Monday, October 11, 2010

Stephen Colbert and Jonathan Swift: More on Satire

Posted by [Professor Michael Meyerhofer](http://www.blogger.com/profile/00754177903554021284)at [4:31 PM](http://bsuenglishcomp103.blogspot.com/2010/10/stephen-colbert-and-jonathan-swift-more.html)

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Hey, folks. Well, I've had so many students ask questions about satire (how it works, why writers take that approach, etc) that I'm starting to think Indiana school systems aren't covering this anymore (which is a bad sign). So I thought I'd write up a crash course, complete with blasphemy and bad jokes.

The classic example of satire, coming from 1729, is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." The essay argues that the Irish government should respond to poverty by using unwanted kids as food. Did Swift actually think we should be eating children? Of course not. He exaggerated for dark humor and shock value, to get his audience's attention, so that he could try and get them to see how bad it was that the government (and the wealthy) of Ireland at that time didn't seem to care about all the neglected and starving children right under their nose.

Satire is to apathy what an uppercut is to somebody's jaw. It's a great way to reach an audience that's stuck in their old ways and very reluctant to consider a different point of view (i.e. people who are dumb). There are many modern examples.

If you watch "The Daily Show," it's pretty obvious that Jon Stewart is a liberal/progressive (even though he picks on Democrats, too) but Stephen Colbert seems on the surface to be mega-conservative. Actually, his act is a total satire, a parody of Bill O'Reilly and Glen Beck off Fox News. From his clothes to his jokes and the various segments on his show, Colbert uses exaggeration to mock what he sees as O'Reilly's and Beck's use of bad logic, their lack of appreciation for science and civil discourse, their use of fear to gain an audience, etc. His [famous speech](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa-4E8ZDj9s) at the White House Correspondents Dinner in which he made fun of George W. Bush (who was literally a few feet away) is another example.

Now, Colbert could just come out and say directly what he really thinks--but that wouldn't be as funny. By using humor and staying in character, he's able to better convey why he thinks the people he's satirizing are absurd. That also has the added bonus of getting under some people's skin because satire isn't always easy to understand and it's very hard to counter.

Here's another example. This [famous letter](http://www.snopes.com/politics/religion/drlaura.asp) made the rounds on the internet awhile back. It was also satire. It was supposedly sent to Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a radio talk show host known for making Bible-based arguments against homosexuality. The letter satirizes this by pointing out plenty of other biblical passages that Schlessinger ignores; in other words, it demonstrates that she was being hypocritical and just trying to claim divine authority for what is really just her personal opinion.

The writer of the "Letter to Dr. Laura" *could*have just said something like, "Dear Dr. Laura, I disagree with your view that homosexuality is a sin, something you've based solely on the Bible, since the ancient books of Leviticus and Exodus also express many other laws that all of us break on a regular basis. So if we don't make burnt offerings or think it's a sin to eat shellfish, and we no longer believe in selling children into slavery, why should we adhere to prohibition of same-sex couples as put forth in Leviticus?"

Instead, though, the letter PRETENDS to agree with Dr. Laura, gets the audience to lower their guard, then proceeds to point out the hypocrisy of those who cherry-pick passages from the Bible (or *any*text, really) just to substantiate their own claims. Why? Well, because it's unexpected, a little funny, and a much more effective way of pointing out that Dr. Laura wasn't even familiar with the very text she was quoting.

A big question people ask: how do we know something is satire? Put another way, how do you know Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, isn't just a satire making fun of racism? Well, even if the Holocaust hadn't happened, you have the way *Mein Kampf* is written, i.e. it's ranting, rambling, and largely incoherent. If you look at "A Modest Proposal," on the other hand, it's well-organized and very articulate. Can you imagine a smart, sane person thinking that we should eat babies? Probably not. so even without looking at Swift's (or Hitler's) other writings, we can tell which one of them is making a satire.

Long story short: satire requires a sense of humor, but more importantly, it requires empathy and three dimensional thinking (aka thinking outside the box).