“WHEN GOD GIVES YOU AIDS...MAKE LEMON-AIDS”: IRONIC PERSONA AND PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY IN SARAH SILVERMAN’S JESUS IS MAGIC

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DEDICATION

To my niece, Montana, a young woman who understands the value of education, the value of honesty, and the value of humor.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“When God Gives You Aids...Make Lemon-Aids”: Ironic Persona and Perspective by Incongruity in Sarah Silverman’s Jesus is Magic

by

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Sarah Silverman created a name for herself as a comedian with the release of the 2005 standup comedy movie Jesus is Magic. However, considering Silverman’s propensity to discuss taboo and potentially offensive topics such as race, 9/11, and AIDS, she has emerged as one of the most polarizing and controversial comedians performing today. Silverman has developed an onstage ironic persona of ignorance and innocence that juxtaposes with her controversial, humorous content to highlight a unique manifestation of Burke’s concept of perspective by incongruity. Throughout her ironic performance, Silverman utilizes satirical white privilege, mock post-feminism, and ironic trivialization of serious events as a means of highlighting questionable social behavior and attitudes. Her use of various comedic styles informs her subversiveness, and ultimately, she creates significance through the comic minimization of social events and issues. An analysis of specific aspects of her standup comedy performance demonstrates her use of comic minimization as a powerful rhetorical method.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At one point in her 2005 standup comedy movie *Jesus is Magic*, comedian Sarah Silverman has a brief moment of directness. Amidst her playful, surprising, and often potentially offensive humor, Silverman addresses a previous appearance she made on *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* in July 1999, in which she jokingly used the word “chink” (Lin, 2000). Silverman said:

I got in trouble for saying the word “chink” on a talk show, a network talk show, and it was in the context of a joke, obviously. That would be weird, that would be like a really bad career choice if it wasn’t. (Herzon, Williams, & Sosin, 2005, 44:38)

This rare moment of sincerity is out of character for the comedian, whose willingness to be cavalier while joking about sensitive topics arguably overshadows this glimpse into her thought process. Silverman dares to joke about topics ranging from 9/11 to rape to the Holocaust, which makes her comic stylings nothing if not attention-grabbing. Silverman forges her own path and seems to combine standup comedy with shocking social commentary (Gilbey, 2008). Though five years have passed and she has told hundreds of other jokes since then, her performance in *Jesus is Magic* remains the epitome of Silverman’s career as a comedian and professional “button-pusher.” As the result of the release of *Jesus is Magic* or the success of her Comedy Central television show, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, Silverman has become one of the most provocative, controversial, and successful comedians of this generation (Goodyear, 2005). Her humor tends to be polarizing for pop-culture audiences because it is extreme, vulgar, and often makes any and every social and cultural
minority the butt of the joke. For those who understand and appreciate her methods, she is
ground-breaking, brave, and hilarious (Gleiberman, 2005). Conversely, it has been argued
that those who are offended by her sharp tongue and “potty-mouth” miss the point she is
attempting to make (Gilbey, 2008).

Despite the racy content of her humor, she delivers her jokes with a childlike
sweetness that borders on socially ignorant and angelic (Gleiberman, 2005). Throughout
most of her act, it seems the sweeter her delivery, the more raunchy and shocking her jokes
become (Goodyear, 2005). It is this juxtaposition of delivery and content that helps make
Silverman a widely controversial comedian (Denby, 2005). Further, while her sense of
humor tends to guide her public image, her physical appearance, like many other female
comedians, is routinely discussed as well, and many reviewers note that she is funny in spite
of her “good-looks” (Gleiberman, 2005; Ide, 2008; Poniewozik, 2007). Silverman is a
conventionally attractive Jewish woman with long dark hair, porcelain skin and a child-like,
sweet voice (Ide, 2008). Some critics argue that without these feminine physical assets,
Silverman’s humor would not be as successful or interesting (Gilbey, 2008; Gleiberman,
2005, Poniewozik, 2007). With standup comedy remaining one of the only venues of the arts
in which women’s roles are still the subject of much debate, Silverman’s humor attempts to
transcend gender and makes no apologies, but her femaleness is never far from discussion,
both on and off stage (Gilbey, 2008). However, it is precisely this divisive and polarizing
nature that warrants a closer examination of her standup comedy. Lenny Bruce, Richard
Pryor, and Roseanne Barr were all criticized for their profanity, vulgarity, and public
obscenity. Regardless of their many critics, these ground-breaking comedic performances
had a distinct mark on popular culture, humor, and everyday communication (Fraiberg, 1994;
Gleiberman, 2005). In the same fashion, Silverman pushes boundaries and does not apologize for her methods, all the while staying true to her unique sense of humor and providing an alternate perspective on various social topics (Fillion, 2007).

The topics that she chooses to address throughout her standup comedy performance and the forms of humor that she implements within her delivery create a rhetorically powerful combination with regard to the socially significant role of humor as a means of social critique. For the purposes of this analysis, I examine Silverman’s use of humor in the Burkean sense, which indicates that the focus is not on the ultimate effect of her sense of humor, but rather on her unique method of utilizing humor. Silverman’s standup comedy is illustrative of the idea of comic correctives, a concept that indicates “…the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness” (Burke, 1959, p. 171, emphasis in original).

Silverman utilizes satire, mockery, and irony, to highlight questionable social attitudes and behaviors by assuming a persona of ignorance regarding the offensiveness of the comments she makes. Instead of focusing on the ways in which the audiences is affected by this use of a comic frame, this analysis examines how Silverman utilizes perspective by incongruity to shed light on significant social issues. Silverman exemplifies Burke’s (1959) idea of perspective by incongruity when she juxtaposes her comic persona of ignorance with subversive social critique. Burke (1959) explains that “‘perspective by incongruity’ makes for a dramatic vocabulary, with weighting and counter-weighting” (p. 311, emphasis in original), and Silverman’s ability to assume a satirical, mocking, and ironic persona to minimize the significance of social topics ultimately leads to a sense of self-reflection among the audience. This humorous juxtaposition provides the audience with what Burke (1959)
would define as “two angles at once” (p. 41). Silverman’s uses satire, mockery, and irony as she discusses race, gender, and emotional social events in *Jesus is Magic*, and consequently humorously trivializes these controversial, perhaps even taboo, topics. These comic rhetorical strategies indicate that she does not intend to literally minimize the significance of these topics, but rather, she aims to indirectly highlight their importance and gravity.

