

A NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF NETFLIX STAND-UP COMEDY SPECIALS

Faiqa Pervez¹, Neelum Almas*², Uzma Safdar³

¹MS Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, Foundation University Islamabad, Pakistan; ²Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan; ³Visiting Faculty, English Department, Fast National University, Lahore

¹ faiqapz@gmail.com; ² neelum.almas@comsats.edu.pk; ³ uzmasafdarazeem@gmail.com

² <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9684-4157>

Corresponding Author: *

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the elements of narratology that are found in the routines of stand-up comedians and the ways in which stand-up comedians use various narrative structures to shape their narratives. This paper analyzes the routines of two highest ranked stand-up comedians by Uproxx on Netflix. Stand-up comedians employ different tools of narratology to shape their stories. The present research will choose the model provided by Gerard Genette in his work *Narrative Discourse* as the primary framework, and will highlight what elements of narratives are present in their storytelling. In addition, the research will throw light upon the unique ways these comedians use the Narratological techniques to fashion their own stories and how they experiment with their narrative styles to create different patterns of storytelling. Although the model of following the conventional patterns of storytelling, i.e. linear model of storytelling, dominates, they also pattern their stories in a way that there is no conclusion at all, hence experimenting with the narrative structure.

Keywords: narratology, Netflix, stand-up comedy, Gerard Genette

INTRODUCTION

Humour has always been an integral part of human life. It plays a pivotal role in bringing people together and providing a mutual platform of connection between people of different backgrounds. Everyone loves to brighten up a dreary day, attract a mate, start a conversation, etc., and what other medium is better than sharing a joke for inciting a good laugh. Gruner states, "Without laughter everyday living becomes drab and lifeless; life would seem hardly human at all. Likewise, a sense of humor is generally considered a person's most admirable attribute" (1). It is a powerful medium that does not only hold the power to bring people together, it can communicate the bitterest of subjects to the masses in the most sweet, sugarcoated manner, for instance, racism, homosexuality, religious prejudice, terrorism, etc. in

the words of Bono. "Humour is probably the most significant characteristic of the human mind. Far more significant than reason. In fact, reason is actually a very cheap commodity" (De Bono 52). Humour is used by many artists in the literature and the entertainment industry alike whether in the written or the oral form. Among many genres of comedy, Stand-Up Comedy has gained enormous popularity in recent years. Standup Comedy can be described as a style of comedy where comic artists interact with the live audience through their performance also called routine. They adopt different techniques to incite laughter, connect with the audience, and say what they have to. They assume many roles when they are on stage; a comic, a mimic, an actor, a singer, etc. in doing so, these comedians

exhibit their own individual styles of interaction with the audience which calls for an interesting study of their unique comic styles. Commenting on the comic styles of one standup comic Tommy Cooper, Fisher says’ “Tommy only had to touch a magical prop and let out his throaty laugh to trigger in all of us the same comic mechanism. He came to absorb aspects of both performers to the extent that he embodied both Stan and Ollie in one human frame, the figurative equivalent of one of his absurd half-and-half portrayals” (*Tommy Cooper* 106).

In Encyclopedia of 20th century American Humour, Nilsen states that the roots of Stand-Up comedy date back to 15th century, starting with jesters, Shakespearean clowns and vaudeville entertainers (Nilsen 34). The early famous stand-up comics include Steve Martin, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, etc., and even to this day, the genre enjoys a massive fan following. Moreover, the social media platforms like HBO, YouTube and Netflix have given an immense boost to the popularity of stand-up comedians, and as there was no censorship applied to the subscription channels at that time, the subject matter of the routines was sexually explicit, very raw, and obscene language was frequently used which contributed towards its massive popularity. The breakthrough to Stand-Up Comedy was given with

the introduction of TV channels like HBO, followed by Bravo and Showtime, which ran an hour-long routine of these comedians and thus they gained immense popularity. Rappoport says that the freedom of expression on such channels made Stand-Up Comedy more popular among a wider audience (140). This popularity still grows by the day, and these comics use multifarious tools to add color to their acts which are no doubt an interesting blend of singing, acting, mimicking and storytelling.

