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**Rhetoric in Comedy: How Comedians Use Persuasion and How Society  
Uses Comedians**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the 1970's, stand-up comedy has been a prominent part of society. Stand-up comedy has grown and progressed with the rest of the world, but one of the things that has remained constant throughout this performance art is the need for one to possess the ability to persuade an audience. This paper looks to analyze how comedy acts as a rhetorical tool for society, using expectancy violation theory to do so. This paper also looks into what can build a connection between a comedian and his or her audience. It will also use the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories to discuss what makes comedy successful. This paper also seeks to rhetorically analyze comedy as a tool of persuasion, using the belief system of the ancient Greek rhetor Isocrates, putting into practice the findings through a text of an original stand-up comedy performance by the author.

**INTRODUCTION**

There are two statements that sum up the culmination of everything that is stand-up comedy and how it is relevant to society. The first is from comedian and author Jay Sankey (1998), who tells us that “[n]obody chooses to be a comic. It’s so difficult and, at times, so amazingly unrewarding, that the only people who do it are people who don’t merely want to do it, but for some reason, must.” (p. 6) Andrea Greenbaum (1999), in the *International Journal of Humor Research*, says that

stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision. (p. 33)

Herein lie the beginnings of what we understand to be the use of persuasion in the foundation of stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy is not about simply convincing an audience that you are funny, although that is necessary; it is also about teaching the audience that there is a different way to think about things. Consequently, stand-up comedy is about getting an audience to think about things the way you have set before them. A true stand-up comic will listen for a joke everywhere and will therefore find jokes everywhere (Sankey, 1998), much

like a true rhetorician will listen for and find persuasion everywhere. It is some how even more than this, though. Ancient rhetors like Isocrates and Gorgias believed in rhetoricians as rare people; these are the kinds of people that make successful comedians (Matsen, Rollinson, Sousa, 1990).

This paper looks to inspect stand-up comedy as the rhetorical discourse society may not see it as (Greenbaum, 1999). In a world where growing up has turned into a dreaded phenomenon, comics, and their comedy, are often the light at the end of a seemingly endless tunnel. But how is it that we can enjoy something of which we have such little understanding? How can we enjoy or understand something we see as somehow inconsequential to our society's formation? By coming to a more full understanding of the artful discipline of stand-up comedy and how it uses rhetoric, we will be able to have a fuller appreciation for what stand-up comics have done not only for our society but also for the individual.

This understanding cannot be reached without a prior knowledge of the primary aspects of rhetoric and persuasion that are necessary for stand-up comedy to work. To accomplish this task, this paper discusses four humor theories that are accepted in the field of rhetoric. With this theoretical knowledge in hand, this paper goes on to discuss how each of these theories works in the world of stand-up comedy and how, therefore, rhetoric and comedy must go hand-in-hand. This paper also briefly explores the history of stand-up comedy in America in hopes of offering the reader a more comprehensive grasp of how inherently relevant comedy is to our society. Once these assertions have been made, analyses of comedy as a rhetorical discourse will be presented to give the reader a clearer awareness of all other arguments made previously in this paper. Following these discussions, arguments, and analyses, the reader will be able to read, with a rhetorical comprehension of stand-up comedy, a transcript of a stand-up comedy routine written by the author of this paper. From all of this, the reader will not only understand how comedy functions as a tool of rhetoric but also how it functions as a tool of society.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

Comedy is designed to make people laugh. Comedians are designed to make comedy. What else is there? The first step is to compare stand-up comedy to the classical side of rhetoric. This included quite a bit of research in the field of comedy itself. For this study, I watched several different comedians perform different sketches, including Brian Regan, Bob Newhart, Red Skelton, and a slew of comedians featured in a documentary called *I Am Comic*. The professional comedians featured in this documentary expressed their feelings for

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performing stand-up much in the same way I and my peers express our feelings for practicing rhetoric in our own fields. In watching these sketches and attending a live comedy night hosted at Georgia College and State University, I began noticing connections between the performance art I was seeing and the classical rhetoric I have spent the last few years studying. Through these connections, I was able to draw my own conclusions and hypotheses about the relationship of rhetoric to comedy.

After this preliminary research had taken place, I began the task of building my own original performance. In order to effectively analyze stand-up comedy as a persuasive tool of rhetoric, I had to have my own set fully completed. This process was both tedious and extraordinarily fun. I looked to other comics when deciding what types of material would be both appropriate and decidedly humorous for my audience. I took in some interesting literature on the art and science of composing, performing, and perfecting stand-up comedy (Sankey, 1998). With the help and inspiration of *I Am Comic*, *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy*, and numerous other texts and stand-up performances, I was able to put together a fairly good amateur stand-up routine. Once the set was entirely composed, I could begin to discuss how rhetoric had been used not only in the process but also how it would be used in the actual performance. To do this analysis, I did some research into the history of stand-up comedy in America. I also looked back to classes I had previously taken at Georgia College and State University and pulled from my own knowledge of rhetoric. The bulk of this research employed specific humor theories, which are discussed below, beginning with superiority theory.

### SUPERIORITY THEORY

Thomas Hobbes, a superiority theorist, describes this theory as the glory we feel when we identify ourselves as having superiority, or supremacy, over others. Both Plato and Aristotle also recognize this theory as something that fuels humor through feelings of aggression (Smuts, 2009). That is to say, the superiority theory supports the idea that certain things are found to be humorous when an audience feels victorious (Meyer, 2000). It could be argued that all forms of humor, even the most subtle, are simply developments of this theory and that “the pleasure we take in humor derives from our feeling of superiority over those we laugh at” (Monro, 1997).