While some audiences may assume Silverman discusses controversial topics in the interest of simply providing shock value, I believe that her performance is an exemplar of standup comedy that serves multiple purposes, from entertainment to social critique. I argue that Silverman, through the use of an ironic onstage persona, employs perspective by incongruity. Through this incongruous performance, Silverman illustrates comic minimization, a rhetorical strategy also referred to as litotes (Livnat, 2011), which is utilized by humorously reducing the apparent significance of a topic in order to ultimately highlight its gravity and importance. I begin by offering an explanation of Silverman’s standup comedy movie *Jesus is Magic*. Next, I will introduce three critical perspectives: satirical white privilege, mock post-feminism, and ironic trivialization, each of which serves to support the idea that Silverman utilizes an ironic comedic persona juxtaposed with the intense topics she discusses to illuminate new perspectives. Through these theoretical lenses, I will examine various aspects of Silverman’s standup performance to showcase her unique use of humor. Finally, I offer my conclusions and implications that reinforce the idea that Silverman’s illustration of Burke’s (1959) idea of perspective by incongruity reinforces her use of comic minimization as a subversive method of addressing important social issues and providing an alternate point of view.
SARAH SILVERMAN AND JESUS IS MAGIC

Though *Jesus is Magic* was produced in 2005, it continues to largely define Silverman’s career as an outspoken, and often polarizing, standup comedian and actress. This standup comedy movie includes Silverman’s standup comedy act, humorous, silly songs, and satirical backstage scenes. The movie begins with Silverman sitting with her friends, both of whom are bragging about their recent opportunities in Hollywood. In an effort to match their success, Silverman extemporaneously begins to formulate a show in which she will star as to not seem inferior to her friends. Audiences are led to believe that the show is happening as Silverman is thinking of it. After an opening musical number, the movie fades to Silverman in a large theater performing standup comedy in front of a live audience. Throughout the movie, Silverman discusses a variety of “hot-button” issues, such as race and gender, religion, as well as several socially uncomfortable topics such as AIDS, the Holocaust, rape, and 9/11. Like many standup comedians, Silverman does not seem to have a clear order in which she chooses her topics. In fact, each of these types of issues arises throughout her performance. She appears to have a stream-of-consciousness method of introducing the topics she chooses to discuss, allowing one humorous story to lead to another.

Silverman’s style of humor includes quick transitions between jokes and punch lines, often shifting to a new topic before the audience realizes the current topic has been abandoned. Spliced with the standup comedy are scenes, many of which include a song, that work in conjunction with the topics she discusses on stage. The interwoven scenes supplement the topics she discusses in front of the audience, but more often than not, the “cut-aways” serve to distract viewers of the movie from the flow of the standup comedy routine Silverman performs for a live audience. Several critics who argue that standup comedy is her clearest strength as a performer point out the inconsistencies between the high
quality of her standup act and the disappointing songs and backstage scenes (Gleiberman, 2005; Ide, 2008). Despite some negative reviews, Jesus is Magic has been lauded for its bravery and originality (Goodyear, 2005). Each aspect of the movie highlights a unique element of Silverman’s interests and talents; however, I focus my analysis exclusively on the standup comedy portions of her performance, in part because they offer the best opportunity for analysis, and also because they are the funniest and most straight-forward parts of the performance.

Silverman’s bold, and often socially inappropriate comic content is consistently juxtaposed with her attractive appearance and angelic voice. Simply put, women who look and sound like Silverman are not traditionally expected to say the things she dares to express (Denby, 2005). In fact, it has been argued that it is precisely her physical attractiveness and “little-girl” persona that aid in her comedic effectiveness, particularly when she includes potentially offensive and taboo topics within her standup routine (Gleiberman, 2005; Ide, 2008). Ide (2008) points out that Silverman is “flirtatious with her outrage: a real stand-up coquette” (p. 1). Covering topics that many people, even standup comedians, would not dare attempt, Silverman intertwines jokes about race, the Holocaust, rape, sexuality, and AIDS with her signature innocent delivery. Considering her calm style of delivery, Silverman’s performance has been described as possessing a “quiet depravity” (Goodyear, 2005, p. 1). It is this understated shock-value that sets Silverman apart from her colleagues, both male and female.

Additionally, Silverman assumes an almost ignorant persona when she seems to be unaware of the fact that the jokes she delivers would be potentially offensive or taboo (Goodyear, 2005; Poniewozik, 2007). In fact, there are times when even the biggest Sarah
Silverman fans are at risk of cringing because of the lengths to which she will go for a joke. Regardless of her reception, Silverman’s bravery with regard to her choice of topics and overall performance methods is apparent throughout *Jesus is Magic*. As Ide (2008) explains:

> It takes a certain amount of bravura and a thoroughly disarming manner to deliver this kind of material successfully, a point that the film makes rather ruthlessly with a brief sketch showing Silverman’s mousey understudy attempting to repeat the gags to an arctic audience. (p. 4)

Further, despite her conventional attractiveness, Silverman portrays a blend of subtle femininity and tomboyishness (Goodyear, 2005). Outside of the embellished costumes she dons within the song segments and backstage scenes, Silverman is dressed in a black, sleeveless T-shirt that sits about an inch above the waist of her black pants.

Despite the extreme nature of the content of her jokes, descriptions of Silverman’s standup comedy are often accompanied with a description of her physical appearance (e.g., Cracked.com, 2005; Goodyear, 2005). Indeed, it seems that the progress of feminism, standup comedy and the public use of humor remain one of the last areas of the arts in which the appropriateness of a woman’s role is still up for debate (Goodyear, 2005). Because standup comedy continues to be dominated by men, Silverman’s performances, including *Jesus is Magic*, are often compared to those of her male-counterparts, and she is frequently lauded for adopting a more masculine style of aggressive, confident joke-telling (Cracked.com, 2005).

In light of her polarizing and potentially controversial style of humor, Silverman appears unaffected by the possibility of offending members of her audience and continues to utilize her unique comic instincts and performance style. Using nearly every politically incorrect attitude and topic available, Silverman addresses these awkward, uneasy situations instead of avoiding them. Most comedians implement humor that is known for its shock
value, but in *Jesus is Magic*, Silverman jokes about the “unjokeable” and says the “unsayable,” rendering the taboo less taboo (DiGiacomo, 2010; Gleberman, 2005).

**IRONIC PERSONA AND PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY**

Humor’s rhetorical value reaches far beyond that of simple entertainment (Smith, 1993). The concept of humor encompasses a wide variety of artistic expression and can manifest in a multitude of ways. Many different forms of humor surface in everyday experiences; however, standup comedy is a specific realm in which many of the most common forms of humor can be examined. Within Sarah Silverman’s performance in *Jesus is Magic*, she discusses topics that typically require a delicate sensitivity, but Silverman’s method of addressing these topics is anything but politically correct. Instead of timidly addressing these taboo topics, she proceeds as if racism, rape, and AIDS, among other sensitive social issues, are openly discussed.

