order to gain mainstream acceptance in comedy, a person must increase the distance between themselves and that mainstream.

Essential Questions:

- How and why did Jewish comedians turn to breaking the boundaries of public speech?
- How was the push to enter the mainstream different for male and female Jewish comedians?
- When, if ever, is it appropriate to challenge established boundaries?

Skills:

Students will be able to...

- identify pieces of Jewish humor in which the author is attempting to push boundaries
- decide what factors make breaking boundaries more or less appropriate
- discuss some of the differences between male and female Jewish comedians

Authentic Assessment/Performance Task:

In small groups, students will be asked to think of a boundary in the classroom that it might be positive to push against. Each group should then create two methods of pushing that boundary – one serious one and one using humor. Each group will share their boundary pushing methods with the class. The class will discuss which method they think would be more effective in actually changing the classroom boundaries.

Lessons

1. What is Shocking?
2. What is Obscene?
3. What Can't You Say on Television?
4. Female Comediennes
5. Is Breaking Boundaries Bad?

Lesson 1: What is shocking?

Essential Questions

- What makes a joke shocking in American society?
- How has the concept of what is shocking changed over time?
- How does America react/respond to jokes that are shocking?

Set Induction

Students will be asked to brainstorm topics that it is considered inappropriate to joke about in public in America. Answers may include the Holocaust, 9/11, ethnic slurs/stereotypes, disabilities, terrorism, etc.

Activities

-Divide the class into small groups. Each group of students will be given a joke that could be considered shocking. There are a few included here as examples. The group will be asked to think about: What made this shocking? Would it still be shocking today? How do you think the public would respond to this joke? Why do you think they might react this way? Is the joke funny? Why or why not?

-Either as a whole class or in jigsaw groups (made up of one person from each of the original groups) students will share what they talked about. In their new groups or as a whole class, students will attempt to create a general theory about what tends to make something shocking to Americans.

-As a class, look at several of these potentially shocking jokes. Why do you think people would joke about this topic? Why might it be good for us to joke about this? Why might it be harmful for us to joke about this? What would be an appropriate response by the public? What might be an inappropriate response?

-As a class, brainstorm topics that might be considered shocking to Jews if used in humor. Answers may include Holocaust, Jewish stereotypes, Jews killing Jesus, etc.

-Students will be asked in pairs or as a whole class to create a Venn diagram of things that are shocking to Americans and to Jews if used in humor.

Conclusion

Discuss as a class: What is the relationship between what humor is shocking in American society and what humor is shocking in Jewish society?

Shocking Humor

1. "Michael Jackson announced this week that the Neverland Ranch is no longer home to him. He said he can't go back there. Which of course is really bad news for the kids locked in the crawlspace." —Jay Leno

2. Q: Why don't Jewish cannibals like eating Germans?

A: They give them gas.

3. Q: What's the biggest difference between 9/11 and the Oklahoma City Bombing?

A: Foreigners once again prove they can do it better and more efficiently.

4. Why is a Tylenol white?

....cause you want it to *work*, don't you?

Lesson 2: What is Obscene?

Essential Questions

- What is the difference between shocking and obscene?
- Why did Lenny Bruce choose to push boundaries?
- Is this humor funny? Is it Jewish?
- Who should get to determine what is obscene?

Set Induction

Last time we talked about shocking things. Today we're going to take that a step farther. Brainstorm a list of what makes something obscene. Note to teacher: there is a fine line here between honesty and inappropriateness.

Activities

-Teacher gives a brief lecture on the biography of Lenny Bruce, including some of the information on his obscenity trials.

-Divide the class into small groups. Each group should be given a characterization and some background information about Lenny Bruce and his obscenity trial. The groups should be given some time to read over their background information and discuss their opinions.

-Each group should be asked to create a documentary about the trial of Lenny Bruce. They may show whichever points of view they would like, but they must stay true to the information they have received. Depending on the resources in your classroom, students may perform their documentaries as skits or film the documentaries.

-The class will watch each of the documentaries. Discuss with the class: What points of view did you choose to represent? Why?

Conclusion

Discuss the question: Did Lenny Bruce's Judaism affect his humor? Some points for discussion are some of his topics are Jewish; as a Jew, he was already outside the mainstream and so not afraid of being pushed out, Jews tend to be politically liberal

Information on Lenny Bruce

Lenny Bruce, **Comedian**

- **Born:** 13 October 1925
- **Birthplace:** Mineola, New York
- **Died:** 3 August 1966 (drug overdose)
- **Best Known As:** Edgy, arrest-prone 1960's comedian

Name at birth: Leonard Alfred Schneider

An American counter-culture icon from the 1960s, Lenny Bruce's obscenity-laced social satire paved the way for modern stand-up comedy. Bruce served in the navy during World War II (1942-45) and began performing stand-up comedy in 1946. As he gained popularity in New York night clubs, his brand of comedy shifted from impersonations to free-wheeling monologues satirizing religion and politics. He released several comedy albums and appeared occasionally on TV, especially as a guest of Steve Allen and Hugh Hefner. In 1961 he was arrested after a performance in San Francisco and charged with obscenity. Bruce was acquitted, but for the next few years he was frequently in trouble with the law for using raw language on stage -- a no-no back then. In 1964 he was convicted of obscenity in New York and jailed for a few months (in 2003 Governor George Pataki posthumously pardoned him). As his legal troubles mounted, he performed less and less and used drugs more and more. He died of a drug overdose (probably either heroin or morphine) at the age of 40, but his style went on to influence the next generation of comedians, from George Carlin and Richard Pryor to Robin Williams and Chris Rock.

- <http://www.answers.com/topic/lenny-bruce>

Bruce on the nature of his performances:

"Do you mind being called a sick comic?"

It is impossible to label me. I develop, on the average, four minutes of new material a night, constantly growing and changing my point of view; I am heinously guilty of the paradoxes I assail in our society.

The reason for the label "sick comic" is the lack of creativity among journalists and critics.

--Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*

Bruce on his legal troubles:

"I'm doing my act and a guy comes in. I know he's a cop--I've had plenty of experience with them. He starts taking down as much of my act as he can. He doesn't miss a dirty word; he doesn't get too much of a rest. He arrests me. We go to court. Me and my lawyers have to defend the act he says I gave. All he says are the dirty words. *His* act is obscene. I'm convicted and have to hire lawyers, maybe go to jail--because of *his* act. There's something screwy about the whole thing."

--Quoted by Martin Garbus in *Ready for the Defense*

Bruce on the legal strategy used in his obscenity case:

"I was so sure I could reach those judges if they'd just let me tell them what I try to do. It was like I was on trial for rape and there I was crying, "But Judge, I can't rape anybody, I haven't the wherewithal," but nobody was listening, and my lawyers were saying, "Don't worry, Lenny, you got a right to rape anyone you please, we'll beat 'em in the appellate court."

--Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*

Bruce on the enforcement of obscenity laws:

"Well, you know, we've got a slight problem. If I say the things that you want me to say, those gentlemen back there [vice squad officers attending Bruce's performance] are going to bust me. [Audience boos.] Don't boo them, it's not *their* fault. They're only doing their job. It's *your* fault I'm being busted. Until you change the law, they have to do what the law requires them to do. It's up to *you* to change the law."

--Bruce's performance at the Unicorn in Los Angeles, February 1962

Bruce on the Supreme Court:

"The law is a beautiful thing. The people who attack the law don't really understand it. You know what it's like? It's like the Supreme Court, that's the daddy and it runs the store because it knows how. All the state courts; they're the clerks, and the daddy says, 'Now you just sweep the floor and unpack the stock and that's it - I don't want you to place any orders or change the displays, and keep your hands out of the register.' But the minute he turns his back all the clerks think they know how to run it better, and they start changing everything and ordering the wrong things and it's a mess. The Supreme Court, the big daddy, it knows what is, but the little guys keep trying to run the store..."

--Quoted by Stan Cohen

Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce
June 13, 1964

We the undersigned are agreed that the recent arrests of night-club entertainer Lenny Bruce by the New York police department on charges of indecent performance constitutes a violation of civil liberties as guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth amendments to the United States Constitution.

Lenny Bruce is a popular and controversial performer in the field of social satire in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais, and Twain. Although Bruce makes use of the vernacular in his night-club performances, he does so within the context of his satirical intent and not to arouse the prurient interests of his listeners. It is up to the audience to determine what is offensive to them; it is not a function of the police department of New York or any other city to decide what adult private citizens may or may not hear.

Whether we regard Bruce as a moral spokesman or simply as an entertainer, we believe he should be allowed to perform free from censorship or harassment.

The signators included theologian Reinhold Niebuhr; psychoanalyst Theodor Reik; Arnold Beichman, chairman of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom; entertainers Woody Allen, Theodore Bikel, Richard Burton, Godfrey Cambridge, Bob Dylan, Herb Gardner, Ben Gazzara, Dick Gregory, Tommy Leonetti, Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor, Rip Tom, Rudy Vallee; novelists and playwrights Nelson Algren, James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Kay Boyle, Jack Gelber, Joseph Heller, Lillian Helman, James Jones, Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, Henry Miller, John Rechy, Jack Richardson, Susan Sontag, Terry Southern, William Styron, John Updike, Gore Vidal, Arnold Weinstein; artists Jules Feiffer, Walt Kelly and Ben Shabo; poets Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Leroi Jones, Peter Orlovsky, Louis Untermeyer; critics Eric Bentley, Robert Brustein, Malcom Cowley, Les Crane, Harry Golden, Michael Harrington, Nat Hentoff, Granville Hicks, Alfred Kazin, Alexander King, Max Lerner, Dwight Macdonald, Jonathan Miller, Philip Rahv, Mark Schorer, Harvey Swados, Jerry Tallmer, Lionel Trilling, Dan Wakefield, Richard Gilman; editors and publishers Ira Gitler (Down Beat), Robert Gottlieb (Simon-& Schuster), Irving Howe (Dissent), Peter Israel (Putnam's), William Phillips (Partisan Review), George Plimpton (Paris Review), Norman Podhoretz (Commentary), Barney Rossett (Grove Press).

Dissent in PEOPLE v. BRUCE
(Criminal Trial Court of the City of New York, Nov. 4,
1964)

The following column, written by Judge J. Randall Creel, ran in the New York Bar Journal on November 24, 1964. Creel's column is largely a statement of the views that led him to dissent in People v Bruce...

By J. Randall Creel
Judge of the Criminal Court of the City of New York

Throughout the recent Lenny Bruce trial a court of which I was a member heard much testimony from many sources in an effort to ascertain the "contemporary community standards" as to obscenity as indeed the directives of higher courts required (People v. Finklestein, 1961, 11 N. Y. 2d 300: People v. Roth, 354 U.S. 4761. But in a total absence of any guideposts or other directives from such higher courts I fear we proceeded not unlike an explorer plunged into a vast uncharted virgin area in pursuit of a mirage or some fabled lost golden city. In this quest the time honored rules of evidence proved to be something of a highly unsuitable incumbrance, and the judicial process revealed itself as a most limited and inadequate, if not improper, tool for this task.

