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HANNAH GADSBY'S NANETTE: CONNECTION THROUGH COMEDY

Sheila Lintott

Abstract: *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (2018) is a brilliant and masterful work of comedy in which Gadsby announces she is quitting comedy. In this article, I draw on classical and contemporary humor theory to explore the comedic content of *Nanette* and critique Gadsby's reasons for quitting. Although I largely agree with Gadsby's concerns about comedy, I argue that the very show in which she presents them, *Nanette*, stands as evidence against their universal truth. Gadsby argues that comedy is no longer conducive to her health for at least three related reasons. First, the self-deprecatory comedy out of which she has built her career is a symptom of her humiliation which she is no longer willing or able to showcase for the pleasure of others. I argue that while self-deprecatory humor can, of course, be a sign of humiliation, it needn't be. Comedians, including those on the margins, can and do effectively employ self-deprecation without humiliation or denigration of self, and one way comedians do this is as a ruse to expose the ignorance of the audience or of comic targets not present. Second, Gadsby analyzes jokes and argues their two-part structure, set-up and punch line, is inadequate for telling the whole story of the trauma she has endured as a lesbian who, as she puts it, presents as "gender not-normal." However, I maintain that, although jokes may not be, stand-up sets are often complete wholes with beginnings, middles, and ends. In fact, *Nannette* is a prime example of such complex comedy. Finally, she argues that the comedian's job is to create and dispel tension, but she is no longer willing to take responsibility for or do anything to dispel the tension created when she speaks of her past trauma. But I discuss how Gadsby, as a true master of her craft, is able to create a highly successful and very funny comedy show in which she completely controls the tension while explicitly choosing to leave significant portions of it with the audience. In fact, super stand-up comedy can introduce tension it neglects to remove without

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sacrificing the humor. Indeed, Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* is a prime example of comedy that powerfully does precisely this.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hannah Gadsby is a comedian from a small rural town in Tasmania, who, in the wake of her tremendously successful and even more culturally important Netflix special, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (2018), is a global phenomenon enjoying much deserved international success. Prior to being filmed for Netflix, the live performance of *Nanette* won numerous awards, including best comedy at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (2017), the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2018), and the Adelaide Fringe (2019); and in 2017, Gadsby was awarded Australia's prestigious Helpmann Award for Best Comedy Performer. The Netflix version of Nanette has garnered Gadsby the Australian Academy for Cinema and Television Arts Award for Best Performance in a Television Comedy (2018), a Peabody Best Stories Award (2019), a Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special (2019), and a GLAAD Media Award for Special Recognition (2019).

So, Gadsby is clearly an acknowledged master of her craft and *Nanette* is undoubtedly a masterpiece; it is intelligent, emotionally moving, wholly captivating, and hilarious. Yet *Nanette* is unlike your standard stand-up special. In it, Gadsby tells her truth—her whole truth, from the realities of growing up gay in a place where homosexuality was illegal until 1997 (as she says, "not long enough ago"), to accounts of the trauma and violence she has faced because of her sexuality and gender presentation.[1] And, as if that's not enough, Gadsby uses *Nanette* as a forum to tell the world that she's quitting comedy.

The hour-long show is carefully structured, opening with straightforward comedy, at which Gadsby is very, very good, transitioning about halfway through into a scathing critique of patriarchy with a nuanced feminist discussion of art history and honest reflections on the limits of comedy, and closing, after one final joke, with the sincere request that we help her take care of her story:

> I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own. Because, like it or not, your story is my story. And my story is your story. I just don't have the strength to take care of my story anymore. I don't want my story defined by anger. All I can ask is just please help me take care of my story.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from *Hannah Gadsby: Nannette* (Gadsby 2018).

Nannette is remarkable in many ways. To me it is most remarkable in not only honestly exploring serious and emotionally charged issues in a hilarious work of comedy, but also in doing so without making light of the topics or apologizing for raising them. *Unapologetic* is the word I think best describes Gadsby's *Nanette*.

My aim here is to fully elaborate, expand, and critique *Nanette* and the case Gadsby presents against comedy, specifically against self-deprecatory comedy performed from the margins. This article is divided into five sections. In section 2, "Do you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up?" I discuss a joke Gadsby recounts from her first comedy show, *New Gay Comic 101: My Coming Out Story*. I analyze the joke in the context of discussing philosophical theories of ridicule, specifically those of Plato and Aristotle, to expose how it is self-deprecating despite targeting a homophobic man. Moreover, I argue that self-deprecatory humor can be, although isn't always, employed to reclaim power and assert authority. This is the case, I maintain, even when the comedian is speaking from the margins. The third section, "You learn from the part of the story you focus on," considers Gadsby's argument that due to the nature and structure of jokes, they are unable to convey the whole of traumatic events. To explain and underscore the importance of Gadsby's point here, I survey philosophical conceptions of jokes and discuss the relevance of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Here I make the case that although jokes might tend to be simple pieces of humor with two parts, comedy sets or shows can be, and often are, much more complex. Comedy can have a beginning, middle, and end, even if it is impossible or unlikely for jokes to. In the fourth section, "This tension, it's yours," I discuss the relationship between comedy and negative emotion in exploring Gadsby's unwillingness to dispel the tension created by sharing her story. My view is that it is possible for comedians to refuse to remove tension, even tension they create, without necessarily sacrificing in terms of humor or laughter. In conclusion, I offer a reading of Nanette according to which Gadsby doesn't break the comedy contract, but instead stretches and bends the contract to allow comedy to be and become more than we ever expected.

2. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT STORY ABOUT THAT YOUNG MAN WHO ALMOST BEAT ME UP?

Gadsby tells us she is quitting comedy because she has built her career to-date out of self-deprecating humor and refuses to continue in that fashion. Self-deprecating humor, of course, is familiar to all and widespread

throughout comedy; in a nutshell, it is humor in which a comedian makes themselves the butt of the joke. Self-deprecating humor, in life and in art, can be highly endearing, signaling, for example, that someone isn't too full of themselves. On the comic stage, it is often an effective tool for connecting with audiences, because the expression of a (sometimes feigned) humility can help an audience better relate to a comedian. Moreover, the history of comedy, especially stand-up comedy, attests to the effectiveness of self-deprecation for those on the margins. For many, it was the cost of admission. For example, when women in comedy were exceedingly rare, early female stand-ups, such as such as Phyllis Diller, Totie Fields, and Judy Canove, likely found it not only effective, but also necessary in order to attain any measure of success in comedy.

But self-deprecation can function in other, more detrimental ways, too. When, for example, someone repeatedly puts themselves down in order to put others at ease, we can grow uneasy as we find ourselves *feeling for*, rather than *connecting with* them. The divide between us and the self-deprecator grows if we detect evidence of their genuine shame amongst the jokes. Danielle Russell, in "Self-Deprecatory Humor and the Female Comic," makes this point as follows:

> [Self-deprecation] does appear to be a (fairly) successful tactic for female performers. However, it can only be effective if it stems from self-confidence; when the "inadequacy" from which the humour is evolved is genuinely felt by the comic, her humour conveys self-loathing rather than the intellectual assurance which should accompany the stance of stand-up comedian [*sic*]. (Russell 2002)

In her self-deprecatory humor, Gadsby is sufficiently talented to mask the self-loathing she comes to openly claim in *Nannette*. Likewise, Gadsby admits that self-deprecation can be simultaneously a sign of confidence and humility, but insists that when self-deprecation comes from someone like her who "already exists in the margins," then, far from being a sign of humility, it is a symptom of humiliation." That the symptom went undetected by her audience does nothing to mitigate the harm she inflicted on herself by holding onto it. She elaborates: "I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. And if that means my comedy career is over, then so be it." In other words, it is the way self-deprecation interacts with her identity that makes it both necessary and unhealthy.

About ten minutes into *Nanette*, Gadsby revisits and retells a joke from her first comedy show, *Classic New Gay Comic 101: My Coming Out Story*. The

joke is about the time she was "almost beaten up by a young man" while waiting at a bus stop late at night:

> I was talking to a girl, and you know, you, you could say flirting. I don't know. And out of nowhere, [her boyfriend] just comes up and starts shoving me, going, "Fuck off, you fucking faggot!" And he goes, "Keep away from my girlfriend, you fucking freak!" And she's just stepping in, going, "Whoa, stop it! It's a girl!" And he's going, "Woah, sorry." He said, "Sorry. Oh, Sorry. Sorry. I don't hit women," he said . . . And he goes, "Sorry," he said, "I got confused. I thought you were a fucking faggot, trying to crack onto my girlfriend" . . . Now, I understand I have a responsibility to help lead people out of ignorance at every opportunity I can, but I left him there, people. Safety first.

This joke, which, it's worth noting, is far funnier when Gadsby performs it, leaves us laughing at the aggressor and his extreme ignorance about gender and sexuality. He is the butt of the joke and the combination of his ignorance and her safety pleases us. In this version of the story, Gadsby emerges unscathed, indeed superior.

Plato's theory of the ridiculous is informative here. In the *Philebus*, Socrates characterizes the ridiculous in terms of self-ignorance:

> SOCRATES: [The ridiculous] is a kind of vice that derives its name from a special disposition; it is, among all the vices, the one with the character that stands in direct opposition to the one recommended by the famous inscription at Delphi.
>
> PROTARCHUS: You mean the one that says "Know Thyself," Socrates?
>
> SOCRATES: I do. The opposite recommendation would obviously be that we not know ourselves at all. (Plato 1993, 56–57)

Further, according to Plato's theory, whether we ridicule or hate an ignorant person is determined by the relative power of the involved parties:

> For ignorance on the side of the strong and powerful is odious and ugly; it is harmful even to their neighbors, both the ignorance itself and its imitations, whatever they may be. Ignorance on the side of the weak, by contrast, deserves to be placed among the ridiculous in rank and nature." (58)

Ignorance everywhere is a vice, but in the ridiculous person, we find a *specific* combination of "delusion and weakness" (58). The ridiculous person lacks the power and prestige that leads us to fear the horrible person. Likewise, in Gadsby's joke, the young man comes across as a buffoon because his ignorance has no obvious negative consequences for Hannah.

His ignorance, rather than causing her harm, allows for her safe escape. The joke, as told, ridicules him.

Similarly, for Aristotle, a person is ridiculous in virtue of being flawed in a way that poses no obvious or immediate threat to themselves or others. He tells us that, whereas a tragic figure tends to be a person of high standing relative to most, the comic figure tends to be a person of low standing relative to most. This relatively low standing limits the scope and significance of any perceived damage they might do by virtue of their faults, thus making their faults somewhat trivial and hence laughable. In Aristotle's words, the ridiculous character is flawed:

> . . . not in the sense that it embraces any and every kind of badness, but in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness. For the ridiculous consists in some form of error or ugliness that is not painful or injurious. (Aristotle 1965, 37)

Compare, for example, the flaws of Hitler to the flaws of a circus clown. Hitler's bigotry and narcissism brought about untold suffering, pain, and lasting damage, but the clown's clumsiness and silliness was and remains inconsequential. We hate Hitler, but we laugh at the clown.

