

THE LAST LAUGH:

HUMOR AND DEATH IN THE ESSAYS OF DAVID SEDARIS

by

Megan Ganz

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Megan Ann Ganz

To my Mother:

For giving me her love
and the safety of a home
so I could laugh at the world.

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ABSTRACT

David Sedaris, the bestselling essayist and popular humorist, has a strange sense of humor. He has a predilection for the macabre, indulges his morbid fascinations, and is preoccupied with thoughts of mental disease, deviant behavior, and physical deformity. Strangest of all, he jokes about *death*—and he does it well. Two of the essays from his bestselling books, *Naked* and *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, are devoted entirely to the subject. These essays, entitled “Ashes” and “The Youth in Asia,” are excellent examples of Sedaris’ skill at blending comedy and tragedy to create essays that resonate with his readers because Sedaris’ humor, like life, is undercut with a tinge of sorrow.

Sedaris employs three humorous techniques to create the unification of comedy and tragedy in his essays. These techniques are found in various forms throughout many of Sedaris’ essays, but function uniquely in his two essays on death. The techniques permit moments of tragedy while providing frequent diversions that prevent the humor of the essays from becoming overcome and obscured by their solemn subject matter.

The first of Sedaris’ humorous techniques, displacement, functions by coaxing the reader into a particular mindset and then delivering an unexpected punchline. In the two essays on death, Sedaris capitalizes on the wealth of expectations and anxieties about mortality already present in his readers. By disappointing their preconceived expectations, Sedaris initiates a conversation about the apprehensions, fears, and customs surrounding death.

Sedaris also utilizes the technique of *representation by the small*, wherein a large, abstract idea is portrayed by a small and inconsequential, often tangible item—often surprising the reader with the similarities of the unlikely pairing. The technique functions differently in the two essays on death. In “Ashes,” Sedaris uses *representation by the small* to mimic the literal process of death—the transformation of the human body into dust, while “The Youth in Asia” enacts the technique by portraying death in terms of regeneration, thereby removing the finality of death and reducing a tragic scene to a farce. Through this technique, Sedaris exposes the euphemisms we use when discussing death.

Finally, Sedaris constructs the characterization of his parents through the technique of *representation by the small* by exaggerating their bizarre, minor traits and allowing these idiosyncrasies to stand for the whole of their identities. After the parents are reduced to caricatures of themselves, Sedaris portrays their deaths in a manner befitting their established characters—making the occurrences of their deaths simply another expression of each parent’s personality instead of a tragic signal of the end of their personalities. The mother’s personality, in particular, serves as a model for how the reader can best approach Sedaris’ text: reserving a reasonable distance from the heightened emotional events in order to resist over-sentimentalizing the dying and crafting inauthentic, romanticized memories of the dead.

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SHORT TITLES

Believer: Spitznagel, Eric. "David Sedaris." *The Believer* Oct. 2005: 49-56.

DYF: Sedaris, David. *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004.

"Humor": White, E. B. "Some Remarks on Humor." *The Norton Reader*. 6th edition. Ed. Arthur M. Eastman. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984. 1047-1048.

Joke: Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. Joyce Crick. London: Penguin Books, 2002.

"Laughter": Bergson, Henri. "Laughter." *Comedy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956. 58-190.

MTP: Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

N: Sedaris, David. *Naked*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997.

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Suppose a man makes a name as a humorist [...] That may not be the expression of the real genius of the man at all. He may have a genuine message for the world. Then let him say it and say it again and then repeat it and let him soak it in sincerity. People will warn him at first that he's getting a bit out of his line, but they'll listen to him at last, if he's really got a message [...] I tell you, life is a serious thing, and, try as a man may, he can't make a joke of it. People forget that no man is all humor, just as they fail to remember that every man is a humorist. [...] Why should we forget that the humorist has his solemn moments? Why should we expect nothing but humor of the humorist?

—Mark Twain (1905)

INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview for *The Believer* magazine, David Sedaris spoke about his latest book tour—the experience of meeting his loyal readers and listening to the strange and fascinating stories they provide him without invitation. Perfect strangers feel compelled to share stories with Sedaris about monkeys and public defecation, and he finds their stories so fascinating he records many of them in his journals. In the interview, Sedaris talked at length about his house in Normandy, where he has adopted several large spiders as pets, feeding them flies and giving them names like Curtis and Paula. It is the quintessential interview of a quirky humorist—amusingly eccentric and anecdotal—until, with hardly a segue, the conversation shifts to Sedaris' fascination with textbooks of forensic pathology:

I have a lot of books about dead people. That's kinda my forté.
[...] Probably my best find is a book called *Spitz and Fisher's Medicolegal Investigation of Death*. It's the bible of forensic pathology. It lists every possible way you could die and then has a picture of it. Here's what you would look like if your throat was slit and you were thrown into the ocean for two days, or four days, or a week, and so on. Here's what you would look like if you were run over by a truck. Here's what you would look like if you were run over by a tractor. It's pretty good. (*Believer* 54-55)

Surprisingly, the interviewer is unfazed by the grotesque descriptions. On the contrary, he encourages Sedaris into darker territory. The interviewer asks Sedaris how he would like to die.

Sedaris replies decisively, “I’d like to have a massive heart attack and die in the waiting room of a hospital” (56). He would prefer to die in public, he claims, because people who die at home alone are often eaten by their pets (“They start with their nose or their cheeks” [56].) or slowly decompose into a puddle of bloated human flesh—which would leave a horribly stubborn carpet stain. “I don’t want my death to be an inconvenience to anybody,” he says (56).

This shift in conversation is unexpected, to say the least. Why would the interviewer allow Sedaris to indulge in this morbid train of thought? Why not change the subject and ask him about his wacky siblings or get his opinion on the new reality TV craze? Perhaps the interviewer knows, like so many of Sedaris’ readers, that although his stories about monkeys and spiders may be entertaining, it is in this darker arena that Sedaris *excels*. Though the back covers of his books read “wildly entertaining,” “irresistibly funny,” and “hilarious,” the inner pages brim with stories of deviant behavior, mental illness, physical deformity and death. Taking guitar lessons from a midget. His summer job at the insane asylum. Christmas Eve with his mother, his siblings, and a visiting whore. Drowning a mouse in a pail. Obsessive compulsive disorder. Euthanasia. Drug addiction. Cancer.¹ These are the fascinations of the Humorist of the Year.²

But somehow his essays manage not to cross the line and become perverted, morbid or even inconsistent in tone. Nor do they stay safely on the side of “just funny” with no substance. Sedaris’ humor has bite. It is a humor that seems to arise not from the funny bone, but from

¹ These topics are found in the following essays, respectively: “Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities” from *Me Talk Pretty*; “Dix Hill” and “Dinah, the Christmas Whore” from *Naked*; “Nuit of the Living Dead” from *Dress Your Family*; “A Plague of Tics” from *Naked*; “The Youth in Asia” and “Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist” from *Me Talk Pretty*; “Ashes” from *Naked*.

² I believe Sedaris’ interest in the macabre and bizarre parts of life can be attributed both to his idiosyncratic personality (“Anything that a twelve-year-old boy would enjoy, I’d probably enjoy [*Believer* 55].”) and his awareness of the effectiveness of morbid humor. In my second letter to Sedaris, I asked him if he consciously chose to focus on more somber topics, to which he replied, “As an ‘essayist,’ I live in fear of becoming cuddly, and writing light hearted pieces about straightening up my sock drawer. Then, too, I think that death and deviant behavior are a lot funnier than most of the subjects generally considered funny” (David Sedaris, Letter to Megan Ganz, 26 Feb. 2006. See Figure 6.).

somewhere deeper, darker, more dangerous. In his most profound and effective moments, Sedaris has us laughing at our fears, our anxieties, our weaknesses, our sins, our humanity, our mortality, ourselves. He has us laughing at the unspeakable shadows that haunt us. Laughing at what “you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh.”³ It is a probing humor, inwardly directed, that is funny and unsettling to equal degrees—unsettling because it “plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth” and funny for the very same reason (“Humor” 1048). It is a humor that resonates with truth because it, like much of life, is undercut with a tinge of sorrow.⁴

Sedaris’ penchant for the disturbing, the macabre, and the tragic may not be as antithetical to his profession as it may seem.⁵ Casting tragedy and comedy as opposing, mutually-exclusive genres is an over-simplification at best, and a complete fallacy at worst. To say that a comedy can never have tragic moments, or a tragedy comedic moments, is an erroneous assumption that has affected, possibly irreparably, our judgment of each genre’s

³ Langston Hughes, quoted in: Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 16.

⁴ In “Some Remarks on Humor,” E.B. White addresses the humorist’s skill at combining laughter and sorrow:

One of the things commonly said about humorists is that they are really very sad people—clowns with a breaking heart. There is some truth in it, but it is badly stated. It would be more accurate, I think, to say that there is a deep vein of melancholy running through everyone’s life and that the humorist, perhaps more sensible of it than some others, compensates for it actively and positively. Humorists fatten on trouble. They have always made trouble pay. They struggle along with a good will and endure pain cheerfully, knowing how well it will serve them in the sweet by and by. [...] They pour out their sorrows profitably, in a form that is not quite fiction nor quite fact either. Beneath the sparkling surface of these dilemmas flows the strong tide of human woe. (1048)

Mark Twain, similarly, recognized the necessity of tempering humor with sorrow: “Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven” (Mark Dawidziak, ed., *Mark My Words: Mark Twain On Writing* [New York: St. Martin’s P, 1996], 89.).

⁵ In fact, when Sedaris was writing columns for *Esquire* magazine, his talent for writing humorously about these darker topics was so apparent to the editors that they sent him to visit a *morgue* for a week, just so he could write about his experiences there. The article, an eerie and mesmerizing exploration into the world of forensic pathology, was titled “Working Stiffs” (David Sedaris, “Working Stiffs,” *Esquire* [Apr. 1998]: 114—121, 142.).

worth—usually to the detriment of comedy. “Tragic” has become synonymous with “serious,”⁶ and since comedy is assumed to be the opposite of tragedy, “comic” is left with “trivial.”⁷ The stigma of triviality looms over humorous writing, making it the underdog of literary genres.

Humor, though thoroughly enjoyed by the public on movie screens, Broadway stages and basic cable, is the dirty little secret of the literary world. And nowhere is the stigma against humor more apparent than at the bookstore, where—beyond the prestigious Literature section, past Non-fiction, and behind Science Fiction and Fantasy—cowers the most pathetic section of them all: Humor.

Usually sandwiched between shelves full of books on poker and travel guides, the humor section of the bookstore is as forsaken and pitiable as the seedy “18 and Older” backrooms at movie stores. The humor shelf is a mishmash of comic strip collections, bathroom readers, and books deemed too funny to be worthwhile. These unfortunate texts were referred to as “laugh out loud” or “uproarious” one too many times and have been booted out of the Literature section—destined to live out their days as stocking stuffers instead of required reading—while *Hamlet*, *Oedipus* and *Death of a Salesman* rest comfortably without fear of being deemed “too tragic” to be serious reading. We’ve come to see comedy as entertainment, as escaping the truth of life, and tragedy as serious business, the supreme expression of our human existence.

The distinction is completely arbitrary. Comedy and tragedy are not opposing forces, and one genre is not more worthwhile or more capable of expressing the human condition than the other. Alone, neither genre can accurately portray the truth of life, because life is a *mix* of

⁶ In his book, *An Anatomy of Humor* (1993), Arthur Asa Berger also questioned this connection, attributing it to our American history: “For some reason, perhaps connected to our Puritan heritage, we’ve been led to think that tragedy is serious stuff and that comedy (and humor in general) is mere entertainment, a diversion from the truly important and ‘solemn’ things in life” (Arthur A. Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* [New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993], 9.).

⁷ Arthur E. DuBois, in his essay “Comedy, an Experience” attributes many of the problems of modern humor theory to this grammatical oversight: “For one of the difficulties students of comedy have labored under is that the recognized antonyms for ‘comic’ have been ‘serious’ and ‘tragic’” and DuBois believes this comparison “has been an over-simplification” (Arthur E. DuBois, “Comedy, an Experience,” *ELH* 7 [1940]: 199.).

comedy and tragedy.⁸ Life has no persistent condition—comic or tragic. It is certainly not a dramatic compilation of fatal flaws and grave errors that speeds us towards our untimely deaths, nor is it a series of blunders and mishaps that inevitably resolves itself peacefully, leaving everyone healthy, happy, and alive. The human condition exists somewhere between tragedy and comedy, and so Sedaris' ability to write humorously about tragedy may be the very sign of his excellence, his adept ability to create a form of humor that resounds with truth.

