



The First Supper
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POSTMODERN IRONY AS SUBVERSIVE RHETORICAL STRATEGY

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In this essay, the use of postmodern rhetorical irony as a subversive strategy is explored. In particular, Susan Dorothea White's painting, *The First Supper*, is analyzed as a subversive, postmodern ironic reading of Leonardo da Vinci's famed work, *The Last Supper*. This analysis suggests that subversive irony assumes distinctive and complex technical and theoretical characteristics, most relevant to its postmodern nature; chief among these is the fact that the irony invites multiple readings on multiple levels, thereby creating multiple potential audiences. Significantly, although the subversive function of irony in this instance may be apparent to a postmodern audience, the text may be just as likely to function hegemonically for other audiences.

THE PLACE OF IRONY AS A SUBJECT of analysis in the field of rhetorical studies is secure. Its study is rooted in the common academic past that English and Communication Studies share, but even apprehended solely as a strategy of speech communication, irony has proved highly worthy of study. As Booth (1974) has noted, "[F]rom the earliest discussion of irony it has been seen as something that, like metaphor, will not stay graciously in an assigned position, something that in fact can easily and quickly expand its own peculiar appeals, move toward dominance, and become some kind of end in

itself" (p. 138). As understood by rhetoricians today, irony is a powerful rhetorical tool whose role in creating meaning should not be underestimated.

In his comprehensive, quasi-historical study of irony, Booth (1974) has chronicled the various technical forms that irony may assume, thus establishing the complex nature of irony as a rhetorical trope. More recently, some scholars have taken a second look at irony as a socio-historical phenomenon. For example, Wilde (1982) makes the provocative argument that the rhetorical use of irony can be traced through three distinct periods: pre-modern, modern, and postmodern. Specifically, he describes premodernist irony as confirming harmony; modernist irony as seeking to transcend acknowledged discontinuities and fragmentation; and postmodernist irony as cultivating multiplicity and fragmentation. A number of contemporary theorists have noted the ubiquity today of postmodern irony (see, e.g., Blair, 1992; Cheatham, 1992; Hutcheon, 1992; Swearingen, 1991). Particularly interesting is the claim of some of these theorists that irony, in its postmodern incarnation, functions primarily as a "rhetorical and structural strategy of resistance and opposition" (Hutcheon, 1992, p. 12).

In this essay, I examine an instance of visual communication wherein postmodern rhetorical irony is utilized precisely as a strategy of resistance and subversion in order to demonstrate that the distinctive and complex technical and theoretical characteristics that postmodern irony assumes are most relevant to its postmodern nature. Specifically, I analyze subversive irony as it functions in Susan Dorothea White's painting, *The First Supper*, whose rhetorical premise is Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. I conclude that although postmodern irony functions subversively for select audiences, it may well function hegemonically for others.

Postmodern Irony

Swearingen (1991) states that "we are moving into a postliterate culture marked by a diversity of secondary oralities Literacy as we know it may be passing; the literacies of the future await our definition" (p. 19). Rhetorical irony, argues Swearingen, is just such a literacy. In particular, its character has been altered by the relative proliferation of meanings available in a postmodern age. Where once only two meanings--literal and intended--were relevant to irony, in these postmodern times, multiple meanings might be inferred at both levels.

Historically, irony has been characterized by incongruity between literal and intended meanings--between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected and what occurs (Foss & Littlejohn, 1986). This incongruity prompts the audience to identify the relationship between the two elements that warrants the irony in order to determine the underlying congruence that unites the two apparently disparate elements. Irony's success as a rhetorical device is attributed to the cohesion that obtains between a rhetor and an audience that can discern successfully the intended, or ironic, meaning. In this way, irony commands a simultaneous engagement with the artifact and a detachment from it, in order to assess the disparity (Booth, 1978). Both of these impulses serve to secure the select audience that can participate on both levels. Booth (1983) argues that

this feature ensures participation in the rhetorical artifact by the audience, which further guarantees that audience's compliance.

Rhetorical irony as traditionally understood, then, is defined by internal contradiction and inconsistency that must be actively detected. Booth himself, however, notes that in a time characterized by contradictions and inconsistencies, irony faces a particular challenge: "At the extreme point of doubt, all statement becomes suspect" (1974, p. 244). Although Booth suggests that, as a result, irony may not feature as prominently as a rhetorical device, other theorists have identified its ubiquity today precisely for this reason. Hutcheon (1992), for example, argues that because irony is founded upon prevarication of meaning, it is particularly suited to a postmodern environment where meaning is no longer perceived "as something single, decidable, or stable" (p. 13). Furthermore, the nature of irony appears to have shifted to accommodate greater paradox in this contemporary world; Moore (1996) detects this paradox as manifest in cynicism and pessimism, which he argues is characteristic of political irony today.

Hutcheon (1991, 1992) and others (see, e.g., Bennett, 1992; Bernard, 1992; Blair, 1992; Mukherjee, 1992; Nadaner, 1984; Waring, 1992) are particularly intrigued by postmodern irony's subversive potential, given the inextricable relationship between postmodernism and the increasingly visible disenfranchised groups whose voices collectively contribute to the problematization of knowledge, truth, and meaning that characterizes postmodernism. Hutcheon (1991) argues that in its postmodern incarnation, irony functions either deconstructively or constructively:

The first is a kind of critical ironic stance that serves to distance, undermine, unmask, relativise, destabilise Here marginality becomes the model for internal subversion of that which presumes to be central. The other, constructive kind of irony ... works to assert difference as a positive ... this irony's focus is on liminality, where ... [i]rony opens up new spaces, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen. (pp. 30-31, italics hers)

Hutcheon (1992) asserts further that postmodern irony has a unique "ability to subvert from within, to speak the language of the dominant order and at the same time suggest another meaning and another evaluation. This... mode of address deconstructs one discourse, even as it constructs another" (p. 16, italics hers).

Postmodern irony, like postmodernism, furthermore is characterized by multiplicity, instability, inconsistency, and paradox (Bernard, 1992; Hutcheon, 1992; Wilde, 1982), which raises questions with respect to the meaning of said irony. If the general purpose of irony is to convey alternative meaning, and if the meanings generated by postmodern irony are multiple and inconsistent, then the derivation of meaning on the part of the audience--the crucial element of irony--is rendered complex indeed. Booth (1974) argues that traditional irony can be enormously successful by virtue of its cultivation of both audience agency and bonding between rhetor and audience. On the other hand, irony "risks disaster more aggressively than any other device" (p. 74) because of the possibility that the audience won't "get it." These extremes may be even more true of postmodern,

subversive irony than of traditional irony. The multiple, complex, and inconsistent messages postmodern, subversive irony advances can be confusing, thereby prompting an audience to dismiss the artifact as incoherent.

