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HUMOR IN DAVID B. FEINBERG'S WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the humor in David B. Feinberg's two novels *Eighty-Sixed* (1989) and *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991) as well as his collection of autobiographical essays, *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (1994). Feinberg was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, and his writing humorously accounts the reality of living with AIDS. My intention is to argue that Feinberg combats the social stigmas of being an HIV-positive gay man through the use of humor. I stress the importance of humor when discussing AIDS by contrasting Feinberg's writing with that of Larry Kramer. I show how theorists of humor have described their literary effects, and I survey examples of humor in gay literature. I then demonstrate how humor functions in Feinberg's fiction. His narrator uses humor in order to build a community of gay men while simultaneously alleviating the narrator's social, physical, and medical concerns. Finally, I examine humor in Feinberg's nonfiction before comparing Feinberg's works to other AIDS novels, memoirs, and plays.

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AIDS and Humor

Shortly after the first case of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) crisis was discovered in 1981, gay men began dying by the thousands while the media, federal politicians, and medical researchers ignored the disease. In fact, it was not until 1987 when President Ronald Regan first publicly spoke about HIV/AIDS. It took over six years and 20,000 lives for an open discourse about this global health problem. By the time Regan addressed the disease, cases had been diagnosed in heterosexuals of various cultures and ethnicities throughout the world. Little was known about the causes and effects of AIDS, and thus protective measures were not taken against its transmission. During the time between the first diagnosis and Regan's speech, gay men were forced to educate themselves about AIDS. In truth, for years well after 1987, gay men were isolated from society at large, left to protect themselves against the rising global health crisis. Even in 2011, gay men are uneducated about their sexual health and protection measures, as funding for gay causes seldom take precedence in the government's budget.

As the numbers of diagnoses and deaths began to climb, gay men started to form groups designed to build empathy, raise awareness, and provide funding for AIDS patients and research. The most prominent group was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), founded by Larry Kramer. David B. Feinberg, an ACT UP member, was a New York City resident, writer, and a gay man living with AIDS, turned AIDS activist. Feinberg participated in several of ACT UP's demonstrations, but began to feel exasperated with the group's bitter and irate nature. On ACT UP New York's chapter website it says that "ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We advise and inform. We demonstrate. WE ARE NOT SILENT" (*ACT UP*). One of ACT UP's well-known

slogans is Silence=Death. While Feinberg agreed with this slogan, quoting it several times in his memoir, he broke away from the group because of its commitment to anger in the face of the AIDS crisis. Instead, Feinberg utilized humor to combat his adversity as a gay man living with AIDS. He used humor as a coping mechanism, allowing him to share experiences with readers before exposing his own anger and bitterness. This enables the reader to build empathy for AIDS patients before Feinberg solicits a political call to action.

As gay men continue to contract HIV/AIDS in the twenty-first century, and other minority groups (women, African Americans, Latino Americans) experience the AIDS crisis in disproportionately high numbers, the issue of how to publicly address AIDS is still a vital topic. While a cure for AIDS has yet to be found, AIDS activists are focusing on how to better inform people about protecting themselves against contracting HIV. ACT UP maintains that protests marked with anger are the most effective way to force America to stop ignoring the AIDS epidemic. The organization attests that unadulterated bitter anger will state their purpose most effectively to the public, leading to political change. Feinberg, on the other hand, uses humor to deliver his call for action.

Tony Kushner's preface to Feinberg's *Queer and Loathing* says that Feinberg balanced humor and tragedy, writing about AIDS "on the razor's edge between comedy and horror. Feinberg makes you laugh from precisely the place inside of you where laughter really hurts" (ix). Feinberg faces the horrors of AIDS through his quips, puns, and sarcasm. This allows the reader to immerse himself into the reality of living with AIDS. A person who is able to laugh at a difficulty can then appropriate it. Feinberg's literature allows AIDS to become part of daily and political conversation. He demands to end the silence, and he starts his discussion with humor in order to eradicate denial and ignorance within the gay community.

Kushner's preface goes on to say, "This is writing that refuses to offer any palliatives, that seeks to intensify what is already unbearable. This is the harshest, and most brave, and most necessary kind of art" (Feinberg, *Queer* x). What makes Feinberg's writing so necessary is that it has the power to lead to social reform. During a time when people (including gay men) would purposely ignore the reality of AIDS, thus worsening the epidemic by continuing its spread, Feinberg made people laugh. This created a conversation. If someone living with the disease says an "inappropriate" remark about it, it strips others from their fear of saying something wrong. Moreover, it provides laughter as the best medicine for AIDS patients, allowing fear to momentarily subside. Kushner believes that Feinberg's humor makes him "uniquely important, among the chronicler of our plague," without which life during the AIDS crisis is "inconceivable" (Feinberg, *Queer* x). Kushner and Feinberg agree that experiencing the tragedy of AIDS without the relief of humor further oppresses the person living with AIDS. Feinberg's work added a new perspective to AIDS literature as well as to groups fighting the AIDS crisis, such as ACT UP.

Prior to the AIDS crisis, in 1978, Kramer wrote the novel *Faggots*, which caused uproar in the gay community. Kramer based the main character, Fred Lemish, on his own life, as a gay man in search of love in the midst of the promiscuity in Manhattan and Fire Island in the late 1970s. Many gay men felt betrayed that Kramer displayed gay men as hyper-sexualized and unable to commit. They believed that Kramer both oversimplified gay culture and subjugated sexually active and drug-using gay men within the gay community. Kramer refrains from using humor in his writing, focusing on the serious issues in gay culture in a grave and solemn manner. At the very end of the novel, Kramer says, "Yes, it's time to get angry" (*Faggots* 360). For

Kramer combatting social problems is best done with irate protesting. He conducted all of his demonstrations and led his followers in unabashed anger and strife.

Kramer alleges that gay men were always “Touching. Holding. But not too close. Please no hassles or involvements” (*Faggots* 361). He shows how the gay community is unattached to each other and political causes, focused entirely on sex. After Fred admits his emotional feelings to a sexual partner, Dinky, Dinky reacts by saying, ““Sex doesn’t mean a fucking thing. You just don’t understand that. It’s just a sensation. Stick a popper up your nose and you might just as well have a dildo up your ass as me”” (Kramer, *Faggots* 313). Thanks to drug usage and anonymous sex, Kramer argues, gay men are unable to fall in love. Throughout the novel, love is Fred’s ultimate goal and the solution to his isolation. While observing a bar’s “Nazi or Nice” Christmas party, Fred realizes that if stripped of elaborate hairstyles, costumes, and sex toys, gay men would be forced to love. Thus, Kramer asserts that humor—in the form of camp—prevents gay men from forming connections. Fred leaves the bar thinking, ““The fucking we’re getting’s not worth the fucking we’re getting,’ and it’s time to go...” (Kramer, *Faggots* 340). Fred’s acceptance of his own sexuality works in opposition to other gay men. This creates a split between gay men in search of love and those in search of sex, further isolating gay men from dominant straight society.

After being asked to step down from his leadership position in the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), largely due to the controversy surrounding his view of the gay community in *Faggots*, Kramer wrote the play *The Normal Heart* before forming ACT UP. He wrote the play in order to voice his concern for the AIDS crisis, ultimately commenting on gay men’s apathy for the wellbeing of their own community. Like *Faggots*, *The Normal Heart* is humorless in its attempt to raise awareness about issues affecting the gay community. Kramer explicitly

comments on the fact that AIDS should not be discussed with humor. When Ned is talking to his straight brother Ben about the then unknown disease affecting the gay community, Ben says that he simply cannot understand Ned's worrying. Ben goes on to say that their sexualities make them inherently different, which upsets Ned. Attempting to cheer him up, Ben says, "Come on, Lemon, I still love you. Sarah loves you. Our children. Our cat. Our dog ..." to which Ned responds, "You think this is a joke!" (Kramer, *Normal* 61). Ned becomes angry that Ben is not able to understand the crisis that gay people are facing. He goes on to say to Ben, "I'm beginning to think that you and your straight world are our enemy" (Kramer, *Normal* 61). Kramer is establishing a clear separation between homosexuals and heterosexuals in the midst of the beginning of the AIDS crisis. While his straight brother attempts to alleviate his problems with a joke, Ned insists that gay people should avoid all humor when discussing AIDS.

Kramer continues to eliminate other forms of humor throughout the play. When Ned's activist group realizes that their newsletters were not sent by the post office, Tommy says, "There is a certain amount of irony in all this, though not right now" (Kramer, *Normal* 91). Even when variations of humor are present, the characters consciously eradicate them due to the severity of the crisis. Humor is thus seen as working in opposition to activism. This is specifically shown when Ned talks about the Holocaust, emphasizing the murder of countless Jews. Felix jokes, "This is turning out to be a very romantic evening" (Kramer, *Normal* 40). Ned continues his rant, ignoring Felix's comment, until he eventually says that Felix prioritizes parties and sex above other aspects of his life. Felix's humor is seen as an attempt to end activism, because he ignores what Ned considers vital for the community, focusing on the fleeting pleasures of alcohol, drugs, and sex. Kramer's purposeful criticism of humor shows his assertion that humor will deplete AIDS activism by affirming to heterosexual society that AIDS

is laughable. Thus, Kramer attempts to show the gravity of the AIDS virus in order to educate others about the dire need for political change.

Throughout *The Normal Heart*, Kramer comments on gay activism, emphasizing the importance of protest. Ned relates the Holocaust to the AIDS crisis, claiming that American Jews knew what was going on in Europe and did not protest enough in the United States. Ned says, “Can you imagine how effective it would have been if every Jew in America had marched on Washington? Proudly!” (Kramer, *Normal* 42). Ned feels that the only probable solution for gay men to avoid catastrophic effects of AIDS, like those experienced by Jews in the Holocaust, is to unite in political demonstrations. Ned’s palpable anger allows him to lead a group of gay men into political action. Ned expresses Kramer’s personal views of the importance of radical protests. Not only does he feel the need to be vocal to heterosexuals, the “enemy,” Ned states that all gay men should have the same drive to create change in the government. Ned says that his father’s life “didn’t stand for anything,” and refusing to follow suit, Ned feels the need to fight—“So I fight. Constantly. And if I can do it, I can’t understand why everybody else can’t do it, too. Okay?” (Kramer, *Normal* 66). Ned says that he refuses to accept weakness in other people. Throughout the play, gay men are expected to show strength by fighting against the government. Ned transfers his own fight onto others, saying that they are equally capable. He is attempting to unite gay men, as they turn their mutual anger into united protest. The blatant anger in Kramer’s writing parallels his political perspective. He feels that masking anger in any way (using humor) will diminish the agency of AIDS activism. ACT UP’s “united in anger” policy functions because anger may be gay men’s one shared emotion surrounding the AIDS crisis.

