

parison, and analogy. You've also seen examples of it in the cedy chapter, like Brett Ross's "I Was a Fat Child."

Satiric Narrative

his satiric narrative, the character discovers a new, skeptical osophy. What's Steven Hartman satirizing? What audience ld best appreciate this? How does he top the joke?

The Philosopher

STEVEN HARTMAN

Excitement hung in the air as the university's brightest students and faculty gathered in the lecture hall to hear the legendary philosopher. The members of this impressive assembly chatted idly with one another in a smattering of small groups until it was time to take their seats for the lecture. Existentialists spoke with Neo-Platonists. Atheists mixed with theists. Here and there lone nihilists stood, saying nothing, mixing with no one, just being skeptical. Most of the scholars tried to disguise their excitement by discussing commonplace subjects: the weather, sports, Kierkegaard's radical fideist challenge to nineteenth century rationalists.

One senior professor, Alan Wittenberg, was winding his way to the punch line of a rather involved joke. "And so Socrates says—get this—'Hey Euthyphro, if I don't discover the nature of true piety in the next week, you better come in after me!'" A chorus of hearty chuckles erupted over this knee-slapper. Nearby, three adjuncts were arguing over whether Aristotle wore open or close-faced sandals, while the university's sole Confucian stood quietly to the side, nibbling on a fortune cookie. A group of young graduate students seemed to be the only ones who weren't trying to hide their excitement over the speaker. I was one of these. Although I said nothing, I listened with keen interest to what some of the better-informed students had to say about our distinguished guest.

"Why does he always wear the sailor's outfit?" asked a new student.

Warren Holborn, a fourth-year grad student, was more than happy to enlighten us all. "Well, it's an ingenious way of making a statement, if you think about it. On one hand, the sailor's uniform is symbolic of man being forced out alone at sea—in this case, the sea of thought. But it's also emblematic of society's rigid militarization—an ironic affront to the establishment."

"Wow," squeaked a second-year student, "I've never heard of a philosopher so willing to literally embody his intellectual enterprise."

"What about the name?" asked another first-year student. "Why the pseudonym 'Popeye'? What does it stand for?"

Holborn, an absolute apostle of the man, dazzled us again with his superior knowledge. "Well, the name is undoubtedly an admixture of two roots: the Latin 'populus,' for people, and the Modern English 'eye,' after the Middle English 'eie,' from the Old English 'eage,' akin to the Old High German 'ouga'—or 'eye.' So you see, even his name—'eye of the people'—conveys a subtle message. He is saying, in effect: 'Let me be the means through which you view existence.' If I may, let me quote the intrepid—"

Holborn's words were cut short. The chair of the Philosophy Department, Professor White, had approached the podium to inform us that Mr. Popeye would begin in a few minutes. We all scrambled to our seats. As luck would have it, I ended up right between Holborn and another dedicated Popeyite, Terrance VanBrou, both of whom kept leaning across me, discussing everything their minds could summon up about this monumental thinker.

I was already a little self-conscious about my provisional standing as a grad student, so I can't say it bolstered my confidence to be sandwiched in between the two rising stars of the Philosophy Department. What's more, I knew almost nothing about Mr. Popeye's philosophy. I couldn't read any of his works because he didn't have any. He was illiterate. VanBrou explained to me that this was yet another of the man's many masterstrokes—a symbolic gesture that amounted to a scathing indictment of our educational system.

"Print is dead," Holborn added. "And no one knows this better than Popeye, for whom it was never alive to begin with. Oration is his medium. You might even call him the Demosthenes of our age, raging against wave after ignorant wave on the shore of a decadent sea."

Anyway, Mr. Popeye travelled from university to university giving these lectures, and his following was growing every day, along with his reputation. Tonight's talk would be my first real introduction to his work.

At last, Mr. Popeye himself walked out on stage. He didn't look anything like I'd expected. Except for a single squiggly hair that stood up on the top of his skull, he was entirely bald. He had a large, almost grotesquely cleft chin, and for some reason he only held one eye open at a time. He was wearing his trademark sailor's suit, of course, and on each of his enormous forearms was a tattoo of an anchor. Hanging from his mouth, as if glued to his bottom lip, was a corn-cob pipe. When Mr. Popeye approached the podium, applause resounded throughout the lecture hall.

It didn't end until he held up one hand. Then he let out the strangest giggle I have ever heard and his pipe spun around all by itself, sounding two short, high-pitched "toots."

"I yam what I yam and dat's all what I yam!"

Holborn leaned over me and whispered to VanBrou. "A sly nod to Sartre and the other French existentialists."

"Without question," replied VanBrou. "Not to mention an echo of Yahweh's words to Moses in Chapter III of Genesis."

The giggling philosopher continued. "Now, remembers—I wants ya alts to cats yer spinachk . . ."

"I like how he emphasizes the sustaining power of nature," whispered VanBrou. "It's very Thoreauvian."

"Yes," remarked Holborn. "With some definite Zen overtones."

" . . . cause its ya doesn't cats yer spinachk, you'll never be ables to fights off da Brutus's of dis world."

Van Brou turned to Holborn. "Brutus?"

"Obviously an allusion to the assassination of Caesar," said Holborn. "A subtle condemnation of Machiavellian opportunism."

"When I comes home from da seven seas," Mr. Popeye continued, "I loves to smooches with me Olive Oyl. But nevers in front of little Sweet Pea. I don't wants to sets no bad examples . . . g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g!"

Both my neighbors were quiet for a moment. Then Holborn closed his eyes and shook his head in amazement. "It will take me years of study to master his rhetoric. That one went right over my head."

And so it went for another forty minutes. Over and over again, Holborn and VanBrou noted the extraordinary range of diverse philosophies Mr. Popeye weaved into his own. Almost every statement he made seemed to draw upon the best of Marx or Hegel, Spinoza or Derrida, not to mention dozens of other great philosophers. At the end of his talk, Mr. Popeye received a fifteen-minute standing ovation.

But I didn't stick around for the wine and cheese reception afterwards. I was too depressed. You see, after that lecture I came to a sad and sober realization. I was no scholar, and I probably never would be. I just didn't have the necessary powers of inference. Or maybe I simply lacked the philosopher's innate ability to perceive beyond the surface of things to their real essence. While my teachers and peers found one ingenious insight after another in Mr. Popeye's lecture, I couldn't help feeling that I was listening to the demented babblings of some over-the-hill, punch-drunk sailor. That's when I knew for sure I could never be a true intellectual.