

Caricatures – sharply drawn, sharply meant

You must have seen caricatures in newspapers or magazines. Often their depictions prompt laughter, but their intention is really to provoke contemplation, inquiry and discussion.

To accomplish this, caricaturists use distortion, disassociation and exaggeration (the Italian word “caricare” means “overloaded,” “exaggerated”). So in order to understand caricatures you have to look at what they are exaggerating, with which means and to what purpose.

Caricatures relate to political themes; usually, they criticize societal conditions, but they also ridicule and lampoon specific individuals, particularly politicians. Caricatures are commentary in the form of drawings, which are always addressed to a contemporary audience – and they assume that this public knows what the drawing is about. That is why, in order to understand what an historical caricature is trying to say, you always have several points to consider: You must find out what historical situation the caricature addresses and what attitude the caricaturist had about it, and you must try to explain the illustration.

Description of the caricature

- Describe as closely as possible what the drawing shows, and list the elements you see.
- If there is a text, try putting it into your own words; don't forget to include the facts that are given (such as dates and figures).

Description

Interpretation of the caricature

- Think about which elements of the drawing could be symbols, metaphors, personifications, allegories or citations and allusions.
- Talk about the meaning that these elements could have within this caricature.
- Check whether the text gives you any clues that could help solve the puzzle of the drawing.

Interpretation



Evaluation of the caricature

- Determine when the caricature was made, and uncover its historical background: To which people, or historical situations or events, does the caricature allude, and where was it published?
- To whom is the caricature directed? Who is the artist?
- Summarize: What is the caricature's theme? What is the relationship of drawing to text (a complement or a contradiction)? What does the caricature reveal about the orientation of the artist to the theme at hand? What message did the artist intend to convey, what impact did he or she wish to have?

Evaluation

Elements used in caricatures

- **Symbols** could be a crown and sceptre (representing monarchy); a hammer and sickle (for communists); a swastika (for National Socialists or National Socialism); or a laurel wreath (representing glory or fame).
- Examples of **metaphors** include threatening storms; rising floodwaters; opposites such as large-small, fat-thin; a (balanced) scale; a boat (in which everyone is sitting, or which is sinking); a (blind) mole; a (stubborn) donkey; a (vain) peacock; a (powerful) lion, and so on.
- Some commonly used **personifications** are angels or doves as bringers of peace and the Greek god Mars as the embodiment of war.
- **Allegories** could be, for example, the German Michel (with pointy cap) as an emblem for Germany, Marianne as an emblem for France, a bear symbolizing Russia, and Lady Justice with a sword as an emblem for the rule of law.
- **Citations** of older, well-known caricatures or images used as allusions – for example, the more than 2,000 year-old Roman sculptural group called the "Laocoön."