

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

English Faculty Publications

English

2016

Peeling the Onion: Satire and the Complexity of Audience Response

Jane Fife

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/english_fac_pub



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Rhetoric Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Western Kentucky University

From the Selected Works of Jane Fife

September 6, 2016

Peeling The Onion: Satire and the Complexity of Audience Response

Jane Fife, *Western Kentucky University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/jane-fife/16/>

Peeling *The Onion*: Satire and the Complexity of Audience Response

Abstract

Satire is a popular form of comedic social critique frequently theorized in terms of Kenneth Burke's comic frame. While its humor and unexpected combination of incongruous elements can reduce tension that surrounds controversial issues to make new perspectives more accessible, audience response to satire can vary tremendously—including the very negative as well as the very positive. Teaching satire should include exposure to rhetorical theory and audience reception analysis to better prepare students as consumers and creators of satires. With a complex, layered pedagogy, satire can be an important component of the twenty-first-century rhetor's toolkit.

Satire is a very popular form of comedic social critique, praised by scholars for its rhetorical impact (Goodnow; McClennen and Maisel; Placone and Tumolo; Waisanen).¹ I thank Rhetoric Review reviewers Frank Reynolds and Mark Gellis and editor Theresa Enos for their valuable suggestions and encouragement that helped me improve this article and articulate its contribution. And I thank Mike Sobiech for asking me to be a reader of his MA thesis on satire in first-year composition. Without his enthusiasm about the serious work humor could accomplish in the writing classroom, I would not have begun teaching satire. [View all notes](#) Rhetorical theorists interested in contemporary comedic forms frequently draw on Kenneth Burke's concepts of the comic frame and perspective by incongruity to describe an approach to cultural critique that is self-reflexive, enabling of new perspective, and more unifying than divisive (Hassett 385). These persuasive benefits of comedy and incongruity imply a positive role for satire in public argument. But alongside these benefits, rhetorical scholars also recognize satire's complexity and potential to elicit varied, even divisive responses (Gilbert; Timmerman, Gussman, and King; Gring-Gemble and Watson). Amanda Lynch Morris analyzes the comparably complex benefits and challenges for progressive social rhetoric through the genre of stand-up comedy, calling for scholars and teachers of rhetoric to bring this investigation to the classroom so our students can benefit more directly from its insights (50). However, other contributions to the conversation about popular comedic strategies for social critique within the pages of *Rhetoric Review* include insightful theory and analysis (Hassett's; Timmerman, Gussman, and King's) but have not yet explored these genres in a teaching context. As this body of rhetorical theory and analysis argues, audience responses to comedy and satire can be complex and varied. Therefore, pedagogical explorations of the variable response to satire of real audiences can lead to tremendous insight—for us and our students—about the risks and benefits of comedy, incongruity, ironic reversal, exaggeration, and minimization as rhetorical strategies. I describe one approach to preparing students as consumers and composers of satire, by involving them not only in analysis of satirical texts in order to understand these techniques but also in a study of responses to satire—those theorized by critics and exemplified by actual readers. Then they are better equipped to apply these approaches, if they so choose, in their own texts.

In a 300-level class for English majors called "Argument and Analysis," after studying traditional prose arguments and visual argument, I include a unit on satire. Students conduct a

reception analysis study examining readers' reactions to published satirical texts and then compose a satire of their own accompanied by a rhetorical analysis of their piece. To prepare to write these texts, we study examples of satire—published works and pieces shared by students from earlier classes—along with scholarship about satire and how it is received. The complexity of satire calls for a careful analysis of audience response.

