

**THE LEGACY OF
THE WISECRACK**

**THE LEGACY OF
THE WISECRACK
STAND-UP COMEDY AS THE
GREAT AMERICAN LITERARY FORM**

EDDIE TAFOYA



BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton

*The Legacy of the Wisecrack:
Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*

Copyright © 2009 Eddie Tafoya.

All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton, Florida • USA
2009

ISBN-10: 1-59942-495-9 (*paper*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-495-8 (*paper*)

ISBN-10: 1-59942-496-7 (*ebook*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-496-5 (*ebook*)

www.brownwalker.com

Cover design by Fernando Julio Barraza

Author photo by Jonah Tafoya

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tafoya, Eddie.

The legacy of the wisecrack : stand-up comedy as the great American literary form / Eddie Tafoya.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-495-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59942-495-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Stand-up comedy--United States. 2. Comedy--History and criticism. I. Title.

PN1969.C65T34 2009

792.7'6--dc22

2009000296

*To Richard Pryor, Steven Wright, Whoopi Goldberg,
Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, George Carlin,
Jackie Mason and Paula Poundstone,
because they rank among history's greatest stand-ups;
and to Chico, Harpo and Groucho—
because they were just so damned funny.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Charles Hansen Pike and Robyn Rose for their patience, wisdom, expertise, energy and input. I would also like to thank those who read the manuscript in its various forms: Heather Winterer, Shawn Woodyard, Beth Devore and Nancy Tucker. Also, Helen Tafoya, Jeffery Candelaria, Colleen Jiron and Maria Jerenic were enormously helpful with the individual chapters, while Melanie LaBorwit's help with research was indispensable. I would also like to thank the New Mexico Highlands University Faculty Research Committee, Ms. Prescilla Salazar, and the students in my American Humor, Stand-up Comedy as Literature and American Fool classes. And thanks to the many comedians I have worked with over the years including Russ Rivas, Tony Vicich, Chris Fonseca, James R. Zingleman, Marc Shuter, Jeff Wozer, Curt Fletcher, Rick Semones, John "Hippieman" Novosad, Margaret Smith, Chris Clobber, Gabriel Rutledge, Freddy Charles, Jay Benedict Brown, Patrick Candelaria, George McKelvey, Charlie Moreno and Oscar Solis; furthermore, this book would not have been possible without the help and support of Don, Mary Kay, Vilmos, Dani, Denise and Dione at Wits End Comedy Club in Westminster, Colorado, and Tammy, Terri, Erika and the rest of the folks at Laffs in Albuquerque, my home club.

CONTENTS

Introduction	11
Chapter One: “I Want a <i>Real</i> Literature Class”	19
Chapter Two: Dissecting Americanness	41
Chapter Three: Joke Theories	71
Chapter Four: A Stand-up Prehistory	85
Chapter Five: A History of Stand-up	109
Chapter Six: The American (Comedic) Jeremiad	149
Chapter Seven: Steven Wright and the Post-modern Picaresque	167
Chapter Eight: Richard Pryor, American Dante	181
Conclusion: The Comedic Frontier	203
A Stand-up Comedy Timeline	207
A Stand-up Comedy Glossary	213
Notes	219