Like many comedians, Silverman adopts a distinct onstage persona that allows her to include controversial and potentially offensive topics within her performance without assuming responsibility for the attitudes she presents. Landy (1993) explains that “A primary function of the performer role is to communicate a feeling or idea through a character” (p. 73). It is clear that she is playing a role by adopting a persona based in naiveté and that her actual opinions may not be aligned with the literal interpretation of her comedy. Though Silverman’s implementation of a persona is unique within her style of performance, the use of persona is not a new concept. Often a public persona will differ slightly from the speaker’s actual attitudes or behaviors in an effort to elicit a specific reaction from audiences (Bakola, 2008; Black, 1970; Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Waisanen, 2009). Black (1970) explained that through specific discourse choices, a persona can create an alternate persona that may or may
not be aligned with the person’s authentic self. Further, this “second persona” can be created to denote a clear audience meant to be reached through deliberately selected discourses (Black, 1970). The speaker’s actual self is juxtaposed with the developed persona and illuminates a “distinction between the man and the image, between reality and illusion” (Black, 1970, p. 111). While Silverman’s use of persona differs from Black’s (1970) notion of “second persona” she does implement an onstage, comic persona that is assumed to be distinct from her authentic self. The development of a public persona through the use of strategically placed language and behaviors, allows political figures such as Sarah Palin, and entertainers, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, to portray well-crafted and manufactured images to their audiences (Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Waisanen, 2009). Similar to the way in which Colbert adopts the persona of a conservative, right-wing political pundit on his television show *The Colbert Report*, ultimately to satirize those who he appears to support (Waisanen, 2009), Silverman implements a persona that serves to ironically reinforce controversial social attitudes. Her persona remains consistent throughout *Jesus is Magic*, barring a few obvious breaks in character in which she clearly denotes the fact that she is making a joke. Her persona is often portrayed through a blank, confused look on her face as she discusses serious social topics. Often when comedians make the type of comments Silverman does, they denote the joke by laughing at themselves or explaining, “I’m joking.” Instead, Silverman seems to maintain her controversial opinion and appears confused if the audience does not support her. Based on the extreme nature of Silverman’s standup comedy, her onstage persona is ironic.

Irony, in fact, is the most prominent rhetorical strategy that Silverman utilizes during her performance. Silverman implements irony as a means of reversing the literal meaning of
her humorous observations and this helps to develop and maintain her onstage persona. An ironic message communicates a deliberate meaning that is either opposite to or simply different from its literal interpretation (Attardo, 2000; Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Booth, 1974; Haverkate, 1990). Pretense theory suggests that the originator of the ironic message intentionally portrays him or herself as ignorant and foolish in such a way that it is clear to the audience that the message should not be taken literally (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). The speaker includes cues within the message to denote the irony. During a few points throughout her performance, Silverman explains to the audience that she does not intend for a comment to be taken literally, or she explains that she is “joking.”

Further, because irony contains both a literal and an actual message, it requires audience members to play an active role in the recognition and comprehension of both aspects of a message (Booth, 1974). The audience has a responsibility not only to listen to the message, but also to interpret it and understand why this type of communication is ironic and rhetorically significant (Attardo, 2000; Booth, 1974; Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). By applying an ironic spin to her onstage persona, Silverman is able to present a reversal of the apparent opinions she espouses as part of her unique performance style. Thus, Silverman is able to inhabit this ironic persona in order to make comments that would otherwise be considered inappropriate and offensive, while maintaining a separation from the attitudes that she humorously and ironically questions.

With her ironic persona in the forefront, Silverman offers three distinct forms of humor that serve various comic and rhetorical functions. First, satire is a common comic method that Silverman utilizes within her performance. While satire and irony are not necessarily utilized at the same time, satirical humor can be utilized in an ironic manner
Satire uses humor as a vehicle for questioning, and often critiquing, a behavior, event, or attitude associated with a specific social phenomenon (Vorhaus, 1994). Like irony, satire possesses an element of pretense from the person providing the satirical message (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). By implementing satirical irony, the speaker is able to showcase the inappropriateness of an attitude or behavior in an exaggerated and emphasized manner (Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Griffin, 1994). Burke (1959) explains that “the satirist attacks in others the weaknesses and temptations that are really within himself” (p. 49, emphasis in original). Silverman exemplifies this idea with her use of satirical white privilege as a means of discussing race issues and calling to question those who adopt unfair racial attitudes.

Another form of irony that is apparent in Jesus is Magic is mockery, the use of stereotypical discourse as a degrading representation for an entire social group (Chun, 2004; Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Hill (1999) outlines the idea of “Mock Spanish,” in which white people haphazardly use the Spanish language in a public realm. Appropriating a language in an incomplete fashion, such as the use of “Mock Spanish,” promotes the use of generalized stereotypes regarding the targeted group (Hill, 1999). This concept surfaces in Jesus is Magic, not in the form of Mock Spanish, but in the form of mock post-feminism. In this essay, “mock post-feminism” refers to the disingenuous, stereotypical representations that Silverman creates of women that exemplify ideas outlined by the post-feminist era. Considering the many social advancements made by the women’s movement, there have been various forms of anti-feminist countermovements that served to resistance the social progress achieved through feminism, and post-feminism is one such back-lash (Steuter,
Through her ironic mockery, Silverman appears to be adopting an anti-feminist position in an effort to poke fun at these types of attitudes.

Finally, Silverman routinely discusses controversial social events and topics and appears to offer a perspective that does not align with the majority. In fact, she tends to trivialize the gravity of many specific historical events and potentially offensive topics through the use of meiosis, a form of understatement used to diminish or belittle the apparent gravity of a topic (Carney, 1993; Fahnestock, 2005). Meiosis, as a rhetorical figure, “deliberately represents something as much less in magnitude or importance than it really is, or is ordinarily considered to be” (Abrams, 1988, p. 80), and generally, it is intended to be ironic. Interestingly, Silverman’s use of irony here is double, since the persona’s deliberate irony in the form of meiosis is undercut by the more subtle irony of the performance overall. Through ironic trivialization, the importance of traditionally intense and significant events is reduced in perceived importance (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Specifically, Silverman uses irony as a means of trivializing socially and historically significant topics and providing a seemingly offensive perspective on sensitive topics. In the way Silverman implements this humorous strategy, “the ironic message violates the shared norm in an absurd way to demonstrate how the other person should feel about violating the norm” (Averbeck & Hample, 2008, p. 408, emphasis in original).

With her ironic persona as a guiding force in Jesus is Magic, Sarah Silverman ultimately utilizes Burke’s (1959) notion of perspective by incongruity to implement comic minimization. Burke (1959) explains perspective by incongruity as the practice of applying a seemingly inappropriate word to a new situation in an attempt to cultivate or highlight new relations and perspectives. He explains that “by taking a word usually applied to one setting
and transferring its use to another setting” new perspectives begin to surface (Burke, 1954, p. 90). By juxtaposing ideas that are not traditionally combined with one another, a “double vision” (Burke, 1959, p. 398) is created that allows new perspectives to emerge that allow the audience to view a topic from “two angles at once” (Burke, 1959, p. 41). Burke’s (1959) perspective by incongruity has been utilized by scholars across various disciplines in an effort to illuminate the rhetorical significance of various forms of popular media (Renegar & Dionisopoulos, in press; Rockler, 2002; Shultz & Germeroth, 1998; Waisanen, 2009; Young, 2010). In the same vein, I argue that Silverman’s standup comedy performance in *Jesus is Magic* also exemplifies perspective by incongruity, but in a unique way. Though Burke (1959) introduced perspective by incongruity as “verbal atom cracking” (p. 308), Silverman juxtaposes the verbal with the nonverbal. Silverman modifies the idea of “verbal” juxtapositions for her use as a standup comedian with a deliberate onstage persona. In the same way that Stephen Colbert implements a comic persona juxtaposed with ironic social critique on *The Colbert Report*, Silverman adopts a persona as a means of discussing important social topics in a humorous way (Waisanen, 2009).

