HIGH CULTURE WORK, LOW BROW HUMOR:
A BAKHTINIAN ANALYSIS OF THE PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF
SOUTH PARK IN POST-SECONDARY ENGLISH LITERATURE CLASSES

By

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A Project Presented to
The Faculty of Humboldt State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English: Literature

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May 2013
ABSTRACT

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In the fantasy world of South Park, Colorado, the town named in the popular Comedy Central show, everything is not always as it seems. Eruptions of chaos and melodramatic human relations play out in scores of situations that at times seem fantastic, and at other times, not far from reality at all. Issues of race, free speech, sexuality and gender, war, current political events, poverty, the arts and creative subjectivity, and other topics are addressed in an animated cartoon format by creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker.

South Park has been airing for 16 seasons, is well-known, and has been praised for its critical approaches. It has been nominated for 7 Emmy awards, has won 4 awards, and has been the subject of two collections of critical essays. Furthermore, South Park frequently refers to widely known and taught works of literature, including Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery.” The complexity of synthesizing current events and canonical texts in parody indicates a clear potential for South Park to be effective as a pedagogical tool in the post-secondary classroom. In expanded critical discussions, teachers and students can learn to relate literary criticism to contemporary media.
Employing M.M. Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque as well as critical analysis by scholars in English Studies, I illustrate how the show’s content can be applied in discussing canonical literature. I explicate themes from an episode that parallel themes in Jackson’s story. The greatest potential of such a demonstration is to show how students and teachers can form relations based on a common understanding of the “old” and the “new” in an attempt to increase students’ analytical skills. Using Bakhtinian concepts, I explored the pedagogical and ethical considerations of using South Park in the classroom, and found conflicts and complexities that require a balanced pedagogical approach. To illustrate these considerations, I used the South Park episode “Britney’s New Look,” to look for moments of parody and pedagogical potential.
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INTRODUCTION: TEXTS FROM DIFFERENT ERAS AND BAKHTIN’S LITERARY THEORIES

In the fantasy world of South Park, Colorado, the town named in the popular Comedy Central show, everything is not always as it seems. Eruptions of chaos and melodramatic human relations play out in scores of situations that at times seem fantastic, and at other times, not far from reality at all. Issues of race, free speech, sexuality and gender, war, current political events, poverty, the arts and creative subjectivity, and other topics are addressed in an animated cartoon format by creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker. The complicated drama of the South Park world is played out in a series of improbable events by the main characters: Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman (all of whom are 4th grade students at South Park Elementary School). Through the perspective and experience of the South Park boys, these issues are synthesized in parody and allegory. Each episode offers at least one predictable outcome: one of them will begin a soliloquy with the phrase, “You know, I’ve learned something today….”

While the target audience of South Park is adults in the 18-49 year-old range, millions of people around the world tune into this adult-oriented show, and after fifteen seasons, the show remains one of basic cable’s highest rated shows in the male 18-34 year-old demographic. The extent of interest in the show is best demonstrated by the ratings from the show’s season fifteen premier, which garnered more than 3.148 million viewers, a rating ranked second in viewers only to the NBA finals (tvbythenumbers.com). Audiences eat up the combination of the relentless satire, amusing animation, and
extreme potty humor. Initially, the show’s edginess and obscenity draw viewers, but *South Park* is much more than merely obscene. It is a show that boasts complex satirical content related to American culture, politics, and highly sensitive social issues. Allegories of recent events and allusions to canonical works give viewers compelling reasons to tune in and see what Stone and Parker have to say about any given subject. As a result, the show has seen continued success and longevity.

*South Park* has been airing for 16 seasons, is well-known, and has been praised for its critical approaches. It has been nominated for 7 Emmy awards, has won 4 awards, and has been the subject of two collections of critical essays. Furthermore, *South Park* frequently refers to widely known and taught works of literature, including Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery.” The complexity of synthesizing current events and canonical texts in parody indicates a clear potential for *South Park* to be effective as a pedagogical tool in the post-secondary classroom. In the second half of this essay, I argue that teachers and students can learn to relate literary criticism to contemporary media. This will allow teachers to use *South Park* as a part of their pedagogy. However, it is necessary for me to explain theoretical concepts that legitimize *South Park* as a medium with pedagogical potential, as well as explore ethical considerations surrounding the appropriateness of the show’s content for classroom use.

Employing M.M. Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque as well as critical analysis by scholars in English Studies, I aim to illustrate how the show’s content can be applied in discussing canonical literature. I will explicate themes from an episode that parallel both imagery and themes in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” The
greatest potential of such a demonstration is to show how students and teachers can form intellectual understandings based on a common understanding of “old” and the “new” media. The main goal such a strategy is to increase students’ analytical skills using a medium that is contemporary and somewhat familiar to the students versus a medium that may be more foreign to a younger generation. Using Bakhtinian concepts, I will explore the pedagogical and ethical considerations of using *South Park* in the classroom. To illustrate these considerations, I will use the *South Park* episode “Britney’s New Look,” to look for moments of parody and pedagogical potential.

**Heteroglossia and Parody in *South Park***

Bakhtin describes heteroglossia in “Discourse in the Novel” as

> The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even the hour…(263).

In fiction, Bakhtin argues, the voice of a narrator, may be represented differently from that of a character. For example, consider a narrator who is identified as a figure from a higher class than that of the main protagonist. While these two voices in the same story may share the same language, but for social, cultural, and/or geographical reasons, their class differences create a range of difference in the use of language. The members of the narrator’s class may not accept slang or jargon that may be accepted by the main protagonist’s class, and by the same token, the lexicon of the narrator’s class can
potentially be lost on the protagonist. Still, even within this multiplicity of language use, meaning is made.

Simultaneously, these different ways of using language commingle and create a unified-yet-unique set of utterances that engages the audience in a session of heteroglossic meaning-making defined by the “real world” languages. Since the languages used in the novel are not based in a unitary reality, “The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s appreciative background” (Bakhtin 282). Language is subject to the understanding of the audience, even though it may be in an unfamiliar vernacular. Therefore the author creates multiple languages used by characters that have a lasting impact on the audience. The reader has the responsibility of forming an interpretation, which is deeply influenced by the reader’s prior experience.

_South Park’s_ writing performs heteroglossia in various ways. For example, writers of the show use hyperbolic statements and parody of past and current events with an air of audacity pushing the point of “appropriate” discourse and language use. Components of language typically associated with lower class behaviors such as crudity, foul language, and scatological humor are frequently found in the show. In the episode “It Hits The Fan,” the word “shit” is uttered on television uncensored 162 times, counted by a small “real-time” counter at the bottom corner of the screen. While this gratuitous use of profanity can be seen as a low-brow gag, the enumerated frequency serves to satirize language taboos by exploding one taboo through repetition to the point of ubiquity. In terms of lasting impact, the language of the show is often crude, but its very
crudity points to the tensions surrounding authority figures, group thinking, jargon (whether lay or professional), youth versus adult language use, fads, and the like. By mocking the tensions surrounding language use and appropriateness, *South Park* breaks down social conventions in a humorous but critical manner with the intent of getting audiences to think differently about how they view language.

Bakhtin argues that within heteroglossia, parody plays a significant literary function: “Literary parody of dominant novel-types plays a large role in the history of the European novel. One could even say that the most important novelistic modes and novel-types arose precisely during the parodic destruction of preceding novelistic worlds” (309). If we apply this concept to *South Park’s* use of language (specifically the crude or abrasive kind), the idea stands that parody, as a force of language and literary form, is intended to break down established norms in order for new modes to be produced.

Whether it be about the European novel of Bakhtin’s era or a widely viewed television program, parody serves as an agent of change.

More importantly, Bakhtin identifies the incorporation of heteroglossia in the construction of parody as having...

…a multiplicity of ‘language; and verbal-ideological belief systems…incorporated in an impersonal form ‘from the author,’ alternating with direct authorial discourse. The incorporated languages of social ideological belief systems, while of course utilized to refract the author’s intentions, are unmasked and destroyed as something false, hypocritical, greedy, limited, narrowly rationalistic, inadequate to reality. (311)
With the adoption of normalized belief systems in a text and an author’s intent of dismantling ideologies through language, an author establishes a particular point of view that is identifiable by audiences. At the same time, another side of “truth” is embedded in the language used in a given work may serve a specific function of dismantling points of view. This method is done so in a subtle nature and is highly contextual, but once interpreted or identified, the language of a text can create a new viewpoint. This also allow for further development of new modes, as Bakhtin refers to in the context of the European novel and South Park’s development of animated comedy.

*South Park* criticizes dominant discourses surrounding politics, celebrity, and sociocultural norms with deliberate gags and tongue-in-cheek plays on popular culture. The effect of such an approach is to expose the limitations of mainstream culture and how it affects consumers. Through the vehicle of their fictionalized characters, Stone and Parker use their skills as satirists in some episodes to break down commonly accepted language surrounding the focus of a given episode. Perspectives frequently clash to expose prejudice and ignorance, as well as the psychology surrounding dominant ideologies. This is done deliberately, showing how shallow and short-sighted people become when they are entrenched in their ideologies. However, the narrative of *South Park* idealizes a world where at the focal point of conflict over ideological understandings, two opposing viewpoints can come to a rhetorical point of reason or catharsis.

An episode that demonstrates this is “Goobacks” from season 7, which explores racism towards undocumented immigrants as well as the economic impact of immigrant
labor on the market. In this episode, Latino immigrants are replaced by aliens, who emerge from a time-portal, covered in ectoplasm. The aliens need work in order save money for their impoverished future. The language of the episode highlights common anxieties of citizens about undocumented workers taking minimum wage positions. These anxieties are portrayed in a town hall meeting where angry “rednecks” hold riotous town meetings and cry out loudly how the “Goobacks” (a play on the racial slur “wetbacks”) “took our jobs!”

