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SATIRICAL INQUIRY

by

Gina H. Prescott

Under the Direction of Professor Mary Hocks

ABSTRACT

Satire has worked closely with the ideas of rhetoric, especially in regards to its inherent understanding of audience in order to move people to action within the public sphere. It is important to understand how this connection between the satirical representations of events can be interpreted through a rhetorical lens. On top of this, our contemporary culture seems interested in satire as a way to find, digest, and create meaning, so it seems interesting to understand how Satire now fits within a contemporary culture.

Index Words: Satire, Rhetoric, The Onion, Literature, Taboo, Laughter, Dialectic, Sophists

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Gina H. Prescott

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2007

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For my husband Jeff, because he was right (as he is most of the time) that what seems impossible many times is, in fact, possible.

Acknowledgement

As the years go on and I lose my childhood wonderment, I'm amazed to find that my family consists of the most generous, intelligent, and hardworking people I've ever known. It's quite intimidating to be around them, and I can only shabbily express how much I love them all. Thank you to my mother for punishing me by hiding my books when I was a child. I love to tell people this anecdote, because it usually gets a pretty good laugh (or at least a chuckle), but the truth is, if she hadn't done it, I would not be half the person I am now. At this very moment, I would probably be living off welfare, holed up in a rat-infested apartment reading *Crime and Punishment* for the 5th time thinking about how much effort it is to wash dishes. I would also like to thank my father, because I love him for being one of the smartest and most provocative human beings I know. Thanks to my sister Erin, because she's been like a second parent to me and always points out my flaws when I want to hear them the least but need it the most. I want to thank my brother George for proving that someone in the family could fuck up worse than me (you know have no idea how grateful I am to you). Thank you to my brother-in-law, Brendan for being Irish.

I first have to give out a general thank you to all the people who listened to me bitch, whine, and, moan throughout this entire process. I'm a verbalizer, and I'm perfectly aware that we are the most annoying of all human

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Introduction

Laughing at the misconduct of the world will, in a great measure ease us of any more disagreeable passion about it. One passion is more effectually driven out by another than by reason, whatever some may teach. —Edward Young

One excellent test of the civilization of a country, as I have said, I take to be the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy; and the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter. —George Meredith

For humour, frown upon it as you will, is nothing less than a fresh window of the soul. —Ronald Knox

In every joke, there's a little bit of truth. How many times has this been said (especially if the joke is at the expense of someone)? It's such a common opinion that few people ever wonder at the true power of laughter. Most times, while watching a comedy, people feel their laughter is innocent; their response is nothing more than an acknowledgement that "yes, a pie in the face is awful, and I'm glad it's not happening to me." Or, a witty line is just that, *witty*. It's nothing more than a clever play on words. When Laurel and Hardy play out their brilliant physical comedy by eating rope with red paint on top like spaghetti marinara or Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters* utters, "Cats and dogs living together...Mass hysteria!" as a description to the Mayor of New York as to what will happen if he and the other Ghostbusters not allowed to fight off the ghosts to stop judgment day, the audience laughs at the absurdity being played out before their eyes. Humor creates situations that are incongruent with what is typical human behavior in order to laugh at it. "In all humour [sic] there is a loss of dignity somewhere, virtue has gone out of somebody" (Knox 55). Many times though, humor is not just about losing dignity (it's not just about a pie in the face or about eating rope and paint pasta), but about higher motives.

Take for example Stanley Kubrick's movie, *Dr. Strangelove*. The movie is about a nuclear bomb finally being dropped on Russia, playing out the worst fears of the Cold War. The movie follows the political negotiations in Washington D.C., the crew of the airplane destined to drop the bomb, and the rantings of the mad general who initiated the bombing. The movie is dealing with a serious issue, but instead of playing it out dramatically, it embraces absurd situations and humorous interactions. One of the most famous moments is when George C. Scott gets in a fight with a Russian ambassador over a camera in the War Room. When Scott is confronted about his behavior, he whines, "He was trying to take pictures of the big board with his little camera." The world is on the eve of a potential nuclear war, and the leaders of the nation are not above paranoia, petty argument, and throwing food at one another. Another example of showing world leaders in a poor light is when Peter Sellers (who plays the President of the United States) has a telephone conversation with the Russian Première, Boris. They argue about Sellers not liking Boris enough to call him just to chat. The ridiculousness of the conversation is compounded by Boris being drunk. Typically, Americans would assume a discussion between two world leaders would be professional, so it is funny to see an interaction that is the comparable to two frat boys bickering after a late night.

Throughout the movie, Kubrick works in this manner, renegotiating the assumption that *humans act honorably in times of crisis*. By doing this, the laughter derived from the movie is far from just "a loss of dignity." It is a serious laughing at the weakness of human nature, and its need to destroy and dominate. In the end, Kubrick shows how Mutually Assured Destruction or M.A.D (the assumption that no nuclear war will occur, because all rulers need land to govern), is unwarranted, because all it takes is

one lunatic who cares nothing about acquiring land; he only wants to destroy. Laughing at such a serious topic is a far cry from laughing at Stan Laurel eating marinara rope pasta. Laurel and Hardy made a comedy. Kubrick made a satire.

The fine distinction between satire and humor is that “[h]umor is of an age, satire of all ages [...] it is born to scourge the persistent and ever-recurrent follies of the human creature” (Knox 61). It is within satire that criticisms of the truest kind are awakened in the audience. The laughter of satire is not innocent; it “is a special sort of laughter [that] possesses great powers of magnification” (Lewis 72). Satire is a powerful tool that enlightens its audience towards hypocrisy. The humor of Laurel and Hardy allows us to laugh at the absurd situation that no one can eat rope, but Kubrick’s satire shows that humanity can never really get over its inherent pettiness even in times of crisis. Humor and satire work closely together, but “[h]umour [sic] without satire is, strictly speaking, a perversion, the misuse of sense. Laughter is a deadly explosive which was meant to be wrapped up in the cartridge of satire, and so, aimed unerringly at its appointed target, deal its salutary wound; humour without satire is a flash in the pan; it may be pretty to look at, but it is, in truth, a waste of ammunition” (Knox 62). It is within satire that laughter finds its true power—its ability to lead humanity to knowledge. Yes, we laugh at Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*, but it is only for the moment, satire goes beyond into a realm of instruction.

The term, satire, is derived from the Greek word, *satira* or *satira lanx*, which means a dish full of colorful fruit. It was a reference to satire being “biting” in contrast to other works, such as poetry. Over the centuries, satire has been used in plays, journalism, fiction, poetry, and the media as a strategy to aim criticism at a particular group or

individual through humor. Through literary criticism, satire has been looked at as an art form, which deconstructs the world in order to create meaning. Through, rhetoric, satire has found its model for deliberative persuasion of an audience. Even though satire is primarily thought of as literary genre, it has always carried a great affinity with rhetoric. From its roots in Augustan generic plays to its *Swiftian* heyday to its contemporary place in television shows and film, satire has always been closely aligned to the art of persuasion through its ability to incite thoughtful laughter in order to engage its reader towards a new perspective on the world.

Satire creates a new perspective through its use of parody. For satire, parody does not just create a sketch of a situation, but instead “[w]hen it takes over another literary structure, it tends not just to borrow it, as when a cuckoo finds another bird’s nest for its eggs, but to subvert it” (Griffin 3). Satirical parody “wounds the original (however slightly), pointing out faults, revealing hidden affectations, emphasizing weaknesses and diminishing strengths” (Higley 68). Satire is not creating a representation of the original beautifully or technically accurate, but instead, it mimics the original to accentuate flaws for instruction. A contemporary example of this would be airbrushing in magazines. When a model’s photograph is “airbrushed,” the magazine staff uses computer technology to go over the model’s picture to take out each pimple, wrinkle, and even at times, five to ten pounds. Now this is a false representation, but unlike parody, it does not intentionally want to teach the audience about anything (and it certainly does not point out faults or “emphasize weakness”). Yes, this procedure could potentially reinforce stereotypes of the ideal woman or man, but it does not mean to instruct its reader towards understanding *why* looking this way is so important; the airbrushed

photograph of the model is a sketch of what a human being once was and nothing more. Satire's "airbrushing" instead looks to seek out underlying hypocrisies within a situation. A satirical parody of airbrushing a model's photograph would then glorify in the model's wrinkles, emphasize the pimples, and potentially add ten pounds to the model's weight in order to make a commentary on society's need to be "beautiful" at all costs. Thus, satire's parody "is the difference between a portrait-sketch and a caricature. Both resemble the subject; but one is intended to reproduce the most central and typical features of its model, and the other (however delicately) to distort, to belittle, to wound" (Highet 69). Satire takes from other genres, focusing on the imperfections of its subject, in order to recreate the world to instruct.

Going even further into this aspect is Alvin B. Kernan's study of satire's plot. He defines satire's subject matter not as folly but as *dullness*, or "the blundering energies which drive the world along in satire" (223). Kernan then breaks satire into "three classes of disordered figures: the confusing (misplacing of subject in odd settings), the magnifying (technique by which the trivial become all important or values become inverted), and the diminishing (*bathos*, or focusing on the vulgar/seedy aspects of nature). Satire creates situations that destroy organization so that "the world ceases to be arranged in meaningful patterns and becomes instead an endless number of disjunct objects, a series of mobs" (81). Even though satire "never offers that direct, linear progression which is ordinarily taken as plot" (100), this does not mean it does not have one; but rather satire redefines traditional definitions of it.

Satire's fragmentation of plot and subject matter make it post-modern by nature. Inherently, one technique employed by the author is to deconstruct material surroundings

until they cease to have any traditional meaning for the reader. By removing these traditional touchstones, a reader can then go on to see the world with new eyes, projecting onto it the hypocrisies or ironies expressed within the text. A contemporary citizen of the United States is all too familiar with this concept; examples of satire pervade the media. Shows like *The Daily Show*, *South Park*, *The Family Guy* are watched religiously, and the periodical, *The Onion*, is growing in popularity. One specific example is the political comedian, Sasha Baron Cohen. His three most famous characters are Ali G (a low-class gansta' interviewer from England), Borat (a news reporter from Kazakhstan), and Bruno (a gay Austrian fashion reporter). Recently, Cohen won the *Golden Globe* for Best Actor in a Comedy, and he is currently working on a movie starring his character Bruno. As his character Ali G, Cohen interviews famous politicians, such as Newt Gingrich. Ali G talks like an English "thug." For example, this is the way he introduced (a mildly annoyed) Gingrich on his show: "Wugh, wan [...] I is here with my main man his name be Newt Gingrich and 'im was the leader of the House of Representatives" (Politics). Cohen uses a combination of slang and AAVE in his role. On top of using inappropriate language, he also waves around his hands, wears sunglasses, a ski-cap, jerseys and sweatpants. His dress and manner is completely different from the traditional interviewer, who wears a coat and tie or a dress, and is required to speak standard English.