INTRODUCTION

The Mayfair Theater in Santa Monica is filled to capacity and completely dark when an offstage announcer calls out: “Will you please stand for the singing of our national anthem?” Presently, the song begins: “O-ho say can you motherfuckin’ see, by the dawn’s early motherfuckin’ light?” By the time the singer gets to “whose broad motherfuckin’ stripes,” light is spilling from a hole in the middle of the stage and the singer is rising out of the hole onto stage level. It is Whoopi Goldberg in the persona of her most celebrated alter ego, Fontaine. The song ends when Fontaine pauses, takes a few steps to the right, clears his throat and belts out, “and the home of the motherfuckin’ brave.” Thus begins Goldberg’s forty-six-minute HBO special from 1988, *Fontaine . . . Why Am I Straight?* Soon it is revealed that Fontaine is a homeless, Black, disaffiliated and androgynous (at one point he refers to himself as “she”) reformed junkie with a Ph.D. from Columbia. What ensues is a running commentary on the scandals that characterized America during the Reagan years, matters such as the Iran-Contra affair, the fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s multi-million-dollar Christian televangelist empire, the firing of Jimmy “The Greek” Synder for making an apparently racist comment, and a sequence about Rock Hudson’s contracting AIDS. As the show’s title suggests, the performance implicitly asks why anyone would take seriously Nancy Reagan’s exhortation to “say no to drugs” when being perpetually intoxicated seems to have a better payoff than having to deal with a world that is being ruined by the so-called “straight” people.

In many ways, the symbolism of the profanity-riddled version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” is ingeniously revealing, especially about the nature of the literary form that is stand-up comedy. Coming out of the blackness into the light and appearing out of the depths suggests that the marginalized Fontaine is both a personification of the fears, attitudes and wisdom that dwell deep within the collective American subconscious and a character who gives voice to anger that can no longer be ignored. What has bubbled up to the surface is a long-denied genius, an angry, questioning social commentator, the Jungian shadow that demands its moment at center stage.

It is no coincidence that this unique entrée came when it did, right at the height of an epoch that stand-up comedians would come to refer to as “The Boom,” a period characterized by a sudden and dramatic explosion of interest in stand-up comedy. The art form, after all, tends to flourish in times of heightened social tension, to wit, the early years of the Cold War, when middle-class Americans were streaming to nightclubs; the height of the Vietnam conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when George Carlin seemed to be jumping from one variety show to another; and, of course, during the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan’s supposed war-mongering was widely believed to be bringing the world closer to nuclear devastation. While other literary forms such as the novel, the short story, the poem and the play so often are directed toward revealing a nation’s loftier intellectual and aesthetic ideals, stand-up comedy tends to point itself in the other direction. More often than not, the art form leans toward revealing that which is unpleasant and even visceral, angry and profane (in various senses of the word), turning the floor over to observations and commentaries that grow out of negativity, disgust and carnal appetites. Perhaps this is why, although it has been a mainstay of American entertainment since early in the twentieth century, stand-up comedy has received precious little scholarly attention. While books such as John Limon’s *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory or Abjection in America*, Larry Wilde’s *Great Comedians Talk About Comedy* and Robert Stebbins’ *The Laugh-Makers: Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business and Life-style* have proven indispensable to anyone seriously concerned with understanding stand-up’s deep play, precious little study has been devoted to analyzing the stand-up as a literary form.

Consequently, with the present volume I seek to accomplish three things. First of all, I hope to provide a framework by which to examine the art of stand-up comedy—an art form that is undoubtedly a sophisticated kind of language play that cannot help but reveal a culture’s fears, values, hopes and, most profoundly, our sins—in distinctly literary terms. Secondly, I would like to look at the way in which comedians’ jokes grow out of the conversation between two different competing regions of the subconscious, that which is concerned with social decorum and complies with the social contract and that which is dedicated to instant gratification, more or less the two regions Sigmund Freud identified as the super-ego and the id. Finally, I seek to provide a study of how stand-up comedians exploit this interplay in ways that the novel, short story, poem and play cannot.

The study is divided into three sections. The first, which comprises the first three chapters, establishes a framework first by looking at the nature of literature, then by dissecting the American ethos and finally by reviewing theories of humor and presenting a theory for stand-up itself. To do this, I have chosen what I believe to be the most logical starting point, a question that tends to be overlooked (at least in my experience) in literature classes: "What is literature?" I ask the question knowing full well that it almost begs for responses that can quickly become mired in semantics. Nevertheless, this entry point easily opens up to discussion on what literary critic Terry Eagleton has to say on the subject. Presently, I reform the question, suggesting that it would be more fruitful to abandon that inquiry in favor of one that examines what literature does. The functions I examine are the ways that literature codifies experience, defamiliarizes the world, informs and reveals the zeitgeist, plays with language, engenders wonder and invites the reader to find multiple layers of interpretation.

