

Alexander Sun

Ms. Small

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Ignorance in America: Satire and its Effectiveness

Ignorance becomes easy when someone is surrounded it. Humans lightly put down their morals to join and be accepted within a group. Often, people lack respect for any criticism that calls for change, until they can see the effect of their actions from another perspective. Sometimes it takes heavy ridicule and shame to fully spark motivation to create a desire for improvement. Satire provides a humorous method of attacking faults in society, by generating a reaction or eliciting guilt or shame from the audience. The Juvenalian satire “Babycakes” by Neil Gaiman describes a dystopia where all animals have been wiped out, and now babies are the ones being horrifically experimented upon and conveys the message that animal mistreatment and testing needs to be ended. On the other hand, the “Museum of the Plains White Person” by Rayna Green creates a scenario where Native Americans create a museum describing the traditions of white Americans and satirizes the cruel treatment they faced as a result of the ignorance of Caucasians. In “Museum of the Plains White Person” by Rayna Green and “Babycakes” by Neil Gaiman, both authors use verbal irony, horrific and shocking imagery, and a caustic tone to add gravity to effectively convey their messages of white American ignorance to other cultures, and the lack of respect humans show to nature.

In “Museum of the Plains White Person” by Rayna Green and “Babycakes” by Neil Gaiman, both authors use verbal irony, but Green elicits empathy with her utilization, while

Gaiman focuses on providing logical reasoning; both effectively argue against their respective targets of Caucasian prejudice towards Native Americans, and animal mistreatment. Gaiman introduces babies as lesser beings because, “babies can’t talk. They can hardly move. A baby is not a rational, thinking creature” (Gaiman 1). Such a harsh and shocking statement grabs attention and makes one question how any human could think in such a way. The ironic statement contains a dark truth about the justification that motivates animal mistreatment. Human superiority seems to justify why humans can destroy and kill animals for their own needs. Infancy denotes where all humans begin their lives, and for a human to categorize them as “not a rational, thinking creature” seems contradictory, but by the the inferiority principle, a logical conclusion. By forcing the audience down this train of thought, Gaiman’s irony creates a comparison between the justification behind treating babies cruelly and treating animals the exact same way. Animals think rationally, can move, and communicate with others of their species unlike a baby, but subjecting a baby to horrible testing is morally wrong, while the other is not. Gaiman provides logical reasoning as to why animal mistreatment oftentimes lays on false logic that would subject babies to the same treatment if animals were to disappear. On the other hand, Green focuses on drawing out an empathetic response through her use of irony. She flips the Constitution by stating that the museum has “through [their] powers of eminent domain, acquired at least eighty percent of the white cemeteries in this country” (Green 1), for collection and exhibition purposes. Here, the use of irony displays the unjust use of American laws that has harmed Native Americans in the past. This generates empathy as cemeteries are sacred grounds that never should be disturbed or “acquired”. The Constitution of the United States grants the government the power to acquire any private land if proper compensation is provided. Commonly, the American Government has acquired sacred Native grounds for monetary

purposes. Undeniably, these actions ignore the cultural importance of these grounds, and Green uses irony to around this idea to draw empathy towards the Natives. No person wants a place where their loved ones are meant to be honored and remembered to be obtained for exhibition purposes, or for their “ancestral remains”. By eliciting empathy Green draws the audience to her side of the argument, strengthening it. Therefore, the both authors use verbal irony but in different ways to provide their arguments with more strength. Gaiman uses it to provide a logical attack towards animal testing, while Green does it draw out sympathy and new perspectives on the wrongs committed towards Native Americans.

Next, Green and Gaiman utilize horrific and shocking imagery to creating emotions of shock and shame, which for Gaiman emphasizes the possible dystopian future if humans continue without change, and for Green further highlights the ignorance and wrongs of the American Caucasians and the need for change. Gaiman applies animal testing methods to babies in a downright terrifying way in order to emphasize the cruel and inhumane wrongs that humans commit. The vivid imagery applied to human babies creates disgust and emphasizes that change needs to occur:” The babies breathed our smoke, and the babies’ veins flowed with our medicines and drugs, until they stopped breathing or until their blood ceased to flow” (Gaiman 1). Babies, undoubtedly, are keystones to humanity. By creating images of “smoke”, “drugs”, and blood stopping to flow, Gaiman conveys that animals do not just die, but cruelly as well. The image of any living things, especially babies being treated this way creates emotions of shock and horror. It strengthens Gaiman’s argument as the audience realizes people actually commit these acts, but also shame that they do not make it harder to do so. No one can ignore his message as it contains too much truth in its horror and strengthens Gaiman’s argument. Green’s imagery is less horrific, but the message remains just as strong. As the museum aims to acquire