In his interviews, he forms his questions to project politically incorrect views. While discussing the question of a female president, Ali G asks Gingrich, "But wouldn't there be a danger that they like would fall in love with someone like Saddam Hussein". Gingrich disagrees and says that a man would be just as likely to do this as a woman. Ali

G disputes him, claiming “But woman, they love bastards [...] from me experience the worst you treat ‘em the more they want you. And he could be like doing bad things to the U.S. all the time and she and it’d just get her more and more horny” (Politics). Here, Cohen is expressing that a woman is “weaker” than a man, because she cannot control her emotions; they can’t stop themselves from wanting an “asshole.” It is not politically correct to say a woman is weaker than a man, but Cohen embraces this *taboo* idea (and others like it) in order to parody a traditional news interview. Cohen is so seamless in his performance that even though he stayed on the air for three seasons acting this way, he never had problems getting access to prominent figures. His guests might not know that their interview is a satirical ruse, but his audience does. Only a culture with a heightened awareness for the kind of strategies satire embraces could still laugh at a parody so deceptive.

Wayne Booth’s book, The Rhetoric of Irony, discusses this. In Booth’s opinion, “Whether a given word or passage or work *is* ironic depends [...] not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act. And whether it is *seen* as ironic depends on the reader’s catching the proper clues to those intentions [...] the reader discovers these clues ‘in the context’” (91). Since satire creates a surrounding that in of itself doesn’t exist (not quite a science fiction novel, but closer than a realistic painting of an artichoke), then “the whole engagement between author and reader depends on a world they never made” (100). For example, a viewer would not find Cohen’s Ali G interviews funny if she or he did not recognize that new reporters are held up to a particular standard of professionalism in how they speak, dress, and act. Cohen is creating a recognizably “fictitious” environment, so his interviews would not work if

contemporary Western culture, there was not some element of causal interviewing, such as the interviews done on MTV. If this were true, his interviewees would instantly realize that they were part of a hoax. Cohen's Ali G interviews rely heavily on the viewers' awareness of these two cultural standards of news reporting. The viewer needs to have a grasp of the already established cultural norms in order to understand what Cohen is ironically parodying.

Cultural assumptions needed to understand the ironies in satire are extremely complex. Booth lists the knowledge need to fully appreciate irony:

(a) their common experience of the vocabulary and grammar of English—the dictionary meaning of breast and chest, of harem and censorship, along with understanding of rules which allow for and control verbal inventions, like 'polyform allure'; (b) their common cultural experience and their agreement about its meaning and value—Hollywood harems are inherently ridiculous, the safety of Hollywood is not of major importance, nudity shouldn't matter much to anyone, compromises between prudery and license are not part of important 'moral law' but are instead comic, and so on; (c) their common experience of literary genres, a potentially large (but almost certainly finite) number of shared grooves or tracks into which reading experience can be directed" (100).

Booth sees that the writer relies heavily on preexisting knowledge of his or her readers.

And it is not a minimal amount of information: first, the reader must speak the same language or have a grasp of the different standards existing within that particular language (such as, a viewer knowing that Ali G's way of talking is not considered appropriate for traditional interviewing); they must also have similar cultural values and experiences as the writer (a viewer from Iraq might not see the humor in believing a woman is weaker than a man or the viewer might support Saddam Hussein and does not see how "falling in love with him" could be bad), and lastly, the viewer must recognize the traditional genre that is being lampooned (if the viewer did not know what a standard

news interview looked like and the kinds of questions asked, then they would not see that Ali G's style of interviewing is childish and mocking). It is amazing that irony or satire is ever found funny and many times, this is the case. Satire relies heavily on irony to achieve its humor and Booth's list shows the amount of knowledge a satirist is assuming the reader has in order to appreciate its commentary. These issues compounded with the type of content (the *taboo* and inappropriate) that is usually found in satire, the satirist walks a tottering edge each time he or she writes out a line.

There is a cruelty in what Cohen says to Gingrich about "women loving bastards." It reinforces cultural norms that women are silly and are drawn to being a victim. Cohen has no problem bringing this negative bias or any other that he thinks a person in Western culture might feel but is afraid to express. He challenges these biases by perfectly embodying the uneducated citizen on his show in order to articulate them. By doing this, it is possible for him to break down social stigmas and show the hypocrisies within contemporary politics. As Wyndham Lewis says, "Satire is cold, and that is good!" (76) Only through its derision, can a satirist really get at the negative elements that exist in society—only by embracing what is insulting or politically incorrect, can he or she adequately deconstruct it.

Satire uses language as a way to show the weaknesses and flaws within the person or subject matter it wishes to mock. Puns or wordplay "turns mimesis into an active response, undoing certainties, making them 'come apart at the seams [sic]'" (Redfern 182). Instead of just describing a situation accurately, puns are used to deconstruct comfort zones at the intricate level of language. Irony exists in these puns in order to tease out underlying hypocrisies within an idea. "Irony and puns are transparent

dissimulations [...] both depend on the existence of two orders or levels, of an apparent and assumed meaning, with a play-space between” (Redfern 96). And it is within this play that true meaning occurs and “incites us to think, see and hear on more one level concurrently” (97). Ali G’s use of AAVE is direct example of this. He uses slang to structure his interview questions in an uncommon way, making his viewers pay attention to what is asked and engaging them to think of the dissimilarities between his interviewing technique and a traditional one. By using word play within a text, the satirist is allowing, through a single word, the ability to create meaning of a new order. This reinforces the power of language, and how it can incite an audience to action. Also, the type of language used in satire is insulting to the person being parodied. The wordplay in satire is not sweet, but more so an attempt to chide the flaws seen within a given situation. This makes satire appear “mean,” but this type of insult can also help initiate conversation.

Charles Flynn study Insult and Society shows how culture and insult inform one another. Looking at anecdotes about primitive societies in Africa, the South Pacific, Northern America, and China to show how “insult” is socially constructed within particular societies, Flynn gives evidence to how insult behavior informs hierarchy and power structures. Flynn looks at individual forms of insult on smaller social levels in order to eventually build them up to family units to legal procedures to overarching belief systems of whole cultures; correlating the influence of person to person interaction and its affects on larger cultural beliefs (i.e., religion, war). He ties in the relationship of insult and humor across primitive cultures: “joking relationships are evidently a quite successful means of achieving peace and stability among individuals and subgroups with

competing interests” (88). This argument situates the power satire can potentially have. By using derision and insult playfully, satire can broach *taboo* issues amicably with its audience. Even though satire is not exclusively bound to insult, it still engages in this technique in order to reach its goals, and with its help, satire can be, like Joseph Hall suggests: “[t]he porcupine, That shoots sharp quills [sic] out in each angry line, And wounds the blushing cheek, and fiery eye, Of him that hears, and readeth guiltily” (8). It can help the reader indulge in human cruelty that delights its reader rather than inciting wrath.

Since, even in a democracy, many ideas are still considered unutterable or *taboo* (even in the United States where freedom of speech is espoused, no one would brag about sleeping with their sister because incest is considered morally wrong), satire uses humor to soften its readers. By doing this, the reader is more likely to respond to the content being discussed. “The political sport of comic insult is, like sports in general, a kind of mock warfare. Thus, the effects of political invective are deeply social. They affect a psychological release for the politician and citizen in the competitive aggressiveness of politics” (Schutz 48). Invective, the term invented to describe the satirist Juvenile’s “bitter and harsh attacks on people he saw as greedy, calculating, and obscene” (Scott 23), is intended to be communicative. When Juvenile insulted his contemporaries it was not to deride them into silence, but to begin a discourse. This ties into Flynn’s study of insult as a form of communication within a culture, and it is through this type of insult that political beliefs can be challenged, but in a way that is less aggressive than a public act of dissent; satire uses humor to cushion the blow of its derision, and this is what makes it an effective rhetorical tool. “The mock warfare of political humor displaces and

diffuses the real conflicts among men. Thereby, it facilitates their political reconciliation; real deeds form mock wars proceed” (48). Through humor, satire creates a “common ground” with its audience in order to discuss heated topics. It is satire’s direct use of rhetorical modes of persuasion (especially the pathetic appeal of humor) that makes it a successful discourse within society.

Donald Griffin’s study of satire looks specifically at its rhetorical aspects, and is fundamental to this paper, because of the way in which it problematizes satire’s goal. He believes, like the scholar, Louis I. Bredvold, that a satirist is normally perceived to take a moralist stance on an issue and demands the same of his or her reader (36). Yet, he discusses that this viewpoint is too easily assumed. He breaks down the assumptions that are problematic with the conventional theory of satire:

“(1) that the bipolar praise-and-blame pattern is the formal core of a satire; (2) that the thematic center is some moral standard against which deviations are measure; (3) that the satirist appeals to, and thereby confirms and assumes we share some traditionally sanctioned values; and (4) that the satirist works like the preacher-rhetorician to persuade his audience to virtue” (37).

Griffin is interested in understanding the complexities that truly arise in satire and looks to redefine “how” satire actually functions as a genre. If all the above assumptions are true, then satire becomes overly simplified in what it is attempting to achieve. It only wishes to teach the reader a simple moral, much like a fable.

James Thurber, while writing for *The New Yorker*, parodied many Aesop fables. In these retellings, Thurber took on a common moral through the fable to show how the *opposite* of it can be true. One example of this is “The Glass in the Field,” where Thurber takes on the cliché, *He who hesitates, finishes last*. In the story, a goldfinch is flying in a field where a large square of glass for a building was left behind by workers. Not seeing

the glass, the bird struck it and was knocked out. When he came to, he went to tell his friends about the “air that crystallized” on him. All the other birds couldn’t believe it; they bet him he was wrong and followed the goldfinch to the place in the park. As the group neared the “crystallized air,” the swallow, believing the goldfinch at last, was the only bird that hesitated, so out of the group, he was the only one not knocked cold. Thus, as Thurber writes at the end, the moral of the story is “*He who hesitates is sometimes saved*” (263).