Another characteristic of postmodern irony, as foreshadowed above, is its destabilization not only of meanings in messages but of meaning itself (Hutcheon, 1992; Moore, 1996; Wilde, 1982). This may prove overwhelming to an audience unwilling to subscribe to this particularly profound subversive argument and its far-reaching implications. Referring to traditional irony, Foss and Littlejohn (1986) point out that "the choices made [as a result of irony], and the intensity with which irony requires that we make them, may entail rejecting or accepting a whole way of life" (p. 32). This may be more necessarily and aggressively the case with subversive irony; actively choosing the ironic reading that subverts, rather than simply having it dawn on one, is itself a radical act.

Because it is necessarily defined by the premise that it seeks to subvert, the ironic text may inadvertently reify and reproduce the very meanings it seeks to problematize. Although Bernard (1992) finds compelling the fact that subversive irony "works as a destabilizing force from within the presently existing social order" (p. 143), she acknowledges that it simultaneously reiterates and contradicts dominant representations (p. 136). This is true particularly in the case of limited or superficial readings of postmodern, subversive irony, wherein messages are apprehended selectively from among the several articulated by the irony. Isolating one message and thus disregarding the paradox in which it is embedded arguably belies the ultimate function of postmodern irony.

Given these significant risks, can irony, postmodern or otherwise, function subversively? It certainly appears to be readily available and accessible to that end, as many contemporary theorists claim, and arguably, the paradox on which irony is founded lends itself to use by submerged groups. Still, are the dynamics of rhetorical irony affected in some significant way when power--specifically, problematizing oppressive ideology--is the crux of the ironic text? Hutcheon (1992) argues that the strength of postmodern irony inheres in its ability to cultivate rather than transcend paradox, but whether and, if so, how this strategy functions subversively is not entirely clear. In this essay, I argue that although postmodern irony has subversive potential, its postmodern nature necessarily invites multiple, contradictory meanings that complicate a subversive function and that may even function hegemonically.

Irony as Subversion: A Case Study

To illustrate how postmodern irony functions as a subversive strategy, I analyzed *The First Supper*, by Susan White. This painting, which exemplifies postmodern irony, has as its premise Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Indeed, White (1988) states that *The First Supper* represents an explicit "challenge [to] the acceptance of the image of thirteen men on one side of a table as a celebrated symbol of a patriarchal religion." In this essay, I first provide a description of each artifact in order to establish rhetorical context. Next, I provide a two-part analysis of the rhetorical strategy of postmodern irony that is at work.

In the first part of this analysis, I explore points of congruence, technical and thematic, across the two artifacts; I discuss those features of the The Last Supper that White has retained in her painting. In the second part of the analysis, I address the points at which the two artifacts diverge, including those aspects of da Vinci's original that White has rejected or reconstituted in her work. I then explore whether and how The First Supper challenges the ideological tenets of The Last Supper, based upon my analysis of the relationship between the two artifacts. Finally, I discuss the potential of postmodern irony as a strategy of resistance and subversion.

The Last Supper

"Leonardo da Vinci: This name has become legendary, a synonym for greatness and for universal genius," states Wasserman (1984, p. 7). As Wasserman suggests, examples of da Vinci's work are recognizable universally, even to those unfamiliar with da Vinci himself--the Mona Lisa is one such example, as is The Last Supper.⁽ⁿ¹⁾ An Italian Renaissance painter, da Vinci also is described as the quintessential Renaissance person; he was, apparently, brilliant, knowledgeable, and well educated on a variety of subjects, some of which he incorporated technically into his work. For instance, generally characteristic of da Vinci's work and particularly remarkable in The Last Supper is the technical sophistication of his work with regard to mathematic and geometric principles and details.

The Last Supper is da Vinci's best known work. It was commissioned, probably in 1495, by Ludovico il Moro for the refectory of the Convent of Dominican Friars at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, and it probably was completed in 1497. Measuring 13'10" x 29'7.5", The Last Supper occupies a large part of one of the refectory walls. In a notable deviation from the convention of fresco painting, which generally is characterized by a pigment-water solution applied to wet plaster, da Vinci applied his preferred, hallmark oil-tempera mixture to dry plaster. Unfortunately, this combination did not hold up very well over time, a problem exacerbated by humid conditions in the building that houses the fresco. Consequently, The Last Supper has undergone numerous restorations--so many that, most art historians believe, what now remains is "largely the work of restorers" (Clark, 1983, p. 17). Da Vinci left behind, however, a number of scrupulously detailed sketches of the work that allow contemporary scholars and reviewers considerable insight into the original.

The Last Supper depicts Jesus Christ and his twelve male disciples sharing the last meal on the eve of Christ's crucifixion. Specifically, da Vinci's work chronicles "the announcement of the betrayal: 'Verily, I say unto you that one of you shall betray me'" (Brown, 1983, p. 10). The Last Supper captures the drama and emotion of the disciples' individual and highly emotional reactions to Christ's statement, leading many art critics to laud the work as a profound psychological study.

The action occurs around a table sparsely laden with empty dinnerware, a few rolls of bread, and small containers of red wine. The bread and wine, of course, are symbolic of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, the consumption of which implies salvation.

The room that serves as a setting is gloomy, paneled with dark wood, and the window directly behind Christ frames a threatening landscape: Dark, hovering clouds litter the sky, and the vague, looming shape of mountains are evident in the background. The moment is conveyed in dark colors and shadowed planes; the overriding atmosphere is one of impending doom. Christ appears profoundly saddened and isolated, yet relatively serene, in the maelstrom of dark emotion and passion experienced by his apostles. This feature, combined with the religious and historical significance of the event, serves to cultivate a strong sense of awe and abstraction. The occasion that da Vinci has captured, simultaneously mythical and historical, is truly a "terrible moment" (Clark, 1983, p. 19).

The Last Supper is perhaps the quintessential symbol of Western religion; the painting represents a powerful religious episode whose political implications have been global and profound. Indeed, The Last Supper is rife with meanings, not least the ideological presumption that ascribes power and privilege specifically to white, heterosexual men. Increasingly, that ideology is being challenged; scholars and laypersons alike are articulating challenges, in various forms, to the assumption of white male privilege. The First Supper, in fact, contributes to this dialogue; its challenges to the Western patriarchal paradigm are manifest in its ironic juxtaposition with its premise, The Last Supper.