Is the mandate to find the "community standards" as to obscenity just a judicial snipe hunt? The most current judge-made-law as to obscenity has been established without: any relation to and indeed in controversion of "community standards" of obscenity, in a judicial absolutist application of a judicially declared doctrine of absolute freedom of expression, which has overridden and negated all obscenity laws which may in any way impinge upon the *summum bonum* of unrestrained freedom of all expression. This state of the law warrants raising questions as to the suitability and propriety of attempting to set obscenity standards by the judicial process and by judges. It should be clearly understood that which follows are questions I put for myself and myself alone and should there be any judicial indignation from higher sources it should not be directed at my fellow judges in the Bruce case.

I would suggest that it is most doubtful that there is in fact such a thing as a single overall "community standard" as to obscenity, in such a diverse and varied national community, unless it exists in the predilections of such jurists as have laid down such predilection as such precept: A very large measure of judicial subjectivity is inherent in the determination of obscenity by the judicial process and by judges and it is suggested that this phase "community standard" is most probably but another robe to cloak the extent to which the judiciary which has been forced to reshape and mold the law as to obscenity, exercise the powers of super-legislators or indeed of absolute monarchs.

I suggest that Bench and Bar should not be unmindful that there are grave limitations in the two-sided judicial process (and in the judiciary who can properly function only

through that process) in dealing with such many and multiple-sided social problems, of which obscenity is but of very minor stature among those grave social-policy problems with which the judiciary of today is required to deal. The limitations of the judicial process do not permit the judiciary to call and examine all witnesses who are best informed as to the particular problem presented nor make any provisions for adequate notice nor an opportunity for those effected to be heard on what is only a private litigation thought the decisions and opinion of that private litigation may profoundly effect hundreds of thousands of persons, and indeed even alter or amend the basis law of the constitution.

Periodic constitutional conventions provided for in Article V of the Constitution of the United States afford a much more appropriate adequate and articulate means of solving all such social policy problems of our ever changing society than does the judicial process.

The failure of our society to make any use of the Article V constitutional convention means of meeting change during an era of rapidly developing problems coupled with the failure or refusal of all branches of government, other than the judiciary, to move to meet the need for change have placed upon the limited judicial process not only gravely inappropriate strains, but have brought about a most ironic evolution in the Federal Constitution. That constitution started as the end product of a revolution against the tyrant George III. But it has not developed so as to place the judiciary in much the same position of ultimate power once held by the hereditary magistrate in colonial times or not unlike that held by the Delphic oracle in the ancient Greek world. And most ironically, the voice of the sovereign people is muted into inarticulate impotence once the judiciary has rendered an opinion declaring the matter before it of constitutional import, whether it is obscenity or other vastly more vital social policy problems. This solution has forced the judiciary out of the realm of pure law, where it is strong, into the arena of policy and politics, where it is weak, but yet where its decisions have tremendous force on politics. While the judicial process is a very finely finished instrument of the solution of purely legal controversies, for which it was fashioned, it is suggested it may be a dangerous or at best a most clumsy tool when used to solve problems of policy or politics. Can there be rational doubt that there is a better method of finding a community standard as to obscenity (or solving other graver social problems) than this limited judicial process, and judges who are subjected to an almost endless stream of gaseous hot air and some smoke from counsel's arguments, briefs, records, ??? which swirl around judicial benches not unlike those gaseous volcanic emissions which developed the Delphic oracle of old? Has not human knowledge, science and art of self-government made more substantial progress?

The currently prevailing and controlling law as to obscenity has been laid down in two very recent decisions of the Court of Appeals, and in an equally recent series of United States Supreme Court decisions. These decisions are clearly interrelated and collectively they have materially changed and lowered the legal standards as to obscenity which heretofore were recognized by the law. The Court of Appeals decisions are *People v. Bookcase, Inc.* (N.Y.); *Leo Larkin Corporation Counsel, et. Al. v. Putnams' sons*

(N.Y.). The decisions of the United States Supreme Court are *Grove Press, Inc., v. Gerstein* (U.S. June 22, 1964); *Tralins v. Gerstein* (U.S., June 22, 1964) *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (U.S. June, 1964).

It is noted that to the majority holdings of the Court of Appeals there were strong cogent dissents by Chief Judge Desmond and Associate Judges Burke and Scileppi. The stinging, scalding and caustic dissenting opinion of Chief Judge Desmond (*Larkin v. Putnams Sons*) the effect that “into the law itself there has come from nowhere a new constitutional theory which licenses the most unrelieved sexual filth” did not deter the majority of his court from holding that “we are bound,” “must respect,” “must follow” the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States.

In *Larkin v. Putnams’ Sons* that court held that because “some cities” writers and teachers of stature testified at the trial: that the alleged obscene matter “has merit and the testimony as a whole showed differences of opinion as to its value-it does not warrant suppression” and apparently it was not obscene as a matter of law. By this standard the performance which are the subject matter of this trail cannot be held to be obscene since indeed a number of critics, writers, publishers, ??? did testify that these performances did have critical merit though there was the greatest diversity of opinion as to its critical values or indeed as to its comprehensibility aside from its vulgarity.

In the second very recent decision of the Court of Appeals, *People v. Bookcase, Inc.* it was held that a very recent statutory enactment designed to protect minors under eighteen years from the purveyors of pornography for profit of that “which exploits” is devoted to or is principally made up of descriptions of illicit sex or sexual immorality” namely Penal law 484B was unconstitutional as too vague for enforcement, the majority opinion used the words “so road and so obscene in its coverage as to abridge the constitutionally protected freedom.” That statute thus stricken down, was the result of a very long most intensive and careful legislative study by the legislature of New York State, and it was a far more precise and definite statute in its terms and provisions than the older broader termed and less explicit statute on which the prosecution in the Bruce case was based. It that most precisely drafted statute is thus unconstitutional it must follow that the far less precise provisions of Penal Law 1140A are likewise unconstitutional.

These most current high judicial pronouncements of the law as to obscenity have reduced legal obscenity to a negative nothingness and have rendered impotent the sovereign people, their duty elected representatives, prosecuting attorneys, law enforcement officials, trial courts and judges from taking any constructive action to protect the people or their children (and have in fact licensed) the purveyors of the vilest pornography for profit. The monumental mountainous labor of the judiciary who have heard and written of obscenity in a vast articulation into a verbosity of millions of words has indeed produced a mouse-a nothingness which I dare to suggest cogently demonstrates the grave limitations of the judicial process and of judges in solving social policy problems outside their domain of pure law.

It this nihilistic state of judge-made-law as to obscenity is found unsuited to the needs of the citizenry in their efforts to establish a more perfect society: that citizenry should not be unmindful of the fact that under the Constitution of the United States it is the citizenry who are the ultimate and final sovereign, not the Judiciary and that under the procedure provided in Article V of the constitution by the never yes used federal constitutional convention, the citizenry constitutionally have the right and the power and the duty to find a more perfect expression of the law, and not only as to obscenity.

- <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/bruce/bruce.html>

Lesson 3: What Can't You Say on Television/Radio? (fully scripted)

Objectives

Students should be able to...

- Define obscenity, indecency and profanity according to FCC guidelines
- Explain if George Carlin or Howard Stern broke the FCC rules
- Decide whether or not they think the FCC guidelines prohibit free speech

Essential Questions

- Why are there words a person cannot say on television/the radio?
- Who decides what these words are and regulates them?
- Does this violate the first amendment?
- What should be the punishment for breaking these rules?

Set Induction

(15 min) Ask students to think about a time when someone told them not to do something, and it made them want to do it even more. Did they end up doing it? Why or why not? What were the consequences?

Activities

- (20 min) As a class, read through the FCC's rules of obscenity, indecency and profanity. Do these rules make sense? Are they fair? What are their goals? Do they succeed? Are these laws necessary? Why or why not? Are the consequences fair? Why or why not?

- (10 min) Ask half of the class to read information about George Carlin's interaction with the court and the other half to read information about Howard Stern's fight with the FCC.

- (15 min) Pair students up so that each pair includes one person who looked at each of the cases. Students should share with their partner a summary of the information they read. They should discuss the following questions: What did the comedian do "wrong"? Was it really wrong? How did it violate the rules of the FCC? What were the consequences? What should have been the consequences?

- (5 min) Ask each pair of students to share one of the main points they talked about with their partner with the whole class.

- (15 min) Each student should then choose one of the cases and write a letter to the FCC either supporting or protesting the results of the case.

Conclusion

(10 min) Students may share the letters they have written.

Materials Needed

Information about FCC's definitions of and rules about obscenity, indecency and profanity

Information about George Carlin's legal battle

Information about Howard Stern's legal battle

Lined paper

Pens

Federal Communications Commission's Rules

Regulation of Obscenity, Indecency and Profanity

It is a violation of federal law to air obscene programming at any time. It is also a violation of federal law to broadcast indecent or profane programming during certain hours. Congress has given the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) the responsibility for administratively enforcing the law that governs these types of broadcasts. The FCC has authority to issue civil monetary penalties, revoke a license or deny a renewal application. In addition, violators of the law, if convicted in a federal district court, are subject to criminal fines and/or imprisonment for not more than two years.

The FCC vigorously enforces this law where we find violations. In 2004 alone, the FCC took action in 12 cases, involving hundreds of thousands of complaints, assessing penalties and voluntary payments totaling approximately \$8,000,000. The Commission has also toughened its enforcement penalties by proposing monetary penalties based on each indecent utterance in a broadcast, rather than proposing a single monetary penalty for the entire broadcast.

At the same time, however, the Commission is careful of First Amendment protections and the prohibitions on censorship and interference with broadcasters' freedom of speech. The FCC has denied complaints in cases in which we determined the broadcast was not indecent based on the overall context of the programming. Regardless of the outcome, the FCC strives to address every complaint within 9 months of its receipt.

What makes material "obscene?" Obscene speech is not protected by the First Amendment and broadcasters are prohibited, by statute and regulation, from airing obscene programming at any time. According to the U.S. Supreme Court, to be obscene, material must meet a three-prong test: (1) an average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest (i.e., material having a tendency to excite lustful thoughts); (2) the material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law; and (3) the material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. The Supreme Court has indicated that this test is designed to cover hard-core pornography.

What makes material "indecent?" Indecent material contains sexual or excretory material that does not rise to the level of obscenity. For this reason, the courts have held that indecent material is protected by the First Amendment and cannot be banned entirely. It may, however, be restricted to avoid its broadcast during times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience. The FCC has determined, with the approval of the courts, that there is a reasonable risk that children will be in the audience from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., local time. Therefore, the FCC prohibits station licensees from broadcasting indecent material during that period.

Material is indecent if, in context, it depicts or describes sexual or excretory organs or activities in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium. In each case, the FCC must determine whether the material describes or depicts sexual or excretory organs or activities and, if so, whether the material is "patently offensive."

In our assessment of whether material is “patently offensive,” context is critical. The FCC looks at three primary factors when analyzing broadcast material: (1) whether the description or depiction is explicit or graphic; (2) whether the material dwells on or repeats at length descriptions or depictions of sexual or excretory organs; and (3) whether the material appears to pander or is used to titillate or shock. No single factor is determinative. The FCC weighs and balances these factors because each case presents its own mix of these, and possibly other, factors.

