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Jewish Humor
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A Paper About Nothing:
An Outline and Analysis of the Jewish Humor in Seinfeld

In 1989, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David's show *Seinfeld* premiered. The show would run for nine seasons and become one of the most popular shows in America, ranking number one in its final season (classictvhits.com). Widely hailed as a show about nothing, the series featured four New Yorkers and their families and acquaintances in mostly everyday situations, deriving comedy from both the character traits of each person on the show as well as how each one reacted to the situation at hand. Along with being a hallmark of late 20th century American humor, *Seinfeld* is an excellent example of late 20th century Jewish humor due to its use of the traditional Jewish stock characters and employment of many of the historically thematic components of the genre.

It is impossible to dispute that *Seinfeld* was created by Jews. The co-creators, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David are both Jewish, as are three of the four main cast members: Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jerry Seinfeld, and Jason Alexander. In addition, much of the production crew was Jewish. A quick viewing of the end credits of an early episode contains names like Shapiro, Greenberg, Goldman, and Hirschfeld. The Jewish roots of the show are very apparent to those who understand the patterns and histories of the various stages of Jewish humor, but the show would not have been nearly as successful had the humor been presented in a less accessible manner.

Although there are very few practicing Jews portrayed on the show, many of the characters fit into a number of Jewish stock characters and stereotypes from the history of Jewish

humor. Starting back at Talmudic and Rabbinic humor, Jewish humor tends to feature the manipulation of words and logic for comedic purposes. *Seinfeld* builds on this concept and interweaves it with the stock character of the *schlemiel* in the persona of George Costanza, who often becomes the butt of his own joke when a plot to trick or manipulate someone, usually a woman, goes horribly awry. In “The Boyfriend,” George spins a web of lies in order to maintain unemployment benefits instead of going out and taking a low-paying, manual labor. He dupes Mrs. Sokol into believing that he interviewed for a fake latex company called ‘Vandelay Industries’ and when Kramer fails to play along in answering Jerry’s phone, George must return to the unemployment office, and instead of confessing to his lies, he doubles-down and ends up taking Mrs. Sokol’s plain-looking daughter on a date. When the evening turns sour and Carrie Sokol threatens to rat George out to her mother, George keeps going with his attempted manipulation and promises to bring Met’s player Keith Hernandez to meet Mrs. Sokol in exchange for an extension on his benefits. It is implied that George fails to do this and therefore loses his benefits (David 3.17-18). Repeated incidents where George becomes the butt of his own joke firmly establish his role as the *schlemiel* within the *Seinfeld* universe.

Drawing on the Dundes article about the Jewish American Princess and Jewish American Mother in American humor, it is evident that both character archetypes are present in the show. Beginning with the JAP, which Dundes identifies as a self-obsessed, materially-oriented, interested in ‘marrying up,’ sexually frigid, young Jewish woman, it is easy to identify Julia Louis-Dreyfus’ character, Elaine, with nearly all of these qualities (Dundes). Although Elaine is not Jewish, Louis-Dreyfus herself is, much of the writing staff was, and Elaine does demonstrate the other qualities inherent in the JAP stereotype. The attribute of self-obsession occurs thematically throughout the show, culminating in the finale when numerous secondary characters

are brought into the Latham, Massachusetts courtroom to testify about the selfishness of the four main characters.

Elaine demonstrates her love for material possessions in “The Shoes,” when Jerry’s girlfriend Gail inquires as to where Elaine purchased her shoes, to which Elaine responds “Botticelli’s.” After their lunch, Elaine makes it very clear that Gail’s response of “Oooh, look at you with your Botticelli’s” offended her greatly and Elaine nearly launches into a tirade defending her own right to wear whatever designer shoes she chooses. She later reluctantly exchanges the shoes with Gail for a personal favor (David 4.16). Elaine’s ardent defense of her shoes shows her obsession with material possessions, particularly because she felt that her own issue outweighed Jerry’s and George’s problem of NBC turning down their pilot. Elaine’s desire to date men of higher status and wealth also fits with her obsession with material possessions. Although she did date such figures as “Crazy Joe” Devola and Alan the Bad Breaker-Upper, many of Elaine’s romantic interests were considerably more successful than she, including Tim Whatley the dentist, her psychiatrist, Lloyd Brawn (who worked for the mayor), and Bob “The Maestro” Cobb (a conductor with a house in Tuscany, Italy). In terms of fascination with acquiring material wealth, Elaine definitely meets the requirements for being a JAP.

