

Satire Turned Sour: An Analysis on the Core Features of Failed Satires

To quote American novelist Philip Roth, “Satire is moral outrage transformed into comedic art”. Indeed, satire is known to be one of the most effective ways to convey the need to address a problematic system, belief, or idea, due to its appeal to the target audience’s common sense. Satire attacks the societal issue by identifying the issue and pushing the reader to take action against it. This form of writing may utilize several literary devices to do so, including hyperbolizing the target audience’s idea, making the problematic idea seem burlesque or disgusting, and otherwise reducing the proponents of such an idea to inhumans through sarcasm, mockery, and derision. The most famous example of a satire is *A Modest Proposal*, written by Jonathan Swift during the Irish famines in the early 1700s. Swift ridiculed the lack of progress in aiding the Irish people by proposing that they eat their children to combat starvation. This piece is often viewed as the pinnacle of satirical writing due to Swift’s effective use of literary devices to convey his message that something had to be done about the Irish famines, and that most solutions to the famines were useless. However, many times satire fails to engage the reader and push for action, as seen in the ineffective satires “Fist Bump: The Politics of Fear” by Barry Blitt, “So Are We Just Not Going to Tell People New Year’s Was a Month Ago” by Nicole Mullen, and “Have They Run out of Provinces Yet?” by Calvin Trillin. These satires are ineffective due to their misuse of rhetorical devices. As seen when comparing the misuse of rhetorical devices in ineffective satires to the effective usage of rhetorical devices in *A Modest Proposal*, many times satire can be ineffective due to its usage in the wrong context, pointed and overblown slander, and lack of a clear call to action.

While Swift ridicules the ineffective solutions against the Irish famine using a blatantly absurd analogy, ineffective satires such as “Fist Bump: The Politics of Fear” ridicule racism without making it seem ridiculous to the audience. In the model satire *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift introduces an equally ridiculous proposition: the idea of eating children as a way to combat starvation. Nevertheless, the target audience reading *A Modest Proposal* understood the central message of the piece because it was introduced in the right context-- people were not seriously debating whether to consider babies as a reliable food source. The target audience was able to understand

Swift's intent to highlight the ridiculousness of all other ineffective ideas proposed to aid in the starvation problem by other noblemen. However, satires are ineffective when their mockery of the system, belief, or idea is issued in the wrong context. This happens when the author ridicules the idea that many people believe in without making the idea seem absurd to the target audience. During the 2008 United States presidential campaign, there were some proponents of the idea that presidential candidate Barack Obama was, in fact, a terrorist and a danger to the country (Kelly). In the political cartoon for the *New Yorker's* cover "Fist Bump: The Politics of Fear," the cartoonist Barry Blitt attempted to ridicule the very idea that Obama could be working with terrorists by drawing a controversial political cartoon depicting Barack and Michelle Obama as terrorists in the Oval Office while the American flag burned in the fireplace (Blitt). Although the intended message of the satire was that it was ridiculous to even consider that the presidential candidate was siding with a group of terrorists, many of the target audience, the American people, received the message as an insensitive racial slur, and those who did not agree said that it was out of place considering the situation (Kelly). Blitt did not take into account that many of his readers would take the political cartoon seriously. For example, the cartoon accentuated the Obamas' nose and lips with a higher color contrast and larger caricatures, which are commonly associated with African or non-white physical attributes. This put the emphasis on the Obamas' un-Americanness and less on the ridiculousness of the controversial idea. This sparked outrage among the people because it represented the very idea that many people saw. This struck as a racist take on President Obama's presidency more than a satire. An effective satire is only successful if it can introduce a clearly absurd analogy in the right context.

While Swift effectively conveys his central message through his focus on the mockery of a broken system, many ineffective satires such as "So Are We Just Not Going to Tell Chinese People New Year's Was a Month Ago?" fail to do this by mocking the target audience instead of the system, belief, or idea they are trying to satirize. Slander and mockery of a group of people are often masked under the pretense of comedy, however this is not effective due to the focus on degrading the target audience rather than bringing to light a problematic system, belief, or idea. The piece written by Nick Mullen (under the pseudonym Nicole Mullen) titled "So Are We Just Not Going to Tell Chinese People New Year's Was a Month Ago?" is a prime example of such ineffective satire. The article fails to target a problematic system, and instead marginalizes the target audience by playing on Asian stereotypes, noting that "[they're] Swearing off dog and gluten at least until [the] Chinese Super Bowl" (Mullen). Although the