To examine the American ethos I employ an analogy particularly befitting a book on stand-up comedy: a large stage is encircled by five spotlights, each of which is aimed at a center spot and each of which has its own color and quality. One way to begin understanding that center pool of light, then, is to examine each beam individually. Among those I have identified are the frontier, whether it is that explored by Christopher Columbus, Lewis and Clark or *Star Trek's* Captain James Kirk, and the Puritan foundation, the vestiges of which, even in the twenty-first century, are alive and well in right-wing American politics, Christian Pentecostalism, American hegemony and the American attitudes of privilege. Next is the landscape which, characterized by the lushness of the eastern seaboard and the high mountains, low deserts and vast plains west of the Mississippi, has left Americans with the feeling that we are larger than life, that we roam among the gods. The last beam to be examined is the sanctity of the individual which, with its concomitant liberties such as a free-market economy and freedom of speech, is an innovation which (although it was inspired by European thinkers) has over the centuries become distinctly American.

The third chapter explores a more psychological and philosophical terrain. I begin by reviewing the three theories of humor that have received the most attention over the centuries: Relief Theory, Superiority Theory and Incongruity Theory, each of which has been favored by one acclaimed thinker or another, philosophers such as Freud, Henri

Bergson, Thomas Hobbes and Arthur Schopenhauer, and each of which can explain many laughter events even though none can explain all completely. In fact, laughter, joking and humor are such mysterious phenomena that even all three theories when taken together cannot tell the whole story. Most stand-up comedians are well aware that every performance comes with more than a few surprises. At times the best jokes can fall flat while the mediocre material can elicit explosions of laughter. Even at a time when scientists are on the brink of producing a single theory that explains everything in nature from sub-subatomic particles to an endless string of universes, laughter remains mysterious.

From there I move on to explicate my own theory of humor, how the majority of jokes tend to grow out of a conversation, if not a heated argument, between bodily appetites and the demands of social propriety or, in other words, the id and the super-ego. Consequently, I situate the beginning of humor with the phenomenon of apes throwing feces, acts that, like good jokes, are simultaneously hostile and intimate as they tell an aggressor to stay away (who would want to go near that?) yet parallel an infant's "gifting" his feces to a parent, something that is recalled in a more sanitized form each time a comic movie involves a pie in the face. Also, I argue that just as humor begins with feces-throwing, the prototypical joke is human flatulence since, like a vocalization, the passing of intestinal gas comes from an opening in the digestive tract that involves mucous membranes and emits sounds and smells. We need go no farther than the local playground to find linguistic evidence for the connection: a person whose words have little value is often referred to as "an asshole," while someone causing trouble is or talking nonsense is "talking shit," or "talking shit out his ass" or, in more polite company, is referred to as being "full of hot air." Likewise, it is not uncommon for a person making inappropriate or irreverent remarks to be called a "smart ass" and his utterances to be inadvertently compared to short bursts of intestinal gas, or "cracks." The very term "wise crack," consequently, is a rich conceptual metaphor in that it linguistically links the higher and lower faculties, the onomatopoeic "crack" from the rectum and the supposed wisdom of the mind. This section argues, in other words, that the wisecrack has a long and distinguished legacy, that eons before it was employed by the likes of Groucho Marx and David Letterman it was useful in diffusing tension between both intratribal and intertribal enemies.

