

## Putting Society Under a Glass: Being a Satirist

### Genres

Political cartoon  
Magazine column  
Short story

### Strands

Processing Information (STEPS 1–6)  
Viewing (STEP 3)  
Critical Thinking (STEPS 3, 6)  
Close Reading (STEP 3)  
Exploring Language (STEPS 3–4, 6)  
Presenting (STEPS 4, 6)  
Writing (STEPS 4, 6)  
Interpersonal Speaking (STEP 6)

### STEP 1: Getting started

1. List the things you like about the society you live in.
2. List the things you don't like about the society you live in.
3. List the things you find laughable about the society you live in. You might begin each item with words such as: "I think it's hilarious that ..." or "I think it's stupid the way people ..."
4. Have you seen a film or television programme lately that pokes fun at someone or some aspect of your society or cultural group? What sorts of things does it poke fun at?
5. Make a list of some ethnic groups? What is the stereotypic view of these ethnic groups? In what ways do stereotypes distort (twist) the truth?

### STEP 2: Finding a focus

Satire is a general term that we can apply to that large group of texts which in some way point to a person or institution or group or behavior and say: "Isn't that silly!" or "Isn't that deplorable!" Because satire is often designed to make people laugh, it can be a very powerful critical weapon.

In this chapter, we will be regarding satire as a language function. The following table indicates the range of genres in which language *can* function satirically.

**TABLE A: Some satirical genres**

Oral	Written	Visual
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Joke Anecdote Stand-up comedy After-dinner speech	Novel Satirical poem Newspaper column Short story	Cartoon Play Poster Comedy
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The question we will be exploring in this chapter is:

### **How does satire function in a society that values freedom of speech?**

As a way of dealing with this big question, we will be exploring the following questions.

- How can stories function as arguments?
- How does satire operate as argument?
- What part does stereotyping play in satire?
- What are the most effective satirical genres?
- Why is satire important in a democratic society?

In this chapter, we will be focusing on three genres: the cartoon, the column and the short story.

### **STEP 3: Working with text: targets, stereotypes, arguments and resistances**

#### **GENRE A: The cartoon**

“On the Edge of Reason”, (See **RESOURCE A**) was a regularly appearing cartoon-strip in the *Listener*. Read through the Hodgson cartoon a couple of times and then work on the following reading tasks.

#### **1. The target**

- Which of the two characters in this cartoon is being criticized (satirized)?
- What value does the developer in this cartoon put on the landscape? Putting this another way, why is the landscape *valuable* to the developer?
- Think about how the developer is conducting himself. (He dresses in certain ways. He talks in certain ways. He acts in certain ways. He values certain things.) Which of these things is the cartoonist satirizing? List them. We are going to call these things the **target** of the satirist.

#### **2. Stereotypes**

- What has the cartoonist done to enable us to recognize one of the characters as a developer? (Look at clothing, physical features and language.)
- What type of character is Wayne? How can you tell?
- Why would you not expect the developer character to say, “This resort is going to provide simple back-to-basics accommodation for people who want to enjoy unspoiled, natural beauty?”
- If he did start saying things like this, what would happen to the satire?

#### **3. The argument**

In any satire, there is a kind of argument going on. Because the argument is not always obvious, we can say that it is an **implied argument**. In most cases, this argument can be expressed by the formula:

**This kind of conduct is undesirable and/or ridiculous.  
After all ... look what comes from this kind of behavior.**

- Come up with a statement that identifies the conduct that Hodgson is satirising.
- List some of the consequences that result from this conduct. (You'll notice that the cartoon suggests that the developer's conduct will affect local people, the indigenous people and the flora and fauna of the place. How will these things be affected?)

#### 4. Resistance

- Satirists like Hodgson are adopting a particular point of view. How do you think Hodgson himself thinks the landscape should be regarded?
- What might other people say who disagree with Hodgson's position. (For example, what might a local person say who sees the development as providing much needed jobs?)
- How fair is Hodgson's portrayal of the people he is stereotyping?

**RESOURCE A: Cartoon strip: "On the Edge of Reason"**

[See appendices]

#### GENRE B: The magazine column

A column is a genre that appears in newspapers and magazines. It gets its name from the fact that newspapers are set out *in* columns. A columnist is a person who is regularly invited by a newspaper or magazine to contribute a point of view on issues that would appeal to readers. Newspaper and magazine columns are probably the best place to look if you want to find an "essay" in the real world outside of school.

Not all columnists are satirists. Rosemary McLeod who wrote the satirical column, **RESOURCE B: "You'd have to be thick"** (which originally appeared in *The Listener*) is both a columnist and a feature writer. You'll notice that she is also a rather clever cartoonist. Read through the column a couple of times and then address the following reading tasks.