Recognizing Satire

Our class begins the study of satire with some definitions of satire, parody, and irony. Jordynn Jack and Katie Rose Guest Pryal in *How Writing Works* defines satirical techniques very briefly: “A satirical argument works by arguing the opposite case in an exaggerated way, or by using irony to point out the inconsistencies or absurdity in another argument” (250). Satire involves critique, but usually not in a direct way. Linda Hutcheon characterizes satire by its “ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction” (43). She explains that parody, in contrast, works by repeating features of a specific text or genre, with a difference, but not always for the purpose of ridiculing that textual form (43). A parody may have as its only target some text or genre. A text may be satire as well as parody by parodying a particular type of text with an additional focus of criticizing some practice in the world—apart from the text(s) being parodied. Frequently, satires use irony, having an implicit meaning that is different (often opposite) from the literal one. Far from being an easily defined genre with consistent features, satires have been called “pre-generic” since they typically rely on the features of “pre-existing genres,” often news articles, editorials, or newscasts that they may be parodying in order to satirize their target (Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, and Morey 191). We also discuss the distinction in satiric approach between the darker, biting Juvenalian satire and the lighter, wry Horatian. We discuss interpretive steps audiences must process to recognize satire: (1) recognition of the prior event or behavior that is being satirized; (2) recognition of cues in the text that signal irony, that the claims are not literal or sincere; and (3) agreement or disagreement with the satire's message (Stewart 198–99). Wayne Booth discusses similar steps and adds that the evaluation of the text's message includes gauging the appropriateness of the satirist's tone, techniques, and humor, in addition to the message of critique implied in the text (43). The complexity of response to satire involves ample potential for misinterpretation.

The Benefits of Satire

Why would someone risk being misunderstood when they can argue straightforwardly without the complication of irony? Burke's concept of “perspective by incongruity” helps explain how an unexpected combination of elements invites the audience to see the issue in a new light, to reconsider their usual perspective (308). Burke's idea of the comic frame also helps us understand how satire can elicit thought about a divisive topic that avoids the resentment that can accompany tragic framing: “The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*” (41). Christopher Gilbert describes Burke's struggle to “reconcile satire (a poetic category of rejection) with a comic perspective (a frame of acceptance)” and theorizes a “satyric” comic corrective as incorporating “ongoing reorientations within a complex and dialectical framework of acceptance and rejection” in order to “revise our understanding of contemporary satire as a comic enterprise” (281, 298, 280). Similarly, Timmerman, Gussman, and King emphasize the weaving back and forth between frames of

acceptance and rejection in the satirical comedy *The Boondocks*. Both these articles suggest that the messy, conflicted inhabiting of acceptance and rejection frames by satire may add to its practical effectiveness even as it complicates our theorizing of its rhetorical function. The persuasive potential of Burke's comic frame is very appealing. My students find it compelling that satire (or some approaches to satire) can, at least in theory, make it more comfortable for audiences to consider perspectives that differ from their own and frame critique within comic relief.

When audiences interpret nonliteral language to get the humorous payoff, they often find the decoding pleasurable and develop a more favorable view of the communication. Booth argues that an appreciative audience also transfers some of their pleasure at their own cleverness in figuring out the communicative puzzle onto the satirist's message (43) and constructs a positive evaluation of the rhetor: "The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes *my* capacity for dealing with it, and—most important—because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built" (28). So rhetors can benefit from the indirectness of irony and satire by pleasing audiences with their humor and wit: Readers are pleased with the cleverness of the rhetor and with their own cleverness in interpreting the nonliteral communication. These ironic utterances can also invite a more conscious consideration of the rhetor's ethos (in addition to the message) than what a non-ironic statement invites, and this consideration of ethos might not always result in a positive evaluation. But when the evaluation is positive, that positive judgment of the rhetor's effort may not stop with one reader. Humorous argument can draw on our tendency to share with others what amuses us and greatly expand its audience (Self 73). This pleasurable response to the humor can increase the effectiveness of the argument by leading to its "redistribution"; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel argue that rhetors should consider "rhetorical velocity" or the "potential recomposition and redistribution of a text" (79). They suggest that considering rhetorical velocity includes thought about "what *might motivate* a third party to redistribute and/or recompose a text, or what might give a text future velocity" (79). The humorousness and cleverness of a satirical text that pleases an audience and makes them want to share it further is certainly an important aspect contributing to rhetorical velocity.