Sedaris does not sterilize his essays of tragedy. He does not sculpt his humor by chiseling or carving away misfortune, sorrow and death to leave only bliss and levity, but rather creates a humor *of the earth*—gathering the raw, unaltered materials of life in order to mold and refashion them into a representation of his unique humorous vision. Unlike the world created for cheesy romantic comedies or predictable television sitcoms—where all the women are beautiful and intelligent, all the men are secretly dying to settle down with The One, everyone is rich yet no one wastes precious time “working,” love conquers all and there’s somebody for everybody—the world Sedaris envisions for his essays is not devoid of hardship. Sedaris’ characters, like his readers, try and fail. They love and lose. They live and die. Sedaris does not run from, or dismiss, the disquieting specter of existence—the lingering possibility of our own inconsequence. Instead, he “compensates for it actively and positively,” creating a body of work that is at once raucous and reflective, blissful and sorrowful, life-affirming and sorrowful, comic and tragic.

Certainly, such an impressive and profound achievement in literature is worthy of scholarly analysis. But critics must approach humor with caution. It seems that jokes, like magic tricks, must conceal their inner workings or else lose all effectiveness. Revelation often spoils

⁸ Many humor theorists and humorists have also characterized life as a mix of tragedy and comedy. Henri Bergson addressed this duality in “Laughter,” where he asserted, “Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving, and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree” (196). Many years later, Charlie Chaplin took a slightly different view, attributing the comedy-tragedy paradox to an issue of perspective: “Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in a long-shot.”

our enjoyment of these amusements by making them appear ordinary and formulaic; it destroys any semblance of the spontaneous cleverness that gives us pleasure. It is possible, however, that discovering the methods behind a particularly impressive card trick could delight a spectator by a display of sheer ingenuity; perhaps, then, a particularly well-crafted joke might survive analysis by showing its construction to be impressively witty. For this reason, I have chosen to focus my analysis primarily on two of Sedaris' essays that deal almost exclusively with death: "The Youth in Asia" and "Ashes." It is my hope that, by defining the various humorous techniques Sedaris employs in these essays in the service of preserving the humorous tone despite the solemn subject matter, and analyzing the dialogues about death and dying that each technique initiates, I will not destroy the fragile humor of the pieces, but rather enhance the enjoyment of the essays by exposing their skillful creation.

Thankfully, my research into the long history of humor theory⁹ has provided me with a clear vision of how *not* to proceed with an investigation of humor. Philosophers, psychologists, literary critics, and sociologists alike have explored humor with a disciplined critical eye, and many of them have strangled humor in the pursuit of humor theory. But as E.B. White noted, destroying humor for the sake of understanding it is of no use to anyone: "Analysts have had their go at humor, and I have read some of this interpretive literature, but without being greatly instructed" ("Humor" 1047).¹⁰

I share White's frustration. In the past several months, I have suffered through the most zealous (and misguided) of humor theorists, read books with enticing titles like *The Anatomy of*

⁹ Its long, boring, *soul-crushing* history. My experience with humor theory makes me appreciate the wisdom of Robert Benchley—an American humorist, himself—when he said, "Defining and analyzing humor is the pastime of humorless people."

¹⁰ Throughout the essay, White comments derisively on humor theorists and their tendency to destroy humor through analysis, saying, "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind" ("Humor" 1047).

Humor: Biopsychosocial and Therapeutic Perspectives and perused the *International Journal of Humor Research*¹¹ for its many uproarious articles like “Humor Appreciation And Latency Of Comprehension,” “Script Oppositions and Logical Mechanisms,” and (my personal favorite), “A Note On The Neuro-Mathematics Of Laughter.” I have encountered graphs—yes, *graphs*—of jokes.¹² Amazingly, these sorts of explorations are the cutting edge of humor research. There are also many outdated theories of humor that (perhaps due to the absence of computers and brain scans) manage to not completely disembowel humor in pursuit of its defining characteristics.¹³ But, as a whole, it seems these theorists have sacrificed their subject for their scholarship.

The common fault of these disappointing humor theorists is their attempt to reduce all humor or all jokes in one tidy, little definition—one that can be utilized to classify and categorize every joke told from here to the end of time. No one will accept less than the Holy Grail of humor theories, and in their pursuit these theorists begin to over-generalize, claiming that technique A in situation B *will* produce laughter through the psychological process C. When a

¹¹ The least humorous publication since *Mein Kampf*.

¹² See Figures 1 and 2.

¹³ Some choice examples of these theories are summarized by Robin Andrew Haig in his aforementioned book, *The Anatomy of Humor*:

Joubert's, in his “Treatise on Laughter” (1560), described laughter as the result of joy and sorrow mixing in the heart. Many people believed that joy caused the heart to expand, while sorrow caused contraction, and (since the heart was believed to be connected to the diaphragm), this rapid movement caused the lungs to shake and produce laughter. So laughter, in essence, is like a very tiny, very pleasurable heart attack. Also, just for good measure, Joubert concluded that “Fat people, women and children” laugh the most—which might not be supported by conclusive research like modern humor theories, but certainly brings to mind a more interesting mental image (Robin A. Haig, *The Anatomy of Humor: Biopsychosocial and Therapeutic Perspectives* [Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1988], 12, 14.).

In Tomkin's “Theory of Affect as Increased Intensity and Density of Neural Firing” (1962), the effect of jokes is reduced to a mental short circuit: “A stimulus, either external or internal, resulted in neural firing. Differential increases, levels and decreases in rates of neural firing resulted in different affects. A moderate increase in the rate of firing resulted in interest and excitement, whilst a sharp decrease resulted in joy, smiling or laughter. [...] In a joke, the novel information resulted in an increased rate of neural firing initially, followed by a sharply decreased rate of firing, presumably on hearing the punch line, which then resulted in laughter” (Ibid. 25-26). For some strange reason, this description has never been used to promote a stand-up show or new romantic comedy.

theorist eventually reaches his or her conclusion, the definition is often too over-reaching to be useful—and, in the process, the humor these theorists have attempted to define suffers the consequences of dissection.¹⁴

When a joke, like an IKEA dresser, is disassembled, reassembled, and its parts categorized, the joke ceases to be spontaneous. Humor becomes predictable and formulaic when its structure is made so transparent. When theorists examine jokes to discover their common structure, they discount the possibility of a *je ne sais quoi*, an extra special something that distinguishes a really great joke. Without this indescribable, non-formulaic element, there can be no great comedians—just ordinary people who have properly followed “the rules” of comedy. An audience would hardly be impressed by a Jerry Seinfeld or a Chris Rock who was simply following a recipe for the perfect stand-up act. There must be a sense of mystery about what makes a great joke in order for there to be master joke-tellers.

Humor theories that purport a single, conclusive definition are not only discounting the comedian’s talent, but also the audience’s varied tastes. A joke that gets a thunderous laugh at the Apollo Theater will likely be greeted with gasps on a senior citizens’ cruise ship. The success or failure of a joke or humorous piece does not follow a simple formula, but varies widely depending on the context of its telling. We laugh for many different reasons at different times in different moods and environments.¹⁵ When a comedian or humorist is able to gain widespread

¹⁴ I am not alone in my critique of modern humor theory. In his essay on humor, DuBois argues that many humor theories “over-limit and give false impressions of the functions of comedy” (DuBois 200). Similarly, humor scholar J. L. Styan claims that “no theorist seemed capable of putting forward an explanation sufficiently all-embracing, and the philosophical and the psychological approaches have both been wanting” (J. L. Styan, “Types of Comedy,” *The Dark Comedy* [Cambridge: University Press, 1962], 42.).

¹⁵ Styan comments on some of the various forms of laughter:

Laughter, a recurring and therefore an evidently important ingredient, seems to arise from a great variety of sources: we laugh at other people’s bad luck, or at relief from embarrassment, or at a little flattery, or even when we do not want to laugh. We laugh heartily, or smile gently, or at some comedy we may not laugh

popularity, it is a clearly an indication of his or her talent and ability to adapt and not the result of following a humor formula.

However, this negative assessment of humor theory leaves me in a precarious position to start my own analysis. I find myself agreeing with White and other critics who believe that “when a joke is dissected, it abruptly ceases to be funny,”¹⁶ and yet, with this thesis, I am clearly offering my own analysis. But I hope to save myself from charges of hypocrisy by asserting my intentions for this study were quite different from the methods I have just criticized. I had no lofty expectations of identifying a single, universal method by which Sedaris creates the humor of his essays. In fact, if I believed Sedaris had a single method for creating all his essays, I would hardly find them worthy of this kind of in-depth analysis. Furthermore, I did not set out to prove whether or not his essays are “funny” or to determine their success or failure, as it is obviously too dependent on the individual reader’s taste and varies greatly. I have not attempted to conclusively determine what complex psychological processes occur in the reader when he or she encounters these essays. Instead, I have confined my analysis to the visceral reactions and basic thought-processes that may affect the reader and are likely to result in laughter. My scope of analysis has been purposely focused to prevent over-generalization and unfounded claims.

Most importantly, I have tried to preserve the humor of the essays—to make it an ally of my arguments, not a casualty. “[Humor] has a certain fragility, an evasiveness, which one had best respect” (“Humor” 1047-1048). I enjoy Sedaris’ essays very much, and wish to continue enjoying them after the completion of this thesis. Therefore, I have employed a form of humor analysis that is focused enough to allow an investigation of Sedaris’ essays that does not destroy

at all. There are so many uses to which laughter can be put, from the promotion of a cold vindictive sarcasm to that of the empty gaiety of knock-about. (Ibid. 42)

¹⁶ Ibid 43.

their integrity. In his essay “Laughter,” Henri Bergson crafts a useful set of guiding principles for approaching comedy in a productive, and not *destructive* way:

[W]e shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. [...] [W]e shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand. (61)

In this attempt, my study incorporates the opinions and insights of comedians and other humorists, as I consider them to be equal to established humor theorists as qualified sources. Woody Allen, Mark Twain, James Thurber, Mel Brooks—these are my gurus, on par with Freud and Bergson. I have also tried to temper the sterile tone of scholarly analysis and retain my sense of humor throughout these chapters in order to keep the tone receptive to the humor of Sedaris’ passages and provide a smooth transition between the tone of these passages and my analysis of them.

Finally, though I identify three major joke-techniques used by Sedaris in his two essays on death, I do not contend that Sedaris has consciously employed these techniques in his writing,¹⁷ or that they the *only* techniques at work in the passages. Many techniques overlap and

¹⁷ In Sedaris’ first reply to my letter, he claimed to have no real awareness of the method of his writing:

Like most writers I know, I just sort of stab at things until they’re finished, never thinking of what it all means. Things might occur to me once the essay has been published, but when I’m at my desk I’m simply trying to tell a story, and get to the movie theater by 4 PM. (David Sedaris, Letter to Megan Ganz, 16 Nov. 2005. See Figure 4.)

Later, when I asked him what he thought of having his work closely analyzed, he replied,

To be honest, I never thought about it until fairly recently, when my essays began appearing in college text books. They’ll print the story, “Let It Snow,” for example, and follow it with a list of questions. “This essay used hyperbole to make its point. What examples can you find?” “There is a shift in the tone of the essay after paragraph 7. What is the shift, and why is it effective?” I myself, have no idea what a hyperbole is, and notice no shift in paragraph seven. Good

occur simultaneously. I have only focused on what I believe to be the *primary* technique at work in any given passage or essay.

The humorous techniques Sedaris employs in “The Youth in Asia” and “Ashes” allow him to confront the tragic and sorrowful shades of life, without obscuring the life’s comical elements in the process. Laughing life’s tragic moments does not diminish them, but allows us take the good and bad in stride. The humor of Sedaris’ essays permits a momentarily escape from sorrows and resists the temptation to indulge in melodrama and sentimentalism, thereby creating a context that is more conducive to a productive, level-headed discourse on life and mortality. The humorous techniques Sedaris utilizes in his essays achieve this context through different syntactic and structural means and, as a result, each technique produces a unique dialogue about our anxieties and fears about death. I have chosen to discuss what I consider to be the three primary techniques of Sedaris’ essays on death—displacement, representation by the small, and characterization of the parents—and the resulting discourse on mortality initiated by each.

thing I’m not a college student. (David Sedaris, Letter to Megan Ganz, 26 Feb. 2006. See Figure 6.)

