

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?:
AN EXAMINATION OF LATE-NIGHT SATIRE

by

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In this era of "Peak TV," our discussions of television are often focused on the next hit show, which writer crafted the tightest script or which actor most fully inhabited a particular character. While these types of discussions were and are the norm, there was a brief, but noticeable, shift in the conversation around the time of the 2016 presidential election. During and following the 2016 election, the genre of late-night comedy and its subcategory of satire underwent what felt like a tremendous boom. People like Seth Myers and John Oliver were suddenly at the center of the national dialogue, with their words bearing almost as much weight as those of established pundits.

It's this shift that sparked the idea for what would eventually become this thesis. Many people noted the shift, and clips from the shows were often water-cooler talking points, but it was often left at that. Academics have long recognized that satire has effects on its viewers different from those of traditional media, but I wanted to ask a more specific, pointed question. I wanted to know why these specific shows, airing at these specific times, were resonating with audiences as much as they were.

The way that question will be answered will be via a thorough content analysis of the primary sources— contemporaneous satirical clips from late-night shows. I will break down the satirical styles and tendencies of two popular modern satirists, Seth Meyers and John Oliver. I chose these men in particular for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, I chose these hosts since I am familiar with and watch both of their shows. But more broadly, I picked them because they serve as excellent foils for each other. Their respective approaches to the genre are wildly different, and the contrast between the two allows me to explore two distinct types of satire/audience interactions.

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Chapter 1: Laying the Groundwork

A Working Definition of Satire

Before we can start to analyze late-night shows, we first have to understand what type of content we are dealing with; we have to know the rules of the game, so to speak. The shows (*Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*) I will be examining in this thesis can both be grouped into a genre of comedy called satire. The amount of satirical content might vary between the shows, but it is still there, and it is those satirical portions that I will be focusing on. Two main questions need to be answered before work on this thesis can begin: What exactly is satire and why is it so important?

Satire, in general, can be classified into two main categories: the Horatian and the Juvenalian. Horatian satire is light-hearted and witty. While it definitely pokes fun at the foibles of society, it is not outright attacking them. Horatian satire thus takes on the form of an oblique commentary, where the criticism of the issue may not be necessarily present in the words of the satirist, but in the effect he induces in his audience. Juvenalian satire, by contrast, is far harsher, taking on figures of power and issues with a ferocity not present in Horatian works. Juvenalian satirists still tell jokes, but they are far more direct, explicitly questioning the merits of a given position.

The first and most obvious divide between Meyers and Oliver is that the former is a Horatian and the latter is a Juvenalian. This initial categorization informs many aspects of their satire, from their general onscreen comportment to the specific devices each employs.

Meyers, both as a Horatian and as a host on network television, has far less leeway to be explicit about his opinions than a Juvenalian might, and so he must carefully pick how he conveys his arguments. As such, he often uses more oblique or indirect tools, obfuscating his critiques with a fog of irreverent humor.

Two of Meyers' most common satirical techniques are *reductio ad absurdum* and caricature. *Reductio* lets Meyers critique current happenings many steps removed, by devising and criticizing an absurd notion and then letting the audience draw their own inferences. Horatian satire, and Meyers' brand of it especially, is all about reading between the lines. Meyers does occasionally make declarative statements, but more often than not, the arguments of the *A Closer Look (ACL)* segments are subtly embedded in the jokes he makes.

Take, for example, Meyers' reaction to Paul Ryan's "defense" of Steve Bannon, back when Bannon was being considered for a high level position inside the White House. Faced with claims of Bannon's ties to the alt-right and white supremacy due to his being the CEO of Breitbart News, Ryan proclaimed that he hadn't ever met Bannon, and as such couldn't judge his character. Meyers was thoroughly perplexed by this, saying "I never met John Wilkes Booth, but I let his past work inform my opinion of him."¹ Similarly, Meyers' described the Trump administration's proposed emendations to Obamacare as if they "took an oatmeal raisin cookie and added cilantro,"² the idea being that they took a good, but not amazing thing, and made it outright terrible.

Both of these are classic instances of *reductio*, where Meyers has created a situation so far removed the issue at hand, that he can freely voice his opinions without being overtly political. This distancing also features, though to a lesser degree, in

Meyers' other favorite technique: caricature. In *ACL*, just as in traditional visual caricature, Meyers takes a characteristic of his target and dramatically emphasizes it. How Meyers does caricature on his (verbal) show is simple: he makes clever similes and metaphors. Most often, Meyers compares Trump to some kind of child, directly highlighting the president's immaturity and temperament.

Just as with *reductio*, Meyers uses the caricature as a stepping stone to criticize Trump and his actions. Directly saying that Trump is a bad leader is a bit too explicit for a Horatian like Meyers, but comparing Trump to bratty teen does the same job, without the need to make the critique verbatim.

Oliver, meanwhile, as a Juvenalian on HBO, can essentially say whatever he wants, and that comes across clearly in his satire. Far and away, the rhetorical device that defines Oliver's work is the invective— the lobbing of extremely harsh words at your target. And while Oliver's invectives often lack humor, (calling our current state of affairs "f***ed up"³ or calling Trump a "pathological liar"⁴), they are just as often quite funny, and for good reason. No one particularly wants to see somebody rant about politics for half an hour with no entertainment value. So, Oliver often turns his invectives into punchlines, allowing him to both make his points and keep the audience engaged.

Two good examples of this humorous type of invective come from Oliver's show discussing the new federal budget that had been proposed just a few months into the Trump presidency. The budget essentially boiled down to increases for defense and cuts to almost everything else, and Oliver had a few comments to make. He called the budget the "mood board" of the president, whose mood is "always impatient, vain and

horny for malice”⁵ and, when showing a scrolling list of all the agencies whose funding was cut, Oliver referred to it as “the end credits of America.”⁶ Oliver is making clear his stance on Trump and his proposed budget, but he’s not just yelling at his audience or plainly insulting Trump. Yes, he’s being harsh, but he’s being harsh in a clever and entertaining way, and that, among other things, is what makes people want to tune in.

This is by no means an exhaustive analysis of each host’s style and techniques—I discuss the above topics and others in detail in the body of my thesis. This is simply a bit of table-setting, as I think it’s important to lay out some generalities up front.

Another generality worth noting is what I will *not* be spending time on, namely parody, which is one of the chief tools employed by *SNL*. I do this simply because that type of satire doesn’t really fit in with what I wish to examine. Parody is largely based on imitating the mannerisms or behavior of the person being parodied, and while this kind of “personal” satire is a valid form of commentary, I am more interested in satirical content that focuses more directly on policy or ideology rather than mannerisms. This is why my thesis focuses on hosts like Meyers and Oliver, who issue those types of comments.

As for why satire is important, it’s important because it was what was resonating with many audiences during the 2016 presidential election. The clips that were getting shared around back in 2016 were mostly, if not all, satirical, in some form or another. And the reason those clips resonated is connected to the nature of satire. As Jonathan Gray and his coauthors write in their book *Satire TV*, satire can be defined as “a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their public actions.”⁷ More specifically, Gray and company write that

satire often functions as a “critical interrogator of politicians” and a “mouthpiece of the people’s displeasure with those in power.”⁸ In other words, satire is a type of comedy defined by the frequent attacks or criticisms it levies at those in power, usually through jokes.

Thus, satire already has a kind of “in” with its audience; it bonds with them over their shared complaints about the systems of power and those who run them. This is not to say that every American is strongly anti-government, but more that regardless of what side of the aisle you are on, there are probably some things you disagree with or are points of debate. It’s these points that satire latches onto and injects humor into, or, just as often, simply points out the humor that was already there.