Dundes’ final quality of being a JAP is sexual frigidity; and although her character can be described as a serial dater, Elaine does exhibit a few moments of unwillingness to participate sexually. The first of two notable examples occurs in “The Mango,” in which a casual café conversation about George’s lack of sexual confidence leads Elaine to admit that she often fakes orgasms, and in actuality, faked them most of the time she was with Jerry. Through the episode, George’s plotline revolves around regaining his confidence in bed, but Jerry and Elaine quarrel back and forth over whether Elaine faked her orgasms due to Jerry’s unskillfulness or her own

frigidity (David 5.01).

The second occurrence, which provides far more comedic material and is far less uncomfortable for the viewer is in “The Sponge.” This episode centers around Elaine’s preferred choice of contraceptive, the Today Sponge, which, in the show, had just been taken off of the market. Elaine purchases a case of sixty sponges, which may very well have been the last ones left in the city. Later, when she is presented with the opportunity to have sex with her boyfriend, Elaine must decide whether the man is good enough to use one of her sponges on, coining the term ‘spongeworthy,’ which recurs in the final seasons. Ultimately, after an interrogation which more closely resembled a job interview than a courtship, Elaine decides that her boyfriend is, in fact, spongeworthy (David 7.9). While neither of these cases shows the true sexual frigidity outlined in some of the jokes included in the Dundes piece, both show some level of sexual reluctance on the part of Elaine. As with all of the JAP character traits, Elaine demonstrates both subtle and obvious portrayals of these qualities without devolving into a two-dimensional caricature the way that the Jewish American Mother is portrayed, particularly in the case of Estelle Costanza.

Dundes describes the Jewish American Mother (JAM) as overbearing, food-pushing, overly concerned with her son’s wellbeing, and desperate for his attention, often employing guilt as a mode of accomplishing her goals (Dundes 457). While Estelle Costanza is not expressly identified as ethnically or religiously Jewish, she does demonstrate many of the characteristics of the JAM, and technically it is possible that Estelle is Jewish and simply married a man with an Italian surname.

While Estelle Costanza certainly doesn’t fit the stereotype of the JAM as well as fellow

sitcom mother Sylvia Fine from *The Nanny*, she is certainly overbearing enough to be considered a Jewish American Mother. While quarrels over menial events make up a large portion of the conversations between Estelle and George, that does not mean that Estelle does not care for George's wellbeing. One of the greatest examples of how much Estelle and Frank Costanza care for their son occurs midway through the series when George moves back in with his parents following some bad luck in a hand modeling career. No matter how heated a conflict becomes, a true JAM would never throw her son out on the street. Estelle very much wants her son to be successful, and even employs guilt to try to push him in the right direction. The phrase she used since George's childhood, which reared its ugly head once again when George helped his father sell computers in "The Serenity Now" was "Why can't you be more like Lloyd Braun?" Lloyd was a childhood friend of George's whom Estelle clearly thought was smarter and more successful than her own son. In a scene in "The Contest," Estelle, confined to a hospital bed as a result of fainting after walking in on George "treating [his] body like it was an amusement park," launches into a sarcastic, guilt-inducing tirade at George, which included the sarcasm-laden line, "Too bad you can't do *that* for a living. You'd be very successful at it. You could sell out Madison Square Garden! Thousands of people could watch you! You could be a big star!" (David 4.11). The JAM's chief concern in life is the happiness and success of her son, and Estelle is no exception. Although her abrasive nature and tendency for sarcasm seems to alienate George and push him away, Estelle's intentions are mostly selfless and George's perception that she is constantly trying to tear him down is merely a result of his own neuroses.