aim of the writer was purportedly to insinuate the ridiculousness of targeting the Asian population through stereotypes, the writing backfires due to its purposeless and racist degradation of the target audience. However, in *A Modest Proposal*, Swift utilizes the reduction of his target audience, not to slander his audience, but to bring to light the sheer absurdity of the problematic idea they are proposing. Swift satirizes wealthy and selfish Irish landlords by encouraging them to buy the dead children for meat, as "...this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children." (Swift). Swift only reduces the wealthy landlords to money-making monsters to show the ridiculousness of the treatment the landlords give to Irish peasants, instead of completely demeaning his target audience without a clear purpose. The use of excessive amounts of mockery and derision against the target audience in a satire yields it ineffective because it fails to convey the need to see the absurdity of a problematic system, idea, or belief.

The central rationale behind the use of satire is to bring attention to a particular issue and push the reader to take action against it; in "A Modest Proposal", Swift effectively introduces a call to action in his satire whereas ineffective satires such as "Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?" fail to do so. In *A Modest Proposal*, Swift has a direct purpose with his satire: to ridicule the lack of practical ideas to aid the starving Irish people. Swift talked about the ridiculous solutions proposed by other wealthy noblemen to handle the excess number of children in Ireland, and the need to address the problem, "For we[the Irish people] can neither employ them in handicraft nor agriculture; we neither build houses... that a boy or a girl before twelve years old, is no saleable commodity" (Swift). Swift pushes the reader to think about the immensity of the situation, by pointing out how desperate the community is if their best solution is to employ and sell the underage children. Swift initiates a call to action by emphasizing the magnitude of the problem. Ineffective satires fail to specifically pinpoint why the reader should take action against the system, belief, or idea and what that action would look like. However, In the controversial poem "Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?," *New Yorker* satirist and poet Calvin Trillin seems to mock the excessive Chinese food diversity without pinpointing a problematic system, belief, or idea (Trillin). Although the poem was supposedly about fickle American foodie culture, Trillin's purpose and call to action with the poem is unclear. Trillin talked about the "past," "When we never were faced with the threat,/ Of more provinces we hadn't met," which seems to reference imperialistic times more than it does foodie culture. Trillin references the presence of the vast variety of

Chinese food rather than the volatile cravings of the whimsical American foodie. Indeed, effective satires present a clear purpose and call to action, while ineffective satire fails to do so.

If used in the right way, satire can be one of the most powerful methods of persuasion. However, often, satire fails due to its usage in the wrong context, when the author fails to make a problematic idea seem ridiculous. Satire is also ineffective when the writing slanders and mocks the target audience more than the issue. Moreover, when it fails to establish a central message and need for action against a problematic system, belief, or idea, satire also fails to convey the reason of the writing to the target audience. In these cases, the writing may not only fail to convey the desired message but also walk a fine line between attempted satire and targeted resentment. With this in mind, it is important to be able to differentiate between the two not only when writing satire, but also when reading it.

References

"'I'm Just Trying To Make Myself Laugh': 'New Yorker' Artist Shares His Cover Stories." *NPR.org*. Web. Nov 30, 2019

<<https://www.npr.org/2017/10/20/558777025/im-just-trying-to-make-myself-laugh-new-yorker-artist-shares-his-cover-stories>>.

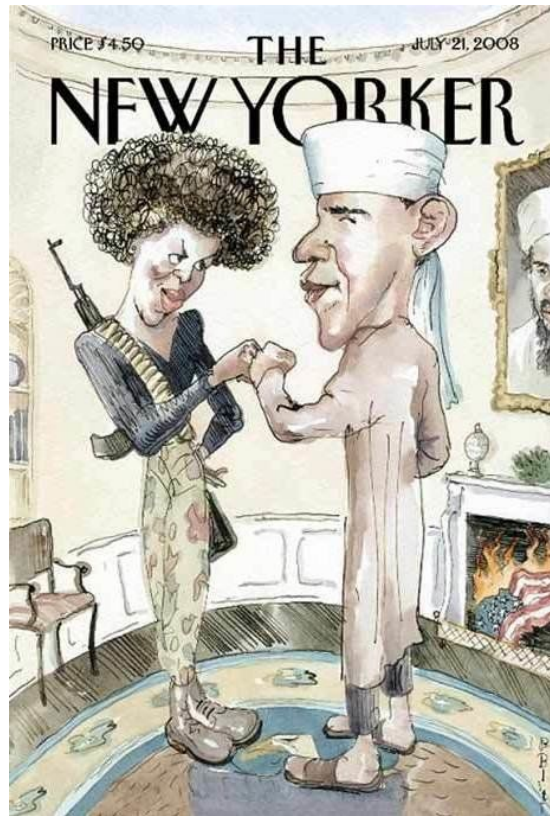
So are we just Not Going to Tell Chinese People that New Years was A Month Ago?., 2014. Web. Nov 30, 2019.