The chapter concludes with the explication of an insight that came to me after my twelfth reading of Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *Tender*

Is the Night. That is that one of the great engines propelling world literature is the complex of neuroses surrounding paternal abandonment and the quest to heal that rift. To make the argument, I take cursory glances at some of the world's most influential masterpieces—works such as *Oedipus Rex*, the story of Cronos, the New and Old Testaments, the *Tao Te Ching*, *Hamlet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Great Expectations*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Death of a Salesman* to name but a few—the great majority of which, to one degree or another, have the quest for unification with an abandoning parent, usually a father, be it actual or surrogate, as a central concern.

With this foundation in place, I make the argument that the stand-up comedian, who must remain emotionally available and accessible in order to have a successful show, is able to address and perhaps even heal this rift immediately although temporarily. With each successful performance, audience members subconsciously revert to childhood as they stand before a father figure who, because of a sound system and an elevated stage, is in the position of the prototypical father in that he has a booming voice and elevated stature. Like their actual fathers, fathers of myth or the parish priest (who by no accident is called Father), the comedian—even a female comedian—is in a fatherly role as he (or she) is the locus of both power and attention and is ready to admonish those less powerful when they get unruly or speak out of turn. Because a comedian must remain emotionally connected, he is in a position to provide an anodyne to the paternal trauma. By doing this, he is in fact ready, willing and obligated to make fun of larger authorities such as the president, the government, movie stars and social mores. To put the matter another way, we can say that the comedian is an authority figure whose job it is to undermine authority.

In the second section of the book I seek to provide a historical context for the art form. Chapter Four summarizes the pre-history of stand-up comedy beginning with the previously mentioned simian feces-throwing and the effect audible flatulence undoubtedly had on hostile hunter-gatherers. From there, I examine several high points in the evolution of comedy such as trickster tales, the remnants of which we see today most obviously in cartoons featuring the likes of Bugs Bunny or Bart Simpson. Then there are the court jesters, who not only have a documented presence throughout the history of civilization, but share close metaphorical connections to flatulence and bodily appetites. Also included in the discussion is the *Commedia dell'arte* of Renaissance

Italy, a comedy troupe that essentially invented the improv sketch. Then there is the clown who in one guise or another also has had a presence in virtually every society in recorded history, and the minstrel show, which not only featured the comedic Tambo and Bones characters, but often concluded with a stump speech, which has been considered a primitive form of stand-up. Another key development came by way of the Chautauqua, an entertainment phenomenon that popularized the direct-address performance, speeches that were often designed with the specific intention of eliciting laughter from the audience. Finally, no discussion of the history of stand-up could be complete without some mention of that fateful day in January 1856 when a twenty-year-old Samuel Clemens, while attending a convention of printers celebrating Benjamin Franklin's one-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, gave an after-dinner speech that introduced the world to a new level of direct-address comedy.

The succeeding chapter examines the age of stand-up proper, beginning with a look at Charley Case, an African-American vaudevillian who worked in blackface and is arguably history's first stand-up comedian. From there, I examine various high points in stand-up history, including vaudeville and its more ethnic parallels, the Borscht Belt of Sullivan County, New York, which was designed to cater to Jewish audiences, and the Chitlin' Circuit, which catered to Black audiences; *The Ed Sullivan Show* and other variety shows; the "New Wave" of stand-up that involved the likes of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce compromising their laughs-per-minute ratios in order to address more heady and topical issues; the rise of the nightclub and the "Boom" of the 1980s.

The third and final section is made up of more specific examinations. Chapter Six provides a closer look at the New Wave comedians and their legacy, mainly Bruce, Sahl and Dick Gregory, whose incisive parodies and social commentaries complemented the Civil Rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s. The chapter concludes with a look at the work of those who have picked up the mantle, comedians such as George Carlin, who in the 1960s and 1970s became the hippies' comedic spokesman; Bill Hicks, whose monologues consistently called the Reagan administration to task; Chris Rock, whose shows provide a running commentary on a misguided world in post-Civil Rights and politically correct times; and of course, Whoopi Goldberg, whose one-woman theatrical pieces have the look and feel of stand-up as they closely examine the nation's ills. In short, I compare these comedians to the American Puritans of colonial times and argue that they, like

Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, provide a running critique on how their nation as a whole is failing to live up to its contractual promises. While for Mather and Edwards the contract was between the Puritans and the God of Abraham, for Bruce, Carlin and Rock it was between America and the God of Reason, He who inspired the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

The penultimate chapter looks at how comedian Steven Wright's three decades of work jell into a single story that draws on the power of one of the most ancient of all comedians, the fool archetype, makes him the protagonist in an ongoing picaresque story, and uses the character as a means of exploring post-modern anxieties, not the least of which is the threat of nuclear annihilation. Resembling a walking, breathing, joke-telling corpse, Wright simultaneously reveals and assuages modern humans' (and especially modern Americans') deepest fears by simultaneously manipulating us into entering a universe where conventional logic no longer applies and then assuaging these fears by convincing us that he, not us, is the one residing in this most horrifying of realms.

The final chapter looks at what more than likely is the most talked-about of stand-up comedy performances: *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip*. Recorded just a year and half after his famous suicide attempt that left him near death with third-degree burns over half his body, this 1982 performance film functions for late twentieth-century America much as Dante Alighieri's epic poem *Inferno* did for Renaissance Europe in that it chronicles descent into an underworld, climaxes with a confrontation with a demon and, by the end, provides a horrific assessment of its society's sins and shortcomings as well as a calling out for change.

In sum, this book is an argument that, as a literary form that has been enabled and nourished by America's most cherished innovations, stand-up comedy remains a wildly popular and deeply provocative worldwide phenomenon because it can accomplish what its literary cousins cannot. Its performances can be molded, remolded and rere-molded in the course of a single evening. A performer can exploit the art form's plasticity to fit each venue, each audience and even individual audience members. While other literary forms can address the paternal cleavage mentioned above, they can do so only obliquely. The poem, short story and novel must be transmitted through the written or spoken word, in situations where bright lines persist between the author and narrator and the real and imagined audience. With stand-up

comedy, however, the metaphorical father usually talks in his real voice, wears clothes that can hardly be called “a costume” and addresses his audience directly and immediately. He can interrupt his own performance, change directions, return to an earlier sequence, add a comment here and subtract or condense a joke there. Such adjustments would be much harder to make in a performance of *Hamlet* and are virtually impossible with a novel or a poem.

Even beyond that, stand-up comedy is unique in the way that its products tend to take on lives of their own. While it would be odd for coworkers to linger around the office coffee urn exchanging haiku, it is not at all uncommon for those in similar situations to exchange jokes they heard at a comedy club the week before. In fact, it is likely that intraoffice banter includes jokes that were first heard on a comedy club stage months or even years before and managed to be passed from person to person, office to office, and even state to state, spreading out in a network that even the most sophisticated sociologist would be hard-pressed to track.

While my primary objective is to study stand-up comedy rather than to classify it, I nevertheless hope that one day soon editions of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* will not be seen as complete unless they come packaged with DVDs demonstrating the power and artistry of performers such as Pryor, Wright, Carlin and Goldberg. In the twenty-first century, literary audiences are changing rapidly, becoming less concerned with the written and more concerned with the spoken and performative. The time is ripe for stand-up comedy to stop being the Rodney Dangerfield of the literary world and to get some of the respect it deserves.

CHAPTER ONE

“I WANT A *REAL* LITERATURE CLASS”

Not long ago, an honor student at New Mexico Highlands University, a small teaching college in Northern New Mexico, scooped up a legal pad, a highlighter and a ballpoint pen, shoved them into her backpack and stormed out of her junior-level American literature class, never to return. Minutes before, her professor was deep into a lecture about the 1982 performance film *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip*, pontificating about how it was nothing less than stand-up comedy’s answer to Dante Alighieri’s fourteenth-century epic poem *Inferno*. His contention was that the comedian who was as famous for his self-destructive behavior as he was for his jokes had constructed an epic tale, a one-man show that was every bit as harrowing and complex as anything penned by the canonized masters.