An alternate storyline also appears when Stan’s parents hire a future person to work in their house for ten cents an hour, which is something that Stan’s dad Randy is more than happy to exploit. The narrative of Stan’s Parents taking advantage of low-wage immigrant labor sets a contrast between the anxieties of working class Americans who see the future people as a threat versus middle to high income families that use undocumented laborers to tend to menial tasks. With their hired housekeeper, the Marsh family is able to enjoy more free time, all while paying next to nothing to do so.

The “Goobacks” episode is just one example that demonstrates the sociocultural parody Stone and Parker employ regarding contentious issues: a real-time drama that polarizes language and popular opinion. Most importantly, Stone and Parker intentionally parody the discourses surrounding illegal immigration and labor through the characterizations of South Park’s citizens. Audiences of the episode are presented an argument about undocumented labor in America that is both despised yet heavily utilized. While Stone and Parker’s assessment does not necessarily provide a solution to the inherent problems of racism and economic exploitation, their gaze is directed at the
language of said problems for the audience to break down and interpret the rhetoric of prejudice and their sources.

The topic of undocumented labor in the US is rehashed by Stone and Parker again in season 15 with the episode “Last of the Meheecans,” a play on Michael Mann’s 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans*, starring Daniel Day-Lewis. In the episode, the *South Park* boys are playing “border patrol,” and Butters, dressed in a poncho, inadvertently is deported to Mexico. The episode is centered on Butters’ misadventures with undocumented migrant workers struggling for dignity in a country that takes advantage of their labor without granting the same basic rights provided for citizens.

The concept of parody is subtle in nature, and in order for it to function properly audiences must be aware of the complexities of the parodied object as well as be open to discussion. Take the “Goobacks” and “Last of the Meheecans” episodes as examples for facilitating a classroom discussion on racism, the economy, and undocumented workers. The effectiveness of discussing the parodies could easily be derailed if the outrageous nature of the gags themselves dominates the conversation. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the intention of the parody will not offend some students or make some students feel threatened. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is imperative that discussions be prefaced by the notion that the lesson is not intended to mock individuals. The point is to examine the commonalities of the language used in the episodes and how it relates to contemporary understandings surrounding the main issues. The focus should remain on how the parody functions to challenge ideologies, including what parts are most successful and which parts are the least successful in doing so.
Stone and Parker deliberately seek out issues that are divisive, poking and prodding at the language as well as the representation of ideological mindsets. They don’t really care if some people are offended; their main objective is to point out some of the facets of issues like racism. The hope is that by using parody, audiences who may have been ideologically bound to one, narrow perspective may gain another, broader one. This should be the same with a classroom discussion. There are no guarantees that minds will be changed, but there is hope through the vehicle of parodying racist language and representation that dialogue can be engaged.

The Carnivalesque

Another dimension of heteroglossia and the complexity of creative use of language is that of the comedic approach of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque incorporates parody, satire, and inversion as techniques intended to “humble” and unify people in a humorous, humanistic sense. Bakhtin draws the carnivalesque from medieval festivals during which rigid social mores and boundaries were temporarily suspended. Street parades included wild pageantry, where the poor dressed like the rich and/or powerful, mocking the speech and behavior of the elite class. Often, the humor used to mock the higher classes was accompanied by gluttonous or obscene acts. The exaggerated and colorful celebration’s most vital statement lies in the mockery of people in positions of high social authority that dictate the day-to-day functions of the lower classes. High priests, local officials and governors, all those at the top of the social food chain are brought down to the “earthy” level of the commoner during carnival.
The spirit of the carnival and the “earthly” human level is examined in Bakhtin’s analysis of Rabelais’s assertion of the human need to consume and excrete (Halsall 24). It is a practice that temporarily disarms the prestige of the elite and, in mocking them, reminds all what unites them: humanity. Authors have used this technique in the past to critique society, leaders, and ideologies that require the lower classes to conform to behaviors or regulated norms that at times do not make sense. It is in this spirit that Stone and Parker utilize the carnivalesque and canonical texts. In *South Park*’s reference to literature, parody operates to provide allegories to contemporary social issues that can easily be identified.

Like the medieval carnival, *South Park* relies heavily on spectacle and outrageous satire in its visual gags and writing. Often, the objects of this approach are celebrities or politicos who occupy a spotlight in the public consciousness of the time, such as Jennifer Lopez (“Fatbutt and Pancake Head,” season 7), George W. Bush (“The Mystery of the Urinal Deuce,” season, 10), or Bono (“More Crap,” Season 11) just to name a few. In each episode, the celebrities are exaggerated in their personas, highlighting some of their supposed faults; like Lopez’s self-centered perspective, the perceived incompetence of Bush, or Bono’s almost non-stop humanitarian awards. In the eyes of the “everyday” person, these people are the recipients of privilege and prestige that some only dream of. By blowing them out of proportion and making them the butt of the joke, their privilege and social position are inverted. This is indicative of the resentment and jealousy felt by those in lower classes toward politicians or celebrities. Stone and Parker’s satire of
politicians and celebrities allows us “common people” to relieve our tensions, harkening to the origins of the medieval carnival.

Critic Alison Halsall directly ties *South Park* to the carnivalesque in her examination of the film *Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, the 1998 *South Park* movie. While Halsall notes that a lot of the humor from the show often relies on overtly vulgar or offensive gags and jokes, “Its humor is not easily summarized in terms of its ideological agenda, and it is this very resistance to summary that makes *South Park* so open-ended, so polysemic, and therefore so productive as a vehicle of popular resistance (23).” The humor of the film is the primary draw and serves as a means to be critical of a variety of issues, including censorship, socially appropriate behavior, xenophobia and war. Essentially, because there is room for multiple interpretations, the viewer has the opportunity to be critical of both the issues the movie presents as well as Stone and Parker’s treatment of these issues.

*Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* is just part of the larger *South Park* critical phenomena. Halsall views the popular resistance of this film as not exclusive to the film, but to the show’s primary schema. Every week, the show airs new episodes and the carnivalesque functions within the outrageous writing and spectacular visual presentation. This enables Stone and Parker to present a criticism of the inherent hypocrisies in current events and ideologies by blowing situations way out of proportion (as cartoons do), all the while using the rhetoric of various ideological standpoints to do so. In Stone and Parker’s world, the real world is more insane than the one created on their prime-time cable cartoon show.
The presentation of the show is both outrageous and indicative of Stone and Parker’s attitudes towards contemporary pop icons, pundits, and the audiences that pay attention to these public figures. The carnivalesque runs rampant in the show’s scripts, where some of the largest names in pop culture and politics suddenly turn up in the fictional town of South Park under absurd pretenses and in wild scenarios. People who are respected, revered, or at least talked about by the general public via mainstream media wind up making asses of themselves in a crowd, and the normal people of South Park raise eyebrows, stare blankly, or open their mouths in surprise.

A prime example of this is found in an episode from season 8, titled “The Passion of the Jew,” a direct reference to criticism of Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*. “The Passion of the Jew” follows the hysteria created by public reactions to the film. In the realm of *South Park*, the buzz from the film created two fronts on the issue. Specifically identified are those of the born-again Evangelical Christian persuasion, who interpret the film as a testament to Christ’s suffering for their sins. Also identified are characters from the town’s Jewish community, who see the film as anti-Semitic in nature. Mel Gibson comes to *South Park* in the midst of a heated argument between Christian and Jewish peoples in front of the movie theatre playing *The Passion of the Christ*. Gibson flies into the scene driving a *Mad Max* style truck with *Braveheart* war paint on his face, acting erratically and asking to be tortured by the crowd (a nod to the numerous torture scenes he had previously acted in). In carnivalesque mode, Gibson is dethroned from his celebrity and shown as a fool, someone to be mocked and not revered as either genius or villain.
In the spirit of the carnival, this representation of Gibson lasts as long as the episode. However, it is the memory that viewers take of this representation that lasts the longest. Gibson may be able to distance himself from the public and continue his pursuits, but those who have seen “The Passion of the Jew” can also understand him as a blabbering masochist and not a visionary actor/director. By demystifying the individual who is Mel Gibson, Stone and Parker imply that since the director himself has appeared to the public as illogical and somewhat insane, *The Passion of the Christ* should not be taken so seriously as to provoke arguments amongst religious groups or to be interpreted as anything more than a film.

While Stone and Parker’s representation of Gibson is the most outrageous, the two sides clashing over *The Passion* become targets of ridicule as well. The Christian Evangelical side that embraced the film as a testament of Christ’s devotion is portrayed as a bunch ignorant boobs, and the Jewish community is portrayed as heavy-handed and stubborn. In the middle of it all, Stan and Kenny, two of the *South Park* boys, have the coolest heads and describe *The Passion* as “a snuff film.” Stone and Parker show a dichotomy of belief and interpretation as well the “balanced” center that disregards religious or cultural belief, reporting “just the facts” about the film.

It is within the framework of the outrageous nature coupled with “logical” conclusions that current events are re-staged. Most of the issues Stone and Parker present are serious, yet through laughter and mockery they provide what Halsall sees as “liberation from constraint. Laughter breeds irreverence, which in turn encourages freedom from rituals and rules, social expectations, hierarchical divisions, and official
dogmas” (24). Whether or not their writing can be deemed appropriate by social standards and official regulations or not, Stone and Parker refuse to adhere to etiquette. Indeed, this has been to the benefit of their franchise. I believe that Stone and Parker also think the show is a benefit to the audience by unabashedly using language that is looked down upon or questioning behaviors promoted by social convention. Even if this rebellious nature can be seen as a force of good, Stone and Parker seem to have a hard time avoiding controversy. However, critics who can see past the initial controversy caused by the show’s themes, content, or language often praise Stone and Parker for their pointed social critiques.

