The American Tradition of Social Satire in *South Park* Television Series

Przemysław Komsa

University of Opole

Abstract: The main objective of this work is to show how the authors of the animated series *South Park* use controversial humor to satirize people, habits, ideologies and mindsets within the American society. Although *South Park* is made in a cartoon style, it is definitely intended only for adults. In order to fully appreciate the show and understand all ironic references and satirical jokes, the viewer has to possess the general knowledge of American customs and institutions, as well as be aware of the tradition of satire and American humor. This work identifies and discusses satirical values in the chosen episodes of the show that relate to controversies around community values, homosexuality and racism. It relates them to three classical types of satire: Menippean, Juvenalian and Horatian.

Keywords: South Park, satire, humor, controversies

1. Introduction

South Park is an animated TV comedy series co-created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone for Comedy Central network in the United States. The show debuted in 1997 and since its first episode it has been widely appreciated by viewers. It is famous for using controversial humor and satire to address selected social and political problems. Since satire is a genre where the main purpose is not only to bring enjoyment but also to make viewers reflect on social reality and think critically, this study focuses on how *South Park* achieves this effect.

The first part of this article is devoted to the genre of satire by providing the definitions from well-established authors and literary critics. It reveals the origins of the genre and of the word "satire" itself. Although the first traces

Przemysław Komsa "The American Tradition of Social Satire in *South Park* Television Series", *Polish Journal of English Studies* 4.1(2018): 57–77.

of works with satirical elements could be found in Ancient Egypt, it was ancient Greece and the Roman Empire where satire as we know it today was developed. Then, three main types of satire are described, namely, Menippean, Juvenalian and Horatian with their distinct characteristics The following section concerns the category of American satire and traces how American humor emerged by referring to such notable satirists as Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, Joseph Heller, Washington Irving or Kurt Vonnegut. Finally, the section discusses satire in modern television and refers to the phenomenon of how animated TV series became popular among the adult audience.

The next part is devoted to *South Park*. It starts with the brief history of the series and how it developed from paper-cut technique to fully digitalised animation technology. After that, the article introduces *South Park*'s main characters, leading ideas and important aspects of representation. The central part of the analysis concerns chosen motifs that have been controversially presented and satirized. These are the images of the American society, the approaches to homosexuality and the issue of racism. In the course of the analysis, a description of the addressed problem by the authors in a given episode is followed by reasons that have motivated the authors in satirizing particular situations, and the reception of the discussed episodes.

2. Satire as a Genre

Satire is often defined in dictionaries as a use of humor, parody and irony to criticize individual or collective behaviour or ideas, with an intention to mock people's negative characteristics and expose vices. Satire differs from comedy in the way that, apart from enjoying the humor, the reader or viewer has to reflect on the social mores to understand the punchline and its implications. Satire often exposes people who have negative character traits, senseless ideas and who act irrationally and might be targeted at the audience itself. As Jonatan Swift (1891, 11) observes in *The Battle of the Books and Other Short Pieces*: "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets with in the world, and that so very few are offended with it." Yet, the aim of well-written satire is not to evoke the feeling of scorn and indignation, but rather of amusement and reflectivity. A satirist does not intend to do harm to an individual or cause damage to the society through mockery, but rather to expose,

either directly or indirectly, the defects of human nature that do harm to the social order. What is more, satirists use these emotions as a tool to encourage people to correct their flaws and improve themselves. As William Flint Thrall (2011, 436) observes "[satire] blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved."

There are different value systems and customs that originate with various ethnic groups, social classes, religions, some of which involve abuses of power, gender inequalities and social habits or cultural practices, which divide and discriminate. Thus, if these negative phenomena exist in a society, it is likely that satirists will find and expose them. As Daniel Hooley (2007, 1) argues in *Roman Satire:* "Satire is simply one of the fundamental modes of human expression. […] it is always about us, our habits, our manners, our leaders, our enemies, our sins, our absurdities. Humankind will stop satirizing only when it stops existing." Satire is very old, since, as a literary genre, it flourished in the Roman Empire. Horace, Juvenal and Persius were the most famous Roman satirists along with such influential satirists as Ennius, Lucilius, Pacuvius Turnus, Varro, Seneca, Petronius, Martial, Gellius (Hooley 2007).

The Greeks did not have a word for satire, but works which resemble satire did appear in ancient Greece. The English term "satire" is derived from the Greek word "satura" which was used by the Roman scholar Quintilian for specific works he read from Greek authors. As Robert C. Elliott (2017) notices, "satura referred, in short, to a poetic form, established and fixed by Roman practice. […] After Quintilian's day, satura began to be used metaphorically to designate works that were satirical in tone but not in form." The best-known Greek satirist was Aristophanes who wrote mostly political and social critiques, many of which survived to this day. Another famous satirical writer was Menippus of Gadara who was called "a joker of serious things" (Highet 1962, 36).

