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Pushing Past a Laugh

Maura Donnelly

Comedy has the ability to connect people through laughter, but oftentimes jokes can be taken too far and offend others without meaning to. What people find funny is subjective and dependent on personal experiences, so there is a large gray area for appropriate jokes to make and certain topics cross a line. As a comedian, this isn't easy to navigate. This struggle with balance is not a new idea, and many comedians have utilized their platforms to experiment with these boundaries. Charlie Chaplin and Hannah Gadsby have expanded the purpose of their pieces to challenge their audiences and attempt to incite change through comedy. Chaplin and Gadsby use humor to highlight injustices in society, allowing those facing mistreatment to feel less alone. In their efforts to connect with the marginalized members of society, Chaplin struggles to balance comedy and seriousness, while Gadsby has developed and perfected her ability to make jokes without invalidating others' experiences.

Chaplin draws from his own experiences with poverty growing up to accurately depict, in *Modern Times*, how hard it was for working-class men at the time. However, because Chaplin was insanely wealthy at the time, his efforts to relate to the lower class can come across as ingenuine. Author of "New World Poor through an Old-World Lens: Charlie Chaplin's Engagement with Poverty," Barbara Korte writes, "Chaplin's representation of class troubles are grounded...in personal experience. His rise from poverty during his South London youth, to great wealth and celebrity in America, is often rendered as a classical rags-to-riches story" (127). Chaplin worked in a workhouse from a young age, but after his mother got sick, he was sent to boarding school for orphans. There he experienced hunger and physical mistreatment (notablebiographies.com). After touring music halls, he came to the states with the Fred Karno company in 1910. Shortly after, he began appearing in films and eventually built his own studio and signed a million-dollar contract. *Modern Times* was one of Chaplin's later movies released in 1936, just after the Great Depression. While Chaplin's roots allow him to sympathize with lower-class status, Chaplin himself was a millionaire (history.com). Even though he experienced many hardships at a young age his success inhibited him from fully understanding life as a member of the poor working class in the 30s. Although he demonstrates in *Modern Times* the struggles of working-class men, he is one of the minorities that remained financially stable during the Great Depression.

Modern Times attempts to highlight faults in an unjust system but falls flat because Chaplin's humor revolves around the factory worker's mental and physical abuse rather than criticizing those in power. Chaplin's message is restricted as he challenges big industries from a position of comfort because

he does not have to deal with the hardships he presents in his film. Mark Winokur author of "*Modern Times* and the Comedy of Transformation," states, "the theme of *Modern Times*...can be restated more mechanically as the use of the individual for something other than what he intended" (220). Chaplin uses physical comedy with the Tramp to communicate factory workers are overworked, put in danger in factories, and experience job instability. In *Modern Times*, the Tramp's job in the assembly line is to tighten bolts, and because he is forced to work at such a fast pace with no breaks, the hand movement becomes a nervous twitch. The movement has been ingrained in him, and it becomes part of his muscle memory, inhibiting him from picking up soup without spilling it all over himself (9:14). The Tramp cannot keep up with the assembly line's face-paced nature, and he ends up going through the machine trying to keep up, which sets off a nervous breakdown. This is a comedic scene because the workers chase the Tramp around the factory, and the Tramp turns the machines on to distract them because the workers are controlled by the assembly line (18:19). By using the Tramp as the focal point for his jokes, audiences watch *Modern Times* and laugh at the factory worker, which invalidates working classmen's experiences. This does factory workers a disservice because instead of gaining support for more rights, their abuse is not taken seriously as it has been turned into an exaggerated joke. While Champlin's humiliation and dehumanization of the Tramp was meant to criticize industrialization and big bosses, Chaplin doesn't fully utilize his platform and position of power to take a stance. Instead, he indirectly attacks rich factory owners who take advantage of the working class by humiliating the factory worker, which does not send as powerful a message.

Chaplin attempts to balance comedy and trauma by thoughtfully presenting the Gamin's story, but he quickly diffuses the tension so that his audience remains comfortable and in good spirits. When Chaplin shows the Gamin sobbing, running to her father, who has been shot and lying in the road, the music changes. The next scene depicts the orphans being taken by the police, and the Gamin runs away (29:49). It is clear to audiences that these scenes are not meant to be funny. Chaplin wants his audience to sympathize with the orphans because he can personally relate to being in that situation. However, the tone does not stay sad for long as the next scene goes back to the Tramp in jail, and the storyline never comes back to the orphans. Audiences are not given the opportunity to dwell on the pain in this scene, inhibiting them from empathizing with the characters. Thus, the film does not present audiences with a true perspective of how hard life in the 30s was for the poor working class. Chaplin avoids dwelling in the tension for fear of losing his audience. Chaplin lacks the ability to balance his use of slapstick and his desire to tie in serious issues that were a reality for many during the 30s. This could be because he did not want to stray too far outside the boundaries by making direct political statements.