One example of an ongoing controversy for Stone and Parker has been their continual pursuit to depict the Islamic Prophet Muhammad on their show. Jonah Weiner chronicled this pursuit on the online publication of Slate magazine on April 29, 2010, documenting one actual visual depiction in the episode “Super Best Friends” (where Jesus, Bhudda, Vishnu, and Muhammad battle a metaphor of Scientology and cultism in the figure of magician David Blaine); a fully censored version of Muhammad in “Cartoon Wars” (an episode that debates freedom of expression against violent retribution amidst the reaction to Danish cartoonists’ portrayal of Muhammad); and a two-part episode “200” and “201,” which offered both full characterizations and entirely censored versions of Muhammad. For the censored versions of Muhammad in “200” and “201,” Muhammad is strategically covered up by a moving van, a bear suit, and a “Censored” bar, in order to skirt the taboo with ridiculous props.
Weiner notes that ultimately, it doesn’t seem to be Stone and Parker’s intent to ridicule the Muslim faith, but rather to debate free speech and censorship brought on by fear: “The episodes vibrantly illustrate the idea—fascinating both in its political and philosophical implications—that a U-Haul van, a bear suit, and a ‘CENSORED’ bar can themselves come to represent precisely the thing they were meant to obscure.” Essentially, *South Park*’s use of censoring props do not cover up the fact that Stone and Parker are making the taboo known, and also criticizing the television network executives that make such rules. Regardless, the potential of blasphemy against one of the world’s largest religious groups is hard to ignore, even if the criticism is aimed at a higher target.

Multitudes of moral conundrums exist within *South Park*’s various episodes, but Stone and Parker’s final objective is not to bully the “little people” in their pursuits of laughs and the opening of social dialogue. In this light, we can see a carnivalesque connection that has a higher purpose other than cheap laughter at the expense of oppressed or marginalized people. It is people in positions of great privilege or prestige that are the ultimate target for criticism, which again underscores the nature of the carnivalesque. In the context of the classroom, this can serve to be a reminder to students to look at the totality of the representations they are being shown, and not to get caught up on how stereotypes are being portrayed but to what purpose the portrayals serve.
STEREOTYPES AND REHABILITATION: THE “MEL BROOKS FORMULA”

“I want to say in comedic terms, ‘J’Accuse.’ My job as a comedy film maker is to point out and remind us of what we are---to humble us and expose our foibles.”-Mel Brooks (Bonsetter 19).

Mel Brooks, the creator of such films as Blazing Saddles and History of the World, Part I, pulls no punches when it comes to issues such as racism, corruption, and injustice. However, he does not use his platform to only condemn people who are party to these issues. The main objective with the exclamation of “J’Accuse,” is to rehabilitate audiences who might otherwise be ignorant about the degree to which they condone or reify negative prejudices. To rehabilitate, by definition, is “to restore to good repute: reestablish the good name of,” or “ to restore or bring to a condition of health or useful and constructive activity” (Merriam-Webster.com). This definition applies to the humor and messages of South Park. The use of stereotypes in the show is aimed at pointing out our deeply embedded prejudices. Pedagogically speaking, using such comedy in the classroom has the danger of reinscribing prejudices instead of rehabilitating them. This is why a careful examination of the context of the material as well as the proper approach by the facilitator is needed in order to be successful at using South Park to its fullest pedagogical potential.
Charles Bazerman evaluates Bakhtin’s stances on parody and the carnivalesque in terms of utterances and their subjective power. For example, Bazerman notes that there is a danger when using the carnivalesque of alienating one social group from another:

His [Bakhtin’s] treatment opens up the issue of the complex attitudes we have toward each other as we recognize and reevaluate the character of each other’s voice. Such complexity of evaluative attitude can serve to exclude or demote appreciation of the other, and is a frequent method for keeping at a distance those who are different from us, as we might parody a foreign accent or nondominant dialect or we might mockingly repeat words we dismiss as absurd (57-58).

This becomes especially relevant in analyzing South Park, where, in many cases, parts of the show’s dialogue and writing is oriented to pronounce this difference. Despite any ”it’s all fair game” premise, Stone and Parker’s work cannot determine the reaction of the audience. No one caricature or figure is safe from a potentially brutal lampooning by Stone and Parker, but that doesn’t mean that all of those in the audience won’t be offended by the stereotypes portrayed in South Park.

Therein lies the potential for controversy: when the carnivalesque skates too close to the edge of offense. Considering Bazerman’s examples of distance from that with which we are unfamiliar, or from groups of people who can become targets of stereotypes, South Park’s presentation of stereotypes can be used by certain audiences to reinforce stereotypes instead of dismantling them. However, Bazerman defends Bakhtin’s carnivalesque analysis, pointing out that this form of parody is constructed to “deflate the oppressively powerful ruling forces rather than to stigmatize the powerless
(58).” More importantly, this playful approach to examining the rhetorical choices of authors, and in this case, visual media, presents a cross-section of various perspectives that reveal ideological positioning: “Bakhtin provides conceptual tools for understanding how authors engage or repress complexity of perspectives and represent evaluation and attitude toward the perspectives of the characters they represent (58).” The same could be said for Stone and Parker, who, even while poking fun at groups of people who are all too often stereotyped, simultaneously mock the contexts and people who reify these stereotypes.

In a pedagogical setting, it is best not to assume that stereotypes won’t be taken at face value by students. The irony and inversion of these stereotypes can easily be taken as cheap shots and humor-for-humor’s sake, given that South Park is a comedy. In order to avoid the use of South Park’s portrayal of stereotypes in a negative, non-constructive way in the classroom, dialogues must be held between all active participants in the conversation. In doing so, the root of the stereotypes should be determined and how they can be actively dispelled without creating a division in the conversation that alienates students.

This is where rehabilitation of ingrained stereotypes is most vital in discussing South Park’s intent. Beth E. Bonsetter relays themes of rehabilitation in an examination of Mel Brooks’s satiric films Blazing Saddles and History of the World Part I. In her study of Brooks’s films, Bonsetter draws from Kenneth Burke’s theories on satire/burlesque and Bakhtin’s carnivalesque examinations of literature. In her article, “Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin),” she first notes the dangers of
using comedy in the classroom because many students see visual media as purely entertainment for entertainment’s sake, and that “Humorous films can potentially compound this problem because the affective nature of such films can discourage audiences from looking beyond the laughter. However, looking beyond the laughter is crucial in satiric films because of their potential to be misread and further hegemony (18).” With a framework oriented toward “rehabilitating” characters that display racist or ignorant behaviors within a text, the main objective is to guide audiences through the satire.

The rehabilitation approach is applied to Brooks’s Blazing Saddles, whose main focus is a critique of racism and the fantasy of the American Frontier. Take, for example, the main character, Bart: “Of all the characters in the film, it is African American Bart who is presented as the smartest, bravest, most noble, and so on. Bart is not a placid, flawless, white bread ‘hero’ as is found in many Westerns. Despite this, he is not a clod, a clown, or a stereotype; his actions are consistent with those of a reasonable person” (21). The continuous irony of the film and its carnivalesque nature is that during a time of immense racism (which the film liberally displays with continual use of racial epithets and the unethical treatment towards minorities), a black man becomes the ultimate hero despite the continued resistance of the white townspeople he is charged to protect and the evil forces at play. In the case of the townspeople, they are stereotyped to be ignorant, yet they are redeemed after rehabilitating their initial stance towards Bart. If ignorance is indeed the enemy in this situation, then no one individual can be demonized.
Furthermore, if audiences are given reminders of the humanity of all characters involved in a text then it is especially true that no one individual can be demonized for his or her attitudes or behaviors. A purely Bakhtinian concept explored by Bonsetter that is a device designed to disarm prejudice is the grotesque, a concept derived from the carnivalesque. Speaking directly to bodily functions as a means of regeneration, Bonsetter states: “The grotesque may be the chief convention that hurls everyone back to the earth to be reborn and be renewed (23).” This is exemplified in the crude but comedic “bean eating scene” in *Blazing Saddles*. In the scene, the powerful and brutish henchmen of the Headly Lamarr (the main antagonist) are gathered for a camp dinner consisting of beans. The thugs defy decorum by continuously belching and passing gas for most of the scene. This reminds the audience that despite their claims of authority and their ill intent, they are humans with the same biological functions as all others. Thus, they are figuratively “reborn” through a potentially embarrassing sequence, reducing their oppressive nature in the audience’s perspective.

Ethical Considerations: The Challenges of Rehabilitation

*South Park* has strategically used the carnivalesque and the grotesque on countless occasions throughout the show’s history in the same vein that Mel Brooks utters, “J’accuse.” *South Park*’s writers go further with the mockery of their targets than simple pokes and jabs, and have been identified to use stereotypes purely for their own amusement. Pedagogically speaking, the strategies employed by the writers of *South Park* leave much to be questioned in terms of how to address the portrayal of stereotypes. Jonah Wiener, with his praises for the show’s ingenuity and complex ways of presenting
arguments, also criticizes some of the show’s writing: “They are overly convinced of the hilarity of Asian people speaking English poorly” (1). Some of their jokes are insensitive and childish, which is true in the case Wiener’s assessment of Stone and Parker’s penchant for mocking Asian people speaking English.

One of the auxiliary characters, “Tuong Lu Kim” appears in three episodes as a tongue-in-cheek stereotype of a Chinese-American man with a thick accent. The tongue-in-cheek nature of Tuong Lu Kim sends a mixed message concerning the presentation of Asian people in the show’s content as well as Kim’s role in the show that begs the question: is South Park excluding selected groups of people, like Asian people, by using normalized stereotypes, or is the show mocking the existence and usage of such stereotypes? Furthermore, would students find these stereotypes offensive? Would they find them humorous and reveal their prejudices too openly for comfort? Or, would they read them as a critique of the stereotypes and find humor in that? All of these questions add to the ethical and pedagogical complexities of the show and the use of the show in the classroom, and should be taken into account when considering the show’s potential use in the classroom.