By utilizing perspective by incongruity, a speaker is able to illuminate alternative ways of perceiving a sensitive social issue (Renegar & Dionisopoulos, in press). Instead of juxtaposing words, Silverman counters her naive delivery with the harshness of her seemingly prejudicial speech. Her ironic persona allows her to provide an attitude of insensitivity toward historically sensitive and intense social issues. The literal content of her humor indicates a lack of respect for and understanding of the importance of these issues; however, the use of irony reverses the literal meaning. Therefore, the topics Silverman discusses in *Jesus is Magic* are comically minimized in an effort to highlight their ultimate
importance. Though she is not adhering to Burke’s original concept of purely verbal juxtapositions, Silverman is able to provide alternate perspective by contrasting her ironic persona with her controversial humor. Through her use of the rhetorical strategies of satirical white privilege, mock post-feminism, and ironic trivialization, Silverman’s ironic persona is manifest which then enables her to comically and ironically minimize the gravity of serious topics. The incongruity between her ironic naiveté and the controversial nature of the topics she discusses provides a perspective that is deeper than her literal, surface message. Silverman’s humor serves to comically minimize the importance of a topic in an ultimate effort to highlight its significance
CHAPTER 2

SATIRE, MOCKERY, AND TRIVIALIZATION IN

JESUS IS MAGIC

Incongruities are apparent in Jesus is Magic as Silverman’s ironic persona takes form in several ways. Universally, she adopts the persona of “the kid,” especially when discussing shocking and crude material on stage (Gilbert, 2004, p. 97). Women who portray this persona onstage rarely make their femininity or sexuality the focus of their humor. Instead, they provide an androgynous and desexualized perspective for audiences. Despite her conventional attractiveness, she does not capitalize on her femininity or sexualize herself; instead, Silverman’s onstage persona is based in childlike naivété and ignorance. Gilbert (2004) explains that female comedians who cultivate this nonthreatening type of onstage character seem to base their humor in honest observations of social situations. While Silverman’s persona projects innocence, her material is far from child-like. Unlike a traditional “kid” onstage persona, which includes observations of common, everyday topics (Gilbert, 2004), Silverman offers rebellious opinions that risk being perceived as offensive to a majority of audience members. Silverman develops a sense of innocence through her persona which is juxtaposed with the controversial content of her humor. Because her delivery and her words are clearly incongruent, the audience has a better chance of identifying and understanding her message as ironic (Haverkate, 1990).

Silverman has several behaviors that cue her use of irony in its various forms. She rarely breaks character or laughs at herself to denote the presence of a joke; rather, she maintains a “dead-pan” expression when making politically incorrect comments regarding
racial minorities, national disasters, and debilitating diseases. It is precisely this style of
delivery that allows her ironic persona to take form. Silverman’s ironic persona can be seen
as she utilizes the three rhetorical strategies of satire, mockery, and trivialization throughout
her entire performance, barring a couple of rare moments of directness, in Jesus is Magic.

**Satirical White Privilege**

Standup comedians routinely use humor to address relevant social issues, and race is
one topic that is commonly discussed on stage. Sarah Silverman is widely known for the
ways in which she discusses race, particularly the ways she appears to emphasize and support
racial divisions and cultural stereotypes. One of the most prevalent topics within Jesus is
Magic is race, and through her ironic, onstage persona, Silverman assumes a position of
satirical white privilege.

White privilege is the social construction of unofficial social power based solely on
membership in the racial majority group. As the racial majority, white people can develop a
sense of social superiority that can manifest in outward displays of entitlement based solely
on racial group membership (Chow, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). In realistic terms, white
privilege “is the result of not having to address blatant and subtle prejudice and not having to
be prepared for the possibility of encountering discrimination” (Swim & Miller, 1999, p.
511). However, though the actual content of Silverman’s act may appear to be laden with
racist terms and attitudes, her use of ironic satire is apparent. Silverman implements her
ironic persona and utilizes a satirical perspective in an effort to question the social
phenomenon of white privilege (Griffin, 1994; Vorhaus, 1994). The utilization of satire
allows performers to “avoid committing” themselves while highlighting problematic attitudes
held by others (Griffin, 1994, p. 93). By adopting an ironic persona of ignorance and
innocence, Silverman is able to separate herself from the literal message within her standup comedy performances while addressing important topics. With regard to white privilege, her satiric social commentaries embedded within her humor highlight people who actually adopt these types of racially exclusive perspectives.

As Silverman discusses the aforementioned experience in which she said the racial slur “chink” on television and subsequently received much criticism, she makes an ironic observation. In a tone that denotes complete seriousness and confusion, she says, “What kind of world do we live in when a totally cute white girl can’t say ‘chink’ on network television?” (Herzon et al., 2005, 45:24). Silverman appears to be befuddled at the first sign of resistance against her assumption that a white person is able to openly degrade a person of another race. In fact, instead of those who are the brunt of her racial slur, she assumes the position of the victim in this ironic scenario. Her use of white privilege is the focus of this joke because she appears to be oblivious to the detrimental effects of using such generalizing and derogatory language. However, because she openly expresses an attitude that traditionally remains hidden or unsaid, the satire embedded within this message surfaces. Satire is utilized as a means of pointing out a lack of virtue within a specific behavior or attitude, and it often utilizes exaggeration to ensure the message is recognized (Griffin, 1994). Silverman exposes the absurdity associated with a white person assuming they are exempt from certain social rules purely based on race.

Further, she seems to abandon any subtlety as she overtly explains, “I don’t want to be labeled as straight or labeled as gay. I just want people to look at me and see me, you know, as white” (Herzon et al., 2005, 55:30). The satirical white privilege within this explanation is apparent because the comment begins by discussing labels of sexual
orientation and then takes an unexpected turn. The comment appears to be directed toward members of society who are preoccupied by unnecessary sexuality labels, which indicates the inclusion of Silverman’s persona within this particular joke. Satirically, Silverman is explaining to audiences that, above all else, the most important social hegemonic label is based on race. Showing the perceived importance and social gain that accompanies being white, Silverman ironically emphasizes the significant power that being a member of the racial majority can provide. The way in which Silverman seems to so blatantly express her desire to capitalize on white privilege emphasizes the irony and satire within her humor.