Barriers to Interpretation

The redistribution of a satirical text, often by sharing it across social media, can sometimes lead to misinterpretation when the text is separated from its original venue that may frame it as satire more clearly. Separation (temporal and physical) from the original context of the satire can pose a tremendous barrier for readers in recognizing what is being talked about, let alone interpreting the satirists' evaluative stance. Booth notes the common frame of reference readers and writers must share for satire to be effective: vocabulary and grammar, experience and understanding of cultural events, awareness of the literary genres being used as the vehicle for the satire (100). Many composition teachers have experienced discussions of satirical texts where students did not have adequate contextual knowledge (even for texts more recent than Swift's "A Modest Proposal") to catch the references, the hyperbole, and the irony. In *Shimmering Literacies*, his study of college students' online reading and writing practices, Bronwyn Williams describes one such discussion where some students missed the irony in an *Onion* article about a "government

program to fund the construction of a \$1.3 billion national poem” (166). Williams explains that since many of the students involved in the article discussion knew little about government funding of the arts and budget processes, “it seemed as if it were real to them, but somehow not quite right” (166). Barriers to interpreting satire extend beyond the lack of cultural knowledge needed to recognize the target of critique.

The association of comedy and irony with amusement may make it hard for some to see satire as having a serious message rather than being an escape from the serious. McClennen and Maisel praise satire for encouraging critical thinking (112). However, this is not a default reaction to expect for every audience. Based on his study of college students’ online literacy practices, Williams warns against reading “too much critique into the ironic displays of students” since they can be motivated by the desire for a carefree, nonserious ethos. One student he interviewed explained the rationale behind ironic content on his social media profile this way: “I want people to know I’m not taking myself too seriously” (162). Williams notes that this impulse was common among the students he interviewed: “[They] regarded irony as an attempt to create a text that mocked its own pretensions. They understood that the irony could be used as a way to pre-empt critique and protect themselves from judgment” (167). One challenge in teaching satire could be helping students see irony as a technique for critiquing an issue instead of as a technique to deflect critique by proclaiming no serious intent.

The reluctance to interpret a text once it registers as not serious is a problem for satirists as well as teachers. Communication researchers have documented a “discounting cue” when people perceive a text as humorous and therefore “not deserving of the same level of critical analysis as serious discourse” (Polk, Young, and Holbert 206). Researchers investigating audience response to satire found just such a response: “Once the text was read as satire, participants seemed to feel that it . . . was just ‘trying to be comical’ or was ‘for entertainment’ and would say little else about it” (Johnson, del Rio, and Kemmitt 412–13). Writers choosing whether to satirize need to keep in mind some readers’ reluctance to interpret satirical communications once they perceive irony.

Building a Satirist’s Toolkit

Analyzing sample satires is a crucial practice for would-be satirists to engage in. In order to build a toolkit of satirical techniques, my class explores the dynamics of satirical interpretation with some examples. We watch the *Onion News Network*’s “Pre-Game Coin Toss Makes Jaguars Realize the Randomness of Life” video looking for familiar media conventions it uses to comment on cultural practices and assumptions. Students observe that the video resembles videos on ESPN’s Sportscenter with the anchors engaging in the same back and forth commentary and enthusiastic critique of the sports event. They also comment on the typical musical lead-in and the authentic look of the screen, utilizing a split screen sometimes, along with a headline ticker. The look and sound of the text closely echoes real sports news, and the content echoes real details of the sports world like the names of teams, players, and coaches. Don Waisanen argues that the close mimicking (with some exaggeration) of media conventions on *Onion News Network* combined with unexpected content draws the audience’s attention to these usually unnoticed media practices, opening them up for critique and questioning of journalistic framing of reality (510). The students note that while much of the dialogue sounds authentic

(with phrases like “you just can’t wise-off to a ref like that”), the content is unbelievable and incongruous: The idea that the Jacksonville Jaguars’ reaction to the game-starting coin toss would be “to realize the randomness of life and the triviality of their own existence” just does not mesh with what they know about football. This ironic reversal of typical sporting behavior is, of course, the major cue that the text is not literal. Similarly, the sportscasters’ philosophical discourse in nuggets of analysis like the following is incongruous: “The Jags started smacking themselves in the face with playbooks in hopes that the sting of pain would bring them into consciousness of the present moment and shouting imponderable riddles to fans.” The coach telling the players to “give whatever percent you want” instead of the stereotypical “110%” epitomizes the ironic reversal depicted in the segment.