The First Supper

In her painting, *The First Supper*,⁽ⁿ²⁾ Australian artist Susan Dorothea White challenges da Vinci's depiction of the legacy of Western Christianity on a number of apparent levels. Acrylic on wood and measuring 4'4" x 8'4", this work was exhibited originally in Munich, Germany, in 1988. White (1988) explains that, in addition to her desire to challenge patriarchal religion as represented in *The Last Supper*, the 1988 Australian Bicentennial influenced her painting. The Bicentennial generated a controversy in Australia regarding the appropriateness of celebrating the white invasion of Aboriginal life and land. In *The First Supper*, the Christ figure has been replaced with an Aboriginal woman wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the Aboriginal Land Rights flag. The table is adorned with a variety of luscious fruits, vegetables, and prepared foods characteristic of the Australian diet. The world beyond the room, framed by the window in the background, features the bright, arid Australian landscape and includes Uluru, a large rock and sacred site especially symbolic to Aboriginal peoples because of its recent (at the time of the painting) return to them by the Australian government.

In her painting, White also acknowledges that Australian society is composed of more than just European colonizers and Aboriginal natives. The figures who replace Christ's disciples in the painting "represent women from different regions of the world, who are part of Australian society today" (White, 1988). These women are dressed in traditional garb corresponding to their ethnicity and/or nationality. Notably, the only white person present is the woman who replaces da Vinci's Judas.

The physical proportions and elements of da Vinci's painting have been duplicated exactly by White in *The First Supper*. Indeed, White (1988) describes the pains she has taken to replicate scrupulously the physical dimensions of *The Last Supper*: She notes

that she "used a calculator to construct my composition in proportion to Leonardo's." She has gone so far as to use the same mathematical Fibonacci series that da Vinci employed in order to convey consistently the missing feet (due to erosion) of The Last Supper in her piece. The only instance in which she deviates, she points out, is with regard to the "impossible configuration of Peter's arm," which she suggests is unlikely to be da Vinci's work (as opposed to that of a restorer, presumably). Instead, White strives for a more natural rendering of the movement by the woman who replaces Peter in The Last Supper by "altering the elbow to an inward-pointing position" (White, 1988). Although the mechanics of White's scrupulous precision probably are lost on the lay viewer, her meticulous replication of form guarantees the reference to The Last Supper.

Analysis of Artifacts

Particularly significant with regard to this analysis is the fact that The Last Supper, which serves as the premise on which the irony of The First Supper is founded, is a universally familiar artifact. By the same token, most people are familiar, if only on a superficial level, with the narrative that the painting portrays: the eve of Christ's crucifixion, brought about by Judas' betrayal. Given the context of this familiarity, The First Supper is immediately recognizable as referencing The Last Supper; the signification is virtually guaranteed.

The central feature of incongruence between that which is expected and that which occurs in The First Supper qualifies it as an ironic text. However, in this case, irony has undergone a technical reconfiguration. Traditionally, irony is distinguished by the imposed association of two apparently incongruent elements such that their deeper congruence with each other is uncovered by the audience. In the case of The First Supper, the opposite is true: The apparent congruence disguises meaning that inheres in the incongruities between the artifacts. The rhetorical irony apparent in The First Supper seems to function, essentially, in reverse. To clarify the mechanical components of the irony that occurs in this instance, I next discuss The Last Supper and The First Supper both in terms of their readily apparent congruence and in terms of their incongruence, which contains the subtextual meaning that constitutes the irony.

Congruence between Texts

The most obvious similarity between the two artifacts is that of form. The physical setting has been reproduced exactly in White's painting. In both artifacts, a long table with eight legs is centered in a room of paneled walls and ceiling; a tripartite window frames the background and allows a glimpse of the external world. Empty plates, water, and unbroken bread on the table are apparent in both pieces as well.

The physical dimensions common to both paintings are especially remarkable because they are characterized by artifice and visual paradox (Kemp, 1981, p. 194). According to Kemp, the most immediate evidence of visual paradox in The Last Supper is that the table does not accommodate, realistically, all the subjects featured; it is not wide enough, does not allow adequate seating, and is too long to allow any seating at the ends, even

though characters are placed there. A second difficulty with the painting's setting is that the walls and ceiling are not portrayed realistically--a logical extension of their respective planes indicates that they could not be attached--although they do conform rigidly to mathematical and musical principles (p. 198). The precision with which these aberrations have been reproduced in *The First Supper* further ensures connection of that work with da Vinci's original.

The subjects featured in *The First Supper* also reflect exactly the physical proportions of corresponding subjects in *The Last Supper*. In each artifact, the subjects, with the exception of the central figure, are broken loosely into agitated clusters of three in their apparent responses to the central figure's dramatic revelation. Within these clusters, the women in *The First Supper* are posed identically to the corresponding subjects in *The Last Supper*. Like Christ in *The Last Supper*, the Aboriginal woman in *The First Supper* is isolated, physically offset from the other subjects; also, as with the original Christ, the notion of the trinity is reproduced in *The First Supper* by virtue of "the strict triangularity of [her] silhouette as framed against the rectangular window and the crowning segmental arch" (Wasserman, 1984, p. 94). Like da Vinci's Christ, the Aboriginal woman in *The First Supper* reaches toward a small loaf of bread, at which [she] glances with yearning" (Wasserman, 1984, p. 94); the woman in Judas's place "guiltily withdraws" (p. 96) from the Aboriginal woman as Judas does from Christ; and so on with each of the subjects.

Each subject in *The First Supper* also retains the mannerisms and objects with which her counterpart in *The Last Supper* is portrayed. The woman in Peter's stead, for example, clutches the knife Peter holds in the original, a pose "which prefigures his severing a soldier's ear" (Kemp, 1981, p. 192). Just as Judas does in *The Last Supper*, the woman in Judas's stead in *The First Supper* clutches a moneybag, which symbolizes greed and corruption. As in the original, her other hand hovers above a dish for which the Aboriginal woman in Christ's stead also reaches; this symbolizes in the original Christ's prophecy that he would be betrayed by one who "dippeth his hand with me in the dish" (Brown, 1983, p. 9).

White also replicates the physical expressions of each of da Vinci's subjects in her work; these expressions contribute in significant ways to the sense of "an explosive and highly dramatic scene" (Wasserman, 1984, p. 94). The profound emotional reactions of Christ's disciples in *The Last Supper* have been retained in White's painting. The "impulsive surge of shock expressed by Peter's angular motion, as he elbows his way towards Christ... carefully contrasted with the sleepy curves of young John, and set in counterpoint to the tense recoil of Judas, whose tendons contract like taut bow strings" (Kemp, 1981, p. 191), apparent in *The Last Supper*, are reproduced exactly in the corresponding subjects of *The First Supper*. The Aboriginal woman in Christ's place, too, conveys a similar sense of melancholy serenity; like Christ in *The Last Supper*, her "dignity, aloofness, and perfect calm distinguish [her] psychologically and attitudinally from the apostles" (Wasserman, 1984, p. 94).