Moreover, although I have been discussing satire in a wholly political sense, that is by no means the extent of the genre. Satire can be social, i.e., not inherently about the policy of an issue. A good example of this is editorial cartoons. While there may be a policy related to what the cartoon is trying to say, the cartoon’s main point is often to comment on an ideology or thought process rather than a specific piece of legislation. Much of Meyers’ satire, in fact, is a mix of political and social, simultaneously criticizing both GOP policies and the ideologies underlying them. Satire can also be more cultural, poking fun at our habits and mores, as publications like *MAD Magazine*, *The Onion* and various college humor publications do. Satire is a very large umbrella, but for the purposes of this thesis, I am focusing in on the political varieties of satire, since that is what I am particularly interested in.

Goals for the Project

In very broad terms, I'm doing this thesis to help myself and others better understand satire. The genre has become more and more important since its widespread growth in the mid-90s and is now clearly a part of our ever evolving media landscape. In order to better understand that landscape and how we interact with it, it is necessary to understand each separate component of the landscape, satire included.

This is not to say that academia has overlooked satire. To the contrary, there is solid research showing that watching late-night comedy such as satire can have some net positive effect on viewers; the strength of that effect and how it comes about vary from study to study. A brief list of such studies follows.

Kristen Landreville, a prominent communications researcher, showed a strong link between watching late-night comedy and watching presidential debates in a 2010 study. Because watching the debates often led to more political discussion among people, Landreville said that watching late-night has an indirect but measurable effect on political engagement. She also confirmed that the effects of late-night comedy are greater the younger the viewer is.

Young also published a study with results similar to Landreville's in 2009. A key distinction the Young study made was to separate analysis of satirical shows from those which are not. Because of this, Young found that while watching any kind of late-night does result in improved political engagement over non-viewers, those who watched satire had an even greater level of engagement, outstripping both non-viewers and those who only watched late-night talk shows.

Finally, a 2009 study (Baek and Wojcieszak) found similar results, showing that watching late-night moderately improved political knowledge, and that the effect was most pronounced among those who were not as attentive prior to watching.

So satire clearly has an effect on its viewers. That debate has long been settled. Therefore, this thesis is asking a different question. I wrote above that I want to better understand satire. More specifically, I want to analyze some of the “Why?” of satire, something that has gone overlooked by academia during its various forays into comedy research. I have briefly touched upon some of the techniques Meyers and Oliver use, and I will continue to probe them in this thesis, analyzing them and conjecturing about how these specific techniques might affect viewers. In other words, rather than looking at what happens to people when they watch satire, I want to try to figure out how that happens.

¹ “Aaron Eckhart/Michelle Dockery/Michelle Price/Atom Willard.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 36, NBC, 14 Nov. 2016.

A note on these citations: I cite some of the *ACL* segments in the manner above, and others with an actual composition title, not just a list of names. The only differences between them are that the ones with “real” titles were uploaded on YouTube and given titles, while the others were simply in an archive.

² “Wanda Sykes/Chris Gethard/Devin Dawson/Josh Dlon.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 112, NBC, 4 May 2017.

³ “President-Elect Trump.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 3, episode 30, HBO, 13 Nov. 2016.

⁴ “Trump vs Truth.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 1, HBO, 12 Feb. 2017.

⁵ “Federal Budget.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 6, HBO, 19 Mar. 2017

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gray, Jonathan, et al., editors. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. NYU Press, 2009. p. ix

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4

Chapter 2: Taking “A Closer Look” at Seth Meyers’ Satire

Overview

Before jumping into the details of Meyers’ satire, it’s worth briefly investigating the structure of Meyers’ show to see how Meyers’ satirical segments fit into the larger landscape of late-night comedy.

Late Night with Seth Meyers is in many ways a traditional late-night talk show: various guests come to the show and have entertaining and enlightening conversations with the host, in this case Meyers. *Late Night* eschews the game segments like those of Jimmy Fallon or James Corden, but the show has plenty of other light-hearted bits, like *Popsicle Schtick* (Meyers tells bad popsicle stick jokes, aided by visual gags) and *Back in My Day* (a parody of your elderly grandfather telling you how things were so much better in the past). But, *Late Night* does have at least one segment that is strongly satirical: *A Closer Look*.

A Closer Look represents a bit of an anomaly in the broadcast television late-night world for a couple of reasons. One is its satirical nature. If you examine the late-night shows on broadcast television (i.e., not cable), you’ll find they all follow roughly the pattern I mentioned above: guest interviews and lighted-hearted, apolitical segments. It does not fit the established “brand” of late-night television, and as such, one would not necessarily expect the segment to be successful. That brings us to the second reason *ACL* is an anomaly: not only is it satire on broadcast television, but it is *successful* satire.

Compare audience response on an *ACL* segment to that of one of Meyer's regular opening monologues. The monologues get laughs, sometimes even big laughs, but Meyers' commentary and jokes during *ACLs* often get *cheers*. While the cheers might be a symptom of audience members' excitement at being at a taping, the popularity of the *ACL* segments on Meyers' YouTube channel seems to confirm the veracity of the live reactions.

Looking at the *Late Night* YouTube channel, where they upload various clips from broadcasts (including many *ACL* segments), it's fairly clear that both the channel's total subscriber count and their total view count has been steadily rising since the spring of 2016– the final stretches of the most recent presidential election, and a time where political satire like the *ACL* segments would be most relevant to viewers.¹ Moreover, many of the *ACL* segments the channel uploads have garnered multiple million views, with such segments comprising three of the channels top 10 most watched videos.² If you expand the range to the top 20 videos, nearly half are *ACL* segments.³

To recap, Meyers' *ACL* segments are somewhat anomalous in the broadcast television world, in no small part because they are so successful. So, one asks, why are the segments so successful? This is the question that the core of this section will try to answer, noting what type of satire Meyers frequently employs (Horatian vs. Juvenalian) as well as common devices or themes that crop up across segments and then attempting to discern how those types and devices might impact viewers.

Analysis Prologue– Not as Funny as You’d Think

The success of *A Closer Look* as a segment wouldn’t necessarily be obvious by just looking at a description of the bit and how it compares to other late-night comedy. I’d like to more fully explain that comment before starting the analysis of one of the first aspects of Meyers’ satire: its relatively low quantity of jokes.

In the face of the questionable success of *A Closer Look*, there is an argument to be made that the segment can be viewed in some ways as spiritually adjacent to *Weekend Update* on *Saturday Night Live*, and that because *Update* is successful, *ACL* should be too. While I don’t deny the connections between *ACL* and *Update* (humorous takes on the news as well as Meyers himself, who sat on the *Update* desk for eight years), I would also say that there are distinct structural differences between the two that make a direct comparison difficult. Namely, *ACL* is far more focused on politics than *Update*, and by extension is less focused on making jokes.

That’s not to say that Meyers doesn’t make jokes during *A Closer Look*. He does, and the jokes are often quite funny. But unlike a traditional monologue joke, which has the basic structure of headline/punchline, *A Closer Look* often uses jokes as springboards into heavy analysis, analysis which is then sprinkled with jokes to keep the audience engaged. As Jesse David Fox wrote in a profile of Meyers for *Vulture*, “It was a good joke — but the segment wasn’t over.”⁴

Take, for example, Meyers’ bit on the numerous protests that sprang up in the wake of Trump’s victory. He leads in with a lighthearted tone, saying that the protests feature “one of the few joys of this election so far– great protest signs,” before highlighting some of the more humorous signs that had been found across the country.⁵

Most comedians would end the bit there, perhaps putting a nice button on it, but not Meyers. Meyers then goes on to highlight the opposition that the protesters are facing, from possible Trump cabinet picks advocating for the maximum amount of non-lethal force to people like Kelly-Anne Conway and Rudy Giuliani attempting to discredit the protestors on national television.