##### 1. The target

- Is McLeod saying that it's easy to get a man or hard to get a man? Find evidence in the text to support your answer.
- The words "it is said" occur in paragraph one and the words "is said" occur in paragraph two. Does this indicate that McLeod agrees or disagrees with what "is said" here?
- In paragraph three, McLeod describes how men "feed" a certain line. What is this line? Does McLeod agree with this line? Does the expression "feed this line" suggest that men are trustworthy or untrustworthy?

- This article targets a certain kind of man. List some of the things this kind of man does that McLeod finds laughable?
- “Such is the unreasonableness of women.” Does McLeod *agree* that women are unreasonable or is she being **ironic** or **sarcastic**?

## 2. The stereotype

- What features of McLeod’s cartoon male link with the description of the male in the written text?
- Look at the four paragraphs beginning with the words, “Such men have mastered the art ...” Come up with a sentence beginning: “Rosemary McLeod portrays men as ...” Complete the sentence by adding a list of adjectives.

## 3. The argument

- Come up with a statement that identifies the conduct in men that McLeod is satirizing.
- List some of the consequences that result from this conduct. (For example, how does this conduct in men affect women? How does it affect the relationships men form with women when they become husbands?)

## 4. The resistance

- How do you imagine that McLeod would *like* men to act?
- Some people might say that McLeod’s portrayal of men in this column is a bit over the top? How might these people justify their view?
- To what extent do you agree with the way McLeod portrays the “courtship rituals” between men and women?
- To what extent do you think that McLeod is taking a rather extreme position in order to stir up her readers and to sell copies of *The Listener*?

**RESOURCE B: The magazine column: “You’d have to be thick”**

[See appendices]

## GENRE C: The short story

The primary function of a short story is to narrate ... to communicate a chain of events involving people and places. But stories are often written to make a point ... to highlight some aspect of society that a writer disapproves of. Such stories can be funny, but often they are not. Satire does not have to be funny.

Read the short story, “Soesa”, by Graeme Lay, (**RESOURCE C**) and work your way through the following reading tasks.

### 1. The target

- The writer makes it clear in this story that Soesa had the qualifications necessary to get the job she applied for. How does he do this?
- Why, then, did Soesa not get the job?

- Look at the three paragraphs beginning, “Soesa stood in front of the office for a moment ...” Identify factors that might have contributed to Soesa’s nervousness *before* she entered Mr Harding’s office.
- List the things Mr Harding did that contributed to Soesa’s nervousness and panic?
- How likable is Mrs Williams as a character? (For example, what do you make of the following: “The respect she felt for her [Soesa] was somehow different to that which she felt for her European pupils, but it was respect nevertheless, deep-felt and genuine. Soesa would be an asset to any office.”)

## 2. The stereotype

- Find evidence that Mr Harding stereotypes Pacific Islanders.
- Find evidence in the story that the writer, Graeme Lay, views the stereotyping of Pacific Islanders by Europeans (Palagis) as widespread.
- What evidence is there in the story that personnel managers as a group all appear to have difficulty in seeing Soesa’s real qualities?
- Why do you think this might be?

## 3. The argument

- List the things that the Europeans in the story do which you think the writer is satirizing.
- How do these things make it hard for Pacific Islanders to move into higher-paid jobs?

## 4. Resistance

- On the basis of a non-Pacific Island person that you know (It could be your own dad!), reconstruct the character of Mr Harding so that he becomes a sympathetic character. In other words, get Mr Harding to talk and act differently than he does in Lay’s story.
- Using your new version of Mr Harding, rewrite the end of the story beginning with the sentence, “Soesa hesitated for a moment, then walked in.”
- Your new story would have ceased to be satire. Why?

**RESOURCE C: A short story: “Soesa”**

[See appendices]

## STEP 4: Working with text: production

### GENRE A: The cartoon

#### 1. Orientation

- List the sorts of things that you consider to be laughable and/or deplorable in your society. It may help to imagine particular situations (e.g. young people at a party, adults at a barbecue) and how people behave in them. These are your targets.
- What sort of publication might your cartoon appear in? Who is your audience? Are they likely to agree with your point of view?

- How do you feel about your target? Are you amused by it or do you strongly oppose what it is you want to target? Your feelings about it will affect your final product.

## 2. Preparing to draw

- Select *one* target from your list. Remember that cartoons are best kept simple.
- Picture a typical situation which illustrates your chosen target.
- Can you summarize your situation in one frame, or will you need a number of linked frames in sequence (a cartoon strip)?
- Jot down some of the main features of the stereotyped personalities you are going to use in your cartoon. Think about clothing, facial and other physical characteristics and language.