Since *Modern Times*' release in 1936, the comedy genre has expanded significantly, giving way for comedians like Hannah Gadsby to include meaningful topics, challenging their audiences to do more than laugh at their performances. Unlike Chaplin, Gadsby creates tension in her performance and purposefully makes her audience uncomfortable. Author of "Beyond a Joke," Robin Ince, uses Gadsby as an example of a comedian whose act affects you longer than the night you hear it. He argues, "sometimes it is worth sacrificing the laughs per second rate if you are hitting a nerve instead" (38). Gadsby uses *Nanette* as a turning point for how she balances jokes and trauma. Gadsby sacrifices her audiences' comfort to make her point and assure others who share similar experiences that they are not alone and are heard and understood. Towards the end of her show, Gadsby follows up a joke she told earlier of a guy almost beating her up for hitting on his girlfriend but reveals the darker truth that the man beat her up and no one stepped in to stop him. She lets her audience wrestle with this tension and sit with the heaviness of her story. She tells them, "This tension is what not-normals carry inside them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different" (1:00:08). Gadsby has carried the truth of her story with her for so long, only revealing the censored version, and by finally letting her audience in, she hopes they can understand what the gay community has to deal with. While sharing such intimate details may seem extreme, Gadsby used *Nanette* to experiment with her balance of humor and trauma, and her audiences were receptive to her technique. Through passing her tension and anger on to her audience, Gadsby challenges them to fight societal norms and connects with those who have suffered similar injustices.

Chaplin chooses to end his film on a happy note, but in doing so, he reveals his privilege. In contrast, Gadsby vulnerably reveals her pain with her audience and ends *Nanette* with tangible tension in the air to communicate her message. *Modern Times* ends with the Tramp and the Gamine running away, and the final shot shows them walking off into the horizon (1:27:20). His intentions with this ending were to give a message of hope and reassurance that the individual's value is not based on their place in an unjust system. However, the ending depicts an unrealistic solution for members of the working class in the 30s. In reality, factory workers could not just quit their job and run away. Success was very much based on work as times were hard and making money was necessary, so for Chaplin, who is wealthy and has a job he likes, this ending is insensitive. Gadsby takes the opposite approach to her ending. She does not end her performance on a feel-good note. Instead, she is brutally honest with her audience. Robin Ince writes, "...the reward is when someone is affected by your act when it has been useful as well as funny" (36). This is something that Gadsby does better than Chaplin. Gadsby pours her heart out to her audience, and she chokes up explaining how the pain and shame she has lived with for so long have done real damage to her,

and because of her experiences, she will never really be okay. In her final message to her audience, she asks them, "just please help me take care of my story" (1:07:27). She does not strive for the ideal happy ending because, in reality, her life is not full of laughter and happiness, which is true for many struggling with their sexuality. Gadsby's message is more impactful than Chaplin's because of its raw emotion and honesty, which audiences can appreciate, connect with, and learn from.

Although Gadsby takes a different approach in *Douglas* by ending her performance on a laugh, unlike in *Modern Times*, the stories she tells are not brushed to the side by the illusion of a happy ending. Hannah Gadsby uses *Douglas* to continue to discuss stereotypes in society, this time focusing on her experience as someone who is on the spectrum. Since most of her audience is familiar with *Nanette*, Gadsby starts *Douglas* by walking audiences through an outline of her performance. When revealing how she will end the show, she says, "I will drop the mic. Except I won't drop the mic because...I have autism and I find loud noises quite distressing" (12:13). After her lecture on the oversexualizing of women in art, she ends by comparing a baby in a painting to the comedian Louis CK. Louis CK is a comedian whose jokes often marginalize the disabled and those in minority groups, specifically those of the LGBT community. Then, as the crowd erupts, Gadsby sets her mic on the ground and walks offstage. She has spent her whole performance emphasizing that there should be a place for the marginalized in comedy and this joke further pushes her point that comedy should not punch down and further oppress those groups. *Modern Time's* ending shows that even through all the injustices the Tramp suffered, he got a happy ending, leaving the audience with a sense of relief that the issues discussed had been resolved somehow. Gadsby does the opposite. Her final joke proves to her audience that there are still comedians and people in society like Louis CK that benefit from laughing at the pain of others and reinforces that our work is not done to make the marginalized feel welcome in society. While her dig at Louis CK and her planned mic drop is a hilarious way to end her act, they also tie her act together and help her to effectively show how she is taking back comedy and changing the narrative. Gadsby punches up at the privileged, who for so long have made jokes out of the disability and LGBTQ communities and validates the experiences of people who identify as members of these communities.

