

## Stephen Colbert and the Washington Correspondents' Dinner: Swiftian Irony and Multiple Audiences

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On April 29, 2006, American comedian Stephen Colbert spoke at the Washington Correspondents' Dinner. His audience consisted largely of members of the Washington media — newspaper reporters and television reporters. Also in his audience was George W. Bush, the President of the United States. Colbert is generally considered a funny speaker, but as his speech went on, fewer and fewer people laughed. At the end of his speech, applause was very weak, and most of the reporters there said later that his speech was not funny at all. Lloyd Grove with the New York Daily News reported that Colbert “bombed badly.” Chris Lehmann at the New York Observer said that “the material wasn’t all that original; that Mr. Colbert’s persona gets wearily one-note-ish in person; and that his timing was dreadfully off.” The majority of reporters covering the event focused on the Bush impersonator who opened the night and failed to mention Colbert at all: Joan Walsh at *Salon* noted that the “resounding silence” was “a little chilling.”

However, his speech became incredibly popular on the Internet — Yahoo’s “Buzz Log,” which reports on what searches are popular on Yahoo, reported that searches for Colbert jumped 5,625% in the week after his speech (“Mocking”). On YouTube, the video-sharing web site, hits for the video of Colbert’s speech topped 2.7 million within a week (Bray). Why was Colbert’s speech not successful when given but very successful later on the Internet? The answer lies in understanding different audiences and their reactions. In this paper, I analyze Stephen Colbert’s speech that day by looking at his audiences, then by looking at his use of irony to speak past one audience and to another. Colbert’s speech serves as a useful reminder that when studying rhetoric, the most immediate audience may not be the key audience at all.

When studying speeches, traditionally rhetorical scholars have often looked at the success or failure of the speech as measured by the response of the people present at the speech, or the immediate effects of the speech. However, this way of judging a speech sometimes fails to explain a powerful speech. For example, President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, considered one of the best speeches in American history, was something of a failure at the time of its delivery according to some witnesses. The 1863 audience expected a longer, more triumphant speech (to mark a major victory in the Civil War), and Lincoln’s short, thoughtful, rather melancholy speech was not what they expected.

Similarly, in *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, Edwin Black examines a 1912 speech

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by John Jay Chapman, "The Coatesville Address." Chapman gave a speech about race relations in the United States after a lynching in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. The speech was a grieving and mournful speech about how all Americans are hurt by lynchings. He said that when he heard about the lynching, "I seemed to get a glimpse into the unconscious soul of this country... I seemed to be looking into the heart of the criminal — a cold thing, and awful thing... For to look at the agony of a fellow-being and remain aloof means death in the heart of the onlooker" (cited in Black, 79-80).

The people of Coatesville did not want to hear what Chapman wanted to say. In fact, only three people attended his speech (Black, 79). It was largely forgotten after he gave it. By usual standards, the speech was a terrible failure. However, writing years later, Black concluded that the speech "is not a cold marble monument. It lives. But to see its life, we must find its proper context" (83). Black explains that context carefully: although only three people heard Chapman's original speech, it speaks (and continues to speak) to the larger context of American culture and America's terrible history of racial intolerance. Indeed, Black argues that only recently has Chapman's real audience even started to exist: white people sensitive enough to race history to be able to feel guilt and shame at events like the Coatesville lynching. "It may be," Black argues, "that Chapman's Coatesville Address is only just now finding its understanding audience... as we brood and debate upon where we went wrong as a nation and what we should do to set things right again" (88-89).

Stephen Colbert's speech in Washington "failed" (in the most obvious sense) in the same way Chapman's speech "failed": it confronted his immediate audience with a way of looking at the world that they did not share and did not want to share. Colbert's speech was sarcastic and ironic. In it, he pretended to be a strong supporter of the President, but his comments made clear that in reality, he was angry at the Bush administration. For example, in one section he said he liked President Bush

because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound — with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world. (Frederick)

Here the bitter humor of the speech relies on the small difference between "stand for things" (to have strong beliefs) and "stand on things" (Bush's speeches at American disaster sites, speeches that Colbert implied are empty and meaningless). With the President sitting just a few feet away from him, Colbert could not have expected that the crowd would feel comfortable with this kind of humor. Indeed, video taken from the speech shows President Bush rolling his eyes and shaking his head, clearly disapproving of the speech.

