

The Reality Clause

Dr. Coleman enters his office one final time before the formal debate in Decthagh Hall. He realizes his bright red folder of research and reference material is nowhere to be found. "Strange..." he murmurs. After 30 seconds of searching, he shrugs. "Well, this debate should be easy enough to win without it." He straightens his tie and leaves for the auditorium.

The crowd hushes as the two debaters take the stage and shake hands as the emcee tests his microphone.

"Good evening. My, what a turnout tonight! I hope you all are staying warm. Without further delay, let's get into tonight's academic debate topic: 'Is Santa Claus, the physics-defying, global gift distributor, a real person?' Dr. Charles Coleman, renowned author and academic journalist, will present the negative, and Dr. Cody Mulligan, award-winning archivist and researcher, will present the affirmative. Dr. Coleman, whenever you're ready, please begin your opening statement."

"Thank you, Nick." Dr. Coleman begins. "Well, I think we all know the answer to this question already, of course." The crowd chuckles with him. "I think it's safe to say, the answer is in the question itself. Physics-defying? Global gift distributor? Clearly, all this is impossible to anyone who knows how the world works. The alternative is simple. Clearly, this magical character is no more than folklore—an embellished caricature of the 19th century." Dr. Coleman turns to Dr. Mulligan and pauses.

The abrupt conclusion surprises the emcee. "Um, Dr. Coleman, you still have 9 minutes remaining."

"Oh, no thank you," Dr. Coleman clarifies. "I won't be needing further evidence for this debate."

"...Oh," the emcee freezes. "Well... I suppose if you concede your time, we can turn it over to Dr. Mulligan."

Dr. Mulligan laughs softly and shuffles his papers.

He slams his fist on the podium. "As a Doctor of History, I can say with *100% certainty* that Santa Claus, his elves, and all his flying reindeer are *REAL*."

The crowd holds back laughter as Dr. Coleman looks quizzically at Dr. Mulligan. "Your wit has always been impeccable, Dr. Mulligan, but what is your real opening statement?"

"I am 100% serious." Dr. Mulligan notes, locking eyes with Dr. Coleman. "Perhaps I should present my most pressing evidence." Dr. Coleman has a glimmer of fear in his eyes for a split second. Dr. Mulligan continues, "I saw him. Yes, with my own eyes." Dr. Mulligan stares down the crowd. "Indeed."

Crimson suit. Jolly visage. Large, rotund figure. All of it. He made a special appearance at the Brew Mall."

Dr. Coleman chuckles awkwardly. "You're... kidding, right? Dr. Mulligan, you do realize that most malls around this time do have someone dressed as Santa Claus, right? That isn't really Santa Claus."

"No, Dr. Coleman. It was unmistakably him. Think about it. Would thousands of people choose to dress in such a goofy manner? Every. Single. Year? Outrageous. Besides, Santa clearly isn't busy until Christmas Eve. Why wouldn't he visit our charming town?"

Dr. Coleman furrows his brow in confusion. "What are you talking about? That's... That's not even evidence!"

Dr. Mulligan continues to stare him down. "Then why not present some positive evidence yourself?"

Hesitant, Dr. Coleman ponders the question. "Well, I didn't think I'd have to, but, umm... well... nobody's ever seen him on Christmas! I mean come on, you guys." He motions to the crowd. "Like, have you guys ever seen him? This is ridiculous."

Dr. Mulligan points aggressively. "Well, the reason YOU haven't seen him is because... because... because YOU'RE ON THE NAUGHTY LIST!"

The crowd gasps.

Dr. Coleman turns to the crowd fiercely. "What?? You guys can't be serious! Dr. Mulligan, now you're just fueling a fire!"

Dr. Mulligan slams his fist hard on the podium, "You WOULD think that WOULDN'T YOU, Dr. COLEMAN. Or should I call you, COAL MAN?!"

"Um... what?" Dr. Coleman falters. "You just said my name twice...?"

"You know what I mean, you grinch. It's right in the name, folks! He's the man of the coals. His stocking's full of the stuff, your honor!"

Dr. Coleman fumbles over his words, taken aback by the scathing personal attack.

"FURTHERMORE," Dr. Mulligan exclaims. "A name like Charles? Like, Charles Dickens? He's the guy that wrote that book, uh... that, you know, the Scrooge, or whatever! You're a curmudgeon! A-grade naughty list material!"

"M-me on the naughty list? That is balderdash and horribly unprofessional, and you know it, Mulligan."

"Not so fast! So you DO acknowledge the existence of the naughty list?"

"Well," Dr. Coleman facepalms. "No, I— That's not what I mea—"

"You know that correlation does not equal CLAUSation, *Charles!!*" Dr. Mulligan retorts.

"What? That doesn't even make sense." Dr. Coleman protests. "He keeps saying puns! *Puns*, your honor— I mean Nick!"

The emcee calmly turns to Dr. Coleman. "Well, you haven't said *anything*, Charles."

Charles is in shock, speechless.

"Tell me, Charlie." Dr. Mulligan continues. "Do you put out cookies and milk for Santa on Christmas Eve?"

"Of course not, he's not rea—"

"Well, of course you'd say that! No cookies, no Santa!! Oh, wait, you're on the naughty list anyway!! No wonder he never came!"

"I— But—" Dr. Coleman can barely put a coherent sentence together. "No, no. This is all drivel. I know this stuff. I literally study mythology for a living!"

"Mythology??" Dr. Mulligan exclaims. "Then, why are you even studying Santa, a clearly real figure? Literally assuming your conclusion. Seems you're putting the sleigh before the reindeer on that one, *Charles!*"

"It's *Dr. Coleman*, you troglodyte! *DOCTOR!* I HAVE A P. H. FLIPPING D.!!"

The audience gasps as the emcee interjects. "Now, Charles, I'm sure you worked hard for that title, but we would like to keep this debate friendly and civil. This is no place to use vulgar language like the f-word."

"WHAT?" Dr. Coleman cries out.

The emcee continues. "Well, it looks like Dr. Mulligan's time is almost up. Go ahead and wrap up, Doctor."

"Well, everyone." Dr. Mulligan concludes. "I think I've very well convinced all the nice-listers here. Preaching to the elf choir, it seems. Well, I'm glad I'm getting paid for this. In any case, allow me to present my final evidence. Take a look at this page I have right here." He removes a printed image from a bright red folder and places it under the document camera to project to the crowd.

"See there? This disheveled man on the left represents Doctor, I mean, *Mister*, Coleman. And the buff guy on the right represents me. You see, he is the soyjack, while I am the gigachad."

The crowd gasps and cheers as Charles looks in horror at the screen. He slams his hand on the podium and shouts, "Plagiarism!"

But only Dr. Mulligan hears. He whispers to Charles, "Skill issue."

Dr. Mulligan clears his throat and reaches out to shake Charles' hand.

Dr. Mulligan dons a pair of sunglasses. "Merry Christmas." He drops his mic and struts off the stage.