He even went so far as to say, in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, that his work has no profound meaning at all: “My writing is just a desperate attempt to get laughs. If you get anything else out of it, it’s an accident” (Kathie Bergquist, “La Maison de Mes Dents,” *Publishers Weekly* [19 Jun. 2000]: 55.). Whether his success as a writer is a sign of his intrinsic, unconscious talent with prose or the result of hard-work and meticulous editing that he refuses to admit to is anyone’s guess. But the success and effectiveness of his essays cannot be denied.

DISPLACEMENT: ANXIETIES AND EXPECTATIONS OF DEATH

The element of surprise is essential to the comedian. If a talented entertainer can catch his audience off-guard with a witty play-on-words (“Take my wife... please!”) or a bit of faulty logic (“I won’t join any club that would have me as a member.”), he’s likely to get a huge laugh. Turning the audience’s expectations against them is a well-worn comedic tool, employed not only on stage but also in sitcoms, comic plays and humorous writing. Also referred to as “displacement,” this technique can be found in many of Sedaris’ essays, including his more solemn essays on death. A thorough investigation of displacement will provide a useful foundation for a more in-depth analysis, as displacement is the most syntactically obvious device used in Sedaris’ essays, making its examples easy to find and its methods simply identified.

Humor theorists identify displacement as a relatively basic element common to many jokes and humorous dialogues—a technique which occurs frequently but takes many different forms in its expression. The technique of displacement should be immediately familiar, since it was likely present in our first experiences with joke-telling. The displacement joke is a favorite among five-year-olds. *Why did the chicken cross the road?* To get to the other side, of course. This classic example of displacement preys upon the joke-form itself. The listener expects to receive a nonsensical, “jokey” answer, and receives instead one that is bland and literal. He laughs not because the punchline was particularly humorous, but because it was *unexpected*.

It is this disappointment of expectation, this sudden redirection of thought that characterizes the displacement joke. Freud speaks in length about the technique of displacement in his essay, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), where he emphasizes that the

essential element of a displacement joke is “its diversion of the train of thought, its displacement of the psychological emphasis to a different theme from the one first broached” (*Joke 43*). These jokes produce a linguistic bait and switch, coaxing the listener into a particular mindset and then delivering an unexpected punchline. The greater and more clever the displacement, the greater the humor.

For this reason, displacement jokes are often front-loaded, placing the weight of importance on the initial direction in order to secure the listener’s focus before abruptly ending in an about-face. This displacement must always arrive at the very end of the joke, as its effectiveness is a result of both its suddenness and lack of accompanying explanation. Allowing the joke to continue after the displacement would detract from its humor by using logic to reconcile the incongruous set-up and punchline, thereby making the unexpected displacement seem predictable. For example:

Why did the chicken cross the road?

To get to the other side. That is to say, this particular chicken felt a compulsion to traverse the street, and—in lieu of using a bridge or underground walkway—found it necessary to cross the road on foot in order to reach the opposing (in this case identified as “other”) side. Though his objectives remain unclear, we can be relatively certain that he acted of sound mind thus far.

A classic joke is butchered. The expanded punchline detracts from the joke’s humor by changing a surprising diversion into a simple change in topic. The displacement has become little more than a poorly-executed segue. Clearly, the displacement joke’s key to success lies in its clever, surprising twist—and its brevity.

Although a sudden diversion from the expected is common to all forms of displacement jokes, the manner by which each joke plays the listeners' expectations against them can differ greatly. The simplest form of displacement joke employs language that permits multiple interpretations, such as a pun or play-on-words, where a word's expected meaning is rejected for another (*Why shouldn't you tell secrets in a cornfield? Because of all the ears!*¹⁸), but the more clever and interesting forms of displacement jokes derive their humor from redirecting the listener's mental focus (*Joke 45*). Because these jokes toy with the listeners' expectations of a situation created by the setup, instead of the way they interpret the joke's wording, these jokes often generate a bigger laugh:

Why do mice have such small balls?

Because hardly any of them know how to dance.

After hearing this particular joke's set-up, the listeners have established a train of thought tending toward the bawdy; but upon hearing the punchline, their mindset is returned to the innocent. Incidentally, a pun on the word "balls," (meaning both "testicles" and "a party for dancing"), is present in this joke, but the humor results from exposing a listener's inclination towards the vulgar definition instead of the equally suitable, innocuous one. Unlike the previous joke, which surprised the listener by disappointing his or her expectations of the word "ears," this displacement has defeated the listener's expectations regarding the entire situation posed by the set-up. It is likely that the latter came as a greater shock because the listener placed greater *investment* in the act of imagining a complete situation than in defining a single word. The success of a displacement joke is directly related to its ability to mislead the listener, to cause

¹⁸ I will not attempt any analysis of these sorts of jokes, as I have not found them in any of Sedaris' essays and because puns are universally accepted to be the lowest form of humor—an assessment with which I wholeheartedly agree. Besides, I am in the business of probing what makes us laugh, not what makes us groan and roll our eyes at Grandpa.

him or her to become *invested* in a certain mindset, before the surprising diversion occurs and the listener's expectations are denied.

Often, the teller of a joke or the author of a humorous text creates these expectations intentionally, setting their audience up for the humorous diversion to come. In many of the occurrences of displacement in Sedaris' essays, the author puts significant effort into establishing an elaborate set-up that will direct his readers into adopting a certain mindset, only to dash their expectations with a quick diversion. The further the reader is drawn into the situation, the more successful the displacement becomes in catching him or her off-guard. In an essay entitled "A Shiner Like a Diamond" from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, Sedaris enhances the incongruity of his punchline by devoting careful attention to establishing the scene at his sister Amy's glamorous magazine photo shoot:

[A]t the scheduled time, my sister arrived at the studio with unwashed hair and took a seat beside the dozen other New York women selected by the magazine. She complimented them on their flattering, carefully chosen outfits and waited as they had their hair fashioned, their eyebrows trained, and their slight imperfections masked by powder.

When it was her turn at the styling table, Amy said, "I want to look like someone has beaten the shit out of me." (*MTP* 140)

Here, the diversion is strengthened by Sedaris' attentive description of the beautiful women and their exhaustive beauty regimen, which invites the reader into a mindset that favors attractiveness and perfection. By noting that Amy complimented the women on their appearance, Sedaris suggests that she, too, values beauty. After the scene is set, it comes as a great shock to the

reader when, instead of having her “slight imperfections” masked in kind, Amy asks to be given hideous bruises and scars. The effect of these manufactured expectations are clear; had Sedaris more succinctly stated, “Amy went to a magazine photo shoot where she asked the make-up artist to make her look as if she had been abused,” the reader would have little time to commit to a particular train of thought before the strange and unexpected request was made, and the displacement would have been lessened.

In some cases, Sedaris devotes entire essays to developing expectations that are dashed in the final paragraphs. In “Cyclops,” Sedaris spends the whole of the essay describing the various horror stories his father would tell the Sedaris children to keep them from engaging in dangerous (or sometimes just childish) behavior. His father had stories about a Navy friend who had a firecracker explode in his lap, another friend who was struck by lightning and could no longer chew his own food, and yet another friend who “sliced his face right in half” using a table saw (*N* 47-48). Garbage disposals, lawn mowers, automobiles—all death traps in the eyes of the father, and he told endless gruesome tales to prove as much to his children. Sedaris opens the essay with one such story:

When he was young my father shot out his best friend’s eye with a BB gun. That is what he told us. “One foolish moment and, Jesus, if I could take it back, I would.” He winced, shaking his fist as if it held a rattle. “It eats me alive,” he said. “I mean to tell you that it absolutely tears me apart.” (46)

Sedaris even recalls meeting this man, “a shoe salesman whose milky pupil hugged the corner of his mangled socket” (46), and the memory fills him with fear and paranoia. The effect upon the reader is similar, and when Sedaris writes about his decision to move to New York City, the

reader may go so far as to echo the father's sentiments: "New York? Are you out of your mind? You might as well take a razor to your throat because, let me tell you something, those New Yorkers are going to eat you alive" (51). After becoming solidly entrenched in this paranoid mindset, the reader is just as surprised as Sedaris when his father's tall-tales are exposed:

I'd lived in New York for several years when, traveling upstate to attend a wedding, I stopped in my father's hometown. [...] I found my father's old apartment, but his friends shoe store had been converted into a pool hall. When I called to tell him about it, my father said, "What shoe store? What are you talking about?"

"The place where your friend worked," I said. "You remember, the guy whose eye you shot out."

"Frank?" he said. "I didn't shoot his eye out; the guy was born that way." (51-52)

The discovery causes a displacement by coming in direct conflict with the expectations created by Sedaris throughout the essay. By coaxing the reader into sharing Sedaris' childhood fears that are only worsened by his father's stories, the reader vicariously experiences his astonishment upon discovering his father's lie. The humor results from this surprising discovery, making the essay a single, superb example of displacement.

However, not all occurrences of displacement are the result of Sedaris' manufactured expectations. Often, displacements rely on expectations that are already established in the reader's mind, expectations about family, society, life, and death. Displacements based on common assumptions do not necessitate an extended set-up in order to draw the reader into the desired frame of mind, and so they are able to remain fairly concise. In "A Plague of Tics,"

Sedaris plays on his readers' established experiences with parental advice in order to generate humor:

“College is the best thing that can ever happen to you,” my father used to say, and he was right, for it was there that I discovered drugs, drinking, and smoking. (N 21)

In this example, the set-up and displacement are confined to a single sentence. Sedaris is able to establish his reader's mindset instantly by alluding to a common experience: a parent delivering a lecture to a child. It is probable that the reader will identify with the scene and bring to the text certain expectations of what a father might consider to be the benefits of college life: education, friendship, responsibility, etc. Sedaris encourages these expectations by offering his agreement with his father's wisdom (“he was right”). The displacement occurs when the benefits of “drugs, drinking, and smoking” are offered instead, which are decidedly not what the reader, or the father, had in mind. Unlike episodes of displacement based on the author's lengthy set-ups to manufacture expectations, this displacement is compressed into a single sentence, enhancing its effectiveness by denying the readers an opportunity to divert their attention or question their basic assumptions before being tousled from one train of thought to the next. We expect such a drastic change to occur over the span of several paragraphs, not in a single sentence—especially when this new mindset is in contrast to what we have previously accepted as true. The swift and surprising shift is likely to strike the reader as humorous.

If a more striking displacement between expectation and outcome can produce greater humor, then it stands to reason that creating displacements which involve our most innate and strongly-held beliefs will prove to be an extraordinarily humorous and useful technique. After all, no situation posed by an author can draw the level of investment a reader has for his own

deepest hopes and fears, strengthened by a lifetime of experiences. If an author can touch on expectations which are already present in the reader, and use them to humor's advantage, the outcome can be not only very humorous, but often very significant. Displacement brings a greater significance to the essays when the technique touches on more meaningful and weighty issues and challenges the readers' innate understandings about the world in a way that exposes our inner conflicts, underlying fears, and inhibitions.

However, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly *what* is occurring in a listener's mind upon hearing a "serious" joke. At some level (consciously or subconsciously) we encounter these jokes and find cause to laugh, but it is difficult to determine exactly what mental processes are at work to create this laughter. Many humor theorists have attempted to find a definitive, all-encompassing explanation for the processes of humor and our reactions to it—and though theorists are plentiful, they are seldom in agreement.

In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud speaks in length about jokes which touch on serious subject matter such as sexuality and mortality, which he refers to as "tendentious" jokes (*Joke* 87). It is Freud's assertion that tendentious jokes always produce their humor by allowing our psyche to overcome obstacles—such as sexual censorship, personal inhibitions, or fears—without making much effort (144-45). For instance, a joke which can make us laugh at a man's sexual inadequacy allows us to momentarily conquer our unconscious fears about sexual relations, and our laughter is the release of the psychical energy we did not need to use in order to do so. Freud contends that when we expose and conquer these unconscious fears, we "*open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*" (100).

In contrast, Henri Bergson concludes that tendentious jokes function as a method of catharsis through self-scrutiny and triumph over our foibles. Laughter, for Bergson, is a sort of

psychological compensation for our human failures: “Whenever we become aware that this is not the best of possible worlds, we need the help of the comedian to meet the ‘insuperable defects of actuality.’ We escape with him into a logical order by laughing at the imperfections of the world around us; the comic artist releases us from the limitations in things as they are” (“Laughter” 246). In short, we laugh at tendentious jokes to relieve ourselves of the world’s worries.

