

Humanities Out There Lessons 8 & 9: Parody and Satire

Now that we've established the key historical contexts for *Huckleberry Finn*, we're going to look at one of Twain's techniques for his framing his observations and criticisms of the U.S. in the 1880s. The scheduling mishap allows us to basically take over the class for three consecutive days. On Wednesday, we'll introduce the concepts and do close reading. You'll also nudge the students in the direction of the writing assignment that they'll begin on Thursday with Ms. Wood. Then on Friday we'll come back and do a hands-on writing workshop.

Teaching issues to discuss:

- 1) Just a note here because I didn't find a place for it elsewhere. This week is going to be extra chaotic in terms of settling the groups because there will be some roster turnover with the students transitioning into their spring semester. Plus we will have a few substitute teachers on Friday, so that will make things even crazier.
- 2) Most of the messageboard discussion this week consisted of your very helpful critiques of the board game exercise. (Which I have responded to pretty thoroughly FYI.) So I don't want to talk any more about last week unless it is something broader like the way your group members related together socially, their interaction with you, etc.
- 3) So yes, I'm curious to hear more descriptions of your groups' psychology/roles and how you see them progressing.
- 4) Perhaps we could talk about how to talk productively to the students about college stuff.

Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday & Friday

- 1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it. Bring it to the school on Wednesday and Friday because you'll need it for cribnotes.
- 2) Read chapters 17-31 of *Huckleberry Finn*. Your students should be familiar with the plot and characters up to about chapter 8, so they're going to have a lot more context now.
- 3) Post to the messageboard on Wednesday or Thursday so I can have some sense how the first session went. Since a few of you will be unavailable on Friday, this will also allow your substitutes to know what to expect: <http://eee.uci.edu/toolbox/noteboard/index.php?board=4854>
- 4) Make sure your carpool is OK for both days.

0:00-0:10 Aaron's PowerPoint

The purpose of the PowerPoint is to introduce the concepts of parody and satire to show how they relate to each other.

- 1) If you're one of the Friday substitutes and you don't get a chance to see the PowerPoint, parody is the imitation of a work of art, literature, film, etc.¹ Like doing a funny imitation of the way someone talks, or a parrot speaking in a human voice, parody has a tendency to demonstrate the hollow and formulaic quality of the styles it mocks.

¹ I'll be showing the trailer for "Epic Movie" to give the students the basic idea.

- 2) Satire is the use of humor and ridicule for social/political critique. Parody is an important tool of satire because every set of ideas expresses itself in a certain style/genre of presentation, and it is often more effective and less tedious to mock the style than the ideas themselves.² Although not all parodies are satires and not all satires are parodies.

0:10-0:40 Close reading exercise

The goal of this exercise is to help students master the recognition of parody techniques by looking at some sections of *Huckleberry Finn* that are transparently parodic. In reality, nearly every episode of the novel has some kind of parodic reference, but these are the easiest to recognize without a lot of historical knowledge.

- 1) Be sure students are clear on the concept of parody before you get them started. Ask them to give more examples; *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and the *Strong Bad* internet cartoons are perpetually using this technique. The point we're trying to make here is that parody is more than just mimicry; it's mimicry of an artistic/literary genre that has a specific set of recognizable formulas and rules.
- 2) Don't forget to point out somewhere along the line that the students have already studied an instance of Twain parodying a genre of literature, i.e. the didactic children's literature we studied in Lesson #6.
- 3) Let your students choose which of the three examples they want to analyze; there will only be time for one of them. Alternately, you are welcome to choose the one that you find more interesting and get your group to do that one. Start by reading the original (in gray), or in the case of the third one just look at the chart I made and explain what it is. After that, read the passage from Twain wherein the parody occurs. It shouldn't be necessary to give much other context; one of the nice things about *Huck Finn* is that it's episodic and we can kind of skip around now that they're somewhat familiar with it. As they do the analysis, force them to point out *specific words and sentences* and *specific parody techniques*.³ They are easily capable of doing this, but their tendency will be to generalize without actually proving their assertions.
- 4) The trickier bit is to explain how parody could perform a satiric criticism. I'm not even certain that it does so in the cases I selected, but you might as well force it. Doesn't the con-man's mangling of the Shakespeare speech show how some people use big words and fancy elements of culture to manipulate people into thinking they're smart when they're really not? That's satire. Doesn't the obituary poetry in the second example idealize passivity, weakness, and ultimately death itself? Or maybe the poet doesn't really care about the child and this is just a hackneyed formula that sells; she wrote dozens of these poems, as does her counterpart in *Huck*. The infant mortality rate was very high in these days and Twain lost his oldest son and even blamed himself; perhaps the counterfeit emotion angers him. Or perhaps it's worth asking