What makes material “profane?” “Profane language” includes those words that are so highly offensive that their mere utterance in the context presented may, in legal terms, amount to a “nuisance.” In its Golden Globe Awards Order the FCC warned broadcasters that, depending on the context, it would consider the “F-Word” and those words (or variants thereof) that are as highly offensive as the “F-Word” to be “profane language” that cannot be broadcast between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.

What monetary sanctions has the FCC imposed for violation of its indecency, profanity, and obscenity restrictions? The base monetary sanction for violation of the FCC's indecency, profanity, and/or obscenity restrictions is \$7,000 per violation. The FCC may adjust this monetary sanction upwards, up to a current statutory maximum of \$32,500 per violation, based on such factors as the nature, circumstances, extent and gravity of the violation, and, with respect to the violator, the degree of culpability, any history of prior offenses, ability to pay, and such other matters as justice may require.

During 2004, the FCC imposed monetary sanctions for indecency violations up to \$1,183,000, for an aggregate annual total of \$3,658,000. In addition, some entities chose to settle claims against them and made voluntary payments to the U.S. Treasury, totaling \$7,928,080 in 2004.

What will Stern do if FCC cracks down on his radio show?

Now that radio giant Clear Channel settled for a record \$1.75 million last week with the Federal Communications Commission over broadcasts deemed indecent, speculation is that Viacom will be the FCC's next target.

Viacom's Infinity Broadcasting is home to Howard Stern. The shock jock's show was among those cited in the FCC's complaint against Clear Channel, which aired Stern on a handful of stations before dropping him in February.

But when it comes to Stern, Viacom, unlike Clear Channel, has a difference of opinion with the FCC — and with some observers in the debate over media indecency since Janet Jackson revealed her breast during the Super Bowl halftime show on Viacom's CBS.

"I don't think he does anything indecent, and I'm going to back him," Les Moonves, new co-president of Viacom, said shortly before the settlement. Moonves and Tom Freston took over after the surprise resignation this month of Mel Karmazin, Stern's longtime friend and supporter.

Since the resignation, Stern has been telling his listeners that his "days are numbered" with Infinity. It was Karmazin who "rescued" him, he says, after he was booted by NBC in the '80s. Karmazin helped make Stern a star by putting him on as morning host of WXRK in New York. "If NBC was a concentration camp, then Mel was my Schindler," Stern says.

Karmazin staunchly defended Stern during the indecency debate, during which the sexually explicit radio host has speculated that he might jump to the new medium of satellite radio to avoid FCC scrutiny. "With Mel gone, I am seeing the darkness at the end of the tunnel," Stern says. "He's the guy who had my back."

He continues to bite the hand that feeds him, poking fun at Viacom CEO (and Karmazin nemesis) Sumner Redstone and his daughter, board member Shari Redstone. But Stern has backed off his previous vow to quit, saying Viacom would sue him if he broke his contract.

Moonves says he appreciates the "important bond" between Stern and Karmazin. "Howard is very important to Viacom, and I genuinely hope that when his contract is up (in 19 months), he will stay with us for a very, very long time," Moonves says. "We'll see what the future brings."

Stern draws listeners. During his battle with the FCC and Clear Channel, he has been ranked No. 1 in L.A. and New York, the two largest markets. His numbers have shot up, particularly among younger listeners, in Chicago, Dallas and elsewhere.

Michael Harrison, of trade journal *Talkers*, says Stern "seems to be loving this. He plays the role of victim very well. But I don't see him going anywhere unless they throw him out — unless the cost of keeping him is greater than the money he makes, and that has yet to be proven."

David Butler, spokesman for XM Satellite Radio, acknowledges that executives there have approached Stern about joining XM, the subscription-based service that is not subject to FCC regulations. "He is a huge talent," Butler says. "The question is: How much would it cost?" Stern is said to make as much as \$20 million a year; XM lost \$170 million in the first quarter of 2004.

Karmazin still backs Stern. "I think Howard should honor his contract and continue to do the great kind of radio he's been doing. When his contract is up, he should stay with Viacom — and be paid a lot more money."

But Stern might be "forced to find a different platform," Karmazin says, if the heat from the FCC becomes too much. "It would be a shame if he was not on free over-the-air radio. Why deprive these people of their entertainment as they drive to work each day?"

Contributing: Michael McCarthy

http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2004-06-13-media-mix_x.htm

George Carlin

FCC vs. Pacifica Foundation – Supreme Court 1978

This case requires that we decide whether the Federal Communications Commission has any power to regulate a radio broadcast that is indecent but not obscene.

A satiric humorist named George Carlin recorded a 12-minute monologue entitled "Filthy Words" before a live audience in a California theater. He began by referring to his thoughts about "the words you couldn't say on the public, ah, airwaves, um, the ones you definitely wouldn't say, ever." He proceeded to list those words and repeat them over and over again in a variety of colloquialisms. The transcript of the recording, which is appended to this opinion, indicates frequent laughter from the audience.

At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday, October 30, 1973, a New York radio station, owned by respondent Pacifica Foundation, broadcast the "Filthy Words" monologue. A few weeks later a man, who stated that he had heard the broadcast while driving with his young son, wrote a letter complaining to the Commission. He stated that, although he could perhaps understand the "record's being sold for private use, I certainly cannot understand the broadcast of same over the air that, supposedly, you control."

The complaint was forwarded to the station for comment. In its response, Pacifica explained that the monologue had been played during a program about contemporary society's attitude toward language and that, immediately before its broadcast, listeners had been advised that it included "sensitive language which might be regarded as offensive to some." Pacifica characterized George Carlin as "a significant social satirist" who "like Twain and Sahl before him, examines the language of ordinary people. . . . Carlin is not mouthing obscenities, he is merely using words to satirize as harmless and essentially silly our attitudes towards those words." Pacifica stated that it was not aware of any other complaints about the broadcast.

On February 21, 1975, the Commission issued a declaratory order granting the complaint and holding that Pacifica "could have been the subject of administrative sanctions." The Commission did not impose formal sanctions, but it did state that the order would be "associated with the station's license file, and in the event that subsequent complaints are received, the Commission will then decide whether it should utilize any of the available sanctions it has been granted by Congress."

In its memorandum opinion the Commission stated that it intended to "clarify the standards which will be utilized in considering" the growing number of complaints about indecent speech on the airwaves. Advancing several reasons for treating broadcast speech differently from other forms of expression, the Commission found a power to regulate indecent broadcasting in two statutes: 18 U.S.C. 1464 (1976 ed.), which forbids the use of "any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communications," and

47 U.S.C. 303 (g), which requires the Commission to "encourage the larger and more effective use of radio in the public interest."

The Commission characterized the language used in the Carlin monologue as "patently offensive," though not necessarily obscene, and expressed the opinion that it should be regulated by principles analogous to those found in the law of nuisance where the "law generally speaks to channeling behavior more than actually prohibiting it. . . . [T]he concept of 'indecent' is intimately connected with the exposure of children to language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities and organs, at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience." Applying these considerations to the language used in the monologue as broadcast by respondent, the Commission concluded that certain words depicted sexual and excretory activities in a patently offensive manner, noted that they "were broadcast at a time when children were undoubtedly in the audience (i. e., in the early afternoon)," and that the prerecorded language, with these offensive words "repeated over and over," was "deliberately broadcast." In summary, the Commission stated: "We therefore hold that the language as broadcast was indecent and prohibited by 18 U.S.C. [] 1464."

After the order issued, the Commission was asked to clarify its opinion by ruling that the broadcast of indecent words as part of a live newscast would not be prohibited. The Commission issued another opinion in which it pointed out that it "never intended to place an absolute prohibition on the broadcast of this type of language, but rather sought to channel it to times of day when children most likely would not be exposed to it." The Commission noted that its "declaratory order was issued in a specific factual context," and declined to comment on various hypothetical situations presented by the petition. It relied on its "long standing policy of refusing to issue interpretive rulings or advisory opinions when the critical facts are not explicitly stated or there is a possibility that subsequent events will alter them."

The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit reversed, with each of the three judges on the panel writing separately. Judge Tamm concluded that the order represented censorship and was expressly prohibited by 326 of the Communications Act. Alternatively, Judge Tamm read the Commission opinion as the functional equivalent of a rule and concluded that it was "overbroad." Chief Judge Bazelon's concurrence rested on the Constitution. He was persuaded that 326's prohibition against censorship is inapplicable to broadcasts forbidden by 1464. However, he concluded that 1464 must be narrowly construed to cover only language that is obscene or otherwise unprotected by the First Amendment. Judge Leventhal, in dissent, stated that the only issue was whether the Commission could regulate the language "as broadcast." Emphasizing the interest in protecting children, not only from exposure to indecent language, but also from exposure to the idea that such language has official approval, he concluded that the Commission had correctly condemned the daytime broadcast as indecent.

<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=438&invol=726>

Lesson 4 – Female Jewish Comediennes

Essential Questions

-Are there differences between male and female Jewish comedians? What are they?

-How do female comedians push boundaries? Are they pushing boundaries just by being female comedians?

Set Induction

Ask students to brainstorm stereotypically male jobs and stereotypically female jobs on the board. Are there any themes you can see in whether a job is seen as male or female? Does “comedian” fit into any of those themes?

Activities

-Divide the class into three groups. One group will learn about Sophie Tucker and read some quotes of her humor. The second group will learn about Joan Rivers and read some quotes of her humor. The third group will learn about Sarah Silverman and some quotes of her humor. Each group will read information about their comedian and fill out a chart asking them what makes their comedian funny, how shocking they are, and what they think made each comedian successful.

-Jigsaw these groups – creating new groups with one person from each of the previous groups. Each student will be asked to share their chart with their new group. The three charts will be condensed into one.

-Based on what they have learned so far about male comedians, each group will be challenged to hypothesize whether or not there is any difference between being a male comedian or a female comedian, and if so, what those differences are. They will share their hypothesis with the class. Ask the class to discuss: what kind of information would we need in order to prove or disprove one of these hypotheses?

-Students will be asked to create torn paper pictures of the relationships between and among male comedians, female comedians, and the boundaries of what it is acceptable to say in public.

Conclusion

Students will share their artwork and discuss the question: Do female comedians push boundaries just by the nature of being a female comedian?

Sophie Tucker (January 13, 1884 - February 9, 1966)

"Last of the Red Hot Mamas": vaudeville entertainer

She was required to wear blackface by managers who felt that she would not otherwise be accepted, since she was "so big and ugly" as one manager put it. She joined a burlesque show in 1908, and, when she found herself without her makeup or any of her luggage one night, she went on without her blackface, was a hit with the audience, and never wore the blackface again.

She briefly appeared with the Ziegfield Follies, but her popularity with audiences made her unpopular with the female stars, who refused to go on stage with her.

Tucker's stage image emphasized her "fat girl" image but also a humorous suggestiveness. She sang songs like "I Don't Want to Be Thin," "Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love." She introduced in 1911 the song which would become her trademark: "Some of These Days."

She added jazz and sentimental ballads to her ragtime repertoire, and, in the 1930s, when American vaudeville was dying, she took to playing England. She made eight movies and appeared on radio and, as it became popular, television.

