Joanna Kłos, "Entry on: Thug Notes (series): Homer's Odyssey / Dante's Inferno / Oedipus The King / Julius Caesar by Shakespeare by Wisecrack , Jared Bauer, Greg Edwards, Jacob Salamon, Joseph Salvaggio", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/233. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Wisecrack , Jared Bauer , Greg Edwards , Jacob Salamon , Joseph Salvaggio

Thug Notes (series): Homer's Odyssey / Dante's Inferno / Oedipus The King / Julius Caesar by Shakespeare

Online (2013)

TAGS: Athena Brutus Caesar Homer Katabasis Odysseus / Ulysses Oedipus Penelope Poseidon Roman Republic Sophocles Thebes Tragedy (Ancient) Virgil



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General information	
Title of the work	Thug Notes (series): Homer's Odyssey / Dante's Inferno / Oedipus The King / Julius Caesar by Shakespeare
Country of the First Edition	Online
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2013
First Edition Details	*Homer's Odyssey* – Thug Notes Summary and Analysis. Thug Notes: Classical Literature, Original Gangster S 1 E 18, October 15, 2013, 4 min 47 sec. *Dante's Inferno* – Thug Notes Summary and Analysis. Thug Notes: Classical Literature, Original Gangster S 2 E 4, November 26, 2013, 4 min 17 sec. *Oedipus The King* – Thug Notes Summary and Analysis. Thug Notes: Classic Literature, Original Gangster S 2 E 13, February 11, 2014, 5 min 9 sec. *Julius Caesar by Shakespeare* – Thug Notes Summary & Analysis. Thug Notes: Classical Literature, Original Gangster S 3 E 16, October 21, 2014, 4 min 58 sec.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Running time	4 min 47 sec / 4 min 17 sec / 5 min 9 sec / 4 min 58 sec
Official Website	*Homer's Odyssey* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Dante's Inferno* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Oedipus The King* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Julius Caesar by Shakespeare* (accessed: August 20, 2018).
Available Onllne	*Homer's Odyssey* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Dante's Inferno* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Oedipus The King* (accessed: August 20, 2018); *Julius Caesar by Shakespeare* (accessed: August 20, 2018).
Genre	Animated films, Instructional and educational works, Internet videos, Short films
Author of the Entry	Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos.@al.uw.edu.pl
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk

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Creators



Wisecrack (Production Company)

Wisecrack (accessed: July 5, 2018) is a Los Angeles-based collective of academics, comedians and artists – they create YouTube shows where famous books, films, philosophical works and concepts are commented in an amusing way, with the use of narrative means that are untypical for "higher" knowledge, such as old computer games' visual manner or hip-hop discourse. The main target of Wisecrack's content are young adults and people interested in popular culture. The collective's members often underline that their films are enthusiastically used by teachers and admired by students. This relates especially to Wisecrack's oldest and most popular series – *Thug Notes* – where classical literary pieces are interpreted by a character called Sparky Sweets PhD. Played by the African American comedian Greg Edwards, Sparky uses non-academic language, largely inspired by African American Vernacular English, hip-hop culture, colloquial phrases and obscenities.

Sparky speaks to the audience from a study room with elegant armchairs, a vintage lamp and shelves full of books. In contrast, his typical outfit consists of a hoodie/T-shirts, sneakers, and a golden chain. Occasionally, he adds some props relating to the literary piece under discussion (e.g. a golden wreath while speaking of Julius Caesar, and a T-shirt with the word MOM framed in heart while speaking of Oedipus). His words are illustrated with animations presenting the main characters of the discussed books.

Source:

Twitter profile (accessed: July 5, 2018).

Prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw,

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Jared Bauer

Jared Bauer studied Radio, Television and Film at the University of Texas. There at astronomy classes he met Jacob Salamon, with whom years later he founded the film development company Napkin Film Productions (2012) and then Wisecrack.