In his writing, Feinberg continually comments on Kramer's literature and policies. In *Spontaneous Combustion*, B.J. (the narrator) feels that he is isolated from other gay men and unable to speak when attending ACT UP functions: "I go to ACT UP meetings, never saying a word, and end up more stressed-out than I was before; I go to demonstrations and scream myself hoarse and then visit my new primary health-care practitioner who...gives me hugs and provides for my sore throat" (Feinberg 80). At ACT UP meetings, B.J. is unable to voice his political opinions or medical concerns. He says, "I want to end the AIDS crisis and stop the government logjam of red tape and paperwork, and there should be some sort of cure in the near future, and the only thing is whether I will still be alive to use it" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 80). While B.J. is optimistic that political action will lead to an end of the AIDS crisis, he is primarily distressed about his own health. However, ACT UP's leaders dominate conversation, silencing his concerns. Thus, ACT UP's slogan, Silence=Death, may be leading to B.J.'s demise. Because B.J. yells along with other ACT UP members at demonstrations, he worsens his condition and needs additional medical attention. B.J. feels that ACT UP does not meet his needs as a gay man living with AIDS, and he eventually stops going to any of the group's meetings or protesting efforts, much like Feinberg himself.

B.J. further criticizes ACT UP throughout the novel. He jokes that ACT UP actually worsens his AIDS symptoms, showing his disapproval with the organization's structure. B.J. says that ACT UP's "bombastic" meetings "tended to raise the blood pressure. When some angry activists spoke, my T-cell count took a nose dive" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 164). The heightened anger in ACT UP's meetings lessens B.J.'s immediate desire for ending the AIDS crisis as well as diminishing his relationships with other gay men. Feinberg demonstrates that while anger furthers the ailments caused by AIDS (a declining T-cell count), humor can assist a person with

AIDS. B.J. uses humor in the form of satire to describe angry ACT UP members affecting his T-cells, so that he can ultimately overcome his opposition to ACT UP's leadership and society's stigma of gay men with AIDS. While B.J.'s satiric humor is marked with aggression and anger, he is able to balance the two opposing sides. ACT UP fails to find this middle ground, focusing solely on anger as a political motivation.

At the end of the novel Feinberg writes an appendix set in a post-AIDS America. Now that AIDS is no longer a threat, B.J. is able to return to his past way of life, while continuing to use humor to expose the failures of others during the AIDS crisis, including Larry Kramer. B.J. says, "Larry Kramer forms an organization dealing with our most pressing health concern since the AIDS epidemic: DSBU (Deadly Sperm Build-Up). Three months later he will be forcibly removed from the board of directors, at his own request" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 225). B.J. is using his satire to create a humorous and ridiculous situation, while commenting on Kramer's failed leadership in both the GMHC and ACT UP. Feinberg fills his discussion about the cure of AIDS with humor in order to further criticize Kramer.

Feinberg further criticizes Kramer in his collection of autobiographical essays, *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone*. Feinberg recounts his experience with an ACT UP demonstration at the FDA headquarters. He says that he was exasperated with ACT UP's lack of leadership, deficient plan of action, and heated debates. Because of this, Feinberg says that gay men should all ignore Kramer's "rantings and ravings as those of a demented lunatic" (*Queer* 13). He denounces *Faggots* and *The Normal Heart* as political diatribes that show Kramer's "bitter and cynical" nature (Feinberg, *Queer* 14). However, Feinberg notes that Kramer's advice in *Faggots* to not have "sex with more than six thousand partners" might have stopped AIDS from becoming an epidemic; he says, "I place it under the category of brutal irony

and leave it at that” (*Queer* 13). Because Feinberg is distraught about both Kramer and the state of AIDS in America, he uses jokes and irony in order to alleviate his distress.

Feinberg goes on to say that Kramer’s prose style is unreadable—“The amount of chaff in his writing is so thick I can barely make it through his prose to get his points. Somewhere along the line he lost his sense of humor” (*Queer* 15). Feinberg emphasizes the fact that Kramer is humorless in his AIDS literature, making it inapplicable to gay men and thus ineffective in political discourse. He is able to create an apparent contrast between his own writing and that of Kramer’s by humorously criticizing Kramer’s humorless novels and plays. Feinberg says that “Kramer is consumed by so much anger that he can offer only venom and accusations. Larry Kramer—the fag that cried wolf, Cassandra, the prophetess of doom—shrieks his diatribes into the wind, and no one listens” (*Queer* 15). Feinberg uses humor to highlight Kramer’s anger, as well as to mask his own. Feinberg, like Kramer, has bitter feelings about being HIV-positive and the effect of AIDS on the gay community. In contrast to Kramer, Feinberg uses humor in order to both express his anger and bitterness for political action and alleviate his own concerns about the disease. While both men work to help gay men during the AIDS crisis with their writing, Feinberg states that Kramer is unsuccessful in his attempts.

In his essay “AIDS and Humor” in *Queer and Loathing*, Feinberg discusses his unabashed use of humor throughout his body of AIDS literature. He starts by quoting Edmund White who said that when writing about AIDS the author needs to “Avoid humor, because humor seems grotesquely inappropriate for the occasion” (Feinberg, *Queer* 84). White feels that humor belittles the seriousness of the situation and thus debases all AIDS-related social and political progress. Feinberg disagrees adamantly, saying that AIDS literature without any humor is off-putting, uninspired, and most of all, not pertinent or motivational to those suffering from

AIDS. He says that no literary character should be exemplified as faultless and incessantly serious, because all living people have faults, quirks, and levity.

In order to allow readers to empathize with the characters and situation, Feinberg feels that humor is needed to soften the truth before ultimately exposing its rawness. In this way, the reader is emotionally invested and can truly feel for the person suffering from AIDS. Feinberg says that humor is a much needed filter for the graveness of AIDS: “Humor is a survival tactic, a defensive mechanism, a way of lessening the horror” (*Queer* 87). Humor, Feinberg says, allows people living with AIDS to remain sane. He notes that laughing is a way to reduce crying. The emotional relief of humor provides hope and a reminder of the joys that life has to offer. Feinberg says that he uses humor with AIDS in his daily life to “attain a certain amount of control over it. For example: ‘My T-cells recently dropped below my IQ. It’s a good thing I’m not Amy Hempel, or I’d be legally dead’” (*Queer* 87). By making a joke about Hempel, Feinberg is able to temporarily mentally (and by extension physically) conquer the fact that his T-cell count has fallen. By belittling his disease as a mere joke, Feinberg is able to regain control and lessen his constant fear.

In his essay Feinberg works to define what type of humor he attempts to convey in his AIDS writing. His humor functions to combine the pleasure of humor with the pain of AIDS, engaging with the reader while forcing him to contemplate and participate in the AIDS crisis. Feinberg says:

I’m interested in the joke that makes you wince as you laugh or suppress a smile; the joke that simultaneously appeals and appalls; the joke on the edge; the uncomfortable joke; the joke that catches you unaware, where your first response is to laugh and you immediately check yourself, ashamed. (*Queer* 87)

Feinberg is attempting to make the reader question what is appropriate or politically correct when talking about AIDS. He would argue that all discourse is not only suitable but also encouraged, because it allows for an open conversation about AIDS to be present in mainstream society, which took years to commence. Feinberg is strongly opposed to Kramer's writing and political leadership because it is overpowered with anger and therefore does not allow a dialogue about AIDS to develop. To be sure, Feinberg says that although he feels that everyone can write about AIDS with humor, including those who are HIV-negative, an author has to be very careful with humor. It is important to not overwhelm the reader with humor for "Failed humor trivializes the tragedy and offends the reader" (Feinberg, *Queer* 88). Feinberg admits to have offended many, but holds fast that AIDS humor should not be used for the sole sake of being shocking. In his own writing, Feinberg tries "to share experiences and use humor to get closer to the bitter truth" (*Queer* 88). Thus, whether or not the humor is successful at producing laughter, the reader is able to experience Feinberg's bitter anger without being overwhelmed with the gravity of the illness. Feinberg's interplay between humor and anger allows his reader to understand their commonality with a person living with AIDS. Feinberg attempts to draw the reader into political action after first inviting them in with humor. Feinberg's self-described "uncomfortable" humor intends to both combat the pain and distress accompanied with AIDS, in order to produce joy in AIDS patients, allowing them to battle their disease. He simultaneously creates empathy in the reader, urging him or her to help fight the epidemic by being a friend, caregiver, advocate, or political voice of reason.

For the purpose of this thesis, I plan to demonstrate that humor combats the social, emotional, physical, and political hardships and stigmas of AIDS. Further, I will assert that humor is able to achieve this to an extent that drama and tragedy are not. Feinberg is capable of

not only alleviating his own adversity as a person living with AIDS, but his literature extends this power to all gay men and AIDS patients throughout the world. He uses humor to unite readers. After exposing his anger and the severity of the AIDS crisis, Feinberg hopes that his readers will ultimately be able to come together to make political changes. Feinberg's literature thus functions to eliminate the adversity of living with AIDS by providing social cohesion among gay men. His humor techniques include comedy, jokes, irony/satire, and camp. Each intends to spark a specific social development or change.

Theories of Humor

In order to discuss the humor in the works of Feinberg, it is necessary to develop a framework of the varieties of humor in literature. This will create a dialogue between the theorists and scholars who have written about humor. Because humor has various intended effects for the reader, it has many different forms. While types of humor may differ, the primary goal is always the same—to alleviate concern and foster joy within the audience members. The pieces discussed are arranged in order from the oldest (those which are not specifically pertaining to gay humor) to the newest (those which are focused on gay humor). Therefore, gay humor can be analyzed in relation to classical archetypes of humor. In addition, an example of each variety of humor from a literary work will follow each theorist's groundwork. Each piece of fiction utilizing humor is either in direct conversation about gay culture or has homoerotic subtexts. It is important to note that there is some debate as to where one type of humor ends and the next begins. While not all theorists will agree, an exposition of humor's varieties will allow the purposes and effects of the humor in Feinberg's literature to be better discerned.

Comedy—

Comedy is arguably the most common form of humor. It works to unite the subjects within the comedy, which then strengthens the bonds among audience members by highlighting their commonalities. George Meredith describes the relationship between comedy and social behavior in his essay, "On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit." Meredith sums up his argument by claiming that "there never will be civilization where Comedy is not possible" (21). Comedy is vital to human socialization. Meredith states that the comic poet makes the reader view unlike subjects (namely, man and woman) in a similar light. Thus, in a society that views two groups of people as complete opposites, comedy creates unity where there

was previously no commonality. According to Meredith, comedy allows oppressed groups to stand up for themselves. Meredith states that “heroines of Comedy” are able to use their wits, no longer relying on the actions of a man (9). Women are able to not only share similarities with men; they also begin to become their own person, no longer subjugated by men. If this is viewed in relation to heterosexuals and homosexuals, comedy will function to produce similarities between the two divergent communities. Through comedy, gay men and lesbians will be able to establish themselves as worthy citizens with legitimate identities, without the approval of heterosexuals. This will allow homosexuals to better themselves and create a community of people with a common identity.