Several other respected humor theorists—including Wylie Sypher, George Meredith, Mark Twain, and E. B. White—offer slightly different hypotheses regarding the psychological processes at work when we encounter tendentious humor. I find no single assertion more valid than the next and so will not attempt to select the “correct” theory—or even presume to offer my own. Instead, I intend to confine my analysis to determining *what* Sedaris can achieve through tendentious humor, instead of the specifics of *how* he achieves it.

In his essay on “Types of Comedy,” J. L. Styan emphasizes that comedy can serve a greater purpose than simply inciting laughter; it can set the groundwork for “the dramatic achievement of other things.”¹⁹ Styan suggests comedy’s greater purpose, its true value, can be seen “only when we measure the *uses* to which it is put.”²⁰ By investigating the manner in which Sedaris uses tendentious humor, we will be able to identify the benefits this humor provides to Sedaris’ essays—especially those essays that include solemn or tragic subject matter.

If displacement humor benefits from tackling serious subject matter, it will find ample material in confronting the topic of death. One would be hard-pressed to find an issue a reader places more investment in than his own mortality. When Sedaris approaches death in his essays, he is able to play off a wealth of emotions already present in his audience—and the result is both devastatingly humorous and profound. The popularity of his essays, and their ability to include

¹⁹ Styan, “Types of Comedy,” 49.

²⁰ Ibid.

somber moments while remaining “sidesplitting,”²¹ suggests Sedaris has successfully used this device to his advantage.

Instances of tendentious displacement can be found in Sedaris’ essay “The Youth in Asia,” which includes a humorous chronology of the Sedaris family’s now-deceased pets. Though recounting a slew of dead pets might seem a topic which provides little opportunity for humor, “The Youth in Asia” is a delightfully funny essay that showcases Sedaris’ talents for blending the somber and the silly.²² In the essay, Sedaris recounts his mother’s string of beloved cats, and each cat’s eventual demise. When the fourth and oldest cat develops feline leukemia, Sedaris’ mother makes the difficult decision to have the cat euthanized. As the author describes his mother’s sorrow over the loss of Sadie, her much-loved cat, he welcomes his readers to identify with her pain, possibly even to recall their own memories of losing pets. Loss of this kind is a common experience, and so the reader brings to the story expectations of how to sympathize with another human being experiencing loss, including the expectation that others will react with kind words or comforting gestures. Sedaris, however, does not satisfy his readers’ expectations. A displacement occurs immediately after Sadie is put to sleep, when the children—instead of offering their sympathy—react quite unexpectedly:

The cat was put down, and then came a series of crank phone calls and anonymous postcards orchestrated by my sisters and me. The cards announced a miraculous new cure for feline leukemia, and the callers identified themselves as representatives from *Cat Fancy* magazine. “We’d like to use Sadie as our September cover story

²¹ *New York Times Book Review*, quoted on back cover of *Naked*.

²² In fact, “The Youth In Asia” is one of the few essays on the *Me Talk Pretty One Day* audiobook that Sedaris performs before a live audience—and many of the loudest and longest laughs occur after the jokes touching on the most somber and morbid topics (David Sedaris, “The Youth in Asia,” *Me Talk Pretty One Day* Audiobook, Rec. live in San Fransisco [Time Warner Audiobooks, 2000].).

and were hoping to schedule a photo shoot as soon as possible. Do you think you could have her ready by tomorrow?" (*MTP* 72)

The reader can hardly help but laugh at the needless taunts, launched so soon after a traumatic incident. The children see their mother's loss as an opportunity for clever pranks, not consoling words, and their actions are nothing like the expectations held by the reader. As one part of a close-knit society, the reader is undoubtedly aware of the generally accepted codes of conduct we expect will be performed whenever encountering someone who has suffered a loss: we sympathize, comfort as best we can, and are sensitive to the person's feelings. In this passage, the Sedaris children adhere to none of these rules. They punish the mother for euthanizing her poor cat and make her remorse a laughing matter.

By presenting his readers with a deliberate rejection of our mores about death, Sedaris brings these customs to our conscious mind and subjects them to closer scrutiny, where many questions emerge: Why do we walk on egg-shells around those people experiencing loss? Why are we expected to sincerely sympathize with a pain we have not experienced first-hand and which will not affect us? Why is playing a prank considered an inappropriate way to console the grieving? It seems our fears and anxieties have given death an elevated status in our society, making it an issue that we seldom take lightly and one that is surrounded by many taboos. At times, it seems as though mortality can only be conceived of in poetry and philosophy. Our inability to approach it on a practical level has led to the creation of many strange rituals which mediate our contact with death. We embalm bodies, dress them in suits and skirts, cover their faces in make-up, and bury them in elaborate coffins with pillows and their personal effects in an attempt to forget the physical reality of death—the lifeless, rotting bodies we put under the soil.

Later in “The Youth in Asia,” another example of displacement exposes one such attempt to evade the reality of death, and the result is one of the most humorous moments in the essay. All grown up and living on his own, Sedaris recalls having to euthanize his own beloved cat Neil, who grew old and very sick. After the cat is put to sleep, its body is cremated and Sedaris receives the ashes in a forest green can. In his most vulnerable moment, Sedaris’ mother exacts her revenge:

My mother sent a consoling letter along with a check to cover the cost of cremation. In the left-hand corner, on the line marked MEMO, she’d written, “Pet Burning.” I had it coming. (80)

The humor in this example comes as a result of replacing the neutral word “cremation” with the jarringly blunt “pet burning”—which was, after all, exactly what occurred. The cruelty here is multiplied because the mother’s insensitive word selection is thrust upon the grieving Sedaris at the most inopportune time, without warning or cause, creating a harsh displacement. This displacement capitalizes on the anesthetized language we have created to talk about death: “passed away” instead of “died,” “the deceased” instead of “the corpse,” etc. We employ our diverse vocabulary to separate ourselves from the reality of death, making a phrase like “pet burning” unspeakable. Sedaris has utilized displacement techniques to expose in his reader a reluctance to directly confront mortality. If a preference for these softer words was not already established in the mind of the reader, replacing “cremation” with “pet burning” would not strike the reader as strange, and the humor would be entirely lost.

While the displacements employed by Sedaris in “The Youth in Asia” probe the societal customs that mediate our ideas about death and allow us to avoid becoming too directly engaged with death’s reality, his tendentious displacements in “Ashes” serve an altogether different

function. “Ashes” is arguably Sedaris’ most skillful blend of humor and tragedy and the only essay in which Sedaris speaks at length about the death of his mother—an event that finds itself infiltrating much of *Naked*, but in subtler ways. The essay begins with a humorous displacement where Sedaris accepts his sexuality on strange conditions: “The moment I realized I would be a homosexual for the rest of my life, I forced my brother and sisters to sign a contract swearing they’d never get married” (*N* 234). Unfortunately for Sedaris, his sister Lisa broke the contract by marrying her long-time boyfriend Bob. Lisa does not *exactly* receive her brother’s blessing: “‘My sister’s wedding’ was right up there with ‘my recent colostomy’ in terms of three-word phrases I hoped never to use” (237).

While preparing for Lisa’s wedding, the Sedaris children receive the shocking news that their mother has a large tumor in her lung. Her lung cancer is progressed and inoperable, but Sedaris and his siblings retain their unfounded optimism for as long as possible. As the essay progresses, an extended displacement unfolds as the children continue to hope for the best (“‘The doctor has a plan!’ my sisters and I crowed to one another.”) while their mother accepts the worst (“‘Right,’ my mother said. ‘He plans to golf on Saturday, sail on Sunday, and ask for my eyes, kidneys, and what’s left of my liver on that following Monday. That’s his plan.’”) (238). This extended displacement allows a vein of humor to run throughout an otherwise somber essay.

When the best can no longer be expected and the distraction of the wedding is over, Sedaris shifts his focus to the peculiar situation of interacting with a mother he knows is dying. She wants nothing more than to forget about her cancer, but her children find it impossible to put out of their minds. Sedaris examines his odd compulsion to make every last moment with his mother significant, memorable:

The knowledge of her illness forced everything into the spotlight and demanded that it be memorable. We were no longer calling our mother. Now we were picking up the telephone to call our mother with cancer. (240)

This bizarre change in Sedaris' interactions with his mother exposes another consequence of our inability to engage fully with our own mortality: our sentimentalization of the dying. We learn of another's illness, and suddenly every visit, every phone call, every embrace is noteworthy because it may be "The Last." When we obsess over creating lasting memories, we often lose sight of the person. Calling my mother with cancer. Visiting my grandfather with Parkinson's. The dying person forfeits his identity to his disease. Perhaps it is our best defense against the pain of watching someone die; we hoard memories and dehumanize "the diseased." It is a self-defense mechanism unknowingly performed, and does little to prevent the anguish of loss. Towards the end of "Ashes," it becomes apparent that Sedaris has fallen victim to the ritual as he fixates on memorializing every minute spent with his mother. He remembers their many steak dinners together, but finds the details unsatisfying:

I try recalling a single one of those evenings, wanting to take comfort in the details, but they are lost to me. Even my diary tells me nothing: "Ate steaks with Mom." But which steaks, porterhouse or New York strip? What had we talked about and why hadn't I paid attention? (248)

Sedaris' frustration, however, serves no useful purpose. Even if he were able to recall every dinner in photographic detail, the sum of his memories can hardly fill the void that would

inevitably be left by the death of his mother. Collecting these memories in the hopes of preparing himself for the coming loss is as futile as wearing thick socks to a minefield.

Yet Sedaris refuses to punish himself for the effort—however hopeless it may be. As the essay draws to a close, he opens up his narration to a broader perspective by replacing “I” with “you” and offers his hard-wrought insights to the reader:

You can't brace yourself for famine if you've never known hunger;
it is foolish even to try. The most you can do is eat up while you
still can, stuffing yourself, shoveling it in with both hands and
licking clean the plates, recalling every course in vivid detail. (249-
50)

Death, Sedaris concedes, is impossible to prepare for. There is no sufficient defense before, no satisfactory compensation after. In this somber moment, Sedaris has exposed perhaps the greatest displacement, a disparity between expectation and outcome that exists at the foundation of human existence: death, we are all aware, is inevitable and yet, despite all our anxieties, fears, and anticipations about our final moments, in the end, we don't know what to expect. *We will always be surprised.*

REPRESENTATION BY THE SMALL: THE PHYSICAL REALITY AND FINALITY OF DEATH

The second category of joke-technique employed by Sedaris, *representation by the small*,²³ can be classified as a specific form of displacement in which something large is represented or replaced by something small. When this juxtaposition draws unexpected comparisons between “The Large” and “The Small,” perhaps exposing similarities the listener has never before considered or was not expecting to find, the resulting displacement is often very humorous. Sedaris employs *representation by the small* in many of his essays, but the way the technique functions in his solemn essays is unique and compelling.

Freud briefly defines the technique of *representation by the small* as a subsection of indirect representation jokes. Indirect representation jokes, according to Freud, are intellectual jokes which attempt to describe or define “something that cannot be expressed directly” (*Joke* 64). In the case of *representation by the small* jokes, this indescribable “something” is often compared to a physical object, and the comparison “solves the task of giving full expression to an entire character by expressing it by some minute detail” (69). They are, in a way, a kind of humorous synecdoche. But unlike calling sailors “hands” or a car “wheels,” the abstract, indescribable Large and the physical, tangible Small may not have an obvious connection until the humorist unites them. Like displacements, the technique of *representation by the small* draws its humor from surprising the reader with the similarities of the unlikely pairing.

In jokes that utilize *representation by the small*, this element of surprise can be enhanced in a number of different ways, thereby enhancing the humor. The economy or conciseness of a

²³ The phrase “representation by the small” will be italicized throughout this chapter to distinguish it as a single technique, as it is formatted in Freud’s *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*.

comparison can increase its effectiveness by placing two incongruous elements in very close proximity, thereby establishing their similarities quickly and with little superfluous explanation. The reader's mind is abruptly taken from the Large to the Small, and the effect is surprising and humorous.

An example of this economy of language and its benefits to the technique of *representation by the small* can be found in one of Sedaris' essays from *Naked*, entitled "The Drama Bug." In this essay, Sedaris recalls an actor who visited his high school drama class—describing the man's strange behavior as he struggled with an imaginary wall, pulled an invisible rope, and was almost blown away by a sudden wind—before concluding: "You know you're living in a small town when you can reach the ninth grade without ever having seen a mime" (N 95).

