

Group Questions - "A Modest Proposal"

Look at the following definition of satire taken directly from M.H. Abrams Literary Glossary, and answer the questions that follow it. As you answer the group questions – use citations as you give supporting quotes. All quotes must be cited in MLA style – (pg(s)). Your text may be abbreviated as Elements; this handout abbreviated as “Swift H.O.”. For example a quote found on page 423 of your text would be cited as (Elements 423).

Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire “derides”; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual (in “personal satire”), or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even (as in Rochester’s “A Satyr against Mankind,” 1675, and much of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, 1726, especially Book IV) the whole human race. The distinction between the comic and the satiric, however, is a sharp one only at its extremes. Shakespeare’s Falstaff is a comic creation, presented without derision for our unmitigated enjoyment; the puritanical Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* is for the most part comic but has aspects of satire directed against the type of the fatuous and hypocritical Puritan; Jonson’s Volpone (1607) clearly satirizes the type of man whose cleverness stupidity is put at the service of his cupidity; and Dryden’s MacFlecknoe (1682), while representing a permanent type of the pretentious poetaster, ridiculed specifically the living author Shadwell.

Satire has usually been justified by those who practice it as a corrective of human vice and folly; Pope remarked that “those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous.” Its frequent claim (not always borne out in the practice) has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual, and to limit its ridicule to corrigible faults, excluding those for which a person is not responsible. See the text box to the right to see what Swift said, speaking of himself in his ironic “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (1739)

Yet malice never was his aim;
He lashed the vice, but spared the name. His
satire points at no defect,
But what all mortals may correct....
He spared a hump, or crooked nose,
Whose owners set not up for beaux.

Satire occurs as an incidental element in many works whose overall mode is not satirical a certain character, or situation, or interpolated passage of ironic commentary on some aspect of the human condition or of contemporary society. But in many literary achievements, verse or prose, the attempt to diminish a subject by ridicule is the organizing principle of the whole, and these works constitute the formal genre of “satires.”

1. Is “A Modest Proposal” a serious work or a piece of satire? How do you know? Poll your group – at what point (be specific) did each member know the essay was not to be taken literally (if you didn’t know that till now, then state that fact as well)? What specific evidence (textual) points towards satire here (2 quotes)? What, from Swift’s life, points towards this being satire (2 quotes)? Be sure to consult the above definition.

2. What is **IRONIC** about Swift’s piece? How does he describe the Irish? As human? Find 5 examples that imply (from “A Modest Proposal”) that they are something less than human.

3. Who is blamed (in the piece) for the problems of the Irish? Is there any evidence that Swift blames the poor themselves for their own sorry predicament? Explain with specifics (quotes).

4. What group of people do satires such as this one, appeal to? Would the “uneducated” get the joke as well as everyone else (metaquestion: is even *asking* that question offensive on some level)? Are there ever any **dangers** that the “real” message will be misunderstood? As recently as this year a press secretary to the President tweeted a headline about himself (from The Onion) that was in fact, satire (was he being satirical as well – perhaps) What can a satirist do to avoid that problem? Should the satirist even worry? How does Randy Newman handle this issue (be specific) in “Short People” in an obvious way that Swift never resorts to? (hint: “Short people are just...”)

4b. Notice in Newman’s other song (on the back) – he is also satirizing something (the glitzy view of LA and Hollywood versus the reality of its poverty). However, people sing his song at ball games, it’s in movies – and most people don’t even pay attention to the biting lyrics. Similarly, when a Norwegian Comedy show created a satirical send up of take-themselves-too-seriously videos, the writers at Saturday Night Live (a show that allegedly specializes in satire) were so clueless that they created a parody of the song – “What Does the Fox Say,” implying that they never even knew it was satire to begin with. Can satire be too subtle – explain. If you make it less subtle (see your answer to 4 above) do you lose something (see 5 below). Please bring your work on satire from *Gulliver’s Travels* into this discussion.

5. They say that one of the best tricks in telling a funny joke, in a funny way, is to keep a straight face. Does Swift do this in his essay – how? How does Randy Newman, in “Short People,” not keep that straight face (see question 4)?