Meredith states that comedy “may be accepted as a version of the ordinary worldly understanding of our social life” (10). Comedy can also function as a different way to view life. Without offering an “infamous reflection upon life,” comedy remains a pure form of rhetoric because it allows the audience members to realize characters’ connections in the text (Meredith 10). In Meredith’s view, comedy is in its truest form when it is not over-conceived, rather, is subtle and acute. Further, it has the ability to bring happiness in the darkest of times. In times of despair “pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions” (Meredith 20). Meredith demonstrates that comedy can be used to direct humor at one’s own actions, helping a person to better themselves when all appears to be hopeless. He mentions another benefit of comedy—political action—in his essay. Meredith states that comedies possess “the Idea of Good Citizenship...using laughter for his political weapon” (26). To laugh at something is to devalue and take control over it. Comedy allows the writer and the viewer to discern a problem humorously. This allows them to view the

problem from a different perspective while building a community of minorities. Therefore, as their viewpoints and commonalities emerge, they begin to solve the issue at hand.

An example of comedy in gay literature is *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. Prior and Harper meet for the first time while they are having an overlapping hallucination. Through a series of comedic lines, the two begin to understand one another's problems: Prior is an isolated HIV-positive gay man, Harper is a female Valium addict in a troubled marriage. As the scene continues, they are able to foster a relationship, understanding one another, while simultaneously beginning to develop some clarity and strength within their own damaged lives. At one point, Harper's ability to disclose information about her Valium addiction to Prior allows him to come out:

Harper: It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon.

Prior: I'm a homosexual.

Harper: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

Prior: In my church we don't believe in Mormons.

Harper: What church do . . . oh! (*She laughs*) I get it. (Kushner 38)

By reversing her statement, Prior combats Harper's claim that Mormons do not believe in homosexuals. Comedy thus allows Harper to laugh as she stops viewing Prior as a homosexual and begins to see him as another person with problems much like her own. As the two continue the scene, Prior begins to mentally overcome his fear of impending death following his AIDS diagnosis, largely due to Harper saying, "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that" (Kushner 40). Even though he never revealed his disease to Harper, Prior was able to be comforted by her. Similarly, Harper is able to gain a new

perspective about her marriage, granting her greater personal clarity and understanding of the gay community. Comedy aided their self-betterment and mutual acceptance.

Jokes—

Jokes are a way in which people communicate humor to one another, typically in the oral tradition. Jokes are expressed among three necessary parties—the joke teller, the subject of the joke, and a third person to overhear. In literature, the third person is the reader, who fosters the joke by actively participating through reading. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud analyzes the techniques, purposes, and motives of jokes. Jokes are able to give the listener pleasure; Freud works to uncover the physiological reasons behind this happening. Tendentious jokes allow for happiness to arise where it would otherwise be absent. Freud states, “A joke...is the most social of all mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure” (179). According to Freud, tendentious jokes specifically aid minorities who are unable to voice their viewpoints. Minorities begin to lessen their social subjugation by producing “a cheerful mood,” and gaining control over their oppression (Freud 100). Tendentious jokes include hostile, obscene, cynical, and skeptical jokes. Hostile jokes work to release aggressiveness and defensiveness in the joke teller and his listeners. Freud says, “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him...” (103). From that point, a third party is able to partake in the humor of the enemy’s vilification. By showing a weakness in a person’s enemy, they are now able to gain dominance over their foe. An “enemy” can be more than a person—it may be a group, an object, or a disease. Once the joke is told it “will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud 103). Therefore, through joking, an oppressed minority may regain

a social standing and begin to feel a sense of happiness that was previously diminished by the social majority.

An obscene joke works to expose a topic that is hidden from conversation within society. An example of an obscene joke is smut, which heightens sexual aggression and seduction. Obscene jokes allow society to express desire for the sexual object of the joke. Cynical jokes primarily target morality, as they expose the flaws of typical moral behavior. Furthermore, most cynical jokes attack the institution of marriage, which is the archetype of moral behavior in society. Cynical jokes expose marriage's greatest failing—the suppression of sexuality. Skeptical jokes work to question our way of thinking, by comparing a subject to its opposite. These jokes search for truth in the world by contrasting differing points of view.

In Paul Monette's novel *Halfway Home*, jokes are used to gain control over the characters' complications with AIDS, including medical ailments and social stigmas. In *Halfway Home* the narrator Tom is an AIDS patient who, by the end of the novel, feels that he has come to the end of his life. When his doctor tells him that he has to stay overnight in the hospital, Tom says, "I want to die in the beach house. Not here," to his fellow AIDS patient, turned lover, Gray (Monette, *Halfway* 183). Over the course of the novel, Tom had used jokes in order to mend his relationship with his estranged brother, Brian. He now has control over his relationship with his family members, by employing jokes, yet he remains unable to gain power over his disease.

Tom decides to leave the hospital, against the staff's orders, with the help of Gray. When a nurse yells at them, ordering them to stay in their chairs, Tom says that they "laughed more or less in her face, as if her bark had pricked a private joke in us—indeed as if we had diplomatic immunity. She didn't repeat her command as we proceeded chairless into the lift. The small victories get you through" (Monette, *Halfway* 184). Without vocalizing any words, Tom and

Gray are able to make a hostile joke about the circumstance in the hospital. Their bond and shared experiences of having AIDS unites them in order to belittle the nurse and achieve power within the hospital. This victory over the hospital staff becomes a greater success—gaining psychological control over AIDS. Tom and Gray no longer constantly worry about their impending deaths. Jokes enabled Tom and Gray to reclaim their lives; the novel ends with the couple beginning another relaxing summer at their beach house.

Irony and Satire—

Irony and satire correlate with one another; Northrop Frye compares them in one single chapter, “The Mythos of Winter,” of his essay “Historical Criticism: A Theory of Modes.” Frye describes satire as a moral version of irony; satire has set standard “against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (223). Frye says, “The satirist commonly takes a high moral line” (225). Satire requires two conventions, wit in relation to fantasy and “an object of attack” (Frye 224). Irony, on the other hand, is marked by realism and a neutral attitude of the author. Frye outlines six phases of irony and satire, while discussing how they relate to tragedy. Irony and satire take the reader to another dimension, absent from tragic literature. These humor techniques allow the reader to view a tragedy from another perspective, thus gaining clarity. While tragedy only allows the reader to view the subject in its current form, irony and satire can turn everything “bottom side up,” as they expose truth in the darkest depths of society through humor (Frye 239).

In phase one, ironic comedy involves a humorous society in which a common character is depicted to contrast the absurdity of his surroundings. Phase two is the comedy of escape which allows people to break away from beliefs, practices, and stereotypes “that impede the free movement...of society” (Frye 233). By eliminating the oppressive social patterns, a person can

eradicate the actual happening or conflict. Phase three works to question the reader's notion of common sense because the characters are depicted in a bizarre manner, yet appear normal in the story. The fourth phase is the fall of the tragic hero, in which the author does not attempt to draw humor out of the character's behavior, but rather allows the reader to sympathize with the hero. This phase may exaggerate an emotion in order to bring attention to it, while reducing the inevitability of death. The fifth phase emphasizes fate and the natural progression of life. Misery, madness, and suffering are key aspects of phase six.

Adam Mars-Jones uses irony and satire throughout his novel, *The Waters of Thirst*. William and Terry are able to begin a committed relationship as the AIDS crisis starts to spread into a full-blown epidemic. Ironically, however, William (the narrator) falls victim to another disease, kidney disease. He is subjugated as he becomes physically ill, experiencing the social shame of living under a restricted diet and having jaundice. William is very much a common character stuck in chaotic surroundings; like AIDS patients, much like Frye's phase one, ironic comedy. The novel is therefore a satire about AIDS, even though none of the main characters are HIV positive. Therefore, phase two is also shown in the novel as the stereotypes of AIDS are eliminated. Because William has kidney disease and not AIDS, he (as a satiric AIDS patient) is viewed as a sick person and not as promiscuous gay men.

William is forced to eliminate all salt from his diet. However, he devises a plan to eat a bacon sandwich—what he is most longing for—while undergoing dialysis. The novel enters the fourth phase, the fall of the tragic hero, as the reader begins to empathize with William's adversity. As he eats the sandwich, it ironically loses all of the salty taste which he was craving. William develops two theories for this phenomenon: that the dialysis eliminates the salt before it reaches his taste buds or that his taste buds had declined in sensitivity each year while he was

living a salt-less life. Void of all taste, he begins to “dutifully” eat potato chips during every dialysis session, satirically mimicking the continual activity of the machine. William eats in spite of his disease, reclaiming his identity. William reaches a middle ground between his two theories saying that his “ability to taste salt had atrophied with disuse, so that saltiness was now a sensation that I could only imagine and not experience, no matter what I put in my mouth. The saline oasis was full of neutral crystals, and salt for me could only be a memory or a fantasy” (Mars-Jones 128). Following Frye’s fourth phase, the reader moves beyond William’s impending kidney failure and instead focuses attention on his disease. William’s desire for a sandwich is so innocent that the reader can easily build empathy for him. As the satire of AIDS continues, people living with AIDS can be viewed as people with intrinsic humanity.

Camp—

Camp is a type of humor developed and continued in the gay and lesbian community. It functions to unite this oppressed community in order to overcome the adversity which it faces. In his novel, *The World in the Evening*, Christopher Isherwood divides camp into two subcategories: High Camp and Low Camp. A common example of Low Camp is drag—men dressing up as women for entertainment and spectacle. Isherwood is much more interested in High Camp, such as literature, film, or plays. Isherwood states, “...true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it” (110). As Jack Babuscio says in his essay “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” camp relates all aspects of life to gayness. Camp pushes the boundaries of social norms, as it is subversive of common norms and practices. Like comedy, camp allows (gay) people to gain control over their environment. It reverses sex roles in order to belittle the social restrictions that bind gay people. Babuscio says, “Laughter, rather than tears,

is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society” (Bergman 28). Camp is a way to overcome adversity through humor.

Susan Sontag wrote one of the first essays on camp, entitled “Notes on ‘Camp’” in 1964. In the essay, Sontag works to organize the very unstructured nature of camp itself by putting her notes into numbered points, 1 through 58. Sontag states that camp is so visual that there is an emphasis of “style at the expense of content” (278). Camp focuses on style, but what Sontag appears to omit is that the viewer of camp perceives content from the style which is presented. The style tends to be full of exaggeration, extravagance, and artifice. Sontag also states that androgyny is a key feature of camp. A sexual contradiction is created by camp because the most appealing form of sexual desirability is said to be “going against the grain of one’s sex” (Sontag 279). Therefore, camp works to force the viewer into rethinking sexuality. This will work to make deviant sexuality commonplace, and as camp is strongly associated with gay culture, homosexual activity is seen as normal by comparison with the subject being camped.

