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“A Presidential Candidate” Satirical Analysis

As the 2024 presidential election draws near, candidates from all parties are in their attempts to gain as much voter support as possible. In recent years, America has seen more diversity in the people running for office than ever before. From former vice presidents and governors to pop singers and complete criminals, anyone interested can run for office—as long as they are American citizens. The loose requirement puts the burden on the American public to make informed and thoughtful voting decisions. However, political candidates often use manipulative speeches and campaigns to influence common citizens for their support. “A Presidential Candidate” is an original satire written by Mark Twain in 1879 that uses many rhetorical devices such as irony and logical fallacies to satirize presidential candidates and their deception.

Twain utilizes irony to highlight the contradictions and inconsistencies in the behavior of political candidates. Political officers can often be found with contradicting statements, mainly because they know the public will not notice them. For every issue or bill in the government, there are always two sides, which leads these officials to say opposite things in order to gain support from both sides. However, doing so takes away a level of trust and honesty between the candidate and the public. In many cases, the public does not think critically or logically when these political speakers speak, not recognizing the most obvious lies. For example, Twain poses

as a prospective presidential candidate but uses satire in the form of a campaign speech to characterize political candidates as untruthful and corrupt. In an attempt to clear his name, Twain owns up to all of his past mistakes, which include “ [running] [his disabled grandfather] out of the front door in his nightshirt at the point of a shotgun, “[burying] a dead aunt under my grapevine,” and many other gruesome acts. However, at the very end of the speech, Twain quickly states, “I recommend myself as a safe man-- a man who starts from the basis of total depravity and proposes to be fiendish to the last.” The last sentence is a form of irony, as someone who has committed many acts of murder would not be considered a safe person. Directly after he calls himself a safe man, he states that he will be evil till the end. Twain intentionally contradicts himself to make the readers aware of the deception of presidential candidates. These candidates often portray themselves in a positive, diplomatic manner, even if their actions directly contradict their portrayal. The irony intends to highlight the mask politicians use when conveying themselves as honest when their true nature is the complete opposite. Twain states that he is owning up to his past mistakes because, “If you know the worst about a candidate, to begin with, every attempt to spring things on him will be checkmated.” Political leaders will always attempt to make their opponents look bad. Twain’s statement is an example of irony as publicly displaying all of his past mistakes gives the opponent a chance to use those mistakes against him. If anything, owning up to his mistakes makes the viewers aware of his negative side, and gives the public a greater chance of not supporting the candidate. However, most candidates know this, which is why many attempt to hide their pasts until their opponent brings them to light, which forces the candidate to make excuses to protect their reputation. Clearly, Twain uses irony to demonstrate the contradiction and ambiguity in political candidates.

In addition to emphasizing the deceit of government officials, Twain employs logical fallacies to unveil the flawed reasoning and manipulative tactics often used by politicians. Politicians will often use faulty logic in order to make their statements seem rational. Likewise, Twain attempts to rationalize his cowardness by using George Washington as an example. However, those who think critically would understand how the logic is internally flawed, which in turn disproves Twain's justification. After Twain fled from Gettysburg, he attempted to save face by claiming that his cowardness had the same intention as "the purpose of imitating Washington, who went into the woods at Valley Forge for the purpose of saying his prayers." George Washington's presidential and military legacy is remembered as the foundation of the country, especially after Washington led to independence through many battles, including Valley Forge. He is known as the founding father of our country and is a greatly respected president. Twain attempts to defend himself using Washington as an example in an attempt to gain just as much respect. Twain fled the battlefield because "[he] was scared...and preferred to have somebody else save it." This is very different than Washington's legacy as he was never one to flee the battlefield and wait for other people to fight on his behalf. Twain is comparing his cowardness to Washington's attempt to gain morale at Valley Forge, which would be an example of false cause, which is when the author creates a link between events that seems to be logical but is intrinsically flawed. Twain's reason for fleeing is not the same as the reason for Washington praying for battle, showing how political leaders will use whatever justification possible to save their reputation. Rather than owning up to their mistakes, politicians make excuses but do so in a way that manipulates the public. For example, after revealing that he buried his aunt, Twain asks the rhetorical question, "Does that unfit me for the Presidency? The Constitution of our country does not say so. No other citizen was ever considered unworthy of

this office because he enriched his grapevines with his dead relatives.” This is an example of a fallacy of antecedent, which is a logical fallacy that involves drawing an incorrect conclusion from an if/then argument. Twain attempts to use the fact that previous candidates were never punished for burying their relatives, so he should not be punished. However, this logic is flawed as no president has been punished because no one has ever buried their relatives before. Using a logical fallacy makes the reader aware of false evidence or justifications that political leaders use to make themselves look better. Evidently, Twain uses logical fallacies to reveal manipulation tactics and faulty logic used by political leaders to protect themselves.

Mark Twain uses many rhetorical devices such as irony and logical fallacies in his piece, “A Presidential Candidate,” to satirize presidential candidates and their deceptive campaigns. His effective use of rhetorical devices makes the reader aware of their naivety and encourages them to think critically before believing the claims of political leaders.