Stand-up comics are essentially excellent storytellers; they adopt various tools of narrations to perfect their routines by telling stories in order to reach their desired purpose, be it to incite laughter only or to talk about more sensitive social issues. Thus, the study of the narrative styles of Stand-up comedians indeed provides us with a more in-depth analysis of the genre of Stand-Up Comedy. This research focuses on the narrative styles of the two highly ranked stand-up comics; Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chapelle, of 2019 on Netflix as mentioned by Uproxx. It will throw light on the elements of narratology found in their stories and how they make use of these tools to devise stories of their own. These comics might choose to follow the conventional pattern of storytelling, for instance, a linear model, or might go out and beyond it to shape their stories.

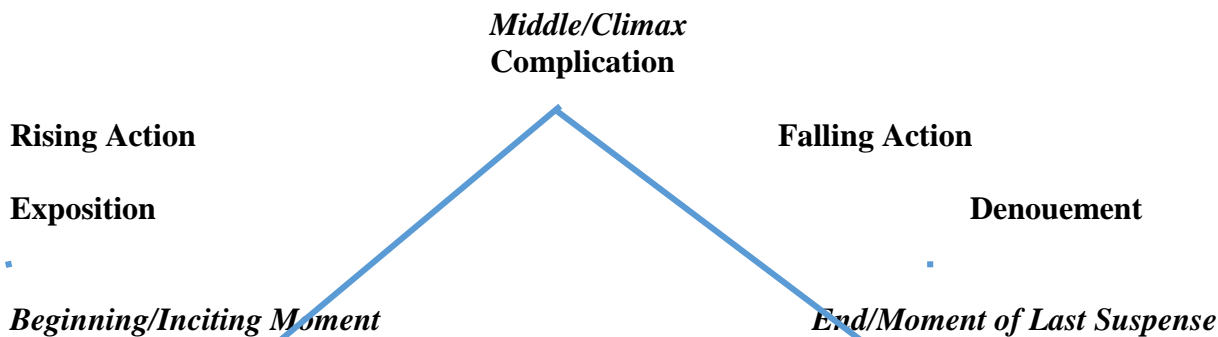


Fig.1. Madej, Krystina. “Traditional Narrative Structure” – not traditional so why the norm? (2008)

The above figure shows the linear and traditional way of storytelling

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches have been carried out on to study the genre of Stand-Up Comedy and it has been looked upon in terms of its subject matter, use of jokes or punchlines, the style of individual comics, etc., but a wide gap has been left in the research about these comics as marvelous story tellers, how they make use of different tools of narratology in their acts, and in turn how they make stories of their own. David Gillota in his research "Reckless Talk: Exploration and Contradiction in Dave Chappelle's Recent Stand-Up Comedy" talks about the return of Dave Chapelle and what change his subjects have undergone in the meanwhile. He took a break from the media in 2006 as it was feared that his content might incite "harmful stereotypes" amongst Black Americans (1). He was welcomed with open arms by the audience and the critics alike because he had always managed to impress them with his hilarious take on the most sensitive of subjects, like homosexuality. He was much criticized by many but Chapelle was of the view that his aim was not to offend anyone but he was only aiming to be funny. Gillota mentions that many critics even argued that Chapelle has failed to change with time, especially his reckless content on #MeToo, transgenders, etc. Chapelle on the other hand clearly believes that he does not "feel bad" when he tells jokes, but only when he hurts others through his jokes or fails to incite laughter (8). Gillota believes that Chapelle's routines mirror the realities that Chapelle himself has lived through and provide a thorough insight into the realities of life. They create polarization amongst masses, especially in his talk about critical issues like LGBT or homosexuality, but Gillota believes that the society is in much need of it.