Most of the audience was made up of reporters and news people, and Colbert's humor was not kind to them either. On his television show (and before that, on "The Daily Show,") Colbert has made it clear that he feels reporters have failed to criticize the President when they should have. In his speech, he took the chance to criticize them fiercely for being too friendly to the President. In one section, he told them (again, pretending to like the President) that the job of the press is merely to report what the President tells them to report. Colbert told the reporters they should enjoy all the extra time they have saved by not

investigating the White House: "Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know – fiction! (Frederick)." Here Colbert used sarcasm to tell the reporters that he thinks they're cowards who obey the President no matter what. It's no surprise that the audience gathered there was uncomfortable, unhappy, and unimpressed with his speech.

However, to judge Colbert's speech a "failure" would be to ignore the larger context of the speech. Unlike Chapman's speech, we do not have the benefit of fifty or more years of history to tell us if Colbert's speech will resonate for future audiences. However, it certainly was popular among a large group of people who were not immediately present at the speech: Internet-users who do not approve of President Bush. Among this group of people (a much larger group than the ones in the room he spoke in) the speech was funny, truthful, and honestly angry. If Colbert was aiming his speech to that audience, then he was a success.

The major rhetorical tool that Colbert employed in that speech (and continues to employ on his show) is one called *irony*. Irony is a difficult concept to pin down, and it has many different levels. At its simplest level, irony is any disjunction between what a speaker says and what he or she really feels. Sarcasm, where a speaker says something but with a nonverbal tone that contradicts it, is a basic form of irony: When a friend says "Oh, *that* was graceful" after you've tripped and fallen, that's irony.

Colbert's speech employs a much more complicated and sophisticated form of irony often called "Swiftian satire." Jonathan Swift was an Irish writer in the 18th century, probably best known for his parody *Gulliver's Travels*. One of his finest and most famous uses of irony is in the essay called "A Modest Proposal," in which Swift spoke as if he were a reasonable man discussing the "Irish problem." As the speaker continues to explain his modest proposal to solving the difficulties of poverty and famine in Ireland, it slowly dawns on the reader that the author is "calmly offer [ing], and systematically defend [ing], a solution to the crisis – that the children of the poor be cannibalized" (Fox 27). Swift's interlocuter carefully lays out his plan in the most reasonable tone imaginable, explaining the costs and the benefits in extremely clinical language. For example:

A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter. (504)

As the essay continues, the "modest proposal" becomes more and more overtly horrific. All the while, Swift's voice remains completely calm and "reasonable," even as the reader becomes more and more convinced of the insanity of his idea:

Those who are more thrifty... may flay the carcass; the skin of which artificially dressed will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.

As to our city of Dublin, shambles may be appointed for this purpose in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs. (505)

F. R. Leavis, in "The Irony of Swift," notes that "the dispassionate, matter-of-fact tone induces

a feeling and a motion of assent, while the burden, at the same time, compels the feelings appropriate to rejection, and in the contrast – the tension – a remarkably disturbing energy is generated” (19). The repugnance that the reader can't help but feel when hearing children discussed as meat reveals how inhumane it is to discuss human lives as if they don't matter. Swift's actual position, of course, was quite the opposite – that the suffering of the Irish under British occupation was barbarous and shameful to human instincts.

Near the end of the essay, as the reader is reeling at the grotesque contrast between the author's hideous proposal and his tone, Swift lets the “mask” of the speaker slip just a bit, to reveal the weariness and despair of the true author behind the insanely calm monster. The author suggests a variety of reasonable solutions to the “Irish problem,” but implores his readers not to even consider any of them:

Let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, 'till he hath at least some glympse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice. But, as to my self, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal... (508-509)

Here, near the end, the author's true face is revealed for just a moment. In a very subtle use of language, Swift tells us that he has suggested these more reasonable plans for years and has lost even a glimpse of hope that anyone would ever try them. And since no one will try the *real* modest proposals he has made, he is forced to suggest something so savagely cruel that it might force people to pay attention and see how England was consuming Ireland figuratively, if not literally.