“their most important elaborate ceremonial shamanistic costumes” (Green 2), the image of important and influential clothing can only be expected. Instead the garments are revealed to be “a Barbie shaman’s spike heels and bikini underpants” (Green 2). The contrasting images and ideas of importance reflects upon ignorance towards the accuracy of information. No white American thinks that “spike heels” and “bikini underpants” accurately represents elaborate or influential clothing. Green’s contrasting imagery to the audience’s expectations generate realizations into their own belittling actions or faults of how they have portrayed Native Americans. Caucasians have conveyed Native Americans as savages and made fun of their rituals, ceremonies and clothing. Green’s imagery here elicits shame because of this realization and serves to strengthen her point that this prejudice needs to be set aside, and that society and the Natives deserve change. Therefore, through vivid imagery, “Babycakes” utilization of horror strengthens the how humans’ disgusting actions need to be cleansed, while “The Museum of the Plains White Person” uses imagery to elicit shame which effectively argues as the necessity for white Americans to set things right with the Native Americans.

Finally, using a caustic tone, both authors make their intent bitterly clear; the authors attack the roots of their problems, and the heavy sarcasm used, emphasizes the urgency and emotion behind their arguments, increasing the gravity in their respective messages. Gaiman’s tone attacks the target’s ignorance and complacency towards doing the correct and sensible thing compared to morally just thing. In effect, the tone fully convinces one of the true depths of the problem. Gaiman sarcastically characterizes the babies’ departure: “They didn’t even leave us a note or say goodbye. We never figured out quite where they’d gone” (Gaiman 1). The author comments on the ignorance of society towards these problems, like they never thought about or linked the cause to themselves and their own actions. Through this idea, Gaiman attacks humans

and their ignorance. The author's bitter sarcasm makes it obvious that humans as a whole are responsible, and not being actively involved is just not enough to solve the problem. His tone adds gravity to the irony and effect he creates because he actively mocks and ridicules the audience for participating or ignoring the problem as whole not just tell them of their wrongs. The sarcasm adds the sting to the author's statements and causes the realizations the audience experiences. As Green conveys that the white American ignorance needs to be changed, her tone adds power as she ridicules and shows the unjustness of the mistakes made by Caucasians. She comments on racist games that almost every American child has played ignorantly: "And finally, we will be assembling a stellar and major collection of items of costume associated with their centuries-old significant, though puzzling, form of ritual behavior called 'playing Indian'" (Green 3). The tone implies the author's anger taken to the game of playing "Indian" and adds guilt as the final piece to support her argument. The sarcasm uses the tradition of playing this game against the white Americans and fills them with shame as it punishes the ignorance and racism of this game. Without the use of a caustic tone, the intent and feel of the piece would be lost as each insult or jab would not contain the same power. The harsh sarcasm makes reading the piece almost painful as it attacks each wrong that white Americans have committed in the past as exemplified with how she attacks playing "Indian." Therefore, the use of a caustic tone in "Babycakes" and "Museum of the Plains White Person", ultimately serve to strengthen their arguments by adding gravity through creating harsh and bitter attacks to the problems they wish to combat.

Both authors in "Museum of the Plains White Person" by Rayna Green and "Babycakes" by Neil Gaiman, use verbal irony, horrific imagery, and a caustic tone to strongly argue against white American ignorance towards Native Americans, and animal mistreatment. Satire has

become an effective tool for facilitating change in a now dominant digital society. Pieces that elicit polarizing emotions or even ridiculous pieces will spread like wildfire across social media platforms. This makes satire which is often darker or more comical an extremely efficient tool for creating the conversations needed in society. Often time even the most logical of criticisms can be ignored and an open mind to change can be hard to locate. Emotions conjured in the reader often have more effect and with this, satires excel. If anything, more satires need to be written to make society improve to where everyone wants it to be faster, or to at least admit that these problems exist.