“He just stands up there and cusses,” said the nineteen-year-old lover of American literature, a devoted scholarship student who planned to write her dissertation on Flannery O’Connor. “And look how he treats women.”

This was enough to set the professor off again, ranting about how when layers of the performance were peeled away, some of the most nefarious American sins lay exposed, sins like slavery, hegemony, the proliferation of drug addiction and the reduction of people to commodities. He went on about how the show incorporates personifications of each of the Seven Deadly Sins and a conversation with a demon, about how it was literature at its most personal, horrifying and intimate.

“The show begins with a rebirth,” the professor said, “and it climaxes with a dual baptism. One by water and one by fire. Look at the structure. This is the stuff of classical mythology.”

The student pushed up her glasses, folded her arms and glanced out the window before saying, “Dante didn’t yell the word ‘motherfucker’ in every other sentence.”

She shook her head, zipped her backpack and slipped the strap on her shoulder. “The second day of this class you wouldn’t shut up about shit and farts. Now this. I want a *real* literature class.”

And she walked out.

That professor was me. This scene took place years ago, when I was still starry-eyed about my pursuit of stand-up comedy as literature. The student’s reaction was hardly unique. Since I began this study I have received more than a few derisive scoffs, more than a few eye-rolls from students and colleagues alike, people who sneered at me as if to echo the student’s sentiment that I should direct my efforts toward *real* literature. One professor admitted that even though he believed the art form to be worthy of study, it was more befitting American studies or cultural studies. Despite a softening of my position over the years, the core of my argument remains intact: stand-up comedy is nothing less than the great American literary form, and *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip* remains an American masterpiece, a work of art that reveals, at the very least, as much about the American ethos as do minor masterpieces such as Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural*, John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and that it is certainly more worthy of attention than some works that often show up on American literature reading lists. If great literature, as William Faulkner said in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, grows out of “the human heart in conflict with itself,” then *Live on the Sunset Strip* fits the bill in two ways. First of all, it is the story of a man so incapacitated by drug addiction that he can ask for help only by setting himself on fire and, secondly, it is a portrait of a nation that, more than a century after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and a generation after the Civil Rights marches, still cannot come to terms fully with the promises of the Declaration of Independence.

I have continued to argue that just as Faulkner, in his masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury*, takes us into the suicidal world of Quentin Compson and his pathological devotion to family honor, just as Shakespeare takes us deep into the chaotic mind of the deposed King Lear and just as Dante takes us on a guided tour of Hell, Pryor also takes us deep into the pit of madness, a madness fueled by cocaine addiction. In his one-person show, Pryor draws us into the junkie’s home, then into his secret room and finally into his private torture chamber and the most mortifying of nightmares, one replete with horror scenes that rival the best work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Ernest Hemingway.

All this is not to say, however, that my student’s concerns were not without merit. Her unwillingness to accept what I believed to be a well-founded and well-thought-out argument raises important questions, the most important of which I have never heard discussed in a college classroom, despite some twenty-five years devoted to literary study. That is, “What, exactly, is literature?” A secondary question is, “If stand-up comedy is not literature, then what is it?”

If we consult the Oxford English Dictionary, the waters may become less muddied, but not in any immediate or significant way. It defines “literature” as “written works, especially those regarded as having artistic merit.” An etymological definition of “literature” (which actually works against my argument) also offers little help. According to the *Arcaide Dictionary of Word Origins*, the word “literature” comes from the Latin word *littera*, meaning “letter,” and thus formed the basis of the “further derivative *litteratura*, which denoted ‘writing formed with letters.’” While it might be argued that *Live on the Sunset Strip* or certain of George Carlin’s routines have superior or lasting merit, whether stand-up routines qualify as “written works” may be a matter of dispute, since not all stand-ups commit their jokes to the legal pad or Word for Windows file. Furthermore, even those comedians who do keep meticulous records of their jokes will, in the midst of a performance, add, subtract, embellish or edit a joke or a routine. In the strictest sense, then, stand-up comedy cannot be literature.