² For instance, *Huckleberry Finn* is a powerful satire of the racist thinking of the 1880s. But this effect is achieved indirectly, and one of the principal ways Twain does it is by his hilarious parodies of certain genres of literature from the time period that he thinks are implicitly racist, for instance stories that harken back to the 'good old days' of antebellum plantation life (think of the Shepherdson/Grangerford episode) and stories of knights and chivalry (think of Tom Sawyer's reading habits). I'll be showing a parody of Bush's State of the Union Address as a contemporary example of parody used in the service of satire.

³ The specific parody techniques I introduce in the PowerPoint are *precise imitation* (the key to all parody), *transposition* (i.e. scrambling things out of order, like mixing up Bush's words), *reduction* (making something important seem mundane or trivial, like junk coming out of the door to Narnia), and the introduction of *mismatched stylistic elements* (like rap video styles on a pirate ship).

whether Julia Moore would write one of those poems for Jim's kids, or even for Huck. As for the last example, see footnote #2 on the previous page of this handout. All you really need to know is that any reader in the 1880s would immediately associate narratives of chivalry with Southern pretensions of aristocracy. The Ku Klux Klanmen thought of themselves as knights. Connect the dots.

0:40-0:50 Brainstorm exercise

If you have enough time, this is a lead-in to Thursday's assignment.

- 1) The students will be asked to begin with a satirical critique. The reason for this is they will easily grasp *how* they might parody/imitate something but not *why*. So they have to get mad about something first.
 - 2) Then they're asked to think of a characteristic genre or style of expression that pertains to this situation they're satirizing, and then how they might give it a parodic twist. This may take quite a bit of coaching on your part. The classic example that occurs to me in this context is the group of teenagers in New York City who wrote a multiple choice test in Ebonics to show how the SAT was culturally biased.⁴
 - 3) There are two ways to go here, and it will depend on what you think would be more appropriate to your group. You could have them all brainstorm together and form a consensus on the best idea. Then they would work both together and individually developing that idea. Alternately, you could have them all begin individual projects and then vote on Thursday as to which one they will choose to continue developing.
 - 4) But if it seems like you won't have enough time for this, don't worry. They'll catch up on Thursday.
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0:50-1:20 Revision exercise

What the students *should* have done by Friday is settle on a target and a means to attack it through parody. They should also have five sentences each of their attempts at the parody. What you'll be doing is helping meld all of this together into a finished product.

- 1) Be aware that the bells for Friday are actually slightly different. The class is actually longer... 8:15-9:10 for the morning and 1:02-1:57 for the afternoon.
- 2) First, get a reality check as to what your group has actually accomplished. If you're a substitute, you can play dumb and get them to explain the assignment to you. This is a great teaching technique by the way, although difficult. It takes a smart person to pretend to be stupid effectively.⁵ In any case, get them to read you what they wrote.

⁴ Of **course** it's culturally biased. Anything involving language is culturally biased by its very nature. It is easier to learn Chinese if you understand the background to the ideographs and concepts. I taught SAT prep in Thailand and I can assure you that it slows them down on the reading sections when they know nothing about U.S. history. The SAT is not an intelligence test; it's a critical reasoning test that depends to a great extent on having an educational background in standard written English and certain aspects of U.S. history and culture. Now whether that is a good or bad thing is a separate and more complicated issue.