Questions surrounding political correctness and sensitivity towards the use of stereotypes in South Park are not simple matters, and criticism of the use of racial and ethnic stereotypes in the show should be welcomed in teaching. The show’s use of offensive humor is complicated by its message as well as by visual representations of those who play out/play into the offense in question. Going back to the episode, “The Passion of the Jew,” Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx examine South Park’s satire and
ironic use of stereotypes from a more critical position. They argue for an analysis that seeks an “understanding of the ways in which the program’s integration of offensive humor ethnic humor operates within a broader discursive context (5)” Other studies, while finding faults within the show’s penchant for stereotyping, ultimately celebrate its use of satire and overtly offensive humor. Sienkiewicz and Marx see the representations of South Park’s Jewish community as being so overt that the intent must be to draw out our own prejudices, fears, and assumptions for the purpose of laughter and breaking new grounds on the forefront of a more understanding, tolerant society.

However, Sienkiewicz and Marx view this as too simplistic, and they cannot get past how Stone and Parker on the one hand deride anti-Semitism in the “Passion of the Jew,” and simultaneously stereotype Jewish people: “Although Cartman’s loathsome anti-Semitic stereotypes may be blunted by Gibson’s insanity, the actual Jewish characters portrayed in the episode serve to re-inscribe such stereotypes (12).” Yet Sienkiewicz and Marx recognize Stone and Parker’s intent, stating that “however, these apparently exaggerated and anti-Semitic representations have a greater purpose—to criticize the overreactions and empty rhetoric surrounding all sides of the contemporaneous media debate over anti-Semitism (14).” Sienkiewicz and Marx do an excellent job of critiquing South Park’s employment of offensive humor and the possible repercussions of its use, even when using it ironically or satirically. They do miss one key point of the satire that involves a critical double-voiced satirical moment: a member of South Park’s synagogue congregation stands up, shouting out in a stereotyped Jewish voice that “Stereotyping Jews is terrible!” At the end of it all, Sienkiewicz and Marx still
recognize that *South Park* addresses systematic issues of racism and ethnocentrism on a highly visible platform.

This is one of the factors that makes the show contentious, potent, and complicated. It can be argued that while Sienkiewicz and Marx have a point about the deeper implications of the show’s humor, the potential for a literal translation by viewing audiences remains dangerously clear. Knee-jerk reactions could potentially prevail over the satiric or ironic messages and presentation, especially among younger, less sophisticated viewers. The most vital element to an effective pedagogical use of *South Park* when it comes to stereotypes is the rehabilitation of stereotypes. As exemplified by Bonsetter and her analysis of Mel Brooks’s strategies, *South Park*’s method of inverting stereotypes by overtly portraying offensive stereotypes in an animated format is meant to be constructive and not to reinscribe prejudiced attitudes. If *South Park* is to be used in the classroom, it should be noted that the educator must be prepared for a multiplicity of reactions ranging from offense to pointed analysis to laughter of all types.

The reaction that is most challenging to overcome would be that of offense. As facilitators of education and development, instructors need to be sensitive to individual student sensibilities. It is not the aim of a pedagogical use of *South Park* to elicit pain or anger. This is why, before a lesson involving *South Park* begins, instructors must disclaim that there is offensive humor. But it should be noted that *South Park*’s writing is intended to push boundaries and comfort zones. Instructors should further qualify that the parameters of the lesson include an honest and open forum for students to speak freely. If a situation should arise that a student or students become offended, therein arises an
opportunity to discuss why they are offended, in what ways they might assess the context of the stereotype, and how it hurts them specifically. In a compassionate manner, fellow students and instructors might have input on the purpose of the stereotype’s placement in the show, and how others might view the degree of effectiveness the stereotype holds in the context of the episode/scene/discussion. The most important thing about this process is to encourage a safe space, as well as a productive space for all involved.

Beyond the dangers of a classroom succumbing to fits of laughter that detracts from discussion, or, in worst-case scenarios, that leads to a total breakdown of the lesson because of material that offends students, the ethics of using comedic material that may be deemed offensive by some is still on the table. Catherine Yu explores the ethics and humor of the show in her article “Is it Okay to Laugh at South Park?” She cites the episode “Fattbutt and Pancake Head,” in which the character Cartman receives money from the Latino Endowment Council for dressing up his hand like Jennifer Lopez and performing a racist ventriloquist act, only to end up creating a split personality within himself which, in turn, becomes Ben Affleck’s new love interest (17). Several highly contestable moral issues arise here: racism, using serious psychological illness as a gag, and (albeit indirectly) sexual abuse of a minor.

Yet Yu still cannot deny the episode’s ability to generate laughs: “Even so, one can barely suppress a grin as one thinks of all of these shenanigans. But could it be morally wrong to laugh? Or, is it all just moral prudishness to even suggest that it might be so? (17-18).” Speaking from a philosophical standpoint, the show seems to be designed to test people’s limits of moral discretion and ability to glean satire from what
could be considered rubbish. Whatever the intent of the writers may be, this question still remains.

To address this dilemma, Yu considers the work of Susan Wolf and her idea of the “moral saint” to be one side of the argument that says, no, it is not okay to laugh at the offensive humor of *South Park*: “Would a moral saint laugh at *South Park*? Wolf would probably say no… Why? People are made out to be idiots, or are insulted, or find themselves in some awkward or nasty situation and, because of these misfortunes, we laugh at them” (23-24). This begs the question of whether or not, outside of the cartoon reality of *South Park*, we would do the same to a flesh and blood person. Yu then brings up Aristotelian perspectives, arguing that Aristotle treasured the human ability to evaluate and make balanced assessments of a given situation, and may laugh at something risqué without imbibing it fully. In an attempt to further tease out an answer to the question of morality in finding *South Park* humorous, Yu discusses Robert De Sousa’s endorsement of “phthonic humor,” which is described a sense of humor that is cultivated at others’ expense. Yu assumes that De Sousa would argue against *South Park*’s humor, because to laugh at such jokes is to truly believe in their messages and further damage the butt of the phthonic joke: “it turns out we’re quite horrible people when we enjoy *South Park* (26).”

The level of the show’s appropriateness for pedagogical uses seems to lessen considerably with two philosophical standpoints. Both standpoints argue against the overall design of the show when Yu evokes Wolf’s and De Souza’s ideas against Aristotle’s principles. Guilty as we may be in the eyes of Wolf and De Souza, Yu does not draw the ultimate conclusion from these philosophers. While the jokes, such as the
ones generated for “Fatbutt and Pancake Head,” are offensive, the humor is in imagining that a character like Cartman with his racist ideologies and psychotic tendencies exists, and therefore the phthonic humor is inversed: “To find these portrayals funny, one need only be aware of what stereotypes and caricatures are in attendance and use this information to imaginatively adopt relevant attitudes. There is, in short, a middle ground between endorsing pernicious attitudes and merely knowing about them (27).” The redemption the viewer garners after laughing at the offensive jokes, in this instance, is being aware yet not laughing at the jokes themselves, but their presentation. This is a crucial point that should be part of the discussion when South Park enters the classroom: delivery and presentation. How are the jokes set up, and in what context? What purpose do the jokes serve? How do the visual gags or representations add to the interpretation of the joke(s)? When viewers are able to read South Park’s satire in a more holistic fashion, they can divorce themselves from the notion that they might be morally objectionable people.

The idea that enjoying the morally suspect humor is not a crime is demonstrated by Melissa Hart in her assessment of the show via “South Park in the Tradition of Chaucer and Shakespeare,” an article written for The Chronicle of Higher Education. Essentially Hart testifies to the effects of the show’s humor on the English department faculty at the community college she teaches at. The teachers often regaled each other with recountings of episodes they missed; without even watching, they were still thrown into fits of laughter. The article, which was released in 2002 and during South Park’s 4th season, represents an early appreciation for the satire it presented by educated, intelligent
teachers. It could be argued that this season was still developing some of the more
critical and complex satires that have won the show numerous Golden Globe and Emmy
awards.

For instance, Hart, an anglo-American, recounts a time that she watched an
episode with a fellow faculty member, a Mexican-American:

Together, we watched an episode in which the citizens of
South Park (a quiet mountain redneck town) battle over
what holiday to celebrate in December. The conflict turns
into an ethnic war. “What can we do to clean up this
town?” cries the mayor. The third-grade teacher, Mr.
Garrison, raises his hand. “Can we get rid of all the
Mexicans?” Mario and I exchanged a wide-eyed look
before he hit the floor laughing (25).

Hart points out that such humor is effective towards a crowd that recognizes the
ignorance bred by a society bent on homogeneity. As educators in the field of literature, she
and her colleagues see the stereotypes as one giant reflection of ourselves, one which
points to both our limitations as well as our deeper goals in the fight against ignorance
(26). Despite this relevant and meaningful assessment, the fact remains that the show
does contain humor of the bodily functions as well as profanity, effectively preventing
certain audiences from receiving the social criticisms that have made the show into
something more than cheap laughs.

The idea that South Park is just for cheap laughter versus a more sophisticated
comedic approach to issues is a generational difference that is identified by Hart. She
cites her parents and grandparents being appalled by her and her siblings laughing
hysterically. However, Hart uses her training and knowledge of literature to defend the show’s connection to past writings in the same spirit:

I would remind them that in 1387, Chaucer made readers laugh with his depiction of flatulent characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. And 213 years later, Shakespeare delighted audiences with Beatrice and Benedick, caustic-tongued partners whose insults could give the *South Park* boys a run for their money. From the beginning of comedy, intellectuals have stepped down from the upper classes to revel in lowbrow humor. (26-27)

Hart sees *South Park’s* ethos steeped in reference to and reverence for comic writers past. Offensive or taboo humor is not something new, and has been canonized and celebrated for centuries. And while there is not further discussion regarding the connection between low and high brow humor, evoking the tales of literary greats’ ventures into the obscene points to the impact of using such humor to engage audiences in order to reveal messages of greater importance than the joke itself.