So is Meyers trying to make jokes, or is he trying to be a genuine news source? The answer, it seems, is a little bit of both. That is the dichotomy that exists within all of the *ACL* segments, a balance between humor and headlines. Meyers does want the audience to have some fun— why else would he write jokes if he didn't?— but he's also trying to inform (and also often comment/critique). He has described the opening act of *Late Night* (which includes the *ACL* segments) as the “newspaper act” of the show, where the content is “of the day,”⁶ which is reflective of the informative aspect that *ACL* has.

So there are two aspects to Meyers' particular brand of satire: the entertainment and the commentary. These two things are often quite intertwined, so I will start off by painting the broad strokes of Meyers' humor— what type it is, what types of rhetorical devices he traditionally uses— before exploring how he uses those techniques to make his points.

Analysis, Part I: Following in Horace's Footsteps

I mentioned above that there are two main types of satire, the Horatian and the Juvenalian. Knowing what type of satire Meyers (or any satirist) uses is a good starting point for analysis, since knowing which of the two types is being employed can guide you as you search for techniques the host uses. After watching a reasonable amount of *ACL* clips, it becomes fairly clear that *ACL*, as well as Meyers' satire in general, is of

the Horatian class. The *ACL* segments are so often witty, filled with clever juxtapositions and inventive similes and metaphors to convey important information to his viewers. While Meyers does discuss weighty issues during the *ACL* segments, he's never having an outburst like Bill Maher (or the slightly more subdued but still energetic Oliver) and his jokes are just as often meant to lighten the mood as they are to drive home a point.

Horatian satire is not, to use a colloquialism, very "in your face." Horatian satirists aren't trying to wildly shake you awake, but rather spark something in your mind that will lead to further contemplation and analysis. As a Horatian, Meyers' job is, in both a literal and figurative sense, to say things along the lines of "Isn't it funny that..." and then let the audience take from the humor what they will.

Knowing that *ACL* employs Horatian satire, the next logical question would be "Why does it do that?" The short answer is that *Late Night* airs on a network station,⁷ and therefore has to play to the lowest common denominator— not being overtly political or leaning too far toward either side. This tempering likely works to the show's advantage though, by A) not alienating one side of the aisle and B) not requiring a great amount of political knowledge; whatever a viewer picked up through osmosis during the day is likely enough to understand Meyers' jokes.

By taking a more oblique stance in his humor and commentary, Meyers is endeavoring to not alienate his viewing population while still attempting to give them new political knowledge or experience. Meyers does this through a variety of rhetorical techniques, a few of which I will explore below.

It's also worth noting here that just because Meyers traditionally adopts a wry and somewhat casual attitude during the *ACL* segments, that doesn't mean that he can't hit hard when he wants to. To the contrary, Meyers has often explicitly called out Trump or his policies with language that, if not harsh, leaves very little room for interpretation. Meyers has compared the Trump presidency to an authoritarian regime in various *ACL* segments, going so far as to say that the administration is "challenging and perhaps eroding the basic pillars of our democracy,"⁸ that it is wont to "peddle falsehoods and deny reality,"⁹ and calling Trump himself an "unhinged narcissist."¹⁰ He has also called various policies enacted by the administration, from the travel ban to attempts to revise "Obamacare" and repeal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, some variation on the adjective "cruel."

While these sharp criticisms are traditionally alien to the realm of Horatian satire, the genre is still helping him make his point when he makes these direct attacks. Meyers' words would be considered serious in any setting, but their weight is underscored by their intense juxtaposition with the rest of Meyers' Horatian tendencies.

While viewers might not necessarily remember every joke or detail from a given *ACL* segment, they likely *will* remember the moment when Meyers looked straight into the camera and told them that their democracy was on the verge of collapse, if only because it is tonally unique among a sea of wry comments. Thus, Meyers subverts the conventions of the genre to his advantage, reserving some of his harshest language, which he knows will stick in viewers' minds, for only select and crucial instances.

Analysis, Part II: The Absurdity of it All

While Meyers does have his serious moments, the majority of the *ACL* content complies with the guidelines of Horatian satire. One key aspect of both Horatian satire in general and of the *ACL* segments in particular is the use of absurdity, either developed by the satirist's techniques or present in the real world. Meyers, like many others, employs the traditional rhetorical device of *reductio ad absurdum*, in which an author or commentator takes an argument and extends it to its furthest possible application, doing so with the intent of revealing the ideological fallacies that underlie the argument.

When reports first started coming in about Trump's propensity to have his daily security briefings as short as possible, Meyers employed *reductio* to highlight just how unproductive that tactic is. Speaking with a Trump-like affection, Meyers declared, "Ideally, I like my security briefings delivered via fortune cookie," complete with an on screen graphic of a fortune cookie that read "Russian tanks in Ukraine."¹¹ By taking Trump's real world action of short briefings to the extreme (single sentence fortune cookies), Meyers shows just how bizarre this inclination is, and that it can't really be all that practical for conveying important information.

Another classic example of Meyers using *reductio* comes from a March 2017 *ACL* segment, in which he discussed the once again debated issue of women's reproductive rights. This time, after showing a clip in which a Republican congressman questioned why men should have to pay for women's prenatal care, Meyers had this to say:

“Yeah, why should men pay for prenatal care? For that matter, why should women? Prenatal care is for the fetuses, the fetuses should pay for it. They’ll just have to give up their precious iPhones.”¹²

Obviously, gestating fetuses do not own iPhones or even possess the capital necessary to procure such an item. Meyers is not suggesting that the fetuses actually pay— that’s him using *reductio* to make a point. And the point he is making is that it is inane to suggest the removal of one of the eligible payment groups (men) on the grounds that they do not directly benefit or participate in the process, for by that logic, it truly would be the fetuses’ responsibility.

But just as intriguing (if not more so) as Meyers using *reductio* to comment on and critique the Trump administration is Meyers’ other use of absurdity, in which he simply calls attention to bizarre yet true aspects of our reality as a way to get viewers contemplating current events. When Trump was choosing his cabinet members during the transition, Meyers did an *ACL* on the process, highlighting each potential pick and explaining the issues that he saw with them. And while he did tackle substantial talking points, like Jeff Sessions’ racist comments or Rick Perry’s inability to remember that the Department of Energy existed, Meyers also showcased some real life absurdity to help bolster his position.¹³

When talking about Sessions’ alleged racist comments in 1986, Meyers pointed out that while *16 Candles*’ infamous “Oh, sexy girlfriend!” scene wasn’t widely considered offensive at that time, Sessions’ comments were. By making this juxtaposition, Meyers makes the implicit claim that Sessions was considered too racist for even the less progressive 1980s.

Meyers also employs a similar tactic on Perry in the same segment, reminding viewers about the fact that Perry was a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* mere months before being a possible cabinet pick. Most people would probably be in agreement that anyone who is a contestant on *Dancing* is probably not the first choice to have a position of great power in our government. In Perry's defense, he did have prior governmental experience, but Meyers argues that it makes the current (at the time of the segment's airing) situation no less absurd. "This is the world we live in," Meyers is silently saying. "Doesn't that warrant some thought?"

Analysis, Part III: Here's Looking at You, "Kid"

One of the hallmarks of Horatian satire is its cleverness, its ability to point out the foibles of society and its inhabitants. Moreover, Horatian satire often does this in a somewhat oblique way, drawing comparisons through metaphor or simile and allowing the audience to make those connections on their own. With that in mind, this section of the analysis will explore one of Meyers' long running comparative techniques in which Trump is equated with a child, adolescent, or some other generally immature (and sometimes incompetent) figure.

The first instance of this theme that I noted in my data set came from an *ACL* segment that aired during the January 25, 2017 episode of *Late Night*, just a handful of days after Trump had officially taken office. In this clip, Meyers discusses the then recent report that many White House staffers believe that Trump watches too much television and that it was negatively impacting his duties. Meyers' response to this news?