Thurber’s piece has a simple structure, falling within the traditional praise/blame binary that Griffin notes as the goal of many works of satire. Also, Thurber’s fable “assumes we share some traditionally sanctioned values” (we recognize the cliché it’s undermining), and lastly, Thurber acts as “preacher-rhetorician,” in that he sums up the moral of the story in the last sentence of the piece. He is not looking for any questioning beyond the challenging of society’s preconceived notion that *He who hesitates, finishes last*. In the end, this fable chooses a commonly held belief as its point of contention and tells a simple story to elucidate a moral. Unfortunately, as Griffin notes, many pieces of satire do not function in this way. Take for example Jonathan Swift’s “A Meditation Upon a Broomstick.”

In this piece, Swift uses the life of a broomstick as a metaphor for humanity. He describes the living beauty of a tree in a forest and how that is contrary to human nature, which is no more than a broomstick. “Nature sent him into the world strong and lusty, in a thriving condition [...] the proper branches of this reasoning vegetable, until the axe of impertinence has lopped off his green boughs, and left off him a withered trunk” (14). After humankind has received this modification (axe of impertinence chopping off its

green boughs), it attempts through the “arts” to dress itself and the world up with “an unnatural bundle of hairs (all covered with powder)” (14). Because the broomstick (humanity) is dead, it feels the need to compensate through self-important endeavors, such as art and political activism. This is obviously negative to Swift from the biting way in which he describes the rationale behind these undertakings: “But a broomstick perhaps, you will say, is an emblem of a tree standing on its head; and pray what is man, but a topsy-turvy creature, his animal faculties perpetually mounted on his rational, his head where his heels should be, groveling on the earth” (15). Humans are formed upside-down, so all their acts are confused and misguided by their inherent structure. Even if a person wished to engage in instruction (as art wishes) or in a rhetorical act to persuade an audience to action (as political activism does), it is a worthless cause, because humans were created to always misunderstand the way the world truly works.

Swift’s portrayal of humanity is cynical and caustic; it’s also humorous that he uses a broomstick, a common household item, as his metaphor for human nature. He is not using some great artifact, such as a scepter, to describe humanity, but the worn-out broom that “raises a mighty dust where there was none before” (15). His main goal in writing this piece is to show a reinterpretation of activism within culture: Man spends a majority of his life as the “remover of grievances,” much like the broom goes into sweeping out dusty corners of a house, but in the end, the “dust” would not be flying into the air if no one had begun sweeping. In this short, simple piece (not much longer than Thurber’s fable), Swift complicates humanity’s need to improve upon its surroundings, and how that desire for improvement, is exactly what causes the world to get “dusty.”

Unlike Thurber's fable, there is no simple moral written in the last line. Instead, the reader is left with the truculent assessment that a broomstick, at the end of its life, "is either kicked out of doors, or made use of to kindle flames for others to warm themselves by" (15). One way to interpret this ending is to focus on the cynicism: All the great accomplishments of a person's life is insignificant, and each person goes to the grave unceremoniously and unappreciated. Yet, there's an optimistic interpretation of this ending too: That the broomstick could become kindling and warm others, so humans can continue to give pleasure to others through the most common of human experiences, death. Considering the elements that are espoused prior though (that humans tasks appear to cause more trouble than they help), it is odd that he would even add this element which undermines part of his argument. Swift, at first seemingly simple and direct, becomes allusive in what he wants his reader to know. Or as André Breton states, "Swift's eyes were so changeable that they could turn from light blue to black, from the candid to the terrible (4).

It's obvious from the Swift piece that satirists do not always demark a fixed moral at the end of their work. Many times, satire creates, through metaphor, alternative arguments to long-held beliefs, but does not give a clear-cut answer to them. Who would ever say that activism is a negative? Swift challenges it, and the reader sees how human life can destroy even when attempting to do *good*, because by its very nature, is disconnected from the actual world. Yet, Swift gives no answer to how the reader can rectify this situation. The complexity of Swift's work is why Griffin feels a new understanding of satire should be explored. In order to understand the difference between works like Thurber's "The Glass in the Field" and Swift's "A Meditation Upon a

Broomstick,” Griffin uses rhetoric. He explains that there are two types of rhetoric that can occur within a piece of satire: the rhetoric of inquiry and the rhetoric of provocation. “If rhetoric of inquiry is ‘positive,’ an exploratory attempt to arrive at truth, the rhetoric of provocation is ‘negative,’ a critique of false understanding. In each case the satirist raises questions; in provocation, the question is designed to expose or demolish a foolish certainty” (52). Thurber’s fable would fit within the traditional idea of moral instruction, which arrives at a truth through parody. It does give way to inquiry and has a simple “critique of false understanding,” but it does not allow for further questioning. On the other hand, Swift’s essay is one of “inquiry and provocation,” which attempts to “destroy false understanding” and explore potential “truths.” Swift is not absolute in his satire; he is pushing his readers to interpret his text, thus engaging them to think. All satire has a moralist potential, but many pieces lend themselves to a discussion—an elucidation of misconceived ideas engendering questioning—rather than leading the reader to an answer or a moral.

Or as Griffin notes, “Many of the terms we use to describe the formal properties of satiric discourse—*lanx satura*, *sermo*, *farrago*, dialogue, essay, anatomy—suggest that the form lends itself to open-ended inquiry rather than to a steady progress toward conclusion, either predetermined or (as in scientific discourse) predicted” (41). The writer and satirist, Wyndham Lewis, wrote an essay that supports Griffin’s redefinition through his attack on a satire’s need to always have a moral. Lewis believes that the best satire is *nonmoral*. “But how can satire stand without the moral sanction? you may ask. For satire can only exist in contrast to something else—it is a shadow, and an ugly shadow at that, of some perfection. And it is so disagreeable, and so painful [...] that no one would

pursue it *for its own sake*, or take up the occupation of satirist unless compelled to do so, out of indignation at the spectacle of the neglect of beauty and virtue” (71). He states that people can’t believe someone would revel in the worst of the world without the goal of resituating the “beautiful” back in its rightful place. The crux of his argument is that all men and women are inherently corrupted (much in the same way Swift suggests) and the “disagreeable” or “wicked” aspects of humanity have always existed within each individual in society, so it is right that vice and ugliness are written about for *their* own sake, not just to bring “beauty” back from the beyond. Satire does not need to proclaim beauty or virtue, but instead, its main function is to point out the worst of society—the inherent malice, degradation, and misconduct—that exists and revels in it. By looking at the vices of mankind, readers begin to understand how they function within society. They also become better equipped to recognize their own vices which they can never fully loose but can potentially contain.

Like Griffin, Lewis sees that, many times, satire creates laughter of “inquiry and provocation” instead of a laughter of certainty. It is through this, that satire finds its real power. Most people are drawn to the beautiful in life, but it is the satirist, who will throw him or herself into the mud in order to better instruct on the foibles of the world. It is the satirist, who will throw off traditional views of morality to elucidate a truth. Take for example, Fredrick Nietzsche’s letter to Jacob Burckhardt in which Nietzsche (in the process of accepting a professorship) garnered the attention of psychiatrists. He wrote: “In the end I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not dared push my private egoism so far as to desist for its sake from the creation of the world. You see, one must make sacrifices however and where one lives” (130). In this, Nietzsche is

playing on the egoism of human kind's need to be "God." He's also looking at how a university professor is equated (though less than) to being godlike. He admits his sacrifice might not stick, because he could be a God even though, for the moment, he has not chosen it. Nietzsche is assuming that people have the potential to be "God," and it is only through choice that he or she gives this up.

If a reader did not assume it was blasphemous to consider this possibility, he or she would recognize that Nietzsche is playing around with human egoism in the purest sense. Aren't we all a leading actor in our own melodramatic mini-series? Don't we all feel we are perfect and have the potential to be the best out of the group? And isn't this feeling the exact reason why we can even conceive of God or perfection? Yet, the reader obviously did believe this to be blasphemous (the fact it was a joke, which Nietzsche explains, only adds to his transgression), because he got negative criticism for not only this letter, but also, for his overarching philosophy. Here, Nietzsche is specifically being a *nonmoralist* as Lewis suggests. He is deliberately reveling in human egotism; he is questioning an individual's motives for needing a title (needing a professorship) and why such hierarchies are an important part of society. It's because a person's desire to be "better" comes not from a desire to help the world, but instead to fulfill his or her own ego. Like Swift, Nietzsche does not give a clear answer to this dilemma—the egotism of mankind allows it to really understand and relate to God, but it also keeps it from being altruistic—but only, through humor, brings its complexities to the forefront for discussion.

Griffin admits that many of satire's intentions are uncontrollable: "a satirist wished to engage others in their passionate attack, but instead of spreading, it turns into a

benign amusement” (68). Griffin goes on to state that this could be what’s lacking in satire—the humor works too well as a deflector. People fail to realize the importance of the intended message. But then again, as Griffin says himself, maybe readers want too much from satire? Why is “action” necessary? “Perhaps the inquiry is all, the end in itself” (70) and the reader needs nothing more than be awakened to the alternative possibilities. Satire can bring a free-flowing movement that borders on the dialectic, and is not then the inquiry enough or does all satire need its moral spelled out in the last line like Thurber? Because if there is not *some* direction, as Griffin warns, in certain cases “the process of inquiry is truly open-ended; its exploration has no territory to map, no particular complacency to disturb. The danger is that the satirist will fall into a mindless cynicism where everything is subject to satire, or the kind of ‘free-thinking’ that Swift would have called no thinking at all” (70). When this occurs, the reader is not getting any direction, but being lead into an apathetic state of mind where no truth can be achieved. In this mindset, the audience only learns that *everything can be made fun of, everything is flawed and nothing exists that is beautiful and virtuous*. This can be an important concern when looking at a contemporary example of satire, because not only is it pervasive in society, but many times this is a criticism of it.

Contemporary satire contains all the traditional elements of satire: humor, parody, puns, insult (or derision), irony, a consideration of audience, and potentially, moralist intent. Many examples of contemporary satire, like Griffin suggests, does not have a direct moral it is attempting to teach. Instead, it relies heavily on the reader picking up the clues in order to renegotiate the seedy aspects of society through laughter. And what is wrong with just laughing? Only that, anyone can laugh at the faults of

humankind—anyone can laugh at a woman falling on her ass—it takes the satirist to change this negative event and transform it into a meaningful interpretation of what humankind is or potentially could be. It takes a satirist to turn it into art.