In his work "Joke's on You!", Sameer Rao comments on the various kinds of hecklers and how they can be dealt with in the best possible manner by stand-up comedians. Moreover, he analyzes different routines

A. Voice

1. Person
 - a. homodiegetic
 - b. heterodiegetic
2. Time of Narration
 - a. subsequent
 - b. simultaneous
 - c. prior
 - d. interpolated

that took place in Boston and Philadelphia for their comic routines, also different TV shows, their origin, and how in fact they are suitably responded by the stand-up comedians. Rao believes that in order for the comic to deal with these hecklers, their origin and cultural backgrounds must be known. It is important for the comic to understand whether the remarks passed on by the heckler are funny or not, as the definition of what is funny or not varies from place to place. He remarks, "However, there are times when the audience is the perceived problem and performers cannot control what they do" (30). Sometimes the heckler is having fun and does not intend to be rude with the comic, then a comedian's harsh reply might make the heckler more aggressive. One of the most suitable ways to quieten him initially is to simply tell him to be quiet, politely. Sometimes the heckling goes out of control, especially if it has been planned ahead, and the comic then cannot do anything much about it. The host is then responsible to put a stop to this undesired interruption before the situation goes haywire (39).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study will adopt textual study of the stand-up acts of the two highest ranked comedians by Uproxx on Netflix in 2019. The narrative theory of Gerard Genette is employed as a framework within which the unique and individual style of narration will be analyzed, thus providing an in-depth analysis into the genre of Stand-up Comedy. For this purpose, the researcher will choose the framework devised by Gerard Genette in his work *Narrative Discourse* as the primary resource, which focuses on the principles of structuralism. Genette essentially emphasizes on the three levels of narratives; narration, discourse and story. In doing so, he establishes a link between these three by further categorizing them in relation to the Voice, Tense and Mood.

3. Narrative Level

- a. extradiegetic
- b. intradiegetic
- c. metadiegetic

B. Tense

1. Order

- a. anachronies
- b. achrony

2. Duration

- a. ellipsis
- b. summary
- c. scene
- d. stretch
- e. pause

3. Frequency

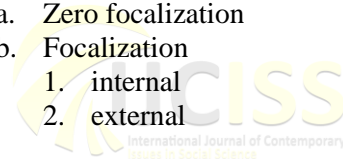
- a. singulative
- b. iterative
- c. repetitive

C. Mood

1. Distance

2. Focalization

- a. Zero focalization
- b. Focalization
 - 1. internal
 - 2. external



Stand-up comedy is a tool which stand-up comics use to act as social actors with the purpose to bring about change and to interact with the wider audience, and these comics as they act as social actors and use comedy as rhetoric, etc., are the topics that are researched upon. However, the present research aims to study how stand-up comedians make their way towards communicating with the audience by adopting different tools from the model provided by narratology. The primary source of reference is Gerard Genette's narrative model, and it will be employed to discuss how Stand-Up comedians create and structure their stories. Also, the works of Jason Rutter, David M. Jenkins, IbukenFilani and Colleen Manwell, etc., are the sources from which will be referred to for the study. The researcher will throw light upon what patterns of narrations the two chosen comedians follow to tell their stories to the audience, what elements and characteristics of narratology are present in their narrations, and also, what overall pattern and structure of stories emerges as a result.

The researchers have chosen the top-ranked two comedians from Netflix Originals in the year 2019, as listed in Uproxx ("The Best"). Their live on-stage performances will be studied in addition to their individual use of tools and elements presented in a narrative theory, and how they make use of these features to build the stories of their own. The research will provide references from the written transcripts along with video clips of the routines from Netflix. The table provided below shows the top two Stand-Up performances by the chosen comedians based on their Originals on Netflix, 2019, as ranked by Uproxx ("The Best").

Serial No.	Comedian	Title of the Original	Duration (Minutes)
1	Hannah Gadsby	Nanette	69
2	Dave Chapelle	The Age of Spin	67

DISCUSSION

Anne Misje opines that standup comedy is a “humorous monologue” presented before a live audience in a “spontaneous and conversational” way (87). The comic usually narrates humorous stories comprising jokes, anecdotes and monologues (Stankey). Standup comics deal with the art of storytelling that relies on narrative structure for telling stories. It means that a good comic is an artist who knows how to create a story and narration in order to get the desired result i.e. laughter from the audience. This paper analyzes the routines of the two selected comics to study the narrative pattern and elements that they make use of in their performances. Hannah Gadsby is the most prominent stand-up comedian. Her comedy routine named *Nanette* (2017) is shown on Netflix. It is a 69 minute long execution of strands of stories that Gadsby uses to communicate with the live audience as she sensitively discusses trauma, homosexuality and gender discrimination. Basically, she devises her storylines to talk about the harsh experiences of her life and how these have affected her and have changed her as a person, and in turn has made her stronger and forthcoming (Gadsby, “Scraps” 25). “And what I had done, with that comedy show about coming out, was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes” (Gadsby, “Scraps” 14).