The Menippean satire is a subgenre that connects reality and fantasy; it mixes prose with verse and criticizes mental attitudes rather than individuals. It "uses narrative to lambaste, parody, or make ironic fun of its satiric objective, usually through dialogue between fools, knaves, or ironists" (Quintero 2007, 7). The sense of humor here does not consist in aggressive mockery, but rather in a subtle and intelligent ridicule. For Frye (2000, 309), "the Menippean satire resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic." Other characteristics of this type of satire include a fragmented narrative, distinct types of parody, mythological burlesque, a critique of the mythology

derived from traditional culture, and a mixing of different styles and targets (Bakhtin 1984, 114–118).

Some influential examples of later works that can be classified as Menippean satire genre are François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1564), John Barclay's *Euphormionis Satyricon* (1605), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794), Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928), Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1843), Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1939), Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), Jacob M. Appel's *The Man Who Wouldn't Stand Up* (2012), Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013).

In the 2nd century AD, Roman poet Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, known in English as Juvenal, wrote a collection of sixteen poems in five books called *The Satires*. The term "Juvenalian satire" is derived from his name. His works were more bitter in tone and contained sharp criticisms of society and a savage ridicule of targeted groups or individuals. Juvenal focused on contemporary public persons and current events and his general aim was to present those people and situations to exaggerate their monstrous and incompetent manner. "A Juvenalian satirist is much more likely to see the targets of his satire as evil or actively harmful to society, and to attack them with serious intent to harm their reputation or power" (Podzemny 2013–2019). What is more, the usual methods of this kind of satire include scorn, derision, irony and sarcasm to mock social flaws, society's vicious tendencies and people with power, such as politicians. Without a doubt, Juvenalian satire is the most hostile. It is targeted at a particular individual, a group of people, or a public institution, and it directly points out what is wrong about them.

The most famous authors and works of this genre are: Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), George Byron's *Don Juan* (1824), Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of the Dog* (1925), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1952), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1953), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Julian Barnes' *England England* (1998), Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011), or Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015).

Similarly to Juvenalian satire, Horatian satire gained its name after a famous Roman poet. Horace lived in the 1st century BC and his full Latin name was Quintus Horatius Flaccus. He is considered to have been one of the greatest Roman lyric writers. He wrote many works and these which survived are two books of satires, a book of epodes, four books of odes, three books of letters or epistles, and a hymn. Rankin (2013–2019) notices that Horace's humor was directed "at the dominant philosophical beliefs of ancient Rome and Greece. This approach, amused at human foibles but was generally warm toward humanity itself." Horace's aim was largely to "entertain with wry humor, wit and light-hearted mockery, avoiding negativity by refusing to place blame on others for any perceived misgivings. As such then, the objective of Horatian satire is to be clever and knowing, whilst evoking humor by exposing the peculiarities of human behaviour" (Edley 2017). Horatian humor is subtler and it tries to ridicule human follies, absurdities and habits. It does not intend to change people in the manner of enticing them to self-improvement, to eliminate their weaknesses or become aware of their bad habits. This type of satire intends to make people feel entertained and enjoy the light-hearted mockery and mild, gentle sense of humor. As Arthur N. Applebee (2002, 584) states, "Horatian satire is playfully amusing and seeks to correct vice or foolishness with gentle laughter and understanding."

The most recognizable works written in Horatian style are: Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1717), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Other well-known works of this subgenre are Daniel Defoe's *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*, Clive Staples Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* (1961).

3. American Tradition of Satire

The United States has a long political tradition; hence, a variety of political themes in satire have tended to be enormously popular. Also, the notion of freedom of speech is deeply rooted in the American culture. As a result, Americans have grown to be fond of making fun of themselves, their leaders, as well as those who represent different ethnic groups, social classes, religions, customs, views and ideas. The satirical mode of American humor emerged in colonial

times. Benjamin Franklin was one of the first writers in America who was considered a satirist. Another notable author was Washington Irving (1783–1859) with his book *Rip Van Winkle* (1918), where he "uses humor to comment on the profound change that occurred when America transitioned from colony to sovereign nation" (Ezell 2016, 41).

A writer who has made a crucial contribution to the American satire is Mark Twain (1835-1910). With his most notable books, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), he gained enormous popularity and became one of the best known writers in United States – the father of American satire. Twain's books can be put into the category of Horatian style, as he uses satire to criticize social norms, religion, classes, hypocrisy, education and government. For instance, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* he uses innocence and youth of the main character Huck to criticise the contradictions and follies of the adult world. To honor Twain, since 1988 *The John F. Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts* has annually awared individuals for their contribution to American humor and comedy with the "Mark Twain Prize for American Humor."

Another author who produced influential satires is Joseph Heller (1923–1999) with his *Catch-22* (1961). The book is set during World War II and it depicts the pointless absurdities and insanity of war. Heller introduced the term "catch-22" into popular parlance to describe situations of a double bind from which an individual cannot escape unpunished because of the contrary or conflicting rules. Other notable writers include Kurt Vonnegut with his *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Breakfast for Champions* (1973), Sinclair Lewis with *Babbitt* (1922), and Christopher Buckley with *Thank You for Smoking* (1994).