Her fame and popularity lasted more than fifty years; she never retired, playing the Latin Quarter in New York only months before she died in 1966. Always partly self-parody, the core of her act remained vaudeville: earthy, suggestive songs, whether jazzy or sentimental, taking advantage of her enormous voice.

- http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio_tucker_sophie.htm

Sophie Tucker Quotes

“I've been rich and I've been poor; rich is better.”

“From birth to age eighteen, a girl needs good parents. From eighteen to thirty-five, she needs good looks. From thirty-five to fifty-five, she needs a good personality. From fifty-five on, she needs good cash.”

“Success in show business depends on your ability to make and keep friends”

“When Am I Getting the Mink, Mr. Fink?”

You made a deal with me

I kept it faithfully

I gave you credit for what is always C.O.D.

You promised to give me the mink in July.

It's three months overdue and so am I

A silver fox you're offering me.

You're such a heel

Look at all the room rent I saved you

In the back seat of your automobile.

No, I won't settle for a stole.

Don't forget, you cheapskate lover.

The whole of me you've got to cover.

Now I want my mink, Mr. Fink, right now.

Joan Rivers

JOAN RIVERS is a force of nature—and one of the hardest working celebrities in the world—comedienne, bestselling author, Tony-nominated actress, playwright, screenwriter, motion picture director, columnist, lecturer, syndicated radio host, Emmy Award-winning television talk-show host, jewelry designer, red-carpet fashion laureate, businesswoman and, most importantly to her, mother and grandmother.

The daughter of immigrant Russian parents, Joan created her own brand of irreverent, unconventional comedy to forge her remarkable rise to stardom in the entertainment world. Enduring humiliation and privation for nearly a decade playing tawdry clubs, Borscht Belt hotels, and Greenwich Village cabarets (“I was insanely persistent,” she says), Joan’s career skyrocketed in 1965 when she appeared on “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson.

Within three years she was hosting “That Show With Joan Rivers,” one of the first syndicated daytime shows, and went on to become the first sole guest host of “The Tonight Show.” Her own “Late Show with Joan Rivers” was launched in 1986, and in 1989 she returned to TV with “The Joan Rivers Show,” winning an Emmy for Outstanding Talk Show Host the following year—and her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Using her unique gifts of humor, compassion and tenacity has enabled Joan to triumph over personal tragedy and attain extraordinary professional success. In a brilliant teaming with QVC in 1990, she launched her sensational fashion jewelry line, the Joan Rivers Classics Collection, winning an ACE award from the Accessories Council in 1997 and achieving unprecedented—and continuing—success with record-breaking 500 million dollars plus in sales.

- http://joanrivers.com/AllAboutJoan/Joan_Rivers_Bio06.pdf

Joan Rivers Quotes

“I don't exercise. If God had wanted me to bend over, he would have put diamonds on the floor.”

“I hate housework. You make the beds, you wash the dishes and six months later you have to start all over again.”

“I have flabby thighs, but fortunately my stomach covers them.”

“I knew I was an unwanted baby when I saw that my bath toys were a toaster and a radio.”

“People say that money is not the key to happiness, but I always figured if you have enough money, you can have a key made.”

“She doesn't understand the concept of Roman numerals. She thought we just fought in world war eleven.”

Sarah Silverman

Sarah Kate Silverman (born December 1, 1970) is an American stand-up comedienne, actress, and writer. While usually credited as **Sarah Silverman**, she is sometimes credited by her nickname *Big S* or *Sarah 'Big S' Silverman*. Her comedy deals with topical humor and satire, mild or serious societal taboos, and controversial topics such as racism, sexism, and religion.

Her comedy acts are sometimes performed from a caricatured or stereotypical Jewish-American princess perspective, in which, according to *Village Voice* writer Michael Musto, she mocks bigotry and ethnic or religious group stereotypes by ironically embracing them. Silverman stars in and produces the *The Sarah Silverman Program*, which debuted February 1, 2007 on Comedy Central.

Silverman received national exposure after earning a role on the 1993-94 season of *Saturday Night Live*. She was a writer and featured player at this time, but was fired after one season because she had written only one sketch that survived through to dress rehearsal and none which made it to air. Bob Odenkirk, a former *SNL* writer who knew her from her stand-up act in Los Angeles, commented on why she was fired: "I could see how it wouldn't work at *SNL* because she's got her own voice, she's very much Sarah Silverman all the time. She can play a character but she doesn't disappear into the character—she makes the character her." Silverman states that she was fired by *SNL* in an undignified manner (via fax) and this upset her greatly. This situation was parodied when she appeared in *The Larry Sanders Show* episode "The New Writer", in which she appears as the new writer on Larry's staff and her jokes are not used because of the "chauvinism", disregard for female comedians and possible bias of the male head comedy writer, who favors the jokes of his male co-writers.

She then moved on to the HBO sketch comedy show *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, where she was a featured performer. Silverman made guest appearances on such programs as the 1997 *Seinfeld* episode "The Money," the two-part time-travel episode "Future's End" of *Star Trek: Voyager* and as a series regular on the TV show *Greg the Bunny* (2002), playing serious characters, as well as the voice of character "Hadassah Guberman" on the salacious puppet television comedy *Crank Yankers*. She has also had small parts in films such as *There's Something About Mary*, *Say It Isn't So*, *School of Rock*, *The Way of the Gun*, *Overnight Delivery*, *Screwed*, *Heartbreakers*, *Evolution*, "School for Scoundrels" and *Rent*, again playing serious roles. On November 11, 2005, her stand-up comedy act (one-woman show) was released as a feature film, *Sarah Silverman: Jesus Is Magic*. As part of the publicity campaign surrounding the film, Silverman made several high profile appearances, including online in *Slate*, as the cover subject of *Heeb* magazine, and performing on the Comedy Central roasts of Pamela Anderson and Hugh Hefner.

On *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, she has parodied sketches from *Chappelle's Show*, as a point of view of what would happen if she played Rick James, Tyrone, or the Pilot Boy Productions-like logo called Pilot Girl Productions. This segment is based on a popular rumor that Silverman is a planned replacement for Dave Chappelle after the apparent demise of his popular television show *Chappelle's Show*.

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Silverman

Sarah Silverman Quotes

“Guess what, Martin Luther King? I had a (expletive) dream, too.”

“I’ll tell you why we make fun of midgets: We’re not afraid of them.”

“The best time to have a baby is when you’re a black teenager.”

“I don’t care if you think I’m racist. I only care if you think I’m thin.”

“She called me up and she’s like, ‘Aunt Sarah, did you know that Hitler killed sixty million Jews.’ And I corrected her and I said, ‘You know, I think he’s responsible for killing six million Jews.’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah! Six million! I knew that but seriously, I mean, what’s the difference?’ ‘Uh, the difference is sixty million is unforgivable, young lady!’”

Lesson 5 – Is Breaking Boundaries Wrong?

Essential Questions

- Do Jewish comedians push boundaries more often than non-Jewish comedians? Why?
- Is it desirable to be part of a community that pushes boundaries?
- What is the result of pushing boundaries in our society?

Set Induction

Place Venn diagrams of what is shocking in Jewish society and what is shocking in American society (from Lesson 1) in a place where everyone can see them (on the wall, floor or a table). Ask students to look at these diagrams and think about the questions: Are Jews or Americans more easily shocked? Which piece of the diagram most closely reflects what shocks you? Do you think our American or Jewish sensitivities have greater impact on what shocks us? Why?

Activities

-Ask students to look through recent newspapers and magazines for pictures and articles that push the boundaries of what it is ok to say or show in public. Each student should choose one artifact. Ask students to create a class collage of the artifacts they have chosen – as each student gets up to add his or her artifact, they should tell the class what the artifact is, why they think it pushes boundaries, how they think it was received by society, and what, if any, effect it will have on society.

-There are some boundaries that society could benefit from pushing (for example, talking publicly about some mental illnesses) and there are some that could be more harmful to society if they are pushed against (for example, taboos against racial slurs). Looking at the collages, ask the students to point out which pieces they think push boundaries in a way that is positive for society and which in a way that is negative for society.

-In small groups, ask students to think of a boundary in the classroom that it might be positive to push against. Each group should then create two methods of pushing that boundary – one serious one and one using humor.

Conclusion

Each group will share their boundary pushing methods with the class. Discuss which method you think would be more effective in actually changing the classroom boundaries. Why?

Unit 5 - Part of the Ingroup?

Goals

- to explore Jewish humor that has made it into the American mainstream
- to encourage students to think about the effect Jewish humor has had on American culture
- to think about the role Jewish humor might play in the future of America

Understandings

- The popularity and prevalence of Jewish humor has affected both Jewish identity and American culture in the 20th Century.

Essential Questions

- Has Jewish humor lost its Judaism as it moved into the mainstream?
- In what ways Jewish humor truly mainstream in America? In what ways is it outside the mainstream?
- How have stereotypes of Jews in America changed through the 20th Century?

Skills

Students will be able to...

- identify ways in which Jewish culture has influenced American culture
- discuss the changes in Jewish stereotypes in America over the 20th Century
- hypothesize about the role Jewish humor will play in America in the future

Authentic Assessment

Students will be asked to respond to the following prompt with a written paper, poster, video presentation, audio presentation, dramatic presentation, or another form approved by the teacher:

If you were to meet someone who had never met an American Jew, how would you use humor to explain to that person what it means to be an American Jew today?

Lessons

1. Television
2. Movies
3. How Jewish is This Humor?
4. Introduction to Final Project
5. Conclusion of Final Project

Lesson 1: Television

Essential Questions

- How did Jews become so popular in comedy television?
- What was the reaction of mainstream America to Jewishness on television?
- What kind of Judaism is acceptable on television?

Set Induction

Brainstorm on the board a list of television characters on comedy shows who are supposed to be Jewish. For each character, ask the students how they know that character is Jewish.

Activities

-Watch clips of a few Jewish characters in comedy television, including *Seinfeld*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*. As they watch, ask students to make a list of everything Jewish that they notice. In small groups, ask students to combine their lists and determine which character is the most Jewish. Ask students to share their decisions and discuss: What criteria did you use to decide? Why? What parts of Judaism did you notice most frequently? Are there any parts of Judaism that are missing? Why do you think this is? Do you see any connection between how Jewish a show seemed to be and how popular that show was?

- Give students handout of Saturday Night Live jokes/sketches about Jews and Judaism. Do these fit into the same categories as the sitcoms? Look at the criteria for funniness and Jewishness created in Unit 1. Are the Saturday Night Live jokes funny? Are they Jewish? What stereotypes do they use?

-Imagine that you are not Jewish. What would you not understand about the Saturday Night Live jokes? Would you still find them funny? Why or why not?

Conclusion

Why do you think there is so much Jewish humor on television when Jews are such a small minority in America? How does that make you feel?

Saturday Night Live Jewish Humor

Jewess Jeans

Rhonda Weiss.....Gilda Radner

Jingle:

Jewess Jeans
they're skin-tight, they're out of sight
Jewess Jeans.