Sontag states that she is able to accurately discuss the inner workings of camp because she is both interested in and “offended by it” (276). David Bergman and the other authors of the essays in his work, *Camp Grounds*, take a different view of camp, as they identify themselves as part of the homosexual community. Sontag states that camp is “Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (280). Sontag views camp in the essence of the hyperbole being drawn by camping. Bergman, however, notes that the truth in camping lies somewhere between the mask and the face, or rather, between the created and creator. Bergman states that “while seemingly superficial, [camp] reveals to the initiated an unspoken subtext” (99). Also, camp demands that the performer and the viewer disguise what is being camped as heterosexual in nature. Thus, camp “forces the classical to

participate in the grotesque,” by using concepts and figures that demonstrate heterosexuality in a manner which eludes a homosexual perspective or conduct (Bergman 102).

Sontag seems unable to view the importance of camp’s message to the gay community. She says, “Camp is the glorification of ‘character.’ The statement is of no importance—except, of course, to the person...who makes it” (285). Sontag argues that the message that camp makes is important only to the creator and not to audience members. Bergman, and other gay writers, would disagree. Camp has an ability to create unity within the gay community. In the pre-Stonewall era, camp created a conversation between gay men and women who were oppressed and isolated in a world that both ignored and despised their existence. Camp therefore worked with the text at hand—what was allowed to be discussed—and heightened its meaning to become queer. Bergman states, “The aggressive passivity of camp has been among its most potent tools in giving gay people a voice that we ourselves could hear and then use to speak to others” (107). Camp helped to create a much needed subculture for gay Americans.

In his article discussing the importance of camp in plays about AIDS, David Román says that the “pairing of AIDS and humor need not run counter to a politics of representation set forth by AIDS and/or gay activists” (Bergman 206). In the three plays which he examines, Román shows that camp marked with “outrage, irony, and wit” can work to alleviate the adversity that gay men with AIDS experience (Bergman 206). By allowing the audience to laugh, Román says that they are left pondering the issues raised by the plot and characters, without solely focusing on the emotions that they experienced. This shows that camp may allow for more thought-provoking responses from viewers than a drama would. From that point, the issues surrounding AIDS are brought to the forefront of people’s minds, so that they may be “discussed, debated, and argued” after the show (Bergman 226). In short, camp starts a conversation about AIDS, a

previously silenced subject. By uniting one community of individuals, Román notes, camp alienates those who are not part of the minority group (heterosexuals). He says, “From this perspective, camp solicits a very different distancing effect that results in a form of dismissal” (Bergman 227). Unlike comedy, which Meredith stated brings dissimilar people together, Román says that camp distances spectators who are not the intended audience. Being that camp is a fixture in gay culture, because it was created and sustained by gay men, it therefore always isolates straight people.

Oscar Wilde is often thought to be the founder of literary camp. In fact, Sontag opens “Notes on Camp” by saying, “These notes are for Oscar Wilde” (277). *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the quintessential camp play. Although there are no openly gay characters, the play is full of hyperbolic caricatures of heterosexuality. Thus, Wilde is camping heteronormativity by calling attention to the irrationality of constraining sexual desire. Camille Paglia states that “*The Importance of Being Earnest*, belongs to a category of sexual personae that I call the androgyne of manners” (531). The absurdity of the characters’ relational pursuits, such as Gwendolen and Cecily’s insistence on marrying a man named Earnest, are highlighted throughout the play. Paglia says, “They have no sex because they have no real sexual feelings” (534). Thus, the androgynous ideal that Sontag discussed is made apparent in Wilde’s work.

Camp functions in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by displaying each character as insatiably desirous. In the opening scene, Algernon continuously eats cucumber sandwiches throughout his entire conversation with Jack. At one point, Jack reaches for a sandwich and Algernon says, “Please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [*Takes one and eats it.*]” (Wilde 482). Through the use of camp, Wilde creates characters with notable peculiarities, such that homosexuality appears normal in comparison.

While the characters are so fixated on their odd desires, they appear unable to appropriately emotionally react. Paglia says that the characters' "escalating emotion is completely absorbed by the ceremonial framework and by the formality of their social masks" (552). When Gwendolen and Cecily think that they are engaged to the same man, they react with no emotion—not surprise, anger, sadness, or confusion. They simply ponder this new development. However, when they realize that the men they are to marry are not named Earnest, they react by ending the engagement, displaying their peculiar romantic and sexual desires. Because his characters are so adamant about their future husbands' names, Wilde is demonstrating that all sexual desire has its own absurdities, and thus all sexuality is inherently bizarre. Moreover, if all sexuality is abnormal, the abnormality becomes the norm. Thus, homosexuality is no longer viewed as immoral, because all sexual practices inherently lack reason and morality. By utilizing camp, Wilde is removing morality from sexuality by appropriating uncommon sexual yearning.

Humor in Feinberg's Fiction

David B. Feinberg's two novels, *Eighty-Sixed* and its sequel *Spontaneous Combustion*, are both narrated by Benjamin Joseph Rosenthal (B.J.), a character who Feinberg said is based on his own life. It is not until the second novel that B.J. is diagnosed as HIV-positive; however, he is faced with the AIDS crisis as a gay man living in New York City during the 1980s and 90s in the first novel. Sarcastic humor is B.J.'s primary weapon against the oncoming AIDS epidemic. Throughout the novels, Feinberg demonstrates the power of humor to combat the social and political hardships experienced by AIDS. As B.J. continued use of humor in the story progresses, he finds himself building a family of gay men, while distancing himself from heterosexuals and casual sex.

Eighty-Sixed is broken up into two halves—1980 and 1986. These dates are one year before the start of the AIDS crisis and five years after. The years' differences are demonstrated with many pointed changes in B.J.'s life. Each of the two years is further divided into the twelve months of the year, followed by a short piece of observational humor from B.J.'s perspective. One of these pieces is "How to Tell When Your Relationship Is on the Rocks" which includes a numbered list (a common trend in Feinberg's writing), which says, "7. He complains he's too tired for sex. ...10. He suggests a threesome and forgets to invite you along" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 124). To B.J., sex is the most important part of all of his relationships with men. He cannot grasp why anyone, especially a gay man, would want to be in a committed relationship. B.J. chooses instead to frequent bathhouses for his sexual satisfaction. When his friend Dennis states that it is his three week anniversary with his boyfriend, B.J. makes retching noises. His joke belittles not only Dennis's short-term relationship, but characterizes all monogamy among gay men as both sickening and laughable.

B.J. uses sarcastic joking throughout the novel. It enables him to gain power over an opposing force, whether that opposition is society, AIDS, or simply another person. While B.J. is visiting his family for Thanksgiving in 1980, he feels so distant from gay culture in the small New Jersey town where he was raised, that he has a brief sexual encounter with an unattractive cabdriver. The cabdriver leaves before B.J. orgasms, saying, “‘The better half is waiting.’ I decided that given him and virtually any other person on this planet, the other would always be ‘the better half’” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 141). Even though B.J. feels no sexual attraction to the cabdriver, he still has sex with him, because it is his only way he knows to interact with other gay men. Thus, sex allows him to express his identity. B.J. cracks a joke in order to make himself feel superior in relation to the cabdriver, who B.J. felt did not equally satisfy him during the sexual act.

Comedy is also used as a strategy of humor in the novel. When his extended family asks him if he has a girlfriend, B.J. says his friend Rachel and he are dating and then says, “‘No, darling, I prefer to take it up the ass,’ I’d mutter to myself” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 132). This comedic scene allows B.J. to accept his own identity by making an inaudible humorous remark, while simultaneously letting his family continue to live in blissful ignorance, thinking that their relative is a “normal” heterosexual. A superficial unity is created, but the individuals’ personal emotions take precedence. Another example of comedy is seen when B.J. breaks up with his boyfriend, Richard—the only man B.J. has ever loved. B.J. says to Richard, “‘I have some bad news. Better sit down. It’s terminal cancer. No, just joking. We’re only breaking up’” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 126). Richard takes the news well, saying that he wanted the relationship to end as well. B.J.’s comedy functions to end the relationship on mutual and friendly terms, leaving both parties satisfied with the decision reached. Comedy, if one follows Meredith’s argument, allows

the characters in the novel to establish mutual respect with others, while more importantly, elevating the individual's self-worth.

B.J.'s lists are used to make order out of chaos, such as his list of ways to "Get Eighty-Sixed from the Restaurant or Cocktail Lounge of Your Choice." In 1980 B.J. only uses the term "Eighty-sixed" to refer to the isolation of the gay community within a heteronormative and homophobic society. During that year, this was B.J.'s top concern in life, as he struggles with his relationship with heterosexuals, including his coworkers and family members. His effort for the acceptance of his sexual identity is overturned by a more dire issue in 1986. During this year, "Eighty-sixed" is only used as a term for death, as B.J.'s friend Joey says of an AIDS patient, "Don't fool yourself, B.J. He's got 'Eighty-sixed' written all over his face. He's not going to make it through to winter" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 267). B.J. is forced to confront the reality that his friend is going to die. Gone are the days of bemoaning intolerance, for B.J. is now focused on life and death in the face of AIDS. The two meanings of "Eighty-sixed" are in conversation with one another in 1986; Feinberg comments on the gay community's isolation from dominant society during the AIDS crisis because of the intolerance gay men face from the government.

As the novel shifts to 1986 there are several acute changes in B.J.'s life. One change is that B.J. begins to make lists much more frequently. The lists no longer only appear at the end of each month; listing is seen throughout B.J.'s daily thoughts and conversations. In his list "Some Symptoms" of AIDS, B.J. breaks up more common and serious symptoms such as "Lack of appetite" and "Purple bruises" with humorous symptoms such as "An inability to insert the correct protuberance into an appropriate orifice during the sexual act" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 162). These jokes allow B.J. to gain mental clarity and diminish his fear of contracting HIV.

His frequent panics, thinking that he has AIDS, are alleviated when he makes jokes that portray AIDS as humorous and thus not threatening. Thus, humor functions as a means to mask fears and concerns surrounding the AIDS crisis.

The listing begins to become satiric as B.J. presents ways to have safe sex and to remain celibate in the age of anxiety. In order to have completely safe sex, B.J. recommends to “Cover your mouth with adhesive tape and then do the same to your partner...Foreplay should commence in the shower. The water temperature should be at least 180 degrees Fahrenheit” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 223). Clearly, B.J. believes that sex can never be completely safe. Thus, he creates a mockery out of the extremes that gay men have resorted to in order to protect themselves during a time when little is known about spreading the AIDS virus. Later, when safe sex becomes too unsafe, B.J. lists ways in which he and other gay men can stay celibate including, “Redecorate your apartment in hospital chic....Place a rolling metal IV support-stand next to your bed along with glucose and miles of plastic tubing” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 238). A satire is again created as B.J. hyperbolizes the AIDS crisis. B.J. places the medical impacts of living with AIDS in the forefront of daily life, using humor to discuss the grimness of AIDS. Further, he is bringing the cause (sex) and the effect (hospitalization) of AIDS into the same scenario in order to increase awareness about the disease.