He works as a film critic, director, producer and writer. He writes for National Public Radio and *OverthinkingIt.com*. Among his film productions are shorts *Brotherly Love* (2010) and *The Death and Return of Superman* (2012); he directed also a short *Intern Revolution* (2009), a TV miniseries *Creepy Priest* (2011), as well as numerous Wisecrack videos.

Bauer came up with the idea of Thug Notes when he realized that there are analogies between Stanley Kubrick's classical adaptation of William Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* and Brian De Palma's gangster film *Scarface*.

Source:

Profile at IMDB.com (accessed: July 4, 2018).

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl

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Greg Edwards (Actor)

Greg Edwards is a stand-up comedian and a painter who also works with web design, digital and graphic art. Highly popular, not only because of his Sparky Sweets PhD role, he performs very often in different venues in LA and Hollywood. His work is also available online including at his website; on YouTube his comedy series *Paraphrase* is available; he also created a comedy mixtape *Gregarious*, a comedy album *Fuck You Greg*, and a podcast together with another comedian Brodie Reed where they interview performers, musicians and breakdancers.

Sources:

Twitter profile (accessed: May 24, 2018).

Official website (accessed: May 24, 2018).

Sparky Sweets PhD Twitter profile (accessed: May 24, 2018).

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl



Jacob Salamon (Producer)

Jacob Salamon is a co-founder and CEO of Wisecrack. He studied the Business Honors Program at The University of Texas where during his freshmen year he met Jared Bauer. In 2012 they both decided to move to Los Angeles and create Napkin Film Productions. Before that, Salamon was a highly successful businessman, working, among others, for companies that he himself founded: Bazaarvoice and Inling

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Design.

Source:

LinkedIn profile (accessed: June 24, 2018).

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl



Joseph Salvaggio

Joseph Salvaggio studied classics at Texas Tech. Working on his PhD he became "frustrated by the ivory tower nature of academia," as according to him literature should be understandable to everyone. This is the reason why he joined Wisecrack as a co-writer and researcher.

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl

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Additional information

Summary

Homer's Odyssey

The video, introduced as "keepin it epic with Homer's Odyssey," starts with the briefest possible – and undoubtfully colloquial expression-rich – synopsis of the poem: how Odysseus (presented, as all the other characters, with the use of photographs of ancient sculptures) was absent for 20 years from Ithaca, where his son Telemachus and "sexy wife Penelope," harassed by "108 shady hustlas," were waiting for him; how Calypso held the hero captive at Ogygia until the gods told her to let him go; how Poseidon persecuted him with a "nasty storm" but he managed to come to Phaecia where he recounted his adventures to the king and queen; how he made Polyphemus "crazy drunk", fooled him about his name being "Nobody" and blinded him; how this caused Poseidon's anger; how Odysseus came back to Ithaca, dressed as a "nasty hobo", took part in the archery contest and killed the suitors afterwards (as he went "straight postal for all dem haters"); how Athena established peace at Ithaca at the end of the story.

The suitors' episode is followed by Odysseus' portrait. As a hero he has "true OG status," because he is physically strong, but also exceptionally smart in using lies and disguise. This makes him an example of a folktale "trickster." Yet, as we are told, Odysseus "ain't always in the driver's seat" – there are times when he is just being manipulated by gods. With this statement Sparky Sweets introduces another motif crucial for the poem: "Is it the gods' fault that bad sh*t happens on Earth? Or is humanity responsible for all that mess?" and quotes Zeus' words from the first book (vv. 37–39, as translated by Stanley Lombardo's in 2000). We are invited to consider whether the cause of Odysseus' wandering was his own decision to blind Poseidon's son, or the god's vengeful personality.

Odysseus' story is also compared to that of Agamemnon, who after coming back from the Trojan War "found his woman hot in bed" with another man. Meanwhile Penelope was faithful and as good as his husband in tricking people: she manipulated her suitors all the time with weaving the vest, which according to Sparky makes her "as heroic as Odysseus." If it wasn't for her and Athena, Odysseus wouldn't have been successful. This leads Sparky to conclude that "even a Greek hero as badass as Odysseus ain't doin sh*t without a

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woman."