6. It would be impossible to talk about satire without mentioning the massacre that occurred at the office of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris during January, 2015. Twelve people were shot and killed at the French Satirical magazine. There will be more on this on your work for Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels”. For now, let us consider the facts: These cartoonists (at Charlie Hebdo), editors, and staff were killed for what was published in their magazine. After this massacre, there were many who said we should not feel sorry for those who were killed given that they offended (purposefully) so many people. Without considering the exact nature of what was satirized or who did the massacring –SPECIFICALLY tie these murders to as many of the questions (and your answers) from today’s work as possible. Stick to the specifics of today’s questions – but tie them to the generality of creative satirical artists being killed for what they produced.

Artist: Randy Newman
Album: Little Criminals
Title: Short People

Short People got no reason
Short People got no reason
Short People got no reason

7. **Big Question:** How does Satire (specifically, such as this) get the reader to examine not only what is being written, but their own values (lens?) through which they interpret what they read? At colleges all over this country, books are being banned and even words are expunged from curriculum because they are making students uncomfortable (and worse). Is it



always a bad thing to be uncomfortable? Consider, in your answer – the definition of satire above (and Swift’s appraisal of himself) as well as such ideas as the spider web of theories that we’ve created to get from one part of lives to the next (*Grendel*). Be as analytical and specific in your answer as you can be.

When Randy Newman's "Short People" was released in the late seventies, it caused a huge stir among pop fans who took the song's inhumane message ("Short people got no reason to live") at face value. And while Newman's "I Love L.A." booms through the stadium at a Los Angeles sporting events, few fans are listening closely enough to the song's lyrics to hear that it's painting a portrait of a superficial, somewhat seedy city.

But a healthy dose of perversity never hurt anyone -- especially Newman. Since his early days as a West Coast songwriter-for-hire, Newman has been a master at undermining pop conventions in the service of his own unique sense of humor. The Newman method, which has remained remarkably consistent for his 30 years as a recording artist, is relatively simple--take a character and voice that character's prejudices and biases. When a character is narrow-minded, write a narrow-minded song. When a character is cruel, write a cruel song.

Newman's gift for twisting the conventions of the pop song has served him well, not only in his biggest hits, but also in lesser-known classics like "Rednecks" (an anti-racist anthem told from behind the mask of a racist), "God's Song" (an anti-religion anthem told from God's point of view), "Yellow Man" (a hilariously reductive history of Asia) and "I Just Want You To Hurt Like I Do" (a chilling tale of emotional abuse disguised as lullaby). And in the last decade, Newman has built a second career as one of Hollywood's premier composers, penning scores for such films as *Avalon*, *Awakenings*, *Parenthood*, *The Paper*, and this year's *Pleasantville* and *A Bug's Life* ([Yahoo Life](#)).

Title: I Love L.A.

Hate New York City
It's cold and it's damp
And all the people dressed like
monkeys
Let's leave Chicago to the Eskimos
That town's a little bit too rugged
For you and me you bad girl

Rollin' down the Imperial Highway
With a big nasty redhead at my side
Santa Ana winds blowin' hot from the
north
And we as born to ride

Roll down the window put down the
top
Crank up the Beach Boys baby
Don't let the music stop
We're gonna ride it till we just can't
ride it no more

From the South Bay to the Valley
From the West Side to the East Side
Everybody's very happy
'Cause the sun is shining all the time
Looks like another perfect day

I love L.A. (We love it)
I love L.A. (We love it)

Look at that mountain
Look at those trees
Look at that bum over there, man
He's down on his knees
Look at these women
There ain't nothin' like 'em
nowhere

Century Boulevard (We love it)
Victory Boulevard (We love it)
Santa Monica Boulevard (We
love it)
Sixth Street (We love it, we love
it)

I love L.A.
I love L.A.

Extra Credit (up to 50 points) – Listen to Malcolm Gladwell’s podcast, Revisionist History – Episode 10, “The Satire Paradox”. As you listen – take notes – specifically, have your group work (on Swift and “A Modest Proposal”) out – and look for connections between what Mr. Gladwell is saying – and what you were asked, and what you wrote about for that group work. After you are done – write a short essay, connecting “The Satire Paradox” to this group work, to satire, to Swift. Be as specific as possible, make sure you have a thesis (and paragraphs, etc.) Make sure you listen to the entire podcast, and use evidence from as much as the podcast as you can. Be thoughtful. Be creative.

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