Although not as vital to establishing a relationship with *The Last Supper*, White's recreation of the emotional and psychological reactions of the subjects reinforces the

reference and makes it compelling. White's replication of da Vinci's "intens[e] ... psychological analysis of each participant in the drama" (Brown, 1983, p. 9), conveyed by very particular facial and physical expressions, suggests that similar dynamics and identical or highly similar circumstances are being enacted in *The First Supper*

In terms of the formal similarities between the two artifacts, then, White has taken great pains to replicate precisely the physical setting, proportions, and expressions (physical and facial) of the subjects in *The Last Supper*. This scrupulous reproduction guarantees that the reference to da Vinci's work, an historic artifact powerfully symbolic of Western Christianity and religious ideology, is immediately apparent. In other words, the similarities ensure that *The Last Supper* functions as the fundamental premise for understanding *The First Supper*.

Incongruence between Texts

An obvious if not visual difference between *The Last Supper* and *The First Supper* is that of title. Da Vinci's work depicts the eve of Christ's crucifixion as described in the Bible; literally, this is Christ's last supper. According to Biblical interpretation and as rendered by da Vinci, the occasion is characterized by the explicit prophecy of Christ's impending betrayal by Judas, Christ's martyrdom, and the ensuing angst of Christ's disciples. The title of da Vinci's work, then, appropriately conveys a sense of finality that is as foreboding and tragic as it is inevitable. White's work, conversely, is entitled *The First Supper*. Clearly, this indicates a beginning, although whether or not the beginning is a positive one is unclear. The title certainly is suggestive of optimism and hope; at the very least, the title of White's work rejects the finality implied by *The Last Supper*.

The most immediately apparent visual differences between *The Last Supper* and *The First Supper* exist with regard to the physical placement and dimensions of the actual works. As noted, *The Last Supper* measures 13'10" x 29'7.5" and occupies most of a wall in a Catholic refectory. Its location there is significant; the Catholic setting establishes a congruent (with the painting) background replete with elaborate rituals, extreme conceptions of divinity and evil, and rigid, institutionalized hierarchy. The wall fresco is situated so that the viewpoint—the ideal viewing position—is located "in an impossible position at more than twice the height of a man [sic]" (Kemp, 1981, p. 196). In simple terms, da Vinci's original is huge and immovable, and it can be viewed only from one perspective: from below. Kemp (1981) points out that a lower placement of *The Last Supper* on the refectory wall "would have rendered it highly vulnerable to a change of viewpoint" (p. 196) or a change of perspective, something da Vinci strategically sought to avoid, according to Kemp. Given that perspective dramatically influences interpretation, a fixed, immutable viewing perspective constrains the range of possible interpretations.

In contrast, White's *The First Supper*, measuring 4'4" x 8'4", is depicted on a free-standing, "hand-produced woodblock" (White, 1988), which was exhibited originally in Volkshochschule ("the people's university") in Munich.⁽ⁿ³⁾ Relative to *The Last Supper*, White's work is significantly smaller, a feature that implies that it is less daunting and less intimidating than da Vinci's painting. In addition, the fact that *The First Supper's*

canvas is a free-standing woodblock, regardless of how it was exhibited originally, renders it manipulable in terms of placement in a way that the wall containing *The Last Supper* is not. Thus, *The First Supper* is inherently subject to a variety of viewing perspectives, and consequently lends itself to a greater variety of interpretations than *The Last Supper*. Also, the exhibition of White's painting in "the people's university" suggests a viewing atmosphere characterized by openness, egalitarianism, and lack of pretension, in contrast to the closed, rigid setting of *The Last Supper*. In marked contrast to *The Last Supper*, whose physical context enhances and reinforces an atmosphere of awe and inaccessibility, the contextual features of *The First Supper* serve to cultivate an atmosphere of accessibility for *The First Supper*. As such, *The First Supper* is rendered relatively more inviting of a range of interpretations, and thus, audience agency.

Another point on which the paintings diverge is with regard to medium--the different painting materials employed by the two artists. *The Last Supper* is an oil-tempera mixture, a medium that was classically da Vinci in that he flaunted tradition and practicality by using it for a fresco. According to Wasserman (1984), da Vinci "favored the use of an oil mixture because it permitted him to attain atmospheric effects and veiled sensuous surfaces" (p. 92); da Vinci greatly appreciated the "transparent and luminous skin surfaces, lustrous jewelry, silken hair, and atmospheric space" (p. 9) that an artist could attain with oil. The subtle, generally dark shadings of hue and tone made possible with oil contribute to a sense of inevitable shadows and darkness. Also, the fluidity of those shadings evoke secrecy; danger and betrayal could lurk anywhere. At the same time, da Vinci's use of an oil medium is responsible for the luminosity of the subjects' skin; this luminosity contributes to the sense of holiness (historically associated with light) that imbues *The Last Supper*. Indeed, consistent with the narrative, the Christ figure is endowed with more luminosity than are his disciples' figures in *The Last Supper*. Thus, in *The Last Supper*, the sensuous and ambiguous qualities afforded by da Vinci's oil-tempera medium convey an atmosphere of drama and tragedy. The psychologically and emotionally complex emotions portrayed in the work are echoed by the equally complex medium in which they are rendered, and this reinforces the tense, tragic mood of the painting.

The medium White utilized for *The First Supper* is acrylic paint, a synthetic compound known for its durability. Given the notorious fragility of *The Last Supper*, which already had begun deteriorating significantly during da Vinci's lifetime, this choice of medium is especially notable. Although acrylic paint can mimic the density of oil paint, it cannot replicate oil's subtle and luminous qualities; rather, brilliant color characterizes acrylic paint. Thus, *The First Supper* is conveyed in bright, flat colors; shading and shadows are conspicuously absent. This cultivates an atmosphere of openness and accessibility, particularly in contrast to the dramatic, ominous atmosphere of *The Last Supper*. Hints of danger do not appear to lurk in corners and shadows in *The First Supper*. Although the charged emotional attitudes of the subjects imply turmoil, the work's rather cheery rendering conveys the sense that the trauma is manageable rather than irredeemably terrible.