The idea that animated TV series are only for children is no longer valid, as *The Simpsons, South Park, Family Guy, Rick and Morty* and many more productions have changed the general view on cartoons. The humor in those cartoon series is rather mature and it would be hard or even impossible to understand the jokes or puns without the specific knowledge of institutions, politics or social mores. The matter has been pointed out by Silas Kaine Ezell in his book *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television:* "After the 1960s saw the run of *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* end, many wondered whether or not animation targeted toward adults during primetime would ever again be viable. That mindset changed with the success of Fox's *The Simpsons* in 1989" (Ezell 2016, 1). Both *The Simpsons* and many other subsequent animated television series designed for older audiences proved that television programing based

on animation can very well sustain satire as a genre and allow scholars to start assessing the role of this technology "in the pantheon of American humor" (Ezell 2016, 1). It can certainly be claimed that television cartoons have by now been firmly established in the American satirical tradition.

4. *South Park* as the Continuator of the American Satirical Tradition

South Park has been constantly on air since 1997, i.e. for more than 20 years. One can say that it is a notable example of American satire with an original and complex application of controversy and humor. Ezell indicates that "the show has become a phenomenon because of its willingness to critique numerous religious, cultural, and political shibboleths via satire" (Ezell 2016, 10). Robert Arp and Kevin S. Decker in their book *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy* (2013, 1) opine that "*South Park* is one of the most important series on TV. Why? Because the show isn't afraid to lampoon the extremist fanatics that are associated with any social, ethical, economic, or religious position. This is extremely important and necessary in our diverse society of free and autonomous persons who hold a plurality of beliefs and values."

Almost the entire show of *South Park* has been developed by two men: Trey Parker and Matt Stone. They have voiced most of the characters and directed almost every episode. Trey Parker was born in 1969 in Conifer, Colorado, and since his childhood he has been interested in films and movies. Matt Stone was born in 1971 in Huston, Texas. They both studied at the University of Colorado at Boulder where Stone studied mathematics and Parker studied music theory, but never graduated. As Amber Petty reports, the two authors met in 1992 in a film class where they were so bored that they started doing silly voices to amuse each other. Though Stone was a mathematics major and Parker was a music major, they got along well and found out they had the same sense of humor. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Parker revealed: "We would always talk like these little kids and make each other laugh," and, as the author of the interview reports, "They messed around with these kid characters for a full year before they ever thought to commit anything to film" (Petty, n.d.). Besides *South Park,* the duo also produced, directed or co-directed black humored musical horror *Cannibal! The Musical* (1993), sex comedy *Orgazmo* (1997), adult animated musical black comedy *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999),

comedy *Team America: World Police* (2004) and the Tony Award-winning musical *The Book of Mormon* (2011).

Before creating *South Park,* Parker made a student cartoon presentation called *American History,* where he used construction paper-cut style for the first time. This technique was further adapted in *South Park* to offer an original visual layout. The animation won a student prize at the University of Colorado in 1992 (Petty, n.d.). Using the same paper-cut style Parker and Stone made a short video *Jesus vs Frosty.* The animation is about four boys who make a snowman, which they bring to life by putting a magic hat on the top of its head. The evil Frosty snowman kills two of the boys, but the other two are rescued by baby Jesus who kills Frosty. Some of the motifs used here were later transposed into *South Park*. Parker and Stone were approached by a Fox executive Brian Graden who wanted them to produce a pilot for the network, and who hired them "to produce a holiday video for his industry contacts based on an animated short the boys had produced […] about Frosty the Snowman. The result was the now legendary *The Spirit of Christmas*, a five-minute refined version of the Frosty story in which Jesus and Santa Claus duke it out over who has the bigger claim on the holiday while the kids cheer them on" (Weinstock 2008, 7). The video became an underground obsession that won them many high-profile fans. According to a 1997 *People Weekly* article, actor George Clooney dubbed 100 copies of the video, which catapulted Parker and Stone to stardom (Weinstock 2008, 7). Thanks to *The Spirit of Christmas* they were interviewed by different studios, but none of them wanted to have a show so vulgar except Comedy Central.

South Park aired in August 1997 and, according to Amber Petty, "the premiere got 889,000 viewers, and the show was pulling in over 5 million by the end of the season. It was an instant, insane hit. The show was on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Newsweek*" (Petty n.d.). A total of 297 episodes in 22 seasons aired since the show debuted and have received numerous awards and recognitions, such as Primetime Emmy Awards, Annie Awards, Online Film & Television Association Awards, Peabody Awards and it has been nominated for the Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program sixteen times (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004–2011, and 2013–2017).

The animation in the series plays a very important role. It emphasizes the satirical undertone and often helps the viewer recognize the role which the given character plays. Unsophisticated drawing is used deliberately: "Parker and Stone originally attempted to make their show look as primitive as possible,

thereby enhancing the possibility for satirical manipulation" (Cogan 2008, 27). The two-dimensional cut-out figures are devoid of visual complexity and highlight "the woodenness of the characters." As a result, viewers can quickly "identify the characters as specific types" and read the satirical message (Cogan 2008, 27).

South Park is a fictional town placed in Colorado in the neighbourhood of Rocky Mountains. The show mainly focuses on adventures of the four potty-mouthed boys from fourth grade: Eric Cartman, Kyle Broflovski, Stan Marsh and Kenny McCormick. It also focuses on the town people and the town itself, which represents middle America. The show gained its popularity due to its usage of satire with respect to, among others, current events, religion, sexuality, celebrities, disability, culture, or politics. The show is also appreciated for pointing out important social and individual matters, as almost every single episode tries to reflect on a different issue. Since the show is currently digitally animated, it allows the creators to alter episodes days before airing allowing them to comment immediately on very recent developments (Cogan 2008).