Gadsby’s routine *Nanette* (2017) tells stories that vary in subjects and content. These are stories that are very similar to conventional storytelling, for instance the events told in a chronological order following a linear structure, and yet they are very different. Genette states, “... the poet delivers a speech as if he were someone else (as if he were such and such a character), if we are dealing with spoken words (this is what Plato properly calls imitation, or mimesis)” (*Narrative Discourse* 162). In a similar manner, her routine is mimetic in which during her narration of stories, she enacts and mimics the characters, copies their gestures and tone of voice and makes it seem quite dramatic which is a necessity in Stand-Up Comedy. Her stories are a collection of flashbacks or in Genette’s words, “analepsis” (48). It is a kind of “anachrony”, where she recounts the

happenings of her past life while talking about the incidents in detail. In Genette’s words, “Every anachrony constitutes, with respect to the narrative into which it is inserted-into which it is grafted-a narrative that is temporally second, subordinate to the first...” (Genette 48)

The anachrony of these incidents may vary as at times they follow the conventional linear structure of storytelling, i.e., the beginning, middle and the end and sometimes they do not. In *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Metz states, “Narrative is a ... doubly temporal sequence.... There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative. This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives”(18). Some of Gadsby’s stories apparently follow a linear structure, which is a beginning, a middle and an end in chronological order, but interestingly she provides the actual conclusion to that story somewhere towards the end of the routine. For example, she narrates a story where she was mistaken for a boy because of manly appearance, and received a rough treatment at the hands of the boyfriend of the girls who thought she was hitting on her. Later he realized she was a woman and laughed off the whole matter. It seems the story ended there where all is resolved and has a happy ending. Interestingly, Gadsby reveals the actual ending to the story in the later part of the act which quite befits the tone of the more serious part of the routine. She continues to crack jokes, keeps sealing off her half-told stories and others in punchlines, till she reaches the more somber part of the routine, which deals with her struggle for her identity, the traumas of life, the rejection, etc. In this part of her routine, she shares the actual conclusion to the story. She says, “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” (Gadsby, “Scraps” 23).

Moreover, she narrates a story about the painter Vincent Van Gogh and starts by saying how she learned about him that he was not medicated for his

ailment as a result of which he painted the famous sunflower. She remembers once a man remarked that if he would have been medicated, the masterpiece would have never come to existence in the first place. Gadsby's obvious reply to him was to correct him, as she is an art graduate, stating that Van Gogh was not just medicated but "He self-medicated a lot. He drank a lot" (13). Her stance is that we learn from that part of the story we focus on, and thus she feels that the stories she narrates, and especially her story, needs to

be told properly (16). Thus, she talks more seriously in the second half of the routine and that is where she takes her narrative back to the actual conclusion. She concludes by saying that the sunflowers in his paintings are bright yellow because Vincent Van Gogh had a brother who loved him dearly, and that is where our focus on the story should be, we need to put our preferences in the right place, rather than glorifying Gogh's sickness as a result of not taking medication for the masterpiece he had created.