Related to the different media employed by each artist are their equally distinctive uses of color. The Last Supper is characterized unequivocally by darkness. The room is very dark; the panels of dark wood on the walls and ceiling are so darkly shadowed that they seem to constitute deep recesses. The window might offer some respite from the darkness, but the glimpse of the outside world that it affords is overcome by a dark and threatening sky. Although streams and grassy hills can be identified, they are virtually lost in the shadow of dark, looming mountains and low clouds. Christ and the disciples, too, are clothed in dark colors--dark blues, browns, and reds prevail--which are rendered even darker by dense shadows. The men's robes--with the exception of Christ's garments, which are relatively luminous--are so dark that they recede for the viewer (Parsons, 1987, p. 114). Even the relatively warm, red tones of Christ's clothing and his luminous rendering are not inviting; rather, they are designed to distinguish his divine status from that of the disciples and thus make him less rather than more accessible. Da Vinci's monochromatic use of color, too, is significant in this respect; the colors of the subjects' garb reinforce the powerful sense of abstraction characteristic of the painting on other levels. Nothing about the individual subjects detracts from the epic magnitude of the narrative; only Christ is distinguished, but it is around him that the narrative, after all, revolves.

Compared to The Last Supper, The First Supper is a veritable explosion of light and color. Its lightness is evident in the room's composition: its blond wood conveys no hint of hidden places--no threat, real or implied, is shrouded in darkness and shadow. The light wooden floor is distinguished by a geometric pattern in a variety of pale, muted colors. The world beyond the window is open and inviting: The warm Australian desert, leavened by hints of greenery, reclines beneath a bright, cloudless sky. In the distant background, Uluru, the sacred site of Aboriginal people, is visible. Although tragedy and drama are conveyed in the scene, they are contextualized by bright light, which suggests optimism and hope.

Color itself is of primary significance in White's work. The depicted women are dressed in drastically diverse garments representative of various nationalities and ethnicities. The bright pinks, reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and greens that prevail are rendered in a variety of patterns. No two women wear exactly the same color; for that matter, no two women share the same skin color. In addition, the table is adorned with intensely colorful fruits, vegetables, grains, and seafood. With the exception of the physical setting--the room and the desert beyond, which are rendered in light, neutral colors and pastels--White's use of primary colors reinforces the notion of concreteness and accessibility; such primary colors often are associated with openness and guilelessness (see, e.g., Parramon, 1989; Wilcox, 1983).

The fact that each of the subjects is unique with regard to color and dress functions to diffuse the narrative and to decenter the Aboriginal woman as the primary subject. Each of the women is highly distinct from the others and invites individual perusal, so that the idea of a unifying narrative recedes. As a result, the particular hierarchy depicted in The Last Supper--Christ as the lead character and the apostles in supporting and relatively interchangeable roles--is challenged in The First Supper. The absence of hierarchy

cultivates the theme of accessibility in the work and serves to minimize the dramatic and epic proportions of the narrative, thus alleviating its potentially intimidating and awesome qualities.

The two paintings differ markedly with respect to form, as well. The Last Supper is characterized by long, simple lines whose dramatic effect is enhanced by the darkness of the work. The panels of the walls and ceiling reflect this pattern of long lines, and the shadows into which they disappear suggest that they may be even longer. Similarly, the disciples' robes are rendered with long, clean lines; folds are minimal. Long lines also are used to render thin and gaunt the subjects' faces.

The sparseness implied by these long, thin lines, especially in the rendering of human beings, contributes to an aura of asceticism, suffering, and austerity, themes generally characteristic of Christianity and particularly Catholicism. Within most Christian faiths, asceticism, especially as the result of self-denial, is associated with divinity: Those who are most frugal, chaste, and modest with regard to their needs and desires are least worldly and, thus, closest to God. The notable exception in the painting is Judas; rife with human imperfection, he clutches a money bag, which signifies his greed and indulgence. The form of The Last Supper, then, contributes to the sacred abstraction of the work. The theme of self-control also has subtle gendered implications in that, just as the feminine historically has been equated with nature, control over nature--in this case, over natural urges and drives--is associated frequently with masculinity.

In contrast, the form of The First Supper is characterized by roundness and shorter lines. Although the physical setting of The Last Supper has been duplicated with regard to proportion, its sense of length and sparseness is alleviated considerably by White's depiction of the setting as light and bright. This lightness conveys an impression of breadth and density. The subjects of White's piece differ dramatically from those of da Vinci's in this regard. The women are round; most are plump, and although many are petite, none are thin. In marked contrast to the subjects of The Last Supper, the appearances of the women of The First Supper do not suggest self-denial; rather, they appear indulgent and sensuous. In other words, these women are depicted as profoundly human, not simply resigned to but reveling in their natural human impulses. Their characteristics thus invite a radically different reading of spirituality: The divine is no longer characterized by self-control and self-denial, nor is it characterized by the masculine. Rather, spirituality is characterized by pleasure, nature, and the feminine. The roundness featured in The First Supper also conveys warmth and invitation; it fosters a sense of accessibility. The vibrance with which these women are rendered suggests further that although they are now distressed, they could be just as readily be joyful. This contrasts sharply with the subjects of The Last Supper, whose self-imposed suffering seems to be both inherent in their characters and required by their faith.

The notions of asceticism and self-denial central to The Last Supper are evident also with regard to the meal laid out before the men on the table. That menu consists of bread rolls, red wine, water bowls, one scant platter of sliced fish, and some unidentifiable foodstuffs--tiny and undistinctive with regard to shape and color; most of these foods

recede into the shadows cast upon the table by the men. The food in *The Last Supper* is secondary to the scene; at best, it serves to reinforce rather than embody meaning. For instance, Wasserman (1984) believes the fish are significant primarily as indicators to the identities of those disciples depicted immediately behind them--Peter and Andrew, who were fishers by trade (p. 100).

The bread and wine of *The Last Supper* have particular significance with regard to Christianity: They represent the body and blood of Christ, whose consumption by the faithful signifies salvation. The presence of these items could be construed as hopeful and optimistic elements in a setting that is characterized otherwise so thoroughly by tragedy. However, the ritual also is imbued with distinct overtones of exploitation, if not violence, for they are (symbolically) eating the body of one who sits among them. Although hope and redemption arguably are themes characteristic of Christianity, in the case of *The Last Supper*, the notion of sacrifice inherent to the symbolic consumption of this bread and wine hinders an optimistic reading; the clear allusion to the impending bloody sacrifice of Christ in *The Last Supper* perpetuates the notion that divinity and spirituality are connected intrinsically with suffering. This notion is enhanced by the overriding]y sparse table setting. What little food is in evidence is no threat to the men's self-control; it is too nondescript to be tempting. The conventional themes of sacristy and divinity thus are reinforced: To be holy in spirit, one must suffer, sacrifice, and deny the flesh.