Similarly, in his speech Colbert attempted to paint an image of a supporter of Bush who is so proudly ignorant and cruel no humane person could support it. For example, he criticized the First Lady's efforts to improve literacy:

I'm sorry, I've never been a fan of books. I don't trust them. They're all fact, no heart. I mean, they're elitist, telling us what is or isn't true, or what did or didn't happen. Who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was built in 1914? If I want to say it was built in 1941, that's my right as an American! I'm with the president, let history decide what did or did not happen. (Frederick)

Here Colbert mocks the President's well-known lack of reading and uses that to develop the idea that Bush and his supporters are actively ignoring reality, caring only about emotion and sacrificing real facts. More than a mere jab at Bush' lack of erudition, it becomes a scathing attack on the administration's infamous tendency to ignore facts when they are inconvenient.

The extended use of irony into parody and satire is referred to by many different metaphors in literary criticism. Arguing against the common metaphor of “interpreting” irony, Wayne Booth argued that a better metaphor was that of a mask or “persona.”

In this view the reader is thought of as unmasking an eiron, or detecting behind a “mask-character” or persona the lineaments of the true speaker. This metaphor has at least the great advantage, over terms like “decipher” or “decode” or “translate,” of suggesting the complexity and uniqueness of persons, not the substitution of one simple message for another simple message. The meaning of an irony in this view inescapably

includes the dramatic engagement of person with person – in the form of peering and unmasking. And the metaphor has the final advantage of entailing “personal feelings” and suggesting the presence of drama. (33)

The rhetorical pleasure that Stephen Colbert and his cohorts at the Daily Show evoke is the pleasure of enjoying a well-crafted persona or mask, and more specifically of seeing the real person beneath peek out sometimes in their tone or attitude. One of Colbert's most effective routines on his television show is called “The Word,” where Colbert rants in his Bush-supporting persona, and at the same time words appear on a split-screen next to him that undermine and mock him. The “Word” is a glimpse of the true Colbert peeking out from behind the mask, encouraging the audience to laugh at this buffoon he's acting and share his outrage at the words the mask is mouthing. One of the most quoted lines from his speech has his persona, pretending to support Bush, noting that some say changing the staff at the White House is like “re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” (a common metaphor for making small changes when everything has become a disaster). Colbert, in persona, disagreed: “This administration is not sinking. This administration is **soaring**. If anything, they are rearranging the deck chairs on the Hindenburg!” (Frederick). Colbert's ironic inability to see that replacing one disaster with another doesn't fix the problem (in addition to the incongruous image of deck chairs on a blimp) winks at the viewer-in-the-know, inviting us to share his anger at the “disaster” (whether it be Titanic or Hindenburg) Bush has created.

Much has been made recently of a study indicating that viewers of The Daily Show (Colbert's original program and one with which he still shares the style) are more cynical than non-viewers (Baumgartner & Morris). However, for irony to work well, there must be a sense that there is a real person with real feelings behind the ironic mask. As Eric Gans puts it, “irony is like a Black Mass [the Satanic rite], a mode of disbelief that only a believer can engage in” (68). Just as one must believe in God to worship Satan, so the person who enjoys Colbert's dark, vicious attacks on the President must believe in a vision of the world that prompts such outrage. The reporters and politicians present at the physical event largely did not partake of that vision with the man behind Colbert's mask. But Colbert spoke through that mask, and through the immediate audience, using irony to encourage them to see the world as he did and to embrace that worldview.

In short, Stephen Colbert's speech to the Washington Correspondent's Dinner is a reminder that sometimes a rhetorical act that looks like a total failure can echo with different audiences and at different times, becoming a success with people and in places far from its original delivery. Fans of Colbert would argue that he was speaking *past* the people present *to* the people in America who disapprove of the President and the media, expressing their anger and their belief that the Bush administration has failed. Or as he put it that evening, while sarcastically explaining why he was “anti-fact”: “reality has a well-known liberal bias.”

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