South Park is also appreciated for not being associated with either strong libertarian or conservative views. When Parker and Stone were asked about the term "South Park Republicans" (center-right political beliefs apparently formed under the influence of the show) they responded: "Yeah, we have seen that. […] And we're both just pretty middle-ground guys. We find just as many things to rip on on the left as we do on the right. People on the far left and the far right are the same exact person to us" (Cogan 2008, 219).

Townspeople in *South Park* are presented very specifically. In order to address a particular problem sometimes specific individuals, families, organizations and their behaviour and actions are shown in a very exaggerated manner. For example, the seventh episode of season 7 "Red Man's Greed" shows irresponsibility and greed of adults from almost the entire town. The townspeople are facing a big problem with Native Americans who are the owners of the nearby *Three feathers* casino. They want to buy out the town of South Park to tear it down and build a highway in its place. The aim is to attract more people to the casino. The townspeople try to stop the ruthless casino owners and raise the money themselves to buy out the town, but the mayor informs them that they have to raise $300,000 which they are not able to get. They only manage to raise $10,000. Afterwards, the kids come up with an idea to take the $10,000 to the casino and bet it, which in the case of winning would give them $350,000. They all agree it is a "long shot, but the only shot they have got

to save their town." They all go to the casino and bet all the money. Surprisingly, they win and all cheer when someone notices that if they win again, they will get more than $12 million. This person is Gerald Broflovski who previously lost $26,000 to gambling in the same casino. However, the people get excited about the idea that they would be able to buy the city and be extremely rich, so they all agree to "let it ride" and, predictably, they lose all the money. The children cannot believe in the silliness and greed of their parents and neighbours. Trey Parker and Matt Stone depict a society that is reckless and irresponsible. Although the kids tried their best to save the town, they simply could not overcome the adults' greed. This scene is a satire of people who cannot reason logically when the situation involves money and when people get a chance to get rich. Although the episode depicts Native Americans as greedy and ruthless and the society as silly and thoughtless, it received positive reviews with 7.7/10 on IMDb and 8.7/10 on TV.com.

Another example of striking social satire in *South Park* is the eleventh episode of season 6 "Child Abduction Is Not Funny" which presents American people as gullible and easy to manipulate. The episode starts with a boy named Tweek watching news on TV where every station provides information about children safety. Meanwhile, his parents call him for a talk. They want to warn him about the risk that comes from talking and dealing with strangers and tell him to never open his bedroom's door except to his parents. The same night Tweek's father makes the test knocking to his son's doors pretending to be a police officer. He tells him that there is an abductor in his room and he has to open the door, which the kid obviously does. Behind the door, a frightened Tweek sees his father pointing a gun at his face telling him he had failed the test. The next day Tweek is so appalled that he is not able to buy a movie ticket from a stranger, assist an older woman across the road, and eventually help a paralyzed man on a wheelchair get off the train tracks to save him from death. He is so brainwashed by his parents that he thinks that all of this could be a trick to abduct him.

Later in the episode there is a real attempt to abduct Tweek. When the information is spread among other parents, they all go mad. Together with the mayor of the town they come up with the idea to close the town off from unwanted strangers by building a huge wall around the city. They all agree that the best person to do this would be the only Chinese living in the neighbourhood – Tuong Lu Kim. Obviously, because the Chinese built the Great Wall of China, the townspeople think that every Chinese can do it. To make

children even more secure they force them to wear special outfits with satellite dishes as helmets called "Child Tracker" and they follow the children everywhere, even to school. The situation gets even worse as parents hear on the news that a study has shown that the most likely abductors of children are parents themselves. They instantly go mad and start to look at each other with suspicion and eventually come to a conclusion that the children are not safe around them, so they banish the kids outside the wall. In this episode authors depict the townspeople as unable to think rationally. It also satirizes the impact of TV and media on common people, who believe in all they see and hear, no matter how silly and ridiculous it is. When there is one exceptional case of a kidnapping attempt, parents decisively exaggerate and eventually jeopardize their children. Although the episode shows the society in a bad light, it received high scores on the internet movie databases with 8.6/10 on IMDb and 9.2/10 on TV.com.

The American society has also been satirized in the sixth episode of season 12 named "Over Logging" where the whole country freaked out because the Internet was gone. The episode starts in Marsh's house where the whole family are performing some internet activities. Only Sharon (Randy's wife and mother of Stan and Shelly) does not use internet and sends everyone to bed saying that there is enough Internet for today and they all can use it the next morning. Apparently when they wake up in the morning, the Internet is already gone, and the whole family are shocked. They all go to the Broflovskis' house only to find out that there is no Internet in their home either. Now, the two families are frightened, as they cannot check e-mails, browse the news, or chat online, so they decide to head to Starbucks where the free wireless internet connection should be available. As soon as they leave the house, they see all neighbours wandering on the street in panic looking for the Internet. The scene looks as if a disaster struck the town. On arriving at Starbucks they see a frightened crowd in front of the building. It turns out there is no connection in the entire town. People decide to break into the local TV shop to watch the news and they find out that the lack of Internet is nationwide.