Interestingly, Gadsby renounces her former joke despite the fact that it pointedly ridicules her aggressor. Her main gripe about her former comedy is its reliance on self-deprecating humor, yet this joke does not appear to be self-deprecating. Moreover, the joke is highly successful. It is funny and has gained her many laughs over many years. However, in the last ten minutes of *Nanette*, Gadsby revisits the joke to explain the problem with the joke:

> But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened because I couldn't tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said, 'Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of yous,' and he did! He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him. And I didn't report that to the police. And I did not take myself to hospital. And I should have. And you know why I didn't? It's because I thought that was all I was worth.

Whereas in Gadsby's joke about the bus stop incident, she leads us to laugh at the ridiculousness of the ignorant but harmless man, the story version makes it clear that neither he nor his ignorance is harmless and that hatred for the violent and dangerous bigot is more appropriate. On reflection, Gadsby comes to believe her earlier humor, as exemplified in this joke, cost her more than it cost anyone she mocks. She explains, "I need to tell my story properly. Because I paid dearly for a lesson that nobody seems

to have wanted to learn." Neither will a utilitarian calculus help here, for the pleasure of the audience is not enough to compensate for her pain. She makes this clear in rejecting the myth of the tortured artist: "What do you honestly think, mate?" I said. "That creativity means you must suffer? That is the burden of creativity? Just so you can enjoy it? Fuck you, mate."

However, earlier in her career, it seems Gadsby wasn't yet clear on this. Despite initial appearances, the joke set at the bus stop harbors a self-deprecation invisible to the audience because to tell that story as a joke, Gadsby literally has to diminish herself, pretending for the sake of the performance that the story ends on that funny note. Telling it as a joke requires silencing herself and ignoring her own pain and suffering. In so doing, she prioritizes our laughs over her self-worth. For years, she did so, willingly, for the pleasure of her audience, but no longer. Because the tension is making her sick:

> Do you know why I'm such a funny fucker? Do you? It's because, you know, I've been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a children [*sic*]. Back then it wasn't a job, wasn't even a hobby; it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I was the tension. And I'm tired of tension. Tension is making me sick. It is time I stopped comedy. I have to quit comedy.

Gadsby's indictment of self-deprecating comedy as unhealthy is supported by work in personality studies. For example, Torres-Marín et al. find that while "aggressive humor correlated with higher trait-anger and external expression of anger," the case is quite different for self-deprecating humor where we find a correlation with higher *internal* [emphasis added] expression of anger" (Torres-Marín et al. 2018, 200).

Gadsby admits, a number of times, that she is angry: "I am angry, and I believe I've got every right to be angry!" Gadsby is angry, angry about the homophobia and shame she internalized in her youth and carries with her today and angry about the violence men have inflicted on her:

> I don't hate men, but I wonder how a man would feel if they'd lived my life. Because it was a man who sexually abused me when I was a child. It was a man who beat the shit out of me when I was 17 . . . It was two men who raped me when I was barely in my twenties. Tell me why is that okay. Why was it okay to pick me off the pack like that and do that to me? It would have been more humane to take me out to the back paddock and put a bullet in my head if it is that much of a crime to be different.

The anger we see expressed on the comedy stage is almost always performed by white men or what Gadsby calls "gender-normals." Self-deprecating humor is a safer bet for comedians who exist in the margins. In addition to being most comfortable with men doing angry comedy—indeed, audiences

are often in awe of their bravery and intellect—we tend to be more comfortable when their jokes target "someone who exists in the margins." For example, Gadsby mentions the comedy surrounding the Bill Clinton sex scandal:

> Do you know who used to be an easy punch line? Monica Lewinsky. Maybe, if comedians had done their job properly and made fun of a man who abused his power, then perhaps we might have had a middle-aged woman with an appropriate amount of experience in the White House, instead of, as we do, a man who openly admitted to sexually assaulting vulnerable young women because he could.

Here, Gadsby is admitting that anger can have a place in comedy. In fact, the suggestion is that angry humor has the potential to be morally instructive, but not as it tends to be performed, by those with power "punching down" to target those lacking power, that is, the marginal in society. When Gadsby expresses her anger in *Nannette*, it is not through self-deprecating anger expressed inward. Her anger is directly externally, at patriarchy and all its trappings. In other words, Gadsby is "punching up." In *Nanette*, in fact, Gadsby does what comedians who mocked Lewinsky failed to do: she openly mocks the powerful. In the process, she comes across as a real force to be reckoned with. She effectively employs self-deprecation as a ruse to expose the ignorance of the audience or of comic targets not present; however, as Russell points out, with self-deprecatory humor, often "the surrender of power is an illusion" (Russell 2002).

Not all self-deprecatory humor is the same, not even all self-deprecatory humor performed from the margins. Some may be evidence of shame and humility, but when self-deprecatory humor is pure pretense, it can also be playful or strategic. Comedians, even those on the margins, can and do effectively employ self-deprecation without humiliation or denigration of self. The self-deprecation in *Nannette* is a façade: she pokes fun at herself for inconsequential things or for imaginary flaws. For example, she mocks her home state, calling Tasmania the "little island floating off the arse end of Australia" with such a small gene pool that her family tree is "a bit topiary." She mocks herself for not being a good lesbian, "Do you know what I reckon my problem is? I don't lesbian enough" and for not fitting in:

> The pressure on my people to express our identity and pride through the metaphor of party is very intense. Don't get me wrong, I love the spectacle, I really do, but I've never felt compelled to get amongst it. Do you know? I'm a quiet soul. My favorite sound in the whole world is the sound of a teacup finding its place on a saucer. Oh, it's very, very difficult to flaunt that lifestyle in a parade.