If a work’s being committed to paper is the chief requirement, however, other problems arise. Where, for instance, does this leave works like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* or sections of the New Testament, for that matter, works whose authors never considered print or publication? What about the stories of those peoples for whom written language was either unimportant or never considered? Are Winnebago trickster tales not literature? What about Norse myths or the *corridos* from the Spanish-speaking regions of North America? What about the fairy tales that circulated around Europe before the Brothers Grimm collected them? Are such stories, poems and songs not literature? Are they something other than literature? Is the term “oral literature” an oxymoron?

Even to someone as respected as British literary theorist Terry Eagleton the answers do not come easily. In the initial chapter of his seminal book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton examines the matter, arguing that

Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or “imaginative,” but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this

theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an “organized violence committed on ordinary speech.” If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur, “Thou still unravished bride of quietness,” then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because the texture, rhythm and resonance of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning—or, as the linguists might more technically put it, there is a disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds. Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like, “Don’t you know the drivers are on strike?” do not.¹

Eagleton then goes on to suggest that the defining feature of literature may be its amorphousness, arguing that it is “non-pragmatic language” in that it differs from textbooks and grocery lists because literature “serves no immediate practical purpose”² or that the very word “literature” functions much like the word “weed” since “weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener doesn’t want around. Perhaps ‘literature’ means something like the opposite: any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly.”³ The upshot, however, seems to be that even for one of the world’s leading authorities on the subject, there are no hard, fast or easy answers.

Perhaps then the core of the problem is not the lack of answers but the inadequacy of the question, and therefore some reframing is in order. Rather than looking at what literature *is*, perhaps it would be more fruitful to examine what literature *does*. Although this approach has been a matter of public debate since, at the very least, the days of Aristotle and does not offer any quick and easy answers, it allows for certain parameters to be set in place and, consequently, enables us to begin an inquiry that is not mired in the muck of semantics. Without delving into heavy-duty literary theory or aesthetic philosophy, we can explore at least a few of the primary functions of literature that have been identified throughout the ages.

Literature Codifies Experience

Perhaps this dynamic, which echoes Leo Tolstoy’s argument that the purpose of literature is to promote a brotherhood of man,⁴ is best explained by Robert Pirsig who wrote in his landmark autobiography/novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* about how the mythos, that body of myths and stories that shape human consciousness, “unites our minds as cells are united in the body of a man.” Pirsig ex-

plains, “each child is born as ignorant as any caveman. What keeps the world from reverting to the Neanderthal with each generation is the continuing, ongoing mythos. . . . To feel that one is not so united, that one can accept or discard this mythos as one pleases, is not to understand what the mythos is.”

In other words, Pirsig is arguing that any normal person’s understanding of the world is shaped in no small way by the countless stories, legends and anecdotes, whether real or fantastical, that a person reads, hears or sees. A child living in a Kansas village, for instance, knows about monkeys, whales, oceans and spaceships even though he or she may have never ventured more than a few miles from home and may never have experienced any of these entities first-hand. Much the way Leonardo da Vinci and the Wright Brothers were able to conceive of human flight because of stories like that of Icarus and Daedalus, literature allows this child to imagine life on another planet, life in a gulag or what it might be like to be raised by wolves. This is because each normal human being draws from a common literary pool in order to begin making sense of an otherwise chaotic world. This pool contains, in addition to a vast mosaic of images, stories and characters, the words, expressions and idioms that shape and define human consciousness. We know how, for instance, American expatriates in 1920s Europe might have talked, what they valued and what they feared because of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*. College students in future centuries, meanwhile, will be better able to understand the words, deeds, attitudes and conflicts of the early twenty-first century because of the work of Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy and rapper Eminem.