The superiority theory can be found in stand-up through stories in which we laugh at a comedian because the aftermath of a story being told has never happened to us; we feel that we are above such humiliation. It could also be argued, though, that a stand-up comic tells a story because it is one through which he or she feels superior. In his book *Zen and the Art of Stand-Up Comedy*,

Sankey (1998) says that in his experience, the majority of stand-up comics are “extremely sensitive, relatively insecure, very insightful, highly intelligent people” (p. 5). Thus it becomes easier to understand why a stand-up comic would subconsciously use the superiority theory. He or she becomes funny by telling stories that may or may not be about his or her own life but that persuade an audience to laugh *with* him or her, rather than at him or her. Even with this understanding of how superiority theory can work successfully in comedy, one main argument against it is that it almost completely overlooks incongruity theory.

### INCONGRUITY THEORY

Unlike superiority theory, incongruity theory seems to cover almost all cases of humor, not just those in which feelings of triumph are present (Smuts, 2009). Incongruity theory works much like Judee Burgoon’s expectancy violations theory. Much as the name of Burgoon’s theory suggests, expectancy violations theory deals with what happens to our communication when what we think will happen does not (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The incongruity theory of humor works in much the same way. Immanuel Kant (1790) describes it quite eloquently in his book *Critique of Judgment* in which he says, “In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (p. 54). Put more simply, incongruity theory is put into practice when humor is found by an event that was not expected, something absurd. Incongruity theory is also described through the experience of finding surprising connections between ideas (Monro, 1988). With all of these varying explanations, incongruity theory is one that may seem difficult to grasp. The general consensus, though, is that things are incongruous and, as a result, funny when they are surprising. It can also be argued that the incongruity theory works when comedians bring to our attention thoughts we ourselves have had before but we were unable to turn into a joke. In some way, it surprises us that the joke works because we were not able to build it, but it is successful because we connect with it. Jeff Foxworthy may have put it best when he said, “Everyone has that thought. Comedians learn to grab it” (Foxworthy, 2010). This kind of focus on the unexpected lends to the understanding of the third major humor theory, relief theory.

### RELIEF THEORY

The relief theory of humor describes laughter as a release of excess energy (Smuts, 2009). The relief theory, according to Sigmund Freud, is based

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on the argument that there are three distinct sources of laughter: joking, humor, and the comic, the last of which this paper focuses on. Though each one of these sources differ, they all share the commonality of energy being dispelled from the body through the act of laughter. For the purposes of this research, we will simply focus on the comic. When stand-up comics begin to tell their audiences a story or “bit,” as it is technically named, they are proposing some kind of intellectual challenge with which the audience must keep up. When the bit has ended, the audience experiences relief in the knowledge that they have successfully solved the challenge. This relief allows the audience to release their extra cognitive energy in the form of laughter (Freud, 1905). This argument is supported through stand-up in that comics will tell intricate stories that force the audience to think. The audience is only allowed to enjoy the joke when they understand it. An audience responds once stand-up has been performed, not before (Roy, 2010). The shortcoming of the relief theory is in its inability to distinguish humorous laughter from non-humorous laughter (Smuts, 2009). That is to say, the relief theory only says that an audience will laugh; it does not specify whether it will be because something is comical or because the audience is relieved. Relief theory is the third and final humor theory that this paper uses to critically analyze comedy as a rhetorical discourse. From here, we will discuss one other major communication theory: Expectancy violations theory.

### **EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY**

As previously stated, the expectancy violations theory works much like the incongruity theory. One main difference, though, is that the expectancy violations theory is not particular to humor; it is a contemporary communication theory that can be applied to rhetorical situations. Expectancy violations theory is heavily based on the studies of personal space and proxemics, or the study of people’s use of space (Griffin, 2009). The key to the expectancy violations theory is the argument that when our expectations are violated, we have the choice of responding negatively or positively. A comic’s goal is to persuade his or her audience to respond positively to a violation of personal space or any other previously set expectation. If an audience responds negatively to a comic, the joke or set of jokes has not been successful. If the joke or set of jokes has not been successful, the comic has failed to persuade his or her audience to appreciate the comedy. The comic has failed to successfully use rhetoric.

### **BACKGROUND OF STAND-UP COMEDY IN AMERICA**

According to Lawrence Mintz, quoted in *American Quarterly* (1985), stand-up comedy may be “the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply

significant form of humorous expression.” Stand-up comedy boomed in America in the 1970s, though it had been largely popular before then. The mark this kind of performance made on society was incredible, to say the least. Although many of the most renowned comics of the late 1960s and 1970s may be somewhat forgotten, in studying, performing, and perfecting stand-up, it is important to understand the impact they made on the discipline.