In a joking manner, she downplays contributions she has made to social progress: "My coming out story. I told lots of cool jokes about homophobia. Really solved that problem. Tick." She mocks women, particularly lesbians, for lacking a good sense of humor:

> I should quit. I'm a disgrace. What sort of comedian can't even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That's a good joke, isn't it? Classic. It's bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it's funny . . . because it's true. The only people who don't think it's funny . . . are us lezzers . . . But we've got to laugh . . . because if we don't . . . proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn't write that. That is not my joke. It's an old . . . An oldie. Oldie but a goldie. A classic. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny.

Finally, she mocks her appearance, explaining that she feels tense in a small town, "mainly because I am this situation" and gesturing at herself. And the last joke she offers in *Nanette* takes aim at her own fashion sense:

> To the men in the room, I speak to you now, particularly the white men, especially the straight white men. Pull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian. That's your last joke.

The jabs she makes at herself are relatively trivial or wholly insincere, but they do have a place in *Nannette*. In fact, I would argue that the tremendous success of *Nannette* as comedy was made possible by the inclusion of self-deprecatory humor.

Because she is able to occasionally lighten the load on the audience through self-deprecation, her message is less likely to be met by defensiveness from the audience. Neuroscientist Lynne Barker explains this strategy can work because:

> Laughter does have the power to override other emotions momentarily—we cannot sob morosely or simmer with anger while simultaneously laughing. This is because our facial muscles and vocal architecture have been hijacked by sunnier emotions. And it is all controlled by specialised brain circuits and chemical messengers (neurotransmitters).
>
> We know there are several brain pathways that contribute to laughter—each for different components of it. For example, brain regions usually involved in decision-making and controlling our behaviour have to be inhibited to facilitate spontaneous and unbridled laughter. (Barker 2017)

Although Gadsby employs self-deprecating humor in *Nannette*, she does so strategically to claim her voice and to unapologetically speak her truth. As Russell argues, "Self-deprecation allows the speaker to adopt what is

essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience" (Russell 2002).

If there is any doubt that, despite the occasional self-deprecatory joking, the Gadsby we see in *Nannette* is a fearless woman, ready to stand up for herself and others, and wholly unwilling to sacrifice her integrity in the process, consider her forceful assertion:

> I am in my prime! Would you test your strength out on me? There is no way anyone would dare test their strength out on me, because you all know there is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself.

So, although Gadsby is correct that self-deprecating humor can be a sign of anger or hatred of self, in *Nannette*, she uses it playfully and strategically, without genuine self-loathing. This suggests that Gadsby is implicitly admitting that self-deprecation can be used safely and effectively even from the margins. That is, it need not be a sign of humiliation. Because she insists her voice deserves to be heard and that her story has value, the rather trivial self-deprecation she engages in, far from evidence of humiliation, is ingratiating and strategically effective; in *Nannette*, Gadsby strides from the margins, taking center stage and owning her space and her time in the spotlight.

3. YOU LEARN FROM THE PART OF THE STORY YOU FOCUS ON

In addition to rejecting self-deprecatory humor, another key element in the case Gadsby makes for quitting comedy is a distinction she draws between jokes and stories: "Stories," she explains, "unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes only need two parts: a beginning and a middle." The beginning is the setup and the end, of course, is the punch line. That jokes involve setups and punch lines isn't news to anyone, but the nature of punch lines is rarely considered. In "On Jokes," Noël Carroll aims to pinpoint the distinctive structure of jokes, maintaining that "the feature that distinguishes a joke from other riddles and narratives is a punch line. Where tragedies conclude with that state that modern literary theorists call closure, the last part of a joke is a punch line" (Carroll 2001, 323). Seeking closure exclusively through joking is ill-advised. Whereas stories tend to culminate with a relatively clear ending, jokes end with a punch line for the audience to interpret. On the other hand, stories can give the teller a sense of being heard and understood; thus, forging a connection where previously there was isolation. In *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to*

Meaning and Wholeness in the Academy, Robert Nash argues that stories are the best way to share ourselves with others:

> I believe that each of us conceals a nagging need to tell some kind of truth about our lives. And each of us, at some point, wants to move from "conceals" to "reveals." When, and if, we are ready, the best way to convey a truth is to tell a story. A story is always profoundly personal and unique to some degree, never replicated in exactly the same form by anyone else. Your truth may be very different from mind, and vice versa. But if I can hear your truth within the context of my own personal story, I might be better able to find its corollary in my own story. (Nash and Viray 2014, 34–35)

Unlike understanding a story, understanding or "getting the joke" is not to hear another's truth, nor is it to find our own. Punch lines offer only partial, unexpected conclusions to the setup of the joke.