The contents of the table in *The First Supper* differ radically from those featured in *The Last Supper*. Only the bread is retained; as White (1988) notes, the wine has been replaced with glasses of water, which symbolizes purity and cleansing. This particular replacement implies a rejection of exploitation and violence as hallmarks of spirituality; the figurative blood of da Vinci's work is absent. Thus, the bread is decontextualized, no longer representative of a body to be consumed.

The most striking difference between the two table settings is the fact that the *The First Supper* depicts a table laden with a dazzling and colorful array of lush fruits and vegetables, as well as a bright blue-green emu egg, a fresh crab, and a fresh fish. In her artist's statement (1988), White explains that she has placed each item strategically to correspond to the native origin of the woman depicted immediately behind it. The overall effect of voluptuous abundance enhances the feminine qualities of White's piece and, again, challenges the notion that denying the physical (sensual) enriches the spirit. Instead, sensual indulgence and pleasure are encouraged in this rendering of the spiritual. In *The First Supper*, the physical and the spiritual are inextricably linked, and abundance is vital to both.

The foods depicted in *The First Supper* are symbolic individually as well as collectively. The character who replaces Judas, the only Western European, has before her a Coca Cola and a hamburger instead of the water, bread, fruits, vegetables, and seafood that all the other women have. This subject's highly refined and processed foods, which contrast starkly with the natural, simple, and whole foods featured otherwise, symbolize commercialism, capitalism, artifice, and exploitation of natural resources. This female Judas is not connected with nature, as the other women are. Ironically, she echoes *The*

Last Supper's theme of control over nature, conveyed in this case as exploitation and commercialism. In White's piece, that theme (of controlling nature in terms of manipulating or denying it) has been distilled in one woman who is the least admirable of all the subjects. Like Judas in *The Last Supper*, this woman is one of whom all should be wary; she, too, embodies betrayal, here in its colonial and consumptive incarnations.

The homogeneous white male subjects of the original painting have been replaced in *The First Supper* with women from various cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds who are clad in traditional garb that identifies those respective heritages. In *The Last Supper*, Peter, John, and Judas are seated together immediately on Christ's right; to their right are clustered James the Less, Bartholomew, and Andrew. On Christ's immediate left are James the Greater, Thomas, and Philip; and on their left hover Matthew, Thaddeus, and Simon (Wasserman, 1984, pp. 96-102). In *The First Supper*, these clusters are reconstituted as follows: To the right of the Aboriginal woman (placed in Christ's stead) are characters who appear to be, by virtue of their dress, a Chinese woman, an Arabic woman, and a Western European woman (in Judas's place); on their right are clustered characters who appear to be a Black African woman, a South American Indian woman, and a Polynesian woman. On the Aboriginal woman's left are women whose clothing suggests that they are Korean, Israeli, and West Indian women; and clustered on their left are women who seem to be Indian, Japanese, and Eastern European.

The two subjects of *The First Supper* that invite particular scrutiny are the women who replace Christ and Judas. The central figure in White's painting, the Aboriginal woman, deviates in obvious ways from the Christ character in *The Last Supper*. First, she is a woman. She is the only subject in *The First Supper* whose sex is physically showcased; clothed in a T-shirt bearing the motif of the Aboriginal Land Rights flag, her ample breasts and hips are very much in evidence. Her depiction evokes representations of ancient female deities who were associated typically with creation and sustenance, as opposed to the Christian tradition, which squarely asserts that divinity is masculine (see, e.g., Knapp, 1998; Mollenkott, 1994).

In appearance, as well, Christ and the Aboriginal woman differ dramatically. Christ is physically nearly perfect by Eurocentric standards. He appears as conventionally beautiful, with waves of lustrous blond hair and shining white skin; his neat clothing drapes gracefully over and totally obscures his anatomy. In direct contrast, the Aboriginal woman is extremely dark and unkempt. Her hair is scraggly and uncombed, her breasts are unbound, and her legs are bare; she is shoeless, and she is unquestionably Aboriginal. This totally antithetical representation of the Christ figure indicates a clear inversion of the Western hierarchy that places "cultured" European men at the very top and women below, with women of "other," darker skinned races relegated to the very bottom. Christ's physical perfection in *The Last Supper* further discourages a perception of him as accessible; indeed, his perfection enhances his "aloofness from ordinary human feelings" (Clark, 1983, p. 20) that are so prominent in the other men in the painting. Conversely, in *The First Supper*, the Aboriginal woman's aloof facial expression is offset and mitigated dramatically by her human appearance. In this radical reconceptualization of spirituality, accessibility is a central theme. In *The First Supper*, the spiritual is no longer

characterized by pretension, ritual, suffering, and hegemonic control of the natural. It also is no longer abstract and inaccessible, hierarchical and masculine. Rather, like the Aboriginal woman who embodies it, the spiritual is thoroughly natural, simple, and "easy"; it is concrete and accessible; it is everywhere, not just "up there"; and it is feminine.

The white woman in *The First Supper* who replaces Judas is, like him, clutching a money purse; this feature, combined with the refined and processed foods that constitute her table setting, identify her as a greedy, exploitative, capitalist consumer in the midst of nature's bounty. Significantly, too, she is dressed in a plaid shirt, denim overalls, and running shoes. In contrast to the simple, unaffected, yet culturally symbolic clothing of the other women, her manufactured, mass-produced attire evokes artifice and suggests that she lacks integrity, allegiance, and identity. In addition, this woman's clothing is the most conventionally masculine attire depicted in the painting. The implied rejection of and concomitant control over the natural entailed by her choices of food and clothing, as well as her relatively masculine (or at least androgynous) dress, endow her with masculine qualities, relative to the other woman portrayed.

As carefully as *The First Supper* reproduces the physical dimensions of every aspect of *The Last Supper*, it rejects the modes by which the original narrative is rendered. This is evidenced by virtue of *The First Supper's* title, size, location (material and contextual), medium, color, line, table setting, and characters (with regard to sex, dress, and heritage). Whereas the formal, literal similarities between the two artifacts establish *The Last Supper* as the premise for reading *The First Supper*, the differences between them, which constitute the ironic meaning, serve to subvert it.