“Hey, I hear you. I’m dealing with the same issue with my son. He’s nine months old, and we’re trying to observe a ‘no screens’ rule, but sometimes he gets cranky and the only thing that works is *Dora the Explorer*. So— been there.”¹⁴

The humor of the joke (complete with the visual gag of Trump photoshopped to be watching *Dora* in the Oval Office), is quite clear. Meyers’ is comparing the leader of the free world to his small child who is barely a year old, and the juxtaposition of those two extremes is amusing. But there’s more to it than that. Comparing someone to a child is very often meant to be construed as an insult or jab, even if the comment isn’t phrased that way. By comparing Trump to a toddler, Meyers is making the implicit claim that Trump might not be the best person for the job. It’s important to note that, as a Horatian, Meyers is not *saying* that Trump is unqualified for the job, he is merely *implying* it, making a humorous comparison and letting the audience figure out what said comparison might mean.

I should note here that one joke comparing Trump to a baby does not a scathing condemnation make. If this had been a one-time joke, some of that deeper meaning might be applicable, but it also could just be the simile that the writers’ room came up with that week. What makes the baby/child simile in *ACL* so interesting is that it is frequent, cropping up in multiple segments as a through-line of the *ACL* interpretation of the Trump administration.

This consistent and targeted joke is unique among late-night shows. Shows like *Late Night* or *Last Week Tonight* often have a liberal slant to them, but there may not be issue- or person-specific themes that can be tracked across multiple episodes; the satirists simply talk about what is on the front page that day with little forethought into how tonight’s episode connects to yesterday’s or tomorrow’s.

Thus, when roughly a third of the *ACL* segments I analyzed contain some variation of this theme (a handful even contain multiple jokes in one segment), it seems clear that this a purposeful device that Meyers is employing, and if it has purpose, it likely has meaning, too.

I referred to this trend just above as a “baby/child” simile, but that’s not entirely accurate. Indeed, the characters to which Meyers compares Trump vary widely in age and situation. We can break down the jokes into three main categories: those involving toddlers, those involving younger children (lower grade school ages) and those about young adults (middle and high schoolers). Each comparison evokes a different aspect of Trump’s personality, which I’ll elucidate through a handful of examples in each category before talking more broadly about the effects and intentions of Meyers’ child comparisons.

The first category, that involving the toddlers, features comparisons that highlight the President’s more erratic tendencies, making connections between the chaos of the Trump White House and things like a toddler “helping” his parents in the kitchen.¹⁵ Other similar comparisons include Meyers’ statement that the countries that Trump visits often have to “coddle the notoriously temperamental president,”¹⁶ and the analogy of White House staff members trying to wrangle Trump like “a toddler on a road trip”¹⁷ who is always escaping his car seat. These comparisons underscore the impulsiveness that characterizes much of Trump’s personality. When he makes these comparisons, Meyers is obliquely critiquing Trump, implying that he is someone who needs to be controlled, to be held back from his own impulses, and that these capricious facets of Trump’s behavior are likely detrimental to the country.

The second group of comparisons, those about slightly older children, focus more on Trump's apparent immaturity or unprofessionalism, his inability to appropriately comport himself. Meyers has said that "The White House is a middle school cafeteria,"¹⁸ and after both the Boy Scouts and a local police department were forced to issue statements saying that they do not condone opinions Trump expressed at their respective rallies, Meyers mused, "What's next? 'We here at the public library in no way support the drawing of cartoon wieners in our margins of our books?'"¹⁹ More directly, Meyers has compared Trump to a clueless eight year old²⁰ as well as "a kid who just got home from his first air show," complete with Meyers, with Trump like affectations, describing the exploits of the fighter jets.²¹ Just as with the toddler comparisons, Meyers is obliquely criticizing Trump, making implicit claims that he lacks the demeanor appropriate to adequately lead the free world.

The final type of comparison equates Trump with a tween or teen, highlighting his immense stubbornness and emotionality characteristic of that age group. When talking of Trump's reported dislike of most White House staff members, Meyers compared him to "a moody teenager"²² whose parents won't let him do what he wants to. During other *ACL* segments Trump's convoluted relationship with the Department of Justice is compared to "a catty teenager who's in a fight with her best friend"²³ and his interactions with China were seen as akin to how "parents treat a 16 year old who won't come down for Thanksgiving dinner" in that China was refusing to cave under the pressure of Trump's Twitter outbursts, calling them "emotional venting."²⁴

But Meyers has more teenager stereotypes up his sleeve. Most notably, Meyers has repeatedly compared the president to some kind of lazy teenager, criticisms that often were not entirely unwarranted. The theme came up when Trump was seemingly baffled at the prospect of actually doing work on a trip to North Korea²⁵ and following the bizarre paper towel throwing incident in Puerto Rico, where Meyers compared the escapade to something “a teenager in the break room of Costco”²⁶ would do. Then, after Senator Bob Corker said that there as “a lack of desire to be competent” in Trump, translated that statement for his audience, explaining, “That’s how you say he doesn’t give a f*** on CNN,” before likening the statement to the performance review of a teenager who is habitually late to his job as a fast food cashier.²⁷

While each of these types of simile are representative of wildly varying aspects of Trump’s personality, Meyers employs them all for a single purpose: to showcase a holistic picture of the president, with a particular focus on his flaws and foibles. In true Horatian manner, Meyers never says outright that he feels Trump’s personality is destructive or that he is incredibly temperamental, but he implies it through all of the comparisons that he makes, and he hopes that his audience will draw similar conclusions from his jokes.

¹ The channel’s subscriber count grew from around half a million in the spring of 2016 to its current (as of March 2019) count of nearly three million. The channel’s total view count increased massively, going from around 175 million total views to over one *billion* views in the same amount of time. “Latenightseth Monthly YouTube Statistics.” *SocialBlade*, SocialBlade, socialblade.com/youtube/user/latenightseth/monthly.

² “Latenightseth Most Viewed YouTube Videos.” *SocialBlade*, SocialBlade, socialblade.com/youtube/user/latenightseth/videos/mostviewed.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fox, Jesse David. “Seth Meyers Is Going to Tell You the Truth, One Trump Joke at a Time.” *Vulture*, 12 Dec. 2016, www.vulture.com/2016/12/seth-meyers-late-night-c-v-r.html.

⁵ “Aaron Eckhart/Michelle Dockery/Michelle Price/Atom Willard.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 36, NBC, 14 Nov. 2016.

⁷ The influence of broadcast rules is something I explore more in depth in the final chapter of this thesis.

⁸ “Tracee Ellis Ross/Dan Stevens/Electric Guest.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 73, NBC, 6 Feb. 2017.

⁹ “Trump Abuses His Presidential Power: A Closer Look.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 76, NBC, 9 Feb. 2017.

¹⁰ “Jason Sudeikis/Michelle Monaghan/Van Jones.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 57, NBC, 9 Jan. 2017.

¹¹ “Jim Parsons/Ben McKenzie/Jon Favreau/Dan Pfeiffer/Leah Shapiro.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 64, NBC, 19 Jan. 2017.

¹² “Glenn Close/Alex Karpovsky/Mohsin Hamid/Nicko McBrain.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 89, NBC, 13 March 2017.

¹³ “Curtis ‘50 Cent’ Jackson/Katy Tur/K.Flay.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 42, NBC, 23 Nov. 2017.

¹⁴ “Katie Couric/Bryce Dallas Howard/Matt Taibbi/Darren King.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 67, NBC, 25 Jan. 2017.

¹⁵ “Mike Myers/Erin Gibson & Bryan Safi/Nicko McBrain.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 92, NBC, 16 March 2017.

¹⁶ “Kyle Chandler/Michaela Watkins/Matt Frazier.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 121, NBC, 22 May 2017.

¹⁷ “Joel Edgerton/Zoe Lister-Jones/Royal Blood/Jared Champion.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 128, NBC, 8 June 2017.