In *Nanette*, Gadsby directly attacks the issues she has with traditional comedy and exposes the homophobia and misogyny ingrained in society without holding anything back. Gadsby upsets the equilibrium by abruptly transitioning between lighthearted humor and intense pain and trauma, potentially overwhelming her audience. Gadsby uses *Nanette* to candidly tell her story without overly joking in hopes of making members of the gay community heard and her audience aware of inherent stereotypes in society.

She has coped with her shame and hatred of herself through jokes, but she is done with self-deprecating humor and censoring her content to make her audience more comfortable. She tells her audience, "...do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation" (18:07). Instead of making jokes that further marginalize members of the gay community, she focuses on attacking those in power. She rants about how art has been used to oversexualize women and argues that Picasso had a mental illness, "is misogyny a mental illness? Yeah. Yeah, it is! Especially if you're a heterosexual man" (52:10). She makes sly jabs at straight white men throughout her show, and at this point in her show, a switch flips and reveals a harsher side to her set. This anger at society is a key difference between Chaplin and Gadsby. Unlike Chaplin, Gadsby is not afraid to attack and critique those in power directly because she is a marginalized community member and experiences injustices in her daily life. However, her message can come across as overly aggressive, and those in the audience who are members of the group she is attacking can get defensive. Gadsby has not worked out a balance in *Nanette*, so she blindsides her audience with her transition between jokes and trauma, which can anger those in the audience who feel called out and cause them to tune out what she has to say.

In *Douglas*, Gadsby dives into intersectionality and proves that she has transformed her comedy by aiming her jokes at ignorant people she has encountered. To start the show, she gives a preview of what she is going to talk about, and she mentions that she is going to reveal that she has autism. She warns her audience she will start a bit unlikable because, "this show is about autism. And people with autism rarely make a good first impression. And most people tend to write us off because of that" (14:18). Her purpose of writing *Douglas* is to make room for the minority in comedy without laughing at them. She is careful in her jokes not to invalidate others' experiences and gives audiences an uncensored idea of what it is like to be autistic and exist in society. Gadsby perfectly balances comedy and her message by telling stories where she has faced prejudice or hatred. Instead of using self-deprecation to retort, she makes fun of the person who mistreated her. *Douglas* sends a more impactful message because, unlike in *Nanette*, Gadsby sprinkles these lighthearted jokes into stories that highlight society's issues throughout her performance. In response to her haters who have messaged her to tell her they have never heard of her, she tells her audience she is worried for them, "if new things are so painful... that's a learning difficulty. Imagine school for someone like that. Long division. (yells) I've never fucking heard of it!" (47:22). While this joke is hilarious, her reason for telling it is to highlight how ridiculous it is that people cannot accept people who are different from them and try to understand things from their perspective. Gadsby shares her experiences as a gay woman on the spectrum

to encourage her audience to be more open-minded and educate them on what normal looks like for those who are not neurotypical. *Douglas* is proof that comedy can go beyond jokes and send a deeper message without further marginalizing those who don't fit in society.

Chaplin and Gadsby are both comedians who challenged the expectations at the time for comedies and pushed for their pieces to have a real impact on their audiences. Both used their platforms to draw attention to issues in society. However, Chaplin had more to lose, and at the time he released *Modern Times*, he had less in common with the working-class men he was fighting for. His disconnect from the lower-class experiencing mistreatment working in the factories is obvious in how he directed the humor in *Modern Times*. Instead of punching up at the big bosses, Chaplin indirectly draws attention to the time's injustices through the comedic misfortunes and abuses the Tramp endures. By turning the Tramp's exhaustion and mental breakdown into a joke, Chaplin invalidates working classmen's experiences at the time. Gadsby is more skilled than Chaplin at making jokes without putting down those already underrepresented in society or experiencing injustices. She is intentional in directing her laughs at privileged individuals in her stories who have mistreated her. Unlike Chaplin, Gadsby is unafraid to make her audience uncomfortable by openly discussing the trauma she has been through. In *Nanette*, Gadsby states that she needs to stray from comedy that censors and invalidates her experience, and in *Douglas*, she proves that she has found the balance between humor and pain. Comedy does not have to be at the expense of those who are different. Jokes and stories can open our eyes to others' experiences and perspectives, allowing us to connect and empathize with people different from ourselves.

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