Along with the stock characters, *Seinfeld* also features a number of the thematic components of Jewish humor. Novak and Waldocks, in the introduction to *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, state that Jewish humor traditionally plays on a balance of short-run pessimism

and long-run optimism, which is definitely present in *Seinfeld* (Novak and Waldocks xi). In the series, this balance is found in the characters of George and Kramer, the former being the unwavering pessimist and the latter the guileless optimist. Kramer is constantly motivated with a positive outlook on life, and the ironic joke is that he never succeeds. Whether it is building levels or installing a hot tub in his apartment or working at a job that he doesn't really have at Brandt-Leland, Kramer constantly hopes for success but never quite finds it. On the other side of the coin, George works immensely hard, and often succeeds, but never has a positive outlook. In "The Pilot," George and Jerry should be thrilled that the pilot episode for their show is being produced, but George becomes preoccupied with a white blemish on his lip. In reference to the spot, George tells Jerry, "Told you God would never let me be successful. I never should have written that pilot. Now the show will be a big hit, we'll make millions of dollars, and I'll be dead. Dead, Jerry. Because of this" (David 4.23). George's pessimism borders on the absurd. He makes these statements before even seeing a doctor, and because it never comes up in a future episode, it can be assumed that George did not have cancer. George's immediate leap from blemish to death demonstrates the pessimism found in Jewish humor.

Ted Cohen outlines the abundance of absurdity as another thematic aspect of Jewish humor, and that laughing at the absurdity can represent the understanding that the joke is entirely not comprehensible (Cohen 50). It can be hard to imagine *Seinfeld* as being absurd; many of the characters feel very real, the setting feels very real, and many of the situations feel very real, but taking a step back can reveal some deep absurdities in the show. The character of Kramer is one such aspect. While some of the actions he takes may not be considered absurd within the confines of each episode, but looking at the long-term pattern reveals a certain lunacy to the character's actions. The most apparent of these outlandish incidents occur both times Kramer

plays Doctor van Nostrand. In “The Nose Job,” Kramer poses as Martin van Nostrand, a professor, in order to retrieve his jacket from another man’s apartment. Kramer’s character is a swarthy, cigar-puffing, pretentious man, but the viewer can obviously tell that it is Kramer trying to act a part (David 3.09). In the second incident, a scene in “The Slicer” finds Kramer posing as Peter van Nostrand, a dermatologist who goes to where George works in order for George to acquire a picture of his boss without a shirt in order to fix a photograph which was wrongly airbrushed (David 9.07). The first of these cases seems crazy in analysis, but as presented in the episode, the plan to recapture the jacket seems normal for three reasons. The first is that we are told that the man who had the jacket was arrested for mail fraud, and the second is that the apartment building is shown as run down and dark and the landlord is a large, rude man, which gives the impression that the apartment may not be in the safest part of the town. In addition, Elaine, who is usually a relatively rational character, goes along with the plan without much questioning. Combined, these rationales allow a viewer to accept that there may actually be no better way for Kramer to retrieve his coat than posing as a member of the intellectual elite and duping a landlord.

The situation in “The Slicer” is quite absurd, even at face value, but might go unnoticed because of the absurdity of the entire episode, which begins with George discovering that a number of years prior, he had thrown his current boss’ boombox into the ocean. The episode features a series of escalating attempts by George to fix his original problem and clean up after the messes that his solutions cause. Finally he calls Kramer in to pose as a dermatologist. While this situation is classically absurd, we as viewers still buy it because the escalation seems so natural. By the time that someone watching the episode has time to sit back and ask, “Wait, how ridiculous is it that George was even in his boss’ photograph to begin with?” the episode is over.

We also may not see Kramer's actions as absurd because he did not conceive of them himself. Just as how in "The Nose Job" Elaine's acceptance makes Kramer's decisions seem more rational, the situation in "The Slicer" shifts the blame for Kramer's insanity to George, even though it is Kramer who is playing the character and using his basic knowledge from a medical encyclopedia to try to diagnose illnesses.

Cohen also discusses the thematic use of the *insider/outsider* where Jewish humor often presents Jews as a separate group from whichever majority lives around them, whether they be Babylonians, Arabs, or Russians (Cohen). This theme is largely absent from *Seinfeld* and American Jewish humor in general due to the assimilation of Jews in American society over the past seventy years, but one area where a distinction between Jews and non-Jews remains is in dating and marriage. In American Jewish humor, especially in Woody Allen's works, there is a tendency for Jewish men to seek out and marry non-Jewish women, which may reflect the real-life situation of increasing rates of intermarriage. *Seinfeld* pokes fun at this theme in "The Serenity Now" when Elaine is invited to the *bar mitzvah* of her former boss, Mr. Lippman. At the event, Adam Lippman kisses Elaine, and later George explains that Elaine has "shiksappeal," a portmanteau of 'shikse' and 'appeal' describing a non-Jewish woman who is extremely attractive to Jewish men, explaining that Jewish men are thrilled to meet a woman who isn't like their mothers. Elaine suddenly notices that every Jewish man she encounters is profoundly enthralled by her. Mr. Lippman and his son both renounce Judaism in an attempt to woo her, Jerry proposes to her, and when she requests help from the gossipy rabbi in her building, he hits on her instead of offering any sort of guidance (David 9.03). In this episode, the show calls attention to the trope of Jewish men seeking out non-Jewish women, which is the last remaining vestige of the idea that Jews are some sort of group which is separate from the rest of the