Postmodern Irony as Subversive in *The First Supper*

Taken as a whole, *The First Supper* is a clear example of postmodern, subversive irony. The multiple and paradoxical messages that the work advances are entirely characteristic of the subversive function of postmodern irony, as chronicled by a host of contemporary theorists who note its ability to destabilize and undermine meaning (see, e.g., Bernard, 1992; Hutcheon, 1992; Moore, 1996; Waring, 1992). However, the same features that qualify *The First Supper* as an example of postmodern irony also invite a plethora of possible interpretations, which complicates the subversive function of the ironic piece and suggests that postmodern irony may serve other functions, as well.

The First Supper's postmodern moorings are thrown into even sharper relief by virtue of its ironic juxtaposition with *The Last Supper*. Although da Vinci's work did not occur in a modern context, the tenets of modernism (which represented, after all, an historical accumulation of ideological presumptions, including those of Western Christianity)-order, unity, and certainty (Wilde, 1982)--constitute central themes of the work. Such modernist assumptions are especially evident in the narrative structure of *The Last Supper*. Da Vinci's work articulates a clear, singular message, and every facet of the painting contributes to the narrative of deceit, sacrifice, and divinity. Indeed, a very superficial reading of *The First Supper*--one that remains at the level of literal meaning--

may invite a similar interpretation. That is, *The First Supper* could be construed as straightforward irony in which the primary assumptions of *The Last Supper* are merely inverted. In this reading, the racist, patriarchal, and somber character of spirituality is simply and summarily rejected, replaced with the exact antitheses of these qualities.

However, this is a highly superficial interpretation; closer analysis reveals that *The First Supper* is considerably more complex. In fact, the painting appears to reject any and all standards, both external (i.e., those articulated in *The Last Supper*) and internal to the work. *The First Supper* addresses a number of significant issues: gender, patriarchy, spirituality, religion, colonialism, Aboriginal rights, and multiculturalism. As such, unlike *The Last Supper*, the focus of the work is diffused. Of course, messages regarding each of these topics can be construed, but notably, the painting contains as many elements that undermine a specific message as support it.

For instance, *The First Supper* may be read as a challenge to patriarchy in that women are depicted as central, powerful, and multidimensional agents: The fact that women are portrayed as capable as men of power and evil challenges essentialist assumptions regarding gender. However, other aspects of the work reify essentialist assumptions: Women concurrently are portrayed as connected to nature, as sensual (historically construed as animalistic and uncivilized), as gentle (conveyed by the conspicuous absence of symbolic and atmospheric references to violence present in *The Last Supper*), and as corruptible by men.

A reading of the work through the lens of religion and spirituality reveals a similar multiplicity of meanings. Conventional Western notions of religion and spirituality are challenged in a highly ironic fashion in that respect for the earth, nature, and others are key to spirituality in *The First Supper*. Yet several standards of Western Christianity that are maintained and reinforced in the painting contradict this challenge. For instance, the Aboriginal woman, like Christ in *The Last Supper*, is the crux of a geometric trinity. This reifies religious hierarchy and belies the foregrounded message that challenges hierarchical ordering. *The First Supper* also may be read as a challenge to the patriarchal character of conventionalized spirituality and further as a paean to ancient female religions and deities. However, the painting showcases a supreme female deity betrayed by a female disciple, replicating exactly the model of Western Christianity. These messages not only contradict those articulated in *The Last Supper*, they contradict each other as well.

The First Supper also could be interpreted as an ironic challenge to ethnocentrism by virtue of the multiple ethnicities featured. The marked centrality of the Aboriginal woman, however, suggests that ethnocentrism is not so much rejected as modified by cultural sensitivity--a hierarchy of race and culture is maintained, but reconfigured. Related to this theme, White (1988) specifically identifies the Australian Bicentennial as an impetus for her work, and several elements of the painting suggest an indictment of the European colonizers responsible of the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. However, while the painting chastises the exploitation of Aborigines and Aboriginal land at the hands of other cultures, it simultaneously invites and celebrates cultural diversity.

Similarly, the clear ethnic identities of the respective women could be construed either as a celebration of cultural difference or as rigid classification on the basis of ethnic origin. White (1988) explains that she wanted to identify the various folk who comprise Australian society today. However, most contemporary Australians probably do not dress like these women; they may not even identify with the countries of their parents' birth, or, for that matter, appreciate the "pigeonholing."

With regard to the number and inconsistent nature of the messages in *The First Supper*, especially in light of the clarity and singularity of the message of *The Last Supper*, White's work certainly constitutes an example of postmodern irony. The painting is itself clearly postmodern and arguably subversive because it vigorously challenges virtually all traditional standards, including those of narrative and logic. However, as this painting illustrates, postmodern irony is not limited to deconstructing its premise, *The Last Supper*; rather, by cultivating opposing meanings with the text, *The First Supper* problematizes the very nature of meaning (Hutcheon, 1992). Still, this alone does not necessarily ensure that White's work is subversive. Although incorporating these complex messages certainly can be interpreted as subversive, such a strategy may also be construed as incoherent and confusing, particularly given that *The Last Supper* is characterized by such clarity and coherence. By virtue of the inevitable, stipulated comparison with this premise, *The First Supper* could be dismissed as inarticulate and ineffective rather than subversive or even ironic.

Another issue that may qualify the subversive potential of *The First Supper* is the fact that, fragmented and inconsistent as its messages may be, the painting advances a profound critique of a dominant discourse that enjoys powerful presumption. Acknowledging the irony is arguably a subversive act in itself, one that may prove overwhelming to audiences and serve to winnow them further. On this point, *The First Supper* may embody Booth's (1974) caution that, "at the extreme point of doubt, all statement becomes suspect" (p. 244), thus problematizing its subversive promise.

An obvious but noteworthy risk entailed by the strategy of subversive irony that *The First Supper* employs is that it inadvertently may reify the very ideological tenets that it seeks to subvert. The historical and ideological presumption that da Vinci's work thus enjoys very well could induce audience members to superimpose, consciously or not, expectations or standards relevant to and established by the original onto *The First Supper*. Ironically, then, *The First Supper* could be construed as a charming homage to *The Last Supper* rather than as a subversive political argument.

Functions and Implications of Subversive (Postmodern) Irony

As an example of subversive irony, *The First Supper* confirms the traditional ironic principle of detachment: the distinction between congruent and incongruent meanings. The extremely precise and obvious nature of the similarities between White's and da Vinci's paintings establishes congruence and an awareness of the relatedness of the two artifacts. The significant and equally compelling differences between the two artifacts, however, suggest clearly the presence of meaning(s) other than the paintings' relatedness

to each other. Notably, the technical configuration of components is reversed in *The First Supper*. Rather than an apparent incongruence disguising a deeper congruence, in this case, subversive irony inheres in an apparent congruence that disguises a profound incongruence.