The incongruity of the philosophical discourse with the sports discourse pushes the reader toward a new perspective on the values usually taken for granted in sports. The students hypothesize several possible targets of the satire’s critique: the way sportscasters talk so dramatically and the idea that the outcomes of sporting events are so momentous. Students familiar with philosophy add that the discourse of existential philosophy is made light of as well. But all the implied critiques of these assumptions common to sports teams, fans, journalists, and even philosophers are framed comically. We can see the critique of these ideas as foibles, seeming good-natured rather than mean-spirited. We discuss how the tone affects the likelihood that the audience might identify with the satirists, echoing their judgment rather than condemning it. But the use of incongruity to open new perspectives can lead to multiple possible perspectives. Interpreting satire can remind us we need to tolerate some ambiguity and that as satirists we may need to expect various interpretations from our readers.

In addition to ironic reversal, incongruity of discourses and actions, and the mimicry or parody of familiar genres, exaggeration and minimization are common satiric tools. Exaggeration is a prominent device in an *Onion* article we read about people being dismayed by a “large block of uninterrupted text” devoid of videos, pictures, or even significant words in italics and completely at a loss as to how to interpret it. Exaggerating our typical appreciation of visual aids when reading online, the article depicts audience reaction with details like these:

At 3:16 p.m., a deafening sigh was heard across the country as the nation grappled with the daunting cascade of syllables, whose unfamiliar letter-upon-letter structure stretched on for an endless 500 words. Children wailed for the attention of their bewildered parents, businesses were shuttered, and local governments ground to a halt as Americans scanned the text in vain for a web link to click on. (“Nation Shudders”)

A contrasting tactic to exaggeration that achieves similar ends, minimization, is also a frequent tool of satirists. *The Onion* ridicules a pro-gun perspective by minimizing the significance of a school shooting. It depicts Wayne LaPierre (head of the National Rifle Association) as being frustrated with continuing attention to the Newtown shooting weeks following it. The mock news story attributes multiple minimizing viewpoints to LaPierre, for example: “Noting that the massacre was ‘almost a month ago’ and that all of the victims had been laid to rest, the frustrated lobbyist said he couldn’t help but think the nation’s continued efforts to mourn victims and its protracted discussions of gun control were ‘a little much’ at this point.” No explicit evaluation (even ironic) is included in these faux news articles, with readers left to infer the critique.

Studying selected *Onion* articles in tandem with reactions to them on *Literally Unbelievable* reminds students that a rhetor's goals for persuasion are not guaranteed by using common satirical techniques. The theory of audience response to satire can be quite distinct from flesh-and-blood audience response.

Missing the Irony but Getting the Message

Sometimes missing the irony and thus not recognizing the text as satirical may not mean that the satire has completely failed in its persuasive goals: If the audience thinks the text is literal but dismisses its message as absurd, then the satirist has partly achieved the persuasive goal of making the target look ridiculous. Researchers studying response to satirical videos separated from their original contextual frame wondered how often the satire would “backfire” and persuade the audience of a message opposite of its intended one. They found that about half of the participants (fourteen out of thirty-one) “missed” the irony, but that only one out of those fourteen who missed the irony was also persuaded by the literal message. The researchers conclude that while the subtleties of satire might be missed on the audience, the real meaning behind the piece is not; in other words, they say, the satire does not “backfire” and reinforce the view that it intends to critique (Johnson, del Rio, and Kemmitt 410–11). When we read this study, my students begin to see backfire as less of a worry for satirists. Even when the irony is missed, the literal argument is usually too weak to be persuasive to most audiences. The distinction between the audience “missing the joke” (or the irony) versus the satire “backfiring” is an important one in our discussion of satirical reception.

We find more corroboration that the backfiring of satire is a rare phenomenon when students analyze examples of misread satire on *Literally Unbelievable* (a web archive of social media posts that take satirical articles seriously). Missing the irony is required for these postings to make it to *Literally Unbelievable*. But backfire of message is something we did not happen upon. Because of the wildly exaggerated content in articles from *The Onion*, *The Daily Carrant*, and other satirical sources, people who have missed the irony are usually horrified—or at least surprised—that those events described could be true; these comments do not endorse the behavior or attitude ridiculed by the satirist.

