Neil Simon Utilizing Character Exaggeration Essay, Research Paper

NEIL SIMON: UTILIZING CHARACTER EXAGGERATION

“Neil (”Doc”) Simon stands alone as by far the most successful American playwright of this century and most probably in the history of the American theater” (Litz 573). He has entertained audiences for over thirty years with many Broadway productions, screenplays and television scripts. “He has been hailed as the most formidable comedy writer in American theater” (Geitner 253). Despite his great success, the majority of critics have refused to look past Simon’s “detonatingly funny” quips and punchlines to the subject matter in his plays (Geitner 253). “He has been virtually ignored by these literary critics, who routinely dismiss him as a writer of popular comedies that cater to the tastes of a well-established and loyal audience” (Litz 573). It is occasionally true that Simon sacrifices meaning and depth for a good joke, but “even in Simon s lightest comedies there are undertones of seriousness” (Geitner 253). Simon illustrates serious themes through the medium of comedy. He conveys the conflict while at the same time, cracks a joke. According to Simon, “My idea of ultimate achievement in a comedy is to make a whole audience fall onto floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out” (Geitner 254). Simon uses different elements to put stress on the conflict and also to aid in the humor of his plays. The jokes that Simon produces arise from the situation, usuallybrought forth by variegated elements, one of which is character exaggeration.

In two of his early plays, Come Blow Your Horn and Last of the Red Hot Lovers, Simon utilizes character exaggeration. In each of these plays the conflicts are aided by the exaggeration of the characters, which reveals each character s personality clearly and accurately. Situations are intensified and apparent, thus the underlying conflict is easily perceived. The character exaggeration also promotes themes that arise throughout Simon s plays.

Neil Simon’s Come Blow Your Horn, is centered around two brothers, Alan and Buddy. They both work for their father’s waxed fruit company. Alan, the older of the brothers, is a swinging bachelor who comes fully equipt with his own apartment and many willing women to fill it. Buddy, on the other hand, is Alan’s opposite, hard working and conscientious.

The play opens up with Alan trying to seduce one of his lady friends, Peggy, with whom he spent the weekend at a ski resort. To overstate his character further, he repeatedly called Peggy, “Connie” who is another one of his girlfriends. To top it off , he, unknowly at the time, missed an important sales meeting. After Peggy left, Alan’s kid brother Buddy enters. Buddy had just moved out of his parents house to live with Alan, unbeknownst to his parents. Alan is happy to see his brother brake away from their overbearing parents.

Soon after, their father, Mr. Barker enters. Simon vividly conveys Mr. Bakers characterization. From The moment he steps into Alan’s apartment and nods disgustedly, his personality takes shape. He examines the room and, “It is obvious he approves of nothing in the apartment” (Come Blow Her Horn 17). Mr. Baker does not talk, he yells and as best put by Alan, ” We don’t talk. We have heart to heart threatening-” (Come Blow Your Horn 10). Mr. Baker barks at Alan, while Buddy hides in Alan’s bedroom, the brothers fear of their father is obvious. Mr. Baker runs down a long list of complaints to Alan, everything from missing the meeting to take a vacation, to being an unmarried bum. Alan’s lazy attitude and lifestyle interferes with his job, and consequently his father, who is his boss. The fact that when Alan moved away from home Mr. Baker began to disapprove of him, and now Buddy, the son to whom Mr. Baker had decided to endow all his hope, moved away from home unquestionably put the nail in the coffin.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers is Simon’s attack on despair through comedy. “Last of the Red Hot Lovers is not merely a comedy, but a commentary in the manner of Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961)” (Geitner 257). The main character, Barney Cashman, who is the “last of the red hot lovers” is facing a mid-life crisis. For the first time in his life he is meditating about death. He feels as if he has missed out on many things during his lifetime. In an act of desperation before he gets too old, “He decides to introduce excitement into his life via adultery” (Martin 4). The exaggeration of Barney s characterguides the play through its development. He tries too hard to have an affair and usually, inadvertently talks his way out of having intercourse. He owns a restaurant where he uses cheap pick up lines to lure some of Manhattan s most disturbed women back to his mother s vacant apartment. Barney’s would-be lovers all suffer from one affliction or another.

