

## THE CARTOON ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

**VISUAL SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS:** A visual symbol in a cartoon is any image that stands for some other thing, event, person, abstract idea or trend in the news. For example, a dollar sign may stand for the entire economy. An octopus may stand for a powerful corporation with “tentacles” controlling many other institutions. Metaphors are like symbols in that they describe one thing as something else entirely. Shakespeare used a metaphor when he wrote “All the world’s a stage.” (A cartoon would simply show the world as a stage.)

- Begin any cartoon analysis by describing all the details in it that are symbols and metaphors.

**VISUAL DISTORTION:** Changes or exaggerations in size, shape, emotions or gestures often add extra meaning to the symbols the cartoon includes. For example, a dragon is often used as a symbol for China. But a huge, snorting dragon will make a different point about China from a tired, limping, meek dragon. Every detail in a cartoon, especially one that is distorted in some way, is likely to be a part of the cartoon’s meaning.

- Identify the cartoon’s symbols and notice how they are drawn.

**IRONY IN WORDS AND IMAGES:** Irony is a form of humor in which something is said in a way that undercuts or mocks its own apparent meaning. In other words, what is said seems to mean one thing, but it will be taken to mean the opposite. Irony is well suited to political cartoons, which often seek to mock something and show how false, unfair or dangerous it is. Irony always entails a contradiction. Often, an amusing image undercuts and reverses the meaning of the words in a caption. Sometimes, however, the image alone conveys the double meaning.

- Consider whether irony is used and if so, how?

**STEREOTYPES AND CARICATURE:** A stereotype is a vastly oversimplified view of some group. Stereotypes are often insulting. Yet they may give cartoons a shorthand way to make a complex point quickly. They also reveal broad cultural attitudes. Caricature is the opposite of a stereotype. It is an exaggerated or distorted drawing of an individual highlighting what the artist sees as most unique about that individual. You should be critical of cartoon stereotyping, yet also notice how it contributes to making a point dramatically and forcefully. If there are stereotypes in the cartoon you are analyzing, how would you evaluate them?

- Identify any stereotypes and caricatures and consider what they communicate.

**AN ARGUMENT NOT A SLOGAN:** Slogans merely assert something. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” A good editorial cartoon is more than a slogan. Though blunt and opinionated, it actually invites you to consider its argument or its reasoning. At its best, a cartoon offers visual and written features that together “make its case.” In other words, it presents reasons to support its view, or at least it hints at or suggests those reasons. So even though it is biased, the cartoon gives you grounds for responding and even arguing back.

- Consider what features of the cartoon help present its argument or make its case.

## THE USES AND MISUSES OF POLITICAL CARTOONS

Editorial cartoons may be funny, outrageous, even insulting. Yet above all, their aim is to provoke thought about some issue in the news. They cannot be taken as simple reflections of “the way things were.” Yet that is a common misuse of them. They reveal cultural assumptions, prevailing moods, even real insights about events and trends. They can be used as evidence of all these things.

- Political cartoons always represent points of view that can be challenged.

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Sample Lesson – Handout 1 Symbol and Metaphor

**The Cartoon:** This cartoon on the drive for women’s suffrage appeared along with an article in the magazine *Judge*, March 3, 1917. The cartoon shows four women backing the drive for female suffrage riding on a steamroller crushing rocks labeled "opposition."



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-USZ62-128029

**Background:** By March of 1917, an energized women’s suffrage movement was in the last stages of its push to win the right to vote for all women in the United States. Women began winning voting rights in some western states in the late 1800s. The reform movement known as “Progressivism” further boosted the drive for female suffrage in the early 1900s. The effective roles women played during World War I may have finally pushed President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 to agree to back a Constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. The 19th amendment was passed in 1919 and sent to the states. The states ratified it in 1920.

**Checklist Item – Symbol and Metaphor in Cartoons:** A visual symbol in a cartoon is any image that stands for some other thing, event, person, abstract idea or trend in the news. For example, a dollar sign may stand for the entire economy. An octopus may stand for a powerful corporation with “tentacles” controlling many other institutions. Metaphors are like symbols in that they describe one thing as something else entirely. Shakespeare used a metaphor when he wrote “All the world’s a stage.” (A cartoon would simply show the world as a stage.)

- Begin any cartoon analysis by describing all the details in it that are symbols and metaphors.