Silverman tells these racially charged stories as if she were speaking about a topic that is far less polarizing and emotional. She makes comments that are politically incorrect and racially offensive, but she continues to speak confidently as if she were offering a common perspective. Silverman assumes a comic position in which the dominant in-group is superior to all others, and this advantageous social rank is deserved and warranted (Chow et al., 2008). In a comic attempt to justify her opinions, she offers what appears to be a proud explanation of her apparent racist point of view:

I went out with a Mexican man. Do racist people go out with Mexican men? I don’t think so. No, they’re filthy. It’s so hard…like I feel bad…but like…its jokes. This woman came up to me last night, and she was Mexican. She was just so, she was so irate, you know, she was so angry. And she came up to me and she said, ‘I’m Mexican and I don’t stink.’ And it just broke my heart. Like, I felt, I had to explain to her, like, you can’t smell yourself. (Herzon et al., 2005, 59:14)

Silverman ostensibly prides herself in her willingness to date outside her race within this story. Because she humorously assumes that dating a person who is a racial minority is worthy of praise, the satire within her message becomes more clear. After her initial pride associated with her admission of dating a Mexican man, she drops her smile and says, as if to be honest with the audience, that Mexican men are actually “filthy.” Like previous jokes,
Silverman allows her ironic persona to lead the audience to believe she actually harbors racist attitudes. However, the explicitness with which she utilizes derogatory racial stereotypes emphasizes the satirical nature of her comments. Simultaneously, though, as Silverman appears to be breaking character in an attempt to explain that her comments are meant to be understood satirically, she continues the joke as an ironic justification of her politically incorrect comments.

Though some standup comedians will be clear regarding the seriousness of a comment if it lies in the balance between being appropriate or inappropriate, Silverman does not drop her ironic persona during a joke. As she appears to be showing a softer side, she discusses the heart-wrenching television advertisements that depict children in need of assistance:

I’m just sensitive. My skin is paper thin, and people don’t realize it because I’m sassy and I’m brassy, but I am. You know, I see these CARE commercials with these little kids with the giant bellies and the flies. These are one and two year old babies, you know, nine months pregnant. It breaks my heart in two. It breaks my heart in half. And I don’t give money, because I don’t want them to spend it on drugs. (Herzon et al., 2005, 27:10)

Just as with many of her jokes, Silverman begins this story leading the audience to believe that she is a caring, philanthropic person. The joke takes a turn when she forgoes her put-on caring demeanor and adopts one of racial superiority. After appearing to care about the plight of children in other countries, Silverman explains to the audience, out of the side of her mouth and in a low voice, that she assumes a black child will spend any money on drugs. Typically, these types of racist attitudes are not espoused in such a public way. Silverman’s assumption is that the audience will support and appreciate her racially insensitive comments, and it is clear this over-exaggeration of white privilege is meant to be viewed as social satire and critique.
Silverman’s brand of humor largely relies on stereotypes and the audience’s understanding of these stereotypes. However, after attempting to appease the audience and satirically explain that her comedy is based on fact, and not stereotypes, Silverman offers a story that attempts to support her non-racist perspective. She explains the fictitious experience she had while dating a black man:

I used to go out with a guy who is half black, who broke up with me because I’m a fucking loser. I just heard myself say that. I’m such a pessimist. I have the worst attitude. He’s half white. (Herzon et al., 2005, 56:02)

Though Silverman leads the audience to believe that she is referring to her comment, “I’m a fucking loser” as her tendency to be pessimistic, she actually reverses the expectation by indicating that referring to a person as “half-black” is a cynical attitude. She insinuates that the person’s “black” heritage is a negative aspect, and calling a person half white puts a more positive spin on this cultural characteristic. Her tone of voice drops as she reveals that she believes referring to a person as half-black is a pessimistic comment, and she maintains a blank expression on her face. As the satirist, Silverman is attempting to call into question those who actually believe that being a member of a cultural minority is socially detrimental (Griffin, 1994).

In light of the fact that, throughout her entire performance, Silverman utilizes various racial generalizations and stereotypes, she addresses any potential critiques of her ironic directness. Because many white people are less likely to notice the privilege awarded to them based solely on race, they may remain unaware of their racist attitudes (Swim & Miller, 1999). Silverman provides a satirical example of this lack of self-reflexivity when she explains how she develops her racial humor:

I do talk a little bit about race. The important thing, it’s like…if I based my material on stereotypes that would be messed up. It would, but I don’t. I base it on fact. Fact, every 30 seconds in this country, a person of color jumps up and down
and waves their hands behind a local news reporter. Fact. (Herzon et al., 2005, 57:57)

Like many of her jokes, Silverman begins this humorous explanation leading the audience to believe she is offering a momentary break in her persona. Instead, she maintains her ironic persona and appears to seriously explain that people who are racial minorities are more likely to act foolish on television.

Silverman’s performance in *Jesus is Magic* is packed with racial humor that highlights her apparent appreciation of the privileges awarded to white people based solely on cultural background. Her ironic persona of a woman who is oblivious to the opinions of those around her emphasizes the Silverman’s satirical spin. Because she is direct with her ironic sense of white privilege, the satirical nature of her comments surfaces and it becomes more apparent that her humor serves to point out the absurdity of adopting this type of social attitude. Through over-exaggerated and over-the-top racially charged comments, Silverman calls into question the social behavior of those within the cultural majority who tend to expect preferential treatment based on group membership.

**Mock Post-Feminism**

As a woman, Silverman is among the minority in the field of standup comedy. Whether or not she intends to be, she often serves as the voice of an entire sector of this form of artistic performance. Silverman remains true to her personal style of humor and implements irony as she addresses gender roles and traditional stereotypes. Specifically, when gender is her focus, Silverman’s persona utilizes the ideas of mockery, which is apparent as she presents an ironic persona of mock post-feminist attitudes.

Silverman’s use of stereotypical mockery is evident as she offers an essentialized portrayal of a woman which is aligned with traditional gender expectations (Chun, 2004).
These stereotypical expectations are in direct opposition to the changes brought about by the feminist movement. In response to the progress associated with the feminist movement, there are men and women who do not approve of or accept the ideological changes. Reacting to feminism, many feminist countermovements have surfaced, and post-feminist is one of those reactions (Steuter, 1992). Post-feminism is “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Further, post-feminist attitudes often appear to be promoting a feminist ideal with subtle, negative undertones (McRobbie, 2004). Silverman presents a comic attitude of mock post-feminist, as her use of irony indicates she does not necessarily support the ideas her onstage character does. Additionally, because Silverman seems to be mocking women, her humor seems less aggressive than her humor focused on racial hierarchies. Chun (2004) explained that “according to commonly held mainstream ideology in the U.S., mocking ‘one’s own’ is harmless” (p. 278). Because making fun of your own social group is more readily accepted, those who are not a member of that group are granted the ability to enjoy the mocking tone as it aligns with social hierarchy and tradition (Chun, 2004). Further, Silverman’s humor appears to carry a less caustic or offensive tone because she assumes an ironic persona that portrays women in an essentialized manner.