Another change in 1986 is that a community of gay men is established in B.J.’s life. Previously, his relationship with gay men involved little more than one-night stands and nothing more than physical connections. After the start of the AIDS crisis, B.J. uses his humor in order to establish a family of gay men. When he meets up with Richard after their long separation, B.J. makes a joke about Richard’s stay in a halfway house asking, “Do two halfway houses make a whole?” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 174). By punning on the serious events during their

uncomfortable separation, B.J. is able to reconnect with Richard. From that point, they are able to discuss B.J.'s herpes outbreaks and Richard's drug addiction, isolation, and depression. Much like Harper and Prior in *Angels in America*, B.J. and Richard's relationship is made stronger through B.J.'s comedy.

It is important to note that in 1980 B.J. had only two significant friends: Rachel and his closeted gay friend and priest Dennis. In 1986, however, he begins to befriend a group of gay men after Bob Broome is diagnosed with AIDS. When B.J. hears about Bob, he cannot remember who Bob is. Thinking that they had a sexual encounter, B.J. is unable to stop worrying about his own wellbeing. B.J. says, "Bob was a bit dull. Should use the past tense. Bob is a bit dull. What did we do?I should be feeling sorry for Bob" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 181). Around this point, B.J. begins to lose some of his humor, as he is unsure what humor is now appropriate. AIDS forces him to reevaluate all aspects of his life and his humor ceases.

By the end of 1986, B.J. regains his sense of humor and begins to make sarcastic comments again. This is due to his connection with gay men who are able to empathize with his concern about the AIDS virus. In affect, they restore B.J.'s humor. B.J. visits Bob daily, feeling guilty when he cannot make it to the hospital. B.J. finds it hard to separate himself from Bob's misfortunes because, as a gay man who has been sexually active in the 1980s, B.J. knows that he could be in Bob's position. He says, "It could just as well be me at Lenox Hill Hospital. I am painfully aware of this fact. It could just as well be me" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 200). B.J.'s listing takes a new form as he begins to repeat his worries and fears. This is seen when he lists "Everything" that he fears—a list that contains the word "AIDS" 34 times. AIDS becomes an obsession in B.J.'s life, and his realization that any gay man (including himself) could be the

next AIDS patient at Lenox Hill Hospital, creates a dichotomy in his life between fellow openly gay and politically active homosexuals and oblivious heterosexuals and closeted homosexuals.

B.J. all but ends communication with Rachel and Dennis, his former sole friends. As a heterosexual woman and a closeted gay priest, the two are unable to grasp B.J.'s reality of having friends and loved ones dying of AIDS, while being constantly distressed that his own life is at risk. B.J. notes this separation from his former friends when talking to Gordon, another openly gay man who frequently visits Bob in the hospital; B.J. says, "Rachel is married to her job; she's always busy. Dennis has his lover and his jobs, and besides, he lives in New Jersey" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 228). As Dennis retreats further into closeting his identity, Rachel becomes overly fixated on her new job. B.J. finally manages to make dinner plans with Rachel and "As expected, Rachel canceled at the last minute" (Feinberg *Eighty-Sixed* 204). B.J. emphasizes the emotional (and even physical) distance between himself and Rachel and Dennis. His only friends in 1986 are those who share his concern and anger surrounding the AIDS crisis.

In the light of Freud's theory of jokes, one might say that B.J.'s humor is made to draw a distinct separation between out gay men and everyone else, namely heterosexuals. During gay pride, B.J. goes to a demonstration where the speaker asks the crowd how many gay couples have been together for more than a year. B.J. becomes annoyed and leaves the rally while thinking, "What does it prove if we can mimic straight behavior? Why should we try to justify ourselves according to the breeder standards?" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 243). B.J. feels that gay people and straight people are inherently different. His pride stems from this fact, and he feels that acting straight causes a disparity in gay identity. Thus, he makes a joke about straight people being "breeders" in order to disparage heterosexual culture by expressing his bitterness and rage about being politically and socially oppressed.

B.J. continues to feel that straight people are unable to understand gay men and their fight against AIDS, even when he goes out to lunch with his female friends. At this point in the year, B.J. is still readjusting to the impact of AIDS on his and Bob's life, leaving him temporarily without humor. This is directly contrasted with his straight friends who are full of humorous remarks. When B.J. says that he hates eating eggs, Maxie remarks, "'Poor little pussy! He's afraid of a little *ovum*. Can you believe it?' 'Fruit salad for him,' suggests Belinda" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 206). B.J. spends the lunch uncomfortably still and silent; he is the only person at the table who is not constantly laughing. The conversation that the women have is full of so many fragmented sentences and topic changes that following their dialogue is almost impossible. This is a shift from 1980, when B.J. was able to communicate to heterosexuals with ease. He even skips his annual visit home for Thanksgiving, avoiding his biological family during the time of crisis within the gay community.

As the lunch with his female friends continues, Lucy says that she will pretend to have herpes to upset her ex-boyfriend. B.J., who is consumed with thoughts of the deadly AIDS virus, cannot believe that fake herpes is the most important topic in Lucy's life. He reflects to himself, "To think that *herpes* is so upsetting to the straights" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 207). B.J. emphasizes the word "herpes," denoting it as an inferior concern. His silent comedic thought creates a coping mechanism for him and allows the women to continue their way of thinking. The difference between straight people and gay people continues to be emphasized; a unity between the two groups seems impossible as the year progresses.

As the lunch draws to an end, B.J. hopes to convince the women to sign up for pledges for the AIDS Walk. It makes him extremely uncomfortable to do so, because he has been all but forced out of the table's conversation and he knows that they do not want to be bothered with a

disease affecting the gay community. While all of them sign up, Lucy signs her name “Lucy Brook Astor Ziti” and says, “Now all you have to do is figure out the check for us and we’re set” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 208). Lucy, along with the other heterosexuals at the table, are unconcerned about AIDS. Feinberg is making a comment about how apathetic heterosexual society was in 1986. Lucy is “set” and satisfied with a life of lunching everyday with her friends, while B.J. is visiting morbidly ill friends in the hospital. In fact, she feels that signing her name to a pledge sheet makes her a selfless philanthropist like Brooke Astor. While B.J. was previously exasperated by the fact that the women’s humor focused on unimportant and minute details, he is now outraged that they are belittling his most significant concern—AIDS and the wellbeing of his community. Like Kramer, Feinberg uses anger when confronted with ignorance about AIDS. Feinberg demonstrates the cruelty in humor by showing how the straight women use humor to further gay subjugation.

While B.J. continually uses humor when talking about gay culture and AIDS itself, he is faced with a situation in which humor is no longer appropriate when discussing AIDS. He and his friend Joey are talking about the recently closed gay bar, Mineshaft, when Joey says about the men who frequented the bar, “I wonder where they all are now? . . .the local AIDS distribution center.’ I blanch. Joey is just kidding but even I have my limits. Bob Broome is dying at Lenox Hill Hospital, and Joey is joking about AIDS. ‘I think I’d better go now, Joey” (Feinberg, *Eigthy-Sixed* 261). B.J. draws a sharp contrast between the type of humor that he uses and what Joey says. As Freud said, jokes are always made at the expense of one party. Thus, jokes have an aggressive edge. Joey’s joke puts down the sick—those within his own community who are HIV-positive. B.J. removes himself from the situation, leaving Joey and his insensitivity, while he goes to visit Bob Broome with his other gay friends at the hospital.

This contrast is seen again when B.J. and Joey are talking on the phone. B.J. is discussing his ritual of saying the names of people in the obituaries who died of AIDS aloud each morning, when Joey interrupts him to say, “‘Instead of this morbid remembrance, I want you to think about the *huge thing*. You know what I mean.’ With that Joey cackles and hangs up. Sometimes I think Joey will never grow up” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 300). Because it is not working to alleviate any of the problems surrounding AIDS, B.J. is further annoyed with Joey’s AIDS humor. For B.J., Joey’s ignorance of the seriousness of the disease leads to a denial of the problem. Thus, like the ACT UP slogan Silence=Death, his silence through inappropriate humor leads to a further progression of AIDS.

In 1986, B.J. stops having any sexual contact with men, a direct contrast to his behavior in 1980 when he had countless anonymous sexual encounters. While Richard was the only man B.J. had ever loved, he is now a bother in his newly prioritized life. After talking to Richard on the phone about his drug problems, B.J. thinks, “I can barely survive Bob’s illness....Do I really have to put up with Richard’s insanity on top of everything?” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 291). B.J.’s life has become irrevocably altered due to the AIDS epidemic. It is not until the month of November that B.J. starts to engage in his first sexual act of the year. After picking up Mario at the bar, the two men begin foreplay, kissing and touching each other in bed. B.J. imagines that he is about to participate in an orgy—a satire of the view that “you sleep with every one of his partners for the last five years” (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 318). B.J.’s satirical humor enables him to continue doing what he has spent the entire year both desiring and fearing.

At the exact moment that Mario is about to penetrate B.J., leaving B.J. most vulnerable for contracting the AIDS virus, B.J.’s phone rings. B.J.’s friend Dave leaves a message on the machine saying that Bob Broome has died. Dave says, “‘His lungs filled up with fluid, and he

drowned.' . . . He hangs up. I go limp. Mario Stops. I wait for the tears to flow" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 319). The threat of AIDS is made even more apparent as B.J.'s risky sexual behavior is brought to an end with the news of Bob's AIDS-related death. This is the first time that B.J. even contemplates the idea of crying, previously dismissing it as a weakness and allowing his humor to combat all of the hardships within his life.

Bob's death leaves B.J. once again humorless, as he attempts to adjust to life without Bob. This is the first time B.J. has lost a friend to AIDS. One month later, B.J.'s friend Gordon, who always visited Bob in the hospital, calls to inform B.J. that he is HIV-positive. B.J.'s tears are echoed by the imagery of rain; "It begins as a gentle rain. Just a drop, for each illness, each death. And with each passing day it gets worse. Now a downpour. Now a torrent. And there is no likelihood of its ever ending" (Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* 326). As the last words of the novel, the reader is left with a solemn feeling. B.J. has been stripped of his humor. Left without his shields of comedy, jokes, irony/satire, and camp, B.J. is alone to battle the oncoming AIDS epidemic.

Feinberg continues to follow B.J. from 1985 to 1990 in *Eight-Sixed's* sequel, *Spontaneous Combustion*. Shortly after the last novel leaves off, B.J. is diagnosed with the AIDS virus. While he carries on with his listing, B.J. starts to develop long streams of consciousness. He seems unable to stop or even make sense of his own thoughts as he both thinks and says run-on sentences that span pages of the text. As AIDS begins to take control over B.J.'s mind, it becomes clear that the effects of the virus are much greater than physical ailments. B.J.'s personal spontaneous combustion threatens when he becomes overwhelmed with life as an HIV-positive gay man. He says, "It was enough to make me wonder if one day I would explode" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 159). However, through all of his adversity, B.J. is still able to utilize humor as he works to actualize power over his disease.