¹⁸ “Molly Shannon/Matthew Rhys/Bleachers.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 149, NBC, 31 July 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Billy Eichner/Ashley Graham/The All-American Rejects/Venzella Joy.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 153, NBC, 7 Aug. 2017. Myers referred to a Trump tweet about “meetings and calls” as “how an eight year old would describe an adult job.”

²¹ “Manafort, Rocket Man and the New GOP Health Care Bill: A Closer Look.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 8, NBC, 19 Sept. 2017.

²² “Gerard Butler/Patton Oswalt/Joe Russo.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 23, NBC, 12 Oct. 2017.

²³ “Ellen Pompeo/John Leguizamo/Jhene Aiko.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 32, NBC, 6 Nov. 2017.

²⁴ “Colin Jost & Michael Che/Brian Knappenberger/Venzella Joy.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 4, episode 155, NBC, 9 Aug. 2017.

²⁵ “Ellen Pompeo/John Leguizamo/Jhene Aiko.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 32, NBC, 6 Nov. 2017.

²⁶ “Gerard Butler/Patton Oswalt/Joe Russo.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 23, NBC, 12 Oct. 2017.

²⁷ “Megyn Kelly/Nathan Fielder/Colton Dunn/Sonny Emory.” *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, performance by Seth Meyers, season 5, episode 26, NBC, 25 Oct. 2017.

Chapter 3: Juvenal Oliver?

Overview

Two key differences between *Late Night* and *Last Week Tonight* are the channels on which they air and their general intent. As I discussed above, the fact that *Late Night* is broadcast on a traditional network limits the types of content Meyers can play around with, and that likely at least partially informs his Horatian outlook. The inverse is true for Oliver. *Last Week Tonight* is broadcast on HBO— a cable channel that is largely free from the influence of the FCC. As such, Oliver has a wider berth in which he can practice his satire and the very nature of his outlet allows him to become more Juvenalian than Meyers ever could.

The other way that Oliver differs from Meyers as television hosts is in their intents. Unlike *Late Night*, which is really just a traditional late-night talk show with a popular satirical element, *Last Week Tonight* is quite obviously a show whose purpose is to deliver political comedy/satire. Whereas *A Closer Look* comprises only a small fraction of the total run time of *Late Night*, the Main Story¹ for each episode will often take roughly 20 minutes (sometimes even more) of the show's half hour runtime. The core of *Last Week Tonight* is the satire, making it more in the family of *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* than of Leno or Letterman.²

One other key thing to note about Oliver is his success. I noted that Meyers was an anomaly in late-night because he had a successful satirical platform, and that still holds true. However, Meyers' success pales in comparison to Oliver's, a man who can, because of where his show is aired, more fully harness the power of satire. Oliver's

shows consistently rack up multiple million views on the show's YouTube channel, often achieving over ten million and occasionally surpassing the twenty-million view threshold. It's worth noting here that the *Last Week Tonight* channel only has (as of this writing) 6.7 million subscribers, which means one of two things: either all of the subscribers are watching the Main Story uploads multiple times (seems unlikely) or people are widely sharing the segments, allowing them to rack up massive view counts. In other words, the view counts alone are fairly indicative of Oliver's success, but the view count/subscriber ratio more fully confirms that belief.

With some of the basics of Oliver's comedy laid out, I'll now move on to the more detailed analysis of some of his Juvenalian techniques, most notably his extreme harshness and the level of profanity he employs.

Analysis, Part I: Not Mincing Words

One key aspect of Oliver's satire, as well as the Juvenalian form in general, is how harsh it is.³ If Meyers' Horatian criticisms came in a somewhat oblique fashion, Oliver's are almost akin to a direct attack. As the title of this section suggests, Oliver is not one to mince words, frequently explicitly stating his positions, which often involves bluntly decrying those of Trump and his associates. Such explicitness is present in almost every episode, but let's begin with what could be called Oliver's initial reactions to the electoral victory of Donald Trump: his first show in a world where Trump won, which aired the weekend following the 2016 election.

The entire show is laced with the traditional Juvenalian harshness as Oliver bitterly recounts what has transpired over the last few days. Summarizing the results, Oliver says that "Instead of showing our daughters that they could someday be

president, America proved that no grandpa is too racist to become leader of the free world.”⁴ In the span of a single sentence, Oliver both denounces the white nationalist influences that fueled Trump’s success, as well as briefly lamenting the messages we are sending to younger generations. Most of the election show will vacillate between these two states, each displayed with an intensity befitting a Juvenalian satirist.

Sometimes the lament and the attack will be rolled into a single soundbite, such as when Oliver talks of how he has endured “wave after wave of nausea,”⁵ in recent days, a sentiment he will repeat near the close of the show. This phrasing works to combine both the lament and the attack in that using the word nausea creates a value judgment against the nausea inducing thing: here, the continuing existence of Trump’s presidency. Other times, like the comment that opened the show, the lament and the attack are more clearly delineated. Toward the end of the show, Oliver tells his audience that if they don’t try to “mitigate Trump’s damage, things will not be okay.”⁶

But as despondent as Oliver is over the coming years, he does not wallow in his misery. He does not allow himself to checkout, and he attempts to keep his audience from doing the same. “You may lament,” Oliver essentially says, “but you must also stay vigilant.” This idea of vigilance will be examined more deeply in a later section of this thesis, where I will explore how Oliver often issues calls to action to his audience that other satirists do not.

This vigilance, at least for Oliver, is exemplified in the more direct attacks that he makes on Trump and his administration, an attempt to keep the president in check by keeping his viewers more fully informed. Indeed, for all his lamentations, Oliver spends much of the first post-election show harshly attacking the then forthcoming Trump

administration, pointing serious potential problems with Trump's presidency, problems that must be constantly watched lest they spiral out of control. He calls the proposed policies "alarming," and compares them to "the to-do list on Satan's refrigerator," while calling some members of Trump's transition team "horrificing" and Trump's attitudes towards the media "genuinely worrisome."⁷

But all of those comments are, in terms of the Juvenalian, small potatoes. They are harsh and unbridled, but those types of comments are not restricted to Juvenalians. Though Horatians like Meyers typically stay away from such direct attacks, it is not wholly unheard of. Indeed, Meyers has, on occasion, employed some Juvenalian adjacent language to call out the Trump administration, as I discussed in the Meyers section.

Still though, there are moments on *Last Week Tonight* that Oliver can only achieve because he is a Juvenalian, most notably his unvarnished attacks on Trump himself, where he makes comments that Horatians like Meyers never could. There are two main examples of this type of harshness in the post-election show, each representing how even the most rhetorically simple statements can function as powerful criticism. Both times when Oliver directly attacks Trump, he does so with all of the pretense of a comedian having been stripped away.

Near the start of the show, he says that "[Trump] is not normal. He is abnormal."⁸ It's a simple but effective attack. Oliver contrasts the set of the prior 44 presidents (as well as most people) with the singular set of Trump. "He does not fit the paradigm," Oliver says, "and as such, we must be careful."

The other instance comes toward the end the broadcast, serving as a kind of final reminder for the audience and echoing Oliver's earlier comments: "A Klan-backed, misogynist, internet troll is going to be delivering the next SOTU and that is not normal. That is f***ed up."⁹

By going directly to the heart of the issue, Oliver is attempting to cut through the perceived fog of partisan and media interpretation.¹⁰ During his first election show, Oliver tackled the much larger issue of the media, both social and mainstream. He criticized the mainstream media for waiting too long to take Trump seriously, citing CNN's propensity to air his unedited campaign rallies and also warned against the dangers of living in partisan echo chambers saying that "there is no consensus on what a fact is" and that "a healthy media diet has to be broader than [the echo chamber]."