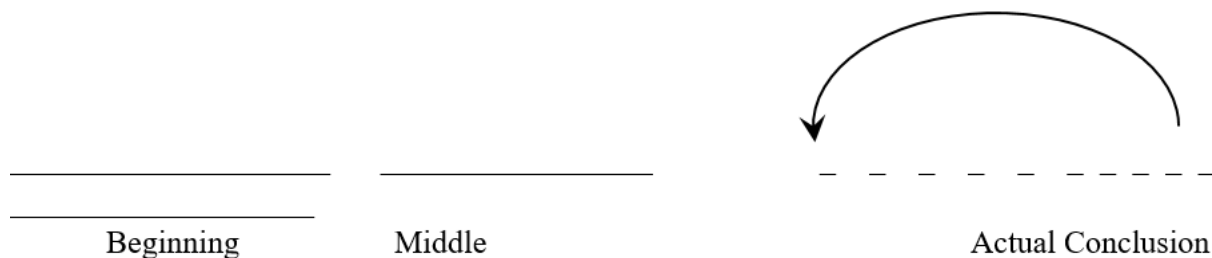


Fig. 2. No conclusion

In addition, another feature of her narratives is that she provides no conclusion to the stories at all. Gadsby clearly mentions that she tells jokes as she is basically a stand-up comic, and in order to create and retain humor in the routine, she needs to conceal the story in a joke, and skip the conclusion all together. In the beginning of her act, she tells how she named her show *Nanette*, which is because she had met a woman named Nanette in the café of her small home town Tasmania, Australia, and that is all the information she shares about naming the show after her (Gadsby, "Scraps" 16). One would anticipate telling something more about who she was and how the story would unfold, this is all the information she shares for naming her show, and wraps up the story which had just begun in a joke. Hardly any events follow this half-told story too. She shares feedback from someone about one of her shows, "I was very disappointed in your show this year, Hannah. I just don't think there was enough lesbian content." I'd been on stage the whole time. I didn't... even straighten up halfway through, you know?" (5). The mentioned incident is taken from another incident where an audience member complained to her about not providing ample content for homosexuals in her show, and like many other stories, this one too is sealed off in a joke.

The anachrony that Gadsby's stories follow portray a variety in patterns and techniques of narration as one of the stories starts from the middle. In the beginning of the routine, she mentions that in Tasmania, her hometown, homosexuality was looked upon as a crime (16). This narration clearly does not start from the beginning mentioning how her childhood was like growing up as a homosexual. This story evidently starts from the middle and does not follow a chronological order. And typically, Gadsby's other narrations have no end too. "I feel like, in a comedy show, there's no room for the best part of the story... which is the ending. You know, in order to finish on a laugh, you know, you have to end... with punchlines. Like, take my coming-out story, for example. The best part of that story is the fact that Mum and I have a wonderful relationship now" (14). Gadsby clearly mentions that conclusions are the best part of stories, but in a comedy show, there is no room for serious conclusions as these need to be sealed off in a punchline or a joke (14). It is because after all Stand-up Comedy is about humor and laughter. She provides conclusions to a few of her narrations, for instance, how her mother finally acknowledged her being a homosexual. But Gadsby believes that although it is a comedy show, she needs

to tell her story properly. She mentions that she made use of self-deprecating humor and missing out humor to create comedy, and was never easy for her. She states, "I didn't come out to my grandma last year because I'm still ashamed of who I am. Not intellectually. But, right there, I still have shame. You learn from the part of the story you focus on. I need to tell my story properly" (17). Likewise, she changes the anachrony of her stories where the beginning comes at the middle or the end of the story. She narrates her coming out story in the beginning of

the act, how she drenched in shame and was too afraid to tell her family about her inner feelings and how the small town of Tasmania felt about gays. Later in her act, she mentions the environment in which she was brought up which was amongst the rigid beliefs of the people of Tasmania, and as a homosexual, how hard it was. She states, "I sat soaking in shame... in the closet, for ten years. Because the closet can only stop you from being seen. It is not shame-proof" (16).