She's got a lifestyle uniquely hers
Europe, Nassau, wholesale furs.
She's read every best-selling book
She's a gourmet blender cook.
She's got that Jewess look.

Jewess Jeans
they're uptight, alright
Jewess Jeans.

She shops the sales for designer clothes
She's got designer nails and a designer nose.
She's an American princess and a disco queen.
She's the Jewess in Jewess Jeans.
She's the Jewess in Jewess Jeans.

Announcer: You don't have to be Jewish.

Rhonda Weiss: But it wouldn't hurt.

Announcer: Jewess Jeans. Guaranteed to ride up.

Tina Fey: "The Jewish holiday of Passover began at sundown Wednesday. Jews all over the world gathered at Seder tables and asked the traditional question: 'Deal or No Deal?'"

Tina Fey: "A group of ultra-Orthodox Jewish hackers are waging a war against porn Web sites by replacing the content with a single photo of the late rabbi Menachem Schneerson. Which sends away millions of web porn-surfers, although you know there's gotta be one guy who sees this and is like, 'Jackpot!'"

"Jew, Not a Jew"

A killer sketch that sat around for a few years because NBC's Standards and Practices wouldn't allow it on the air. Contestants on a game show hosted by Hanks are asked to determine whether or not certain celebrities or other public figures are Jewish. Remember, "*Jew, Not a Jew*" is brought to you by Feldman's Kosher Pickles. You don't have to be Jewish to like Feldman's, but it helps."

Lesson 2: Movies

Essential Questions

- How much of an influence do movies have on our lives?
- How much have Judaism and Jewishness appeared in the movies?
- Do the movies show Jews and Judaism in a positive or negative light?

Set Induction

Ask students to think about the questions: If you had to choose a movie that best represented your life, what would it be? Ask some students to share their answers. Ask the students to discuss: Is there anything Jewish about the movie you chose?

Activities

-Show a clip of (or read the script of) the meeting the family dinner scene in *Annie Hall*, Ben Stiller in *Keeping the Faith*, Barbra Streisand in *Yentl*, *Keeping Up With the Steins*. For each clip, ask students to make a list of the things they notice that are Jewish. Ask student to code their list: C-cultural, R-religious, S-stereotype. Discuss which letter came up most often, why do you think that is?

-Ask each student to write on an index card a movie that has something Jewish in it and not show it to anyone. Play charades with these cards: Have the student act out the Jewish part of the movie they wrote down. Discuss: Was it difficult to think of movies? Was it difficult only seeing the Jewish part of the movie? Why or why not?

-Discuss with the class: If you were not Jewish, what would you think about Jews from what you saw in the movies? Would you have an accurate idea? Would it be positive, negative, or neutral? As a Jew, how do you feel about how Jews are portrayed in movies?

Conclusion

If there was going to be a news story on TV about Jewish humor in movies, what would the teaser be?

Lesson 3: How Jewish is this Humor? (fully scripted)

Objectives

Students should be able to...

- list what characteristics they think make humor Jewish
- state how they think the Jewishness of American humor has changed over time
- hypothesize about what American Jewish humor will be like in the future

Essential Questions

- Is it possible to join the mainstream and remain Jewish?
- In what ways has Judaism or Jewishness become part of mainstream American culture?
- How Jewish is Jewish humor today? What do you think will happen to Jewish humor in the future?

Set Induction

(20 min) Think about a time when you were part of a group and a time when you were outside of a group. In which case was it easier to hold onto your individual identity? Why? Were you conscious of trying to hold onto your identity or trying to fit in with the group?

Activities

- (20 min) Show several clips of *Seinfeld*. Ask students to pay attention to and make a list of which parts of the humor are Jewish and which are not. Discuss these answers using the criteria for Jewish humor that were listed during the first unit. Was *Seinfeld* Jewish according to our criteria?

- (20 min) Hang quotes from Jewish SF article about whether or not *Seinfeld* is Jewish around the room. Ask students to walk around the room and read the quotes. Each student should then choose a quote that particularly grabbed their interest and stand by it. It may be a quote that they completely agree with, one they disagree with, or one that just caught their attention for some reason. If there are enough students in each group, they should discuss their reasons for choosing that quote. At least one representative for each group should share their reasons.

- (15 min) Gather 3-5 current artifacts of Jewish humor (If possible, ask students to bring in artifacts. These are not included because they should be very current). Using the criteria for Jewishness that was created in Unit 1, ask students to assess how Jewish each artifact is. Discuss answers. How Jewish is Jewish humor today?

Conclusion

(15 min) Have you seen a trend in the Jewishness of Jewish humor? What do you think will happen to Jewish humor in the future? Does that suggest anything about Jewish identity in the future?

Materials Needed

Clips of *Seinfeld* on DVD

Quotes from Jewish SF article on big paper

3-5 current artifacts of Jewish humor

Criteria for Jewishness chart from Unit 1

Quotes from Article about Seinfeld

- "Jonathan Sarna, an American Jewish history professor at Brandeis University, won't limit his parameters of Jewish culture to the study of Talmud. Sarna goes so far as to include TV's 'Seinfeld' show, which traces the offbeat life of a single, assimilated Jewish comedian. 'Seinfeld' is 'reflecting the life of American Jews,' he explained."

- "Stanford religious studies Professor Arnold Eisen compared Jerry Seinfeld's sitcom to 'bagels and lox, which are no longer Jewish.' He instead identifies American Jewish culture with Woody Allen's 'Annie Hall' and 'Crimes and Misdemeanors,' and with artists such as Judy Chicago, who have reconnected with their heritage. 'American Jewish culture at its best is learned conversation among Jews about major issues,' Eisen said. 'It needn't be religious.'"

- "Watching this show with his young daughter, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's executive director Richard Siegel was thrilled to see yet another example of Jewish identity popping up in mainstream culture. 'It's a very reinforcing thing,' Siegel said, which lets the viewer 'be a confident Jew in public. That is tremendously healthy.'"

- "Octogenarian author, critic and scholar Alfred Kazin, a nonobservant Jew whose books include the autobiographical 'New York Jew,' looks to Mea Shearim, Jerusalem's ultra-religious neighborhood where Chassidic men with beards and black hats live minute by minute with God. 'That's Jewish culture to me,' said Kazin, who had trouble finding Jews to include in his upcoming book about American writers' relationships to God. Instead of focusing on God, he said, most American Jewish writers dwell on the day-to-day existence of the bourgeoisie."

- "Harvard University Yiddish literature Professor Ruth Wisse takes a similar view, asserting that the first generation of immigrants was inherently Jewish vis-à-vis their language, diet and dress. But shortcuts to Jewish culture no longer exist, said Wisse, who proudly describes herself as a Litvak -- a Jew of Lithuanian stock. Today's assimilated American Jews, she said, must approach Yiddishkeit 'through the...serious study of Jewish texts.'"

- "Richard Siegel, who co-authored all three volumes of 'The Jewish Catalogue,' likewise eschews arguments that Jewish culture is evaporating. 'We've...broken out of the institutions of the Jewish community,' said the former hippie, who now sports a business suit and a short haircut. Some American Jews fret that mainstream depictions of Judaism dilute the culture. But Siegel feels it lets Jews express their Jewish concerns and experiences in a broader context. 'Schindler's List,' for example, will have more impact on Americans' attitudes toward the Holocaust than any work produced thus far, he predicted. He noted that the movie's creator, Steven Spielberg, is a more or less assimilated Jew."

Lesson 4 – Introduction to Final Project

Essential Questions

- What does Jewish humor tell us about Jews?
- How can we consciously use Jewish humor to express our Jewish identities?

Set Induction

What is one word that expresses your identity as a Jew?

Activities

-Around the room, hang posters with pieces of Jewish humor from different points throughout the 20th Century at the top. Ask students to walk around the room and, pretending they have no other knowledge of that time period, write on the posters what they would think about Jews from that piece of humor.

-Look at the posters and the students' ideas with the class and discuss: How accurate are the portrayals of Jews found in humor? What kinds of things can you learn about Jews from Jewish humor?

-Introduce final authentic assessment. This activity is designed to explore the students' understanding of the enduring understandings of this curriculum by applying them to current times. Until this point, students have focused on the results of the enduring understandings throughout the 20th Century. Now, the students have the opportunity to express the impact of these ideas in their own lives. Students will be asked to respond to the following prompt with a written paper, poster, video presentation, audio presentation, dramatic presentation, or another form approved by the teacher: If you were to meet someone who had never met an American Jew, how would you use humor to explain to that person what it means to be an American Jew today? Students may work in pairs or small groups.

Conclusion

Ask students to share and discuss any questions or struggles they are experiencing in working on their project.

Jewish Humor Throughout the 20th Century

Jack Benny's character was walking home at night. There was a sound effect of footsteps behind him. A man's voice asks for a match, and Benny says he has one. Then the man's voice gets harsher.

"Don't make a move. This is a stickup."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Mister, mister, put down that gun."

"Shut up. Now come on. Your money or your life."

Benny paused, and the thief said, "Look, bud, I said your money or your life."

"I'm thinking it over!" Benny replied.

-Jack Benny, radio, 1948

"Now take my boss—please. He's got borscht instead of blood in his veins. He's the biggest man in 'Who Owes Who.' If he can't take it with him, he'll send his creditors.... You wanna drive your wife crazy? When you get into bed tonight, don't talk in your sleep—just grin. You wanna drive a friend nuts? Send him a telegram saying 'Ignore the first wire.'... I went out with a girl last night. She wasn't a Lana Turner. She was more of a stomach turner." -Henny Youngman, Catskills, 1932

"I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor is goyish... Hadassah, Jewish. Marine corps- heavy goyim, dangerous. Pumpernickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very goyish." -Lenny Bruce, stand-up, 1960

"Mel Brooks appears as Moses carrying three tablets with fifteen commandments and calling out that God wants all these fifteen obeyed. He drops one of the tablets and immediately adapts by altering the required number to ten." -Mel Brooks, *History of the World, Part 1*, 1981

Jerry: Father, I'm afraid that Tim Whatley has converted to Judaism purely for the jokes.

Priest: And this offends you as a Jewish person?

Jerry: No, it offends me as a comedian!

-Jerry Seinfeld, *Seinfeld*, 1997

"When you feel like the only kid in town

Without a Christmas tree

Here's a list of people who are Jewish

Just like you and me

David Lee Roth lights the menorah

So does James Concord Douglas and the late Dina

Shora

Guess who eats together at the Carnegie Deli

Bowser from Sha NaNa and Arthur Fonzerelli.

Paul Newman's half Jewish, Goldie Hawn's half, too.
Put them together, what a fine looking Jew
You don't need Deck the Halls or Jingle Bell Rock
'Cuz you can spin a dreidl with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock
Both Jewish!
O.J. Simpson, not a Jew
But guess who is, Hall of Famer Rod Carew
We got Ann Landers and her sister Dear Abby
Harrison Ford's a quarter Jewish
Not too shabby
Some people think that Ebenezer Scrooge is
Well he's not, but guess who is
All three stooges
So many Jews are in show biz
Tom Cruise isn't, but I heard his agent is"

-Adam Sandler, "The Hanukkah Song," 1994

Lesson 5 – Conclusion of Final Project

Essential Questions

- What stereotypes do we use to describe ourselves as American Jews today?
- How is the relationship between American identity and Jewish identity expressed through humor today?
- What is the relationship between your American identity and your Jewish identity?