From the 1950s to 1960s, comics known as “in one performers” became virtually obsolete; comedy was becoming more about talking with an audience than it was talking to a fellow performer onstage. From this point, comics went from telling jokes based around their everyday lives to turning their everyday lives into a joke. Stand-up comedy was about making a statement, be it political or petty, about things any audience could understand, even if it was not believable. In many cases, jokes were funny simply because they were outrageously unbelievable. The 1960s and 1970s were something of a cultural revolution, particularly for comedy. Some of the most well-known stand-up comics of all time flourished during this time period, completely changing both what qualified as stand-up as well as what audiences would expect and enjoy. Audiences today may sit and wonder when crude, sexual, and/or racist and sexist jokes became acceptable when the truth is that they almost always have been. As surprising as it may seem, even the earliest comics used material about girlfriends and wives in what were arguably disrespectful ways to make a joke. In this way, stand-up comedy became an experience outside of real-world anxieties. These kinds of jokes and commentaries were not supposed to be taken seriously. They were simply, for lack of a better word, jokes (Zoglin, 2008). Stand-up comedy has worked for decades because people like entertainment (Stebbins, 1990). It has changed, though, because the people being entertained have changed. The success of this industry fluctuates greatly because jokes that are constantly recycled quickly lose their zeal (Zoglin, 2008). In a business that depends on consistently changing variables, it makes sense that it is difficult to be considered a truly great comedian. Though the task to make people laugh seemed reasonably simple from the beginning, the job itself required intense discipline.

As cultures, traditions, generations, and taboos have changed, so has stand-up comedy, but one thing that has remained constant is the love the audiences have for comedians. We tell jokes that have been told to us, spreading the gift of comedy to countless individuals. Whether we enjoy these follies because we identify with them or because they are far outside of what we consider normal, we enjoy them enough to weave them into our daily existences.

## ANALYSIS

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The analysis section of this paper consists of two separate categories. The first of these categories is the analysis of how rhetoric is used to structure stand-up comedy and how a better understanding of rhetoric will ultimately result in a better career as a stand-up comic. The second category will be an in-depth analysis of my own original stand-up routine (See Appendix A), discussing how I used my knowledge of rhetoric in building the routine as well as how I plan to use rhetoric in delivering the material.

### **ANALYSIS OF COMEDY AS A RHETORICAL DISCOURSE**

The ancient Greek rhetor Isocrates, when discussing what makes an accomplished orator, states that the people in question must

have a natural aptitude for that which they have elected to do; secondly, they must submit to training and master the knowledge of their particular subject, whatever it may be in each case; and, finally, they must become versed and practised in the use and application of their art; for only on these conditions can they become fully competent and pre-eminent in any of endeavor. (Matsen, Rollinson, Sousa, 1990, pp. 47-48)

This statement is a belief about the nature of rhetoric that has survived through the centuries. Rhetoric is an art that needs to not only be natural; it should be learned and practiced as should any discipline that deserves to be taken seriously. The discipline of writing, performing, and perfecting stand-up comedy fits quite seamlessly into this description.

The first step to being a successful comedian is being funny. Some people are; some people are not. From the point of realizing one has the ability to make others laugh, he or she must begin the process of learning to write jokes, which is harder than it may sound. Thankfully, though, many comedians will admit to sharing the belief that what makes a comedian funny is much more his or her ability to tell a joke than the ability to actually write one, which goes back to the idea of the capability to be a rhetor, or in this case, comedian, being something innate (Matsen et al., 1990). That said, it is also important to remember that comedians are comedians because they tell jokes, not simply because they are good speakers.

Sarah Silverman, a popular female stand-up, said in regards to the delivery of material, "It's not really off the top of our [stand-up comics] heads" (2010). For a rhetorician, this has a lot to do with the stylistic devices of delivering material, whether it is a serious speech or a routine of stand-up comedy. This statement brings to our attention that what a comedian does is memorize a previously constructed manuscript and then make it sound as if it is completely



impromptu. As Sankey (1998) says, what “separates the men and women from the boys and girls is the ability to deliver a joke for the *six-hundredth* time and still make it look fresh and dewy” (p. 11). Though the material a comedian uses is rather different than the material a serious speaker uses, the method by which a comedy sketch is built is much like that which is used to build a speech. Much like rhetoricians, comedians need to have a point when developing their material. If all the jokes do not correlate, a comedian needs to be able to incorporate flawless transitions into his or her routine, even if these transitions are based off of audience responses. Like speeches, sets of jokes work better if there is a strong conclusion; where a speaker should anticipate questions, a comedian should anticipate hecklers and laughter. A comedian should perfect his or her eye contact just like any other speaker. Finally, just like any other speaker, a stand-up comedian should prepare until he or she can prepare no more (Bennett).

Something else to be recognized in the field of stand-up comedy is that a comedian needs to be able to command the attention of his or her audience. This realization even calls for some understanding of the differences in communication between genders. Because the everyday language or jargon men and women use may differ, so will the way in which they tell jokes. Just as the response will be different when men and women communicate in the workplace, jokes may be taken differently depending on the gender of the comedian (Arrighi, 2001). Regardless of the issue or gender, though, every comedian has to be able to be in control of his or her audience. Due to the mainly humorous nature of the content a comedian will be delivering, this control has to be taken gently, almost without the audience realizing it. A comedian’s audience should feel as if they are part of the sketch, not just responding to it.