B.J. begins to create many more satiric moments as well as start to camp about his surroundings after he becomes infected with AIDS. These two varieties of humor work to create a distancing effect between him (along with other AIDS patients) and heterosexuals, who are unable to fully empathize with HIV-positive gay men. After feeling that he is now dead because he has AIDS, B.J. wonders, “Was it better to have loved and gotten infected than never to have loved at all?” camping the common post-relationship phrase of “better to have loved and lost than never loved at all” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 78). However, B.J.’s “love” is much different from the norm of heterosexual love; B.J. rarely had any romantic relationships with men. Further, he remains unaware as to which anonymous sexual partner transmitted the virus to him. To B.J., love and sex are interchangeable concepts. This camps about socially accepted and monogamous heterosexual relationships. B.J.’s humor allows him to realize that living with AIDS is, in fact, living; and he stops talking about being dead.

B.J. again uses camp when talking about his childhood, playing with the archetypes of heterosexuality: Barbie and Ken. He says that he performed surgeries, including illegal abortions, on the dolls but it never became messy because “With plastic dolls there was never blood” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 83). By taking the blood out of the (heterosexual) person, AIDS is unable to become transmitted to the ideal, plastic body. B.J. discovers through camp that he has always been more vulnerable than heterosexuals. B.J. says that AIDS has reduced everything “to a single criterion: Was it good or bad for my T-cells?” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 161). In these moments of honesty, unmasked by humor, B.J. displays his constant anxiety. The new complexity in B.J.’s life further separates himself from the heterosexual community.

This is further shown as B.J. comes out to his mother as being HIV-positive. After he tells her, she responds “With harsh sadness, my long-suffering mother said, ‘It’s a wonderful

life.’ I realized that this was where I had learned irony. It’s a wonderful life-style was what I think she meant.” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 196). B.J. inherits his mother’s coping mechanism of using humor when faced with bitterness and sadness. After his admission, B.J. leaves to return to New York City, as his mother’s humor allows her to cope without uniting her and her son. She uses ironic comedy, which contrasts her normality with the ludicrousness of her surroundings, including her son, B.J.

As B.J. ends his relationship with Roger, another gay man with AIDS, he uses a joke to solidify the breakup. After realizing that Roger lied about his T-cell count, B.J. becomes enraged saying, “‘I was looking for a long-term relationship. Two, three, maybe even four weeks!’” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 109). B.J. jokes about the length of the relationship to strip their bond of its seriousness. His humor highlights the fact that AIDS shortens and intensifies every aspect of life. As B.J. begins dating men with and without the AIDS virus, the reader sees his sexual and romantic life flourishing. Before he contracted AIDS, B.J. adopted a celibate life, denying himself sexual actions and even thoughts. After he becomes positive, however, he says, “‘On my top-ten list of favorite things to do, nine of them involved oral sex’” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 139). Through his humor, B.J. is able to regain his sexuality—both his identity as a gay man and his sexual behavior with other gay men.

In 1980, B.J. was largely unsuccessful in his pursuit of relationships and even one-night stands, feeling self-conscious around other gay men. After he contracts AIDS, B.J. is now able to connect with other gay men on a mental and physical level that was absent before the epidemic. Feinberg draws attention to this apparent contradiction in order to stress the formation of a community gay men coping with the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. B.J. even feels guilty about having not visited a stranger who died of AIDS. Simply because the man had AIDS, B.J. knew

that he would have been a support system in the man's life. There is a relationship between gay men, which was fostered because of the AIDS crisis that transcends all other circumstances. Gay men thus created their own family. As all families are bonded by blood, so are these men connected by their (HIV-positive) blood.

B.J. continues to joke about the uncertainties surrounding the AIDS crisis, as people are still unsure what protective measures are needed for different sexual acts. He jokes, "Even lesbians there were encouraged to wear wet-suits during sex" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 140). B.J. combats his fears and questions about his disease by belittling the vagueness concerning the cause of AIDS, which the gay community is still being exposed to in 1989 as well as today. B.J.'s humor is his only completely safe protective measure against the disease. B.J. later discusses the uncertainty of the drugs, namely AZT, which are used to treat AIDS-related complications. He jokes to overcome his discomfort; "The only way I could stand it was by telling myself that it was only a temporary stopgap measure until something better came along. Sort of like a boyfriend" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 167). B.J. goes on to discuss the fact that after a certain time period, AZT will stop helping his body fight AIDS altogether. He says, "By then there would be new, better, less toxic drugs available. Sure. And I promise I won't come in your mouth" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 167). As a sexual partner will pretend to not come in your mouth before the act commences, so does the medical field lie about their effort to assist AIDS patients. Since the government has provided no support, B.J. is weary of the prospect of any future medical funding or advancements. To him, hope to overcome AIDS is a lie. B.J. accepts this truth through the safeguard of satiric joking.

B.J.'s gay male friends encourage his use of humor. He says, "Gordon was right. I really didn't have any choice. If I kept on despairing, I might as well have been dead" (Feinberg,

Spontaneous 170). If he dwells in his own misery, B.J. will be living as though he is already dead. Through the help of one of his fellow gay men and AIDS patients, Gordon, B.J. realizes that his humorous nature is beneficial to his emotional and physical wellbeing. Dennis also revives B.J.'s humor while B.J. worries about his T-cell count. B.J. is only able to reconnect with Dennis after Dennis comes out as an openly gay man and quits the priesthood. The two can now relate as open members of same community. B.J. says, "I would really appreciate a few T-cells for my birthday," to which Dennis responds, "Benjamin, I'm sorry, they were all out at B. Altman's. I made a special trip to the factory outlet out in Queens. No dice" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 176). By continuing the joke, Dennis reassures B.J. that humor is appropriate to fight his disease. Their conversation is a camp version of the conversations in *Eighty-Sixed* when B.J. had lunch with his heterosexual female friends. By masking the conversation in a joking dialogue (shopping), the two men are able to talk seriously. This echoes the camp used in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the end of *Spontaneous Combustion*, B.J. begins a relationship with an HIV-negative man, Mitchell. While B.J. previously experienced difficulty talking about his HIV-positive status to a "prospective boyfriend," he now developed a strong sense of self-confidence over his disease. He asks Mitchell on the third date:

....are you afraid that I might contaminate you with my deadly seed that I might draw you into the circle of death and destruction, and that maybe I'm the black widow and you will be my last victim, and that I will abandon you as it gets worse and then you will suffer unfathomable horrors.... (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 211)

Talking like this to Mitchell during the beginning of their relationship shows that B.J. has fully accepted living with AIDS. His humor—satirically joking about being "the black widow"—

allows B.J. to openly discuss his life as an HIV-positive man. This creates the needed conversation between him and Mitchell, enabling their relationship to prosper. By joking about the complications of AIDS in a gay relationship, B.J. gains control in his relationship to his disease.

B.J. then makes a grand statement to Mitchell, saying that he is ready for marriage, adopting a pet, and buying a house together. B.J. is finally excited to make plans for the future, no longer trapped by continual worries about AIDS, as he makes the best out of his perceived worst set of circumstances. In response, Mitchell simply asks, ““What makes you think I’m still interested?”” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 222). Because these are the last lines of the chapter and no response from B.J. is provided, this could be read in one of two ways. First, Mitchell is using humor to further develop the relationship. He is acting like B.J. and is now also comfortable to living his life with an HIV-positive lover. Thus, humor would continue to develop relationships among gay men in spite of the AIDS epidemic. Second, Mitchell is earnestly asking the question. If it is read without humor, than Mitchell’s seriousness will lead to the end of their relationship. The lack of humor will allow AIDS to once again overpower B.J.’s life. Humor enables their relationship to thrive, while a lack of humor is toxic to their future as a couple.

At the novel’s closing, Feinberg writes “Appendix: After the Cure,” set in 1996. Written in 1990 when B.J.’s story ends, Feinberg was clearly hopeful that a cure for HIV/AIDS would be found within six years. B.J. creates a satire in which gay men are able to return to their true selves, where unsafe sex is now in fact safe. By using humor in the future, B.J. exposes truths of the past. He says, “Lambda finds that the main active ingredient of AZT is Flintstone vitamins” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 224). B.J. is ecstatic to live in a world where illness and death from AIDS are eradicated. The last sentence says, “And now, if you will excuse me, I have an

engagement with an as-yet unidentified prospective boyfriend at some unseemly cocktail lounge near the docks. Wish me luck” (Feinberg, *Spontaneous* 226). B.J. has returned to his old self, because Mitchell is no longer his serious boyfriend and he is excited to meet another “prospective boyfriend.” B.J.’s humor contributes to an end of the AIDS crisis in *Spontaneous Combustion*. B.J. is alleviated by the social stigmas and mental, physical, and medical concerns surrounding the AIDS crisis through his use of humor.

Humor in Feinberg's Nonfiction

In *Queer and Loathing* Feinberg's collection of autobiographical essays, he continues to use humor to combat the social stigmas of living with AIDS. Feinberg says that this collection allowed him to fully disclose all of the painful realities of having AIDS; he says that "this is as close to the truth as I can get" (*Queer* xii). Feinberg writes lists as he did in his novels, creating a sense of order in his chaotic life, and discusses living with AIDS in greater detail. In addition, these essays allow him to examine his own writing. Feinberg says that his goal "is to reflect on experiences of being HIV-positive and gay life so people can recognize their feelings and feel less isolated" (*Queer* 69). Thus, as in his fiction, Feinberg works to create a community of gay men through the shared experience of living with AIDS. He recognizes that it is difficult to write about AIDS, but jokes that it is cheaper than therapy. Feinberg's therapeutic discourse enables other gay men to relate to his humorous stories, thus ending their isolation.

Feinberg's humor allows him to remain in good spirits when faced with illness. He says that "next to your penis or vagina, a positive attitude is your best friend" (Feinberg, *Queer* 61). Feinberg's "positive attitude" takes the form of humor in his writing. He asserts that this humor will overpower the concerns of having an HIV-positive status. He utilizes humor on the day when he is officially diagnosed with AIDS, April 1st. Feinberg exclaims, "April fools! I've got AIDS" (*Queer* 90). To Feinberg, the April fool's joke masks the gravity of the truth. He is able to use humor in the form of irony so that he can come to a gradual acceptance of his disease. Feinberg jokes that he immediately thought of ways to exploit the system which has exploited him, using AIDS to his advantage; "Can I get reduced-price tickets to the next Saint-at-Large party based on reduced T-cells? ...Will public assistance pay for poppers?" (Feinberg, *Queer* 92). Feinberg's irony and jokes allow him to relieve himself of constantly worrying about his health,

so that he may laugh at the government, thus fighting back by highlighting its faults. At the same time, he places casual sex and the drug culture in the forefront of the gay community. Throughout his essays, Feinberg asserts that gay men living with AIDS can (and should) remain sexual.