surrounding society. Through this exploration, the writers are calling attention to this idea of 'shiksappeal' and overall debunking it as nonsense, but George's line about Jewish men seeking women different from their mothers rings true and hints at a kernel of rationality behind a largely ridiculous concept.

While *Seinfeld* is a strong example of Jewish humor, it is important to note that it does not fit the definition of ethnic Jewish humor. Lois Leveen discusses that ethnic humor depends heavily on generalizations of an ethnic group and the jokes depend heavily on the ethnicity of both the teller and listener and the characters in the joke (Leveen 30-34). Comparing the modern Jewish humor in *Seinfeld* with the more traditional Yiddish humor of Sholom Aleichem, we can see where the two diverge. Both sets of works definitely use stereotypes of Jews and Jewish traditions, but Sholom Aleichem's humor is far more ethnic because of how heavily it relies on the personal identity of the person reading the story. Because he was a Jew writing stories for Jews about Jews in the Jewish language Yiddish, it is no surprise that understanding his work requires a knowledge of Jewish traditions and culture. His short story "The Tenth Man" is not 'laugh out loud' funny, but it does use humor to poke fun at those people who would try to run away from their tradition. However, most of the joke is totally lost on any reader who doesn't have a working knowledge of Jewish rituals, including *minyan*, saying the *Kaddish*, performing a *bris*, and the rules governing work on *Shabbat*, and not having this knowledge makes the story very confusing and not even a little bit funny. However, because *Seinfeld* features white, upper-middle class New Yorkers interacting with other white, upper-middle class New Yorkers, a case could be made that the show is a more white-oriented form of ethnic humor, especially considering the lack of minority characters throughout the show's run.

While *Seinfeld* was created by Jews and it included many of the traditionally Jewish stock

characters, the show is not really about Jews in the way that “The Tenth Man” is, and the humor is not at all inaccessible to those without a working knowledge of Judaism. The series could not have received such consistently high ratings catering only to the small sliver of the population that is Jewish. This is a result of the modern evolution in Jewish humor which has shifted the genre from tradition-oriented to stereotype-oriented form. *Seinfeld*, along with much of the other American Jewish humor we studied, fits into this new type. Even the few episodes which include overtly Jewish themes can be almost fully understood by a viewer with no prior contact with Judaism. In “The Bris,” Elaine is in charge of choosing a *mohel* for her godson’s bris, and the shaky-handed man she chooses accidentally circumcises Jerry’s finger (David 5.05). Because Elaine is not Jewish, all of the ritual aspects of the circumcision have to be explained to her, and, by extension, the audience. A Jew, or anyone else, already familiar with what a *bris* is may feel more comfortable with or derive more humor from the jokes in the episode, but the content is presented in such a way as to prevent non-Jews from not understanding the plot and why the narrative is comical.

Historically, Jewish humor reflected the plight of the Jews who created it. The *Book of Esther* reflects the anxiety from the constant threat of the annihilation of the Israelites by the surrounding peoples, Yiddish humor consisted of stories about the poverty and repression under Russian rule, and Israeli humor makes light of the warlike nature of the Middle East and perpetual bombings of Israel. At first glance, *Seinfeld* does not seem to reflect any Jewish anxieties, rather it features regular people in mundane situations. However, if *Seinfeld* is Jewish humor, then the creators must be using it to reflect some sort of struggle for the Jewish people, meaning that the Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld believe that the situations which plague American Jews in New York City are not persecution or oppression, but are the problems of

regular people, like not being able to find one's car in the parking garage or having an uncomfortable conversation with the father of one's friend. Ultimately, *Seinfeld* reflects the new generation of Jews whose Judaism is no longer a primary portion of their identity.

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