This research looks at how the literary tradition's need to "delight in order to instruct" is problematic for satire. The literary arts should bring the reader towards virtue and beauty, and satire revels in the vice and ugliness. It does allow the reader to laugh at these negative qualities, but it still could lead the reader towards the vices it discusses. Many times, satire does not have a clear moral as its goal, and since it indulges describing the human weakness, it can be deemed unsuccessful in bringing its readers to no nothing more than apathetic state of mind. If satire fails at its instruction, it will only show how bad society can be, and will only lead the reader towards cynicism. Since the literary tradition limits the way we can understand how satire function, this study looks at rhetorical qualities found within satire: Satire's awareness of its audience, its deconstruction of culturally bound truths, and its ability to incite thoughtful questioning.

Rhetorical scholars are interested in the types of discourses used within a culture to create meaning. Normally, they look at speeches, civic documents, technical manuals, websites, and the generalized media, but very little attention has been placed on how satire functions rhetorically. It could be because satire is considered low-brow, especially from a literary perspective, but it also could be that rhetoric has only recently reentered the academic dialogue. Either way, it appears that satire, which is written to show hypocrisies within society's or an individual's thinking, could be better understood through a rhetorical perspective.

In this paper, satire is looked at through a rhetorical lens in order to understand its place as a discourse within contemporary culture. Satire functions as place where politically heated topics and *taboo* ideas can be discussed through a veil of humor. After looking at the ways that satire works within rhetorical principles (situational truths, means of persuasion, and the dialectic as rhetorical model for Griffin's rhetoric of "inquiry and provocation"), these ideas are applied to a contemporary text, *The Onion*, in order to show how satire can be used as a dialogue within the public sphere in instances where traditional rhetorical acts have problems accessing. In this way, satire can be seen as the persuasive tool it is for questioning false belief ideas in order to inspire its audience to a place of satirical inquiry.

The Rhetoric of Satire

Satire Delivers Only the Brazen

Horace famously said: “Poets aim either to do good or to give pleasure—or, thirdly, to say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life” (132). In this sentence, the aim of literature is explicitly stated: literature delights in order to instruct. Also, on this day, the distinction between what is called literature (which does both, instruct and delight) and fiction (that potentially does one or the other) is distinguished. Many types of poetry, fiction, or plays have come under this one lines close scrutiny. If one of these two basic elements fails to be present (particularly instruction) then it loses its place among the pieces of “serious” literature and is considered as something less worthwhile. Yes, it might make the reader laugh or forget about the stress within in his or her life, but it will never be considered “art,” because it fails to instruct the reader on underlying knowledge about the human condition. Throughout its history, satire has, more often than not, been considered of the second variety. Much like the limerick is considered a lesser form of poetry, satire is considered a low-brow form of fiction.

Note though, as stated above, that “delighting” is only a means by which the greater goal of instruction is achieved. Or as Horace puts it: “It is not enough for poetry to be beautiful; it must also be pleasing and lead the hearer’s mind wherever it will” (126). A purely beautiful written rendition of an situation does not necessarily make great poetry (e.g. a realistic painting of an artichoke is not automatically “art”); it must also bring the reader to a greater level of knowledge—or the mind must move towards other realms of understanding through its consumption.

Looking again at Swift's "A Meditation Upon a Broomstick" will help bring this point out further. When Swift describes the broomstick in his piece, he does not describe each ridge of a broomstick's handle or the number of bristles that make up its head. The kind of tree, the color of bark, the amount of nicks and wear, and the age of the broom are not stated within the piece. Swift is not interested in giving a scientific analysis of the broom; he's interested in transforming the broomstick into a metaphor of humanity. Actually, not one physical description of the broomstick is given. Instead, the activities the broomstick discussed through its actions: "But a broomstick, perhaps, you will say, is an emblem of a tree standing on its head [...] a topsyturvy creature, his animal faculties perpetually mounted on his rational, his head where his heels should be, groveling on the earth; and yet, with all his faults, he sets up to be a universal reformer and corrector of abuses, a remover of grievances, rakes into every slut's corner of Nature" (15). By disregarding the physical details of the broomstick, Swift can create a representation of humanity, which comments on its need to fix the world. Unlike a realistic paint, Swift's satire does not choose to paint with a technical brushstroke to trick the reader an artichoke can be plucked off the page and prepared for dinner, but instead, looks to break down and reconstruct its surroundings. And no, the cruelty of its wit might not be beautiful, but it could potentially be instructive and lead the reader's "mind wherever it will."

In the 1960s', the scholar, Louis I. Bredvold, looked to reawaken the conversation about satire, stating that it had been overlooked because "no one cares to champion anything so ignoble and ill-mannered and negative" (253). Satire, unlike its cousin comedy, has a touch of malice to it. Comedy seeks laughter in a state of "innocence,"

unlike satire, which finds its laughter through derision of groups, such as jokes pertaining to cripples or a call for the Irish to eat their young. Satire embraces the inappropriate and the seedy. Critics opposed to satire see “the pleasure we derive from [it] may be explained frankly as a perversion of the emotions, an indulgence in cruelty” (255). Since satire seeks “cruelty” rather than beauty, it is considered one of the lowest of the literary arts. There is a distinct belief that “beauty” and “virtue” are the most important of all human knowledge. Instead, satire looks to teach about “vice” and “ugliness.” As Horace said, literature says “things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life,” and if satire does neither (or at best, does either one poorly), then it should not be worthy of serious critique. It’s not that cruel humor can’t be entertaining, but if it appears there is no higher purpose to it other than *to be entertaining*, then what is the use of taking it seriously? Or is it impossible to believe that cruelty or vice can be worthy of instruction? It is this aspect that Brevold defends against, stating that satire (potentially) has the ability to promote social action. He coins the term the “publicist function” to define satires ability to “stir up public opinion against malefactors,” which “prepares the way for effective social action against evils” (257). In the end, he sees a moral connection with that of the function of satire: “all great satirists, as has always been observed, have been moralist” (264).

Satire’s desire to instruct is important to understand its literary merits. The literary arts are a way a person can create meaning about the world through metaphor, and because of this, can be the greatest method of learning. Or as Sir Philip Sidney says in his essay, *An Apology for Poetry*, learning’s “final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable

of” (333). Here Sidney lends himself to discussing the values of overall learning, which is not limited to literature; literature is only one avenue—the best avenue—in which it can be achieved, especially in comparison to philosophy and history. Or as he states:

“Now doth the peerless poet perform: for whosoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as the other doth” (Sidney 335).

Poetry, unlike philosophy, can create the “perfect picture.” A philosopher rambles about a subject in a way that is uninteresting to its readers (like this thesis). It is poets, with their gift to interpret and create the world anew, that truly helps humans understand abstract knowledge in life. Or as Sidney goes on to say: “Now therein of all sciences, I speak still of human, and according to the human conceits is our poet the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter it” (340). Again, the delightful quality of poetry is stated and Sidney appears to be implying that poetry is the greatest of teachers, because it makes learning fun.

Sidney then compares the poet to the historian: poets are superior because they are not shackled down by facts, recording each minute detail, but have the capacity to interpret their surroundings in order to include only key ones. This goes back to Horace and the example of Swift’s broom. It’s not enough for an object to be described flawlessly, there must also be a higher goal of instruction attached to it. Sidney goes so far as to maintain that “the historian, being captive to the truth of foolish world, is many times a terror from well doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness” (339). Since historians are servants to their “facts,” they can describe immoral behavior as a

potentially good idea, such as a murderer going unpunished. Sidney is arguing that at times, a historian fails to instruct properly from the lack of analysis of the events being described.

Literature can be a process by which nature is improved upon, or as Sidney so eloquently states: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (330). A writer not only uses nature as their inspiration, but through their eyes they come to improve upon it. Nature carries with it evil and vice, historians are imprisoned by their need to represent facts, but the poet can mold the world to only show the beautiful and the virtuous in order to instruct his or her audience towards it. This reason, combined with poetry’s ability to bring pleasure while instructing its reader (something philosophy does not do), makes it the greatest of instructional tools.

Satire does attempt to instruct, or as Brevold says, it “prepares the way for effective social action against evils.” Yet, Sidney believes that a true poet (or literary artist) should paint only that which is beautiful. He even states that nature is less than the poet, because nature’s “world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.” Satire does not paint the artichoke in full bloom, plump and sumptuous, but rather, paints the decaying corpse that has been left on the counter to show the wastefulness that exists in society. This is not beautiful—it goes out of its way to be exactly not that. It is the use of parody of human weaknesses that intertwines with this. Satire does not take of genres, from subjects to show its value, but instead, “wounds the original (however slightly), pointing out faults, revealing hidden affectations, emphasizing weaknesses and diminishing

strengths” (Highet 68). Yet, it is the pure reveling in the undesirable that makes it so fascinating.

Unfortunately, the literary tradition does not appreciate a rejection of the beautiful and virtuous. Samuel Johnson wrote: “It is justly considered as the greatest excellence of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is so often discolored by passion, or deformed by wickedness” (464). Here Johnson is reasserting Sidney’s belief that a poet’s mimesis should create beautiful renditions of the world in order to instruct. Johnson states the writer should be conscious of what topics they choose to write, because if human beings are weak and need the writer to help bring them back to the beautiful and moral.

Johnson’s view is problematic for satire, because satire embraces the wicked passions of men. Wyndham Lewis’ assessment that satire “is so disagreeable, and so painful [...] that no one would pursue it *for its own sake*, or take up the occupation of satirist unless compelled to do so, out of indignation at the spectacle of the neglect of beauty and virtue” shows how Johnson is not alone in believing that the “wickedness” of humanity should never be just described for its own sake. Johnson, like many literary critics, believes the literary arts should always work to bring the reader to higher level of moral understanding. Because of its content and because many satirical pieces (like Swift’s “Meditation”) do not give a clear moral at the end of its piece, a literary analysis of it can be problematic.

It is right to judge literature on its level of instruction. Yet, if the need for the content to be beautiful (showing humans being virtuous) is needed for instruction, then

satire falls under attack, because it embraces human's "discolored passion." Satire can be understood through its literary elements (parody, irony, invective, point of view, and metaphor), but if, at a fundamental level, it fails to bring the reader closer to knowledge, then it has failed as an art form. If the reasoning behind why it's important to embrace the wicked is not explain, then an understanding for its place as an important contemporary discourse cannot be reached. In order to rectify this problem, Leon Guilhamet, turned to rhetoric in order to define and understand the "timeless aspects" of satire: "even as satire became a mimetic art, it preserved its affinity for rhetorical form...the persuasive quality of so much satire has kept it under the influence of rhetoric" (24). By looking at traditional forms of rhetorical speech acts (demonstrative, deliberate, and judicial) through examples of Greek, Roman, and 18th century rhetoricians, Guilhamet maps out strategies for understanding artistic implications of satire: "Demonstrative satire encompasses direct attack in the present tense against individuals or specific groups" (27) through curse or mockery; "the dialogue and deliberative forms [of satire] look to the future" (33) moving people to act; and judicial satire borrows from legal (court room settings) rhetorical situations, dealing in binaries of right/wrong and good/evil. This works back to satire having a desire to be moralist, and it ties by to Brevold's "publicist function." Lastly, Guilhamet sees satire as a genre that borrows and restructures other literary genres: "By piecing together what is left over from a disintegrating past, the satirist forms a prism through which the present can be refracted" (166).