Set Induction

What is the one thing (event, object, idea, person) that is the epitome of Jewish American identity today?

Activities

- Finish working on final project.
- Students should present final projects to the class. Students who are not presenting should be asked to pay attention to and make note of the following aspects of each project:
 - What stereotypes are used?
 - What would be your impression of Jewish American identity from this humor?
 - What was the funniest part? Why?

-Students should share these answers and then the presenting group should have a chance to respond to these questions and the student responses as well as sharing anything they would like to about their process.

Conclusion

What are the things you notice when you encounter Jewish humor in American society? How do you feel about it?

Friday May 24, 1996

Is 'Seinfeld' Jewish? Experts seek cultural definitions

NATALIE WEINSTEIN
Bulletin Staff

Watching this show with his young daughter, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's executive director Richard Siegel was thrilled to see yet another example of Jewish identity popping up in mainstream culture.

"It's a very reinforcing thing," Siegel said, which lets the viewer "be a confident Jew in public. That is tremendously healthy."

But can a bit of television comedy count as American Jewish culture? That depends on whom you ask.

Academics and culture mavens from across the country spent four days at Stanford University last week probing the past, present and future of American Jewish culture. Sponsored by the Taube Family Foundation, Koret Foundation and Shoshana and Martin Gerstel Conference Fund in Jewish Studies, the event marked the 10th anniversary of Stanford's Jewish studies program.

While many of the lecturers and guests make a career of pondering Jewish culture in the New World, few agreed on what this actually constitutes.

Octogenarian author, critic and scholar Alfred Kazin, a nonobservant Jew whose books include the autobiographical "New York Jew," looks to Mea Shearim, Jerusalem's ultra-religious neighborhood where Chassidic men with beards and black hats live minute by minute with God.

"That's Jewish culture to me," said Kazin, who had trouble finding Jews to include in his upcoming book about American writers' relationships to God.

Instead of focusing on God, he said, most American Jewish writers dwell on the day-to-day existence of the bourgeoisie. By Kazin's definition, Philip Roth doesn't make the cut. Only Saul Bellow wrestles sufficiently with God to count.

Harvard University Yiddish literature Professor Ruth Wisse takes a similar view, asserting that the first generation of immigrants was inherently Jewish vis-à-vis their language, diet and dress.

But shortcuts to Jewish culture no longer exist, said Wisse, who proudly describes herself as a Litvak -- a Jew of Lithuanian stock. Today's assimilated American Jews, she said, must approach Yiddishkeit "through the...serious study of Jewish texts."

Other scholars at the conference offered broader, more inclusive definitions.

Jonathan Sarna, an American Jewish history professor at Brandeis University, won't limit his parameters of Jewish culture to the study of Talmud.

Sarna goes so far as to include TV's "Seinfeld" show, which traces the offbeat life of a single, assimilated Jewish comedian.

"Seinfeld" is "reflecting the life of American Jews," he explained.

Others disagreed. Stanford religious studies Professor Arnold Eisen compared Jerry Seinfeld's sitcom to "bagels and lox, which are no longer Jewish." He instead identifies American Jewish culture with Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" and "Crimes and Misdemeanors," and with artists such as Judy Chicago, who have reconnected with their heritage.

"American Jewish culture at its best is learned conversation among Jews about major issues," Eisen said. "It needn't be religious."

While some predict doom for American Jews, Eisen sees a burgeoning of this sort of "informed conversation." He notes the influx of Jewish film festivals and Jewish studies programs.

"These are not small things," Eisen said.

That nose-ringed hipsters are launching a Jewish counterculture through magazines such as Davka is another healthy sign, he said, which derives "from total comfort and confidence within America," as well as from a spiritual longing.

Richard Siegel, who co-authored all three volumes of "The Jewish Catalogue," likewise eschews arguments that Jewish culture is evaporating.

"We've...broken out of the institutions of the Jewish community," said the former hippie, who now sports a business suit and a short haircut.

Some American Jews fret that mainstream depictions of Judaism dilute the culture. But Siegel feels it lets Jews express their Jewish concerns and experiences in a broader context.

"Schindler's List," for example, will have more impact on Americans' attitudes toward the Holocaust than any work produced thus far, he predicted.

He noted that the movie's creator, Steven Spielberg, is a more or less assimilated Jew.

Pointing out that filmmaker Mel Brooks recently joked on CNN's "Larry King Live" that his next movie will straighten out all the kinks in the Talmud, Siegel said Jewish culture is becoming more and more a part of the mainstream media.

"It's everywhere," he said.

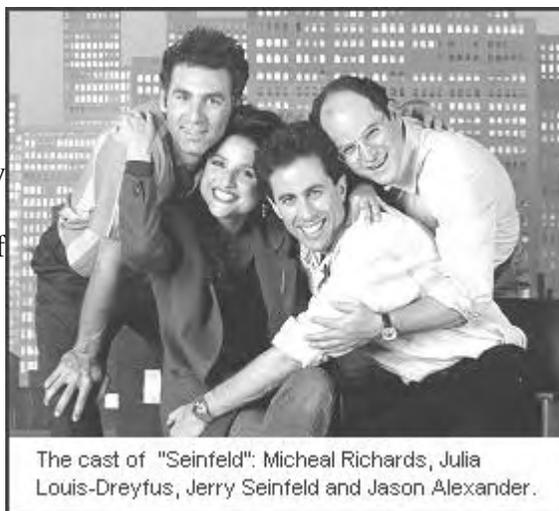
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To be or not to be ... Jewish

Some TV shows are more shy than others about presenting characters in a religious light

LYNNE MEREDITH COHN
Detroit Jewish News

You may think they're Jewish. But those in the know say some of those prime-time TV characters you're sure are Jewish are not necessarily "members of the tribe." And, except for a few strongly identifying individuals - some of them bordering on stereotypes - the majority of TV Jewish characters have a schizophrenic religiosity: marginally Jewish but blending well into the gentile mainstream.



The cast of "Seinfeld": Micheal Richards, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jerry Seinfeld and Jason Alexander.

Take Paul Reiser's character and his extended family on "Mad About You."

Reiser plays Paul Buchman; his parents are named Bert and Sylvia; he's best buds with his cousin Ira; and he's got a dog named Murray. The very Jewish Mel Brooks plays Paul's Uncle Phil, and Sid Caesar is Uncle Harold. Think they're Jewish? Think again.

Reiser says religion has never been discussed "on that show and probably never will be," according to an NBC spokeswoman. Religion, he says, is "an issue that he doesn't get into comedically."

The same air of nebulosity is true for other NBC shows.

For example, on NBC's hit show "ER," Dr. Mark Greene acknowledged his Jewish father - and Christian mother - but considers himself to be "nothing." None of the characters on the show are Jewish, says the NBC spokeswoman (although two actors, Juliana Margulies and Noah Wyle, each have one Jewish parent, just like Dr. Greene).

Although Vicki (Kathy Griffin), the red-head on NBC's "Suddenly Susan," may seem to be Jewish, a spokeswoman says her religious identity hasn't been defined. "The actress is Catholic. I thought she made jokes about not being Jewish," she says.

Two popular NBC sitcoms - "Friends" and "Seinfeld" - have a hard time defining their characters' religious identity.

On "Friends," some of the names sound Jewish: Monica and Ross Geller, Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston). And of course, don't forget Rachel's ex-fiancé, Barry, who married Rachel's best friend. The wedding was typical Long Island Jewish - as is Chandler's girlfriend, Janice.

While Rachel's father appears to be Jewish, her mother, played by Marlo Thomas, has never been pegged for a Jew. In fact, Thomas' father, Danny Thomas, was of Lebanese descent.

Two Christmases ago, a "Friends" episode featured Ross (David Schwimmer) cleaning the wax out of a Hanukkah menorah while his on-screen sister, Monica (Courtney Cox), baked Christmas cookies and opened a package of Christmas lights sent by their mother. The Jewish Elliott Gould plays the part of the siblings' father.

A Warner Bros. spokesperson revealed that "the religion of the characters on 'Friends' has never been established, but viewers can make the educated guess that Monica and Ross are half Jewish and that Rachel and her ex-fiancé Barry are Jewish."

"But," she added, "the 'Friends' producers have never come out and established their characters' religion in an overt way." (In real life, David Schwimmer and Lisa Kudrow, who plays Phoebe on the show, are Jewish.)

Then there's "Seinfeld." Everybody knows Jerry Seinfeld is Jewish - on the tube and off. But what about the rest of the gang - Kramer, Elaine and George? No, no and no - and no to George's parents, as well.

Publicists for the show hemmed and hawed when asked about the characters' religious identities, but a not-so-scientific survey of old episodes revealed that Cosmo Kramer, Elaine Benes and George Costanza are definitely not Jewish.

In one episode, Michael Richards as Kramer (the real Kramer upon whom the character is based is Jewish and an old neighbor of "Seinfeld" co-creator Larry David) plans a Jewish singles function with authentic ethnic foods. He wants Jerry and Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) to attend, and Elaine says, "Well, I'm not Jewish!" To which Kramer replies, "Neither am I."

In the same show, Kramer holds the function at the Knights of Columbus Hall, courtesy of George's dad's membership. Knights of Columbus is a Catholic organization.

The spokeswoman for Jason Alexander, who plays George, says the Jewish actor "does not know the religious background of George Costanza, (and) has no comment about it."

But Estelle Harris, who is Jewish in real life and plays Mrs. Costanza to the Jewish Jerry Stiller's Mr. Costanza, told the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, "When I first came on board, I wondered the same thing. I asked Larry David, 'Well, is she Jewish or not?' "

David, the real-life role model for the character of George, answered the question with a question "What do you care?"

"I said that I needed to know for motivation," said Harris, who never got a definitive answer. "I saw where Larry was right," she said. "This way, without identifying, everyone can relate to the woman."

Meanwhile, Judaism, like most ethnicities and religions that "Seinfeld" has touched upon, has been the focus of what some might deem insensitive poking. Several episodes have inspired phone calls to the Anti-Defamation League, including one about a rabbi, another dealing with keeping kosher and another about a bris. In the rabbi episode, a black-hatted, black-suited rabbi, who speaks in a nasal pitch, divulges confidential information on public TV. The kosher episode features Kramer sneaking lobster into an omelette for Jerry's girlfriend, who keeps kosher.

In the bris episode, Kramer tries to "save" the baby from the mohel's knife, saying the practice is inhuman. In the end, the baby's parents name Kramer as the child's god-parent - because of his concern for the baby's welfare.

At the time of the rabbi episode, Lori Jonas, a publicity agent for the show, said it was all in good fun. Besides, Jerry Seinfeld is Jewish (so the show can't be anti-Semitic).

Jewishness not always hidden

In addition to the assimilated "maybe-Jewish" characters on the Peacock network, one has been clearly defined as Jewish - though perhaps out of touch with his religion. The name doesn't sound Jewish, but Detective John Munch (Richard Belzer) of NBC's "Homicide: Life on the Street" is Jewish, both on and off the show, which is set in Baltimore.