In this sentence, an abstract notion about the quality of suburban life is reduced to a single, definitive criterion: whether or not a person has seen a mime. The two items, small town life and mimes, are seemingly unrelated until combined to form an indirect representation of suburban existence. The movement from the Large to the Small is done suddenly and the essay continues on without explanation, placing the burden of deciphering the connection upon the reader. The combination may be strange and unexpected, but the suggested association between living in a small town and never seeing a mime is quickly and easily discovered by the reader. Reaching high school without ever having seen a mime represents suburbia's separation from urban culture and the sheltered lifestyle of suburban children and their naiveté of other places and cultures.

Mimes and small towns may be an odd pairing, but in this case it is an effective one. The association of these two ideas produces humor by their unusual combination and accuracy of

definition. Sedaris delivers an odd pairing to represent the suburban experience, but their spot-on characterization is at once surprising and delightful. Like a great proverb, this example of *representation by the small* finds its effectiveness in its brevity—its ability to speak a big truth in a small sentence.

Brevity, however, is not the only means by which jokes of this category enhance their humor. The technique of *representation by the small*, like that of displacement, finds greater effectiveness when addressing issues in which the reader is likely to have investment. Jokes which compare topics like death, sex, and religion²⁴ to smaller and seemingly unimportant topics or objects create a larger displacement between expectations and outcome and produce more compelling comparisons between the Large and Small, which often generates more humor. In addition, it seems there is some unexplainable pleasure found in belittling the great, in taking the awesome down a peg.²⁵ Perhaps that is why jokes about presidents are more plentiful than those about garbage men: we enjoy laughing at our superiors, at things or people that we can not control. The bigger, more powerful and more dominating the subject, the more pleasure we find in reducing it to its smallest parts and exposing all its faults and follies. In short, the larger The Large, the larger the laugh.

²⁴ E.g.:

“For three days after death, hair and fingernails continue to grow, but phone calls taper off.”—Johnny Carson

“Sex after children slows down. Every three months now we have sex. Every time I have sex, the next day I pay my quarterly taxes. Unless it’s oral sex—then I renew my driver’s license.”—Ray Romano

“I do not believe in an afterlife. Although I am bringing a change of underwear.”—Woody Allen

²⁵ Freud argues that this process of belittling greatness is one of the basic ways in which we make people or objects comic. Freud calls this process “degrading” the sublime—the sublime, for Freud, being anything that causes us to change our facial expressions and tone of voice when speaking of it, in an attempt to “hold [ourselves] into harmony with the dignity of what [we are] having an idea of” (*Joke* 195). When we employ techniques like parody, mimicry, caricature, or even *representation by the small*, Freud believes we reduce the sublime to a smaller, powerless entity which we have no reason to fear: “Now if the methods we have just discussed of degrading the sublime let me imagine it as something everyday where I do not have to stand to attention, and in whose imagined presence I can put myself ‘at ease’, as the military formula has it, then it saves me expending extra effort on solemn constraint.” Freud concludes this unexpended energy is “discharged by laughter” (*Joke* 196).

In his essays, Sedaris often makes such unexpected comparisons between weighty, abstract topics and small, insignificant physical objects. One such comparison occurs in his essay “Smart Guy” from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, in which Sedaris takes an IQ test at the age of forty and receives a very low score. He does not reveal his score directly, but provides a few strange comparisons as hints:

It turns out that I’m really stupid, practically an idiot. There are cats that weigh more than my IQ score. Were my number translated into dollars, it would buy you about three buckets of fried chicken. The fact that this surprises me only bespeaks the depths of my ignorance. (*MTP* 246)

In this example, Sedaris compares his IQ score to various tangible, physical objects. Clearly, Sedaris believes his IQ score to be an accurate assessment of the whole of his intelligence, since he equates a low IQ score with ignorance—and not, say, an inability to perform on tests or the test’s preference for “right-brained” thinking over creative talent. He has given his “number” significance by believing that it represents a major portion of his identity. The comparison of something this important to objects as insignificant as the weight of a cat or a bucket of fried chicken creates a very humorous displacement.

The several occurrences of *representation by the small* in two of Sedaris’ essays—“Ashes” from *Naked* and “The Youth in Asia” from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*—demonstrate the benefits the technique receives when dealing with important subject matter. In these essays, the large, abstract idea in the comparison is death, dying, or a related tragic subject. This Large, which is undoubtedly a topic of great seriousness to the reader, is compared to insignificant physical objects (in the case of “Ashes”) or expressed through comical situations (in “The Youth

in Asia”). In both cases, *representation by the small* is utilized as a means of distraction, a way to talk about death without depressing the reader and crippling the essay’s humorous tone—to ride the thin line between comedy about death and melodrama.

Sedaris frequently employs the technique of *representation by the small* in “Ashes,” the more somber of the two essays. His poignant recollection of his mother’s battle with cancer is interspersed with humorous moments, often the result of Sedaris’ clever comparisons between dreadful subjects like tumors and cremation and everyday, harmless physical objects. The essay’s first of these comparisons occurs when Sedaris’ mother first learns of the cancer, and calls her children to inform them of her diagnosis:

She’d gone to the doctor complaining about a ringing in her ear,
and the resulting tests revealed a substantial tumor in her lung.
“They tell me it’s the size of a lemon,” she said. “Not a tiny fist or
an egg, but a lemon. I think they describe it in terms of fruit so as
not to scare you, but come on, who wants a lemon in their lung?
They’re hoping to catch it before it becomes a peach or a
grapefruit, but who knows?” (N 237)

This example of *representation by the small* seems almost self-conscious of its intentions: to disarm the reader by expressing a morbid subject (a tumor) in terms of harmless objects (fruit). Sedaris’ mother is aware that her doctor compares the tumor to a lemon to put her at ease, and she, in turn, peppers her rant with fruit comparisons to distract her children from her awful news. The repetitive mention of fruit likewise serves to distract Sedaris’ readers from the seriousness of the topic, and allow them to laugh at the mother’s humorous observation and detached reaction to the diagnosis.

However unpleasant the thought of a tumor may be, it is nonetheless a tangible object that the reader can conceive of in definite terms: size, shape, appearance, etc. Since both tumors and fruit are physical objects; the displacement in this example relies on the reader's expectation that tumors are "serious business," and the discovery of a tumor is cause for weeping—not a vivacious discussion of fruit. The mother's reaction to her diagnosis is unexpected, and it creates a humorous displacement between the reader's expectations of how this phone call to her children should go, and the dispassionate conversation that actually occurs.

When, however, Sedaris creates *representation by the small* comparisons involving subjects that are abstract—like death or suffering—he accomplishes an additional form of displacement by describing the indescribable in tangible, practical terms. Comparing a tumor with a lemon is peculiar, but in the end they are both *objects*. In the next occurrence of *representation by the small* in "Ashes," Sedaris takes the technique one step further and represents his mother's losing battle with cancer in terms of her outfit choices:

Sixty-two years old and none of us had ever seen her in a pair of slacks. I'm not certain why, but it seemed to me that a person needed a pair of pants in order to defeat cancer. (238)

In this instance, the mother's refusal to wear pants is used to represent her domesticity, her conservative feminine nature—obviously not the sort of ambitious, determined attitude she needs to fight the disease. In actuality, the ability to defeat cancer is an abstract idea and the qualities that allow a person to do so are varied and indefinable; some cancer survivors attribute their success to changes in diet, others to religion, doctors, or family support. Sedaris reduces the battle to a matter of clothing, making the struggle comically simplistic: wear pants, beat cancer! The insinuation that pants have anything to do with his mother's chance of overcoming cancer is

comical because it attempts to express an abstract, indefinable notion through a tangible, everyday object.

As his mother's cancer advances and it becomes clear that she will *not* overcome her disease, Sedaris employs the technique of *representation by the small* to discuss his mother's acceptance of death in spite of her children's wishful optimism:

We viewed it as a bad sign when she canceled her subscription to *People* magazine and took to buying her cigarettes in packs rather than cartons. (239)

Once again, an abstract entity (acceptance of death) is portrayed in terms of concrete, physical objects (everyday purchases). Defining the transition from life into death in terms of changes in our everyday buying habits is humorous because death is a gravely serious subject matter and magazines and cigarettes are trivial consumer goods. By paralleling the end of life with the end of consumption, Sedaris may be saying more about the quality of our lives than the process of our deaths. If my life is the sum of my daily latte, blueberry bagel, and *New York Times* crossword puzzle, when they stop, do I stop? Cancelling magazine subscriptions, giving away jewelry to grandchildren, buying less food at the grocery store. It is queer to think of these hyper-practical actions that a person performs when death is not sudden, when a person is consciously dying. The reader expects the dying mother to wax philosophic about life, live out some final wishes, and say a tearful goodbye to her husband and children. Instead, she runs errands and checks off her To-Do list. The displacement between the mother's tragic, frightening situation and her extremely level-headed, practical actions adds humor to this otherwise somber moment.

These examples of *representation by the small* in "Ashes" demonstrate the technique's effectiveness at preserving humor amid tragic scenes by distracting and disarming the reader

with comparisons to smaller, physical objects. Tumors become lemons, survival becomes clothing, dying becomes a change in purchasing habits. In “Ashes,” death has been whittled down to its smallest components; it ceases to be an ominous, terrifying force.

In the final example of *representation by the small*, however, the effect is completely different. The Sedaris family has returned to their hotel after Lisa’s wedding, and while their parents remain in the hotel room, the Sedaris siblings congregate in a nearby graveyard to smoke pot and discuss their mother. In the final sentence of the essay, a comparison is made between death and a physical object that does not diminish the magnitude of the subject or distract the reader from the seriousness of what is being discussed. Rather, this final unification of the Large and Small *defines* death at its most basic level:

Our mother was back in her room and very much alive, probably watching a detective program on television. Maybe that was her light in the window, her figure stepping out onto the patio to light a cigarette. We told ourselves she probably wanted to be left alone, that’s how stoned we were. We’d think of this later, each in our own separate way. I myself tend to dwell on the stupidity of pacing a cemetery while she sat, frightened and alone, staring at the tip of her cigarette and envisioning her self, clearly now, in ashes. (250)

Again, a comparison is made between a large, abstract entity (the concept of one’s self) and a smaller, physical item (ashes). But this comparison of Large to Small is not a clever comparison of two unassociated subjects in order to create a humorous displacement; it is simply precisely what occurs in death: the transformation of the human body into dust. Death, in the most literal sense, is the process of reducing the whole of the human being (including our abstract ideas of

what makes up a human: mind, body, soul) to its smallest, physical parts. Through decomposition, we become dirt—or by cremation, ashes. For this reason, *representation by the small* may be the perfect technique to momentarily distract from the tragic events of the essay without seeming incongruous to the topic; ultimately, the technique defines the physical process of death.

Like “Ashes,” *representation by the small* is used frequently in “The Youth in Asia” to distract the reader and prevent the essay from becoming a tragic, humorless recollection of dead pets. In the latter, however, the comparison made between the Large and the Small occurs at a structural level; it is not simply part of the text, but also part of the essay’s design. Sedaris structures “The Youth in Asia” as a single essay with two layers by framing a somber, retrospective piece within a light-hearted, humorous anecdote.

Due to this double-layered structure, it is difficult to definitively say what “The Youth in Asia” is *about*. It begins as a chronology of the Sedaris family pets. Dogs, cats, hamsters, guinea pigs—each and every one meeting their (untimely) demise. The children are the primary owners of the smaller rodents, but the dogs and cats belong to dad and mom, respectively. Sedaris makes this clear by crafting several comparisons between his mother and her cats, and his father and his dogs. Parallels between the parents and their pets are found throughout the essay, and the reader gets a sense of each parent’s individual dynamic with the pets:

[W]e kept a succession of drowsy, secretive cats that seemed to enjoy a unique bond with our mother. “It’s because I open their cans,” she’d say, though we all knew it ran deeper than that. What they really had in common were their claws. That and a primal urge to destroy my father’s golf bags. (*MTP* 72)

When Mädchen Two [the second of the family's German shepherds] developed splenic tumors, my father dropped everything and ran to her side. Evenings were spent at the animal hospital, lying on a mat outside of her cage and adjusting her IV. He'd never afforded her much attention when she was healthy, but her impending death awoke in him a great sense of duty. (73)

The mother and her cats are united against a common enemy, (which unfortunately happens to be the father's beloved hobby), and the father feels a close connection to the family dog in her final moments. Each parent's choice in animal seems befitting to his or her character, making the pets little more than a walking extension of their personalities. In turn, the animals (especially the cats) reflect the inner desires and emotions of their masters. The pets and humans become unified through these clever comparisons.