Just as with her racial humor, Silverman’s gender-based jokes include well-known stereotypes and generalizations. Relying on the stereotype that women are expected to be sexually available to men, Silverman recalls an experience in which she was being intimate with her boyfriend: “I was licking jelly off my boyfriend’s penis, and all the sudden, I was thinking, ‘Oh my god, I’m turning into my mother’” (Herzon et al., 2005, 10:58). A common cliché among women is their desire to distinguish themselves from their mother. Typically,
when women observe that they are becoming more like their mother, it is viewed negatively, and Silverman appears to be making a self-deprecating joke. However, instead of comparing herself to her mother with regard to an unwanted personality trait, Silverman draws a comparison based on sexual behavior. This comment insinuates that “licking jelly off my boyfriend’s penis” is a common behavior among women, reinforcing the idea that women are traditionally cast in the role of socially inferior to men and aligning with a post-feminist ideology.

Highlighting another prominent issue facing women throughout society, Silverman comically stresses the importance of physical appearance above all else: “I don’t care if you think I’m racist, I just want you to think I’m thin” (Herzon et al., 2005, 57:42). Silverman appears to embody feminine generalizations in the name of mocking them and this emphasizes the stereotype that women place overwhelming importance on her weight. She ironically insinuates that being viewed as a racist is far less damaging than being viewed as physically unattractive and overweight. As she reveals that her physical appearance is more important than her apparent racist attitudes, Silverman mockingly whispers in desperation to emphasize the ridiculousness of her comment. The humorous comparison of a perception of “racist” as compared to a perception of “thinness” pejoratively portrays women as shallow and self-absorbed (Hill, 1999).

Continuing to focus on her physical appearance, Silverman ironically and mockingly brags about a recent “compliment” she received: “They say strippers end up being in porn. It’s like a gateway job to porn. I don’t know; what are you going to do? I’d never do it, and I could if I wanted to. I’ve been approached” (Herzon et al., 2005, 34:16). Based on the common stereotypes that women are preoccupied with their physical appearance and reliant
on compliments as a source of self-worth, Silverman provides an exaggerated example of a woman accepting a compliment regardless of its actual meaning. As she explains that she has been offered roles in pornographic films, Silverman seems to be very proud, and assumes that this is a feat not many women can achieve. The incongruity between the demeaning “compliment” and Silverman’s apparent appreciation of it illuminate the irony of her use of a post-feminist frame of mind. Further, Silverman’s mocking tone surfaces through the ridiculousness of seeming to be proud of being attractive enough to star in a pornographic film.

The feminist movement has provided women the opportunity to address social and gender inequalities and work toward a more equitable distribution of power. As she utilizes one of the products of the work of the feminist movement in maintaining a sense of equality among men and women in the workplace, Silverman tells a story regarding her working relationship with her manager:

I sued my manager for sexual harassment. I don’t know anything about show business, but it’s something that, boy, for a struggling actress to sue her manager out here in Hollywood, it’s something that, it takes a lot of guts to do. Especially because he didn’t do anything. (Herzon et al., 2005, 19:99)

As she begins to describe this experience, Silverman seems to be reliving a difficult time in which she was the victim of a sexual crime. Sexual harassment and the subsequent laws that were created to regulate it, have been significant issues associated with the progress of the women’s movement. When she delivers the punch line, though, she does not change the tone or cadence of her voice. Through her ironic persona, she portrays a woman that does not see the harm in falsely accusing a man of sexual harassment if it will garner some attention.

Further, dressed simply in a basic black sleeveless T-shirt and black pants, Silverman does not appear to be particularly extravagant or traditionally feminine with her personal
style. As Raisborough and Adams (2008) explain, the use of mockery to represent a particular social group is quite effective when the person originating the mocking humor has a level of “physical distance” (p. 6) from the object of ridicule. Because Silverman portrays herself as a “tomboy,” with simple clothes, hair, and make-up, her attempt to explain her love for a particular jewel carries an emphasized ironic and mocking tone and serves to illuminate the incongruities embedded within her performance:

I’m not into jewelry or anything. Ugh, I’m such a hypocrite. There is one jewel that I think is stunning. It’s just gorgeous. And you know, it’s rare, and you know, it’s only found on the tip of the tailbone of Ethiopian babies. They debone the babies. I know that sounds so bad when you say it out loud. But no, if you saw it, so worth it. So worth it. (Herzon et al., 2005, 13:17)

As Silverman tells this story, she seems to be almost ashamed of the way in which this fictitious jewel is found. However, toward the end of the explanation, Silverman becomes less concerned with how the audience perceives her, and more concerned that they understand that killing a baby is worth finding a rare jewel. In light of the stereotype that women are gold-diggers who are obsessed with luxury, through her ironic onstage persona, Silverman presents an exaggerated portrayal of a woman who is willing to sacrifice the life of a child in the effort to obtain a symbol of wealth and class.

Through a juxtaposition of her actual de-feminized demeanor and a stereotypical woman onstage persona, Silverman is able to offer a rhetorical message in which she utilizes mockery to develop an ironic post-feminist attitude. The use of mock post-feminism, as it is implemented through Silverman’s ironic onstage persona, serves to humorously highlight aspects of the typical post-feminist perspective. Silverman seems to be reinforcing female stereotypes and anti-feminist rhetoric, but, with her ironic persona in place, her humor mocks these views by establishing an onstage character who supports the ideologies of an anti-feminist movement.
IRONIC TRIVIALIZATION

As a comedian, Silverman addresses a wide range of sensitive topics. In addition to race and gender, she frequently analyzes historical, noteworthy, and significant social issues through her unique comic perspective, with her ironic persona as the basis of her observations. One of the most significant facets of verbal irony, particularly the way in which Silverman implements it in *Jesus is Magic*, is its ability to trivialize that which is actually incredibly significant (Attardo, 2000; Booth, 1974). Through trivialization, Silverman offers a dissenting and incongruous depiction of topics that seem impossible to reduce in significance. Trivialization can be used as a form of dissonance reduction when faced with a difficult situation that can be difficult to comprehend (Joule & Martinie, 2008; Simon et al., 1995), and through trivialization, a topic that appears daunting becomes more manageable. As opposed to hyperbole, which is used to exaggerate a comment (Colston & O’Brien, 2000), Silverman uses meiosis to trivialize intense, significant events and social issues and create the opposite effect (Fahnestock, 2005).

Often, comedians use their time on stage as a means of coping with and making sense of an otherwise difficult or stressful issue (Binghan & Hernandez, 2009; Greenbaum, 1999). Silverman appears to utilize trivialization in a similar way, but instead of actually attempting to reduce the intense effects of a situation through straightforward discussion, she does so with ironic humor. Throughout these particular aspects of her performance, her use of irony is extremely important for the audience to appreciate and accept the message as a joke. It is through this type of humor that Silverman relies on the audience to understand the fact that her actual message is the reverse of what she literally says (Attardo, 2000). For instance, many comedians struggled with how to humorously discuss the events of September 11, 2001. Though *Jesus is Magic* was filmed nearly four years after the terrorist attacks in New
York City, the experience was still very current and relevant among the American population. Silverman, using her unique style of performance, attempts to put a “positive spin” on a negative situation:

Positive spin is the whole idea of taking something terrible, something tragic, and spin it up into something good. If American Airlines were smart, their slogan would be “American Airlines: First through the towers.” Because it was something in which they came first. (Herzon et al., 2005, 17:38)

Though many comedians addressed this national tragedy onstage, Silverman was among the few who was able to reduce the situation to such nonchalance. Instead of adopting an attitude of unabashed patriotism, Silverman deliberately views the situation in a completely unexpected manner. In light of the gravity of this national tragedy, Silverman’s willingness to minimize the event to an opportunity to “look on the bright side” emphasizes the irony within her humor. Considering the fact that this event was such an emotional experience for most Americans, Silverman’s sense of detachment emphasizes the trivialization of the events of 9/11 that she intends to depict. The incongruity associated with her belittlement of the terrorist attack, an event that is clearly devastating, allows the audience to view the event through a new perspective.