In insisting that stories, especially stories of past trauma, have a beginning, a middle, and an end, Gadsby is in agreement with Aristotle who, in analyzing tragedy, helpfully unpacks this misleadingly simple idea:

> . . . tragedy is the representation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain amplitude—for a thing may be whole and yet lack amplitude. Now a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else, although something also exists or comes about after it. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally follows something else either as a necessary or usual consequence, and it is not itself followed by anything. A middle is that which follows something else, and is itself followed by something. Thus well-constructed plots must neither begin nor end in a haphazard way . . . (Aristotle 1965, 41)

Following Aristotle, Carroll contrasts comedy with tragedy. A tragedy, he explains, ends with closure if "the questions that have been put in motion by the plot have been answered" (Carroll 2001, 323). On the other hand, jokes can and often do end "haphazardly." Jokes don't usually provide closure because "a punch line is not simply a matter of neatly answering the question posed by a riddle nor of drawing all the story lines of a narrative to a summation" (323). Jokes have openness that tragic stories lack (or tragic stories have closure that jokes lack). Jokes, unlike tragedies, as per Aristotle, can end haphazardly. A joke is designed to elicit laughter, and to do so, jokes invite the listener to seek and find the meaning in the punch line, which is rarely a straightforward, predictable meaning. As Carroll puts it, "the end point of telling a joke—the punch line—leaves the listener with one last question which the listener must answer, instead of concluding by answering all the listener's questions (323).

Recall the joke discussed in the previous section, the version before it became a story. The joke has the basic setup–punch line structure just discussed. Actually, this joke has two punch lines—or a punch line and tag: the audience first laughs at "I thought you were a fucking faggot trying to crack on my girlfriend" and again after Gadsby confesses that she "left him there" in his ignorance. This is where the joke ends, as Gadsby says, in the middle of the story, but as Aristotle says, the middle "is itself followed by something" (Aristotle 1965, 41). And, in *Nannette*, Gadsby does inform us that, in fact, there is something, something important, that follows the story as captured by her joke, namely the part where the man returned and violently beat her while witnesses did nothing to help. In telling jokes about such traumas, without including or in downplaying the traumatic parts, Gadsby is not only allowing, she is inviting the audience to be comically amused while she suffers in silence.

In the joke version about the young man at the bus stop, she opens by telling us how irate he grew when he thought she was a man hitting on his girlfriend. Gadsby admits to flirting, "actually, that bit was true, he got that part right, but there was a twist." The twist is the punch line: that he was ready and willing to assault her because he thought she "was a fucking faggot trying to crack onto my girlfriend." To get the joke, the audience comes to think the man in the joke believes gay men are sexually attracted to women. Jokes, as Carroll puts it, "end in punch lines that may in some sense be mistaken themselves and that call for interpretations that require the attribution to or assumption of some kind of error by the implied speaker, and/or characters, and/or the listener, implied or actual" (Carroll 2001, 326). But by construing the man as harmlessly ignorant, she skips the ending; in reality, far from harmless, that man seriously damaged her physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

In deciding to omit the true ending of that story, she and the audience both miss out on an opportunity, because "you learn from the part of the story you focus on." What lesson can she or her audience glean from the joke version of the story? That hate filled bigotry is merely something to laugh about? That ignorance that fuels hate can be coupled with a silly ignorance that makes the hate inconsequential? Because she has been focusing on the wrong part of her stories, Gadsby fears that comedy has left her stunted. Another joke she tells in her earlier comedy is about coming out to her mom, who responds to the news thusly: "Oh, Hannah, why'd you have to tell me *that*? That's not something *I* need to know. I mean, what if I told you I was a murderer?" Gadsby turns this painful remark into a joke, saying "it's a fair call. Murderer. Murderer. You would hope that's a phase."

But in *Nanette*, Gadsby does tell the end of story, “the best part,” which is not captured in the joke: “the best part of that story is the fact that Mum and I have a wonderful relationship now. More than mother and daughter, we’re friends. We trust each other.” But in sharing that part of the story, she loses the funny: “Look what I did to the room. No tension.” There is no tension in a story about healthy family relationships and without tension, the laughter stops. After sharing what she finds the “best part” of that story, she speculates that the audience is “going, ‘Good on you. Got a good relationship with your mom, have you? Can you go back to the tension? That was hilarious.’”

Gadsby attributes the strong relationship she now enjoys with her mother to how her mother has changed in the years since she came out to her. However, while her mother grew, Gadsby fears comedy prevented her from doing the same. “She evolved; I didn’t.”

> I think that part of my problem is that comedy has suspended me in a perpetual state of adolescence. . . . What I had done with that comedy show about coming out was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But unfortunately that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality.

In her comedy about coming out, she shares partial accounts of coming out to her mother, the violent attack at the bus stop, and the effects of going through adolescence in a toxic environment. Now Gadsby wants to share the uncut version of her stories. But these stories, told in their entirety, are not usually the stuff of comedy. Consider how she describes growing up in Tasmania:

> Seventy percent of the people who raised me, who loved me, who I trusted, believed that homosexuality was a sin, that homosexuals were heinous, sub-human pedophiles. Seventy percent. By the time I identified as being gay, it was too late. I was already homophobic, and you do not get to just flick a switch on that. No, what you do is you internalize that homophobia and you learn to hate yourself. Hate yourself to the core. I sat soaking in shame in the closet, for ten years.

No punch line here, and one struggles to imagine a funny punch line for that setup. Her upbringing led Gadsby to internalize the homophobia surrounding her, thereby learning self-hatred and shame. These stories, the full stories including endings, were left unspoken in her earlier comedy because trauma needs more space and more complexity than jokes can offer. Jokes

are the way to laughs, but jokes are setups with punch lines that need to be simple—and funny, not necessary the whole truth.