Sedaris continues to describe his parents in terms of canine and feline until the children have grown up and the parents get a Great Dane named Melina—whom they love equally:

They loved this dog in proportion to its size, and soon their hearts had no room for anyone else. In terms of mutual respect and admiration, their six children had been nothing more than a failed experiment. Melina was the real thing. (73)

Despite the fact that they have united their interests to a single species, the parents have very distinct personal reasons for loving Melina. Sedaris explains that his mother's fondness for Melina "tended toward the horizontal, a pet being little more than a napping companion" while his father "loved the Great Dane for its size, and frequently took her on long, aimless drives,

during which she'd stick her heavy, anvil-sized head out the window and leak great quantities of foamy saliva" (74).

After Sedaris has firmly attached Melina to his parents through common personality traits, the essay takes a somber turn when it addresses the death of his mother. While "The Youth in Asia" may initially seem to be about the family pets, after a second or third reading the mother's death becomes so pervasive throughout the text that it becomes difficult to determine which topic is the primary focus of the essay. The unification of the parents and their pets seems, in retrospection, to be an elaborate form of preparation for this shift in topic. The comparisons have created a kind of *representation by the small* that occurs on a structural level, wherein human life (the Large) can be discussed *in terms of* animal life (small). The children's adolescent years are marked off by each successive hamster or collie. Their movement off to college and out of the house is marked by Melina's entrance. The father's retirement is embodied by his growing fondness for taking long walks with Melina. The story of the family's pets becomes the story of the family.²⁶

²⁶ In the essay, Sedaris directly acknowledges the way pets can provide a good structure for describing human life—how they can demarcate life's "eras." He discusses how the death of his cat, Neil, marked his movement into adulthood:

The cat's death struck me as the end of an era. It was, of course, the end of *her* era, but with the death of a pet there's always that urge to string black crepe over an entire ten- or twenty-year period. The end of my safe college life, the last of my thirty-inch waist, my faltering relationship with my first real boyfriend: I cried for it all and wondered why so few songs are written about cats. (*MTP* 80)

When Melina dies, a similar bracket is placed at the end of a period in the father's life:

Melina's era spanned the final dozen years of his married life. The dog had ridden in the family's last station wagon, attended my father's retirement party, and celebrated the elections of two Republican presidents. She grew weaker and lost her appetite, but against all advice, my father simply could not bear to let go. (81)

The sorrow felt for the loss of these pets is augmented by their association with the passage of life for Sedaris and his father. The animals' deaths are indicative of their masters' aging, and with each successive loss of a pet the Sedaris family is moved from adolescence to adulthood to retirement—and, eventually, to their own deaths. It is likely they mourn not only for the death of their pets, but for the realization of their own mortality.

These comparisons between humans and animals reach a poignant climax when Sedaris broaches the topic of his mother's death. In the *Me Talk Pretty One Day* audiobook, Sedaris performs "The Youth in Asia" before a live audience, and after he received what sounds like his loudest laugh for his quip about "Pet Burning," he transitioned into a somber recollection of his mother with the culminating moment of the essay's human-to-animal unification:

When my mother died, Melina took over her side of the bed. Due to their size, Great Danes generally don't live very long. [...] At the age of eleven she was a wonder of science, gray bearded and teetering. My father massaged her arthritic legs, carried her up the stairs, and lifted her into bed. He treated her the way that men in movies treat their ailing wives, the way he would have treated my mother had she allowed such naked displays of affection.²⁷

The mother's life has been unified with Melina, and now their deaths become intertwined. In this passage, Melina serves only as a medium through which Sedaris can express the pain of his loss, and convey his father's deep commitment to his wife—despite their complicated relationship and her reserved nature. The essay's layered structure permits Sedaris this touching, heart-rending moment without drenching the essay in tragedy and sentimentalism. By expressing his undying compassion to Melina in the place of his wife, the father is not over-inflated as a fictional tragic hero, but realistically portrayed as a genuinely devoted husband.

In "The Youth in Asia" Sedaris has utilized *representation by the small* to establish a layered structure in which the tragedy of his mother's death can be expressed in terms of the death of her beloved Great Dane, allowing the essay to remain generally light-hearted and not melodramatic. Expressing human mortality through animal mortality diverts the reader's focus,

²⁷ Sedaris, "The Youth in Asia," *MTP* Audiobook.

but more importantly, it lends an atmosphere of *replaceability* to this tragic subject. The pets in “The Youth in Asia” are deeply loved, but when they die they are quickly replaced. The first half of the essay is quite literally a string of dead pets and their replacements. Their first two dogs, collies named Rastus and Duchess, have puppies (which are quickly given away). After Rastus runs off and Duchess dies of worms and old age, the Sedaris family barrels through a string of “half a dozen” hamsters and a few guinea pigs. As each of these pets pass away, the children are comforted by the knowledge that there was a brand new pet right around the corner. In the wise words of their mother, “The world is full of guinea pigs” (*MTP* 70). Sedaris remembers that, at their family’s many pet funerals, “Eulogies tended to be brief, our motto being ‘There’s always more where this one came from.’”²⁸ Even the names given to the pets stress their replaceability: the family’s German shepherd named Mädchen has her aptly named successor, Mädchen Two. These animals are not disposable—they are clearly loved by the family—but the mourning period is brief and the void quickly filled with a new puppy or kitten.

Death, viewed in this light of constant regeneration, cannot be tragic. It is death without the biting sting of “forever.” True, the pets are dead, but the constant ushering in of younger animals gives the Sedaris pets the sense of reincarnation. If death is not final—not the end of a being’s life, but the beginning of another—it can hardly be considered tragic. It is, in fact, the formula behind some of our greatest comedies, and some of our best cartoons. Saturday morning classics like Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner would be a gruesome massacre were it not for the constant regeneration of the characters. Whatever perils may befall this pair, the audience rests soundly in the knowledge that they will live to fight another day. Remove all possibility of

²⁸ Sedaris, “The Youth in Asia,” *MTP* Audiobook.

death, and we are free to chuckle when the Coyote's Acme rocket zooms over the side of the cliff. Death is not feared when it has no lasting repercussions.²⁹

In "The Youth in Asia," this atmosphere of replaceability and inconsequential death is present even at the death of Sedaris' mother. The incident of her death is introduced to the reader in the same comical tone previously used to describe the various dead hamsters and late German shepherds:

When my mother died and was cremated herself, we worried that, acting on instinct, our father might run out and immediately replace her. Returning from the funeral, my brother, sisters, and I half expected to find some vaguely familiar Sharon Two standing at the kitchen counter and working the puzzle in *TV Guide*. (MTP 80)

The tragedy of the mother's death is diluted by the essay's comic tone, which stressed regeneration. If the family really was able to replace their mother, as Sedaris' imagination suggests, there is no cause for pathos.³⁰ The comedic tone is preserved by reconfiguring human

²⁹ Interestingly enough, the Warner Bros. website for Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner outlines a list of ten rules created by Chuck Jones that were strictly followed by the cartoonists and writers creating the cartoon. Three of the rules suggest the removal of lasting, deadly consequences:

1. Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by going "Beep! Beep!"
2. No outside force can harm the Coyote—only his own ineptitude or the failure of Acme products.
3. The Coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.

(Looney Tunes: Stars of the Show, Posting Date N/A, Warner Bros., 3 Mar. 2006, <http://looneytunes.warnerbros.com/stars_of_the_show/wile_roadrunner/wile_story.html#>)

³⁰ Of course, this delusion can not be sustained. The reader feels the brunt of the family's pain, even if he or she is momentarily diverted by this imagined scene. This may be the reason that Sedaris deleted this passage entirely from his performed version and transitioned directly from the quip about "Pet Burning" to the passage discussed previously, about Melina taking over the mother's side of the bed. Personally, I think the audiobook version introduces the mother's death more suitably. It forms a much subtler connection between animal life and human life, foregoing the blatant discussion of "Sharon Two." The removal of this passage allows Sedaris' readers to discover these nuances for themselves. Unfortunately, as I cannot reprint the entirety of the essay and allow my readers to experience how this subtle tone of regeneration is created, this passage will suffice as a transparent example of Sedaris' intentions.

mortality within the comical world of replaceable pets. It is a large-scale form of *representation by the small*, in which the tragedy is portrayed in terms of comedy.³¹ A situation that could escalate to a level of melodrama is reduced to its smallest parts, stripped of its lasting consequences—in essence, made a farce. It is like staging *Oedipus Rex* with a cast of My Little Ponies: you can't help but laugh.

³¹ Bergson argues that all of comedy is essentially “a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation” (“Laughter” 220). In effect, all comedy must, like Sedaris’ essay, cleverly dispose of mortality in order to remain humorous. Bergson goes so far as to say that one can only gain a true comic perspective “by making game of ‘serious’ life” (223).

CHARACTERIZATION OF PARENTS: SENTIMENTALIZING DEATH AND THE DYING

The technique of *representation by the small* functions to produce humor and provide momentary distraction from the somber topics Sedaris discusses in his essays, as well as to explore our reluctance to accept the physicality and finality of death. But Sedaris also employs the technique of *representation by the small* as a method of characterization—particularly when describing the personalities of his mother and father. When characterizing by the technique of *representation by the small*, Sedaris describes an entire identity, the whole of a personality, (the Large) by relatively unremarkable character traits and minor idiosyncrasies, (the Small). It is a form of characterization by synecdoche, wherein the parents are described by one or two of their minor traits that are used to stand for the whole of their identities. Sedaris makes his parents into caricatures of themselves, instead of multi-dimensional, developed characters. After reducing his parents to this deconstructed state, Sedaris confronts their death—his mother’s death being actualized and his father’s anticipated—in a manner befitting their established characters, making the occurrences of their deaths simply another expression of each parent’s personality instead of a tragic signal of the *end* of their personalities.

If the description provided in Sedaris’ essays is to be believed,³² his father lacks a complex personality, but has, instead, a singular personality trait that appears in many different and often bizarre manifestations. That singular trait is thriftiness. He is thrifty to the point of

³² Whether Sedaris’ essays are truthful, exaggerated, or completely fictionalized is not an assertion that can be sufficiently established in this thesis. Sedaris has claimed in several interviews that his stories are true-to-life, and the copyright pages of *Naked* and *Me Talk Pretty* include an author’s note, which states, “The events described in these stories are real. Other than the family members, the characters have fictitious names and identifying characteristics”—so, for the purpose of this study, I will assume the descriptions of his parents are mostly accurate.

ludicrousness. He scrimps and saves to a degree that seems excessive—even for a man with six children and a wife to provide for. Though Sedaris never describes his father’s facial features, height, stature or hair color, the essays include *several* references to the father’s thriftiness. In “A Plague of Tics,” Sedaris makes an off-handed remark about his father “driving home from the grocery store with a lapful of rejected, out-of-state coupons” (N 14). In “Ashes,” Sedaris bemoans having to stay with his family in a couple second-rate hotel rooms after his sister Lisa’s wedding:

Traveling with our father meant always having to stay at nationally known motor lodges and take our meals only in fast-food restaurants. “What?” he’d ask. “Are you telling me you’d rather sit down at a table and order food you’ve never tasted before?”

Well, yes, that was exactly what we wanted. Other people did it all the time, and most of them had lived to talk about it. (245)

The coupons, the motel rooms, the fast-food—these physical manifestations of the father’s stinginess appear frequently throughout the essays and, collectively, they come to represent the father as a whole. In this way, the father is characterized through the technique *representation by the small*, wherein a large, abstract notion of the father’s personality is described in terms of small, physical items.