After eight days the Marsh family head out to California to the Red Cross "Internet refugee camp" but there are so many people there that each family is allowed to use internet only for 40 seconds a day. People from the entire country abandon their cities, friends, families only to get to that refugee camp. It turns out that the solution to fix the Internet is to un-plug and plug back the power cord of the main router, which provides internet for the entire country.

This episode is a satire on people who are attached to the Internet so much that they cannot live without it. It shows a society unable to function properly when there is no connection. But at the end of the episode there comes a lesson for those who pointlessly overuse the Internet: when the online access is eventually back, Randy Marsh gives a speech in front of the city that "We cannot take the Internet for granted any longer. We as a country must stop over-logging on. We must use the Internet only when we need it […] To live with the Internet not for it." Those last words especially sum up the behaviour satirized in the episode namely overusing the Internet and living only for it. "Over Logging" received relatively good ratings. On the Internet movie database IMDb this episode scored 8.6/10, on TV.com it scored 8.9/10; however, Travis Fickett (2019a) from IGN gave it a score of 7/10 saying that it "attempts to be a satire on our over reliance on and addiction to the Internet. However, it only raises the topic without actually having much to say or jokes to tell. This isn't a bad episode, but it will be a forgettable one."

One of the factors which make *South Park* so appreciated by viewers is that it addresses many important issues that divide Americans, one of them being homosexuality and homophobia. In the fourth episode of season 1 "Big Gay Al Big Gay Boat Ride," Parker and Stone depict social awareness of homosexuality. They show the extent to which people are prejudiced and how stereotypes can be harmful. The episode starts with Stan, Cartman, Kyle and Kenny waiting at the bus stop where Stan's dog Sparky is about to fight with another dog, but instead he does something else. It turns out that Sparky is a homosexual and this is the reason for the school children to laugh at Stan. The confused boy tries to talk with his teacher Mr. Garrison (who is perceived as a homosexual and he turns out in later episodes to be homosexual indeed) asking him "what is homosexual?" and Mr. Garrison responds: "well, gay people are evil, evil right down to their cold black hearts which pump not blood but a thick vomitus oil which oozes through their rotten veins and clots in their pea-sized brains which becomes the cause of their Nazi-esque patterns of violence." This type of extreme opinion from a school teacher who also represents adults is based on stereotypes and can create prejudices. As Weinstock rightly notices, "the portrayal of Mr. Garrison implies that children do not form these bigoted views out of thin air, but that they are taught by adults. In this world created by adults, however, the children have little opportunity to create their own set of representations" (2008, 118). This exaggerated scene in a satirical way points out that some harmful stereotypes are indeed instilled in children by adults.

After hearing his teacher's opinion, Stan tries to turn his dog into a heterosexual by commanding him simply "don't be gay" and presenting him to a female poodle, but all his attempts fail. Kyle suggests that perhaps there is nothing bad in being gay, but Stan is still confused recalling his teacher's words that "homosexuals are evil" so he decides to call Jesus during his TV show "Jesus and Pals" and ask about homosexuality, but by the time the question is asked his call is cut off. The frustrated boy shouts that "he does not want a gay dog; he wants a butch dog" and when Sparky hears that he runs away to the woods where he finds Big Gay Al's Big Gay Animal Sanctuary. This place is run by Big Gay Al and is a shelter for all homosexual animals who were left and rejected by its owners. Stan worries about his dog and eventually gets to the sanctuary where he meets Big Gay Al. In order to resolve the boy's confusion, Al takes him for a boat ride where he shows Stan the history of homosexuality and that there is nothing wrong with being gay. Stan's attitude towards homosexuality is changed and he apologizes to Sparky, confirming that he wanted to change him only because he did not understand the situation. This episode aims to satirize the very attitude of rejecting someone only because we do not understand certain issues and the attitude of being blind because of our prejudices. With the example of Stan and his dog we can see that ignorance can be harmful and that instead of following stereotypes we should question them and learn things for ourselves.

The episode aired on September 3, 1997 and although homosexuality was portrayed in a relatively stereotypical way, it received positive reception. On the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) the episode received a score 7.7/10, 8.3/10 at TV.com and 8.5/10 at IGN.com. Also the show was appreciated by the LGBT community as Howard Rosenberg states in his article "Yes, I Know It's Sick, but Still…" that "Comedy Central says that it brought overwhelmingly positive responses from viewers who identified themselves as gay and that *South Park* generally has received much less criticism than anticipated, given the show's distinctive raunchiness" (Rosenberg 1997). Alan Johnson from *Chicago Tribune* put this episode in top 10 episodes that have made the most provocative comedies on TV (Johnson 2003). This particular episode was also nominated for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program (1998) and for the GLAAD Award for Outstanding TV – Individual Episode (1998).