On Gadsby's view, because jokes do not have endings, they lack the emotional depth, range, and resolution of stories. Rebecca Krefting connects this with the challenge of utilizing anger in comedy:

> Comedy's imperative to generate resolutions leading to laughter or to ease tensions means that it ends up having to ignore the social and political currency of anger. Not to mention that this rhetorical ping-pong of tension relieved by punch lines forces comics to oscillate between two modes of discourse: serious (angry) or humorous (funny). This leaves precious little space for introducing other emotions and limits the ways comics can resolve the tensions they create. (Krefting 2019, 95)

Of course, it's not as if comedy hasn't been employed to express rage or to share suffering. Some of the "greats" of comedy, such as Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, George Carlin, and Lewis Black, are often very, very angry on stage. And it is hard to think about personal trauma and suffering being shared in comedy without thinking of Richard Pryor's bits about having a heart attack or about the time he set himself on fire while freebasing (among others). But women rarely successfully perform such comedy, especially the angry version. As Gadsby says, "It's not my place to be angry on a comedy stage. I'm meant to be doing self-deprecating humor. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They're the kings of the genre." As Russell puts it:

> The presence of a female comic elicits a much different audience reaction than that of her male counterpart. 'Deviant behavior and expression' are somehow more palatable from a man. He is granted his due—assumed to be funny until he proves to be otherwise—while she starts from a different position - she must prove that she can be funny. (Russell 2002)

The female comic is not given the same room to experiment on stage because she is working against the audience's preconceived notions of appropriate female behavior and women's lack of humor ability. In her earlier comedy, in aiming to please the audience by making them laugh, instead of sharing her pain and rage, Gadsby chooses to accommodate the audience by glossing the story and skipping the trauma in favor of punch lines. Comedy needs tension, but so does trauma. As she puts it: "Punch lines need trauma because punch lines need tension, and tension feeds trauma." Thus, in telling joke versions of traumatic events, Gadsby is able to relieve the audience's tension, but the cost to her is the festering tension of her trauma.

However, although any given joke is unlikely to be able to convey the whole of any traumatic story, stand-up comedy is not simply a matter of telling a joke. It's not even simply a matter of telling many jokes. Stand-up comedians structure their sets, arranging the parts and including a variety of components, including, but not exclusively, jokes, to achieve the desired effect. The desired effect, of course, includes laughter, but a comedy set need not be limited to jokes that aim to evoke laughter. Stand-up often includes material that is not funny as well as funny material that is not in joke form.

Anne Libera, director of comedy studies in the department of Comedy Writing and Performance at Columbia College Chicago, offers a "working hypothesis for a unified theory of comedy" by isolating and analyzing three elements that together create comedy. These are recognition, pain, and distance, and on her view, "comedy is not necessarily defined by laughter" but rather in the calibration of "these elements in order to get a response from an audience" (Libera 2018). Indeed, most comedians purposefully space out the laughs they garner, giving the audience time to catch their breath and space to keep up so that they can "get" the jokes.

Remarkably, if it is laughter the comedian seeks, mere recognition is often sufficient. One kind of recognition is what Libera calls "reference humor"; sometimes audience laughter is evoked when a comic makes "reference to something that they know about but maybe didn't expect anyone else to know about. Like Caillou. Or John Stamos. Or Jane Austen. Or John Stamos. That would be a call back" (Libera 2018). Repetition, for example through call-backs, is one common way comedians connect with their audiences. Recognition is key in stand-up comedy because the audience must find the person on stage at least somewhat relatable to be comfortable enough that laughter is possible, hopefully even likely.

Recognition, although not really funny per se, is very effective in producing laughs in stand-up comedy, as well as in life. To take the most obvious and literal example, unexpectedly running into a friend, that is, recognizing someone somewhere, can induce laughter in both parties. We naturally find pleasure in the mere recognition of things and in some cases this pleasure is marked with a laugh. As Aristotle points out, people naturally enjoy imitation, artistic and otherwise: "They enjoy seeing likenesses because in doing so they acquire information (they reason out what each represents and discover, for instance, that this is a picture of so and so)" (Aristotle 1965, 35). I suspect that this is likely what is at the heart of the Seinfeld-*the-funny-thing-about*-style comedy. It is difficult to isolate clear set-ups and punchlines in much of Seinfeld's and similar observational comedy, but the

aspect of recognition is clear. For one example, consider his bit about riding in a NY taxi:

> The funny thing about being in these cabs is that when you're in Manhattan for some reason you don't get scared, no matter how fast the guy goes. Well, you know, he's driving fast and recklessly, but he's a professional. (Seinfeld 1998)

Anyone who has ever ridden in a NY taxi can relate and recognizes themselves in this account. Jorge Gracia suggests:

> . . . that one of the reasons we laugh at a play, a show, or a book is that in it we see ourselves in a new light. All of a sudden we consider ourselves, our everyday idiosyncrasies, manners, ways, and customs, the peculiarities that we generally do not notice but that permeate our existence, presented for what they are, regularities of daily living that pass us by as insignificant and yet have significance. (Gracia 2000, 231)

So, much laughter, whether at comedy or in everyday life, results from things that are strictly speaking not humorous. Robert Provine's research shows that in everyday life "banal comments like, 'Where have you been?' or 'It was nice meeting you, too'—hardly knee-slappers—are far more likely to precede laughter than jokes. Only 10% to 20% of the laughter episodes we witnessed followed anything joke-like. . . . This suggests that the critical stimulus for laughter is another person, not a joke" (Provine 2000).

