

# Satire and Slavery

'O delicious! Delicious!'



*Barbarities in The West Indies* by James Gillray © The National Portrait Gallery

We often think that cartoons are a modern invention, but they have been entertaining the public for many years. In fact, it is only recently that we have thought of cartoons as something that children read. In the past, cartoons were aimed at adults and often poked fun at the issues of the day.

James Gillray was a cartoonist at the end of the 18th century. His cartoons dealt with a wide range of issues, from the French Revolution to the arthritis that he suffered in his feet. Here are two of his cartoons that tackle the campaign for the abolition of slavery.

This is a very simple cartoon, with a very simple message. It was published in 1791, and depicted a true story told by politician William Wilberforce when he spoke in Parliament against slavery. In the cartoon we see a slave-owner punishing a young slave because he was too sick to work. He threw the slave into a vat of boiling sugar-water, held him there with a pole for 45 minutes, and then whipped him severely. It took the slave many months to recover from his terrible scalds and wounds.

If you look closely on the wall in the background, you can see the body-parts of slaves nailed to the wall. At the time, people often nailed rats and mice to the wall if they caught them; the cartoon suggests that slaves are treated no better than vermin.

## Discussion points

- What do you think Gillray was trying to do with his cartoon?
- Who do you think were his audience?
- Does the cartoon succeed in its aim?

Our second Gillray cartoon, *The Anti-Saccharrites*, is a good example of satire. It was drawn in 1792, when the anti-slavery movement was encouraging everyone to boycott sugar. This was because most sugar was produced using slave labour. The picture shows King George III, who was notoriously mean, enthusiastically joining in with the boycott of sugar. Note how he and his wife are raving about tea without sugar, while the rest of the family look rather disgusted. Gillray is suggesting that George III is only keen on the sugar



The Anti-Saccharites by James Gillray ©The National Portrait Gallery

boycott because it saves him money!

The cartoon uses caricature to portray the king and queen. Cartoonists often do this to emphasise the weak points of the people they are mocking.

## Discussion Points:

- Can you tell what side of the debate Gillray was on? Why?
- Why do you think Gillray used the King and Queen in his cartoon, rather than an ordinary family?
- Notice how the King is plump and the Queen is ugly. Why do you think Gillray showed them like this?
- Why are all the Princesses allowed to be pretty by Gillray?

Satirical cartoons are still popular today. Most newspapers have several cartoons that comment on issues in the news. One famous cartoonist is Martin Rowson, whose cartoons appear in several newspapers, including the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. Here is a cartoon of his that shows how slavery is still an important issue today. Rowson's cartoon doesn't show anyone specific;



Cartoon by Martin Rowson 2007

instead, he draws a portrait of an unknown man, but makes him grotesque so that we know that he is being mocked. The cartoon was published on the day that the Archbishop of York urged the Prime Minister to apologise for slavery. Rowson seems to be suggesting that saying sorry is not enough.

## Discussion Points

- Look closely at the obese man in the centre of the cartoon. What country is he from? What clues does Rowson offer to suggest this?
- Look at the mirror he is looking into. Behind the smiley face, what can you see? What is Rowson implying here?
- What famous logo do you recognise in the picture? Why is it there?
- What is the obese man sitting on? What is Rowson saying here?
- Look at the baby on the right hand side of the picture. Which stars are being mocked?
- The cartoon points to the many problems that Africa is suffering from, such as poverty, debt and starvation. It also suggests that the western world is making the problem worse. Do you agree? What steps could you take to know more about these issues?

## Glossary

- Satire** Using sarcasm to make fun of people, especially politicians.
- Boycott** When a large group of people refuse to use or buy something. This is usually a political protest, designed to draw attention to a cause, or to avoid giving money to groups that are behaving badly.
- Caricature** A portrait of someone that exaggerates their features.
- Grotesque** Exaggeratedly odd, unnatural or ugly.



Larger images from this lesson card available at [www.bridgetowerproject.org](http://www.bridgetowerproject.org)

# • • • Satire and Slavery Activity Sheet



## Make your own cartoons

Why not have a go at drawing your own satirical cartoon? You could show your view on a topic such as:

- The effects of our lifestyles on the environment
- Fairtrade
- Healthy eating
- The proposed new powers of schools to give Saturday detentions
- An issue from your school or community

Don't forget to use all the tools demonstrated by Gillray and Rowson:

- Caricature
- The grotesque
- Captions that explain what's happening
- Speech bubbles
- Lots of detail, even in the background

How can you publish your cartoons so that others can read them? Perhaps you could print a satirical magazine that can be distributed around school?

## Make a satirical TV show



TV shows like *Have I Got News for You* and *Mock the Week* use satire in a different way to cartoons, using comedians to pick over the week's news, and make fun of it. Visit [www.mocktheweek.tv](http://www.mocktheweek.tv) or [www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/haveigotnewsforyou](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/haveigotnewsforyou)

Could you make a satirical show of your own?

1. In groups of 3-4, pick three current news stories, and list all the things you find amusing or ridiculous about them.
2. Write a short script that tries to see the funny side of these stories. Your aim should be to make the people in them look as silly as possible.
3. Film or perform your satirical show.

## Make a caricature collage

You can make a simple caricature of a famous person, even if you're not so confident at drawing.

1. Get your class to bring in old magazines and newspapers.
2. Choose a celebrity or politician to caricature – it helps if you pick someone who is photographed often.
3. Cut out the largest picture of them you can find.
4. Now look closely at it: what are their most distinctive features? Do they, for example, have a large mouth or a strange haircut?
5. Use other magazine cuttings to over-emphasise their key features, e.g. cut out an even bigger mouth and stick it over the real one. You could also add other items to your caricature, e.g. you might give Paris Hilton lots of shopping bags and a small dog. How silly and grotesque can you make your celebrity look?