One episode, called "Kaddish," involves the murder of a Jewish woman, Helen Rosenthal, with whom Munch grew up. The murder takes him back to his hometown of Pikesville, a heavily Jewish suburb of Baltimore. "Kaddish" begins with words from the Hebrew prayer for mourning.

The daughter of the murdered Helen tells the coroner that her mother's body must be buried by morning, according to Jewish law. The coroner already knows, saying she's a knowledgeable "shiksa."

Throughout the episode, Munch's non-Jewish partner asks questions about Jewish observance: "What is shiva?" "There's no wake?" "You can't leave the house?"

"What's a shiksa?" Finally, Munch replies, "Boy, you sure do live in an Irish cocoon, don't you?"

Munch and Helen's daughter discuss Jewish observance. Through flashbacks we see Helen and her Protestant husband divorce. Helen then moves with her daughter into her mother's home and starts going to synagogue.

"My mom said she liked the ritual, routine," the daughter says.

She asks Munch if he's religious; he says no, the extent of it is "I don't like to work on Saturdays."

At the shiva house, the mirrors are covered, and people sit on crates, not chairs. Munch stops his partner from eating before minyan.

The daughter asks Munch to help make the minyan. He declines, saying, "I don't remember the Kaddish." She tells him, "It's like riding a bike." At the end of the episode, he opens a siddur, next to his high school yearbook. The daughter lights a yahrtzeit candle. Munch dons a kippah and goes to the shiva house for minyan.

Finally, NBC makes a real leap of faith with its hit show, "Third Rock from the Sun," which is about a family of aliens who come to Earth to learn about humans. In one episode, the teenager (Tommy Solomon) comes home from school and asks about the family's ethnicity. Not having one, the family embarks upon a search.

Ultimately, the family decides de facto that it is Jewish. The landlady says, "My third husband was the same as you people."

"What do you mean?" they ask.

"You know, Jewish," she replies, thus making their decision.

While the credits are rolling, the family is shown talking, slipping in Yiddish phrases and discussing whether the man the female character is dating is Jewish.

Some shows embrace identity

Not all Jewish characters on TV are of the maybe-yes, maybe-no variety. There are at least two characters which CBS clearly states are Jewish.

On "Chicago Hope," Adam Arkin plays Aaron Shutt - Jewish on screen and off, a publicist confirms.

Then, there's "The Nanny," which a publicist claims to be "embracing of Judaism," albeit in a stereotypical fashion.

A CBS spokeswoman says Fran Fine, Fran Drescher's nasally character on "The

Nanny," is a positive portrayal - and realistic, since the character is based on Drescher's off-the-wall Jewish persona.

On the show, Jewish identity is "used for humor and stereotypical comments about food and clothing and whining," the spokeswoman says. Judaism is "treated lightly and in good taste."

Some examples: Fran's mother buys a condo in Boca; she meets her idol, Bette Midler, and comments on Barbra Streisand; Fran gets in a fight with a woman at Loehmann's over a sweater on clearance.

Yet the show has inspiring moments. Fran and her mother, played by Renee Taylor, host a Passover seder, bringing Judaism to Fran's adopted family. In another episode, Fran dates her temple's eligible cantor. Never mind that he leaves for Broadway with the help of Fran's boss. The temple wants him back - so its members get mad at Fran.

"Fran completely embraces her stereotypical Jewish, female role, is absolutely proud of it and laughs at it," says the CBS spokeswoman. "It's a situation comedy. The writers take examples from her life and personality and enrich them and embellish them and treat them humorously. All done in good taste and good fun -definitely a good example.

"The show has had no complaints about the portrayal," the spokeswoman adds. Meanwhile network competitor ABC seems to have a paucity of identifiably Jewish characters.

When ABC's Ellen (Ellen DeGeneres) came out of the closet on "Ellen," she professed her love for Susan Richman (Laura Dern). The name may sound Jewish, but coming out of the closet, not out of the synagogue, was the name of the game in that episode. An ABC publicist says religion "was never addressed."

Like NBC, Fox is loaded with prime-time Jewish characters. But while NBC glosses over the Jewishness of most of its characters, in several shows Fox ventures full force ahead, tackling matters of death and mourning, anti-Semitism and intermarriage.

Fox's "Beverly Hills 90210," for example, has brought several Jewish characters to the fore and touched on religious issues. Over seven seasons, the two main Jewish characters became romantically involved with non-Jews.

Andrea Zuckerman (Gabrielle Carteris), who left the show a few seasons back, was a character with a strong Jewish identification who became pregnant during college. She married the baby's father, the Catholic Jesse (Mark Espinoza), and they raised their daughter in both religions.

Currently, David Silver (Brian Austin Green) is romantically linked with Donna

Martin (Tori Spelling), also Catholic. David identifies as Jewish, with a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. He thinks Donna's parents disapprove of their relationship because of the couple's religious differences.

In another episode, Kelly (Jenny Garth) befriended a Jewish AIDS patient. When he died, she lit a yahrtzeit candle. Another time a controversial, anti-Semitic black leader came to campus, and Andrea protested. Her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, protested with her.

Bet you didn't know a cartoon could be Jewish. Look no further than "The Simpsons" for Krusty the Clown, a.k.a. Herschel Krustofsky (voice by Dan Castellaneta).

Many of the show's writers are Jewish, which may explain the incredible accuracy and impressive level of Jewish knowledge in the episode, "Like Father, Like Clown." After the episode aired, Fox was flooded with phone calls requesting copies of the episode for Jewish organizations and museums, a spokesperson said.

In the episode, the Jewish characters have curly black tendrils, wear long black coats and hats, study in a yeshiva and live on the "lower east side" of Springfield. Krusty's father, Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky (voiced by Jackie Mason), disowns his son because he aspires to a career as a clown.

Krusty goes to the Simpsons' house for dinner and becomes depressed in the presence of a united family; he misses his father.

So Bart and Lisa approach the rabbi, beseeching him to reconcile with his son. They pepper their arguments with Talmudic phrases. Finally, the rabbi is convinced, thanks to a quote from Sammy Davis Jr. - "a Jewish entertainer, like your son," Bart says.

<http://www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/970905/tv.shtml>

[New York Magazine's 35th Anniversary](#)

D'You Laugh?

Jerry Seinfeld made the American everyman Jewish.

- By [Ariel Levy](#)

COMEDY 1990

How Jewish is Jerry Seinfeld?

On the one hand, very.

In addition to creating a genuinely and consistently funny sitcom (the first we'd had in a while), making himself and his co-stars really rich, and reminding straight men that you don't need a gym or a wardrobe if you have a sense of humor, Seinfeld changed the way America saw New York, which is to say the way America saw Jews. For a while there, *Seinfeld* was ubiquitous—you can still watch it four times every weekday, and no, there aren't *any* you haven't seen. Jerry's world was our world, his friends were our friends, he was Everyman. And that meant that Everyman was, by the way, Jewish.

He wasn't the first to become famous for being a funny, Jewish, wiry-haired New Yorker. The most obvious antecedent is, of course, Woody Allen. But even while Allen's shtick was about being Mr. New York (think of the opening of *Manhattan*: This "was his town, and it always would be"), it was also about being the consummate outsider, the misfit, the guy who morphs into a Hasid with sidelocks when his Wasp girlfriend takes him home to meet her Norman Rockwell family. He reminded us constantly, incessantly, that his outsider status and his Jewishness were inextricably linked. In the famous long shot of Allen and Tony Roberts walking up Central Park West in *Annie Hall*, Allen describes a question a colleague asked him: "'DJew eat?' Jew? No, not 'Did you eat?' but 'Jew eat?' 'Jew.'"

It doesn't matter whether the endless instances of anti-Semitism Allen experiences in his films are examples of paranoia or of bigotry. The point is that you can never be in the presence of the Woody Allen persona and forget for more than a second that if you're a Jew, you're other, and if you're a Gentile, we know you think so (and, frankly, right back at you).

Not so with Jerry. Who cares if you're Jewish (Seinfeld) or Italian (Costanza) or whatever (Kramer? Elaine)? Outsider, shmoutsider. In *Seinfeld's* New York, we're all one big wacky, funny, ethnically ambiguous tribe, in it together for mishaps and kicks. Sure, there was the one where Jerry's dentist converted to Judaism so he could tell Jewish jokes, and the one where they all went to a *Bris*, and then the one where all sorts of Jewish men kept falling in love with Elaine for her "*shiksa* appeal." But there's no us, no them, at least not along religious lines.

So in a way, Seinfeld is less Jewish than his comic forefathers. Of course, this rests on the fragile assumption that Jews are outsiders. But then, the existence of the New York Jew as a central figure in the history of comedy rests on an equally unprovable (if right-feeling) assumption: that Jews are funny.

http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/anniversary/35th/n_8559/

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Who's the *shlemiel* now?

On the eve of Jerry and the gang's farewell, David S. Oderberg, a philosophy lecturer at the University of Reading (England), examines two very different ways in which Jewish identity is played out by Woody Allen and Jerry Seinfeld --- and raises some searching questions about both stereotypes.



WITH THE COMPLETION of the fabulously successful sitcom, *Seinfeld*, it seems many people are going into mourning, if they haven't begun already.

The announcement by Jerry Seinfeld that the show is over has, in its wake, prompted acres of newsprint to be devoted, in America and elsewhere in the English-speaking world, to the question of what made the show one of the most successful ever, what made it tick.

Seinfeld has famously been called a "show about nothing," and commentators have spent much time trying to figure out just what that "nothing" is. The consensus, it appears, is that the program captured the essence of the narcissistic lifestyle of the 30-something professional class in the 1990s, capable of obsessiveness about trivialities.

While this is true, there are other important aspects that need to be explored. Writing recently in *The Age*, Adrian Martin claimed that *Seinfeld* is a "highly democratic" show, with a "generous assortment of personality types of behaviors." This was in response to criticism that the sitcom did not have room for minority characters such as homosexuals, blacks and the handicapped.

Now, I do not think it is the function of television comedy to pander to such political correctness. But in any case, Martin is arguably wrong in another, more interesting way, having to do with the manner in which Jews are portrayed in film and on television.

We have become used to the stereotypical portrayal of Jews epitomized by Woody Allen: the nervous, insecure, wacky intellectual, charming the gentiles around him with a craziness that hides a supposed deeper insight into the absurdity of modern metropolitan life.

The non-Jews Allen typically peoples his movies with are relatively normal, if rather boring and repressed; martini-drinking bourgeois professionals, formal in manner, and adept at idle chit-chat. Allen spends most of his time trying to enter into that world, to belong, to be --- well, normal.

In *Seinfeld*, however, things are very different. George, Elaine and Kramer are not Jewish, despite all the speculation (fanned by a reticent production team, of which more later). They are also, in their own ways, bizarre and abnormal, displaying

frequent bouts of manic behavior, tortured self-obsession, and emotional turmoil: Kramer is arguably just plain mad.

Jerry, on the other hand, is a very normal Jew in the eye of a storm of gentile weirdness. True, he is also prone to self-obsession ("Am I a nice person? Hey yeah, I really am a nice person!"), but on the whole he stands on a different level to that of the others.