In addition to including a significant amount of nonjoke material, stand-up comedy sets also tend to be highly structured. Comedians think carefully about what topics to broach at what points in their sets, how the parts relate to one another and to the whole, and the sort of narrative sense that might emerge over the course of the performance. Libera is helpful here again:

> Even in a show of completely unrelated sketch material with no obviously discernible through line or narrative you can create connection to a performer by having them play a couple of sympathetic and relatable characters in the first act, so when that performer does something darker or more dangerous in the second act, the audience already knows them and trusts them. In essence, it's what behavioral science refers to as the halo effect. (Libera 2018)

The case is similar in a given stand-up comedy performance. Comedians rarely start off with their most taboo or challenging material, rather they first establish a connection with the audience that subsequently allows them more leeway in pushing boundaries later on. Moreover, the structure of a comedy set does, in fact, have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In *Nannette*, Gadsby tells us a story of a highly successful comedian who is quitting comedy. It is her story and more than merely inform us she is quitting, she takes us on a narrative journal explaining who she is and what she has experienced with a focus on how her identity and life experiences led her to this point. When we inquire about a story, we inquire, what is it about? This is a story about a comedian who is quitting comedy and it answers the questions a good story should: Who? (Gadsby, a comedian) What? (quitting comedy) Why? (it's unhealthy). In the first third of *Nannette*, Gadsby tells us, often, but not only, through jokes, who she is. A queer woman from Tasmania who has been mistreated, abused, attacked, and diminished in many ways over the course of her life. She is a comedian who drew comedy from her real life, as many comedians do. However, because she valued comedy and her audience more than herself, she performed comedy that required her to ignore, downplay, and disregard the traumatic events of her life while at the same time using those events as comedic fodder. Over the years, she grew more and more uncomfortable with the sort of comedy she created and questioned whether it was damaging her. She comes to the conclusion that she has to leave comedy for the sake of her physical and psychological health. However, her decision to quit is not one of resignation, it is a revolt. In the story of *Nannette*, it is definitely comedy that will be worse off for the split. Gadsby is, and will, continue to thrive.

4. THIS TENSION, IT'S YOURS

When we share our stories with others, especially traumatic stories, we are looking for a connection of some sort. Comedy can forge, and jokes, I believe, can help foster that connection. It may be tempting to see Gadsby's case for quitting comedy as an indictment of comedy writ large. But it is more complicated than that because *Nannette* actually proves that comedy can accommodate traumatic stories while also being intensely funny. It is unlikely that one joke can accomplish this, but Gadsby undoubtedly succeeds in allowing for both the connection and the laughter. Part of the reason she is able to accomplish this is because *Nannette* isn't *just* comedy; the story she tells in it is both traumatic and tragic. Trauma and tragedy are the sorts of things that cause stress, tension, and anxiety in our lives and one way of getting relief is through comedy. However, in *Nannette*, Gadsby foregrounds the perils of relying too heavily on comedy for the diffusion of individual or group tension. As we have seen, she finds jokes ineffectual for the relief of tension resulting from trauma because jokes don't tend to tell whole and complete stories. Furthermore, Gadsby argues that some

tension shouldn't be relieved because it can teach us much needed lessons. So, in Nannette, Gadsby creates and dispels tension as well as creating and refusing to diffuse other tension. The result is a comedy that is more than funny, it is a comedy that leaves the audience with lingering tension. Given Gadsby's purpose, *Nannette* would have been a failure had she excised all of the tension in the audience. The tension that lingers holds the promise of changing minds and changing behavior.

Much humor can be accurately analyzed in terms of incongruity, from slapstick to stand-up and a great deal of what we find in between. And people typically think of jokes along the lines of incongruity; as Gadsby says, a joke is "essentially a question with a surprise answer." Different kinds of incongruent stimuli, that is, different surprises, can cause very different reactions. Obviously, not every surprise is a good surprise. So, while we may find being presented with an incongruity via humor pleasurable and enjoyable, in other cases, the experience can be of an entirely different valence.

In "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," John Morreall explores three general reactions to incongruity: comic amusement, negative emotion, and puzzlement.[2] He characterizes incongruity as: "a relation of conflict between something we perceive, remember, or imagine, on the one hand, and our conceptual patterns with their attendant expectations, on the other" (Morreall 1987, 188–89).

Of the three reactions to incongruity that he considers, Morreall argues it is humorous amusement that stands out as unique on three counts. In negative emotion, we are disturbed, bothered by our lack of control as we strongly desire to change the situation and we feel an urge to engage in practical action. Something that moves us negatively is likely to literally move us to move. Generally, we either work to change the situation or we remove ourselves from it—fight or flight. Similarly, finding something puzzling can be somewhat uncomfortable, which explains why we seek to solve puzzles. A puzzling incongruity makes us want control, as the incongruity exposes our ignorance or ineptitude. Puzzling incongruities plague us, nagging at us until we figure them out, thus they spur us to think, investigate, and wonder. Unlike the case of negative emotion, puzzlement can be a truly enjoyable experience, but the enjoyment is derived not from the incongruity per se, but rather through the wonderment experienced and

[2] Of course, the list of three general reactions Morreall canvases is not exhaustive. There are a number of other possible reactions to incongruity, including what an anonymous reviewer for this journal calls "oppositional acceptance" wherein a person' reaction is a mixture of, perhaps feigned, acceptance and at least as much rejection.

the process of removing it. The key similarities Morreall unearths between negative emotion and puzzlement are that we feel as if something is wrong, we want it to be otherwise, and we act to make it right. However, on all counts, humorous amusement differs. We do not experience humorous incongruities as wrong, nor do we want them to be otherwise, and so there is nothing for us to do but enjoy.