After noting the lack of “backfire,” we discuss the factors that may have led readers to miss the cues to irony. My students propose that these readers may do one or more of the following: want to believe and, therefore, avoid fact checking; not recognize *The Onion* or other publication site as a satirical venue; be taken in by the journalistic conventions including details, photos, and quotations; have limited or no knowledge of the real content being referred to; or read just part of the article, stopping before the more obvious tip-offs. Because audience response to satire can vary greatly depending on so many factors, theorizing how readers miss satire helps us foreground the complexity of audience response throughout our unit.

Getting the Message but Rejecting the Rhetor's Judgment

Even when audience members pick up on the ironic cues and understand the intended message of critique, persuasion is not guaranteed. Factors of ethos that reflect the rhetor's taste and judgment may lead the reader to reject the rhetor and reject the message—or at least disapprove of the

form or techniques that the rhetor chose. Craig Stewart's examination of readers' responses to the infamous "Politics of Fear" *New Yorker* cover from the 2008 election provides an instructive case study of responses to visual satire including reader evaluations of the rhetor's judgment. The cover image, named "The Politics of Fear," features a caricature of the Obamas fist-bumping with Barack in turban and robe (suggesting Muslim identity) and Michelle in black-pantheresque military attire and afro, sporting an assault rifle. The background, clearly suggesting the oval office, also shows an American flag burning in the fireplace and a picture of Osama bin Laden on the wall. Stewart analyzes readers' comments to a *Huffington Post* story about the cover's controversial reception. Stewart found that just over eighty percent of the comments he studied judged the satire to be unsuccessful. Some argued that there were insufficient cues to its ironic stance (210). Others objected to the racism in the caricatures, claiming that the racism of the images was not clearly critiqued (210). Still others claimed to get the satire but worried that more gullible citizens would perceive the image as a sincere critique of the Obamas and that it could possibly affect the outcome of the election (211). Readers who objected might recognize the events being alluded to, recognize that irony is involved, agree with the critical point of the satire, and still reject the satire as unsatisfactory if they disagree with some aspect of the rhetor's judgment—like using racial caricatures.

Stewart's article models an interesting methodology for studying response to satire in a large audience through readers' comments in an online venue. His study also shows us that providing textual cues to the ironic interpretation of satirical images can be tricky. Stewart suggests that because caricatures (especially racist ones) contain exaggerated details, what would qualify as ample exaggeration in a verbal form to tip off the audience to its ironic stance may seem like racist images in visual discourse (instead of critiques of racist images) (213). Without clear-enough cues to irony, the audience identifies more with whom they perceive to be satirized (the Obamas) and less with the satirist, creating a negative ethos for the satirist. These reactions to satire in *The New Yorker* illustrate the complex range of responses to the satire itself, as well as to the satirist's ethos, and provide thought-provoking case studies to discuss with students about the rhetorical strategies of critique and provocation. These indictments of satirical efforts show us what happens when audiences render a negative judgment on what Booth calls the "cleverness in the use of irony and the fairness of employing such a weapon of contempt" (43). This final step—approving or disapproving of the satirist's judgment, cleverness, and fairness, "identification" with the satirist in Burke's terms—is just as important in an audience's response to satire as the earlier steps of perceiving the irony and inferring the message.

Our Own Case Studies of Response to Satire

Teaching satire should involve considering with our students its limitations as well as its strengths. While the hyperbole common to satire ensures that it is a wonderful attention-getter, it certainly is not equally well suited to all persuasive goals. Studying the theory and then tapping into the reality of audience reception helps students engage more complexly and learn more deeply as readers, writers, and theorists of satire; they decide when it might be a good argumentative option and what rhetorical strategies to use for their situation. As students plan their reception analysis essays, we review the scholarly work about satirical reception. As Stewart's study of responses to *The New Yorker* cover makes clear, even readers who do recognize the satire and get the point may still find the text inappropriate and offensive if they do

not approve of the rhetor's goals or judgment; the majority of comments Stewart studied reflected a negative evaluation of the satire because of disapproval of the rhetor's judgment. Some of my students' analyses compare responses to a satirical argument versus a straight argument on the same topic or two satires that use different techniques. Others may investigate how readers with different political perspectives respond since research (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam) has found that political affiliation greatly influences how viewers interpret Stephen Colbert, with liberals more likely to perceive it as satire and conservatives more likely to think Colbert is just pretending to joke and really believes his statements. But instead of reifying any set of rules about how audiences might respond, my students' reception studies generally complicate previous ideas and suggest how hard it is to predict audience responses to satire. The following examples demonstrate some insights from these analyses.