Feinberg promotes the notion that if gay men are unable to be sexual because of their HIV-status, then they will lose their sexual identities, further isolating them from gay culture. In his essay, "Sex Tips for Boys," Feinberg lists zero reasons "Not to Sleep with Someone Immediately" and five reasons "to Sleep with Someone Immediately" (*Queer* 82). His first reason to do so reads, "Your combined T-cells taken as SAT scores wouldn't get either of you into the tiniest, most decrepit community college in the state of Iowa, and they have open admissions there" (Feinberg, *Queer* 82). Feinberg humorously argues that gay men with AIDS have no reason not to enjoy themselves by having sex. By stating that their T-cells are dwindling, Feinberg exposes the fact that these men's lives are coming to an end and therefore sex cannot wait until the second date.

Continuing his push for HIV-positive gay men to have sex, Feinberg says, "*Carpe frenulum! Seize the dick!*" (*Queer* 82). He is encouraging AIDS patients to live in the moment, basking in the remaining pleasures of life. Feinberg contrasts other AIDS writers, such as Larry Kramer, who view sex as the cause of the AIDS virus and therefore inherently dirty and undesirable. Feinberg asserts that sex is natural and beneficial to continue life as a gay man. He continues with his joke saying, "With Jeffrey Dahmer in prison and Roy Cohn most decidedly dead, I still haven't come up with any adequate reasons not to sleep with someone on a first date...Discrimination is against the law. Moreover, it's tacky" (Feinberg, *Queer* 83). Feinberg uses his satiric humor to criticize Dahmer (who kidnapped, raped, and murdered 17 young men)

and Cohn (a government official who harassed and fired other government employees for being gay). Feinberg says that Cohn was the most hated gay man in the late 1980s and early 90s. Cohn was a publicly closeted government official who harassed and fired other government employees for being gay. He died of AIDS in 1986. Feinberg separates the insane murderer and the corrupt politician from the rest of the gay community, who are all still worthy of the benefits of sex. Thus, he stresses the importance of sexual activity while simultaneously politically criticizing Dahmer and Cohn. Feinberg also camps the idea of discrimination in society, making sex readily available for all gay men, regardless of HIV-status.

Feinberg breaks down the percentage of his day that he spends thinking about various aspects of his life. Feinberg says, “Like most HIV-positive people, I spend 95 percent of my waking hours thinking about AIDS” (*Queer* 172). He goes on to examine four other parts of his daily life, “because I am capable of worrying about as many as five things simultaneously” (*Queer* 172). Feinberg spends 80 percent of his day thinking about sex, again displaying the sexual nature of a gay man living with AIDS. In addition to food, the other three aspects are Madonna and “What would Bette Davis say in this situation?” (Feinberg, *Queer* 173). Along with worrying about AIDS, Feinberg retains his camp sensibility. These percentages overlap, allowing him to think about his AIDS condition while also thinking about Madonna’s wardrobe, dance moves, and music videos or Bette Davis’s witty remarks. Thus, camp empowers Feinberg to both express his concerns about AIDS and contemplate his pop icons, retaining his gay identity.

Feinberg talks about visiting AIDS patients in his essay “How to Visit Someone in the Hospital with a Terminal Disease.” He continues to assert that AIDS patients are sexual, regardless of the fact that they are hospitalized for an infectious disease. Feinberg says that

when visiting an AIDS patient “Avoid giving blowjobs during doctors’ rounds. Be considerate to his roommate. Remember to pull the curtains closed during intimate acts. Consider a discreet handjob as reparation for a minor disturbance” (*Queer* 161). Feinberg shows that helping a person with AIDS can take the form of aiding their sexual desires. Feinberg’s satire relieves him of some of his personal anguish about being an outcast of the gay community for having AIDS. By joking that a handjob for the roommate can amend a disruption, Feinberg demonstrates to other gay men that all AIDS patients are in need of sexual satisfaction.

While Feinberg firmly places sexuality within the lives of gay men living with AIDS throughout his essays, he simultaneously addresses his concerns about the oncoming effects of AIDS, including mental and physical illness, interpersonal abandonment, and death. He discusses a friend who experienced extreme neuropathy and was unable to perform basic physical functions, including opening doors or holding coffee mugs. Feinberg imagines himself with severe neuropathy saying, “I can’t imagine how difficult putting on a condom could be, let alone masturbation. I wonder whether this is the sort of thing a visiting long-term home care attendant would be conversant in” (*Queer* 118). Feinberg jokes that even while his mental and physical functioning begins to diminish, he will continue to feel the need to act on his sexual urges. Stating that he will remain sexual assures Feinberg that he will be mentally stable throughout his life. Thus, he gains psychological control over his disease. In addition, Feinberg uses examples of safe sexual acts to emphasize the continued importance of protection against AIDS.

As in his two novels, Feinberg uses humor to express his bitterness and anger about AIDS in *Queer and Loathing*. While he previously allowed much of his humor to mask his resentment, he now fully uses it to convey his emotions and call for political action. Feinberg

says, “I would like to be cremated after any salvageable organs have been donated to right-wing Republicans and religious fundamentalists (because I’m really not bitter at all)” (*Queer* 137).

Feinberg jokes about his bitterness, while using comedy to plan his spread of AIDS to Republicans and Christians. He shows the extremity of his anger, to stress the disparity between gay men and religious and political conservatives. Feinberg also emphasizes the importance of ending the AIDS crisis by stating how many gay men are affected by AIDS—“the virus has saturated the gay community. An estimated 50 percent of in New York and San Francisco are HIV-positive” (*Queer* 179). Showing the severity of the epidemic allows Feinberg to then insert his political calls to action for gay men and AIDS activists.

This call to action is found in Feinberg’s essay “100 Ways You Can Fight the AIDS Crisis.” All 100 ways are serious, yet Feinberg uses humor when discussing the dire need to fight AIDS in America. Twelve of the ways are various methods to kill Jesse Helms, a politician who was publicly opposed to all funding of AIDS treatment and research. Feinberg lists ways to raise awareness about AIDS, care for AIDS patients, and develop an end to the AIDS virus. He ends with suggesting a manageable everyday action from his reader saying:

Do something every day to fight the AIDS crisis: Write a letter, make a phone call, attend a benefit, sleep with a PWA [person with AIDS], set yourself on fire on the steps of the White House as a gesture of anger at the President’s shoddy response to the AIDS crisis, write a check, share a drinking glass, visit a friend in the hospital, etc. (Feinberg, *Queer* 106)

Feinberg demonstrates that helping to end the AIDS crisis is manageable for every United States citizen. He stresses the importance throughout his books, discussing his and B.J.’s struggles with the virus. Feinberg uses the essay to propose ways to eradicate the damaging effects of AIDS.

His satiric humor aids him in relating to other gay men, making an effective political call to action.

After outlining the ways to combat the AIDS epidemic, Feinberg begins to talk about the more serious effects of living with AIDS. Feinberg discusses his inevitable AIDS-related illnesses and death, using jokes and camp to diminish his mortality. He says, “There’s a certain advantage to dating someone who is positive, if you are positive. You can share nebulizers, prescriptions, and possibly even urns” (Feinberg, *Queer* 188). By joking about this forbidding outcome, Feinberg reveals the commonality of all HIV-positive gay men, who can come together even after their death. Feinberg continues to joke about AIDS-related deaths saying, “Memorials come in twos and threes. For a while we referred to the obituary pages as the ‘gay sports pages’” (*Queer* 194). Again, Feinberg shows that all gay men are suffering from this epidemic, as it affects primarily the gay community in the United States. By using camp to relate the obituaries to the heterosexual sports pages, Feinberg comments on the prevalence of AIDS among gay men and the need for a social, political, and medical change. In his essay “Notes on Death,” Feinberg says “Death means never having to say you’re sorry” (*Queer* 233). He utilizes camp in order to take *Love Story*’s heteronormative movie quote about love, and change it into a queer message about death. As AIDS progresses in the gay community, Feinberg argues, death replaces love.

Feinberg also uses humor in *Queer and Loathing* to belittle the archetype of conservative heterosexuality in the United States—Christianity. Feinberg makes jokes about religion in his novels, but he now uses these jokes within the context of his social isolation as a gay man living with AIDS. He says, “I thank God every day that She chose me to be sacrificed for the sins of the heteros, and as I’m rotting on the cross of CMV retinitis and pneumocystis and toxoplasmosis and a host of other viral bacterial infections and dementia strikes, I’ll consider

myself lucky. Not!” (Feinberg, *Queer* 77). Feinberg camps the image of Jesus dying on the cross, to illustrate his suffering from heterosexuals in public office who blatantly ignore the AIDS crisis. By fighting against considering himself lucky, Feinberg shows that he refuses to remain silent about his pain and alienation.

As the book continues, Feinberg begins to find his own religious center. He is able to develop his own penance for his sins, free from any socially constructed and heteronormative religious practice. Feinberg talks about using his Water Pik, which painfully cleans his bleeding gums saying, “Now I use my Water Pik only on those rare occasions when guilt has so overwhelmed my being that I find it necessary to expiate my sins. Every day for the rest of my fucking life” (*Queer* 101). Feinberg develops his own ritual practice which enables him to gain mental clarity over his wrongdoings. His Water Pik begins to function as his personal confession, alleviating him from his guilt, much like his humor eases his concerns of living with AIDS.

Similar to *Eighty-Sixed* when B.J. criticizes the humor Joey uses against AIDS patients, Feinberg writes humorlessly when discussing his dying and deceased friends. Again, humor is appropriate only when combatting the disease and its physical and social effects, and not when the AIDS patient is the object of the joke. When his friend David P. dies, Feinberg becomes outraged when a gay man, Brian, says that it was simply David P.’s time to die. Feinberg responds, “You fucking coldhearted gay Republican. Damn you! ...Don’t be so cavalier with someone else’s life....You attend the Gay Pride parade if it isn’t your weekend at the beach. You worry that the straight will get the wrong impression from drag queens...you stupid selfish pig” (*Queer* 201). Feinberg expresses his resentment and rage for agnostic gay men as he yells at Brian. He puts aside all humor to belittle Brian fully and publicly. For Feinberg accepting AIDS

without a fight allows straight people and the government to control gay men. Feinberg unmask his anger from all humor in order to show full respect for his deceased friend. He seems to have reached his breaking point, as his anxiety continues to build and his humor slowly diminishes.