## 3. Drawing

- Do your first draft as a mock-up. If you are making a single-frame cartoon, think through how you are going to do your dialogue—as bubbles or as a caption? If you are making a cartoon strip, remember that you can vary the size of your frames. (Notice how the first frame of Hodgson’s cartoon strip is panoramic; it gives a wide-view of the landscape which is important to the cartoon’s message.)
- Do a first draft of your graphic features, e.g. figures, background.
- Draft your written text and experiment with placing it on your mock-up.
- Review your draft. Is your target clear? Are your stereotypes instantly recognizable? Is your language appropriate to the type speaking?
- Construct your finished copy.

## GENRE B: The magazine or newspaper column

### 1. Orientation

- List the sorts of things that you consider to be laughable and/or undesirable in your society. It may help to imagine particular situations (e.g. young people at a party, a school prom, parents watching a school sports fixture) and how people behave in them. These are your targets.
- Find other examples of satirical columns from newspapers or magazines. You’ll find your writing task easier if you look at some good models.
- Notice the way Rosemary McLeod has focused on concrete examples of the lifestyle of the men she is targeting. Remember that satire thrives on well-chosen, lively detail.
- Who are you going to write for? Are they likely to agree with the point of view you are writing from or will they need convincing?

### 2. Preparing to write

- Select one target from your list.
- Imagine some typical situations which illustrate your target. Remember to write about situations that are likely to be instantly recognized by your audience.
- Jot down some of the main features of the stereotyped personalities you are going to use in your column. Think about clothing, facial and other physical characteristics, typical behavior and language.

### 3. Writing

- Think about a way of introducing the topic of your satire. You could approach your topic directly. (“Have you been to a teenage party lately?”). Or, you could approach your topic indirectly. Notice how Rosemary McLeod begins by presenting a view of courtship opposed to the one she thinks is true. That is, she begins with the view that women stalk men, when in fact, as she goes on to say, men actually *want* to be grabbed.
- Write the introduction to your topic.
- Come up with a list of the points you want to make about your topic. Then ensure that you have concrete examples to illustrate your points.
- Draft the body of what you want to say. Notice how paragraphs can still be introduced by topic sentences. McLeod writes the topic sentence, “Such men have mastered the art of looking neglected.” Then she proceeds to give lots of examples of this over four paragraphs.
- In concluding your column, you might reflect on the consequences of the social conduct you are satirizing.
- After you have finished your first draft, edit by looking closely at your examples. Have you been concrete enough? If you have used dialogue, does it suit the type of person talking? Is your own language appropriate. (Why, do you think, does McLeod use expressions like “thick as the proverbial”?)
- Proof-read for spelling and punctuation and complete your final copy.

## **GENRE C: The short story**

### **1. Orientation**

- Again, you will need to think about the sort of social conduct you don’t approve of. List some of these behaviors.
- Remember that a short story allows you to *present* a slice of action without actually *telling* your reader that you are being critical of a certain kind of conduct. In this way, you will be letting your reader form their *own* opinion.

### **2. Preparing to write**

- Choose your target.
- Think through a broad scenario that can show your target. Decide on:
  - a) a range of characters;
  - b) a list of physical and personality features for each of your important characters;
  - c) a chain of events (what is going to happen in your story);
  - d) a number of settings (where the action of your story going is to take place);
  - e) an initial action (“Soesa” starts with a predicament—Mrs Williams’ difficulty in finding Soesa a job—and then moves on when Mrs Williams receives the letter from Island Foods Inc.)
  - f) a climax or turning point: a moment towards which the story can move. (In this case, it is the interview with Mr Harding.)
  - g) a point of view: Graeme Lay writes in the third person. He begins the story by writing from Mrs Williams’ point of view and moves to Soesa’s point of view. (Why do you think he did this?) You’ll need to choose between first person and third person point of view.
  - h) a tense. “Soesa” is written in the past tense. But you *can* write stories in the present tense.