A different take on the same idea can also be found in Sigmund Freud’s landmark study from 1899, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Here, the premier psychoanalyst discusses how Sophocles’ drama *Oedipus Rex* resonates within all people whether they are aware of it or not, because it is simultaneously a story that is universal and yet deeply personal. Writes Freud,

If the *Oedipus Rex* is capable of moving a modern reader or playgoer no less powerfully than it moved the contemporary Greeks, the only possible explanation is that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not depend upon the conflict between fate and human will, but upon the peculiar nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed. There must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate in the *Oedipus*. . . . His fate moves us only because it might have

been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth is the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment—the fulfillment of the wish our childhood.⁶

We see this same dynamic coming into play even in the first decades of the twenty-first century as the perennial Creationism-versus-Evolution debate continues to loom large in American classrooms, churches and courtrooms. This is because the creation story found in those early chapters of Genesis is also simultaneously universal and deeply personal. Although it is undoubtedly mythical and has no scientific evidence to support its facts, the story touches the very core of human experience. The story begins with the divine pronouncement, “Let there be light,” proceeds to a discussion on the separation of water from the dry land and then to the formation of Adam and his naming of the plants and animals of Eden. From there it moves on to the discovery of free will and sexuality before climaxing with the expulsion from paradise. This is nothing less than a metaphor for the story of every normal human being who, upon being born, experiences the power of light, separation from amniotic fluid, the separation of the subject and the object or the “I” and the “not-I,” the awakening of sexuality and the subsequent expulsion from the paradise of childhood.

Much the way every child is, at least to some degree, Oedipus, every person is, to some degree, Adam or Eve. If, as the Existentialists have argued, the quest to transcend the confines of the solitary experience is the central human motivation, then literature in this way is one of the most useful, efficient, time-tested and indispensable tools to aid us in such a quest. Perhaps this was put most succinctly by the student who, in William Nicholson’s play *Shadowlands*, declares to writer C.S. Lewis that “we read to know we are not alone.”

Literature Provides an Emotional Catharsis

The Greek philosopher Aristotle notes in his treatise *Poetics* that the appeal of a tragic drama is the way in which a spectator experiences an emotional purging after having been taken through the ups, downs and tumults of a story. In addition to being given opportunities to laugh, cry, grieve, tremble and identify with the protagonist, says Aristotle, the

audience member is also treated to situations and dialogue that arouse his fear and pity and leave him feeling as though he or she has suffered through the death of a loved one, romantic betrayal or a horrific tragedy and yet, by the end of it all, gets to walk away unscathed, although not unchanged. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer builds upon Aristotle’s theories, arguing that what is experienced when one reads a book or views a play is that the

spectator recognizes himself [or herself] and his [or her] finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance. . . . To see that “this is how it is” is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he [or she], like everyone else, lives.⁷

In other words, the fear of dominance, fear of being crippled or fear being killed is brought out into the open when someone watches or reads an effective story about dominance, violence or murder. While the protagonist of a drama may suffer financial ruin, loss of love or even may die a horrible death, the spectator is provided the opportunity to project himself onto the characters and suffer with them while never compromising his security.

While Aristotle applied his analysis primarily to tragedies, one can easily see that the dynamic works well with other genres, perhaps most obviously horror films. A great many of these, movies such as *Halloween*, *Saw II* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*, for example, are appealing not because they are cinematic masterpieces (it is no secret that a great many of the most popular are not) but because they are the modern cinema’s answer to the roller coaster ride as they take the viewer through a series of theatrical ascents, plunges, spins and lurches.

A rather offbeat take on this same dynamic comes from horror story guru Stephen King, who writes in his essay “Why We Crave Horror Movies”:

The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark. For those reasons, good liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—*Dawn of the Dead*, for instance—as lifting a trapdoor in