

## Satire to Discuss Race in America

Satire blends criticism with quick wit, and can be a powerful tool for change. Satire can also expose societal issues in such a way that the absurdity of it is made clear. Frequently, this form of ridicule is understood as no more than a good-natured ribbing, but throughout literature, satire has been an essential weapon in attacking convention and authority. Mark Twain's novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, is an early example of American satirical literature. The story depicts mid-century America through the eyes of Huck Finn, exposing the hypocrisies of the time such as race, slavery, and religion. More than a century after this book was written racial tensions are more visible than ever. The 'industry' of political and racial satire reaches more people than ever before. Keegan-Michael Key, Jordan Peele and Trevor Noah are all comedians who use satire to bring serious racial issues in America to light by exaggerating what happens in reality through the eyes of black men.

Trevor Noah, who is a comedian on Comedy Central explains the sudden increased interest Americans have in politics during Trump's presidency. He rejects the idea that Trumpism made America "more racist", and states that this has always been an issue. It is just easier for liberal minded individuals to blame racism on a single person than address the core, underlying issues. "We make it seem like one man is bad and if we get rid of him then everyone is good. But that one man just represents an idea" (Noah, 2017). Noah, the South African citizen, has been able to approach his comedy sketches on American race issues from an outsider's perspective. In his sketches he commonly makes exaggerated comparisons about racism and white supremacy, but the underlying message exposes a clear cut reality. In some ways white Americans subconsciously feel certain privileges and rights are inherently owed to them, and fear losing this. They fear living the America people of color experience today and have for

centuries. Noah has found that humor is the best platform to reveal these hypocrisies to both sides. While Trevor Noah effectively satirizes the news and politicians for the lapses in their argument, it only serves as confirmation bias for most of his viewers.

Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key star in their own Comedy Central sketch show. They also use satire in their short sketches to bring the biases of western ideals to attention. Both Key and Peele are biracial which they claim help them attack racial stereotypes from both sides. “It allows us to see things from different angles [that] a person who’s wholly immersed in either one of those cultures might miss” (Peele, 2015). They argue that being biracial makes them more comfortable satirizing white people and African Americans. In the short sketch titled Substitute Teacher, Key plays a substitute struggling pronouncing common white names. The skit challenges what people think is the norm and common knowledge, when in reality many Americans have a Eurocentric viewpoint. How could someone mispronounce a name like Aaron? While this is an exaggeration, their overall message is clear. Key and Peele continuously challenge the perspectives white Americans have on the on black and African American communities. In a different skit titled Flash Mob, white people mistake an innocent black flash dance mob as a race war. Again, this seems like a ridiculous scenario but it is not much of a stretch of what some fear on both sides. The sketch exposes white people’s underlying fear of black people encroaching and having a visible presence in ‘white spaces’. Without having to explicitly explain these double standards and racist social issues, the show conveys their point in a non threatening way, as to not make the side the show is arguing seem foolish.

It is necessary to acknowledge why we think certain things are funny. In many of Key and Peele’s sketches all they do is switch the cultural norm, exaggerate it, and they have a skit. In doing so, this exposes the absurdity of the idea they are challenging. These sketches take

familiar situations and change them just enough to make them humorous and reveal the truths, tensions, and emotions buried beneath the surface in these interactions. The humor allows the point to be made, potentially to someone who might otherwise be resistant to seeing those truths or acknowledge those feelings. Therefore, this makes the realistic sketch technique effective. Arguably too soon, Key and Peele did a sketch about a black man wearing a black hoodie in a white neighbourhood. Jordan Peele walks through the neighbourhood, and gets nervous when homeowners give him unfriendly glares. Eventually, a police car rolls by. In an attempt to seem unnoticeable and not stand out, Peele puts his hood on. Painted on the side of the hood is the side profile of a white man's face. The police officer is 'fooled' and is no longer suspicious. This skit is intended to mock police after the death of Trayvon Martin. Unnecessary police force has become an extremely controversial topic with anti Black Lives Matter protests popping up throughout the United States. Through the use of humor, it is difficult to counter-argue the serious social message.

Trevor Noah, and other comedic takes on the news deconstruct a particular story, interjecting humorous analogies, but inevitably can't avoid making partisan arguments, or at least arguments that seem partisan to a political opponent. While this technique may reach some on the other side politically, they largely serve to reinforce the beliefs of one side. Noah's show can even provide a cathartic relief from news they find despairing. But shows like this are largely dismissed by the other side as partisan, self-congratulatory love fests. A recent political scandal involving Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem has sparked an outcry from both liberal and conservatives. President Donald Trump himself, expressed how upset he was. The Daily Show host did not hold back from ridiculing the president for not understanding the NFL player's message. By using Trump's own words against him to expose his hypocrisies and

wrong doings. By carefully choosing specific shots and visuals, each story is made to seem more laughable. Because the show is unapologetically liberal, Noah knows that his audience typically agrees with him.

Both The Key and Peele Show and The Daily Show use satire to criticize a certain view or person. However, the two shows take very different approaches. One show is not more effective than the other, as the shows have different intentions. Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key's show helps challenge stereotypes involving race, gender, and why society has certain unwritten rules. Their message on these issues are less in-your-face, and could potentially help someone who would normally reject the message to see the other side. Trevor Noah takes a more traditional comedic approach to address similar topics, while also keeping his audience up to date on the news taking a very liberal approach. Because he is not trying to persuade, or change anyone's political stance, Noah takes a much more direct route with his humor. An approach that makes it impossible to miss his point. Both of these techniques effectively use satire to discuss important racial social issues when they might have otherwise been overlooked. Despite the difference in audiences the two comedy shows may appeal to, they start important conversations about the political climate of our country that should have occurred years ago.

## Works Cited

Newburger, Emma, et al. "Trevor Noah Dissects U.S. Race Relations in Talk on Cornell Campus." *The Cornell Daily Sun*, 18 Sept. 2017, [cornellsun.com/2017/09/17/trevor-noah-dissects-u-s-race-relations-in-talk-on-cornell-campus/](http://cornellsun.com/2017/09/17/trevor-noah-dissects-u-s-race-relations-in-talk-on-cornell-campus/).

Swann, Jennifer. "5 Times 'Key & Peele' Made Us Laugh-and Really Think About Equality." *TakePart*, 26 July 2015, [www.takepart.com/article/2015/07/26/key-peeel/](http://www.takepart.com/article/2015/07/26/key-peeel/).