He is calm and collected most of the time, admirably self-deprecating, capable of long periods of quiet while the gentile madness rages around him, looking all the while with a jaundiced eye upon the foibles of his friends.

This perception is reinforced by the very physical appearance of the characters. Jerry stands head and shoulders above George and Elaine, and his unruffled dress and unremarkable physique places in relief the electric-haired, twisted loudness of Kramer.

One cannot watch *Seinfeld* without thinking something like the following: *Jerry is basically a "cool dude," the others are strange at best, borderline psychotic at worst.* The leap from Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld is a remarkable one. Is it, though, an improvement in the way Jews are portrayed? The answer is mixed. Perhaps it's good that the *nebach* (nebbish) or *shlemiel*-persona (to quote Sam Girgus in *The films of Woody Allen*) has been left behind; also the paranoia about anti-Semitism. (Who can forget Alvy/Allen in *Annie Hall*, always hearing "Did you?" as "Jew!") Whereas Allen "craves and achieves gentile approval" (Girgus), Seinfeld neither needs nor wants approval from the nutty non-Jews around him; if anything, they want *his* approval.

On the other hand, there are two areas of commonality between Allen and Seinfeld which might leave cause for concern.

First is the very need to use a kind of negative stereotyping in order to highlight a character's identity. Certainly, the anxious intellectualism Allen endears him to many, including those who, imagining generalities really are all as tight-lipped and repressed as Allen's films, prefer the way Allen wears his turmoil on his sleeve. But there are others who are turned-off by Allen, seeing him as the embodiment of rootless secular Jewish cosmopolitanism, searching for meaning but destined never to find it.

Perhaps Jerry Seinfeld himself has been influenced by this latter interpretation; hence the stable normality of his character. The cost, however, has been a certain negative portrayal of non-Jews in order to highlight that normality.

To be sure, comedy needs its stereotypes, its improbable characters, and the like: but the question is why a more normal portrayal of a Jewish character has to cost an equally Allenesque depiction of gentiles.

Secondly, the question of religion looms large. Neither Allen nor Seinfeld can handle it. Both poke fun at rabbis and Jewish practice such as keeping kosher and having a *bris*, circumcision. (Several *Seinfeld* episodes have prompted complaints to the ADL.) And both skim laughingly past Catholicism (In *Hannah and her sisters*, Mickey/Allen thinks that to be a Catholic you just need to buy a Rosary and some devotional pictures; in *Seinfeld*, Kramer improbably holds a Jewish singles function at the Knights of Columbus hall to which George's father belongs.)

Knowing just how controversial the portrayal of religion can be, *Seinfeld* producers, as well as those of *Friends*, *Mad About You* and other well-known programs, have kept silent or else been deliberately ambiguous about the religious affiliations of their characters. When Estelle Harris, who plays George's mother asked the show's co-creator, Larry David, whether her character is Jewish, he answered: "What do you care?" Even though the Costanzas are most definitely not Jewish.

This inability to come to terms with religion is a problem. Perhaps serious religious exploration does not make for good comedy. But, then again, no decent sitcom avoids dealing at some point with serious issues.

Further, it may be that the disdain for religion found both in Woody Allen and *Seinfeld* -- the inability to depict even one serious religious character -- detracts significantly from the content of their work, to the detriment, among other things, of the portrayal of Jews in film and on television.

Must the choice be between rootless secular cosmopolitan and honorary, or rather substitute, gentile? Here's an idea: Maybe Jerry and Woody should make a movie about it.

<http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0598/seinfeld1.html>

TV's New Prop: Jewishness

By Liel Leibovitz

Suddenly, Judaism's accoutrements, if not Jewish characters, are plentiful. What's behind the trend?

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | A gang of ne'er-do-wells is sitting in a Queens Judaica warehouse, spinning *dreidels* (Chanukah tops) as they plan the perfect heist. A physician in Seattle guides a bereaved colleague through the intricacies of sitting *shiva* (Jewish mourning ritual). Juvenile gangsters in Los Angeles make a statement by tattooing Hebrew letters on their chests.

The catch? None of the abovementioned characters, collected from some of today's trendiest television programs and films, are Jewish.

The would-be burglars, stars of ABC's new sitcom "The Knights of Prosperity," are Irish, Italian, black, Latino and Indian. The doctor, Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), is the Korean-American star of the hit show "Grey's Anatomy"; the rituals of Jewish mourning, she explains to her non-Jewish colleagues, were taught to her by her stepfather, whom she only sees on Yom Kippur.

Similarly, the L.A. gangsters aren't Jewish either, at least not in any discernible fashion; the protagonists of the critically acclaimed film "Alpha Dogs," starring pop prince Justin Timberlake, adorn their bodies with the Alef Bet, we are led to believe, simply because it's cool.

Call it the Madonnafication of television: Like the diva's much-covered foray into Jewish mysticism, a step that propelled everyone from Britney Spears to Demi Moore to tie a slim red bracelet around his or her wrist, pop culture is showing signs of embracing Judaism's hip value.

Which does not necessarily mean embracing Jews. Real Jewish characters are still scarce on either the big or the small screen, at least as fully-fleshed, well-rounded protagonists vocal about their identity. But the accoutrements of being Jewish — the accessories, the rituals, the visuals — those are hot commodities.

It's part of what might be termed the Third Wave of Televised Jews. With television writers and producers, many of whom are Jewish, initially wary of creating Jewish characters, Jews on TV enjoyed a surge of popularity in the 1990s, when such members of the Tribe as Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser and David Schwimmer were free to be Semitic on prime time. Now, however, while Jewishness is still in, Jews are no longer mandatory.

But are Dr. Yang's mourning, or the gangster's lair, signs of a serious embrace of Judaism in pop culture, or merely an inclusive nod in an increasingly multicultural television environment?

Such visual signifiers, said David Zurawik, the television critic for The Baltimore Sun and the author of "The Jews of Prime Time," a comprehensive historical review of Jewish characters on American television, operate as powerful though often shallow markers.

"They are superficial markers," he said, "but they have assumed such a shared sense that you can now put them in a mass medium and everybody will recognize them instantly, and they will lend a certain kind of cool cache to the character who wears them."

Still, Zurawik and others agree that the new, and by all means still elusive, trend is more multifaceted than meets the eye.

"I think there are two ways of looking at it," said David Marchese, a writer for the online magazine Salon who has written extensively about Jews and pop culture. "One way is to see such gags" — the lackluster Knights of Prosperity and their *dreidels*, for example — "as harmless empty signifiers. The show would have worked just as well if the gang was in an Irish factory, playing with shamrocks instead. The Jewish thing just tickled their funny bone a bit better."

But fun aside, Marchese added, there may be another, more urbane side to the sudden influx of all things Jewish.

"Jewish culture is seen as urban culture," he said, "and there's a sophistication here, an association with city living and urban culture that comes from using Yiddishisms and referencing Jewish culture."

Enter "The Class." CBS' new sitcom, created by some of the producers behind the dearly departed "Friends," follows the lives of several 20-something young professionals living in Philadelphia who reunite nearly two decades after they all attended the same third-grade class. Although none of the characters is openly Jewish, and only one has a last name, Ellenbogen, that suggests a Jewish background, they still nonetheless use Yiddishisms liberally, *shlepping* and *kvetching* and to their heart's content.

Such lingual flow, said Marchese, may suggest that "The Class" classmates are haunted by the ghosts of Jewish comedians past and present, from George Burns to Woody Allen, using "connotations and significations" readily and instantly associated with Jewish wit and worldliness.

And yet, one question is unavoidable: Why now? What changes in the climate of the zeitgeist occurred to bring about the sudden storm of Jewishness? Several of the aforementioned shows' creators, approached by The Jewish Week, declined to comment. But Marchese suggested the ultimate Jewish answer: hatred of Jews.

"It's easy to argue that anti-Semitism is at a higher level nowadays," he said, "and maybe [the surge of Jewish symbols in pop culture] is a subconscious reaction to that. There is no better way to show forward-thinking, open-mindedness and ease than to show a non-

Jewish character wearing Jewish emblems. That says more about a character than if they were just wearing a cross around their necks, which is mundane."

Forward-thinking, and cool, too; the *dreidel* is not only a more poignant prop than the cross, but, said Marchese, a more exotic one as well.

"It's easy to forget, especially for us in New York, that the actual number of Jews in the United States is extremely small," he said. "Therefore, there's just a faint whiff of exoticism you can get using a Jewish emblem that you're not going to get with, say, a shamrock, because there are Irish people all over America."

Other examples from television abound: A blond, blue-eyed contestant on VH1's reality show "I Love New York" trying to score cool points by hinting that his refusal to attend church services may have to do with his being Jewish (he is not); Michael, the clueless boss on NBC's "The Office," entertaining Indian guests at a Diwali celebration by singing a Hindu-centric version of Adam Sandler's Chanukah song, implying, however subtly, that comparison with Jews is the greatest compliment one could pay to an ethnic minority; and in the hospital sitcom "Scrubs," a menorah made of ice materialized as a background prop more than once, a Jewish spin on a largely forgotten 1980s cartoon called "Wonder Twins" meant to reference the otherwise unmentioned Jewishness of Zack Braff's character.

"I don't know that I can say there was any direct intention to cash in on anything Jewish," said an ABC executive familiar with both productions who wished to remain unnamed. "But this is the way it often goes; the creative people tap into something in the culture without even knowing it."

That "something," say some observers, is not distinctly Jewish but rather convenient shorthand for multiculturalism. Take, for example, Dr. Yang and her friends on "Grey's Anatomy." The show has been widely hailed as featuring one of the more diverse casts ever seen on network television: Its fictitious Seattle Grace Hospital has a black chief surgeon, senior surgeon and senior resident, as well as a mostly female staff that includes a Latina and an Asian woman.

Make that quasi-Asian; while the show's Dr. Yang is Korean, she seldom references her ethnic identity without acknowledging that her stepfather is Jewish, and that the few rituals she does observe are those of the Chosen People.

And while it might be nice to see Oh, who recently won the Golden Globe award for her portrayal of Dr. Yang, talk Jewish, the gesture, to some, seems empty.

"I think that it's a gesture toward multiculturalism that may or may not be kind of shallow," said Willa Paskin, a New York-based writer and a television aficionado. Dr. Yang's pseudo-Jewishness, she added, "is inclusive. It's a shout-out to everything. The same goes for 'Knights of Prosperity' — they have a Latina, a black man, an Indian, all very diverse. On 'Grey's Anatomy,' the Jewish girl is Asian. It's almost kind of absurd."

The drive to represent as many cultures and ethnicities as possible, Paskin said, might result in meaninglessness. Just look, she suggested, at the cast of "Grey's Anatomy."

"You have everyone there, and everyone is different, but they never talk about it," she said. "For a place where everyone looks different, it's a very racially harmonious place."

In such an environment, she said, having Jewish motifs is not necessarily a signifier of cool, but rather another ingredient that gets lost in the multicultural stew.

"So Yang sits *shiva*," Paskin said. "It's nice, but it doesn't mean anything. The Judaism of it isn't important at all. It's just a nice way to mourn."