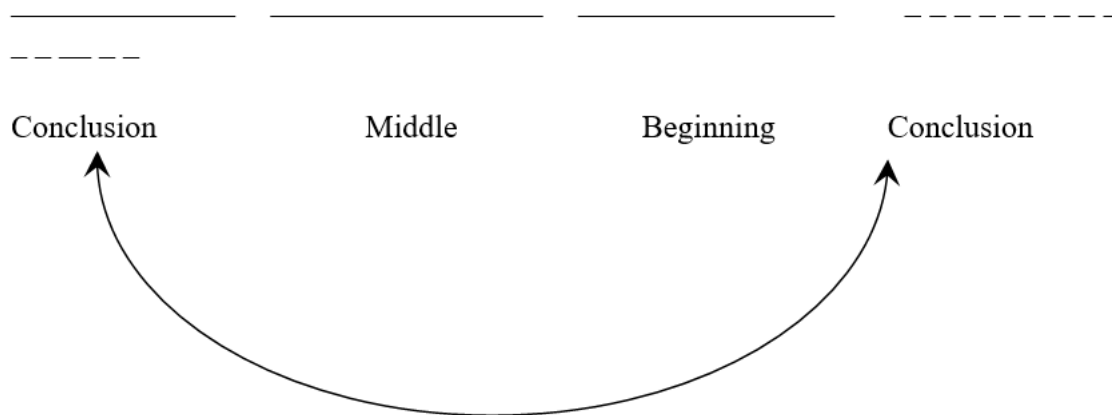


Fig. 3. Providing beginnings later.

The sixty-nine minutes long act is a roller coaster of conflicting beliefs which does not follow a linear chronological order but does have a beginning, middle and an end. We can say that Gadsby's story-telling in *Nanette* follows a general pattern of telling one long story of her life, with varying anachrony which is told in a sequence of multiple little but strong stories adding up and making a powerful whole.

Dave Chapelle's *The Age of Spin* (2017) is a humorous collection of personal experiences, and many interesting incidents involving the stories about OJ Simpson and Bill Cosby. Unlike Gadsby's

routine as one long story about her own life, Chapelle's routine is a movement from one story to another that provides frames to the complete routine. The story telling techniques of Chapelle in his routine depict the similar omission of conclusions from the storyline, which usually conclude not in an event but a punchline. For example, he narrates those four times when he met OJ Simpson, addressing him with the nickname, the "Juice" (Chapelle "Scraps" 8). "And you know, I've met OJ Simpson on four different occasions in my life. And before the end of the show, I will tell you about each of those occasions" (7).

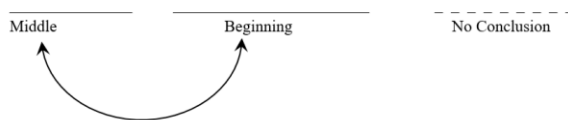


Fig. 4. No Conclusion Diagram

Each time Chapelle narrates the story about OJ Simpson, he skips the conclusion and wraps up the story with a punchline. For instance, he mentions the first time he met him and he was with his wife that he was accused of murdering later. As she greeted Chapelle, she whispered in his ear to take good care of himself, but in his mind his reply to her was, “*****, are you trying to get us both killed?” (8). Moreover, Chapelle in this show mentions the four incidents of meeting the Juice, all four without conclusions, leaving the audience in expectation of listening to what happened as he met O.J. Simpson. Also, the stories end but interestingly without a

conclusion and in a hilarious punchline. This too is a technique of Re-Incorporation as mentioned by Jason Rutter. While mentioning the four stand-up routines in his paper “Rhetoric in Stand-up Comedy”, he mentions the technique of “Re-Incorporation” which is often used by stand-up comics. “A re-incorporation, in this sense, is the reappearance of one element of a joke (usually not a punchline) in a stand-up performer’s routine. That is, a comedian will introduce a topic at some point during their performance and then drop it only to return to it later in the act” (4).

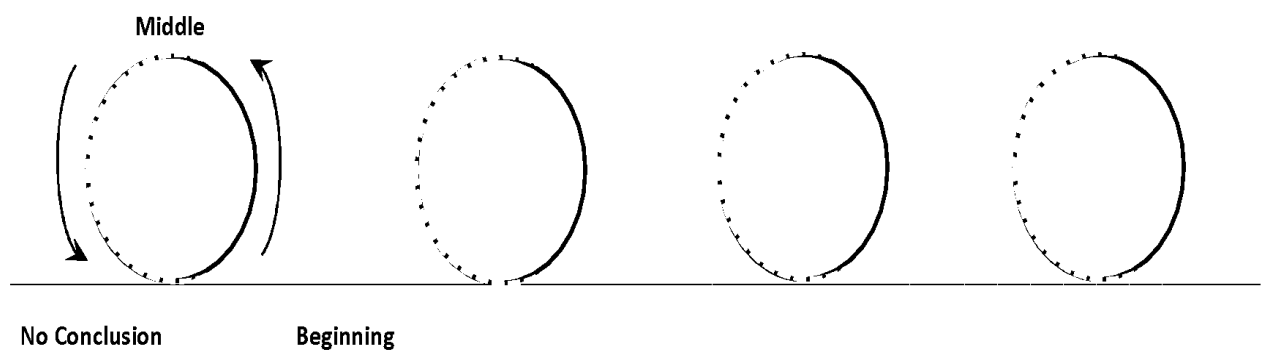


Fig. 5. The Half-a-Loop Pattern.