In fact, in “I’ll Eat What He’s Wearing,” an essay devoted primarily to characterizing the father, Sedaris almost exclusively employs *representation by the small* to construct his father’s personality. The essay offers arguably the most developed portrait of the father available in the entire collection of Sedaris’ work, while only revealing *one* of his idiosyncrasies: his predilection

for hoarding food. Yet another manifestation of his thriftiness, the father's compulsion to save food borders on the pathological—not to mention the grotesque:

For as long as I can remember, my father has saved. He saves money, he saves disfigured sticks that resemble disfigured celebrities, and, most of all, he saves food. Cherry tomatoes, sausage biscuits, the olives plucked from other people's martinis—he hides these things in strange places until they are rotten. And then he eats them. (*MTP* 266)

Here, again, Sedaris represents his father's thriftiness indirectly. Instead of analyzing the cause of his stinginess,³³ Sedaris catalogues the tangible evidence it leaves behind: "liquefied nectarines and rock-hard kaiser rolls," moldy strawberries, decaying pineapples, and "anemic pork chops" (266-68). These are the materials from which the reader is meant to construct the father's identity, and they are clearly inadequate material for the undertaking. These tangible products of the father's stinginess, even when taken collectively, are not enough to generate a rounded character. These physical objects provide no further information about the origins of the father's character (his childhood experiences, family life, education, etc.) or deeper, psychological insight into the father (*why* he might act this way). In short, the reader can compile the pieces, but they produce no whole. Instead they offer, at best, a caricature of the father that—

³³ At one point in the essay, Sedaris suggests his father's thriftiness may be a result of his being born in the Depression, but then quickly dismisses it as a contributing factor:

There are those who attribute my father's hoarding to being raised during the Depression, but my mother was not one of them. "Bullshit," she used to say. "I had it much worse than him, but you don't see *me* hiding figs" (*MTP* 266-267).

For the rest of the essay, Sedaris makes no other attempt to discuss *why* his father hides food, but focuses instead on *what* food he hides.

despite being extremely humorous—simply cannot elicit the same level of attachment and sympathy as a fully developed character.

When a character has been reduced to this deconstructed, piecemeal, caricaturized state that resists the reader's sympathy, how can we mourn his death? The father lacks a certain fullness that would make his death resonate with Sedaris' readers. He is, of course, a fellow human and so the readers are likely to experience some sympathy with him on that basis alone—but unlike a great novel or stirring film that draws out the audience's emotions by crafting lifelike, multi-faceted, authentic characters, Sedaris' essays have not prioritized the development of the father's character beyond his thriftiness. And although an audience may mourn the death of a passionate, idealistic, dark-haired, star-crossed lover—the death of a tight-fisted, food-hoarder is hardly cause for tears.

So, when Sedaris confronts his father's death—or, for now, the possibility of it—the moment does not read as tragic. In an essay from *Naked* entitled "Get Your Ya-Ya's Out," Sedaris' paternal grandmother "Ya Ya" (the Greek word for "grandmother") moves into the Sedaris house when she becomes too weak to live on her own. When Ya Ya finally passes on, the family attends her funeral, and Sedaris' mother shares her own final wishes with her children:

"When I get like that, I want you to shoot me, no questions asked," my mother whispered. "Disconnect the feeding tubes and shut off the monitors, but under no circumstances do I want you to move me into your basement."

We nodded at the casket—my brother, my sisters, and I—knowing that with her, it would never come to that. Our father, on

the other hand, the man weeping in the front row, he would prove to be more difficult. (N 39)

Clearly, Sedaris' mother does not share the customs of her husband's family, traditions that demand children care for their elderly parents during their final days on Earth. She would never burden her children with this responsibility, but Sedaris expects his father might—not because he particularly wants to spend his last days with his children, but because it will be less expensive than a nursing home. Nursing homes are expensive, and “Greeks just didn't *do* things like that. They were too cheap—that's what has always kept their families together” (31).

Even in Sedaris' imagining of his father's death, thriftiness once again arises to the forefront. His death, envisioned in this way, is nothing more than another illustration of the father's identifying personality trait. Sedaris reassures the reader that death will not be the end of the father's thriftiness, and since the majority of Sedaris' work represents his father's identity by this trait alone, it seems death will not be the end of the father, either. At least, it seems, not for the reader. This moment of confronting the father's anticipated death fits with the established caricature and is therefore more likely to provoke laughter than tears.

Similarly, Sedaris characterizes his mother by employing the technique of *representation by the small* to establish her character as the sum of her minor traits and idiosyncrasies. But her depiction materializes as noticeably more complex, more dimensional than her husband's—partly due to the greater abundance of essays dealing with the mother's character. She is strong-willed, practical and stubborn. Her sarcastic outbursts and irreverent tone provide much needed comic distractions and reduce the tension in the essays about her struggle with cancer. More importantly, however, her personality provides a model for the attitude Sedaris' readers should

take when approaching these tragic moments—an attitude of irreverence and levelheaded practicality that resists over-sentimentalizing the dead and the dying.

If “I’ll Eat What He’s Wearing” is the quintessential essay about Sedaris’ father, then “Ashes” is the essay for his mother. It is the essay in which Sedaris directly confronts his mother’s diagnosis of, struggle with, and death from lung cancer. It is also an essay that provides arguably the most vivid depiction of her personality available in Sedaris’ writings. Her stubbornness and practicality in the beginning of her battle, her irreverence in the face of death, and her refusal to engage in touchy-feely, sentimental moments with her children provide moments of distraction from the fatalistic discussion taking place, and her character provides Sedaris’ readers with a model for maintaining a degree of distance from the text, so that the humor is not overtaken by the sorrow of the essay.

When she is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, Sedaris’ mother does not embody the kind of “can-do” spirit her children expect. Mostly as a result of her own stubbornness, she expends little effort actually *battling* her cancer. Sedaris recognizes that his mother’s personality interferes with her ability to overcome her disease, admitting, “Our mother was not the type to greet the dawn or cook with oats and barley. She didn’t reason, she threatened; and if that didn’t work, she chose to ignore the problem” (238). His mother is a woman set in her ways, and—although Sedaris tries his hardest to convince his mother to keep fighting—at times he can’t help but share her perspective:

They [people battling cancer] needed to accept the idea of a new and different future, free of crowded ashtrays and five-gallon jugs of wine and scotch. They needed to believe that such a life might

be worth living. I didn't know that I'd be able to embrace such an unrewarding future, but I hoped that she could. (238)

It seems fighting cancer requires a zest for clean and healthy living that she simply does not possess. His mother has enjoyed her life as she has lived it, and now that she can no longer experience life in the same manner, she is prepared to let it go. Unfortunately, her children are not quite so ready to let *her* go, as evidenced by the countless times David and Paul phone their mother to suggest "new and exciting hobbies she might explore once she was cured and back on her feet"—hobbies like flying airplanes and volunteer work (238). Their mother, however, is less than convinced:

"Please don't call me stoned on pot and tell me there are lots of things I can do with my life," she said. "I just got off the phone with your brother [Paul], who suggested I open up a petting zoo. If that's what being high does for a person, then what I really need to do is start smoking marijuana, which would be a bit difficult for me since the last time I saw my right lung it was lying in the bottom of a pan." (238)

Whenever she is attacked or chastised for becoming complacent in dying, whenever this insatiable zest for life is thrust upon her against her wishes, Sedaris' mother uses humor as a defense. When the Sedaris family dines at a nice restaurant after Lisa's wedding, the mother relaxes with a lit cigarette and a full wine glass—while her husband shouts in her ear:

"What are you doing?" He followed his question with an answer. "You're killing yourself is what you're doing."

My mother lifted her glass in salute. "You got that right, baby." (247)

In these moments, the mother's personality as a whole is dominated by representations of her stubbornness. She is too stubborn to change her diet, too stubborn to stop smoking and drinking, too stubborn to fight. Her death, in a way, will be the supreme example of her stubbornness. Like Sedaris' representation of the father's death as an extension of his thriftiness, the death of the mother can be viewed not as the end of her existence, but her ultimate say-so, the final and most important time she gets her way. From this perspective, her death seems less like a tragic event and more like the most important argument she ever won.

Besides taking the sting out of the tragic events of his mother's death, Sedaris' inclusion of these examples of his mother's humor provides moments of distraction that prevent the reader from becoming engrossed in sorrow. In order for the essays to remain humorous, there must be a certain level of detachment between the reader and tragic events of the text or, more simply, between the reader and the reality of the mother's death. The first step in establishing this distance has been achieved by Sedaris' use of *representation by the small* to characterize his mother—allowing her stubbornness and sarcasm to stand for the whole of her identity—thereby preventing her from attaining that "fullness" that inspires sympathy in the audience.

Sedaris accomplishes the second step in creating distance between the reader and the mother's death by creating distance between the reader and the mother herself. The mother refuses to participate in the highly emotional moments desired by her children and her husband, and her resistance forecloses the possibility of a similar moment developing between the mother and the reader. One such thwarted attempt by Sedaris to connect with his mother on a deeper emotional level happens during a phone call they share after she has been diagnosed with cancer:

“I love you,” I said at the end of one of our late-night phone calls.

“I am going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” she said. I heard a match strike in the background, the tinkling of ice cubes in a raised glass. And then she hung up. I had never said such a thing to my mother, and if I had it to do over again, I would probably take it back. (240)

What begins as a classic Hallmark moment is quickly displaced by the mother’s dismissive comment. Obviously, Sedaris was expecting a different reaction from his mother—maybe a heartfelt “I love you too, son.” or the shedding of a few tears. The mother does not reject this sentiment because of a lack of love for her son. Rather, she rejects the *expression* of the sentiment because it is out-of-character and seems inauthentic. Sedaris admits that he has never “said such a thing” before, so we can assume that his impetus for saying it now is her cancer. His mother rejects this sort of forced emotion, because it attempts to imbue the end of life with more sorrow, more tragedy than the whole of her life has contained.

The idea of having her final days memorialized to the point of spectacle is so disagreeable to the mother that, when she first receives the diagnosis, she delays telling her children:

If she’d had it her way, we would never have known about the cancer. It was our father’s idea to tell us, and she had fought it, agreeing only when he threatened to tell us himself. Our mother worried that once we found out, we would treat her differently, delicately. We might feel obliged to compliment her cooking and

laugh at all her jokes, thinking always of the tumor she was trying so hard to forget. And that is exactly what we did. (239)

Once again, Sedaris' mother resists her children's attempts to sentimentalize her final days. She has not been a saint, nor has she been the perfect mother, so recasting her in these roles would be an attempt to forsake the whole of her life in favor of its final fragment. Doing so would not only produce an inauthentic memory of her life, but would be a disservice to her as a multi-dimensional person.

In describing the mother's resistance of sentimentalization, Sedaris offers the readers a model for how we should interact with the essay's somber tone. The readers, like the Sedaris children, may feel the temptation to indulge in the tragedy of the essay—to let it intensify and expand until it obscures any moments of comedy—but they, like the mother, should resist. It seems, when a loved one is lost, we need the weight of their death to be as immense as their impact on our lives. We need something to block up the absence they have left in their going and so we inflate our memories to fill it. Sedaris tells his mother he loves her, laughs louder at her jokes, gushes over her cooking, and treats her with so much reverence, respect, and appreciation that he loses sight of her actual self. The mother becomes a romantic notion of motherhood, a tragic victim of fate, and the sentimentalized representation is not authentic. Her legacy should not be reduced to tragedy alone, but instead should reflect the complexities of her personality. She is stubborn and considerate, practical and irreverent, sarcastic and loving, comic and tragic. By characterizing her death in terms of her stubbornness, Sedaris preserves an element of his mother's identity from sentimentalization, and presents her as she is—authentically, unapologetically. In death, we do not suddenly become our ideal selves, flawless saints, or tragic

heroes. Nor are we idiosyncratic buffoons who inspire no sympathy. We exist, as we have always existed, somewhere between tragedy and comedy.

CONCLUSION

As Sedaris' interview with *The Believer* magazine draws to a close—having run the gamut of subjects from monkeys to mortality—the interviewer asks Sedaris whether he is afraid of dying. Sedaris replies, “I’m definitely afraid of dying. I have a huge fear of the unknown.” He adds, “When people say they’re not afraid of dying, I just assume they haven’t given it much thought” (*Believer* 56).

Sedaris has undoubtedly given death a great deal of thought. He has produced a body of work that artfully blends comedy and tragedy to create a unique, delightful brand of humor that resonates with the truth of our human experience. By strategically employing humorous techniques, Sedaris allows momentary diversions from the solemn events discussed in his essays. These diversions permit the author to approach our anxieties about mortality, the dying, and the dead without escalating the somber tone and obscuring the essay’s light-hearted moments. His essays temper tragic moments with humor, resisting the temptation to indulge in melodrama and, in so doing, they establish a context for a practical, productive discourse on mortality.

The techniques I have discussed here in length are not the only techniques that produce the humor of the essays. There are many different techniques, immediately discernable or discovered through analysis, at play in these essays on death, which intermingle and overlap with the methods I have enumerated in this thesis. *Representation by the small*, for example, can be seen as simply a specialized form of displacement, wherein unexpected unifications are constructed to surprise the reader by their appropriateness.

