Fitzgerald

Interpreting Political Cartoons

Editorial cartoons may be funny, outrageous, even insulting. Yet above all, their aim is to provoke thought about some issue. A political cartoon always represents a point of view that can be challenged. Such a cartoon is by definition biased, presenting one view of the issue. The cartoon encourages thought, giving the viewer grounds for responding, for arguing back. Consider what features of the cartoon help present its argument or make its case.

**Features to Notice**

* title
* caption
* labels
* individual words and phrases
* numbers and dates
* objects
* type of person - a stereotype
  + A stereotype is a vastly oversimplified way of representing a group of people. Stereotypes are often insulting.
* a specific person - a caricature - specific characteristics of the person exaggerated
* action
* emotions
* clothing
* symbols that stand for a larger concept or idea
  + For example, a dragon is often used as a symbol for China or a dollar sign may stand for the entire economy.
* analogy or metaphor- a comparison made between two unlike things - comparing the issue that is the focus of the cartoon with something else in order to make a point
  + For example, an octopus may stand for a powerful corporation with “tentacles” controlling many other institutions.
* changes or exaggerations in size or shape
* exaggeration - overdoing a characteristics in order to make a point

**For each feature you find** -

* name it
* describe what you see
* then decide what the cartoonist might mean by that feature

**Determine the issue the cartoon is addressing.**

* What historical knowledge do you have of this issue from your studies?
* What knowledge do you have of the context of this issue from your studies?

**Develop an explanation of the cartoon.**

* Relate your knowledge of the topic and the context in which the topic arose,
  + well developed by details and explanation from your studies.
* Express the cartoonist's opinion on this issue,
  + well supported by references to features of the cartoon and your interpretation of those features.