Satire's instruction cannot be fully understood without understanding the rhetorical nature that inherently lies within it. In order to look at a specific example of contemporary satire, discovering how it functions as a tool to create knowledge, three

main ideas can be borrowed from the rhetorical tradition: (1) An understanding of situational truths and how it informs what *is* considered beautiful, and how satire manipulates culturally bound ideas for its readers; (2) How satire's audience and its *taboo* content are inextricably entwined so that humor is its primary tool of persuasion; and lastly, (3) Through these rhetorical elements, satire's laughter transforms from one of entertainment to one that distinctly sounds like understanding.

Satire fits problematically within literary tradition's need to "delight in order to instruct." It's not the *instructive* element that is missing in the equation, but more so, the *delighting* one. Satire's main purpose is to deconstruct commonly held beliefs in order to illuminate truth to the reader, but why does it need to embrace the wicked to do this? Satire does it to show "vice" to the reader, so he or she can recognize it in the future. Also, satire understands that "truth" is something relative and that certain topics are too *taboo* to be broached without humor. In the end, satire understands there is as much value in understanding the decaying artichoke as there is in the sumptuous one. Satire represents the negatives in life in order to accentuate the truth that is hidden beneath the rough edges of human experience. And through a rhetorical lens, satire can achieve the recognition for being the intellectual endeavor it truly is.

Why Satire Matters

Johnson's view that only the beautiful should be discussed in literature in order to bring readers toward a virtuous action is challenge when looking at the Sophistic notion that truth is relative to the cultural standards set in place. Objective understanding is not attainable, because, as humans, it is impossible to move away from the cultural biases that shape our knowledge. This is important to know, as Wayne Booth shows, because understanding the reader's cultural biases relates to how well they can understand the instruction being set in place. Specifically in regards to satire's use of irony, it is important to remember that its audience must have the necessary skills of the language being used, have an awareness of the cultural standards and experiences the audience has experience with, and lastly, is aware of the types of expression which exist in order to see how satire reconstructs them to point out hypocrisies in already established ideologies, institutions, and practices (Booth 100). Contemporary satire, instead of ignoring these issues, embraces them. By understanding situational truths, satire looks to engage its readers through its reconfiguration of other traditional genres in order to create meaning.

As a group, the Sophists (generally agreed upon to include Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Antiphon, Hippias, Critias, and Thrasymachus) agreed that objective truth was problematic, and most knowledge was created through a well-constructed argument that gave a probable course of action. During the time of the Sophists, Greek culture was experiencing a mass globalization. As new cultures were introduced, the Greeks began to see how "customs and standards of behavior which had earlier been accepted as absolute and universal and of divine institution, were in fact local and relative" (Guthrie 16). One example of this was religion. Because of globalization, Athenians saw their "gods"

and/or “religions” were not being practiced throughout the world, causing them to question the validity of it. Also, new scientific discoveries were redefining what place religion had within intellectual thought:

“It was a blow to religion when even the stars and the sun were asserted to be ignited clouds, or rocks torn from the earth and put into orbit by the cosmic vortex. The Olympians, even if they did not create the world, had at least controlled it, but the theories of the natural philosophers left no pat for Zeus to play in the production of rain, thunder or [lightning]sic, nor for Poseidon in the terror of earthquakes” (Guthrie 15).

These discoveries invalidated religious doctrine, which was considered finite in its explanation of how the universe was created and functioned. As a culture, Greeks began to be skeptical in how humans come to knowledge. They saw that many ideas were relative based on the cultural assumptions created within a certain country, group, or institution.

Rhetoric was designed to move people into producing a new future. The particular idea of the “critical moment” was important to the Sophists, because it signified the speaker’s need to live in the moment when attempting to persuade his or her audience. The Sophists were wary of objective truth, and found that the relationship between appearance and reality were the primary ways human’s acquired knowledge, so living in the “now” was a concern for them. Gorgias' had three considerations for understanding life: (1) that everyone (even scientists) believe that they have the answers for all of the natural world, (2) "a single speech can delight and convince the crowd just because it is artistically and cleverly contrived, not because it contains the truth" (51), and (3) all the disagreements among philosophers shows how quickly ideas/truths change.

Adding to this is John Poulakos' definition that "*Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible*" (26). He sees *rhethors* (particularly, the Sophists) as practitioners rather than theorists, who understood the power of "craft" when engaging in public discourse. The interesting aspect to this definition is that it "links rhetoric to a movement originating in the sphere of the actuality and striving to attain a place in that of potentiality" (26). Rhetoric was designed to move people to act, particularly in the political sphere. This last aspect particularly ties into the contemporary satire, since the laughter derived from the humor can be thought to move people to thought (as Griffin theorizes). Yet, it is within this idea of "moving to action" that many scholars have pondered as the goal of satire, yet worry, if it is actual achieved (Griffin, Booth, Brevold, Kernan).

Whether it can be quantified that satire moves people to action beyond laughter is not potentially as important as how it embraces situational truths in order to create meaning for its audience. One of the primary functions of satire is to undermine situational truths through the very way it is written as Kernan suggests. It does this by taking traditional literary structures and breaking them down so the reader is left with new understanding of how the world functions. Also, satire is aware that knowledge and truth are a perception changed by the emotional states of a person: "when a man's soul is in an evil state, and so has thoughts which suit that state, then the a good state of soul makes him think other thoughts, natural to way truer...And the wise and good orators make what is beneficial rather than what is harmful appear just to the cities" (Protagoras). The satirist uses humor to bring its audience to an amicable state in order to discuss

controversial issues. Satire understands how appearance and reality are inextricably linked: appearance informs reality, and embraces this as a method for instructing its audience on the true state of the world.

For a contemporary piece of satire, like *The Onion*, this concept is particularly important, because with mass-communication, American culture has been dealing with the same issues that affected the Greeks, but on an even greater scale. Information moves rapidly—through spatial mediums, such as the internet, instant messaging, cell phones, and physical realities, like fast travel (a person can fly to Paris in only 7 and half hours)—from the source out to billions of people. If we accept, like the Sophists, that much of our standards are relative, then it only seems natural that satire should actively discuss human weakness and immorality, because what is perceived as “immoral” has become broader than ever before. Back in Ancient Greece or in the time of Johnson, the people allowed to engage in the art of rhetoric were educated upper class, white males. Now anyone (women, minorities, children,) can put their thoughts out for people to see. Considering this and the reality that it is easier than ever to access other culture’s customs, it is important for discourses, like satire to communicate the hypocrisies occurring within contemporary culture. Satire is not the only discourse engaging in this, but it is the one discourse that relies primarily on humor as its tool to move its *audience to action*, making it unique in the kind of topics it *can* discuss.

Satire's Unique Power of Laughter

The first person to write critically about satire was the rhetorician, Quintillian. He invented the term in order to discuss the Roman satirist, Lucilious. During Roman times, it was impossible to criticize the emperor or powerful individuals institutions openly; satirists used humor as a way to conceal their descent of political actions. Like another Roman satirist, Juvenile, Lucilious used invective (the “bitter and harsh attacks” of immoral people through humor) as the main way to criticize negatives occurring within his culture. Within culture, not all humans are equal, and individuals with power need to be treated carefully. Traditionally, satire has been aware of the political ramifications of its attacks. Satire uses humor, because *it is attacking* a person, an institution, or a belief. If a satirist is not careful that his or her parody of a subject isn't found humorous by the audience, then that audience can become aggressively removed from the moral attempting to be taught.

By looking at the “Difficulties of Persuasion” by Han Fei Tzu, a better understanding of satire's aggressive audience can be reached. Tzu begins by saying, “On the whole the difficult thing about persuasion is to know the mind of the person one is trying to persuade and to be able to fit one's words to it” (1). This relates back to the Sophists' situational truth, because depending on the cultural assumptions the audience has directly informs the manner in which the speaker presents his or her argument. Yet, unlike the Sophists, Tzu adds that an understanding of power dynamics (and where the speaker fits into it) is needed in order to be effective rhetorically. He advises: “If some person of eminence takes a brief step in the wrong direction and you immediately launch into a lecture on ritual principles and challenge his misdeed, then you will be in danger”

(1). For him, it is a wary business to be dealing with authority. It implies that the speaker must be on guard of not angering his audience, not because he might lose the argument, but more likely, that he'll lose his head. "Only if a speaker can avoid brushing against them will he have any hope of success" (3) Tzu warns. If the speaker has less power than its audience, she or he needs to be wary of the way an argument is formulated. Satire, many times, is taking on powerful cultural assumptions (or people) in its writing, so it needs to be "secretive" in keeping its criticisms from being too direct.

If two people entering into public discourse have equal levels of power, then a need for secrecy is not needed. Yet, satire is not equal with its audience, because of its content, so its "[u]ndertakings succeed through secrecy but fail through being found out"

(1). Part of good satire and Tzu is to stay out of danger by appearing *not* to have any motives in mind. Satire uses humor to lessen the blows—to keep its head from being chopped off—in order to get its message out easily. Yet, democracy and freedom of speech is part of Western culture, so the writers of *The Onion* do not have to worry about getting executed for their opinions. Even so, taboo ideas still exist, so it is important for the satirist, when writing about them, to tread lightly.

The satirist sits down to write with the goal of persuading its audience to a higher virtue, and he or she is aware the content of the work might not be well-received. Satirists then use humor to soften their audience for the shocking truths they will be expressing. Looking at Aristotle's On Rhetoric will help negotiate audience as an important element of satire. Aristotle gives three core reasons why he embarked on a study of rhetoric and audience: (1) "[it] is useful [first] because the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites, so that if judgments are not made in the right way

[the true and just] are necessarily defeated [by their opposites]” (34); (2) having the right answers is not always warranted to being considered right by one’s audience; and (3) “[n]one of the other arts reasons in opposite directions; dialectic and rhetoric alone do this, for both are equally concerned with opposites” (34). Audience is a primary concern, because knowing a subject is different from persuading others to see it. This concept compels a person to see both sides of an argument (theirs and the opposing one) in order to be effectively persuasive. The underlying assumption here is that objective to truth is not the only necessary requirement for winning an argument; being “right” isn’t always the most important thing. A Satirist understands this concept, because it is already playing with truths that are relative and culturally bound. Yet, the dissent that satire engages in needs the persuasive tool of humor, so the topic can even be broached. Satire distorts the world in a humorous fashion, making it easier for the author to engage his or her audience towards a concept that is not beautiful.