With all of these elements, it becomes easier to see that stand-up comedy can be considered a discipline because it fits nicely into Isocrates’ theory of rhetoric. From this point, we can only go deeper into the strictly theoretical side of rhetoric in stand-up comedy. According to Aristotle, rhetoric is comprised of three artistic proofs: Ethos, pathos, and logos. Aristotle argues that while an understanding of all of these proofs is necessary for composing an effective speech, ethos is the most important because it establishes speaker credibility. He argues that it is speaker credibility that encourages the audience to listen to what is being said (Matsen, Rollinson, & Sousa, 1990). For the purposes of comic success, though, this paper ventures to argue that pathos would be the most important of the proofs. Pathos, the proof that deals with emotional appeals, supports the belief that in order to reach an audience, a speaker must move the soul of the listener, ultimately changing the frame of mind of the audience (Matsen et al, 1990). This movement, arguably, is what must happen for a stand-up comic to effectively persuade an audience that a certain joke is truly funny. While speaker

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credibility is important, in stand-up comedy the purpose of the performance is to convince, to persuade, to move an audience to see how something is funny from the comic's point of view. As Jim Gaffigan (2010) said, "They [the audience] can hate me. But they should like this joke." From here, we can move into a short explanation of how a stand-up comic might use each of the previously explained theories to construct sets of jokes.

As previously stated, the superiority theory revolves around the idea of bringing a sense of victory or glory over someone else to an audience (Meyer, 2000). One prime example of this is Brian Regan's sketch *Stupid in School*, which was released in 1997. The sketch revolves around Brian picking on his younger self for making what could be classified as "stupid" mistakes in elementary school. This sketch relates to the superiority theory because by belittling mistakes made by himself as a schoolchild, Regan places his audience above himself; he makes them superior. Interestingly enough, though, arguments could be made supporting other humor theories from this sketch as well. We can see the incongruity theory and expectancy violations theory in *Stupid in School* (Regan, 1997) in that jokes about children not being intelligent are not necessarily normal. We do not expect to hear Regan make fun of himself, or children like him, for not being able to keep up in school; the topic, though funny, is slightly incongruous and the fact that it does reach its audience so well violates expectations that we might have about what is acceptable to joke about. Lastly, the relief theory could be argued for this sketch in that the topic gets so out of control and ridiculous that we are fighting to keep up with where Regan's story is going. Consequently, we are also relieved when the sketch comes to a close because the incongruous topic that forces us to think we are superior is finished.

One thing that is so fantastic about Brian Regan's *Stupid in School* (1997) is that it manages to include each of the three main accepted humor theories as well as the expectancy violations theory. This makes this particular sketch interesting to analyze as a rhetorical artifact because it brings to our attention that despite the differences among these theories, they are able to come together effortlessly if a comedian is a rhetorician.

### ANALYSIS OF RHETORIC IN ORIGINAL STAND-UP (SEE APPENDIX A)

Found in Appendix A of this paper is a transcript of my original stand-up comedy routine, prepared for the presentation portion of this project. This analysis section of the paper is dedicated to that transcript; as formerly stated, the analyses of this paper were broken down into a specific analysis of rhetoric in stand-up comedy and a specific analysis of rhetoric in my own original stand-up. This section breaks down, using theories and ideas already introduced in this

paper, my stand-up routine so that it can be more clearly understood how I was able to incorporate my knowledge of the discipline of rhetoric into this performance.

At the beginning of the routine, I explain the pretense behind my stand-up, saying in some ways, I wanted to draw conclusions from my “experience here at Georgia College & State University.” The line that follows this one mentions that my college experience was funny, though not a joking matter, and will be featured in the comedy, but not much. This sentence, though not brimming with humor, does entail the incongruity theory in that I am virtually calling my college experience a joking matter. The relief theory comes into play when I admit to my audience that my college experience was not a joke. I had presented my audience with an incongruous scenario of my college career being a joke, a scenario that they thought they would have to follow when I mentioned it may be part of my performance. When it is brought to their attention that neither was my college career a joke nor will it be heavily included in the stand-up, this situation becomes humorous in a very minor way. The audience is both relieved that I am not actually going to challenge them with jokes belittling my time as a college student and surprised that such a connection was even made.

From this point on, the jokes get more ridiculous in nature. I mention my cat in a way that tries to personify her as a type of audience, primarily a “good” one. This joke makes use of the incongruity and expectancy violations theory. It is arguably safe to say that no single member of the audience expects the comparison of my cat to a good audience. This joke also leads to even the most subconscious of thought processes about what makes a good audience stand-up comedy and whether the single audience member is accomplishing that task.

The joke about my cat is purely a transitional joke; like a speech, my sketch is formulated into sections, and the first bit, or set of jokes centered on a single story or idea, requires a transition from the introductory joke. The bit to which this joke leads is based off of a quote by a well-known movie director. Because this is a set of jokes and not simply a one-liner, the analysis is slightly trickier to organize, so let us take it step by step. I begin the bit by explaining my educational background, and then connect this to a generational addiction to the internet. From this point, I discuss different elements of the internet that appeal to me personally. This introduction has already set up a spot for the incongruity theory, because no matter what comes next, it will not be completely related to my educational background or my internet habits. As expected I give credit to the internet for allowing me to see the quote which then allows for the rest of the joke to occur. The statement, “If you go home with someone and they don’t have any books, don’t sleep with them” (Waters) in and of itself is incongruous; when faced with the decision of beginning a relationship with another party, our

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automatic reaction is rarely to judge him or her on literary choices. Because of the lovely set up that this quote gives, I am able to form several jokes from this one sentence. The bit, focused on comparing choices of literature or movies to a person's worth in terms of intimate relationships is incongruous for all those listening; the connection can be made, but it is certainly a bit of a leap.