The Limitations of Satire to Correct Misconceptions

Studying readers' reactions to satires, often in comparison with straight arguments, helps the class identify rhetorical contexts and purposes for which satire might be a bad fit. Based on their readers' responses, students frequently observe that while satire is good at critiquing a viewpoint or practice, it is not as strong at suggesting solutions or countering with facts to correct misperceptions, especially when exaggeration is the primary satirical technique. One student, McKenzie Stinson, found that her readers readily perceived that an *Onion* article was critical of the attitude that homeless people are lazy and homeless by choice and agreed with *The Onion*'s critique. However, they generally judged the serious article she paired with it to be more effective since it offered real statistics and images of homeless children that help readers understand the real magnitude of the problem as opposed to just ridiculing the attitude that homeless people are lazy (63).² 2Student papers are quoted with permission. [View all notes](#) These student studies deepened class discussion about when using satire might fit the rhetor's purpose and when more explicit forms of critique, counterpoint, or solutions for change might be needed.

Humor as Enhancing Engagement with Facts

Based on the "Missing the Joke" study (Johnson, del Rio, and Kemmitt) that found people disengaging critically upon recognizing satire, one student, Sarah Kinnicutt, wanted to see how this potential to interpret humorous texts less closely might affect memory for detail. She asked friends to read two articles about sanctions against Russia for their invasion of Crimea. One article was from CNN about actual sanctions while another was from *The Daily Currant* about the US stopping vodka importation since it was the only Russian product Americans purportedly cared about. Kinnicutt expected to find readers amused by but dismissive of *The Daily Currant*'s article about vodka sanctions and remembering much less from it than from the factual article. However, she found the opposite. All of her readers remembered more details from the humorous article. She suggests that this memory advantage of satire might be put to some serious use: "As satire continues to grow in popularity, news sources would do well to explore how light-hearted presentations enable audiences to pay attention to the details." Serious news organizations like *The New York Times* may be catching on to this strategy with real headlines that compete with *Onion* headlines for a credulity double-take: "Fewer Women Run Big

Companies than Men Named John” (Wolfers). (Curious? The percentage of CEOs named John in S & P 1,500 companies is 5.3; women make up only 4.1% of these S & P CEOs.)

Crossing the Line? The Effect of Offensiveness on Persuasion

The hyperbolic strategies common to satire can grab readers’ attention, and one student, Jessica Brumley, wanted to investigate two satirical pieces with different tactics to gauge whether perceived offensiveness of these exaggerations limited their effectiveness. Brumley looked at two *Opinion* articles about school shootings. One, written half a year before the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, was a purported discussion of Wayne LaPierre’s views on whether school shootings could change the NRA’s stance on gun control. Throughout the article the LaPierre persona keeps increasing the number of children killed in a shooting needed to make an impact (from 1,000 to 250,000). The other piece, written just after the shooting at Newtown, focused on representing the shock of putative bystanders through their profanity-filled quotations of dismay. Brumley thought that readers would find the profanity completely inappropriate and disrespectful in close proximity to such a horrific event. However, her readers recognized the satire and found both pieces effective in achieving their different purposes. Some were a bit put off by the mentions of high numbers of dead children in the LaPierre piece. But they found the profanity in the Newtown piece to be an honest and respectful attempt to deal with the horror of the situation without minimizing it or making light of it in any way, in contrast to a “formulaic response created by news reporters to try to put a Band-aid on the situation” (Brumley). While Brumley’s readers found the satirical techniques acceptable to the message, other students studying different texts sometimes encountered readers who understood the irony but thought the issue was too serious to be joked about, so judged the satire as inappropriate, rejecting the rhetor’s judgment.