Chapelle’s routine is essentially mimetic in nature, as he dramatizes and mimics various characters, for example, gay friends of his wife who talk like cats (if the cats could talk that is) (Chapelle, “Scraps” 14), walking like a transgender boss on heels (16), or the cop who pulls him and his friend’s vehicle over for drunk driving (5). “Transgenders are gangsters. I used to do business with a transgender in Hollywood. Man, everybody would be scared of her in the boardroom. She’d walk in there, newly-minted woman, high heels, purse” (16).

In addition, the narration is homodiegetic, as Chapelle narrates personal incidents and happenings of his own life too. In his stories, he makes sounds that suffice for words, and he mimics them to convey a meaning, and thus the structure of the story is not in need of words. For example, in one such instance he tells of a time when the cop asks him to breathe through the breathalyzer, and he mimics the sound of blowing through it (6). In the written text, it might be represented by an ellipsis. In another place, his son

who is an ardent admirer of Kevin Hart, ends up in his dressing room after a hit show with Chapelle. He remembers an impressive dinner being served, and he mimics the sound of his son enjoying his food, “This guy had a fucking spread. It was Tuesday night. This m***** was having Sunday dinner. There were steaks, chops, corn with butter all over it. My son was eating all fast, embarrassing me. I was like, “Slow down, son.” He was like...” (24). Also, many of Chapelle’s stories follow a linear structure. He narrates simple stories narrated in a chronological order of events. One such story is where the cops test the two friends heading somewhere for drunk driving, and somehow, Chapelle is free to go, although he has smoked weed (7). Similarly, meeting Kevin Hart is a story which has a linear anachrony, how he attends his show, met him in person, and the meeting concluded with his son receiving a gift from him. His story about narrating the stories of superheroes to the potential producers too follows a linear plot (10). He also mentions, a time when he showed up drunk for a

routine in Detroit and was booed by the audience, and he concludes by saying that in order to avenge the audience of Detroit, he bought chewing gum worth \$25,000 and distributed it around Detroit after the show, so that its people could eat it and still remain hungry. He says, “You know what I did? I bought \$25,000 worth of bubble gum and drove around Detroit and handed it out to the homeless so they could chew it and still be hungry. I was very mad at Detroit that night” (Chappelle, “Scraps” 4). He

also recalls the time and the backlash that followed the news about Bill Cosby’s scandal, but he also mentions not to forget the number of times Cosby has stood up for Black Americans, which is quite a few times; “Let’s just remember that he has a valuable legacy that I can’t just throw away. I remember that he’s the first black man to ever win an Emmy in television. I also remember that he’s the first guy to make a cartoon with black characters where their lips and noses were drawn proportionately” (25).