In this same bit, however, there is also a touch of the superiority theory. Part of the joke talks about the frivolity of lists made by women seeking potential life partners. When this is brought up in the sketch, my entire demeanor changes; I impersonate a vapid girl who seems to have no grasp on what actually matters in relationships or communication theory. This uses the superiority theory in that, after my audience analysis, it can be argued that the audience for which this sketch was built will feel triumph over this kind of vanity. This does not mean, however, that members of this audience have never made lists for potential mates before. If this is the case, the joke is funny because despite the knowledge that such lists have possibly been made, they have not been as thoughtless as the one created in the sketch.

After primarily using the incongruity theory and incorporating the superiority theory in this first bit, I move to a shorter joke that is still focused on the intellectual aspect of the bit that preceded it. This joke, a play off of a poorly titled article in a newspaper ("Missing Bush emails won't be released"), is explained in itself. This explanation causes the joke to be funny essentially because of the relief theory. For the audience members who kept up without the explanation, they are relieved and find humor in that they got it right. For the audience members who need the explanation, they are relieved and find humor in that a clarification was given and they can at least say they got the joke.

After this joke, I tell a simple one-liner that could have been found in a children's book, but I personalize it by telling it as if it were a true story between a close friend and me. This section uses the incongruity and expectancy violations theory because the audience may not be expecting me to throw children's jokes into the mix. To add flavor to these jokes, I admit that they are part of the sketch for the purpose of having something for people who do not understand the more intelligent jokes. This is funny to the audience members following the sketch well due to the superiority theory; they may find it difficult not to understand the jokes. On the other hand, it is funny, due to the relief theory, to audience members who may be struggling to follow the sketch. Although I have just made fun of them specifically, I have done so in a way that allows them not to be found out.

The joke that follows this one-liner is about my personal experience with a Rhetoric class at Georgia College & State University. Though the joke is

based off of true events, the line that opens it sets it up as a fallacy, which lends to the incongruity theory. Setting up a joke based on my own life as something that is purely fictional is unexpected, and it is the fact that I have discredited myself that becomes humorous. While there is little “laugh out loud” humor in this bit, the joke works well on the audience members who are in the Rhetoric department and are personally acquainted with the individuals involved. I add in pieces of dry wit and tongue-in-cheek sarcasm to fit the joke to the audience members who are not involved personally with the Rhetoric faculty and students. The joke acts mainly as a transition from the one-liner to a more substantial bit and works almost completely off of the incongruity theory, making events from my personal life a laughing matter when they, under normal circumstances, might not be.

From this joke, I move from talking about college to focusing on childhood, telling a personal story about the first time in my life I considered the possibility of being a comedian. This transition works because although I go from college education to primary education, both bits deal with the relationship between teachers and students and students and classmates. It can be argued that this joke uses the incongruity theory because although none of the connections made in the bit are huge leaps, they are still connections that may not be made automatically. For me to compare myself now to the boys that challenged me in the fifth grade is little more than ridiculous. In the same way, however, this bit uses the relief theory because the audience is not completely aware of where the joke is going or what it will ask of them. When they realize it is essentially an anecdote about how my fifth grade aspirations of being a comedian, which is not necessarily considered a profound profession, beat out the fifth grade aspirations of boys who wanted to be astronauts or politicians, which are more notably recognized professions, they are relieved, both that there was not more to the joke and that it was not directed at them. There is also a sense of relief in that while few of my audience members are likely to have achieved one of these “profound” professions, I am not making fun of them specifically.

This bit precedes one that is based off of a joke performed by comedian Daniel Tosh and keeps with the theme of childhood. I begin with a simple introduction, moving from the joke about being a child in school to being a child at home. This transition, which I was able to build based on my knowledge of rhetoric and basic speech composition, is supported by the idea that the jokes are related because one is about being a young child in school and the other is about being a young child at home. This bit, focused on playing a game that involves pretending a floor is some kind of hazard, works for several reasons. What grabs the audience first and foremost is that the topic is familiar and relatable. It is an experience many people in diverse audiences will know and appreciate, but it is also one that they have never thought of in terms of jokes before. This

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realization makes it the perfect joke for using the incongruity and expectancy violations theories. People in the audience remember games like the one mentioned in the joke, but it can be argued that they have never thought about it as a tool for parents in times of economic recession. The joke also uses the incongruity and expectancy violations theories when I talk about how parents' using the game as an excuse to not spend money is more or less using persuasion (rhetoric) in an everyday situation. It is safe to say that this is not a connection the audience would have made on their own, but it is a simple enough one that they will be able to keep up. This joke is also incongruous in that it is not an original joke. The audience members who recognize the material may well be surprised that I had the gumption to not only add it to my routine but to tweak it and personalize it for my own performance.

This bit leads into something of an interlude, where I tell a one-liner that is incongruously humorous, and then use that one-liner to discuss what I did not want my stand-up comedy sketch to be. This interlude goes back to the original bit about books and makes a pun that is incongruous both because the connections are witty and slight and because the audience, by this point, probably was not expecting me to revert back to a previous joke. This is a tool commonly used by stand-up comics to get their audiences not to just think about one joke at a time but to really consider the entire routine as a single entity.