Students Writing Satire

This detailed exploration of how readers respond to satires helps students prepare to write their own. Planning their satires involves toggling back and forth between the writers’ perspectives and those of their imagined audience. Carol Reeves reminds us that “[t]he great satirists of the eighteenth century ... though certainly examining their society from a critical distance, were insiders, acutely knowledgeable about the ridiculous conventions that deserved parodying,” so I ask my students to brainstorm lists of practices or attitudes that annoy them but also that they know well so they are familiar with their particular foibles (15). While Reeves asked her students to mimic earlier examples of satire from the seventeenth or eighteenth century or even more recent verse by e. e. cummings (16), we choose current genres to copy and more recent satirical efforts as models.

Writing a rhetorical analysis of their satires (worth as many points as the satires themselves) reminds them to focus on who their audiences are, what factors might encourage them to respond a certain way (political viewpoint, religious perspective, views on the particular issue, and so forth) and (drawing on both theory and sample satires) what techniques they plan to use to have what effect. I ask them to include the following in their rhetorical analyses: “all the info about your topic, your real stance, the perspective of your satire, the techniques you plan to use and their desired effect on the audience, as well as a venue that would be suitable to publish your

satire.” David Seitz observes in his teaching of parody that assigning critical reflections on the rhetorical strategies in the texts they analyze and write themselves helps students “become more conscious of their intuitive analysis of form and content at a metacognitive level” (373).

Some writers choose the faux news article for their own satires, but others gravitate toward genres they are more familiar with like the Facebook page or Twitter profile to point out the absurdity of a practice. I give them these suggestions to match a textual form with a message of critique: “Choose the textual form you want to mimic and identify its key features for yourself by looking at several real examples (this is how you achieve a convincing fake—if very briefly—of the textual form you’ve chosen. Exaggerate some of the features to make your points. And/or exaggerate the content that you fabricate in order to make a critical argument about your topic.” One student made a realistic looking parody Facebook page for a fake charity “Save Lost and Captured Kangaroos (SLACK)” to satirize “slacktivism” (digital-only activism) as emphasizing the feeling of having made a difference over really making a difference. The page looks realistic, but the exaggerated claims make the premise look ridiculous: “Make a difference from the comfort of your home! Like our page! #itsjusthateasy” and “Tired of all those tricky monthly payments from all your other charities and no return? Forget about them! With SLACK, your donation always = gratification. T-shirts, water bottles, you name it. You give, we give in return! Make the world aware today!”

Many others do try the op-ed type of statement frequently seen in *The Onion* rather than the news article. These opinion pieces usually take the approach of praising something or voicing a viewpoint that is meant to be critiqued. I give them this advice in the assignment prompt for the op-ed/letter to the editor approach: “After finding a topic, identify a stance—often the opposite of your real viewpoint on the issue. Go overboard and exaggerate that stance into an argument. Consider working in a rebuttal in your satire of your real view or solutions you find persuasive—if it fits.” We talk about strategies to avoid with examples from past student satires. We discuss the difference between sarcasm and irony, with theorists attributing greater cleverness, complexity, and subtlety to irony while describing sarcasm as “overt and aggressive” (Polk, Young, and Holbert 204). We note that irony can help to set up a comic frame with clever twists while sarcasm can emphasize derision with a harsher tone. Satires about smoking, for example, are often unsatisfying because they use only sarcasm without any cleverness; statements like “I’m sure those yellow teeth and fingers really help you get dates” ring false immediately. In contrast to this praise that does not fool for a moment, one piece by a former student that we read brings more plausible praise (and, therefore, cleverness) to an unexpected topic in a letter cataloguing the reasons the homeless have an easier life than “home” people, including not having to make difficult decisions ordering off restaurant menus, getting to live every child’s dream of camping out in a cardboard box, and avoiding the stress of a regular job. One could imagine a callous (and clueless) person making similar but probably less extreme claims about what motivates the homeless. However, the treatment casts people with this attitude as “mistaken” rather than “evil,” fitting within the potential Burke outlines for the comic frame.