### 3. Writing

- There is no one way to begin a short story. But there is a job you have to do at the start of any short story and that is to put your reader in the picture. Make sure you include information that will let your reader know who's who, where the action is taking place and what's happening. (Look at the first sentence in Graeme Lay's second paragraph. It contains a lot of background information, doesn't it?) You might try putting some of this information in dialogue.
- Break down your story into scenes. "Soesa" begins with Mrs Williams sitting in her office. She studies Soesa's report and remembers past incidents involving Soesa before she sends for her. Then they go through a mock interview. The next scene is the interview itself. (Look at the way Graeme Lay links these two scenes by making the story move faster. Then look at the way he rounds off his story.)
- Write your first scene. Don't forget to include characters' thoughts. And include lots of sharp detail. Use dialogue when you can.
- Complete your first draft by ensuring that you link your scenes clearly so that you don't lose your reader. (Notice how Graeme Lay provides cues for his readers so they know where and when the action is taking place: "Soesa planned her afternoon very carefully," "Soesa stood in front of the office," "Outside on the footpath.")
- Does your conclusion relate directly as a kind of comment on your last scene?
- After concluding your first draft, check your story for:
  - a) pace (Does your story move too quickly. Have you missed important details?)
  - b) language (Does your language suit the person who is talking or thinking?)
  - c) point of view (Does the story stay with your chosen point of view?)
  - d) paragraphing (Each time your story moves on a little, put a paragraph break. Remember also that you need a paragraph break every time there is a change of speaker in a passage of dialogue.)
- Write a second draft.
- Proof-read for spelling, punctuation and awkward syntax.
- Do your final copy.

### STEP 5: Reflection

Individually, or in groups, consider the following questions:

1. Did your short story function as an argument? What position were you using your story to argue for (or against)?
2. Could you have argued this position using another genre? What are the advantages of using stories for satirical purposes?
3. Why does satire tend to use stereotypical characters?
4. Which of the three genres explored in this chapter use the *most* stereotypical characters? Give reasons for this.
5. Which of the three genres explored in this chapter is, in your view, the most effective for satire? Give reasons.

6. Why is satire important in a democratic society?

### **STEP 6: Exploring further**

Complete as many activities as you like from the matrix below:

<i>Collage</i>	<i>Explication</i>
<i>Mobile</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
<i>Story Parts</i>	<i>Fables</i>
<i>Function Map</i>	<i>Cartoon Display</i>

#### ***Collage***

*Make a collage, using words and pictures, with the headline: Our Class's Satirical Targets.*

#### ***Mobile***

*Make a mobile of hanging cards. On one side of each card print a type of behavior or conduct that has been the target of satire in this chapter (or which has been satirized by yourself or a fellow student). On the reverse side of the card, describe or represent visually, the social consequence of this type of behavior or conduct.*

#### ***Explication***

*Prepare a brief talk explaining to the rest of the class the meaning of the Bromhead cartoon (RESOURCE D) reproduced in this chapter. Your talk should cover:*

- *Background to the cartoon (You might have to research this.);*
- *An explanation of each of the components of the picture;*
- *An explanation of how the components relate to one another;*
- *A description of the kind of conduct this cartoon is targeting;*
- *A description of the consequence of this conduct.*

#### ***Transformation***

*Write a short story based on and using the targets and situations suggested by either RESOURCE A or RESOURCE B.*

#### ***Story Parts***

*Find two examples of each of the following from "Soesa":*

*A sentence providing background information;*

*A sentence indicating time and place;*

*A sentence showing what a character is thinking or feeling;*

*A sentence containing concrete description;*

*A sentence with dialogue;  
A sentence describing someone doing something.*

### ***Function Map***

*Look carefully at each paragraph of **RESOURCE B**. List each paragraph (1, 2, 3, etc.) and describe the main function it is serving. For example, Paragraph 1 describes a common view of women. Can some paragraphs be grouped? Does a pattern emerge? Find a way of describing the sequence this text follows in terms of the functions of the language.*

### ***Fables***

*A fable is a short story, using animal characters, which teaches a lesson. Fables often satirize particular human characteristics. Using your school library and other resources:*

- *Find out the names of two people who wrote fables.*
- *Read two fables.*
- *Identify the type of human conduct being satirized and the consequences of that conduct as portrayed in the fables you read.*

### ***Cartoon Display***

*Collect political cartoons from newspapers and magazines. Create a display which shows a range of cartoons. Create captions for each cartoon describing:*

- *The situation the cartoon refers to;*
- *The conduct being satirized;*
- *The consequence of that conduct as suggested by the cartoon.*

### **References:**

Hodgson, "On the Edge of Reason", *Listener*, August 28, 1993, p. 14.

Rosemary McLeod, "You'd have to be thick", reprinted from David Hill, Elizabeth Smither, eds., *The Seventies Connection*, Dunedin (McIndoe), 1980, pp. 56–57.

Graeme Lay, "Soesa", reprinted from Lydia Wevers, ed., *Tabasco Sauce and Ice*

*Cream: Stories by New Zealanders*, Auckland (Macmillan), 1990, pp. 76–81.

Bromhead, *New Zealand Herald*, August 7, 19?