From this point, I am able to move onto almost any subject because this interlude allows for new material to be introduced without question. What I choose is to tell a joke that is based on one originally performed by comedian Aziz Ansari. Like the joke originally done by Daniel Tosh, I tweak bits of it to make it appropriate and personal for my audience. In this joke, though, I choose to tell the audience that I am not the creator of the joke. This introduces the incongruity theory right from the start, because the audience will not expect me to tell yet another joke I did not write on my own, let alone admit it. The joke itself is an example of both the incongruity and relief theories. I compare a peer's obsession with his own music to a hypothetical obsession of mine to my own comedy, which is funny because neither scenario makes much sense. This joke also uses the relief theory, though, because the audience does not know if it is appropriate to enjoy a joke that was not technically mine to begin with. As the punch lines progress, however, the audience understands the joke as well as, perhaps subconsciously, how it is funny, and in these understandings they allow themselves to accept comedy that is not wholly original because it is still pertinent.

This joke transitions easily into a bit that also focuses on an interaction with a close friend. This bit, like the one before it, employs purely the

incongruity and expectancy violations theories. The joke is incongruous and violates expectancies because the audience arguably does not expect me to feel so strongly about the subject at hand (bagels) or to make so many stories out of such a small thing. The bit also uses the relief theory in that when the audience realizes connections are being made that they were not expecting, they may begin to doubt whether or not they will be able to follow the joke, or even if it will have a satisfactory punch line. Once the audience begins to see that while the connections are multiple and quick, they are also simple, they feel relieved and are subsequently able to enjoy the absurdity of everything else going on in the bit.

The bit that follows this is the closing bit, which was very important to me. I wanted it to be something closely personal, even so much so that possibly only my colleagues in the Rhetoric department at Georgia College and State University would be able to understand it in its entirety. This fact means that the bit has to involve all of the theories discussed in this paper: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Relief Theory, and Expectancy Violations Theory. The joke begins with an introduction that leads the audience into what they think may be a series of stories about my time as an undergraduate student at my university. When this is not the case, the relief theory comes into the play because the audience has lost any awareness they had of what the bit would be. The incongruity and expectancy violations theories come when I tell short stories that revolve around my own capstone class. It is debatable whether or not the audience thought I would make such distinct and individual connections in my stand-up, and this in and of itself is amusing. Another comic attribute of this is that I talk about my classmates in a way that is both adoring and frustrated, and this is something to which the audience can relate well. The superiority theory becomes involved when the students and faculty of the Rhetoric department realize this last bit is a tribute to them. It is special because although the joke has aspects that appeal to the entire audience, only those closely involved in rhetoric will be able to enjoy the joke absolutely. This gives those members of the audience a sense of authority or superiority over those who do not understand the rhetorical humor.

From this analysis of my own stand-up comedy, it could be argued that of all of the theories discussed in this paper, the ones that seem to have the strongest and broadest connection to stand-up are the incongruity theory, the expectancy violations theory, and the relief theory. While the superiority theory is well-used and successful, it is also privy to very specific scenarios that are not, in this case, as relevant to the humor.

## CONCLUSION

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This study has shown the scope of the persuasion of stand-up comedy. This art aims to move its audiences into new frames of mind and help them understand something to be funny (Sankey, 1998). This study has also shown that as a societal tool, stand-up comedy has been effectively changing and supporting societies and the people in them since at least 1960 (Zoglin, 2008). Through the analyses of both stand-up comedy as a rhetorical discourse and the specific analysis of the original stand-up routine found in Appendix A, we can undoubtedly say that stand-up comedy is indeed an important aspect of rhetoric in contemporary society. The more this discourse is studied in depth, the more people will be able to see the benefits of both rhetorical expertise and comic success on society. The further these studies of rhetoric in stand-up comedy strive to reach, the better, because not only have these things been shown to be important to the development of our contemporary world, but they have also been shown to be fun and interesting.

This study was a challenge, but a welcome one. As a student of rhetoric at Georgia College and State University, I have spent quite a bit of time preparing for speeches and performances; this one was no different. Before I could be expected to write stand-up comedy, I had to have a clear understanding of the task at hand. The preliminary research I did helped me reach a deeper understanding of how rhetoric could be, and should be, used in stand-up comedy, but it was not until I actually wrote my own comedy that I was able to take notice of how comedy was highly rhetorical and persuasive.

“Remember, stand-up tends to focus on (1) simple ideas that can be (2) commonly understood, and (3) verbally expressed” (Sankey, 1998, p. 17). As I was writing my stand-up routine, I noticed myself using rhetorical and humor theories in my jokes. I saw myself trying to convince my future audiences that they were superior to someone or to some situation. I saw myself trying to convince them that subjects they would not have connected could be connected, and that these connections could be done so humorously. Although I wanted at some points to shock my future audiences, I tried to avoid topics that would mean they would have to, at any point, feel relieved of something else. Through my research of which jokes will work and which ones will not, I found myself editing out things that I had realized would not be funny. John Limon’s *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000) taught me that my comedy, though amateur and perhaps unmoving, could make a statement, and did not have to follow any pre-conceived notions of what stand-up comedy was. In my routine, I had the opportunity to persuade, to get an audience to think in my own terms, for however short that period of time was. I realized that, like speeches, my comedy needed to be rehearsed. As comedian Ritch Shydney (2010) says, “It’s nothing like riding a bike!” In the words of Tommy Morris (2010), “You



can't just be good at it. You've got to work at it." With respect to Jim Gaffigan's aforementioned knowledge, I also realized that my stand-up was not about being well-liked by my audience so much as it was about successfully telling jokes. My stand-up had morphed from being a solitary study of how I could (and did) use rhetoric in being funny to being about sharing a thought, above desiring a reaction (Garofalo, 2010).