Like the Sophists, Aristotle’s writing on rhetoric has to do with the concept of “probability” and how different conclusions can be drawn depending on the environment in which it is presented, so it is important to Aristotle to understand how to control the environment when speaking. In his writing, Aristotle focuses on three main modes of persuasion (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*) that a speaker needs for engaging in communication. *Ethos* is usually considered the moral character of either the speaker, *pathos* is the emotions awakened by the audience through the speaker’s choice of language and argument, and *logos* is employment of rational arguments (statistics and logic) in order to persuade the audience. As found through the Sophists, rhetoricians embraced situational truths, and always played off “what could happen” to formulate

their argument. Or as Aristotle states: “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (36). *Ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* were Aristotle’s “means of persuasion.” For satire, which potentially uses all three, it is humor (or the use of *pathos*) that helps it negotiate a space where inquiry can be reached. Satirists use invective to show the audience the foibles contained within its subject, but it uses the laughter to situate that derision, so it does not outcast its audience. When this occurs, the insult created by satire can be “social.” Satire then can be a viable discourse within society for initiating dialogues on *taboo* ideas. Satire is concerned on how to impart the knowledge in the most affective way possibly to an aggressive audience, so it consciously uses a balance of parody, humor, and insult to express its critiques to an audience.

Satirical Inquiry

Traditionally, it was assumed that a philosopher imparted his or her wisdom upon the masses, but it was an important consideration on how it was done. Plato's teacher, Socrates never wrote anything down, but imparted all his knowledge orally. He rejected ownership of wisdom, so he believed writing an essay or poem made knowledge stable in a way that disregarded the actual process of understanding. By writing dialogues, in which Plato was not one of the speakers but the author, continued Socrates' rejection of ownership knowledge and allowed, even in a stable environment, the illusion of debate and movement which is necessary to come to true knowledge. By doing this, Plato offers a progression of thought rather than giving an answer to the reader, asking them to think critically about what is being said. Many times, satire is only about inquiry, and it isn't interested in finding a certain truth, but to engage its audience to think possibilities, engendering questioning.

Dialectic is about finding "a truth" and leading its audience to the most probable course of action. This is "mental" (questioning) action rather than a physical one (voting). It is an epistemology embraces disagreement and the exchange of propositions and counter-propositions in order to discover truth. This idea connects to Donald Griffin's concepts, rhetoric of inquiry and rhetoric of provocation. Both these terms denote satire's ability to inspire its reader to question rather than to instruct a moral. In this way, satire is like a dialectic which uses discussion as a way to move towards truth. Satire may not lead to a physical action, but it does lead towards the mental curiosity to know how the world functions.

At the beginning of *Gorgias*, Socrates offers to have a dialectical conversation. He lays down the ground rules for playing the “game”: (1) give the essential attributes of the term that that thing has and no other one; (2) then make analogies to compare it with all other concepts (3) and finally you evaluate. After he defines the rules, Socrates then engages in a dialectic debate with Gorgias on his craft. Gorgias opens his debate with Socrates claiming that the sophist contains all other skills, because an orator can, through argumentation, influence all other skills. Socrates gives the counter-proposition to this, saying an orator is a single skill like all others. Since the discussion between Socrates and Gorgias is about Gorgias’ craft, the idea of “the appearance” verse the “the reality” of something comes into question. Socrates wonders whether a rhetorician needs to know the subject their speaking on, such as, can a (wo)man speak of morality if (s)he is not moral or does not understand it. He is questioning whether a person can effectively project false appearance while still having the audience believe it.

Socrates compares the idea of virtue ("just and unjust," "admirable and shameful") to that of a craft. He uses the metaphor of a man learning the art of music to become a musician (carpentry a carpenter). Socrates wonders is whether a person can appear to be a musician even if he doesn't know how to play an instrument. This is meant to imply that if he didn't actual know to play an instrument a sophist could not pretend to be a musician and truly convince his audience. In the end, Socrates traps Gorgias with the possibility that an even if the orator knew the craft of public speaking, he could still be bad or unjust in his heart, so he would be ineffective in persuading his audience towards good. Gorgias finally has to admit that the "appearance" of good is not as persuasive as the actual representation of it.

After Gorgias loses to Socrates, Polus jumps in to take his place. He believes that rhetoricians are the most powerful people on earth, because if you understand how to move your audience to action. Socrates dismisses this saying that orator has the least amount of freedom, because he always has to do what is good for the community (thus a prisoner of his audience), and cannot be free to do what he likes. Much of what Plato attempts to show in this dialogue is how *not* to engage in a dialectic. Throughout the conversation, Polus is more interested in the “answer” rather than the “question,” which is wrong when engaged in a dialectic conversation. Instead of looking for knowledge, he impetuously races forward, chiding Socrates along the way. Socrates points out that this type of rashness does not bring about true understanding and mentions that Polus, himself, does not appear to be an effective rhetorician.

Lastly, Callicles takes on Socrates and argues that the powerful are better by the sheer fact that they’re stronger. Tyrants are justified in what they do, since they have the capacity to rise above others. By doing “good” for the community, you will acquire the most followers and be the strongest, thus it is necessary for a leader to be moral and good in his decisions. He sees value in rhetoric, because it teaches a person how to lead people through the “appearance” of truth. Socrates agrees that goodness is still needed in order to lead a community—since he equivocates strong with good (something he began to argue with Polos). Yet, Socrates disagrees that rhetoric is the most powerful tool; since it relies on “probability” and appearances, it actually weakens the ability to do “good.” Socrates assumes that goodness is inherent and it cannot be falsified, so it cannot be.

For Socrates, it is more important that people know “how” to think than “what” they think. Dialectic is an epistemology, asking the speaker to debate through

discrepancies of a “truth.” Dialectic helps to tease-out the *appearance* of truth from the actual truth (as seen with the conversation with Gorgias), so *questions* are more important than *answers* (as seen through the conversation with Polis and Callicles). Lastly, audience has more power than the rhetorician, because they choose whether to be moved to action or not, thus Socrates sees that only “good” people rise to power, because only by doing “good” for the audience can a person achieve stations of power. The main principle of dialectic is to value questioning in order to find definitive answers.

Throughout the dialogue, Plato shows the qualities to be a good dialectician: (1) the person must be more concerned with the process of epistemology rather than finding the right answer, so (2) a person is more interested in inquiry than action since the primary objective of dialectic is not to find “truth” but to understand how we come to it; and (3) the primary mode of discussion is questions, since it represents the “how” of thinking the best. A satirist, such as Nietzsche or Swift understood this concept when they choose not write out a moral, like Thurber, at the end of their work. They are looking for their audiences to understand how these truths (when shifted around) can be so funny, engendering a realization that a truth accepted as fixed is actually mutable. Or as Griffin says, Many of the terms we use to describe the formal properties of satiric discourse—*lanx satura*, *sermo*, *farrago*, *dialogue*, *essay*, *anatomy*—suggest that the form lends itself to open-ended inquiry rather than to a steady progress toward conclusion, either predetermined or (as in scientific discourse) predicted” (41). It is satire’s very nature to progress towards questioning rather spell out a fixed moral

Thoughtful Action

Now I shall only consider this one point, whether this satiric kind of writing be deservedly an object of your suspicion. —Horace

Satire is an avenue for discussing the *taboo* and challenges ideologies and individuals; it uses humor in order to break down the barriers of audiences uncomfortable discussing these ideas. Unlike a piece of history, which is restrained by its facts, and philosophy, which is a burden to read because it does not delight, satire uses its humor to delight its readers in order to give them moral instruction. As a literary genre, satire attempts to instruct its reader, but as Johnson suggests, “It is justly considered as the greatest excellence of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is so often discolored by passion, or deformed by wickedness” (464). Too many times, a writer’s senses can cloud what is the appropriate content to use for instruction. It is then the writer’s duty to become unchained from Plato’s wall to see the world as it truly is, because only then can he or she lead an audience towards the good and virtuous.

Yet, the problem with this is the mutable nature of truth. Many ideas and concepts have no answer and only the most probable course of action is known. Weighty topics, such as poverty and how to deal with it, have been debated for long periods of time, but as of yet, humans have not come to an agreement on how this issue should be handled. In cases such as these, it becomes difficult to judge what is the “virtuous” choice rather than wrong one. Satire might deal with seedy topics but it understands the Sophistic notion of “situational truths” in order to “capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible” (26).

The senses are important, because by embracing them, a satirist can engage their audience to the most probable course of action on a complex issue without worry that the topics being discussed (a crippled child, genocide, or abortion) is wrong by its very discussion, because to discuss it is to tempt people to engage in the wrongful activity. Instead, the satirist is discussing these topics in his or her art in order to complicate vice, showing the fixed notion of it can be more complicated than Johnson assumes. To denote what exactly is good or evil is problematic, and the satirist understands that phrases, such as *thou shall not kill*, does not indicate that there is more than one type of killing: there is meditated killing, killing in defense, and accidental killing. A satirist uses humor to break down these differences, so a reader can then begin to question what potentially *could be* a good or evil course of action rather than just give an answer about which to choose.

The *morals* that Johnson so staunchly believes a satirist should embrace are culturally bound, so it makes it difficult for virtue to be expressed. What Johnson had a problem understanding was easy for Greek society and the Sophists. Globalization during the Hellenistic period "made it increasingly obvious that customs and standards of behavior which had earlier been accepted as absolute and universal and of divine institution, were in fact local and relative" (Guthrie 16). As the Greeks conquered more land, the customs of those countries slowly infiltrated into Athens; citizens were asked to see many of their commonly held beliefs, such as their religion, interpreted radically different in other areas of the world. Thinkers of the time began to ponder culturally bound truths—seeing that killing, and what is considered an act of it—was dependant on the accepted behavior within that particular society. A contemporary example of this

would be abortion. Even though abortion is legal in the United States, it is still seen as *murder* by a large number of the population and there is a negative stigma that goes along with the act (it's not something you'd ever discuss within polite society). Yet, in modern Greece, where abortion is not considered an act of murdering a living being, the casualness with which woman would discuss her abortion in public would shock many Americans.