But this charged language, effective as it is, is by no means the only way in which Oliver can make his arguments about the dangers of a Trump presidency. After all, he is a satirist, and as such, comedy constitutes a large part of Oliver's repertoire. Indeed, much like Meyers, Oliver often makes his criticisms by means of a joke, even if his jokes are more direct than Meyers' oblique similes.

Take, for example, how Oliver cleverly calls out the assault allegations against Trump and Mike Pence's ultra-conservative attitudes. While primarily calling out Trump's flip-flopping on whether he'd repeal Obamacare or not, Oliver calls the so-called Trumpcare "a healthcare plan where doctors feel your breasts for lumps whether you want them to or not."¹¹ Similarly, while primarily "fantasizing" about a Trump resignation, Oliver reminds the audience about "Mike F***ing Pence... who looks like he's from the 1950s, but thinks like he's from *the 1650s*."¹²

These are genuinely funny jokes, as evidenced by the audience's reactions to them, but they also underscore what Oliver (and likely, his viewers) see as serious problems with the Trump administration and those who populate it.

Analysis, Part II: So F*ing Cathartic**

A common characteristic of Juvenalian satire is the use of profanity by the satirist to emphasize the harsh points he/she is making. Oliver often employs profanity in this way, but he also uses swears in a slightly different way, as a way to connect with his audience more than he might otherwise be able to. I believe that Oliver's vulgarity functions to endear him to his viewers and that the words act as a kind of catharsis for those who might be fed up with current affairs.¹³

Let's start with how profanity might endear Oliver to his audience. I've previously noted how Meyers employs humorous similes and metaphors to make his point. While this is a valid rhetorical technique, it's also worth pointing out that most regular people don't speak in rhetorical phrases. They talk in scrambled half thoughts, often laced with grammatical errors and, crucially for Oliver, profanity. So when Oliver asks "How the f*** did we get here and what the f*** do we do now?"¹⁴ that resonates with people watching. Similar emotions are evoked when discussing the first bombshells of the then freshly brewing Russia scandal Oliver asked, among other things, "What the f*** is going on?"¹⁵ And later on in that same show, when talking about Trump's seeming inability to be stopped by even the most outrageous mistakes, Oliver laments that "the end of the line is drawn by MC f***ing Escher!"¹⁶

All of these instances are, to some degree, a use of profanity to express exasperation with matters at hand, something that many people do, and especially the people watching Oliver following the election of Trump. Many people watching Oliver are probably there because they share the show's (self-admitted)¹⁷ liberal slant. They too have likely thought something along the lines of "What the f*** is going on?" if not that very question itself. By expressing these simple, profanity-imbued thoughts, Oliver reveals that even though he's the one behind the desk, he's still much like the people watching. It earns him some goodwill with his audience, so that when he calls them to action or asks them to make the hard choice (as he is wont to do), they are perhaps more willing than they'd otherwise be.

Analysis, Part III: Making Demands

One of the most distinctive aspects of Oliver's satire is his willingness to ask more of his audience than to simply watch him and be entertained. Indeed, Oliver has often makes clear that there are real and tangible effects stemming from the issues he is criticizing, and points out to the audience that there are ways to help staunch those effects that are far more efficient than just watching his show. I return again to Oliver's first election show, which also ended up being that year's season finale.¹⁸ In other words, the first time Oliver got to talk about Trump as president (elect) was also the last time he'd talk about him for many months. So while Oliver does spend time employing his traditional satire (as discussed above), he also leaves his audience with a parting message to carry with them during the show's regularly scheduled hiatus.

Oliver spends the final five minutes of the first post-election show giving an impassioned speech to his audience and explaining what needs to be done, both during the hiatus and beyond it. “We are going to need to stay here and fight constantly,” Oliver explains, imploring his audience to act as watchdogs on legislation and to “f***ing vote” during the 2018 midterms. But that’s not enough for Oliver. Indeed, he calls those actions “below the barest minimum.”

Employing a kind of implicit Juvenalian harshness, Oliver explains that while we once had a president who could be counted on to generally do the right thing (Obama), we will no longer have that luxury going forward.¹⁹ “We’re going to have to actively stand up for one another,” Oliver says, “and it can’t be just sounding off on the internet or sharing think-pieces or videos like this one that echo around your bubble.” It is this comment that truly sets the stage for Oliver’s ask of his audience, and it also reveals a deep level of self-awareness on his part.

He may be a wildly successful satirist, but he also realizes that his satire is not the be all, end all for the political climate of the United States. Perhaps he can change some minds, many minds even, but at the end of the day, he is still just a talking head of another form. Oliver realizes his own limitations, and he makes tough demands of his audience because of that. Oliver knows that it is not enough to just to tune in to him every week and that real change requires real action, as well as real capital, as his next handful of lines show.

Oliver paints a dire picture for his audience, asking that they make “actual sacrifice to support people who are now under threat.” Oliver then asks that his audience, if they are able, to donate to one of the many charities which he subsequently

lists, including such institutions as Planned Parenthood, The Trevor Project and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Oliver also pleads with his audience to making recurring donations (again, if they are able) because “this is not a short term problem.” Oliver also urges viewers to subscribe to genuine, hard-hitting journalism like *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* instead of “sharing partisan memes.”

For all of this seriousness though, Oliver still manages to sprinkle in some bits of satire and humor to keep the mood up. Following his mention of MALDEF, Oliver says that donating to MALDEF is a great way to show that “your compassion for Latinos goes beyond, say, oh, I don’t know, occasionally eating a f***ing taco bowl.”²⁰ He also inserts another so-called “dash of fun,” pointing out that donations to all of these various charities can be made in the name of another person, namely the names of those relatives who supported Trump in the prior election, a small, humorous bit of revenge.²¹

Looking more broadly at this idea of calls to action in general, while it may seem like it was only in the immediate aftermath of Trump’s election that Oliver issued these quasi-edicts to his viewers, that’s not the case. Yes, the post-election show was undoubtedly the densest in terms of these types of statements, but they do appear in other shows as well.

In one of the first shows following Trump’s inauguration, Oliver urged his audience that “we all need to commit to protect the reality of facts,”²² and explaining the importance of verifying claims made by news sources and the dangers of drifting too far deep into your echo chamber. In the days following the initial revelation of

Trump's ties to Russia, Oliver warned that it was "dangerous"²³ to become wholly consumed by the drama, which he dubbed "Stupid Watergate", lest other equally important issues slip past.

And a little less than a year into the Trump presidency, Oliver once again urges his viewers not to become complacent, even when their spirits might be bolstered by promising election results. Oliver sums up the issue with a tidy simile saying that "The Trump presidency is basically a marathon: it's painful, it's pointless, and the majority of you didn't even agree to run it, you were just signed up by your dumbest friends."²⁴

But just as important as noting that Oliver often issues these calls to actions is attempting to figure out what allows him to do such things when other satirists usually do not. I believe that Oliver's directions to his audience are borne, at least partly, due to the very structure of the show. Namely, I believe that Oliver, as an explicitly political Juvenalian on HBO, has far more purview in which to work than a broadcast Horatian like Meyers.

Being a Juvenalian satirist, not only will Oliver tell you that he thinks Trump is a terrible president, but he will also why he thinks that. Asking viewers to step up (based on the assumption that they likely share similar views) is a natural extension of the open dialogue Oliver can have as a Juvenalian. Similarly, the show's clear focus on politics also helps to explain Oliver's asks of his audience. Talking about the things that one can do to try and influence the political goings-on of the United States is decidedly within the purview of a political commentary show, but perhaps not appropriate (or possible) to fit into a shorter segment that is part of a larger, apolitical show like *Late Night*.

¹ The Main Story is the term HBO uses to refer to the long-form, satirical piece that is present in each episode of *Last Week Tonight*. It is where Oliver delves deep into a specific issue and breaks it down for his audience, often employing Juvenalian satire to make his points.

