

Interpreting a Political Cartoon



A **political cartoon** is a drawing that makes a statement about a subject. Political cartoons have three main parts. The first part can be identified as its content. Political cartoons found in textbooks often convey messages based on the written text. A political cartoon can focus on a person, event, issue, or theme. For example, the president, congressional leadership, a war, the economy, terrorist groups, or special interests often provide the content of a political cartoon.

The second part of a political cartoon focuses on the methods the author uses to convey the message. Good cartoons deal with emotion and get their message across in a simple and humorous way, usually with few words. Some of the methods used include *caricature* (usually an exaggerated feature of a person), *symbolism* (using a word, icon, or picture to represent something), *stereotyping* (using a trait to apply to a group of people), *irony* (portraying a contradiction between the intended and usual meaning of words), and *sarcasm* (using mockery or bitterness).

The third part of a political cartoon is its purpose. Sometimes the cartoons support or oppose causes. They show reality as opposed to what might be or should be. To extract meaning from political cartoons, students must know the language of cartoons as well as have background knowledge of the subject being presented.

To analyze political cartoons, students should

- examine the date when the cartoon was published. Knowing this will enable them to know if the cartoon was published at the time an event was taking place or at a different period of time.
- find the name of the author of the cartoon. It will be helpful to know if the artist comes from a particular political, social, or cultural background.
- look at any titles or captions. This will help to identify the subject of the cartoon.
- identify people, places, or events that are shown. Knowing who or what is depicted in the cartoon will help place it in an historical or political setting.
- determine the point of view of the cartoonist. Note the size and mannerism of the figures as well as their interaction with one another. Note the use of exaggeration or facial expression to convey a point.

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To Teach students to interpret political cartoons, use Selection 15 and Graphic Organizer 21. You may want to make a transparency of the political cartoon and use it when having the students complete the analysis by answering the questions in the left column.

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1. Show students Selection 15.
2. Use the questions on Graphic Organizer 21, one at a time, to analyze the cartoon.
 - a. Who drew the cartoon?
 - b. When was the cartoon drawn?
 - c. Where was it published?
 - d. What are some symbols you see in the cartoon? What do these symbols represent?
 - e. What techniques does the author use to convey the message (caricature, exaggeration, irony, humor, interpretative language)?
 - f. What is the issue depicted?
 - g. What are the people in the cartoon doing?
 - h. What viewpoint is conveyed?
 - i. What persons or groups might disagree with the view expressed in the cartoon?
3. Allow time for discussion of each question.

1. Who drew the cartoon?
Paul
2. When was the cartoon drawn?
December 1912
3. Where was it published?
In the Jersey City Journal
4. What are some symbols you see in the cartoon? What do these symbols represent?

Symbol	What It Represents
<i>Flag</i>	<i>The Union</i>
<i>Smiling Sun</i>	<i>Approval</i>
<i>Stars</i>	<i>States</i>

5. What techniques does the author use to convey the message (caricature, exaggeration, irony, humor, interpretative language)?
Facial expression of happiness, sun shining
6. What is the issue depicted?
Women's right to vote
7. What are the people in cartoon doing?
Making a flag showing the states that have approved the right to vote for women
8. What viewpoint is conveyed?
They support the right for women to vote
9. What person or groups might disagree with the view expressed in the cartoon?
Answers will vary

To apply the interpreting political cartoons strategy, have students examine political cartoons from a variety of sources, including their textbook. Have students repeat the process they used in the practice session, using Graphic Organizer 21 to record their interpretations.

To extend the strategy, you may want students to compare the cartoon in Selection 15 with the one in Selection 16. You may also have students draw a political cartoon. Then, have them exchange cartoons to determine if a partner can determine the meaning of their drawing.

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Selection 15 - The Modern Betsy Ross by Paul



Jersey City Journal

December 1912

(rpt. *American Review of Reviews*)

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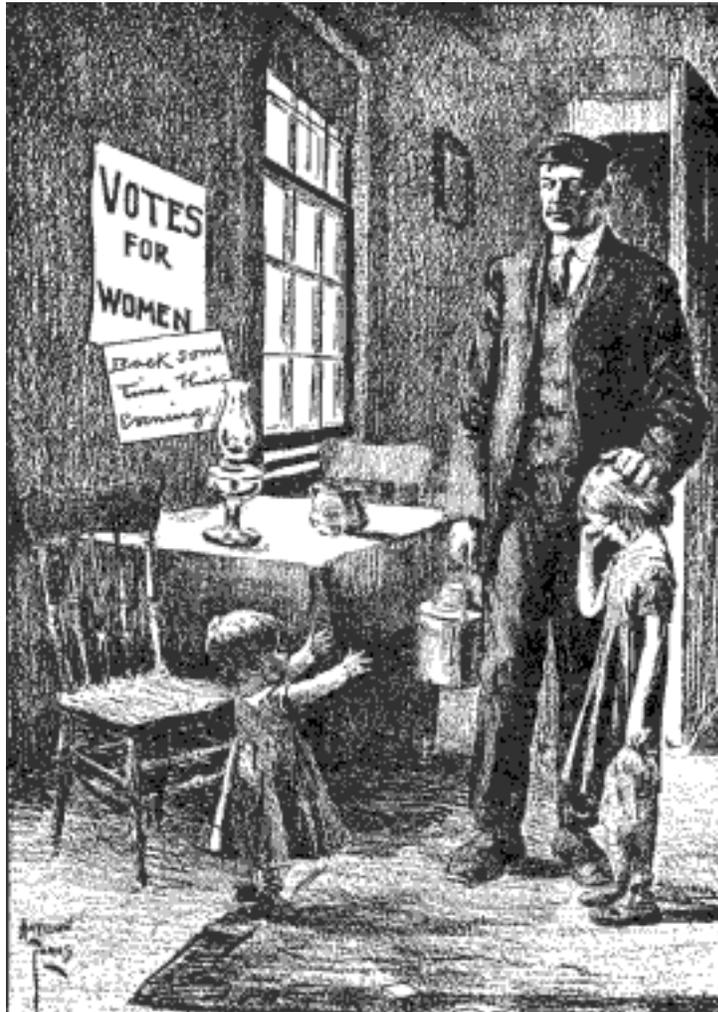
1. Who drew the cartoon?
2. When was the cartoon drawn?
3. Where was it published?
4. What are some symbols you see in the cartoon?
What do these symbols represent?

Symbol	What It Represents

5. What techniques does the author use to convey the message (caricature, exaggeration, irony, humor, interpretative language)?
6. What is the issue depicted?
7. What are the people in cartoon doing?
8. What viewpoint is conveyed?
9. What person or groups might disagree with the view expressed in the cartoon?

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Selection 16 - Home



Women's Anti-Suffrage Association of Massachusetts
(rpt. *Literary Digest*: October 9, 1915)