How exactly, then, did I find rhetoric through stand-up comedy? The answer, for me, is quite simple: passion. I am passionate about rhetoric, about communicating in the best way possible for every situation, and I am passionate about the main goal behind comedy: Making people laugh (*I am Comic*, 2010).

### APPENDIX A

#### *Stand-Up Comedy Routine*

When I began building my stand-up routine, I was very focused on what I wanted it to be centered around. For instance, sometimes comedians have specific sketches. From Dane Cook's on crying to Brian Regan's on being stupid in school to Katt Williams on being a runner with prosthetic legs...the list goes on and on. But what I wanted to bring you today was a little bit of myself, so I wanted to try and focus some of my performance on my experience here at Georgia College which was, at times, funny, albeit not a joke and also at times featured in this sketch...but not much.

You know, when I was working on this routine, my roommate was gone so I couldn't practice material on her. I had to rely on my cat, and I was a little bit wary of that, but she turned out to be a great audience. She didn't heckle me at all.

So, I like to consider myself a pretty smart person as well as quite humble. As you can tell from this being my undergraduate research, I've almost successfully completed college. I got through high school and all the prerequisites for that. I come from a well-read, well-educated family. But I also come from a generation that lives on the internet. I'm not addicted to much, but YouTube and StumbleUpon.com have got me pretty good. YouTube, if watching 20 hours of YouTube a day is wrong, I don't want to be right. For those of you who don't know what StumbleUpon is, Google it. Just kidding. StumbleUpon is a website where you check boxes of interests, like photography, humor, cartoons, videos, whatever, and StumbleUpon randomly takes you to websites centered around these said interests. One day, my stumble took me to a page of quotes of John Waters, a pretty well-known director. I don't know anything off the top of my head that he's directed, but I hear he's pretty well-known. And one of these quotes was—and I'm editing it both for the sake of this joke and my audience—we rhetoricians like to call that “audience analysis” -- “If you go with someone

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and they don't have books, don't sleep with them." And I thought, "Oh! What a great quote! That's so deep and intelligent," and now you think we're going to talk about the importance of an open mind when the real issue at hand is whether or not someone can read you a bedtime story. And that's so pertinent to my life because I'm at this stage where I may like to go out and partake in an adult beverage every now and then and meet new people. So obviously I need to know where the best story time is going to be. And some girls have like...these very extensive lists of qualities for potential mates, like he's gotta be at least 6'3", so I can wear heels. And looks aren't a must, but blue eyes, blonde hair, that wouldn't hurt. Very Aryan. And I'm just thinking, "Where did you even learn the word 'Aryan'? Cosmo? Oh, good choice!" And that seems like a lot of work, and I'm very busy with my undergrad research and I don't want to make a list. I just say, show me your bookshelves. Let's compare bookshelves. I'll tell you who's a good potential mate. Not the guy reading *Twilight*. *Atlas Shrugged*? Either he's read it and is too smart for his own good, or he's never read it and is overcompensating. Go home with a guy who's got *Animal Farm*? He might have his own set of issues. Are you still in your bad-boy stage, ladies? Date a guy reading *Animal Farm*. The guy that's got *The Great Gatsby*? Marry that one. Same way with movies. *Twilight*? No. *Lion King*? We all know the answer to that. If you find a guy that still likes the old school Disney movies, before they were digitally restored? Sold.

Seriously, though, intellect is a big thing. People that you can really talk to? They are a dying breed. If you ever meet the person who titled the article in the Huffington Post, "Missing Bush emails won't be released" that's probably a conversation you won't regret missing out on. Meet the person who gets why that's funny? Sit down for coffee. It's funny because of course they won't be released...they're missing.

So I went to visit my friend Merry a few days ago, and when I walked into her house, I saw a giraffe lying in the middle of her floor. So I asked her, "Merry? What's that lying on the floor?" And she said, "Grace, that's not a lion...that's a giraffe." Sometimes I like to incorporate children's jokes into what I'm saying so that the dummies can keep up. If you didn't get that joke, why did the chicken cross the road?

I went to class the other day, for this first joke. Something pretty common for college students, so I thought it'd be believable. Right? But I went to class with the wonderful Dr. Burt, who has actually graced us with her appearance this evening, and I don't know if you've heard, but if you have class with this woman, you are in for a treat. The first thing she does is call roll, but it's not normal roll-calling. She always has a question for the day, and as each person is

called, he or she has to answer the question. She really knows how to connect with her audiences, you know? And these questions range from, “How did you parents punish you when you were a child,” which we won’t get into tonight for obvious reasons...I know my parents are here, and I’d hate to name names and get anyone else in trouble..., to “What is your superhuman ability?” I love that question. I love this support that I and the rest of my class got as semi-adults from a completely grown woman that superhuman abilities are not imaginary or irrelevant. I just think it’s fantastic that creativity is still a part of my education and that as rhetoric majors, we are encouraged to still want to be transformers when we grow up. On that subject, let’s take a minute and talk about childhood...come on, reminisce with me.

