



JOHN CURTIN PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY EDUCATION PROGRAM

CARTOON ANALYSIS with Dr Jasmine Day, JCPML Education Officer

In many political cartoons, there is an **analogy**. This means that the cartoonist helps you to understand a political situation (and find it funny) by comparing it with another, more familiar situation. Start analysing a political cartoon by asking, 'What is the analogy between?' You might know the answer straight away, or you might work it out gradually. Either way, use the following process:

1. Identify the **analogy**, or take a guess (for now) as to what it is. For example ...

Cartoon title	Political issue	Analogy with everyday situation
<i>Taken Over</i>	Curtin becomes PM	Business – a new boss takes over the company
<i>Shifting Apron Strings</i>	The "turn to America"	Romantic relationships – the "dirty old man" and the "floozy chick"
<i>It's Up To Him</i>	Federal powers over industry	Train controller – which direction will the train be sent in?

2. Now you can figure out how the analogy works. How do the following **details** in the cartoon express either a political issue or an everyday situation?

- Characters' facial expressions, body gestures and costumes
- Objects used by the characters or placed nearby
- The physical setting – what kind of place is the event happening in?

3. You can go deeper into **symbolism** too:

- Characters who look not only like a specific politician, but also like a figure from mythology or popular culture
- Allusions to other historical or mythological events
- **HINT** – you may not be familiar with myths and famous people that are no longer well known, but which were famous in the cartoonist's day. Knowing about these things is called prerequisite knowledge. What prerequisite knowledge would have been necessary to understand the cartoon you are looking at? Would people from another culture have had this knowledge and been able to understand the cartoon too? Many artists and cartoonists in the late 19th and early 20th century alluded to ideas and characters from Greek and Roman (ie. Classical) mythology, European fairy tales and nursery rhymes, famous European paintings from past centuries, and the Bible. Reading about these things in books or on the internet, or watching documentaries about cultural topics, is interesting and boosts your ability to recognise symbolism in historical sources.

4. You can also think **historically**:

- The events that were taking place at the time the cartoon was published – both events that directly influenced the cartoon and those that indirectly influenced it
- Popular beliefs and values of the time that influenced the cartoon
- Political beliefs and values of the time that influenced the cartoon
- Racist, sexist or other discriminatory portrayals of people that were not deemed offensive when the cartoon was originally published (we have to take this cultural context into consideration). They are there to express a message, so what is it and what does it have to do with the overall meaning of the cartoon?
- Portrayals of people smoking (a habit once popular and "manly" but now known to cause cancer)
- **REMEMBER** – thinking historically means understanding how and why people used to have certain beliefs and attitudes, NOT judging them. You don't have to agree with a racist cartoon, for example, but you should not waste time and words accusing it of being racist now that most people would recognise this racism. Instead, try to get inside the mind of the cartoonist and explain what's going on in there.

You should aim to show how the fine points of detail in a cartoon relate to the bigger picture and major themes. So your essay about a cartoon could be structured like this:

1. Introduction: identify the **analogy** – what is the political issue and the everyday situation it is being compared with?
2. Body: discuss how the **details** in the cartoon construct **symbols** and relate to **historical themes**. Suggest how these techniques are used by the cartoonist to manipulate the viewer's emotions to form a certain opinion of a politician or political issue. How effective do you think the cartoonist's attempt to sway the viewer is? Do you know what happened next in history – whether the majority of people agreed with the kind of view expressed in the cartoon, or whether they disagreed? What was the result?
3. Conclusion: restate what the analogy is and briefly summarise several of your most important points about the main methods that the cartoon uses to try to shape the viewer's attitude toward an issue.

Example of Cartoon Analysis – *Shifting Apron Strings*

Australian troops had been stationed in North Africa fighting German and Italian armies. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour, Curtin asked Churchill to return some of these Australian troops to defend Australia from the Japanese forces that were spreading across the Pacific. But Churchill preferred to send the Australian troops to defend British interests in Burma; only after an argument with Churchill via cablegram did Curtin redirect the Australian soldiers' ships back to Australia. Preoccupied with its campaign in Europe and located far from the Pacific region, Britain was unable to render further assistance to Australia, so Curtin asked the United States to assist Australia's war effort – which it reluctantly agreed to do.

The cartoon to the right, 'Shifting Apron Strings' drawn by John Frith (*The Bulletin*, 31 December 1941), was an interpretation of Australia's new alliance with the United States, known as the "turn to America". We can analyse it in terms of its analogy, details, symbols and historical themes.



No offence, mum, but I'm shifting to these here apron strings—at least for twenty-four hours."

Who is the figure on the right? Things to note:

- Britain is drawn as a large matronly woman, known in popular culture as *Britannia*. Since the 19th century, European art had depicted countries as women, a type of symbolism called *personification*. By the 1940s, Britannia would have been widely recognised by newspaper readers.
- Britannia is dressed as warrior – the armour of Ares, the ancient Greek god of war (i.e. Roman god Mars), yet she may also be analogous to Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom (Roman goddess Minerva) – she has a helmet and shield. She also has a trident, weapon of the Greek sea god Poseidon (Roman Neptune) because Britain had possessed the most powerful navy in the world since the reign of Elizabeth I, when the British navy defeated the Spanish armada. A famous 19th century British patriotic song goes, 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves'.
- Britannia is also reminiscent of Boudicca (Boadicea) – a fierce British warrior queen who fought the invading Romans in antiquity. Boudicca became a patriotic British folk hero in the 19th century.
- Britannia is drawn large to represent the power of Britain and personify the concept of Australia's "mother country".

Who is the younger woman in the middle of the cartoon? How do you know? Things to note:

- The USA is drawn as a young woman – she is the "new kid on the block" who has just joined the war. She is a young country with limited fighting experience.
- She wears high heels, impractical in war. Does this make her look ridiculous? Contrast her feet with those of Britannia. The implication is that the US lacks experience.
- The USA wears a sailor suit because most of the US forces who came to defend Australia were navy personnel.
- What facial expression is she casting over her shoulder to the man? How does this relate to her youthful looks?

Who is the man on the left? How do you know? Things to note:

- Australia is lower in rank and power than its allies, following behind them.
- Curtin has dropped Britain's apron strings and taken up the US's – what does "cutting the apron strings" mean? (There was once a saying that a person was "holding onto mother's apron strings", i.e. dependent upon mother or, in this case, the "mother country".)
- Curtin was a tall thin man. Why has he been drawn short and fat? He is portrayed as an older man chasing a younger woman, a "dirty old man".

Caption: 'No offence mum, but I'm shifting to these here apron strings, as least for 24 hours.' "24 hours" was once a way of referring to a "one night stand". In that case, what is the cartoonist saying about Australia's relationship with the USA? He's saying that it's short term and its purpose is simply to save us from the Japanese. The analogy is with a dirty old man's affair with a cheap floozy – it's brief, insincere and bound to end, a relationship of convenience.

- What does Britain think about the alliance? Look at her gaping mouth – what emotion does this signify?
- Do you think that a majority of readers would have agreed with this cartoon's condemnation of Curtin's "turn to America"? Why? Consider Australia's traditional ties to its "mother country" and sense of identity.
- Did Australia's alliance with the USA turn out to be a brief one, as some people expected?