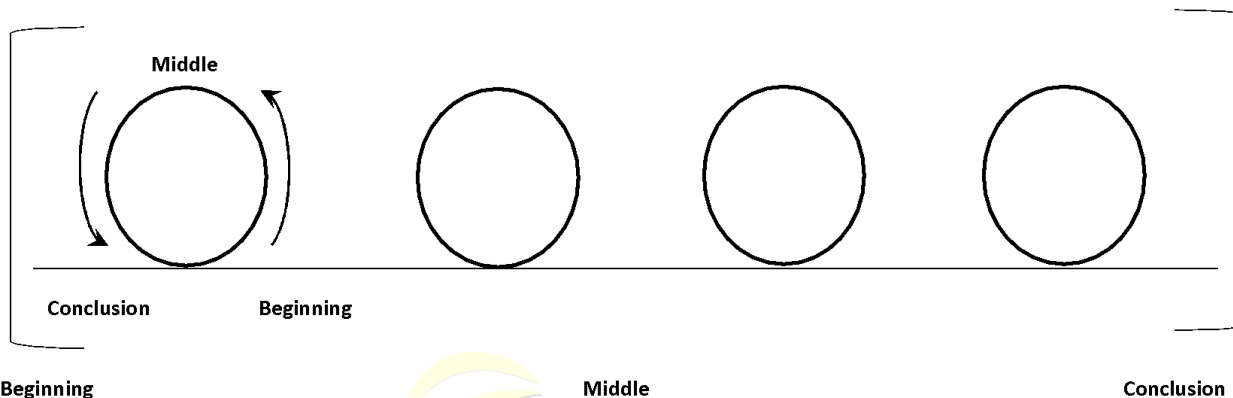


Fig. 6. The Loop Diagram

We can notice that the story telling techniques of Dave Chapelle are laced with stories that have a linear model of storytelling, and yet one can also see that just like Gadsby, he leaves out the conclusions for a few of his stories too. The routine is a mixture of stories following the anachrony of linear storytelling and sometimes stories with only the beginning and the middle, and the ending is provided through a punchline. Chapelle’s stories are essentially told for inciting laughter amongst audience, and even the most sensitive issues like transgenderism, rape and homicides are dealt with stories that are humorous in expression while being

serious in content. So, we can say that the overall pattern that emerges in Chapelle’s storytelling is short, complete, chronologically displayed storylines that might be without conclusions and that end in punch lines.

The overall pattern that emerges in the routines of both comedians is the one shown in the figures below. Both the routines, along with jokes and punchlines, consist of mostly stories that offer no conclusions and are a collection of several small stories and some follow a linear pattern and are mimetic in nature too.



Fig. 9 Linear Pattern of Storytelling

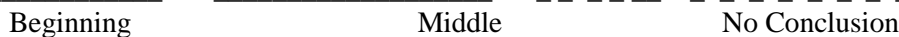


Fig. 10. Story line without conclusion

Thus, it is clear from the study of narrative structures used by the chosen stand-up comics that their stories are sometimes interlinked, sometimes not, and that they are especially etched to bring out laughter from the audience when and where required. These are artfully chosen and narratives that are patterned and executed to primarily entertain the live audience, and to create colorful storylines.

Stand-up Comedy shows an innovative use of the various tools of narration, for example, being mimetic, where the performer himself becomes the character and the audience eagerly connects with him as they witness his live performance. Also, the comedians make use of pauses and stretches and in the written text it is made use of with the help of ellipsis or words like gestures, mimics, sounds, etc. Their stories also follow a linear pattern, i.e., the events placed chronologically in an order. The routine is sometimes a combination of several short stories, where each story follows a chronology or follows an order which is not conventional. The analysis of the routines reveals that the stories of the comedians' choice follow different patterns. For example, Hannah Gadsby's stories are several anecdotes put together to make a larger story which makes up the routine itself, and Dave Chapelle makes use of mostly a linear pattern of stories, plus the technique of Re-Incorporation to repeat the incidents of the story.

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The objective of the article was to study the individual acts of the chosen two comics in order to identify the elements of narration in their stories. We have also discussed and commented upon the ways in which these artists make use of the features of narrative structures in their stories. The article also highlights what overall pattern emerges in their narrations. It is evident that they make use of the conventional patterns of storytelling like the linear model, and create their own narrative structures as well. Moreover, these comics are essentially storytellers who are mimics, and thus the distance between the actual story and the story told and shown lessens the distance between the two, making them praiseworthy performers for the live audience. They do crack jokes, make use of hilarious facial expressions, and interact with the audience, but this research focuses on the narrative structure of their stories' text. The study of narrative structure is significant in that the storytelling was and always will be one of the most cherished and wanted medium of entertainment, and stand-up comedians reinstate the fact by using the tools of narratives and creating their own storylines. Mercury remarks: "The burgeoning contemporary heyday of stand-up indicates a hunger for connection, engagement and collective-restorative intimacy. Stand-up should be cherished in this regard, in its specificity and its potential" ("Humour as social dreaming" 27).

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