This “bigger picture” perspective relayed by Hart has wide implications and possible directions. However, at the heart of Stone and Parker’s intent is the idea that all aspects of society, life, and ideology are subject to criticism and satire. David Valleau Curtis and Gerald J. Erion in “*South Park* and the open society: Defending Democracy Through Satire,” see the work of *South Park* ultimately defending democratic values promoted by philosopher Karl Popper and Thomas Jefferson wherein debate and criticism act to preserve intellectual and social freedom from the tyranny of empty headed rhetoric or fanaticism (112).
Curtis and Erion focus on an interview of Stone and Parker on the Charlie Rose Show as the basis of this thinking: “Consider this pronouncement [from Trey Parker]: ‘what we say with the show is not anything new, but I think it is something that is great to put out there. It is that the people screaming on this side and the people screaming on that side are the same people, and it’s OK to be in the middle, laughing at them both’” (113).” Laughter is the main weapon in Stone and Parker’s defense of democratic principles, and it is a weapon that gives voice to both sides of a controversial issue.

In the minds of Curtis and Erion, this essentially demonstrating Karl Popper’s idealized open society: “Popper’s open society is one where customs are open to the ‘rational reflection’ of its members (114).” The opposite of the open society is the closed society, where criticism is not allowed and social regimes remain unchecked no matter how ridiculous, cruel, rigid, or stale they may be (114). Erion and Curtis site South Park’s ability to be in the middle of all of this and be one of the best protectors of democratic values. This is prevalent in Stone and Parker’s criticism of both the political left and right majorities: they cite an episode that mocks Rob Reiner’s activism as too extreme and out of touch with reality, and have no problem mocking conservative pundits for the same reasons (113).

One episode that comes to mind in which both sides are mocked according to their zealotry is “A Little Bit Country, A Little Bit Rock and Roll” from season 7. The episode is focused around the fights between the left and right to share a public space and demonstrate political values in a fair, balanced environment open for debate concerning post-911 military action. The citizens accidentally schedule concerts on the same day and
the same venue, which first results in a bloody fight but then ends with a rendition of the song “A Little Bit country, a Little Bit Rock and Roll.” The South Park boys become instrumental in breaking up the Left-Right rivalry by not participating in divisive tactics crafted by their parents, and the show ends on a saccharin-sweet and somewhat inexplicable accord of a “agree to disagree” mentality symbolized by the absurdity of the final song number.

For pedagogical use, consider how the show equally blasts both ideologies in such ironies and satirical demonstrations, South Park’s commitment to a “no one is safe from ridicule” attitude gives the show a sense of balance that requires attention from the audience in ways beyond just absorbing media. By breaking down the normalized beliefs of both sides of the political spectrum, students can then examine the flaws of both sides. Also, the idea of “agree to disagree” can be examined, and whether or not the class even thinks that such an attitude is plausible. At times viewers may not agree with the show’s final messages, but what is more important having the space to analyze the messages conveyed by the show, and critically analyzing episodes. The most important aspect of analysis is vital to not be trapped by jokes on a superficial level or getting too distracted by the humor itself.
The success of the show has proven fruitful for Stone, Parker, and all of their network organizers, but academically the show is ripe with material to compare and analyze topics both old and new. This is where *South Park* can come into the classroom with instant recognition, giving instructors opportunities to facilitate discussions based on what students already know, as well as tease out connections to literature that may seem obscure to students. What is most valuable about such a scenario is students and teachers meeting on common intellectual ground via a well-known cultural referent. Teachers thus have the space to discuss issues and for students to make more sophisticated interpretations on familiar territory that can transition into potentially unfamiliar territory. Either way, the intent behind such a strategy is to craft a lesson and dialogue that likely will not be forgotten soon. Furthermore, the show’s emphasis on eschewing fanaticism relays messages for individuals to think for themselves and think critically, another value promoted in the academic world.

Research and testimonial accounts point to *South Park* and the pop culture medium of television as being new sources of information that are readily accessible and widely known by teacher and student populations. So why not incorporate some of the show into an appropriate classroom setting? Including what students like eases the heteroglossic divide of misinterpretation or sequestered knowledge reserved for “the right time.” With careful consideration and navigation by educators familiar with shows such
as *South Park*, connections can be made with reading literature and writing to increase comprehension.

First, although *South Park* is fiction intended for adults, the language of the show reaches into reality as people of all ages imitate the characters’ mannerisms and expressions as well as discussions of events from previous episodes. Helen Nixon noted as early as 1999 (two years after the show’s first season aired) in the article “Adults watching children watch *South Park,*”

…my school teacher colleagues report that their students can be overheard using such common *South Park* expressions such as ‘holy crap, dude!’ and ‘kick a**!’ I would want to argue precisely because of its level of popularity with its child audience, and the degree of censure this has aroused in parents and teachers, *South Park* too requires serious consideration for the significant questions it raises about the relations between childhood and adulthood (12)

Nixon cites the show’s widespread audience across the Anglo-dominant arenas of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and sees that children as young as eight years old are viewing the program, and this requires some parents to have to explain some (if not a lot) of the show’s content to children who are amused by the attitudes of the main characters and their juvenile humor (14). However, she sees the potential for dialogue in the obscenities: “Thus teenagers’ reported schoolyard imitation of Kenny’s mostly incomprehensible dialogue has pedagogic potential. It has the potential, for example, to be used to illustrate a key sociolinguistic point that meaning is made by an utterance’s tone and inflections with its linguistic and social context (15).” While the
teaching of foul language alone is not cause for further study nor may it encourage educators to develop pedagogy around popular culture, the appropriation of the show’s antics and simple dialogue may prove an effective segue with heteroglossic implications.

The incorporation of the languages of the show and the dynamic of the youth and adult population is of itself a heteroglot, socially constructed with different meanings in simultaneous operation. Charles Bazerman’s argues that Bakhtinian intertextualities illustrate how an individual understands a text is based on prior experiences with similar language and is a strong influence on our interpretation of that text (53). Children’s intertextual experiences of the show’s writing begins with a basic understanding of what is naughty (and therefore amusing to them), but by including a discussion of the show’s language, students gain a level of critical sophistication that elevates their understanding of the more subtle points of the show. This sophistication in analysis improves their writing skills as well.

In Tiffany and Bud Hunt’s article “Popular Culture: Building Connections with Our Students,” they give testimonial scenario that goes as follows: Bud Hunt, an English teacher at Olde Columbine High School in Colorado, was teaching a unit on satire and Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” was presented as a classroom reading:

Because of the multiple reading abilities and skill levels in the classroom, Bud had decided to read the text aloud to the class; he asked students to summarize or take notes in the margins as he read. Frequently, he stopped and asked volunteers to summarize out loud the previous paragraphs. As much as Bud thought he was employing successful strategies for student understanding of the text, something was not working. While students were able to grasp the literal meaning of Swift’s piece…they were not certain why
anyone would propose such a ghastly and horrific solution.

Bud, not being able to clarify what “A man who had been dead three hundred years…” was intending to say, went into fight or flight mode and blurted out “Have you ever seen South Park? Outrageous things happen in that show, too, but do you think the creators really want those horrible things to happen (80)?” This juxtaposition of South Park with Swift’s satire gave the students a frame of reference, a place to recognize more complex themes than simply a literal translation of Swift’s piece, thus ending the momentary panic in the situation.

This momentary relief seemed to cause Bud more anxiety than when he started: “Bud knew that teaching students about the world using familiar texts and cultural information was a strong way to engage them in the classroom and in a larger critical analysis of themselves and their culture, but he still felt like he was neglecting a piece of his job (81).” Hunt understood that merely having a mutual understanding of popular cultural artifacts does not stand alone in the teaching of literacy or writing skill. It has to be negotiated properly without letting the pop culture phenomenon in question dominate the classroom discussion or be the overarching norm of curriculum. However, Hunt and Hunt see this instance as an opportunity to open up dialogue and make students more comfortable in the class by openly sharing their pop culture knowledge regularly with the class when appropriate: “Through bringing popular culture into the classroom, teachers can model learning about unfamiliar topics and customs while still providing bridges for learning (82).”
Bud, in unpacking *South Park* to explain Swift, offered a chance for students to reevaluate both the show and the essay in ways they might not have possibly thought before. The implications of this is that students will be able to feel more at ease in the class by being free to share their knowledge in an academic environment when they see points of intersection and develop self-reflective behaviors that are conducive to ideological becoming. When comfort rises, subsequently so does self-confidence, and when the student feels a stronger connection with the material, his/her comprehension and writing on the subject becomes stronger, or at least more open for suggestion instead of a feeling of defeat or confusion.

As Hunt and Hunt have suggested, the mere presence of popular culture artifacts does not mean success every time for the teacher and student. In a survey of two teachers using popular culture artifacts in the classroom, Lisa Patel Stevens sought to find a method for using such texts as *South Park* in a constructive way in the classroom setting in “*South Park* and Society: Instructional and curricular implications of popular culture in the classroom.” After Stevens visited several classes seventh grade language arts social studies classes went through a unit of popular culture and curricular correlations, Stevens found the students to be quite adept at exploring classroom topics via pop culture: “If I was in any doubt about the highly utilitarian nature of the students’ multiliteracies compared with my own infantile grasp of this concept, that…dispelled my doubts (551).” Of the three classes Stevens visited, the social studies class featured *South Park* as part of a small-group assignment on a study of 1990’s pop culture artifacts.
Stevens and the class teacher pre-modeled other pop culture artifacts from the past with a set of guided questions to lead into a small-group presentation: (a) what is the piece of popular culture? (b) Who is the intended audience? (c) Who is not intended to be the audience? (d) Who stands to benefit from it? (e) Who stands either not to advance in society or even to be hurt by it? (f) What does this popular culture artifact and its positioning say about U.S. society at large? (552-53). The class teacher appreciated the South Park presentation greatly: “[One student] noted that not all the inquiries achieved the depth that the South Park group did. Overall, he expressed a high level of satisfaction with student involvement and thought (553).”