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## **Handout 1: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet**

(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

**1. What is this cartoon about?**

(a one sentence summary of its main point)

**2. What elements in the cartoon can be called symbols?**

**3. How are these symbols drawn? Are they drawn in specific ways that add to the point the cartoon makes? Why or why not?**

**4. What other objects might have been used instead of a steamroller and the rubble it is crushing?**

**5. Notice how the three women are drawn. Are these figures also symbols? Why or why not?**

**6. Why is one woman wearing a banner labeled "West"?**

**7. How might an opponent of this cartoon's point of view have altered the symbols in it?**

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Sample Lesson – Handout 2 Visual Distortion

**The Cartoon:** The Library of Congress records no exact date or location for this cartoon on child labor by artist Herbert Johnson. It is a part of a collection attributed to photographer Lewis Hine. Based on photos near it, it is dated to approximately 1912.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-DIG-nclc-04783

**Background:** Child labor existed throughout American history. As the nation industrialized, child labor moved from the farm to the factory. Children were seen as cheaper and easy to control. They were hired in large numbers to work in mines and factories, often in extremely unhealthy and dangerous conditions. In the early 1900s, labor unions and other national reform organizations began to seek legislation regulating or limiting child labor and promoting free, compulsory education as a substitute.

**Checklist Item – Visual Distortion:** Changes or exaggerations in size, shape, emotions or gestures often add extra meaning to the symbols the cartoon includes. For example, a dragon is often used as a symbol for China. But a huge, snorting dragon will make a different point about China from a tired, limping, meek dragon. Every detail in a cartoon, especially one that is distorted in some way, is likely to be a part of the cartoon's meaning.

- Identify the cartoon's symbols and notice how they are drawn.

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Handout 2: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

**1. What big problem is this cartoon concerned with?**

(a one sentence summary of its main point)

**2. What are the key symbols in the cartoon and how are they distorted?**

**3. How do the distortions help the cartoon make its point?**

**4. Is there anything else about this huge hand besides its size that helps the cartoon make its point?**

**5. How are the children in the cartoon drawn? How does this add to the visual effect of the huge hand in the cartoon?**

**6. What else besides a hand might the artist have used to create an effective cartoon on this topic?**

**7. How might an opponent of this cartoon's point of view have altered the symbols in it or changed the way these symbols are distorted?**

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### Sample Lesson – Handout 3 Irony in Words and Images

**The Cartoon:** This cartoon on the evils of political patronage is by one of America’s most famous cartoonists, Thomas Nast. It appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*, April 28, 1877.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-USZ62-89864

**Background:** This cartoon shows a statue of Andrew Jackson on pig. The statue is titled “To the Victors Belong the Spoils,” a phrase used to explain why election winners were entitled to hand out government jobs (patronage) to their loyal followers. Jackson was president from 1829-1837. However, Thomas Nast drew the cartoon in 1877, when he was battling machine politicians in New York City who in his view had proved how corrupt the patronage principle “to the victors belong the spoils” really was.

**Checklist Item – Irony in Words and Images:** Irony is a form of humor in which something is said in a way that undercuts or mocks its own apparent meaning. In other words, what is said seems to mean one thing, but it will be taken to mean the opposite. Irony is well suited to political cartoons, which often seek to mock something and show how false, unfair or dangerous it is. Irony always entails a contradiction. Often, an amusing image undercuts and reverses the meaning of the words in a caption. Sometimes, however, the image alone conveys the double meaning.

- Consider whether irony is used and if so, how?

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## Handout 3: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

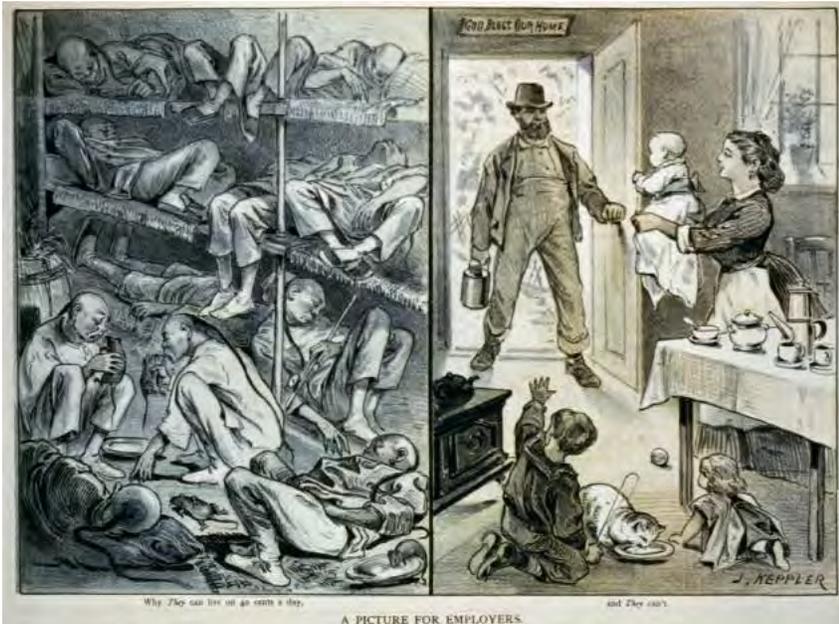
(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