This is seen further in Feinberg's essay "Political Funerals." Feinberg discusses the public funeral of his friend Tim Bailey, which was enacted by ACT UP to make a political statement about the severity of the AIDS crisis. Feinberg is humorless in his description of the event saying, "I am living under a heavy sheet of sadness" (*Queer* 259). His humor subsides, allowing his sadness and anger to be fully expressed. Feinberg becomes outraged as drivers honk and pedestrians yell, thinking that the funeral is a pro-Clinton rally. He says that he becomes "furious, screaming at a passerby, 'This is a fucking funeral, don't you get it?'" (Feinberg, *Queer* 259). Feinberg heightens his separation from the straight community, which is unable to grasp the importance of just one life lost to AIDS. Feinberg continues to yell, along with other gay men and AIDS activists, until he becomes disheartened and depressed. He loses faith in creating change in the political system, and ends by saying, "I cannot speak" (Feinberg, *Queer* 264). Feinberg begins to question the effectiveness of humor or any political message about the AIDS crisis, because it appears that no one is listening.

Humor functions in similar ways in other authors' AIDS writing. Authors such as Tony Kushner, Adam Mars-Jones, and Paul Monette used humor in their AIDS fiction in the 1990s. In Kushner's *Angels in America*, Prior utilizes humor throughout the play. Like B.J. and Feinberg, Prior's humor allows him to mentally alleviate some of the adversities of AIDS while also combatting his oppressors, including Roy Cohn. When Prior comes out to Louis, his boyfriend, as being HIV-positive, Prior shows Louis a lesion on his skin saying, "Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death...I'm a lesionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The

American Lesion. Lesionnaire's disease...My troubles are lesion...Don't you think I'm handling this well? I'm going to die" (Kushner 27). As Prior jokes about his medical condition, Louis is unable to find humor in the situation and ultimately leaves Prior because of his fear of AIDS. The comedy Prior uses enables him to cope with his distress, while creating separation between him and HIV-negative Louis.

Prior continues to use humor throughout the play and, like B.J. and Feinberg, he humorously remains sexualized. When the angel visits him Prior has an intense erection and sexual feeling, restoring his sexual identity as a gay man. Prior says to the angel:

How come...How come I have this...um, erection? It's very hard to concentrate.

Angel: The stiffening of your penis is of no consequence.

Prior: Well maybe not to you but... (Kushner 173)

The play's directions read, "*They both get very turned-on*" and Prior has an orgasm, believing that he had sex with the angel (Kushner 173). As a healing power, the angel brought Prior an orgasm. As in Feinberg's writing, this illustrates the importance of sexual activity for AIDS patients. This scene, as in *Queer and Loathing*, also comments on the role of religion in a gay man's life. The angel combats Prior's anxiety of being emotionally, physically and sexually alone. His orgasm emphasizes the importance of supporting AIDS patients as Feinberg discussed.

In Adam Mars-Jones's *The Waters of Thirst*, William talks about using humor when discussing his kidney disease (a satire of AIDS). William humorously accounts his fight against kidney failure, but laments that he is unable to share this humor with anyone else, because he does not know anyone else with the disease. He says, "There aren't a lot of laughs on a renal unit. The Bumper Book of Kidney Jokes would fit comfortably into your back pocket. Here's

one: *I used to think the Fistula was a river in Poland until I discovered dialysis*. That's renal humour for you...something of a milestone" (Mars-Jones 65). William states that jokes are not frequently made among people in the renal unit of the hospital. This is emphasized by the fact that William is isolated by his illness, because he has no communication with other kidney disease patients. William's humor allows him to mentally overcome the stress of his weekly dialysis as well as the social stigmas surrounding his dietary restrictions and visible physical ailments.

William notes that humor from a patient is entirely different than humor from a nurse. He says, "It really gets on my tits when the trained staff start having their bit of fun" (Mars-Jones 66). William talks about how some of the nurses will jokingly ask him if his dialysis is thrilling; "Jokes about 'thrilling' aren't renal humour, they're jokes around you, jokes about you, cheap disinfectant, cheap anaesthetic" (Mars-Jones 66). Like Feinberg, Mars-Jones shows that humor about the patient is damaging, while humor about the disease is uplifting because it combats personal concerns, social stigmas, and political hardships. William works to belittle his disease, but the nurses' humor inadvertently demeans William and his pain. Thus, he becomes annoyed at the staff for having fun at his expense. William contradicts the nurses' joke that dialysis is "thrilling," by saying that it is "a foreign body in *my* body and it's humming like a transformer that's about to blow up" (Mars-Jones 66). Because the nurses cannot understand his condition, William says that their humor belittles patients with kidney disease. William says that because the nurses cannot understand his condition, they therefore unable to joke about his "thrilling" dialysis. Much like Feinberg noted a dichotomy between gay men living with AIDS and ignorant heterosexuals, so does Mars-Jones create a separation between William and the nurses who have healthy kidneys.

While Paul Monette uses humor in his AIDS fiction, he avoids humor in his AIDS memoir, *Borrowed Time*. Because his memoir focuses on his partner Roger's eventual death from AIDS, Monette emphasizes the gravity of the disease. This is similar to Feinberg who humorlessly discussed his friends' struggles with AIDS. Monette says that when anyone would complain about their trivial life troubles, he would remind them that his friend Cesar is dying from AIDS "as if to sting them with the challenge. What the fuck was their excuse?" (*Borrowed* 30). Monette focuses on bitter anger in his memoir. He emphasizes the importance of avoiding humor as he is unable to write a comedic screenplay after the AIDS crisis becomes his sole concern. Monette goes on to say that in writing his memoir, he "will not be avoiding the anger" (*Borrowed* 19). Unlike Feinberg and like Kramer, Monette faces the AIDS crisis and the loss of his loved ones with unadulterated anger. Feinberg says in *Queer and Loathing* that he uses humor as "a survival tactic," to living with AIDS, much like "You can't stare directly into the sun" (87). Monette, on the other hand, encourages survival through ignorance. Monette says of his partner Roger, "He didn't want to know [his HIV-status] yet, and I don't blame him. Once you know, it's all over" (*Borrowed* 68). Monette and Roger begin life in the AIDS epidemic refusing to accept living with AIDS. Their humorless (staring "directing into the sun") view on the crisis causes them pain as they attempt to accept their inevitable diagnoses of being HIV-positive.

As his memoir continues, Monette documents Roger's diagnosis of and battle with AIDS. Monette recalls his fortieth drawing near, while focusing on Roger's condition. Monette expresses gratitude to his friend Sheldon for agreeing to throw him a birthday party. Monette says, "I even managed a strained laugh at the dark humor of his subsequent remark to Roger. 'How old are you going to be this year?' asked Sheldon. 'Forty-four? Well, we'll have one for

you on your forty-fifth—if you're still here” (*Borrowed* 180). Monette feels indebted to Sheldon for his hospitality, but quickly becomes uncomfortable when Sheldon jokes about Roger’s foreseeable death. Like Feinberg who focused his humor on the medical effects of AIDS and the politics surrounding the disease, Monette becomes irritated as a member of the gay community laughs at a suffering AIDS patient.

Reinaldo Arenas also adopts a serious perspective of the AIDS crisis in his memoir, *Before Night Falls*. Arenas talks about the AIDS crisis during the 1980s in communist Cuba, under the dictatorship of Fidel Castro. Because his writing about gay culture is found by government officials, Arenas is arrested and sent to prison. In prison, he becomes socially isolated, refusing to have sex with any of the prisoners, while outside of prison he had sexual encounters with hundreds of gay men. Arenas says, “I had no sexual relations while in prison, not only as a precaution but because it made no sense; love has to be free” (187). The loss of freedom leads to a loss of identity and community for Arenas. He discusses how gay men would fight each other with makeshift weapons in prison saying, “When two queers fought with these weapons, the goal was to pull the blades several times across each other’s face. Their heads turned into balls of blood. The soldiers took no part in those battles; they rather enjoyed watching the queers cut each other up” (Arenas 186). Arenas humorlessly shows the separation between the straight community and the gay community, as well as the oppositions between gay men. The AIDS epidemic and the homophobic government lead to chaos within the gay community. Like Feinberg, Arenas shows the damaging effects of a government that ignores the reality of AIDS.

Arenas ends his memoir with a chapter titled “Farewell,” in which he writes a letter to his friends, which was later published in newspapers in the United States and abroad, explaining his

plan to commit suicide. Arenas writes, “Due to my delicate state of health and to the terrible emotional depression it causes me not to be able to continue writing and struggling for the freedom of Cuba, I am ending my life” (317). Arenas was so overcome with depression that he committed suicide by overdosing on drugs and alcohol. The emotional hardships of AIDS and communism devastated Arenas. Along with sadness, Arenas ends his memoir with bitter anger saying, “There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro” (317). Arenas expresses his contempt for Castro and encourages Cubans to continue to fight for their freedom. He says, “I want to encourage the Cuban people out of the country as well as on the Island to continue fight for freedom. I do not want to convey to you a message of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope” (Arenas 317). Like Feinberg, Arenas leaves the reader with a call to action, prompting political opposition and inspiring change.

Feinberg ends *Queer and Loathing* by questioning his use of humor in both his writing and political activism. Feinberg says that he regrets not making a stronger attempt to eradicate AIDS saying, “I didn’t do anything substantive to end the AIDS crisis except whine in an unnaturally high pitch” (*Queer* 271). Feinberg jokes about his support of ending the AIDS crisis, showing that he worries about not having done enough. Feinberg finishes his collection of autobiographical essays with “The Last Piece.” In this essay, he further doubts his humorous AIDS writing. Feinberg says that after the political funeral of Tim Bailey, he was “profoundly depressed” and unable to write humor (*Queer* 274). From this point, Feinberg questions humor as a defense mechanism to lessen his concerns about his medical, social, and political hardships. His angry resentment is exposed as he realizes the severity of the AIDS crisis and the indifference of society. Feinberg says that “there comes a point when your sense of humor grow stale...I can only mask so much bitterness and anger with humor. The subject ceases to be

palatable. It all gets too ugly” (*Queer* 273). “The Last Piece” was written for the book, published very shortly before his death. Thus, Feinberg ended his life questioning his humorous view of AIDS because of the government’s betrayal of gay men.

Nevertheless, while Feinberg seems to dispel all humor from his writing, he ends the essay humorously. He ends “The Last Piece” with a sarcastic joke—his most frequently used comic technique. Feinberg says, “Special thanks go to Senator Jesse Helms, John Cardinal O’Connor, former Representative William Dannemeyer, and the religious Right for their efforts in prolonging the epidemic. This concludes our presentation of *Chronicles of a Death Foretold*. Good-bye, and good luck” (*Queer* 275). Feinberg’s sarcastic joke allows him to end with a political message that these leaders need to change or, at the very least, that AIDS activists need to stand in opposition to them. Feinberg then makes a camp comparison between the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and his life story. Camp functions to parallel the death of the novel’s main character (by murder) to Feinberg’s forthcoming death (from AIDS). With a joke about his own demise, Feinberg asserts that the government’s refusal to aid the epidemic is consciously murdering the gay community.

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