

THE CARTOON ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

VISUAL SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS: A visual symbol in a cartoon is any image that stands for some other thing, event, person, abstract idea or trend in the news. For example, a dollar sign may stand for the entire economy. An octopus may stand for a powerful corporation with “tentacles” controlling many other institutions. Metaphors are like symbols in that they describe one thing as something else entirely. Shakespeare used a metaphor when he wrote “All the world’s a stage.” (A cartoon would simply show the world as a stage.)

- Begin any cartoon analysis by describing all the details in it that are symbols and metaphors.

VISUAL DISTORTION: Changes or exaggerations in size, shape, emotions or gestures often add extra meaning to the symbols the cartoon includes. For example, a dragon is often used as a symbol for China. But a huge, snorting dragon will make a different point about China from a tired, limping, meek dragon. Every detail in a cartoon, especially one that is distorted in some way, is likely to be a part of the cartoon’s meaning.

- Identify the cartoon’s symbols and notice how they are drawn.

IRONY IN WORDS AND IMAGES: Irony is a form of humor in which something is said in a way that undercuts or mocks its own apparent meaning. In other words, what is said seems to mean one thing, but it will be taken to mean the opposite. Irony is well suited to political cartoons, which often seek to mock something and show how false, unfair or dangerous it is. Irony always entails a contradiction. Often, an amusing image undercuts and reverses the meaning of the words in a caption. Sometimes, however, the image alone conveys the double meaning.

- Consider whether irony is used and if so, how?

STEREOTYPES AND CARICATURE: A stereotype is a vastly oversimplified view of some group. Stereotypes are often insulting. Yet they may give cartoons a shorthand way to make a complex point quickly. They also reveal broad cultural attitudes. Caricature is the opposite of a stereotype. It is an exaggerated or distorted drawing of an individual highlighting what the artist sees as most unique about that individual. You should be critical of cartoon stereotyping, yet also notice how it contributes to making a point dramatically and forcefully. If there are stereotypes in the cartoon you are analyzing, how would you evaluate them?

- Identify any stereotypes and caricatures and consider what they communicate.

AN ARGUMENT NOT A SLOGAN: Slogans merely assert something. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” A good editorial cartoon is more than a slogan. Though blunt and opinionated, it actually invites you to consider its argument or its reasoning. At its best, a cartoon offers visual and written features that together “make its case.” In other words, it presents reasons to support its view, or at least it hints at or suggests those reasons. So even though it is biased, the cartoon gives you grounds for responding and even arguing back.

- Consider what features of the cartoon help present its argument or make its case.

THE USES AND MISUSES OF POLITICAL CARTOONS

Editorial cartoons may be funny, outrageous, even insulting. Yet above all, their aim is to provoke thought about some issue in the news. They cannot be taken as simple reflections of “the way things were.” Yet that is a common misuse of them. They reveal cultural assumptions, prevailing moods, even real insights about events and trends. They can be used as evidence of all these things.

- Political cartoons always represent points of view that can be challenged.

National History Education Clearinghouse <<http://teachinghistory.org>> is a partnership of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the Stanford History Education Group at Stanford University, the American Historical Association and the National History Center with funding from the US Department of Education Contract # ED-07-CO-0088.