Childhood is such an enriching experience. I think one of the best parts is that nobody really tries to stifle your dreams. You wanna be an astronaut? Nobody’s gonna be tell you that the chances of that are slim. Every kid is told they could president. People encourage childhood dreams, which I appreciate. And for a while, when I was in the 5th grade, I wanted to be a comedian. I just really liked doing impressions and making people laugh and telling jokes, and at a parent-teacher night, my teacher told my parents that she thought I’d be the first woman president. And I said, “No, I think I’m gonna be a stand-up comedian.” And all the dudes in my class were like, “Hehe, yeah right.” (That’s an easy guy impression to do, because most 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys’ voices haven’t dropped yet.) So right now, this is kind of a climactic moment for me, like Take that, you jerk 5th grade boy that didn’t think I was funny! I’m hilarious. Where have your dreams gone? Do you wear glasses or contacts, because if you do you can’t be an astronaut.

Continuing on about childhood... I think that’ll be kind of bittersweet for a lot of you guys...like, here we are, almost done with college. Who appreciates naptime now, guys? All of us. But also, who remembers playing the game *The Floor’s Lava*? Or, the floor is covered in alligators? Doesn’t matter what it’s called, I’m willing to be 99% of us played those kind of games, where for whatever reason, the floor has become a gold-mine of hazards. You know what parents call those games? Money-savers. “Hey, Mom, can I have those new in-line skates? Or the mega-pack of legos? How about the new Nintendo?” “Grace, look, the floor’s lava!” I like to call that rhetoric in everyday life. Your parents persuading you that the lava on your floor is much more consequential than the new in-line skates you want.

So I’ve heard a lot of people say they get their best thinking done in the shower. Does anyone else experience that? I have...I remember homework, things I need from the store, random errands I need to run. But, I no longer support the idea that the shower is the best place for thinking. I didn’t think of any jokes for this set while I was in the shower. Except for this one. Which, of

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course, I'd forgotten by the time I got out. I had to shower three times that day just for one joke.

You know, I feel like some of my jokes are really a lot funnier than other ones. Like, what do you call a dog with no legs? It doesn't matter, because he's not coming either way. That's a hilarious joke. But I really didn't want to do a routine of one-liners. My initial goal was to write one story that kept getting off track, but ultimately everything was intertwined. So I was kinda going off the whole people and their books things, but it seems that we've turned the page. Feel like we've kind of put that back on the shelf. Get it?

In preparation for writing this sketch, I watched a documentary on stand-up that featured several comedians publicly declaring that using someone else's material is not stealing and is perfectly acceptable because comedy is primarily delivery, not the originality of your material. So before I get into some jokes I'm...borrowing, let it be known that stand-up is probably the only profession where plagiarism is not frowned upon. Anyway, one of my fellow rhetoric majors, Harrison Thacker, is an up-and-coming rapper. And I went over to his house the other day and walked in on him listening to his own cd. And I said, "Harrison! Are you seriously listening to your own cd, bopping your own head?" And he said, "Yeah, girl, this track is hot!" And I said, that's like me sitting in my own apartment, listening to a demo track of my own stand-up, going "Hahahahaha, these jokes are awesome!"

And that got me thinking just about everyday conversations I have that are generally hilarious. I mean, it's obvious that wherever I go, hilarity ensues, but that's beside the point. I was talking to a friend of mine a few months ago, and we were talking about food we like, or don't, for that matter. And I brought up bagels, the one food I would probably marry if I could. Forget probably. It's on, bagels! But my friend was like, "Bagels are gross," and I was like, "Have you lost your mind?" And he went on to talk about how eating bagels is basically like going, "Hmm, what do I want to eat today? I think I'd like a nice assortment of cardboard." I'm just at a loss as to what could give someone such a deep hatred for bagels. Bagels? Really? I'm convinced that my friend had a negative encounter with a bagel before and has since turned his back on the little packages of deliciousness. So I've come up with a couple scenarios that might have happened. In this first scenario, my friend, like me, has decided he would like to marry a bagel. But the bagel's like, "Nah, man, I'm kinda into bagels." So my friend, who does not take rejection well, decides to harbor a lifelong grudge against all bagels. In the second scenario, my friend is at a party and is under the influence of hypnosis and is told under hypnosis that he can no longer enjoy bagels or he will die. In the third and final scenario, my friend, for whatever reason, has LOST HIS MIND and thinks bagels are not delicious. Maybe he has

no taste buds. I have no idea.

Ok, so I promised to talk a little bit about my experience here at Georgia College in this routine. So let's talk about rhetoric. I know what you're all thinking...this is such an awesome major, look at what she's doing for her senior project, we've already established how fantastic Dr. Burt's classes are. And you're right. Best major ever. So I've got to have a plethora of hilarious stories from classes, right? Nothing amusing ever happens in rhetoric classes. The story about Dr. Burt? That was a joke, guys, keep up. We're all business, all the time. If you don't think that's funny, you're not in the rhetoric department. But seriously, I have had a blast in this department, and have grown very close to all of my professors and classmates, particularly these six guys I took capstone with this semester. They're kind of like my older brothers. Which is obnoxious. Who in the world needs six older brothers who talk all the time and don't think you're funny. I also got very close to Dr. Vail, my favorite benevolent tyrant. In an attempt to do my absolute best with this project, I asked him what he thought might make the comedy more appealing to the audience. He responded, as many of you may have guessed, "It depends...on how much you're paying them."

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