Greeks began to see the allusiveness of *truth*; they looked particularly at language, because, for them, this was how individuals created and communicated understanding. Though previous societies must have had interest in the nature of language and the art of persuasion, it was the Greeks that named it: *rhetorike*. Being a democracy (which taught that any man could voice his opinion and move the nation) combined with a new admiration for culturally bound truths, an awareness of the persuasive power of language became a focus of philosophical thought. Since there was so much information available, and since "truth" was dependant on the localized situations, "the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding; and discourse which is true and lawful ad just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul" (55). To be eloquent as a speaker was the most powerful of all attributes, because to persuade the masses to the most probable course of action showed refinement in thought in regards to culture, audience, and morality. Satire understands these concepts and wishes to engage in them. Unlike the literary tradition, the rhetorical one allows for a greater understanding of how an audience comes to truth; it is aware that many morals are not universal. Satire, too, values these concepts and directly engages in them.

Since satire borrows from other literary genres and uses its plot to deconstruct its surroundings, it embraces situational truth through its formal aspects. Like Kernan suggests, “the world ceases to be arranged in meaningful patterns and becomes instead an endless number of disjunct objects, a series of mobs” (81). By doing this, the satirist can reconstruct the way his or her reader views the world to be moved towards a better course of action. The negative of embracing situational truths is that satire could “delight and convince the crowd just because it is artistically and cleverly contrived, not because it contains the truth,” but also, truth can never be expressed to an audience if it does not embrace the means of persuasion available (Aristotle’s *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*). *Pathos* is the most important of mean of persuasion for satire, because of its use of humor to negotiate a place of discussion with an aggressive audience. Since satire attacks powerfully held beliefs and individuals, it needs humor to help create a common ground with its audience. Satire’s “mock warfare [...] displaces and diffuses the real conflicts among men. Thereby, it facilitates their political reconciliation; real deeds form mock wars proceed” (48). Satire uses insult, mockery, and derision of its subject in order to wage war against its subject, but this warfare must be under the careful guise of humor for its instruction to be able to take place. Satire wishes to create a social laughter that provokes thinking instead of meanly antagonizing its audience to silence. When this occurs, then insult satire dishes out can become a communication between groups within a culture (like Flynn discovered) and initiate questioning.

If the audience is then capable of catching the cultural clues that allow satire’s humor to take place, a dialogic instruction can occur for the reader. As in the case of Swift’s “Meditation Upon a Broom,” many pieces of satire do not have a clear-cut moral

at the end, but instead, leave their instruction open-ended, allowing for the reader to inquire into the subject discussed. Griffin sees two modes of rhetorical inquiring that occur from satire: “rhetoric of inquiry is ‘positive,’ an exploratory attempt to arrive at truth” and “rhetoric of provocation is ‘negative,’ a critique of false understanding” (52). In both cases, whether a piece of satire critiques a false understanding or explores new ideas, it explains the way satire functions as a rhetorical discourse in society. Also, this thinking aligns itself with Socratic dialectic, which is interested in inquiry over action, questioning over answers, and is concerned with inspiring humanity to engage in a dialogue in order to find knowledge. It’s not that satire inspires *physical action* (the taking up of a sign to picket the government or the writing of a letter to the editor), but more, that it moves its audiences towards the necessary mental questioning needed to one day physically act with eyes wide open.

Right now, individuals can turn on the television, search the internet, walk to the newsstand and find themselves saturated with information. It’s remarkable to suggest that a person in Western culture can take in all the information they are bombarded with in a single week, organize it, and then process it in order to understand its ramifications. News stations run for twenty-four hours, such as Fox News and CNN. The announcers go over *another* bombing in Iraq as late breaking news slowly scrolls along the bottom of the page and stock market reports fluctuate before the viewer’s eye. On any given day a person can find stories on a missing child, a woman killed by her husband, Aids in Africa, the genocide in Darfur, workers’ rights at Walmart, Paris Hilton’s missing dog, Brittany Spear’s failing marriage, the ramifications of obesity, the economic changes in China, and the threat of global warming. It’s not surprising that contemporary Americans

find themselves overwhelmed with information and don't know which "issue" should be the focus of their time; it seems impossible that a person could gather the necessary background information on any one issue in order to make an informed decision. When activism appears ever more vital, people find they can barely know what's going on, let alone find the energy to do anything.

This current atmosphere is what makes satire such an important form of discourse for contemporary culture. People are overwhelmed by the amount of readily available information, and they need guidance to understand what issues should be the focus of their time. Also, many current issues, such as genocide, Global Warming, and the War in Iraq are complex issues without clear-cut answers to them. Unlike traditional news, which explains, through the use of facts, what is occurring in the world, satire interprets its surroundings to instruct its readers. Also, because the news is burdened by its *facts*, like Sidney's historian it cancels out the emotions needed to truly understand the ramifications of issues like Global Warming, genocide, and the Iraq War. "A catastrophe loses its worst terror as soon as rational causes can be found to explain it. [Satire] fixes the responsibility for the tragedy and helps to reconcile the audience to it" (Worcester 139). Satire, unlike traditional forms of discourse (a speech, an editorial, a news paper article, or an essay), embraces "catastrophes" occurring in the world in order to allow its audience to engage in a dialogue about them. Here Wyndham Lewis's *satire for its own sake* should be looked at again. To indulge in the vice, the weakness, and the horrors of humanity means to give people the ability to discuss it. Most times, human beings want to forget the worst about themselves, they want to remember the moment they helped an old lady cross the street, but they don't want to remember the time they left a friend

stranded. Where “good” literature looks to only “deliver golden,” satire delivers “brazen,” giving humanity the chance to ponder its own inherent weakness.

One example of a satirical publication in contemporary culture is *The Onion*. It was first started by two juniors, Tim Keck and Christopher Johnson, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1988. As of present day, it is run by an editorial board and staff that write all the article parodies. It is published once a week and covers topics of real and imaginary events in an attempt to parody newspaper publications. It has a section of its publication called the *A.V. Club*, which interviews real people and reviews movies and books. *The Onion* is seamless in its allusion, and it could be mistaken for a factual newspaper. Much of this comes from its layout, which heavily relies on realistic typeface, organizational strategies, and visuals. Sometimes the visuals are obviously a gag, but many times, they are highly realistic. Currently, *The Onion* has a circulation of 599,000 people, and is an underground favorite of many college students. A person can get a subscription for hard-copy versions, several volumes of it have been collected in volumes, and it has a free website. The website has a search engine for past articles and a person can subscribe to weekly email updates of the newest articles. *The Onion* is a good example of contemporary satire, because of its popularity, availability, and attention to detail when satirizing contemporary texts.

To begin with, here are three headlines from *The Onion* dealing with current topic of genocide:

1. *NIGERIA CHOSEN TO HOST 2008 GENOCIDES*
2. *WELL, I GUESS THAT GENOCIDE IN SUDAN MUST'VE WORKED ITSELF OUT ON ITS OWN*
3. *STUDY: U.S. PETS' HEALTHCARE BETTER THAN RWANDAN HUMANS*

Within these titles, a reader can see a direct undermining of lackadaisical responses to genocide. The first headline suggest that by doing *nothing* in response to current genocides, culture is actually condoning future expressions of it, the second makes fun of the assumption that without intervention, genocide will rectify itself, and the last headline, shows the United States is so much richer than an African country, Rwanda, that its pets have better lives than the human beings living there. In order to laugh at these headlines, (1) a reader would need to know the cultural standards for newspaper reporting and (2) have some knowledge of current views about dealing with genocide (Do countries ignore it? Are people concerned about it?). “Whether a given word or passage or work *is* ironic depends [...] not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act. And whether it is *seen* as ironic depends on the reader’s catching the proper clues to those intentions [...] the reader discovers these clues ‘in the context’” (91), so a reader would need to catch onto the current culturally bound truths in order to understand the humor in the headlines. Again, this is important, because if the humor is lost on the reader, then the audience will become horrified at the thought of “making a joke at the expense of genocide” and fail to truly engage in the kind of questioning satire creates.

Looking particularly at one of these *Onion* articles will help draw out the ways in which satire as rhetoric of inquiry and provocation. The second headline on the list, “Well, I Guess the Genocide in Sudan Must’ve Worked Itself Out on Its Own” is an editorial written by a fake person called Ellen Turlington and it was first published on June 8, 2005.

I was pretty worried a year or so ago when the news came out that thousands of people had been indiscriminately slaughtered in Darfur.

It was unsettling to hear that citizens of one ethnicity (Arab, maybe?) were systematically mass-murdering the population of some other ethnicity (Was it the Ganjaweeds? It's been so long since I've read their names!) But lately, the main stories in the news seem to be about Deep Throat, the new summer blockbusters, and something about stem cells. Since I'm sure I would have remembered if the U.S. had intervened in some way to stop it, I can only assume that the whole genocide-in-Darfur thing has somehow worked itself out.

Well, that's good news then, isn't it?

I also seem to recall that this genocide was causing a massive exodus of displaced refugees, with millions starving to death while attempting to flee to neighboring nations. Since I haven't seen any petitions or heard any emotional entreaties for somebody—anybody—to please, for God's sake, *do* something... Well, I'm gonna guess that the major humanitarian crisis must be over. And thank God, too! The whole situation sounded really awful.

Not that I wanted to be an alarmist, but when I first heard about the Darfur conflict, I thought to myself, "Uh oh! Sounds like another massive ethnic cleansing, not unlike Bosnia and Rwanda!" Those genocides sure were unfathomable! And not only because of the inhumanity of the acts, either—the blind indifference with which the world allowed the killings to continue unchecked was upsetting, too.

Well, someone must've invaded or overthrown a corrupt government or something like that. I know it wasn't the U.S., though. I may not be all that up on current events, but I do follow the news enough to know when my own country attacks another country. Maybe it was one of those genocides that solves itself without substantive international intervention. Well, that's one less horrific reality of modern geopolitics hanging over our heads!

Good thing, 'cause for a while there, it seemed like the Sudan situation was pretty serious, especially when both President Bush and Sen. Kerry talked about it in the presidential debates. Heck, that the Darfur conflict qualified as genocide was practically the *only* thing they agreed on! So, if both presidential candidates acknowledged on TV that genocide was taking place, it's pretty safe to assume that someone stepped in before more innocent victims were systematically butchered. Right?

