

# Introduction

## POLITICAL CARTOONS: SERIOUS FUN

*I don't mind what people write about me.  
Most of my constituents can't read.  
But oh, those damn pictures!*

—Boss Tweed

In general, political cartoons engage us in the serious fun called satire. **Satire** uses humor to lower something or someone in the reader's or viewer's estimation. At its best, satire is not mean-spirited, and its point is not to harm. Rather, satire exposes human folly to make room for improvement.

Political cartoons have characteristic **contents, methods, and purposes**. The **content** of political cartoons is anything political, but the best cartoons deal with universal themes, either because an event itself is so profound—women gaining the right to vote, for example—or because the cartoon deals with a deeper meaning of the issue of the day—a civil rights march is connected to slavery and the Declaration of Independence, for example.

Political cartoons use a number of **methods** in the service of satire: **caricature, symbolism, metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and stereotyping**. **Caricature** works by suggestion and exaggeration, usually by exaggerating one feature of a person or thing. These highlighted features identify the person or thing, but they also say something about the person's or thing's character, beliefs, actions, or significance. Exaggerating Ronald Reagan's thick black hair, for example, makes a point about his well-cultivated image of youthful energy.

A **symbol** represents something else: a dove represents peace, for example. Often a symbol is a material object (e.g., Statue of Liberty) that represents something abstract or invisible (freedom). A **metaphor** uses an object to note a similarity to something else. Using a tiger to represent one nation invading another nation is metaphorical: tigers and nations are different, but a country acts like a tiger when it pounces on and swallows up another country.

**Irony** expresses an idea through a contradiction between something's literal meaning and the intended meaning. Putting a crown on a U.S. president is ironic. The ironic clash between the literal meaning of the crown—a sign of royalty—and the intended meaning—a president has overstepped the boundaries of legitimate democratic power—is expressed by the contradiction of putting a crown on the president's head. This clash adds force to the message. **Sarcasm** is a form of irony. The element that turns irony into sarcasm is the appearance of mockery, or bitterness. Drawing the kingly president as a gluttonous Henry the VIII, with a cabinet of fawning courtiers and a dungeon full of peasants, turns the cartoon into sarcasm. **Stereotypes** work by taking a real or imagined trait of an individual to be true of the group to which the individual belongs. Typically, stereotypes are dangerous because they express bias by imagining traits or generalizing unfairly in order to exercise power in a way that harms others.

Political cartoonists are idealistic crusaders who "reprimand" the world and people for falling short. The **purpose** of most political cartoons is to expose one of two gaps: that between appearance and reality, and that between what is and what should or could be. Thus, political cartoons often expose hypocrisy, point out pretentiousness, laugh at arrogance, deflate the powerful, and give voice to the underdog. That they do such serious things through humor and fun is part of their appeal. The lighthearted genre of the cartoon adds a little sugar to the serious political medicine that is the cartoon's message. In this way, political cartoons also say that we might be better off taking ourselves less seriously, all the while insisting that we live up to our better selves—as people and as citizens.