On the other hand, in the fourteenth episode of season 6 "The Death Camp of Tolerance" Parker and Stone address the problem of tolerance, or, more specifically, the difference between tolerance and acceptance. With the example

of homosexuality, the authors also try to emphasize the fact that when people sometimes do not accept certain issues, it does not make them intolerant. This episode begins in the school office with Mr. Garrison (homosexual) and Principal Victoria who offers him a new position as a fourth-grade teacher. Previously, Mr. Garrison was put off of this job because some people were "uncomfortable with his sexual preferences." Mr. Garrison hesitantly asks Mrs. Victoria if this is for real and if "he is not going to get fired again for being gay tomorrow" to what the Principal responds: "with all the new laws we could never fire you for being gay, now you would be able to sue us for millions of dollars" and provides the case from Minnesota where a teacher was awarded $25 million in a discrimination suit. In that moment Mr. Garrison starts planning to get fired from school and then file a lawsuit.

The next day, he performs outrageous sex acts with his assistant Mr. Slave, who is also a homosexual, wearing a leather bondage outfit. The concerned children complain to their parents, but when they describe the teacher's inappropriate behaviour, the parents accuse the kids of being "discriminators" and send them to the Museum of Tolerance, where they are to be taught to be tolerant of any minority group. Helpless children turn to their school cook Chef who reports the scandalous behaviour of Mr. Garrison to Principal Victoria. This ends up with Chef being sent to the "tolerance seminar" as the principal points out he "demonstrated the lack of tolerance for Mr. Garrison's behaviour." The following day, when children refuse to attend classes, parents together with the school authorities decide to send them to an intensive and severe "seminar camp" which resembles a concentration camp. There, through hard labour, starvation and difficult tasks, they are taught to be tolerant of other people.

Meanwhile, Mr. Garrison talks with Mr. Slave saying that what the parents and the school authorities are doing is unbelievable. Instead of firing him, the parents feel so bad about their children being intolerant that they want to give Mr. Garrison the "courageous teacher" award. During the award ceremony Mr. Garrison wants to display to all the parents and school staff his outrageous behaviour in order to eventually get fired. He arrives at the ceremony dressed in a stereotypical gay manner riding Mr. Slave who is scantily dressed as a horse, and he keeps telling filthy jokes. Some people notice that this kind of behaviour is wrong but, so as not to be called intolerant, they all applaud and call the teacher "courageous." Seeing that, Mr Garrison breaks down and shouts: "don't you people get it? I'm trying to get fired here. Look, this kind of behaviour is not

acceptable from the teacher!" in response he hears "but the museum tells us to be tolerant." Mr. Garrison continues: "Tolerant but not stupid. Look, just because you have to tolerate something doesn't mean you have to approve of it. If you had to like it, it'd be called the museum of acceptance. Tolerate means you're just putting up with it… (but) it can still piss you off!" After this speech the parents realize that their children were not intolerant of homosexuality, but rather that they hated their teacher's behaviour.

This episode is a satire on how harmful excessive tolerance can be. In this case parents do not want to be perceived as intolerant, so when the children report to them that something is wrong with their homosexual teacher, they do not listen. At this time excessive tolerance of the parents exposes their children to inappropriate behaviour, which can be harmful and can lead to further prejudices. Robert Arp sums it up accurately in his book *You Know, I Learned Something Today* by saying: "In 'The Death Camp of Tolerance' Mr. Garrison breaks down at the end and screams at the townspeople for confusing a reasonable moral belief, that people should be tolerant to some extent of different ideas and lifestyles, with a less reasonable moral belief, that condemning or judging anyone for any behaviour, even blatantly degrading and harmful behaviour, is intolerant. The whole episode, including the title, is a satire of intolerance towards the perceived intolerance of others" (2007, 155).

Although very controversial and with many disturbing scenes the episode was received positively. On the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) this episode received a score of 8.8/10. The British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* in 2010 wrote about it: "The episode contains all the ingredients that have helped to transform *South Park* into the funniest, cleverest, most corrosive and watchable satire on television: not just outrageous tastelessness and (almost) fearless defiance of right-on liberal values, but also witty pastiche (in homage to Spielberg, the death camp scenes are shot in black and white), and a sense of surrealism and stylistic adventurousness bordering on the sublime" (Delingpole 2010). Bob Chipman describes this particular episode by saying: "[it] is considered one of the series' turning-point moments, where the most common target of Parker and Stone's ire was gradually switching from needling conservative bugbears to prodding the 'sacred cows' of their largely progressive-leaning showbiz contemporaries" (Chipman 2019). Meanwhile, Weinstock describes the episode as "perhaps the show's strongest assault on institutionally-compelled acceptance" (2008, 155).

There is no doubt that *South Park* gained its popularity also thanks to "saying what you are not supposed to say" which often means being politically incorrect. Yet, the creators of *South Park* do not always use the words "that shall not be spoken" to stir controversy, but also to prove some point and, with the example of such words, satirize certain behaviours. To illustrate, in the first episode of season 11 "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" the word "nigger" was used more than 40 times, but not in a hateful reference to Afro-Americans, but rather to show the example of how some words could have a bad impact on a given community or individuals.