Stevens’s recognition of the current generation’s ability to comprehend multiple texts at once suggests a new contemporary heteroglot: popular culture artifacts in translation of “real” life scenarios. Still, careful navigation must be made for fear of the power of an artifact such as South Park and its potential ability to take over the classroom. Students are excited about what they feel they know and have a better grasp on, but that is a limiting factor when no curricular material is being processed. In response, Stevens finds a formula for integrating pop culture for effective teaching with the following set of questions: “(a) What planning must occur that is unique to popular culture lessons? (b) How do lessons incorporating popular culture fit into existing curricula? and (c) How will students respond to bringing more personal discourse into their classroom (553)?”

Stevens’s work comes to the conclusion that although the treatment of popular culture can be a success in the class, it takes a calculated and careful approach to
implement such strategies for optimum benefits: “Lessons using popular culture and critical media literacy will occur, by and large, in settings where teachers are required to teach a canon of knowledge in the form of a curriculum. Educators need support in finding ways to match popular culture with their overriding curricula, or perhaps explore why popular culture studies may still be valid if not a fit with specific curricula (554).”

Optimistically, Stevens sees her experiment as a success, declaring the students proved themselves to be more than just couch potatoes indulging in guilty pleasures, but individuals with the capacity to analyze beyond the sheer enjoyment of pop culture and to move into the world of scholastic advancement (554). Hers is a conditional optimism: it takes a certain kind of curriculum and a certain kind of class dynamic to work.

Stevens’s experiment shows students in a setting that was guided by a highly defined set of questions and independent group work. However, there are other applications that can be administered, as in the short example from Hunt and Hunt, that are aimed at drawing out a larger discussion about literary curriculum that is supplemented by *South Park* with all of its potency and relevant themes.

One educator, Katherine Richardson Bruna, has used the show in her class as a means to rile up students and to get them to think about the wider consequences of their lack of knowledge: “It can’t be denied that the show, with all its irreverence and vulgarity (in fact because of its irreverence and vulgarity), causes one to think. The very premise of a community in which the children are always surprised and outraged by the ignorance of their parents is itself a commentary on how U.S. society socializes its members into ‘unseeing’ (693).” The outrage that Richardson Bruna speaks of is a
critical element of the show and how it promotes dialogue amongst younger people. This is a positive attribute because it forces younger people to be aware of their surroundings and how to question things they have or haven’t been told yet. The same should be promoted in the classroom, where students are continually finding out new information, sometimes on subjects that they have already learned about in their educational or social past.

Richardson Bruna’s mission in the use of *South Park* is purely from a critical standpoint that attempts to give students the ability to see beyond the pale of their own sheltered existences and into the realm of wider social and intellectual consequences. Ultimately, her aim is to allow for a democratic classroom: one that is crafted to understanding via exploring multiple perspectives safely and respectfully in order to create meaning in the minds of students (695). This is a highly active pedagogical strategy designed to break down prejudices and fear, which requires input from all members and ideally benefits students’ analytic capacities. While some students may choose to remain passive and perform the bare minimum of analysis in the classroom, the hope remains that those students will still remember and pause to think more deeply about topics both close and far from their consciousnesses.

The jokes and storylines of *South Park* are geared towards thinking about subjects that are socially charged. Issues such as freedom of expression, immigration and immigrant labor, political activism, gay marriage, the democratic process, etc., are all featured within the show’s fifteen seasons. David Curtis and Gerald Erion see this wide selection of topics summoned by Stone and Parker as indicative of the spirit of
democracy in the minds of Karl Popper and Thomas Jefferson (112). In addition, what makes the show interesting for use in the classroom is that while the presentation of any given subject/topic/issue is heavily mocked for weakness of argument or lack of credible backing, it is an anti-fanatical stance that forces viewers to form opinions on matters that they may have otherwise passively accepted as truth or morally virtuous. In promoting the open society, as argued by Curtis and Erion (112-113), educators may be able to create a “democratic classroom,” where authority does not mandate truth but helps facilitate the meaning making-process. Imagine an entry-level college literature classroom environment typically described in terms of silence or frustration transformed into one of open dialogue and the fearless search of making meaning. When students confident and comfortable to voice their own opinions, educators are able to do more than just close reading. They are able to discuss deeper themes and meanings.

Students benefit from acquiring or honing analytical skills that teach them to weigh evidence and look for clues into texts that may have been obscured by self-imposed intimidation generated by traditional grade-school pedagogies. In effect, teachers can aid in the ideological becoming of their students, a concept explicated by Bakhtin and explored by Ball and Freedman: “In Bakhtinian writings, ideological becoming refers to how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas…it is also important to note that the concept of ideological becoming does not refer to the development of isolated concepts or ideas. Bakhtin and his followers are interested in the development of the whole person and his/her complex ideas and concepts (5).” This relates to more than just a way of processing information. It relates to the way students
cultivate academic confidence and abilities hidden within them and blocked by
institutional methods of teaching.

James Rennie sees *South Park* fundamentally challenging well entrenched notions
of institutional education in “‘You know, I Learned Something Today…’ Cultural
Pedagogy and the Limits of Formal Education in *South Park*.” Rennie claims the
ineffectual teachers of South Park Elementary provide a commentary on how the
education system has failed to reach children of this nation in an effective way: “With its
narrative reliance on the schoolhouse, Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s *South Park* routinely
undermines the pedagogical influence and function of formal education. From Chef’s
paternal advice to the life-changing results of Internet searches, the most important
lessons come from the least likely of sources (195).” The boys receive their ideological
becoming mostly outside of the classroom, and “they discuss matters among themselves
with a degree of sophistication teachers and parents rarely recognize (Rennie 196).” The
reflection the boys experience after their adventures is the result of being thrown into
countless situations that they would have otherwise been sheltered from in the class.
And, in reality, the shock that adults feel when children reveal “adults-only” information
only leads to panic and more sheltering in the home and in the classroom (198). This is
not in my opinion, so much of an attack on the educators and administrators of public
education. Rather, these statements argue that children have access to information that is
beyond the curricular standards that the public school system offers (or even wants to
offer for that matter).
This is not to say that formal education has failed children in aiding their development into individual thinkers with high intellectual capacities. The problem is much more complex given the dramatic spending cuts in public education. Without the proper funding, teachers are forced to teach in conditions that are not conducive to learning. As well, harsh economic realities at home hamper many students from performing at optimal levels. However, to engage children and young adults in developing their ideological becoming and honing their analytical skills, children and young adults must be recognized for their potential as thinkers and as human beings. *South Park* as an educational tool has the capacity to level out the intellectual and ideological grounds in the college classroom. It has the capacity to aid in further development of analytical skills that are much needed in the transition from high school to post-secondary education. By using such an easily recognizable and versatile pop-culture artifact, students may gain valuable skills and retain messages created in meaning-making, open-ended classroom lessons.
Up to this point I’ve explored various aspects of using *South Park* in the classroom. By explaining the show in terms of Bakhtin’s concepts of language and meaning making in a satirical or parodic sense, the case can be made that there are places of intertextuality between the literary arts and current popular culture artifacts. In looking at the academic and philosophical conversations, there seems to be a significant interest in the show and what it has to offer the intellectual world. And, by providing various examples of the show’s ups and downs, there is enough evidence to glean that there needs to be further exploration into the potential benefits of the show in the classroom setting of post-secondary English Literature courses.

Parody is often implemented into *South Park*’s dialogues and visual gags to provide social critique, sometimes in the form of references to literary texts that are highly used in English classes. A prime example of this strategy is found in the episode “Britney’s New Look” from season 12. This episode highlights the climax of Shirley Jackson’s short story, “The Lottery.” While the full connection between these two artifacts is brief, the impact is large in signifying themes of violence normalized by custom and who may become the target of such violence. However, these themes in Jackson’s story have evaded readers and critics. Shirley Jackson’s story has left some past audiences shocked, angered and baffled by its normalized violence in “The Lottery.” However, the dialogue in “Britney’s New Look” reveals this theme explicitly to the
audience and parodies Jackson at the same time. By intersecting the episode with “The Lottery,” the show becomes an asset in the classroom to help discussion, and aid in crafting interpretations of Jackson’s timeless tale.

Much of the episode revolves around the media and public’s obsession with celebrity meltdowns. From the beginning of the episode, the South Park boys find out that a distraught Britney Spears is hiding out in their town, and they decide to make easy money by taking a compromising photo of Spears. The plan, however, backfires, and Spears attempts suicide right in front of them via shotgun in the mouth. Spears miraculously survives but is missing the top half of her head, and is immediately thrust back into the media spotlight because of her “new look,” which is criticized as a fashion faux pas. This segues into other criticisms about her weight, “boob job scars” and her overall mental state. Stan and Kyle, full of guilt and remorse, try to help by attempting to take her to the North Pole so she will no longer be harassed by the press and hounded by the paparazzi. However, a network of people ranging from teachers, the elderly, civil servants and even their parents, track them down. And when the mob finds them, the boys are in for a terrible surprise.

The sinister element of harassing and ridiculing Britney Spears is revealed when the boys are stopped in an open field adjacent to a small village. The boys learn that Britney Spears was chosen to be the human sacrificed for the benefit of the corn harvest. Here the parody of the climax from “The Lottery” takes full form, with adaptations of its dialogue: “Sacrifice in March, corn have plenty starch,” modified from the original text that says “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon (Jackson 3).” Characters such as “Old
Man Warner” also appear in modified form, with the same complaints about the “old ways” (Jackson 3). In an attempt to stop the nonsensical act of human sacrifice, Kyle utters Mrs. Hutchinson’s final words of “This isn’t fair” (Jackson 5) as he tries to reason with a crowd that is ready to kill Spears. However, instead of stoning Spears to death, the citizens of South Park all pick up cameras with bright flashes and surround her until she is overcome and dies from the stress of having her picture taken again and again. The episode closes with the people of South Park enjoying a bountiful corn harvest, and in a foreshadowing of the next harvest season, video clips of Miley Cyrus appear on the supermarket television. “Looks like next year’s harvest will be even better,” states Randy Marsh, as he leads the store’s customers and staff in a disturbing high pitched chant.