⁵ Does not apply to Paris Hilton; she's just plain stupid.

- 3) Be on the lookout for inequitable divisions of labor; this always happens with group projects. Some people slack off, but on the converse sometimes slacking off is an effect of not feeling included if there is a bossy person imposing their will on the group. There should be an opportunity here for everyone in the group to make a contribution. They're going to read them, so you can always assign the role of performer to someone. (See below)
- 4) If you have an abundance of material to work with, get the students to choose what their favorite jokes are. How you proceed from here will depend on your students' topic; some of them will be more like a story and need to have a beginning, middle, and end. Some will be just interchangeable jokes and you can choose the strongest ones. Whatever it is, you need to get them to scrutinize what they've written. **It's not good enough yet.** They may need to add, or tweak, or simply rewrite what they already have. I gave a rubric with some specific requirements about number of sentences, but you can feel free to ignore them.
- 5) Precision is important for parody, so there is a hidden grammar lesson here. Depending on the form they choose to parody, there are other embellishments that can be made. Some of the students are good artists, for instance, and there could be a visual component to almost anything. (Notice the importance of music and font graphics to the *Chronicles of Narnia* parody I showed for instance. Small details make a big difference.)
- 5) I've given this assignment before to college students and the thing that constantly amazes me is that some people are simply unable to mimic things, even things they are very familiar with. Just tone deaf. It doesn't seem to relate to intelligence or even creativity. You're going to have to accept that some of your students will be more into this assignment than others and try to keep everyone cooperative.
- 6) Keep them to the rubric on their homework sheet. Cindyann says they are used to working with this type of rubric, so it will be meaningful to them.⁶

1:20-1:35 Performing the Parodies

At some point everyone will be mostly finished. The whole point of this exercise would be lost if we didn't read them aloud, because they're supposed to be funny. Be sure to point this out to them from the beginning; they have enough fear of public speaking that it'll make them strive toward quality a bit more.

- 1) The most essential thing is that you **get your group to shut the hell up and pay attention when the other groups are performing.** The temptation to make last minute changes is enormous, and I'm sure some will be more ready than others. This always happens with my college students, and I saw it happen last quarter with Cindyann's students when we did the trial exercise. You can nip it in the bud if you're assertive enough.
- 2) Be sure that you establish *before* the performance who is going to read what. If there is a visual element, this might be lost in the performance. Oh well.
- 3) Have them practice so they don't laugh when they read their jokes. Well, you know, try to minimize it. A little laughing is fun but too much and no one else can even understand what they're saying.⁷

⁶ The rubric may change before Wednesday because I have to run it by Cindyann. The changes will be minor and won't affect *your* ability to process it, but if it does change be sure to look at the new version I send you just so you can be clear on the students' expectations.

1:35-1:45 **Sharing and Caring, a.k.a. Flex Time**

It's hard for me to know exactly how long these exercises will take, especially since they will play out over the course of three days. If it happens that there is time remaining, you must keep the students engaged with you. No video games, no text messages, no math homework, no selling candy bars. You are still their teacher until the bell rings.

- 1) If you think you can pull it off, you might want to talk about *Huckleberry Finn*. Keep it casual, just finding out what they've read and what they think of it so far.
- 2) Another topic – and obviously the most important one – is college. Remember, most SAHS students talk a good game about wanting to go to college but many don't take concrete steps toward actually making it happen. Gentle nagging helps. Ask them if they've made a list of colleges or looked at a brochure. Ask them if they're on track to graduate on time and take the required standardized tests. Don't assume they have any real access to a guidance counselor. If the conversation drifts into them asking about your own college experiences, great. Tell them the steps that you took to prepare for college admission.⁸

⁷ Why Jimmy Fallon wasn't fired from SNL a few years ago is beyond me. Untalented and unprofessional is a bad combination.

⁸ FYI, something like half of SAHS students wind up at Santa Ana College for some amount of time, so this is the most likely scenario you'll be encountering. You might want to ask what their plans to get a four-year B.A. degree are and what they'd like to study.