The episode starts with Randy Marsh taking part in the TV show *Wheel of Fortune* where his task is to solve the puzzle and give the answer to the category "People who annoy you." He is given the letters "N_GGERS" and with confusion and in a reluctant way he answers "niggers." By uttering this word on national TV, he shocks his friends, family, thousands of viewers including Afro-Americans. The correct answers was (obviously) "naggers." The episode addresses many factors but only one – the power of words – will be discussed here. After the incident, Stan (Randy's son) talks with Token (the only African-American boy in school). Stan tries to defend his father explaining that his dad is not racist but only stupid and that saying the n-word is not a big deal. Token responds that it is actually a big deal and that a white person will never understand how it feels when this word is spoken, and if he thinks it is not a big deal he is ignorant. Meanwhile, Randy Marsh tries to rectify the situation and unite with African-American people by apologizing to Jesse Jackson, who is a self-appointed ambassador of the African-American community. The apology is accepted and it is published in all newspapers. Stan meets with Token once more to tell him that everything is alright now because his dad apologized to Jesse Jackson but Token repeats that Stan does not understand anything and yells: "Jesse Jackson is not emperor of black people!" This scene also shows a misconception of one person representing the entire group of people. Stan thinks that if Jesse Jackson accepts apologies, all is fine, but for Token it is obviously not.

As Olivia Cueva commented on this scene: "this satirical humor undermines the fact that many black people operating in all or majority white settings, like Token, are representatives of their entire race every day, not by personal choice, but because white people assign them these roles subconsciously" (2010, 5). Later in the episode, Randy Marsh tries to redeem himself and enters the comedy club where the Afro-American comedian recognizes him. He points

Randy out laughing at him with all the audience and calls him a "nigger guy," which becomes his nickname. The stigmatized man is now rejected by society. People point fingers at him in the streets; he is not welcomed in the stores and there is even an attempt to kill him, but Randy survives. Tired of discrimination, he joins an organization which influences the Congress to pass a law banning the phrase "nigger guy." At the end of the episode, Stan gets a revelation concluding that, as a white person, he will never understand how it feels to be called this specific word. Token finally agrees with him and from now on there is peace between the boys.

With this episode, Parker and Stone address the usage of racial slurs and its impact on the community. First, we see an argument between Stan and Token who is mad at Stan that he diminishes the offence of his father using the n-word. This scene satirizes the ignorance of people who do not take seriously the fact that some words can be very hurtful for given communities. Secondly, the authors use the situation of Randy Marsh, stigmatized as a "nigger guy," to present how minorities feel when being discriminated against. Randy Marsh is a white male, which gives a satirical undertone to the whole situation. "The creators try their best to emulate what it would feel like to endure the racial discrimination African Americans face every day in order for people to better understand what it is like to go through life as a minority individual, but understand that as a white person it is impossible to actually feel it themselves" (Bruder and Leflein 2019).

In spite of the fact that the n-word was used almost 40 times in the episode, the show received positive reviews. Travis Fickett from IGN gave the episode 10/10 stating "There's really no other way to explain how this show remains not only brilliantly funny, but more relevant and insightful than anything else on television" (Fickett 2019b). Furthermore, Kovon and Jill Flower, co-founders of the organization *Abolish the "N" Word* appreciated the episode for the educational part: "This show in its own comedic way, is helping to educate people about the power of this word and how it feels to have hate language directed at you" (Flower and Flower 2007). On the IMDb and TV.com the episode achieved the rates of 8.8/10 and 9.2/10 respectively.

5. Conclusion

South Park is an animated TV series, which probably would not be recommended to children, given its vulgar language, often shallow jokes, and dark humor that pushes the boundaries of good taste. However, in spite of these seemingly unpalatable features, *South Park* is strongly appreciated among the adult audience. Its successful reception is predicated on the fact that it is a great example of social satire where everyone would find something appealing. As Olivia Cueva notices, "as a provocative and anti-politically correct television series, *South Park* offers its viewers an alternative space to critically think about and discuss contemporary issues," adding that "Trey Parker and Matt Stone, satirically tackle the issues of modern-day culture by allowing the viewer to observe these quandaries through the eyes of the (not so) innocent boys" (2010, 2).

This study allows the reader to better understand what is being satirized in the chosen episodes of *South Park* and how it fits in with the American satirical tradition. The American society is presented in the show as greedy, thoughtless, easily to manipulate and often unreasonable, but this presentation has a redeeming aim. The episode "Red Man's Greed" shows how people can behave when they see the prospect of getting rich and how the worst human traits transpire when money is involved. Furthermore, the episode "Child Abduction Is Not Funny" presents people as thoughtless and easily influenced by sensationalist media. Parents blindly believe in the information related to child abduction threats magnified by the media, so instead of protecting their children, they jeopardize them by acting illogically and banishing the children out of town. The episode "Over Logging" shows the danger of overusing the Internet. The society that is cut off of the Internet can no longer function properly. Some people go completely mad abandoning all they have only to be able to use the Internet for a few seconds a day. *South Park* also addresses the problem of tolerance of homosexuality. In the episode "Big Gay Al Big Gay Boat Ride," through the image of a homosexual dog, the show presents how much harm and damage can be caused by prejudiced opinion-leaders unable to renounce gender stereotypes. However, the episode "The Death Camp of Tolerance" addresses the reverse problem of excessive tolerance, where people should be aware of the difference between tolerance and acceptance. "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" touches on the topic of discrimination. Although there is an excessive usage of racial slur in the episode, it is done only to present a harmful impact of the words on certain racial groups.