² This isn't entirely surprising given that, before he was on his own show, Oliver spent many years as a correspondent and writer on *The Daily Show* during Jon Stewart's tenure, an experience that undoubtedly informed his comedic style and personality.

³ Oliver also frequently employs language that is direct and explicit, even if it is not connoted as harsh, but the effect is rather similar.

⁴ "President-Elect Trump." *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 3, episode 30, HBO, 13 Nov. 2016.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ It's also worth noting here that Oliver isn't saying the echo chamber is inherently bad: "There's nothing inherently wrong with media that has a viewpoint. This show has a viewpoint... I don't pretend to be neutral." The issue Oliver has is with people living entirely in their echo chambers and taking whatever they read for granted, explaining that many "hyper-partisan" on both the left and the right were publishing articles that contained straight up lies. In other words, there is fake news on both sides, and Oliver simply doesn't want his viewers to fall prey to it.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Oliver's swearing might seem a somewhat banal topic but remember that when Oliver swears, the audience gets to hear those expletives and not the classic *beep* that denotes profanity on the regular channels.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Stupid Watergate." *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 13, HBO, 21 May 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See footnote 11 for a relevant quote on how Oliver and *Last Week* communicate their ideological stance.

¹⁸ *Last Week Tonight* runs on a spring-fall cycle, taking a hiatus for the holidays and most of the early months of each year.

¹⁹ "For the last eight years, we've had a president who we could assume would generally stand up for the rights of all Americans, but that is going to change now." were Oliver's exact words. I say this is implicit because while Oliver isn't directly attacking Trump, he is juxtaposing him with a far better example and using his juxtaposition (and the stark differences that it highlights) to do his work for him

²⁰ This would be funny on its own, but its funnier when you realize that Oliver's statement is accompanied by a visual President Trump's ill-received Cinco de Mayo tweet that featured him eating a taco bowl from Trump Tower.

²¹ This revelation, it should be noted, got a raucous round of applause from the in-studio audience.

²² “Trump vs Truth.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 1, HBO, 12 Feb. 2017.

²³ “Stupid Watergate.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 13, HBO, 21 May 2017.

²⁴ “Presidency of Donald Trump.” *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, performance by John Oliver, season 4, episode 30, HBO, 12 Nov. 2017.

Chapter 4: Conclusion, or: Same Sat Time, Same Sat Channel

It's clear that Meyers and Oliver take two very different tacks when approaching the art of satire. Meyers has come to adopt the role of the minimally divisive Horatian while Oliver acts as the more extreme and explicit Juvenalian. Though many things inform their comedy, I am certain that the specific rules of network television have at least partially influenced the way both men perform satire.

Take Meyers, for example. One of the main reasons I believe the segments employ the Horatian model is simply a practical one, derived from the very structure of *Late Night* in general. *Late Night* is not a political show, let alone a political satire show. As Meyers once said in an interview with Chuck Todd, "I'm a comedian right now who's talking a lot about politics."¹

This distinction that Meyers makes is important because it, among other things, determines whether a host will lean toward the Horatian or the Juvenalian. Horatian content is often more oblique or sly in its commentary, making jokes and the letting the audience take what they will from them—Meyers' declaration that he is a comedian first, but who looks a lot like a pundit at the moment. Juvenalian satire, meanwhile, being far more direct and harsh, can more deeply examine a particular issue through the use of humor.

In other words, Meyers is a Horatian in large part because his job requires it of him. He is the host of *Late Night*, a decidedly apolitical show, and as such, he cannot get overly political or get lost in the weeds of policy, lest he risk alienating viewers. So even if he wanted to take a more Juvenalian route, (which I don't think he does),² the type of show he's hosting prohibits that.

Moreover, *Late Night* airs on NBC, one of the major broadcast networks, networks whose content is strictly governed and monitored by the FCC. Why is this important? One of the many rules the FCC has concerning what is broadcast is that all of the “major” swear words (think George Carlin’s *Seven Dirty Words* monologue) are barred from being said on broadcast networks. While not a requirement, many Juvenalian satirists (including Oliver) often employ such language to further emphasize their points, something Meyers just cannot do on NBC.

But even though the nature of his show somewhat forces Meyers to adopt the Horatian approach, that doesn’t mean he can’t use the genre effectively. In fact, I’d argue that using Horatian satire is likely one of the better moves Meyers could make. As mentioned above, *Late Night* is not a political show; the people who tune in likely don’t want to hear long-winded discussions of public policy and are probably just there to watch interviews or the musical guest. Horatian satire works to Meyers’ advantage here, as the jokes don’t require a large depth of knowledge; remembering the biggest headlines of the day is likely sufficient.

Thus, *ACL* segments are designed to be able to draw in the largest audience possible and give them all what they want. There is surely the contingent of people who watch *Late Night* just for the *ACL* portions, people who are plugged in to the political news cycle. They get another viewpoint of analysis with the added benefit of some humor out of Meyers’ satire. But the larger portion of the audience is likely the average American, someone who, while caring about politics, doesn’t necessarily want it in their late-night comedy. But these people are still reaping benefits from *ACL* even if that’s not why they watch.

By employing a Horatian style, Meyers is both ensuring that the majority of his audience doesn't tune out when the *ACL* segments come on as well as crafting a segment that can both entertain and perhaps inform. Watching an *ACL* segment might get a viewer thinking about an issue in a new way, or start thinking about it at all, just because they happened to tune in that night.

Conversely, Oliver has far fewer restrictions by virtue of his show airing on HBO, a cable network which is not as beholden to the FCC as NBC is. It's worth noting here that HBO's freedom is twofold. First, like all cable networks, it does not answer to the FCC. But more importantly, HBO generates its own revenue stream via subscriptions, merchandise and other paths, which is why there are no commercials on HBO: the channel simply doesn't need the money ads bring in. I mention this only because the lack of ads bolsters HBO's ability to air whatever they want, as they truly are answering to no one.

Oliver's placement on HBO starts a kind of domino effect that leads to his particular brand of Juvenalian satire. First, he can make his show anything he wants it to be— in this case, an in depth political commentary show. He makes clear where his ideologies lie, again simply because he can. He doesn't worry about alienating viewers because A) at least some portion of HBO subscribers are likely left-leaning, given simple probability and B) those who watch will likely refer their friends, building the audience in a continuous cycle. Next, Oliver shapes his routine to match viewers' expectations of what a cable commentary show looks like: he's dramatic, energetic and adds a plethora of f***s to his dialogue, which is free to do because he's on HBO.

I realize reading that last paragraph can make it seem like Oliver is somehow pandering, which I don't think he is. I think this is what his comic persona looks like,³ and that it is resonating with people for reasons I have already described.

The channels each man hosts on, through their various idiosyncrasies, have molded two very different but equally proficient satirists. Meyers and Oliver present their types of comedy for two very different audiences, as is evident by not only their general style, but the specific techniques they use.

Meyers, through frequent use of *reductio* and caricature, provides a kind of “hands off” satire for a broad audience. Meyers has opinions, but he rarely gets overt with them, instead masquerading them with clever similes and metaphors. In all likelihood, most people don't tune in to *Late Night* to watch *A Closer Look*, so Meyers carefully crafts his satire as to not drive anyone away. He knows the expectations of the network and its audience, and he has created a type of satire that meshes nicely with both those things.

Oliver, on the other hand, markets himself (or at least has come to be marketed as) a kind of *de facto* political commentator, and thus his satire matches the audience's expectations of that. Oliver breaks down things in far more detail than Meyers ever does, because that's the kind of satirist Oliver is. He's speaking truth to power down to the minutiae—again because he can and because many people are willing to listen.