1. **This cartoon makes fun of one aspect of politics in the 1800s. Can you explain?** (a one sentence summary of its main point)
  
2. **In what ways does this image of a statue remind you of monuments dedicated to great or heroic figures?**
  
3. **Using your background knowledge, explain the term "To the Victors Belong the Spoils" in your own words.**
  
4. **What visual symbols in this cartoon undercut or go against the idea that this statue is meant to be heroic or admirable?**
  
5. **The pig on this statue is rooting around in some garbage labeled "fraud," "bribery," "spoils" and "plunder." How does this add to the ironic message of the cartoon?**

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Sample Lesson – Handout 4 Stereotype and Caricature

**The Cartoon:** This cartoon is a lithograph by Joseph Keppler expressing fears about the impact of Chinese immigrant labor. It appeared in *Puck*, August 21, 1878. Keppler founded *Puck* as a magazine of political humor.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-1242

**Background:** During the California gold rush in the 1850s, thousands of unskilled Chinese laborers arrived on the West Coast. They mined for gold, worked in factories, became peddlers, domestic servants and laundry workers. Many helped build the railroads. By the 1870s, American attitudes toward them had turned harshly negative and hostile. The Chinese lived frugally cut off in urban enclaves, or “Chinatowns.” They were often seen as a threat by other American workers who would not take on the dirty, dangerous jobs at the low wages these immigrants were willing to accept.

**Checklist Item – Stereotypes and Caricature:** A stereotype is a vastly oversimplified view of some group. Stereotypes are often insulting. Yet they may give cartoons a shorthand way to make a complex point quickly. They also reveal broad cultural attitudes. Caricature is the opposite of a stereotype. It is an exaggerated or distorted drawing of an individual highlighting what the artist sees as most unique about that individual. You should be critical of cartoon stereotyping, yet also notice how it contributes to making a point dramatically and forcefully. If there are stereotypes in the cartoon you are analyzing, how would you evaluate them?

- Identify any stereotypes and caricatures and consider what they communicate.

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## **Handout 4: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet**

(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

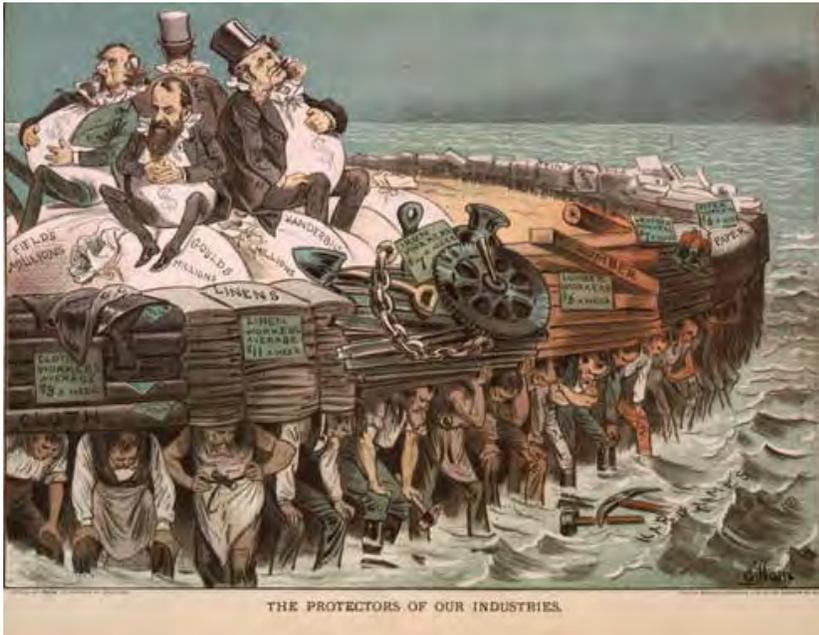
- 1. What main point is this cartoon trying to make?**  
(a one sentence summary of its main point)
  
- 2. The cartoon heading is: "A Picture for Employers." Smaller captions say: "Why they can live on 40 cents a day" (left panel) "and they can't" (right panel). How do the visual features of the cartoon clarify the meaning of these captions?**
  