Trillin, Calvin. "'Have they Run Out of Provinces Yet?'" -03-28T04:00:00.000Z 2016Web. Nov 30, 2019

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/04/have-they-run-out-of-provinces-yet-by-calvin-trillin>>.

Resources

“The Fist Bump: The Politics of Fear”[1]



(Blitt 2008, Kelly 2017)

Thought Catalog: Are We Just Not Going to Tell Chinese People New Year's Was A Month Ago?[2]

By: Nicole Mullen

So, this past week or so I started hearing people talk about Chinese New Year and naturally I assumed it was a band. Imagine my embarrassment when I told someone at Starbucks that I had seen them live a couple of years ago. They gave me a puzzled look and I had to cover quickly by telling them I was thinking of Japanese Solstice, a different band that they surely hadn't heard of (because I made it up.)

The truth is, in fact, much worse.

Apparently Chinese people actually think it's New Years. They're an entire month late. Aren't these people supposed to be good at math? They keep saying it's the year of the horse which I guess is code for doing a shit-ton of smack and being a whole month off on the ball drop. By now, most people have already broken all their resolutions and resigned to another abysmal year as they patiently await death – not the Chinese, they're just now sleeping off their “last hangovers” and googling gym memberships. Swearing off dog and gluten at least until Chinese Super Bowl (Chinese Super Bowl is next month.)

My question is, should we tell them? Is that racist? I understand that you're supposed to respect other people's cultures but this shit could cause some serious problems. Remember Y2K? Millions of computer systems around the world failed because of incorrect dating on older COBOL based banking systems. If we've got a billion people that all look exactly the same writing the wrong dates on checks, you're looking a global financial collapse that no eyes have ever seen – round or slanted. It'll be like Y2K times a million, and who is going to do that math if not the Chinese?

This date discrepancy hurts them just as much as it hurts us. That's when white culture needs to step in, and say, hey, whoa. You need to be on your p's and q's here, Chineses. This isn't pissing in some folks Coca-Cola here, we're talking about a global financial meltdown. This is not a drill, and even if it were, we need to have a

conversation about that as well – you’re not supposed to go back into the car. Anyhow, what I’m saying is, you can trust one group of people to build the railroads, but it takes good honest folks to come by and make the trains run on time.

Personally, I feel like we should say something.

I mean, isn’t that what social justice is about? Speaking up in the best interest of others? I almost feel as if it’s my duty as a progressive young woman to stop every Chinese person I see and let them know that they are literally on the wrong page of the calendar. That’s the progressive move here. How can we work past our cultural differences if we can’t even agree on what time it is? Dates are the first step. After we fix that we can address the fact that they murder baby girls and have abhorrent worker’s rights policies. Hell, maybe they just can’t afford calendars. If you’re lucky enough to be born a man in China you can look forward to a minimum wage of a skinned rabbit per hour.

It’s time to speak up, America. It’s time for us to be the change we want in the world – and that time is February 1st, 2014 – not January 1st, HORSE A.D.

“Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?”

By: Calvin Trillin

Have they run out of provinces yet?

If they haven't, we've reason to fret.

Long ago, there was just Cantonese.

(Long ago, we were easy to please.)

But then food from Szechuan came our way,

Making Cantonese strictly passé.

Szechuanese was the song that we sung,

Though the *ma po* could burn through your tongue.

Then when Shanghainese got in the loop

We slurped dumplings whose insides were soup.

Then Hunan, the birth province of Mao,

Came along with its own style of chow.

So we thought we were finished, and then

A new province arrived: Fukien.

Then respect was a fraction of meagre

For those eaters who'd not eaten Uighur.

And then Xi'an from Shaanxi gained fame,

Plus some others—too many to name.

Now, as each brand-new province appears,

It brings tension, increasing our fears:

Could a place we extolled as a find

Be revealed as one province behind?

So we sometimes do miss, I confess,

Simple days of chow mein but no stress,

When we never were faced with the threat

Of more provinces we hadn't met.

Is there one tucked away near Tibet?

Have they run out of provinces yet?