By November 26, 2017, the video has been viewed 548 855 times on YouTube, it gained about 11 000 "thumbs up" and 715 comments.

Dante's Inferno

With the introduction: "This week on Thug Notes it's getting hella hot with Dante's *Inferno*" Sparky Sweets begins summarizing the first part of the *Divine Comedy*: Dante got lost in the forest and found himself surrounded by the three beasts. The poet Vergil, sent by Beatrice, saves him and takes him for a journey through hell. At first Dante is afraid of the "Uncommitted," but Vergil encourages him to go further. They visit the circles of Hell. In the first one, Limbo, they meet those who were born before Christianity; in the second circle – the lustful ones and Minos; in the third – the gluttons guarded by Cerberus; in the fourth – "the greedy shysters"; in the fifth – the wrathful fighting by the Styx; in the sixth – the heretics; and in the seventh – "homies who been violent". Then Geryon takes Dante and Vergil to Malebolge, the eighth circle, where they meet magicians and astrologists. Finally they reach the ninth circle, where Satan tortures the traitors. The journey ends here and both poets "decide they gonna peace out and slide down the Beast's body to Purgatory".

In the analysis part, Sparky makes a few points about the main interpretative issues connected to the poem. He explains that in spite of a shortage of humour, Dante's work is called 'comedy' – because it ends happily in Paradise; and clarifies how the poet uses allegories in order to symbolize theological and ethical problems of resisting temptation, overcoming sins and achieving heaven, but also in order to speak of political issues: the chaos in Florence and his own exile. At the very end Sparky answers the question why it was Vergil who guided Dante through hell: the Latin poet told the story of the founding of Rome as the result of the fall of Troy – "and just as the beginning of the Trojan's journey to Rome was a raw grind, Dante had to man the fu** up and roll through Hell and Purgatory before getting to Heaven."

By November 26, 2017, the video has been viewed 757 781 times on YouTube, it gained about 14 000 "thumbs up" and 754 comments.

Oedipus the King

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As tragically ironic as it may seem, Sparky Sweets begins the video (originally published on February 11, 2013) with wishes of a happy Valentine's Day. From the synopsis we learn how Thebes are affected by plague and Oedipus must find the murderer of Laius. Tiresias, summoned in order to reveal the identity of "dis mystery killa," points to Oedipus. Jocasta advises Oedipus "not to pay that hater no mind," as Laius surely had been killed by his own son. But when they discuss the crime scene, Oedipus starts to realize that he in fact could have been the slayer – in the past, having learned that his fate was to cause his father's death, he decided to leave Corinth and took the road to Thebes and on his way he killed a man. Next, a Corinthian envoy tells Oedipus that he wasn't born in the city where he was raised, and a shepherd says that Laius' baby had been abandoned in exactly the same place where the infant Oedipus had been found. This makes Sparky conclude with pure disgust: "That means Oedipus been bonin' his mama – his mama! And his kids are his bruthas and sistas," and state sarcastically: "So they do the only logical thing: Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus stabs his eyes out with gold pins."

Analyzing Sophocles' drama, Sparky says that it is "widely considered to be the dankest of all Greek plays," and cites Freud's statement from the *Interpretation of Dreams* on how everybody's fate is to feel both lust and hatred towards the mother. Next, he points out the main paradoxes of the play. Oedipus' name came from the word oida, "I know," and his reputation of the wise one among the Thebans, as he solved the sphinx riddle – but in fact he did not possess knowledge. It was Tiresias who knew what happened despite being blind, and Oedipus who did not recognize the truth although he could see. Commenting on this, Sparky refers to Aristotle's term *peripeteia* – "the doc who was searchin for the cure, ended up bein the sickness." He also points out how gods' decisions were irreversible – and this leads him to ask: "does Oedipus get to do any shot-callin?" According to Sparky, he definitely does. Oedipus' autonomy was marked by his uncompromising attitude in his search for truth, no matter the costs – such quest "may be the only real human freedom we got."