First, Elaine Navazio is a depressed, cynical chain smoker who asks only for quick sex and no complications. Elaine just wants satisfaction, while “Barney describes his intentions as ‘of a romantic nature’” (Johnson 45). Elaine is emotionally cold by nature, and unlike Barney, she does not want to analyze her situation, for she does not have any hope of improving her circumstance in life. She states, “I happen to like the pure, physical act of making love. It warms me, it stimulates me and it makes me feel like a woman- but that’s another ugly story” (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 27). When Barney tries to be romantic towards Elaine, she tells him, If you want undying love and romance, take a guitar and go to Spain (Johnson 45). When Elaine complains about Barney s ceaseless talking, Barney explains that he just wants her to know a little bit more about himself. Atthis point Barney realizes that, In sum, he cannot, after all, be like the young swingers he has heard about who have sex, plain and straight, with total strangers (Johnson 46). Barney and Elaine become irritated with each other and get into a heated argument, about eachother s philosophy of life, which ends with Elaine getting up and walking out of the apartment.

Barney’s second attempt of adultery is Bobbi Michele. She is an amateur nightclub singer with a vast genre of mental problems including paranoia and delusions of grandeur. They met in the park one day, and Barney lent her money for an accompanist for her theater audition. The next day she showed up at Barney’s mother’s apartment to supposedly to pay him back. Bobbi doesn t seem to have a firm grip on reality. Not long after she arrives at the apartment, she says, I love this neighborhood. I knew this street looked familiar. I once had a girl friend who lived on this block. Forty-seventh between First and York (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 33). Barney corrects her: This is Thirty-seventh (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 33). Which she concludes with, Thirty-seventh. Of course. Then she couldn t have lived on this block. Ohh, that s better (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 33). She also tells Barney he is shorter than he looked before, and that she remembered him having a moustache (Johnson 47). She is very misleading and explains bizarre episodes in her life. She complains about receiving obscene phone calls; but then it turns out that, instead of hanging up, she listens to the obscenities for fifteen minutes at a clip (Johnson 47). Bobbi s angry outbursts point to another facet of her personality. She undergoes sudden moodswings. When a roommate is slow to answer Bobbi s phonecall, Bobbi remarks, She hears the phone. She s just a lazy bitch (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 37). Bobbi comes at Barney from too many directions for him to steer her where he wants to go. Barney gives up on trying to analyze Bobbi and opts to listen to her stories before she leaves.

The final woman Barney chooses to pursue is Jeanette Fisher. According to Last of the Red Hot Lovers: She is probably the singularly most depressed woman the face of the Western Hemisphere. She wakes up to gloom and goes to bed with gloom. She fills the in between hours with despair (52). Jeanette and her husband, Mel, are good friends of Barney and his wife, Thelma. At this point, Barney is in almost the exact frame of mind as Elaine. He does not want to chitchat, he wants sex. Ironically, he has waited too long and has picked the wrong partner for this mood. Jeanette, however, brooding about Mel s having an affair with another woman, is too depressed to follow through on her previous impulse to have sex with Barney (Johnson 45). She is aroused and tells Barney: I don t particularly enjoy sex (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 55). Instead, she leads Barney into a debate about whether there are any decent people in the world. Jeanette asks him if he thinks death is terrible. This question catches Barney s attention, for it was his intensified awareness of death that lead to his desire to have an affair. He says that he does think death is terrible. Jeanette follows up with: You mean you enjoy life? ( Last of the Red Hot Lovers 60). Barney responds, I love living. I have some problems with my life, butliving is the best thing they ve come up with so far (Last of the Red Hot Lovers 60). Barney convinces Jeanette that there are some good people in the world. Soon after, he phones his wife so they can meet.

In Come Blow Your Horn and Last of the Red Hot Lovers, Simon uses character exaggeration to intensify conflict and construct a comedy that progresses efficiently and predictably. In Come Blow Your Horn, the conflict is between the lifestyles of the two brothers and how their father thinks that they should live. The exaggeration of the brothers makes their lifestyles seem very extreme, as is the same concerning their father s negative attitude toward them. In Last of the Red Hot Lovers, the exaggeration of the Barney outlines conflicts that arise, and the exaggerations of the women he pursues, adds both stress and humor. Also, In Last of the Red Hot Lovers Simon employs exaggeration for thematic enrichment (Geitner 257). The exaggeration of the characters in Simon s plays aids the conflict, the humor, the evolution of themes, and makes personality traits abruptly obvious. These unique elements which he incorporates into his plays convey the theme and make you laugh in the process. Like many of his plays, in the end of Come Blow Your Horn and Last of the Red Hot Lovers conflict is resolved and they end on a good note. The purpose of a Neil Simon play and the reason most people see one of Simon s works is for the laughter that invariably comes with the experience (Patterson 2). Through Neil Simon s efforts he is and will remain one of America s most popular and prolific playwrights.