The complexity of teaching satire may keep many people from trying. Some colleagues have told me that humor is really hard to write and that the prospect of reading lots of bad satires keeps them from ever trying such an assignment. But teachers who have written about teaching satire describe an experience that was challenging and enjoyable for their students. Carol Reeves

argues for teaching satire because it mediates the anger that drives critique, leading to a more enjoyable argumentative experience: “The indirect, satirical jab provides students an intellectually challenging and enjoyable means of critique and potential transformation—a mediated engine of anger rather than pure unmediated anger itself” (15). My students have also found the task enjoyable and seem to have been propelled to strong work by the intellectual challenge of handling an indirect argument, leading to less automatic, more carefully planned texts. I have stopped being surprised when some students put far more thought and effort into their satires than any other arguments they have written for me and produce their best work of the semester. Students say that writing a satire was difficult but also a lot of fun. Understanding satire as something that can function within Burke’s comic frame and offer a generous critique rather than a contemptuous, mean-spirited one, also frames the satirical enterprise in an appealing way for most students. Some note that they enjoyed using humor while making a serious point. And studying the dynamics of audience reception of satires seems to help them plan their own texts more carefully and successfully.

Learning from Satire

Teaching satire involves peeling the onion, not only in terms of interpreting the rhetorical elements of satirical texts—like those in *The Onion*—but also helping students peel back the layers of reception to understand what factors affect reactions to the content, the message, and the satirist’s ethos. Since most are familiar with reading satires but not writing them, they have not paid attention to their rhetorical techniques before and enjoy modeling their approach after texts that they have found particularly compelling. In their reception analyses, they show curiosity and pleasure in discovering reader insights; they are typically surprised by the reactions they find in some of their readers and reflect on these response dynamics when they plan their own satires. They acknowledge that since warning labels on satire would spoil the effect, there are clear risks of being misinterpreted. Some also see the risks as worth it since the enjoyment of decoding the real meaning and appreciating the humor as a break from straight argument could be very effective with the right audience. Some like the way that introducing incongruity into a description of everyday practices defamiliarizes behaviors so people can notice some problems with them. Other students praise the humor of satire for making people more likely to be receptive to critique of difficult topics within a comic frame.

After the close of the satire unit, we end the semester with a discussion of how the forms of argument we studied might be effective in our current rhetorical context. Students argue that effective twenty-first-century arguments must grab an audience and communicate quickly before the audience moves on to another more interesting text. Some students note that ironic Twitter hashtags can accomplish this feat in a very few words. Effective arguments must be timely, accurate, and relevant; they must matter in the moment. Additionally, it helps if the rhetor conveys passion for the issue. In our final discussions, while students do not argue for satire as the best form of argument for all occasions, they do value its abilities to catch an audience’s attention in a world flooded with discourse, to engage an audience in thoughtful interpretation, to enable a new way of looking at a familiar situation, and to reward the time spent with amusement and possibly new perspectives. Responses to satire can be so diverse that relying only on hypothetical responses imagined by the rhetor through rhetorical analysis can leave a rhetor blindsided by audience response. Knowing some of the characteristics that contribute to certain

kinds of unintended responses (not knowing enough of the content to grasp the implications of what is being satirized or not really favoring satire because it seems an inappropriate or disrespectful form) can be partially avoided if satirists choose carefully where they initially publish their satire. Of course, in the reality of our twenty-first-century digital text circulation practices, satires and other texts are frequently stripped from their initial context and encounter audiences far afield from the rhetor's selected audience. Analyzing the complexity of audience response to these strategies helps students encounter published satires more critically and not discount them as humorous texts deserving of only amused and not serious interaction. Perhaps satire's ability to be serious and enjoyable will encourage some of these newly minted satirists to embrace opportunities for comic ironic reframing of a situation to encourage, if not lasting change, at least a temporary change of perspective in their readers. And bringing the analysis of these comedic strategies from the pages of our journals into the classroom can yield insights from our investigations with students that can in turn enrich our scholarly conversation.

Notes

1. ¹I thank *Rhetoric Review* reviewers Frank Reynolds and Mark Gellis and editor Theresa Enos for their valuable suggestions and encouragement that helped me improve this article and articulate its contribution. And I thank Mike Sobiech for asking me to be a reader of his MA thesis on satire in first-year composition. Without his enthusiasm about the serious work humor could accomplish in the writing classroom, I would not have begun teaching satire.

2. ²Student papers are quoted with permission.