By November 26, 2017, the video has been viewed 576 220 times on YouTube, it gained about 14 000 "thumbs up" and 665 comments.

Julius Caesar by Shakespeare

Sparky Sweets relates how in the play Caesar comes back to Rome

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after defeating Pompey and hears the soothsayer's words: "You best beware the Ides of March." Later on Cassius and Brutus are talking about Caesar's raise to power. The former is sure that he is about to reach for kingship, and the latter has a dilemma which Sparky summarizes as follows: "Caesar's his boy, but he don't want no tyrants messin with the Roman peeps." On the 15th of March, despite his wife's warnings, Caesar leaves home and is murdered by the conspirators (Sparky translates his last words as: "Aw shit you too man?"). After the murder, Brutus and Anthony give their speeches over Caesar's body. Anthony, along with Octavius and Lepidus, starts to raise the army and the battle of Philippi takes place. There Cassius decides on committing suicide as he thinks he had lost his friend Titinius. Titinius, who in fact hasn't been captured, kills himself as well. The same fate awaits Brutus, whom Anthony praises in the final: "cuz unlike the rest of dem backstabbin rats, Brutus was actin for the good of the hood."

In the analysis, Shakespeare's flexibility and creativity in presenting the past are pointed out – "da bard wasn't trippin' bout historical accuracy." His Caesar was half-deaf – which was a metaphor for a dictator hearing only positive things and missing criticism. Sparky presents also the central tragic conflict in the drama: "Caesar's head is so damn big that he thinkin he should rock the crown even though it ain't rightfully his." Blinded by his overconfidence, Caesar ignored the soothsayer, and this led to his end. Sparky comments citing Cicero's words from the play: "Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time. / But men may construe things after their fashion / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves." He also underlines the difficult position of Brutus, the main character of the play after Caesar's death. Unlike Cassius, who was "a jealous playa-hater", Brutus wanted to put an end to the dictatorship because he despised tyranny. Yet, as Sparky says, his tragic flaw was "rolling with the wrong crew."

By November 26, 2017, the video has been viewed 406 073 times on YouTube, it gained about 8 000 "thumbs up" and 534 comments.

Analysis

"Thug Notes" emerged from Jared Bauer's idea that "anything, no matter how 'elevated' could be broken down in slang." As such, it is based on the incongruity theory of humor – combining the narrator from social environment that is typically not associated with the

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authorship of outstanding and defining cultural values literature, with the texts that each decade are more and more perceived as barely accessible because their language is so different from the daily speech. This way the authors want to raise interest in literature in people who find both its original discourse and the typical discourse of appreciation too complex. It seems that for the authors what distinguishes pieces of the canon is that they are so well composed that – even if written in ancient languages – they are easily translatable into any inclusive type of discourse.

Interestingly, the Wisecrack writers don't avoid contact with the sources. In Sparky Sweets' talks there are some quotations – undoubtedly carefully selected, as their message is very clear and they need no 'footnote-kind' explanation. There are even times when Sparky uses original scholarly terms, such as *peripeteia*, without giving a full explanation, this way inviting the audience to research it further.

Graeco-Roman antiquity is not presented by the authors as having any special position compared to all other literary periods, nor is it shown as a superior source of universal motifs and authority we should keep a humble distance from. On the contrary, thanks to countless epithets rendered in contemporary slang, we can think of mythical and historical heroes as close or comparable to us. Yet at the same time, exactly as in 'traditional' literary textbooks, the ancient characters retain their exceptionally inspirational image – in their attitudes towards gods, fate, life's difficulties, and challenges of adventurous journeys.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Athena Brutus Caesar Homer Katabasis Odysseus / Ulysses Oedipus Penelope Poseidon Roman Republic Sophocles Thebes Tragedy (Ancient) Virgil
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Communication Emotions Humour Knowledge Learning Modernity Pop culture references Tricksters

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Further Reading

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