Two analytical frameworks can help construct a discussion surrounding the connection between the episode and Jackson’s story. The primary means of analysis comes from Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque. This is demonstrated in the way Stone and Parker intentionally exaggerate the treatment of Britney Spears in the episode. This is done to an excessive degree in order to make a statement about the treatment of celebrities in crisis by mainstream media platforms and their viewing audiences. The moments of parody in the episode share interpretive messages with the story, including but not limited to violence legitimized by tradition and ritualized in a public environment.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, concepts of heteroglossia as found in “Discourse and the Novel” that relate to the simultaneous unification and stratification of language (272) can be related between the story and the episode. The episode’s use of
“The Lottery” can be used in the classroom to discern why Stone and Parker reference Jackson explicitly, and the implications of such a reference. The main question is why the language of “The Lottery” appears in a cartoon that focuses on the attention placed on the downfall of celebrities, and what is the ultimate outcome. Is Stone and Parker’s use of the language of the story appropriate, and does it parallel the story enough to garner a productive conversation about “The Lottery” in a classroom setting? How do the common languages of the story and the episode align, and do they further our understanding of the story, or is the episode creating too much of a stereotype about society’s penchant for normalized violence to be effective?

The carnivalesque is prevalent in the episode as it builds up to the climax of Spears’ demise. Primarily, the placement of the drama within the town of South Park sets the stage for a carnival-like atmosphere filled with news reports about Spears and all her mistakes. An abundance of paparazzi follows her around and the townspeople’s delirious reaction is both comical and simultaneously telling of the current state of celebrity culture. As explained by Alison Halsall, the town itself is “both every place and no place. It is a small, suburban town that Parker and Stone use to project and exaggerate many of the qualities—and particularly the flaws—that they see typifying U.S. society” (25). Therefore the carnival-like atmosphere that is caused by Spears’ presence in South Park represents how celebrities alter how “everyday” people behave socially; and the generic stage of the town allows Stone and Parker to mock the mainstream media’s focus on celebrities (and for many, their downfall) as well as the American public’s captivation with such media content. Reports on Spears’s behaviors and most miniscule of flaws
interrupt the flow of social life and more pressing matters. This is portrayed in the episode by loud and obnoxious breaking news reports titled “BRITNEY WATCH!” that take precedence over other relevant reports.

The content of these news reports about Spears’ downfall include the lower bodily functions featured in the carnivalesque’s use of the grotesque. The first reports include her peeing on a ladybug, which leads to a slurry of insults from the newscasters. Other “BRITNEY WATCH!” moments further focus on Spears’ imperfect body: one reporter spots a “boob-job scar,” another zooms in on a zit, just to name two of the less vulgar moments. These specific flaws are carnivalesque and grotesque. In terms of the lower “imperfect body” that reduces Spears from idol to human. At the same time the criticisms aimed at Spears are a critique aimed at consumers of such mainstream media.

Spears, who was one of the most well known and popular pop stars in the late nineties to early 2000’s, experienced a fall from grace that was widely publicized by a variety of media outlets. Much of this publicity focused on the seemingly inconsequential aspects of her physical fitness and fashion/style choices. “Britney’s New Look” is a play on Spear’s choice to shave her head when she was in the middle of personal crisis. In a short period of time, Spears went from media darling to a subject of ridicule and revulsion in the mainstream media. Thus, Spears is at once the point of pity for Stone and Parker, as well as an example of the reversal of fortune and power exemplified by the theatrics of the carnivalesque.

Simultaneously, the complicity of the public in consuming such reports complicates the issue further. All the citizens in South Park, with the exception of the
boys after they see Spears’ attempted suicide, are drawn to the “BRITNEY WATCH!” reports as if nothing else matters. When the boys are watching presidential primary debates with Randy Marsh and the debates are interrupted for a “BRITNEY WATCH!,” Randy almost leaps out of his chair with excitement. He exclaims, “She’s such a train wreck!” with a huge smile on his face, demonstrating the delight the public expresses when someone from a higher social standing falls from grace. This is one of the most complex parts of a carnivalesque interpretation of such a moment. On one side of the spectrum, Randy, the lower-middle class symbol of “every person,” enjoys the spectacle of Spears’ fall from celebrity and the ridicule placed upon her. This could be considered the original tradition of the carnival when for a short period of time someone who enjoys the privileges of the upper class has their privileges revoked. However, the portrayal of his glee is not painted as a victory for the lower classes by Stone and Parker; rather, it is shown as one of the ugly sides of American culture. Spears, obviously down from all the negative attention, cannot escape from the gaze of millions of people.

All of the occasions in the episode where Spears is ridiculed leads up to the final scenes, where the parody of “The Lottery” is justified for all of the focus surrounding Spears’ downfall is made known. Randy Marsh explains to the boys: “The truth is that Britney Spears was chosen a long time ago to be adored and built up, and eventually sacrificed for harvest.” Another adult from the crowd pipes up: “We Americans like to think we’re civilized, but our lust for blood and torture is no different than in gladiator times.” The character most closely resembling “Old Man Warner” from “The Lottery” chimes in to give a solidified moment of parody: “Back in my day we used to pick a
person by lottery and stone them to death!” While the story takes its time to lead into this moment, the purpose of Spears’ treatment becomes a multi-faceted metaphor for socialized violence that has existed for thousands of years.

Jackson’s story, which was first published in 1948 for the New Yorker, left readers left in a state of shock by way the story made such a brutal act as stoning a fellow community member seem so routine (Griffin 45). In its wake, Jackson received many negative responses to the story, obviously indicating that she had struck a chord with the reading public: “Of the three-hundred-odd letters I received that summer, I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from friends” (qtd. in Coulthard 227). However, the story has stood the test of time. It is being taught in English classes (I recall my first reading of the story in my junior year of high school), and has found its way into contemporary media like South Park.

Since its publication and after the controversy somewhat subsided, there have been a multitude of interpretations surrounding the events in the story. A.R. Coulthard sums up the story with this interpretation: “‘The Lottery’ expresses Shirley Jackson’s abysmal view of her fellow creatures. Her simple villagers are not brainwashed victims but bloodthirsty victimizers,” and “[‘The Lottery’] is not the story of a custom that makes no sense, but one that fulfills a deep and horrifying need. (228)” Amy A. Griffin from Schreiner College interprets the act of stoning Mrs. Hutchinson as “ritual,” as opposed to murder because it was performed by the entire town, and revealed the need for belonging through ritual (45). These two examples show a spectrum of responses to
the story and leaves room for discussion concerning personal responses and interpretations.

As a nod to Jackson’s story, Stone and Parker state in their commentary of the episode that the choice to parody “The Lottery” was not at all arbitrary. Rather, it was an intentional strategy to parody a complex story to make a larger statement. In the bonus commentary of “Britney’s New Look” from the *South Park* Season 12 DVD set, writer Matt Stone notes a distinct difference in comedic style in the episode and its use of “The Lottery”: “It was a show that was less about the joke and more about the point.” But what was the point, exactly? The choice to use “The Lottery” in such a carnivalesque way was to say, as Trey Parker said in the last part of the episode’s commentary was: “We are responsible for this.” By simultaneously implicating both the media and the consumers of that media, the responsibility of turning Spears into a darling and then into an outcast is similar to Griffin and Coulthard’s interpretations of the normalization of a violent ritual in “The Lottery” by a fictional township.

The citizens of *South Park* (and therefore, mainstream society) are not passive participants in a violent tradition but active agents in Spears’ demise, making them inherently violent not only as a group, but as individuals as well. The other aspect, as Griffin suggests of “The Lottery,” is that Spears’ demise is a point of unity for the people of *South Park*. It is something that common people can access and get behind, in order to make their lives seem more substantial and rewarding than the life of a pop star. And, albeit begrudgingly, the boys who at first tried to rescue Spears from the madness and
brutality of the media spotlight succumb to the tradition and fall in line with the social order.

What we are left with when comparing the two episodes is an intertextual interpretation of Jackson’s words through a contemporary referent conveyed both by images and utterances that are ultimately a heteroglot of the language of “normalcy” and balance that stands in opposition to the extravagant and unstable celebrity life. The visual serves primarily as a means of drawing audiences’ attention by fictionalizing reality. However, the fictionalized reality portrayed in the show is allegorical to the reality seen in mainstream entertainment media. This is where the tensions of heteroglossic language come into play, especially when considering the messages of the show and the story. Bakhtin argues that the unity of our understanding of a common language is not something that is inherent within us, but it is something that we gain over time through exposure and socialized teachings. Therefore, while there is a common understanding of language through an accepted code of linguistic conventions, there is a simultaneous tension between conversational language and literary language (270). In our case the tensions of language involve works of literature versus a television show notoriously known for its use of foul language.

However, there is a unity between the two “languages,” in that neither is neutral: “We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life (271).” In this case, the “language of a world view” for both Jackson and
Stone and Parker seems to be that humankind has a violent streak, and that violent streak is forgiven as long as it is found to be socially acceptable and there is a proper form of ritual or convention that gives the violence structure.