- 3. How are the Chinese drawn in the panel on the left? In what way is this drawing a stereotype of these Chinese workers?**
  
- 4. Does the panel on the right also present a stereotype of the typical American worker? Why or why not?**
  
- 5. What visual details in the panel on the right help add to its view of the typical American worker? List these details and their role in conveying an overall impression.**
  
- 6. What might a recent Chinese immigrant to America in 1877 say about this depiction of Chinese and American workers?**

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Sample Lesson – Handout 5

### The Political Cartoon: An Argument Not a Slogan

**The Cartoon:** This cartoon is titled “The Protectors of Our Industries.” It is about the conflict between labor and capital in the late 1800s. It is by artist Bernhard Gillam, and it appeared in *Puck* on February 7, 1883.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-3108

**Background:** This cartoon shows Cyrus Field, Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Russell Sage seated on bags of "millions" of dollars, on a large raft held up by many workers. The men on top of this raft were all enormously wealthy businessmen in the late 1800s, when American industry came to be dominated by huge corporations serving national and international markets. Starting with the railroads, these corporations created huge bureaucratic organizations, imposed rigidly managed work procedures, and employed hundreds if not thousands of workers. They often exercised great power to control markets, weaken competitors, discipline workers and ensure profits.

**Checklist Item – An Argument Not a Slogan:** Slogans merely assert something. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” A good editorial cartoon is more than a slogan. Though blunt and opinionated, it actually invites you to consider its argument or its reasoning. At its best, a cartoon offers visual and written features that together “make its case.” In other words, it presents reasons to support its view, or at least it hints at or suggests those reasons. So even though it is biased, the cartoon gives you grounds for responding and even arguing back.

- What features of the cartoon help present its argument or make its case?

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## Handout 5: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

- 1. The cartoon's caption is "The Protectors of Our Industries." What is this cartoon about?**  
(a one sentence summary of its main point)
  
- 2. This cartoon shows various workers holding up the products of their labor. List some of the types of workers shown and the products they have on their shoulders?**
  
- 3. All the products these workers are holding up form a platform. What is on this platform?**
  
- 4. The wealthy men on top, the bags of money, the workers and their products, and the water lapping at the workers are all symbols. Together they make a broad point about wealthy business owners and their workers in the 1880s. Write a brief paragraph explaining the point they make.**
  
- 5. The cartoon could be summed up by a political slogan, such as "The rich are betraying the working man." What more does the cartoon add to this slogan?**

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21733>

## Sample Lesson – Handout 6 Uses and Misuses of Political Cartoons

**The Cartoon:** This cartoon by Thomas Nast appeared on the cover of *Harper's Weekly* on March 14, 1874. It is titled “Colored Rule in a Reconstructed(?) State.” It shows members of the South Carolina Legislature arguing as Columbia rebukes them.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-USZ62-102256

**Background:** “Reconstruction” is the term for the effort to bring the Southern states back into the union after the Civil War. The era of Reconstruction lasted from 1865 to 1877. For a good part of this time, Congressional Republicans acted to protect the rights of newly freed slaves, including their right to vote in elections in the South. As a result, a good number of African Americans served as elected lawmakers in Southern state legislatures. This was a time of widespread corruption in the federal government and in many state governments, in both the North and the South. However, as the North wearied of Reconstruction, many claimed that ignorant black voters and lawmakers had made the Southern state governments especially corrupt. Few historians today accept this claim.

**Checklist Item – The Uses and Misuses of Political Cartoons:** Editorial cartoons may be funny, outrageous, even insulting. Yet above all, their aim is to provoke thought about some issue in the news. They cannot be taken as simple reflections of “the way things were.” Yet that is a common misuse of them. They reveal cultural assumptions, prevailing moods, even real insights about events and trends. They can be used as evidence of all these things.

- Political cartoons are always points of view that can be challenged.

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## Handout 6: Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

(Take brief notes to use in a class discussion)

- 1. This cartoon is about Reconstruction governments in the South. What view of those governments does it express?**  
(a one sentence summary of its main point)
  
- 2. This cartoon makes use of stereotypes that many would say are thoroughly racist. Why do they say this?**
  
- 3. What other symbols does the cartoon use to make its point?**
  
- 4. Most historians today disagree with this cartoon's view of the problems of Southern state governments during Reconstruction. Can you explain why?**
  
- 5. Most historians would say this cartoon is both wrong and racially biased. Can it still be useful to us in trying to understand the past? Why or why not?**

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