Considering that 297 episodes of *South Park* have already been produced, an enormous number of pressing social issues and pertinent matters have been tackled in each season. It gives this show an opportunity to fit into all three main categories of classical satirical genres. The whole concept of *South Park* as an animated series is an example of Mennipean satire – using simple animation and fantasy world to make it easier to imagine and understand complex and ambivalent issues. Without a doubt, the majority of the episodes can be put into the category of harsh and savage Juvenalian satire, but there are some parts in the episodes with subtle and gentle mockery, which fits into Horatian style category. The episode "Child Abduction Is Not Funny" can be definitely put into Juvenalian category, in which the society is mainly presented as thoughtless and gullible, but on the other hand the scene with the city wall and Mr. Kim ridicules the tendency for people to think stereotypically. Eventually, *South Park* makes fun of almost everyone and everything, regardless of race, belief, orientation or social class, exposing basic human flaws. This is because the authors believe in freedom of speech, which is rooted in the American tradition.

Works Cited

Applebee, Arthur N. 2002. *The Language of Literature. British Literature*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell.

Arp, Robert, ed. 2007. *South Park and Philosophy: You Know, I Learned Something Today*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Arp, Robert, and Kevin S. Decker, eds. 2013. *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!* The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series 83. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bruder, Hannah, and Jake Leflein. 2019. *Race and Intersectionality in South Park*. Accessed May 27, 2018. http://diversityandmedia.com/race-intersectionality-south-park/.

Chipman, Bob. 2017. 15 South Park Episodes That Haven't Aged Well. *Screenrant*. Accessed May 2, 2019. https://screenrant.com/south-park-old-episodes-aged-badly/.

Cogan, Brian. 2008. *Mosh the Polls: Youth Voters, Popular Culture, and Democratic Engagement*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books.

Cueva, Olivia. 2010. South Park and White Privilege: An Examination of Racialized Messages and the Construction of the White Role in a Discussion About Racism. Accessed May 20. http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/pub/departments/bcurj/pdf/CuevaOliviaART.pdfz.

Delingpole, James. 2010, May 3. South Park: The Most Dangerous Show on Television? *The Telegraph.* Accessed May 2, 2019. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/7671750/South-Park-The-most-dangerous-show-on-television.html.

Edley, Luke. 2017. 'Understanding Different Types of Satire'. *An Introduction to the Three Most Common Types of Satire: Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean.* Accessed February 23, 2019. https://thanetwriters.com/essay/technicalities/understanding-different-types-of-satire/.

Elliott, Robert C. 2017. Satire. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed June 26, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/art/satire.

Ezell, Silas Kaine. 2016. *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television. Animation and The American Joke*. London: Routlege.

Fickett, Travis. 2019a. 'SOUTH PARK: "OVER LOGGING" REVIEW'. Accessed May 5, 2019. https://www.ign.com/articles/2008/04/17/south-park-over-logging-review.

Fickett, Travis. 2019b. 'SOUTH PARK: "WITH APOLOGIES TO JESSE JACKSON" REVIEW'. Accessed May 21, 2019. https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/03/09/south-park-with-apologies-to-jesse-jackson-review.

Flower, Kovon, and Jill Flower. 2007. Transcript of 'Paula Zahn Now' from March 8, 2017. Accessed May 20, 2019. http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0703/08/pzn.01.html.

Frye, Northrop. 2000. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Highet, Gilbert. 1962. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton University Press.

Hooley, Daniel. 2007. *Roman Satire*. Malden MA: Blackwell.

Johnson, Allan. 2003. Whoever Thought This Show Would Last 100 Episodes? *The Chicago Tribune*. Accessed May 3, 2019.

https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:0ycvwP2ETGQJ:https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-04-09-0304090091-story.html+&cd=1&hl=pl&ct=clnk&gl=pl&lr=lang_en|lang_pl.

Petty, Amber. n.d. The True Story behind the Creation of South Park. Accessed April 1, 2019. https://www.looper.com/51475/south-park-made-tv/.

Podzemny, Todd. 2003–2019. "What Is Juvenalian Satire?" *Wisegeek*. Accessed January 12, 2019. https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-juvenalian-satire.htm#comments.

Quintero, Ruben, ed. 2007. *A Companion to Satire*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Rankin, Alan. 2003–2019. "What Is Horatian Satire?" *Wisegeek*. Accessed February 23, 2019. https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-horatian-satire.htm#comments.

Rosenberg, Howard. 1997, Oct 15. "Yes, I Know It's Sick, but Still…" *Los Angeles Times.* Accessed May 3, 2019. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-oct-15-ca-42773-story.html+&cd=1&hl=pl&ct=clnk&gl=pl&lr=lang_en%7Clang_pl.

Swift, Jonathan. 1891. *The Battle of the Books and Other Short Pieces.* Accessed November 3, 2018. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_the_Books_and_Other_Short_Pieces/ The_Battle_of_the_Books

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, ed. 2008. *Taking South Park Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.