Yet under this unity there still is difference, as Bakhtin identifies language as a dynamic system of understanding that is altered at every word spoken. These principles of Bakhtin’s philosophy is reliant on countless factors, but he identifies key points in “Discourse in the Novel”:

> At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word (according to formal linguistic markers, especially phonetically), but also-and for us this is the essential point-into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, “professional” and “generic” languages, languages of generations, and so forth. (271-272)

For me, the most interesting distinction between languages is between socioeconomic demographics and those of the different generations. If we stop to consider these distinctions between writers, we must identify who they are, where they came from, and in what era did they created their respective works. Jackson, a respected female writer, published the story less than five years after the end of World War II. She was also highly educated and lived amongst some of the most acclaimed figures in American literature, including her husband Stanley Hyman and Ralph Ellison (shirleyjackson.org). The other writers, Stone and Parker, were both born after Jackson’s death and attended a four year college before creating the *South Park* franchise. They also have produced musicals, full-length films, and other comedy series. While all the individuals in question
have had prolific careers in their respective arts, the difference in their language can
greatly be attributed to gender, life experience, class, and generation.

Furthermore, the format of the two artifacts in question implies more questions
concerning the language(s) within each text. While the moments of parody in “Britney’s
New Look” are not designed to mock Jackson, there is a large divide between the form
and content between the two. One is a short story that was published in a periodical in
the late forties, and is a combined total of five pages long. While it is a short story, the
themes and the characters created by Jackson have had a lasting impact. The other text
comes in the form of an animated cartoon that has been both celebrated and scorned for
its brashness and disregard for social niceties. The contrast between mediums is obvious;
however, the intent between the two is very different. Jackson claimed to have written
the story not to cause a stir, and just considered it a story (Coulthard 227), whereas Stone
and Parker deliberately stir the pot to get reactions out of people.

As well, Stone and Parker’s penchant for libertarian principles of personal
responsibility complicate the interpretation of the climactic moments of “The Lottery.”
How can we really say, “We are all to blame” for Britney’s Spears’ treatment in the
media? This is a broad indictment of the character of the American public. Such
thinking silences those even in the smallest of circles who have spoken out against the
cruel and pernicious sentiments expressed against Spears or other celebrities in crisis.
While silence can equate to complicity, not all have been silent or complicit and many
chose not to participate in the consumption of mainstream entertainment media. The
notion of the public’s moral obligation to stop celebrity bashing because of its inherently violent nature dramatically alter the way we should compare the two texts.

Specifically, we need to identify dissent against acts of violence between the two stories. In “The Lottery,” the resistant to the annual harvest ritual of human sacrifice is distant. Gossip of ending the tradition is talked about in the story: “‘They do say,’ Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, that over in the north village they’re talking of giving up the lottery (Jackson 4).” The South Park boys are more active in resisting violence, going to great lengths to shelter Britney Spears from the hoards of paparazzi. They are vocal in their opposition, as exemplified by Kyle in the episode’s climax. As well, in “The Lottery,” Mrs. Hutchinson only resists violence when she is subjected to it (Jackson 7). So there is a stark difference in the two texts when it comes to forming the language of resistance to and participation in acts of ritualized violence: in South Park, the boys try to make a difference by doing what they can to stop the ritual, and the only character directly involved in try to stop the ritual in “The Lottery” is the one character who is about to receive the brunt of the ritual’s violence.

Despite these differences, there still is the heteroglossic unity of a common language, which becomes one of the most valuable aspects when considering using “Britney’s New Look” as a tool for interpreting “The Lottery” in a classroom. South Park not only references “The Lottery,” it directly ties its tropes into the episode near its conclusion. In doing so, Stone and Parker make connections between the violence inherent to humankind, and how ritual or socially contrived practices grant groups of people grounds for perpetrating acts of violence. Jackson’s story ends with the implied
act of stoning Mrs. Hutchinson to death and in “Britney’s New Look,” Britney Spears is photographed to death, both implying the need for a violent release by a community in order to renew and thrive as a unified body of people.
CONCLUSION: POTENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO “BRITNEY’S NEW LOOK” AND “THE LOTTERY.”

In terms of practically using the two texts in the classroom, I would suggest an independent reading at home or in class. Naturally, the group would convene after to discuss the story in order to assess the overall comprehension level of the group. A set of guided questions may be issued with the reading to help facilitate meaning making and interpreting the story, or not, just depending on the direction the instructor desires to take. The episode should be viewed as a final step to connect the abstract concepts of Jackson’s story to a contemporary narrative of pop culture. An in-depth session would use the entire episode to explore themes of normalized violence to build a connection to the climax, and a summation might just use the final scenes to connect the direct references of “The Lottery.”

Many simple outlines of how to integrate “Britney’s New Look” with a lesson on “The Lottery” can be constructed. This study, however, does not intend to be a proposed lesson plan. Nor is this study intended to be a definitive guide for teachers. There are more vital questions to provide insight on the usefulness of South Park to allow teachers to decide the value South Park may have in an institutional setting. Questions posed by Stevens in her work with popular culture in the classroom can provide a basis for analysis for Bakhtinian analysis of the two artifacts. While I have cited Stevens’s work as a model for using pop culture artifacts in the class to create critical discussions, they should be applied to “Britney’s New Look” and “The Lottery.” I cite Stevens’s study as an
example for creating structure to a lesson and a means to build discussions to Bakhtinian analysis.

Specifically, Stevens has two primary questions that are the basis for approaching the structure of lessons using pop culture in a lesson. The first is, “What planning must occur that is unique to popular culture lessons (553)?” The plot and dialogue from “Britney’s New Look” has points that can be aligned with “The Lottery.” The moments of parody where South Park plays on the end of Jackson’s story have the potential to frame a perspective around the idea of ritualized violence. Where Jackson’s tale is somewhat mysterious as to why the lottery takes place, Stone and Parker very explicitly give reasons why Britney Spears was selected for sacrifice.

That is not to say that the situation they craft isn’t absurd. Further preparation that could be unique to this lesson is an exploration into the carnivalesque and grotesque sequences of the episode. The social satire surrounding South Park’s outrageous treatment of celebrity culture may serve as a benefit or as detraction. Discussing Spears’ treatment should serve a function, but students need to voice their opinions on the episode’s jargon. As this occurs, hopefully students will both find humor as well as a social statement. Beyond the exaggerated portrayal of both Spears and the paparazzi, there needs to be a substantial connection that helps to clarify some of Jackson’s cryptic themes embedded in “The Lottery.” Using a contemporary referent that satirizes the famous and well-taught story allows for a connection to themes that speak to human nature.
By implementing parody in the lesson, transitions from the texts can become another area of learning. Critical thinking moments can occur when considering the differences between the two stories. What makes sense to the students? What is confusing or seems unnecessary to them? What in the world does Britney Spears and how we treat celebrities have to do with Jackson’s townspeople and their morbid rites? The answers have a potentially wide spectrum. For some students, it may make sense and for others the answers may not be so clear. Instructors must be able to recognize congruencies between the episode’s construction of Britney Spears’s treatment by the public and the reference to “The Lottery’s” harvest ritual. They must also be prepared to help students make the connections if the show’s format or theatrics become too dominant in the minds of some students.

Stevens’s second question concerning how lessons incorporating popular culture fit into existing curricula (553) should be addressed in terms of how it applies to curricular standards. NCTE sets two vital elements as standards for teaching that are appropriate for this proposed lesson. The first element stipulates: “Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features” (ncte.org). The second stipulations states: “Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge” (ncte.org). For students, their prior experience with the show
and their knowledge of celebrity life and specifically Britney Spears is meant to be an asset to comprehending the themes from “The Lottery.” Students will be using another technological resource in the lesson in the form of video, a standard that adheres to the aforementioned NCTE standards.

The NCTE also states in one of its primary standards that literacy is a shared responsibility. By engaging students in discussions about the connections between the two texts, students have an opportunity to take ownership of their literacy by affirming some of their knowledge outside of class, assisting their learning and the learning of their classmates. The hope and intent of this proposed lesson is to help students feel less inclined to dismiss the story and let the teacher “tell them” what it is about. “Britney’s New Look” may be able to draw out some ideas and opinions that might otherwise not be contemplated by individual students and the class itself.

Teachers like Hunt and Hunt or Hart suggest that South Park is art that should be considered when teaching post-secondary aged students because of the opportunity it presents to teach satire and parody in relation to literature. Nixon, along with Curtis and Erion suggests that the dialogue produced by utilizing South Park not only presents the possibility of connecting with students’ knowledge outside of the classroom but also creates an environment of mutual respect between teachers and students. The positive elements that come with these strategies are worthwhile for students to demonstrate their knowledge they have learned outside the classroom and for teachers to create integrations between the show and existing curricula. However, the risks teachers must take by using a South Park episode in a lesson on literature should be weighed before implementation.
Integrating *South Park* into lesson plans presents challenges that stem from the show’s controversial nature. While some teachers such as Hunt or Hart find the show entertaining and provocative, critics of the show point to ethical considerations that may present problems inside a classroom. Catherine Yu argues that the show’s emphasis on phthonic humor makes us question if it’s even okay to enjoy the show on an entertainment level. Mark Wiener finds Stone and Parker’s Libertarian streak bothersome, and is not convinced that their stereotype of Asian people is funny or thought provoking. Sienkiewicz and Marx recognize many of the stereotypes on the show are plays on the prejudices that created the stereotypes. However, they cannot lose sight of the notion that inversion can be lost on some audience members, ultimately reinscribing stereotypes the show may have been trying to dispel.

Furthermore, it is not the intent of this study to tell teachers how to run their classes or that this approach will work for all situations. Nor does this study assume that all teachers and students have a vested interest in translating popular culture into literary analysis. Rather, it is merely an examination of how *South Park* may have value in English Literature classes given the linguistic traits of heteroglossia, parody and the carnivalesque identified by Bakhtin and expounded by Bonsetter and Halsall. To use *South Park* for an English Literature class, teachers must thoughtfully consider how to make the show work in the most favorable way possible. In doing so, *South Park*’s methods of parody have the potential to be a great tool and asset for teaching, as well as introduce a different way of critical thinking that is both accessible to students and teachers.
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22 January 2012.