Morreall sums this up as follows:

> In contrast to the disagreeableness of the incongruity typical of negative emotion and reality assimilation, in amusement the situation that does not meet our expectations is not disturbing to us, nor is the fact, if it is a fact, that we are unable to figure out the incongruity, we do not have desire for the incongruous situation to be different, or for our understanding of it to be different. Indeed, we *enjoy* the incongruity. (Morreall 1987, 195)

A couple things are worth noting. First, the same incongruity can have varying effects depending on individuals' experiences, knowledge, interests and so on. An example of this variance is the comedy of Eddie Izzard. Years ago, I screened Izzard's then new comedy show, *Dress to Kill* (1999), for my Philosophy of Laughter class. The show opens with Izzard taking the stage, dancing and hopping around, in full feminine makeup with long nails painted red and blonde highlights in his hair. He is wearing a fitted black silk shirt, shiny leather pants, and heels. In his opening words, he acknowledges, in a joking manner, his gender presentation: "ln heels, as well. Yeah. Yes, I'm a professional transvestite, so I can run about in heels and not fall over. If women fall over in heels, that's embarrassing but if a bloke falls over in heels, you have to kill yourself. Later he helps clear up some confusion over the fact that he is a transvestite but "fancies women":

> Cause if you're a transvestite, you're actually a male tomboy. It's not drag queen. Gay men have got that covered. And this is male tomboy. People get that mixed up. They put transvestite there. No! It's male lesbian. That's really where it is. Running, jumping, climbing trees. Putting on makeup when you're up there. (Izzard 1999)

When I screened this comedy show for my students in the early 2000s, most rightly found Izzard very funny. But some had mixed experiences and at least one was visibly (and audibly) disturbed. In class discussion after the screening, a few students mentioned feeling somewhat confused, especially at the notion of a "male lesbian." These students did not report negative emotions, just puzzlement along with amusement, and said they came to understand his identity better over the course of the show or during class

discussion. The student who experienced intense negative emotions fueled by homophobia stormed out of the room early in the screening, loudly announcing his disgust at and unwillingness to be exposed to Izzard's gender presentation. Here we see one fairly homogenous group of students responding to the same phenomenon in radically different ways. A number of students even reported feeling initially upset or confused at his appearance, then finding him very funny, and eventually learning some things about sexuality and gender over the course of the show, which removed the initial negative reaction. For these students, the experience alternated among negative emotions, puzzlement, and humorous amusement.

In *Nannette*, we are confronted with incongruities that evoke in us multiple varying reactions. For most, I'd wager, the show is a complex experience of positive and negative emotions and humorous amusement. Some likely find the show difficult to watch and potentially triggering, so their negative emotions may comprise most of the experience. And admittedly, some argue that the show is not funny at all or that she is not funny; I suppose these people experience primarily negative emotion although one would hope for at least some puzzlement as well. But these differing reactions have more to do with those individuals than with Gadsby or *Nannette*.

Given these different reactions and how they compare to one another, we can see why using comedy to address serious issues about which one feels strongly can leave a comedian uncomfortable and unsatisfied. Whereas negative emotion tends to move a person to do something and puzzlement to think about something, humorous amusement invites us to relax and enjoy. After disclosing the facts about being assaulted the audience is still and quiet and Gadsby asserts: "And this tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different." One way of understanding Gadsby's decision to leave comedy is as motivated by a realization that her stories, her traumas, and her struggles are not to be enjoyed for their own sake. There is a purpose and a meaning to them; moreover, there is a purpose and a meaning to her telling them. Her purpose is to be heard and being heard means she is not alone. She explains:

> I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this'cause I want you to know, I need you to know, what I know . . . I will not allow my story to be destroyed. What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. Not for blame. Not for reputation, not for money, not for power. But to feel less alone. To feel connected. I want my story heard.

Without sharing her truth, Gadsby alone carries the tension of her trauma and shame, a burden that is too great for her to bear. In making a connection, the weight is shared. Gadsby created *Nanette* because she was willing to sacrifice her comedy career in the hope of making a genuine connection. She made that connection and, lucky for us, learned that she didn't have to quit comedy.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Nanette*, Gadsby refuses to sacrifice her truth for her comedy, choosing instead to tell her truth and quit comedy. And the results surprised Gadsby, perhaps more than anyone else. In the wake of *Nanette*, Gadsby gave a TED talk in which she shares that she expected the show to alienate audiences:

> I fully expected that by breaking the contract of comedy and telling my story in all its truth and pain that that would push me further into the margins of both life and art. I expected that, and I was willing to pay that cost in order to tell my truth. But that is not what happened. The world did not push me away. It pulled me closer. Through an act of disconnection, I found connection. (Gadsby 2019)

Gadsby felt compelled to quit comedy because she didn't see herself succeeding in comedy without self-deprecation. However, *Nanette* is all the evidence we need that she was wrong. Nanette is a brilliant work of comedy as is her most recent show, *Douglas* (2020). Furthermore, neither relies on self-deprecation for their funniness. In effect, in making her case for quitting comedy, she proves that she shouldn't quit. Moreover, in a show where she argues comedy cannot accommodate trauma, she performs comedy that successfully accommodates trauma. As Gadsby says, "you learn from the part of the story you focus on," and in *Nannette*, the focus is on Gadsby coming into her own and making space for comedy that is more than we had ever expected.

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