This unique, technically "reverse" character of the irony apparent in *The First Supper* may be characteristic of subversive irony. The nature of subversion is challenge, which would also be the point of subversive irony. As such, asserting congruence at the outset may be necessary in order to establish the premise for the perspective by incongruity on which subversive irony turns. The postmodern nature of subversive irony may mandate this further; that is, in order to subvert, a clear and coherent premise may be necessary for the multiple and paradoxical messages that characterize postmodern irony.

Superiority, key to traditional irony, also is evident in subversive irony. In traditional irony, an elite community is forged in that the audience capable of discerning the irony perceives itself as distinguished; in turn, this cultivates an audience's cohesion with the rhetor. Audience agency, by virtue of participation, is crucial to traditional irony's success. In the case of subversive irony, superiority is more complex. In the first place, audience agency appears to be constrained. The specifically postmodern nature of subversive irony appears to cater to and thus invite a particularly postmodern audience. Postmodern irony is highly abstract and esoteric, characterized by and cultivating paradox and fragmentation. To read *The First Supper*, for instance, as a sophisticated, subversive postmodern argument, rife with multiple and contradictory messages, seems to require a fairly "hip," postmodern audience. For audiences not versed in postmodernism and unskilled in productively negotiating paradox and multiplicity of meaning, subversive irony may be confusing, overwhelming, or even salutary, all noted possible readings of *The First Supper*.

Nonetheless, an audience that is not versed in postmodernism may perceive superficial ironies while remaining unaware of or rejecting contradictory elements. For instance, an audience may read simply the superficial irony relevant to the replacement of men with women in *The First Supper*. Thus, the audience for subversive irony is not necessarily exclusively postmodern. By recognizing the artifact as ironic and subversive on this count, the audience gains access to an elite community created by the irony, but one that is quite distinctive from the postmodern audience. Furthermore, the ironic text's subversive function may be qualified by a simple ironic reading as well. The nature of the potential audience (perhaps, more accurately, audiences) for subversive irony is thus complex, and various configurations are possible due to the multiple messages and multiple levels in which the irony is manifest. Arguably, however, these are incidental audiences, perhaps themselves rather condescending constructs of the irony, for deeper analysis of the superficial ironies contradicts them. If the audience is composed of those elite few who can grasp this esoteric reading, subversive irony, while recognizable by that audience as such, may function less as subversion than as affirmation of the audience's postmodern literacy. As such, at least in the case of *The First Supper*, audience agency may be predetermined rather than invited by postmodern, subversive irony.

Predetermination of the audience, if it is characteristic of postmodern, subversive irony, likewise constrains rhetor-audience cohesion. A postmodern audience may be predisposed not only to discern postmodern irony but its tenets, as well. As a result, cohesion between rhetor and audience is likely to be granted and enhanced rather than created by subversive irony; in this respect, and for this audience, postmodern irony's subversive messages are highly successful. Those audiences that are not postmodern but that resonate with select and/or superficial elements of the complex ironic message also may experience rhetor-audience cohesion; however, as noted above, such audiences would appear to be incidental (perhaps even accidental) and not the audiences to whom the irony is directed. Furthermore, the cohesion may be artificial, premised on limited or partial understanding of the irony.

The reverse technical nature of the subversive irony evident in *The First Supper*, which may or may not be representative of subversive irony in general, may contribute to the hegemonic potential of postmodern irony. On its face, the reverse character of subversive irony promises a significantly higher payoff than traditional rhetorical irony in that the likelihood of the audience "getting" the irony is greater. The marked congruence between artifacts compels initial attention, and incongruities are more likely to become dramatically apparent as a result. However, the postmodern nature of subversive irony, as noted above, complicates who the audience(s) is, what the audience "gets," and how it does so. For the audience illiterate in postmodernism, the potential that the premise--the artifact being challenged--will overshadow the ironic text may be significant, especially if (as with *The Last Supper*) the premise enjoys significant presumption. For such an audience, the ironic text, which is necessarily invested in and committed to the original, may reify the very qualities and characteristics it is attempting to challenge.

One significant theoretical question raised by this analysis is whether irony as a rhetorical device, in general and particularly in its postmodern incarnation, is a construct that ultimately can only manufacture audience consent. Irony may be an inherently hegemonic rhetorical device, one that features an illusion of choice but whose options and parameters are firmly established by the rhetor. Traditional irony, which invites an audience to perceive a subtle, underlying congruence, turns on requiring the audience to understand, and to some extent, to accept the premise on which it is founded. This is true of postmodern irony that seeks to subvert, as well, and in that case, the implications are profound. Subversive irony may realize an hegemonic function not only for the audience that perceives the irony but also for the audience that does not or whose perception is partial or otherwise limited. Consent of the postmodern audience is largely assured, as this audience is equipped to recognize the irony's postmodern nature and its subversive function in that context. However, the clear positioning of the subversive ironic artifact in the context of that which it seeks to resist requires the audience that is not versed in postmodernism not only to acknowledge but also to use as its measure of the ironic text the object of resistance. This may lead to an incomplete or superficial assessment of the irony that belies its postmodern context and thus mitigates its subversive function. For the audience that cannot discern the irony, the text may serve instead to reify the very premises that it seeks to subvert. Postmodern irony whose complex subversive function is

not apparent to an audience may serve inevitably to reify the very constructs it seeks to resist.

Investigation of other instances of postmodern, subversive irony is necessary in order to explore these technical and theoretical dimensions further and to assess whether they truly are representative of the genre. Postmodern, subversive irony confirms the historical assessment of irony as a complex rhetorical tool and suggests even further complexity; ironic in itself, its essentially subversive potential may well coexist and even compete with significant hegemonic potential.

NOTES

(n1) Printed reproductions of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* are widely available; sources include, for instance, *Leonardo: Studies for the Last Supper* from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle (Pedretti, 1980); *Studies for The Last Supper* (Pedretti, 1983); and *Leonardo da Vinci: Leonardo* (Wasserman, 1984). A digital reproduction of the work also can be accessed at <http://metalab.unc.edu/wm/paint/auth/vinci>.

(n2) A print of White's *The First Supper* is available from Sacred Source/JBL Statues, Box WWW, Crozet, VA 22932-0163; (800) 290-6203 or (804) 823-1515. By the artist's request, no other reproductions, print or digital, of the work exist.

(n3) I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to learn more about the work's exhibition and reception history (including why it was first exhibited in Munich) as well as its current location.

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