Further, a topic deemed too sensitive for even the best comedians remains the Holocaust. As a Jewish-American woman, Silverman discusses topics closely related to this cultural group through Jesus is Magic. As she discussed her niece’s experience in Hebrew school, Silverman recalls a time she was required to correct the young girl:

[My niece] called me up, and she was like, ‘Aunt Sarah, did you know that Hitler killed 60 million Jews?’ And I corrected her and I said, ‘You know, I think he’s responsible for killing six million Jews.’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah, six million, I knew that. But seriously, what’s the difference?’ Uh, the difference is, 60 million is unforgiveable, young lady. (Herzon et al., 2005, 41:49)
Through ironic trivialization, Silverman insinuates that six million people losing their lives is less significant than 60 million people. Indirectly, she implies that the Holocaust was not the historical tragedy that is it portrayed to be. Audiences should be able to identify the irony within this message, particularly because of Silverman’s Jewish heritage combined with her established ironic persona. The contrast in magnitude indicates Silverman’s use of ironic trivialization (Colston & O’Brien, 2000). As she mimics speaking with her niece, Silverman appears to be frustrated that she is unable to see the distinction between the seriousness of only six million deaths as opposed to 60 million.

Silverman has made a career out of shocking her audience. As she seems to be offering a moment of sincerity and vulnerability, she remains true to her shocking style of humor: “I was raped by a doctor, which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl” (Herzon et al., 2005, 08:03). Through trivializing rape Silverman seems to be showing a certain “sexual callousness toward women” and the act of rape in general (Zillman & Bryant, 1982, p. 19). Ironically, Silverman insinuates that rape, in some circumstances, would be an enjoyable or appropriate experience. Without a smile or a laugh, Silverman offers the explanation of her mixed feelings regarding this fictitious rape with ironic confusion based on her Jewish background. Within this joke, Silverman capitalizes on the well-known stereotype that Jewish people are preoccupied with wealth and social status. Based on her identification as a Jewish person and a woman, audiences are better able to recognize the irony within this message and understand that the trivialization of rape is not meant to be taken literally.

Mirroring her onstage attitude toward rape and the Holocaust, Silverman discusses Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) with an ironic sense of understatement and minimization. Even among comedians, AIDS is traditionally perceived as one of the few
topics that is “off limits.” However, remaining true to her penchant for shock, Silverman does not shy away from a potentially uncomfortable topic. In an effort inspire motivation within her niece, Silverman explains the fictitious consequence of not working hard:

I tell my niece every time she loses at tag, an angel gets AIDS. I tell her that a beautiful angel gets full blown AIDS, and she wins, so think about that. I tell her that when god gives you AIDS, and god does give you AIDS by the way, make lemon-AIDS. (Herzon et al., 2005, 16:43)

Based on the cliché phrase “When life gives you lemons make lemonade,” Silverman reduces AIDS to little more than an attitude or state of mind. Because this disease is serious and life-threatening, Silverman’s ironic explanation of it allows audiences to question why it appears inappropriate for a comedian describe it in such a cavalier and insignificant manner. Further, taking aim at those who assume that contracting AIDS is a punishment, Silverman is clear to ironically explain that “god does give you AIDS.”

In addition to being brave enough to make jokes about topics that appear to be completely incapable of seeming humorous, Silverman takes aim at one of the most respected and revered men in 20th century history, Martin Luther King, Jr. Referencing one of the most iconic aspects of King’s speech, Silverman offers the following ironic story inspired by King’s use of the phrase “I have a dream”:

I’m working on an open letter and it goes like this: Guess what Martin Luther King? I had a fucking dream too. I had a dream that I was in my living room, it wasn’t my living room, but it was like, playing my living room in the dream. And I walked through to the back yard, and there’s a pool. As I’m diving in, there’s a shark coming up from the water, with braces. So maybe you’re not so fucking special, Martin Loser King. Yeah, I want to be the first comic ever to shit on Martin Luther King. (Herzon et al., 2005, 29:12)

Appearing almost defensive, Silverman attempts to diminish the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, as she ironically believes that “having a dream” is not a noteworthy feat.

Choosing to focus merely on the phrase, “I have a dream,” within King’s historical speech,
Silverman is able to trivialize the literal interpretation of King’s words and equate them to no more than an act completed on a nightly basis. Adding to the irony, Silverman does not make King’s race the focus on this joke, a choice that audiences may expect from her considering the aforementioned focus she places on discussing race and racial stereotypes.

Through an ironic trivialization of events and issues that are universally accepted as intense and significant, Silverman’s is able to provide a unique message by implementing perspective by incongruity. Particularly through these types of trivializing jokes in Jesus is Magic, Silverman relies on the audience to understand that she is offering two meanings: her literal words and the underlying message (Attardo, 2000). Ironic trivialization allows Silverman to comically reduce the importance of a topic as a means of showcasing its significance.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Sarah Silverman has created a name for herself as a comedian who is willing to discuss any topic, regardless of its level of social taboo. Allowing her ironic persona to guide the bulk of her standup comedy performance in *Jesus is Magic*, Silverman espouses controversial opinions and perspectives with the understanding that her audience will recognize the multiple levels of meaning embedded within her unique style of humor. In light of her deadpan delivery and unwillingness to break character, audiences may have a difficult time discerning her authentic opinion from over-exaggeration. Despite any potential confusion regarding her literal and underlying messages, several rhetorically significant implications emerge from an examination of Silverman’s standup comedy performance.