Furthermore, death is not the only topic requiring the use of such compelling and complex humorous techniques. Sedaris' essays are filled with typically "unfunny" topics such as mental disease, physical deformity, social rejection, drug abuse, and sexual deviance. His ability to craft best-selling humorous collections out of these strange subjects suggests the possibility of many more techniques than the three listed here. Analyzing Sedaris' treatments of these other subjects could unearth other humorous techniques and the resulting discourses they initiate about life, death, and the human condition.

Certainly, such a pursuit would be worthy of scholarly inquiry. If life is a blend of comedy and tragedy, joy and sorrow experienced simultaneously, than humorists who are able to incorporate tragic moments without breaking form should be praised for their ability to portray a comprehensive vision of life. Sedaris is one such talented humorist, whose complex and profoundly affecting essays are not only fertile ground for in-depth study, but also a genuine pleasure to read.

FIGURE 1: GRAPH RATING "FUN" OF JOKES AND NON-JOKES

Cunningham, William and Peter Derks. "Humor Appreciation and Latency of Comprehension."
Humor Vol. 18-4 (2005): 389-403.

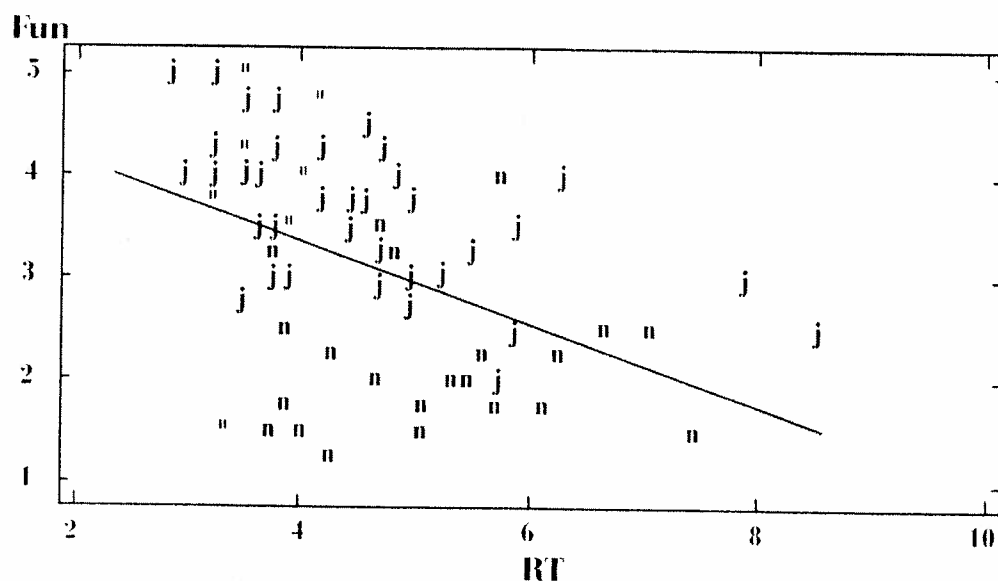


Figure 1. Humor rating (FUN) of jokes (j) and non-jokes (n) as a function of recognition latency in seconds (RT) in experiment 1. (") indicates overlapping scores for different items

FIGURE 2: GRAPH OF FUNNINESS AS A FUNCTION OF SENSITIVITY

Dewitte, Siegfried and Tom Verguts. "Being Funny: A Selectionist Account of Humor Production." *Humor* Vol. 14-1 (2001): 37-53.

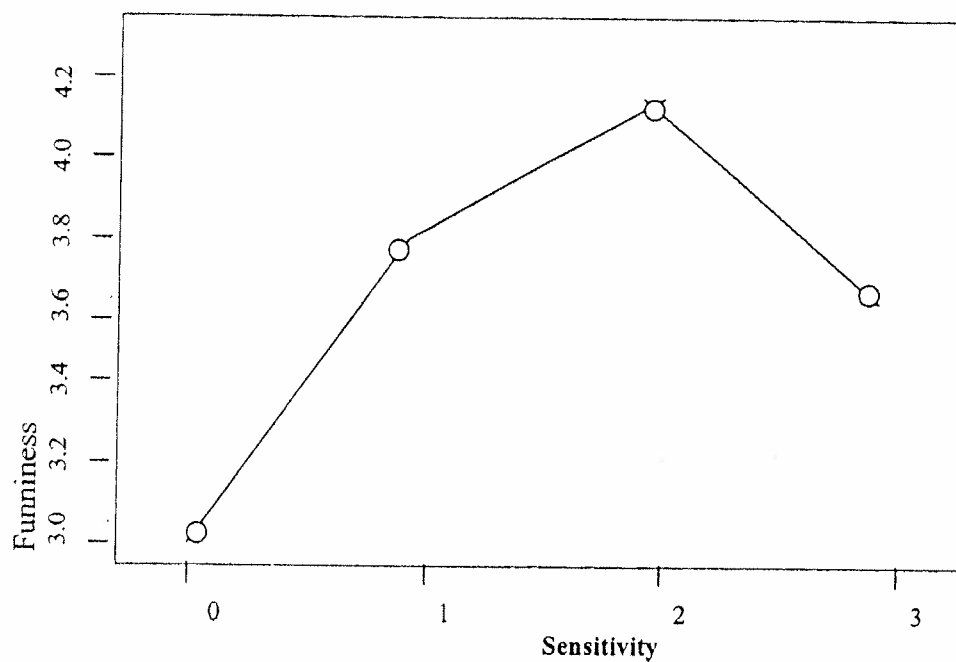


Figure 1. Funniness as a function of sensitivity

FIGURE 3: LETTER TO DAVID SEDARIS, OCT. 31, 2005

Mr. Sedaris—

10/31/05

Please excuse the crude stationery, but I have a special place in my heart for it now. I have been taking page after page of notes on your essays on many pads of this paper, so I thought it fitting. I am at this very moment — and likely will be still when you receive this — holed-up in the University of Michigan library preparing my undergraduate thesis on the topic of your writing. (What my tiny study room lacks in organization and any means of contact with the outside world it makes up for in piles of empty coffee cups and half-completed Sudden puzzles.)

By March I will have written over 60 pages on your essays, which I have found so compelling and clever that I prefer

to spend my time at college reading and rereading them - at the expense of my required reading. (By the way, if your confidence as a writer should ever waver, be secure in the knowledge that your work is heads and tails above even the best 500-page, 18th century epistolary novel.)

So, here I sit, up to my eyeballs in Freud's joke-theory, attempting to craft an essay half as interesting as "Ashes" or "Repeat After Me." My thesis is mainly focused on how you manage the amazing feat of writing essays about disfigurement, mental illness, suburban banality, and death (to name a few) and yet the back of your books are littered with phrases like "side splitting"

and "hilarious." Of course, they are hilarious, but there is a thread in that humor that is so penetrating, it manages to capture life more truthfully than any of the novels, poems, or epistolary novels I have come across thus far. In your essays, I see the faults and eccentricities of human beings and it is all at once beautiful and mesmerizing. Of course, I don't intend to spend the entire essay complimenting you. There may be some actual analysis, too. As of the end of October, it remains a work in progress.

I am writing you this letter to ask your permission to send another letter which will be full of pointed and well-researched questions about your writing. Being able to

read your responses and learn more about your process of writing would be invaluable to my research (and would put me a step ahead of my fellow classmates who won't be putting "Letter from Chaucer" in their bibliographies.) I would greatly appreciate any response you could give and, if not, I will be satisfied simply letting you know how profoundly your writing has affected my life.

(I learned how to guilt from my Mother.)

Sincerely,
Megan Ganz

FIGURE 4: LETTER FROM DAVID SEDARIS, NOV. 16, 2005

Megan Ganz

November 16

Dear Megan,

Thank you for your letter, which was forwarded by my lecture agent, Steven Barclay. I'm flattered that you would write a thesis on me, but, honestly, couldn't you find anyone better? If it's not too late to change your mind, I could recommend any number of worthy subjects-Richard Yates, for example, or Mavis Gallant.

Yes, you can send me some questions, though you'll likely be disappointed with my answers. Like most of the writers I know, I just sort of stab at things until they're finished, never thinking of what it all means. Things might occur to me once the essay has been published, but when I'm at my desk I'm simply trying to tell a story, and to get to the movie theater by 4 PM. Yesterday I saw "Flight Plan," and the day before that, "A History of Violence."

I'll be in Paris until Christmas, and then I'm not sure. To be on the safe side, I'll give you my second address, and you can send your questions to both Paris and London.

Sincerely,

David Sedaris

DS-

FIGURE 5: LETTER TO DAVID SEDARIS, JAN. 28, 2006

Mr. Sedaris—

Thank you for replying so quickly to my letter. It was a very pleasant surprise, to say the least. I was nice to discover you actually do use a typewriter and spend your days in Paris watching movies, like your essays suggest. But I worry that, although knowing random details such as these would be considered “research” for my fellow thesis students (studying dead authors), for me it looks a lot like stalking.

Speaking of which, I had to run out and buy *The Believer* when I heard you gave them an interview. And somehow you had the foresight to speak directly to my thesis topic! (All the talk about morbidity and death.) So, to say “thank you,” I thought I would tell you my best monkey story, which I heard from my boyfriend, who is attending grad school for Public Health and read this story in one of his classes. Apparently there was a monkey under scientific observation because it had become infected with a virus that was multiplying at unheard of rates, causing the monkey to become bloated and distended because the virus had become bigger than its body. One day, the monkey was taken out of its cage so it could undergo various tests and, while a scientist was holding it, the monkey exploded. Typically, I wouldn’t be so thrilled to hear about an animal dying, but it was probably the best thing that could have happened to this particular monkey. Besides, the only think more interesting than a monkey is an exploding monkey with a hair-trigger switch.

Now that I have the important part of the letter out of the way, here are my questions. I promise none of them are about “what it all means.” Those questions only seem to be answered by the most pretentious of authors, anyway, and are never interesting to anyone. Besides, if I were going to ask you something that deep, I would just ask you if you could explain my thesis statement in sixty pages, cite your sources, and mail it to my thesis advisor by March 17. But here are the three questions I can’t answer on my own:

How do you edit your essays for audiobooks and live performances? Is it generally for time-constraints only, or do you alter them for better audience response?

The majority of your essays deal with somber topics—mental-disease, death, deviant behavior, etc.—which seem strange subjects for humor. Is it your conscious decision to deal with more serious issues as opposed to other, more light-hearted topics?

You said you don’t always consider what your work means until after you’re finished, so what do you think about having your work analyzed so closely by someone else?

Feel free to answer any or none of these questions. After doing all this research and writing, it took all my restraint to ask three and not three hundred questions. Hopefully you can still make it to the movie on time. Thank you for all your help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Megan Ganz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Megan" and last name "Ganz" clearly legible.

FIGURE 6: LETTER FROM DAVID SEDARIS, FEB. 26, 2006

Megan Ganz

February 26

Dear Megan,

To answer your questions:

On editing- Aside from the recording, I have very little to do with my audio books. This is my choice, and has not been forced on me by anyone at Little, Brown. My audio book producer is a woman named Maja Thomas. I like her very much, and trust her completely, therefore I let her take care of it. Getting involved would mean listening to my own voice, and that is something I refuse to do.

As for the live shows, I generally tailor my line up to whichever city I'm in. I don't like to repeat myself, so if I'm at UCLA, for example, I'll go into my file and see what I read the last time I was there. My upcoming tour will take me to, I think, 35 places. So far I've got seven new stories, which I'll read before an audience, and then rewrite in my hotel room. Read and rewrite, read and rewrite, I do it every night, and eventually, hopefully, weed out the boring parts.

As for time constraints, I'm contracted to read for an hour, and I make it a point not to exceed my limit. The reading is followed by 20 minutes of audience questions, and I time that as well.


I wasn't aware that my stories deal with somber topics, but I guess you're right. As an "essayist," I live in fear of becoming cuddly, and writing light hearted pieces about straightening up my sock drawer. Then, too, I think that death and deviant behavior are a lot funnier than most of the subjects generally considered funny.

What do I think about having my work analyzed? To be honest, I never thought about it until fairly recently, when my essays began appearing in college text books. They'll print the story, "Let It Snow," for example, and follow it with a list of questions. "This essay used hyperbole to make its point. What examples can you find?" "There is a shift in the tone of the essay after paragraph 7. What is that shift, and why is it effective?"

I myself, have no idea what hyperbole is, and notice no shift in paragraph seven. Good thing I'm not a college student.

Sincerely

David Sedaris



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