What a great turn of events! Frankly, I'm relieved that all the horror, death, and human agony is over. I mean, after all those reports of ongoing murder, rape, and looting, I confess I was a little surprised when I didn't hear much more about it, beyond some international sanctions and aid packages. Ah, but what's the point in belaboring the

grisly details? Why go on and on about *which* paramilitary militias were killing and raping *which* women and children? The important thing is that the conflict's apparently over.

Evidently, the hatred has been healed, peace has been restored, and the perpetrators of this unimaginable crime have been brought to justice. It sure is good to know it all must've turned out all right. It's like they say: No news is good news! Right?

In this editorial, Ellen is admitting that overload of information she is bombarded with has caused her to loose track and doubt the current status of the genocide in Darfur. Or as she says, “I was pretty worried a year or so ago when the news came out that thousands of people had been indiscriminately slaughtered in Darfur [...] [b]ut lately, the main stories in the news seem to be about Deep Throat, the new summer blockbusters, and something about stem cells.” She doesn’t mean to be lost, but there’s so many other things going on that she’s not sure about this one issue. Ellen is confused on the particulars of the Sudan genocide, she recalls part of it, but isn’t sure she’s right. Many Americans feel, like Ellen, an inability to keep track of all the major issues occurring in the world. Ellen is lost, but rightly so: she’s being overwhelmed.

In order to comprehend the kind of complex cultural assumptions needed to understand the humor in this text, it seems wise to look at one particular joke and its irony is lost without them. Ellen is thrill Bush and Sen. Kerry agreed that what was occurring in the Sudan even *was* genocide: “Good thing, 'cause for a while there, it seemed like the Sudan situation was pretty serious, especially when both President Bush and Sen. Kerry talked about it in the presidential debates. Heck, that the Darfur conflict qualified as genocide was practically the *only* thing they agreed on! So, if both presidential candidates acknowledged on TV that genocide was taking place, it's pretty

safe to assume that someone stepped in before more innocent victims were systematically butchered.” Ellen ends this paragraph with the quandry, “Right?” because she is uncertain if this course of action ever took place. The bumbling humor of Ellen’s questioning is funny in of itself, but it also shrouds political dissent about current issues with genocide. Ellen’s happiness in seeing Sen. Kerry and President Bush agree that what is occurring in Darfur *is* in fact genocide could read as part of Ellen’s self-consciousness when dealing with contemporary issues. But if the reader has some knowledge of the new phrase, *ethnic cleansing*, that is beginning to replace the word, *genocide* then the reading of the text changes.

Ethnic cleansing was first popularly used during the Clinton administration to deal with the mass killings occurring in Rwanda. Politicians realized that if they used the word, *genocide*, when discussing the slaughtering of Tutsis by Hutu militia groups, the general populace would require the government to take action and intervene (Powers 358-364). Since the U.S. government was unsure if involvement was possible, they relied heavily on the language they used in discussing the situation. A United States representative, Roméo Dallaire, who personally witnessed the activities in Rwanda, stated “I was self-conscious about saying the killings were ‘genocidal’ because, to us in the West, ‘genocide’ was the equivalent of the Holocaust or the killing fields of Cambodia. I mean millions of people. ‘Ethnic cleansing’ seemed to involve hundreds of thousands of people.” For Dallaire, ‘[g]enocide’ was the highest scale of crimes against humanity imaginable” (Powers 258) while *ethnic cleansing* was of a lower order. What comes out of this example (other than a possible revulsion that such a distinction at the expense of so many violent deaths is necessary or appropriate) shows Dallaire’s

understanding that *one* word has enough connotation for a group to move them to a response, and if that label is wrong, then the person who said it can lose the ability to persuade his or her audience in the future.

Dallaire explicitly states his wariness of this issue: “[Genocide] was so far up there, so far off the charts, that it was not easy to recognize that we could be in such a situation. I also knew that if I used the term too early, I’d have been accused of crying wolf and I’d lost my credibility” (258). Even after the United Nations officially released that the mass killings occurring in Rwanda were considered *genocide*, the United States still failed to use the word when discussing the event to the American public. Dallaire and the U.S. government understand the power of language, and they are not alone. American culture, with its introduction of politically correct phrasing, has done what Dallaire did, but on a larger scale. Because of this, language, at times, has become obfuscating, such as the case with Rwanda

Also, since the genocide is no longer news, she’s not sure about the outcome: Did the genocide stop? Was it fixed? Ellen surmises, “Well, someone must’ve invaded or overthrown a corrupt government or something like that.” She doesn’t think it was the United States, but some action must have been taken, because the genocide in Sudan is no longer news. Ellen is a representation of the “every-person” in America: one overwrought with information, feel intimidated by the knowledge they don’t have, and are trusting of news reporting and the government enough to believe it would still be discussing an issue if it wasn’t solved. This editorial, again, shows the powerful relationship between appearance and reality. If an issue isn’t being reported on, then it

must not exist. This is a powerful tactic employed by news papers as well as the government in keeping information hidden. It's not a challenge to do so, because there are always a million new atrocities to fill in the place it left empty (as Ellen notes).

Unlike a speech or an essay that would state all the negatives of Ellen's qualities in contemporary culture in serious manner, potentially giving solutions (or pointing fingers in our guilty faces), this piece satirize our worst foibles and allows us to laugh at our weaknesses. This is satire using its pathetic appeal of laughter at its finest. Who hasn't felt lost with all the information we're bombarded with? Who hasn't felt themselves trusting that everything *will just work itself out*? It's amazing to find, after the laughter subsides, that so many difficult questions are contained within the text: Is it ok that we trust the news? Is ok that we just assume everything will work itself out? Why are we be so trusting of our governement and of news reporting in general? Why don't we try harder to keep up? Why aren't we more active? These are important issue, and with the help of laughter, its easier for the reader to feel comfortable asking them. Again, there's no clear-cut answers given to any of these questions. Readers are just left to ponder this problems, and hopefully, realize that they are very much like Ellen.

Through satire, people uncover hidden truths and underlying hypocrisies in cases such as these. Many times understanding cannot be reached because a specific need to hide information from the general public exists (such as the Rwanda example) or because in general, as human beings, it is hard to recognize the inherent inhumanity in pretending that “hundreds of thousands of people” is less worthy of our time than a million. In contemporary culture, there are few different discourses available to a person combating the U.S. government’s decision use the phrase *ethnic cleansing* rather than *genocide* in discussing Rwanda. One would be a public speech. Another would be an editorial. A speech or an editorial would rely heavily upon *pathos* when engaging its readers. It’s not that a logical argument does not exist, but is it difficult to believe an argument that a distinction between a death of “hundreds of thousands of people” and a million couldn’t be made. People inherently understand that specific terms to represent specific objects or situations should exist. The legal system in the United States has three levels of murder: There is a distinction between murder 1, which is premeditated; murder 2, which is not pre-meditated; and murder 3, which denotes all other types of murder. If in the United States there is a distinction in the degree of murder, then isn’t it right for Dallaire to then make a distinction in the number of killings needed to denote *genocide*? Wouldn’t that facilitate better communication? If this is true, then a speech or an editorial would need to apply to the emotions of its readers more so than to its logic; it would need to appeal to the allusive idea of *our humanity*. Unfortunately, because of the seriousness of genocide, it would be difficult to get an audience’s attention. Most people do not want to think about genocide, and they definitely don’t want to be told they are making it worse by *not doing anything*. Human beings have a hard time recognizing their own potential

inhumanity, so instead of garnering empathy from its readers, the author might outcast them by pointing out the one thing the audience wishes to ignore: their own weakness in stopping genocide.

A newspaper article, an essay, a speech, or any other form of discourse could not bring home the ramifications of this issue as strongly as satire. The laugh engendered by this satire can be one of horror. It does beg the reader to question: How can we live with so much bounty and care so little for people who struggle? It is horrible and a question that most of us push to the back of our minds. Not because we are necessarily evil, but because, the ramifications to that answer would be overwhelming. This is where satire, with its humor, is indispensable for dialogue within contemporary culture. It might only bring the reader to inquire about themselves—question the world around them and enter into a dialectic—but it rhetorically situates issues that most people want to forget. It brings out the worst in us in the only way we allow, through laughter.

Conclusion

Examples of satire are pervading the media. Shows like *The Daily Show*, *South Park*, *The Family Guy* are watched religiously, and the periodical, *The Onion*, is growing in popularity. People embrace them as not only a source for entertainment, but also, as an alternative source for news. Through it, situational truths can be understood, taboo ideas can be broached, and a person can find a way to think critically without feeling the overwhelming burden of detailed information. In Ancient Greece, Rhetoricians were expected to learn about issues and speak on them effectively enough to move an audience to take action (vote on an issue mostly). They were specifically interested in issues of probability; controversial issues that had more than one direct course of action, such as the death penalty, abortion, and war. In the past, a rhetorical act was exclusively thought of as speeches, because they were public and dealt with civic concerns. As the centuries went on, letters and literature were included. No longer did the author have to be “physically” in the public arena, but only needed to write with the motivation of persuading his or her audience to garner this distinction. Now, with the internet, the public act of writing has taken on a whole new form and rhetorical scholars concern themselves with online writing to literature to how-to manuals. No longer is just a civic speech considered a rhetorical act.

And rightfully so, because without that satire would not be considered the powerfully persuasive tool that it is. Satire might not specifically lead people to a specific action, like voting, or a clear-cut moral, such as *all killing is wrong*, but it does bring an audience to questioning long-held beliefs that otherwise might not be broached. Through laughter, it brings people towards a greater understanding of what is potential.

It allows communities to create dialogue amicably about controversial issues that have no answer. Yes, gravity exists. Yes, two plus two equals four, but is killing a hundred thousand people different from killing a million? Or is killing one less horrible than killing ten? Should that ever be equated? Answers to these questions may not be found in contemporary satire, but they are initiated.

A newspaper article, an essay, a speech, or any other form of discourse could not bring home the ramifications of this issue as strongly as satire. The laugh engendered by this satire can be one of horror, but it helps with the help of laughter, can some topics ever be broached. Satire allows the questions that most of us push to the back of our minds to a place importance once again. As humans, we don't ignore these questions, because we are necessarily evil, but because, the ramifications of that answer could be overwhelming. This is where satire, with its humor, is indispensable for dialogue within contemporary culture. It might only bring the reader to inquire about themselves—question the world around them and enter into a dialectic—but it rhetorically situates issues that most people want to forget. It brings out the worst in us in the only way we allow, through laughter.

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