First and foremost, Silverman’s performance exemplifies a nontraditional method of utilizing Burke’s (1954; 1959) notion of perspective by incongruity that proves to be rhetorically significant. Perspective by incongruity is a rhetorical tool utilized and implemented throughout various forms of communication. However, an understanding of an embodied ironic persona contrasted with controversial humorous messages provides an alternative implementation of perspective by incongruity that sheds a unique light on this rhetorical strategy. The onstage ironic persona that Silverman develops is deliberately contrasted with potentially offensive content of her humor, and the resulting incongruities that surface provide alternate perspectives of significant social topics. The juxtapositions that exist between Silverman’s shocking content and her ironic persona of ignorance and innocence suggest Burke’s (1959) idea of perspective by incongruity need not only exist
among verbal communication. Though Burke (1959) intended for two verbal messages to be
the basis of his notion of perspectives by incongruity, Silverman implements a slight
variation of this concept. Instead of “verbal atom cracking” (Burke, 1959, p. 308), she
utilizes or “cracks” an embodied ironic persona of naiveté as one perspective and the socially
offensive content of her standup comedy as another. Silverman’s ironic onstage persona
projects a sense of innocence and serves to reverse the meaning of her seemingly insensitive
and socially taboo jokes. In other words, as Silverman tells the jokes through the perspective
of her onstage persona, she undermines them with her use of irony in various rhetorical
forms. By allowing the way in which a message is delivered to serve as one perspective and
the actual content of the message to serve as other, speakers are able to provide a vastly
different form of perspective by incongruity that has the potential to offer significant
rhetorical value to this well-known communication construct.

Further, using this implementation of perspective by incongruity, a speaker is able to
develop a sense of comic minimization by implementing the rhetorical figure litotes and
addressing significant social issues in a cavalier and ostensibly insensitive manner. Comic
minimization, as Silverman exemplified, offers a rhetorically subversive method of social
criticism and illuminates alternative perspective on common social issues. Through various
forms of humor, such as satire, mockery, and trivialization, a speaker, specifically a standup
comedian, is able to portray topics in an understated way that allows specific attitudes toward
these topics to be called into question (Greenbaum, 1999). By ironically reducing the
importance or significance of a topic that is universally regarded as intense, the ultimate
gravity of the topic emerges and illuminates the rhetorical tool of comic minimization.
Additionally, irony, when used as a form of comic minimization, can be a powerful tool for consciousness-raising as it highlights the existence of alternate ways of behaving and thinking (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Comic irony is a significant rhetorical device because it allows the speaker to utilize communication that is, not necessarily the opposite of its intended meaning, but rather simply different than its intended meaning (Booth, 1974; Haverkate, 1990). In Silverman’s case, it appears as though nearly every opinion and extreme point of view she expresses is meant to be understood as a clear case of irony, and not an actual representation of her personal perspective. As Silverman illustrates, comically belittling the importance of a topic or event allows the audience to examine why such topics actually contain social significance. By implementing ironic observations and comments, this type of humor proves to be counter-hegemonic for those who understand it. The use of an ironic persona to discuss significant social issues is rhetorically subversive because it is used as a conscious-raising tactic and requires the audience to be self-reflexive. In the way that Burke (1959) explained that utilizing perspective by incongruity illuminates alternate perspectives, this analysis of an ironic persona illuminates the ways in which an audiences is able to examine why they choose to laugh or not at a controversial joke. Specifically, as highlighted by Silverman’s performance, ironic comic minimization of significant social topics and events has the potential to invoke self-reflexivity among audience members who are able to understand their responsibility as listeners of an ironic message.

The observations and critiques embedded within an ironic message are only apparent to those audience members who fully understand their role while irony is being utilized by the performer. Audience members are required to recognize and understand the irony within a message in order for it to offer any rhetorical significance (Attardo, 2000; Booth, 1974).
The type of humor that Silverman implements throughout her performance in *Jesus is Magic* is certainly risky from a rhetorical perspective. While the use of ironic methods can be apparent to some, others may lose the differentiation between the literal and actual underlying messages within the comedy. Therefore, a single joke has the potential to both unite the comic and the audience members who identify the irony, while at the same time, further divide those who accept a message at face value (Meyer, 2000). Further, if the originator of an ironic message is misunderstood by audience members, they may unintentionally reinforce the idea that was originally meant to be subverted (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). In other words, while irony has the potential to expose unfair or ridiculous attitudes, if the audience is unable to identify its existence, it risks perpetuating hateful rhetoric.

Often, standup comedians are granted momentary immunity when discussing certain controversial social issues (Greenbaum, 1999). The inclusion of potentially offensive perspectives within a humorous performance runs the risk of polarizing the audience. Even audience members who are able to identify the irony may still deem a performance like Silverman’s as inappropriate and socially disruptive. Well-placed humor plays a productive role within communication, but there are certainly detrimental aspects to making light of such grave issues (Smuts, 2010). Because controversial topics have the potential to elicit a vast variety of reactions from audience members when discussed humorously, it is difficult to determine if the ultimate impact is socially beneficial or detrimental. Discussing these potentially polarizing topics is still necessary because it serves to bring these topics to the forefront of a necessary public discussion.
Regardless of possible backlash, offering social critiques and observations within the realm of standup comedy has unique rhetorical significance (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009; Greenbaum, 1999). In Silverman’s case, because she offers an ironic perspective within the realm of a standup comedy performance, audiences are less likely to assume her literal message is her actual point of view. Audiences expect that she will discuss topics in a way that may not be appropriate in other social realms (Fraiberg, 1994; Zwagerman, 2010). Comedians are granted a level of artistic freedom that does not exist in other public forums when discussing sensitive or uncomfortable topics. It is precisely through their use of humor that comedians are able to offer social critiques and personal observations (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). Routinely, comedians offer rhetorical messages that are aimed at challenging the ideologies and perspectives of members of the audience (Greenbaum, 1999), and Silverman’s use of irony, satire, mockery, and trivialization is no exception.

Further, because Silverman is a conventionally attractive female comedian, it is possible that she is able to discuss issues that are considered taboo based on her “softer” demeanor and attractive outward appearance. Rarely is Silverman discussed by members of the media when her physical appearance is not mentioned in some form (e.g., Cracked.com, 2005; Goodyear, 2005). Though Silverman appears to disregard her appearance through most of her performance, it remains unclear whether or not a comedian with a vastly different, and even unattractive appearance, would be granted the ability to continuously address such taboo topics. Additionally, because women are not as prominent within the world of standup comedy, humor from a female perspective has the potential to be particularly rhetorically subversive (Fraiberg, 1994). Traditionally, women have been expected to portray a good sense of humor by laughing at jokes produced by a man. For women, the simple act of going
up on a standup comedy stage is subversive because she is assuming a position of public power (Gilbert, 2004). Silverman offers humorous observations from the perspective of a woman; as such, she has the potential to provide humor that can undermine hegemonic social rules. Regardless of whether or not women choose to perform in an extreme or subtle way, their willingness to publicly perform standup comedy serves to resist and subvert traditional gender expectations.

Love her or hate her, Silverman has had a clear and significant impact on society at large and the venue of standup comedy in particular. The ways in which she discusses significant social issues such as race, gender, and historical events set her apart from most other comedians and allow her to provide a one-of-a-kind perspective. The contrast between her ironic persona of innocence and the political incorrectness of the content of her humor provides perspective by incongruity in a way that others are unable to establish. Whether in an ironic tone or through a literal frame, Silverman puts it best: “I’m a comic with something to say. I think that’s the difference. Learn-med, that’s what I call it” (Herzon et al., 2005, 30:51). While she is still “in-character” as she makes the claim that her humor is also educational, Silverman certainly has an important message. However, it is up to the audience to figure it out for themselves.
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