I believe each host's content is different not only because of network constraints (or lack thereof), but because of the markedly different purposes each one serves. While I have been discussing Oliver in terms of satire, he very often veers into polemics. Satire is often described as being a genre that mocks its subjects, but Oliver far exceeds

that threshold, routinely tearing apart whatever he is discussing, only occasionally lightening the mood with his humorous invectives. As professor of cultural studies Amber Day notes, “Oliver allows himself to become incensed about an issue.”⁴ Whereas traditional satire points out the foibles or quirks of society, Oliver frequently takes on bigger issues or perceived injustices. This is not to say that Oliver’s method is bad—his anger reflects “an informed and engaged citizenry (a populace that not only votes, but also thinks, feels, speaks, and agitates)”⁵—it simply isn’t quite satire.

Similarly, Oliver’s high level of activism and calls to action, while good for democracy, disqualify him from being considered as wholly satirical. During the satire renaissance of the past few years, the mainstream media has often pondered exactly how much impact satire has on elections, if it has any at all. Day believes that it doesn’t, and that’s fine. In a 2012 roundtable discussion,⁶ a number political comedians echoed similar sentiments (two are quoted below), insisting that satire’s job is to simply to highlight issues and not to necessarily do anything about them.

“It’s not as if satire, or comedic influence in general, is going to radically change someone’s mind. No one says, ‘Oh, I heard this joke and I’m not a Republican anymore.’”

—Baratunde Thurston, former executive editor of *The Onion*

“Generally we’re in it for the laughs, not for an impact on society.”

—Allison Silverman, former head writer for *The Colbert Report*

This is not the case with Oliver. As Day writes, Oliver encourages his viewers to “flex [their activism] muscles.”⁷ And flex they have. *Time* magazine published a piece detailing the “John Oliver Effect,” multiple instances of Oliver doing a piece on some issue (bail reforms, net neutrality, etc.) and the subsequent and substantial outpouring of

comments from viewers, comments that have led to new laws being passed or massive donations being given.⁸ Again, there is nothing inherently undesirable about Oliver's activism, it doesn't quite meet the mark for satire.

As our world evolves though, it's worth asking if our definition of satire will evolve along with it. Traditionally, satire has been believed to look very much like what Meyers does. He's not being an activist, but simply pointing out things he feels are worth talking about and letting the audience come to their own conclusions. Meyers' Horatian sensibilities really work for him when he practices this classical type of satire, By keeping his commentary implicit, he puts the onus on the audience to do the work and critical thinking for themselves while he simply provides the information. Meyers doesn't want to personally instigate change like Oliver does, he only wants to keep people informed, and maybe entertain them along the way.

It's quite possible that as time goes on, the line between entertainment (for, after all, satire *is* entertainment) and activism will continue to be blurred. Despite not neatly fitting into our current definition of satire, it's clear that Oliver has been successful. According to *The Guardian*, every week, four million people watched *Last Week Tonight* during its first season, not to mention three or four times that number in online views.⁹ In the coming years, we may come to recognize Oliver as the first host to take up a "new, more calls-to-arms direction for US political satire." Author Dave Barry has said, "Political satirists aren't trying to do good,"¹⁰ but Oliver's success may mean that that adage will soon be a thing of the past as satirists lean more heavily into activism as Oliver has.

It's important to point out that Oliver's calls to action are a kind of lightning in a bottle. As I've shown, the calls to action only work because Oliver has won over his audience via the satirical run-up to his polemical main point of the evening. Yes, Oliver is a man "whose jokes have long gone beyond even political argumentation. Who's insisted, again and again, on action,"¹¹ and he is someone "making it very difficult to tell where, precisely, the 'comedian' ends and the 'activist' begins,"¹² yet he is still telling jokes and is still a comedian. Prominent communications researcher Dannagal Young, has said that "His [Oliver's] power is in his ability to be playful."¹³

This idea of playfulness or entertainment is an important point, and it's something (perhaps the only thing) that Meyers and Oliver share. My thesis has discussed the various ways both hosts connect with their audiences, and the crucial thing they both do is to emotionally contextualize the news. Meyers does this through comedy, and Oliver does it through anger with some comedy mixed in. Aside from informing people, I'd argue that this emotional connection is the other key role of satire. And it's another thought that came up frequently in the roundtable; I've quoted a few instances of it happening below.¹⁴

"The role of satire is to help people deal with the political reality, it's to keep them from being depressed and anxious."— Comedian Peter Sagal

"That's the power of satire: to distill certain truths and convey them to us in ways that are not only digestible but simple and enjoyable because it's comedy."— Author Rebecca Traister

"The ability to laugh at it [politics] makes it more bearable."
— Baratunde Thurston, former executive for *The Onion*

This idea of connection and the related belief of satire being entertainment first and politics second is more than just a theory I posit or an in-group belief among comedians. Young writes about the importance of “accessible— even enjoyable—ways for citizens to demystify political discourse and help keep politicians and media institutions accountable.”¹⁵

Her article was written during the zenith of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart’s popularity, but the ideas she discusses can easily be applied to Meyers and Oliver. Both shows are ones that are “consistently treating politics in the context of entertainment” and the programs “do not fit neatly into an entertainment-or-information dichotomy.”¹⁶ As this thesis has shown, Meyers is largely entertainment, but there is commentary buried in there, as this thesis has shown. Conversely, Oliver is mostly commentary, but he is still clearly entertaining.

Young claimed that “this playful space [the satirical shows] isn’t a realm that exists separate from politics; for most people, this is politics,”¹⁷ and I believe that statement neatly captures an important point that my thesis demonstrates: the idea that satire is not only a complex and self-contained ecosystem, with its own patterns and foibles, but that it also exists as part of a much larger societal machinery, intersecting with, among other things, politics and media guidelines. Satire is a rich and fascinating genre, and I hope that my thesis has shed some light on the inner workings of this evolving form of comedy.

¹ MSNBC. “Seth Meyers Offers 'Sincerest Apologies' For Trump | MTP Daily | MSNBC.” YouTube, MSNBC, 10 Oct. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvDIMxGNe74.

² This is all speculative, but everything I’ve seen of Meyers seems to indicate that he’s a fairly nice guy. He’s always amenable in interviews, makes real connections with his guests and often laughs/breaks at his own jokes during *ACL*. He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who could routinely channel the fierceness needed to be a Juvenalian satirist.

³ The man did write for the equally Juvenalian *Colbert Report* earlier in his career, which aired Comedy Central, which is non-regulated like HBO.

⁴ Day, Amber. “Satire Might Not Sway Votes, but That Isn’t the Point.” *The Conversation*, 4 Nov. 2014, theconversation.com/satire-might-not-sway-votes-but-that-isnt-the-point-33002.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “How Does Satire Influence Politics?” *Moment Magazine*, 1 Nov. 2012, www.momentmag.com/how-does-satire-influence-politics/.

⁷ Day.

⁸ Luckerson, Victor. “The John Oliver Effect: The HBO Host's Real-World Impact.” *Time*, Time, 20 Jan. 2015, time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america/.

⁹ Helmore, Edward. “How John Oliver Started a Revolution in US TV's Political Satire.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 June 2014, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/jun/15/john-oliver-started-a-revolution-in-us-tv-political-satire.

¹⁰ “How Does Satire Influence Politics?” *Moment Magazine*, 1 Nov. 2012, www.momentmag.com/how-does-satire-influence-politics/.

¹¹ Garber, Megan. “John Oliver Pushes Comedy Further Toward Activism.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 15 Nov. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/john-oliver-activist-comedian/507599/.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Helmore.

¹⁴ “How Does Satire Influence Politics?” *Moment Magazine*, 1 Nov. 2012, www.momentmag.com/how-does-satire-influence-politics/.

¹⁵ Young, Dannagal G. “Lighten up: How Satire Will Make American Politics Relevant Again.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, archives.cjr.org/cover_story/lighten_up.php.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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