

WHAT IS SATIRE

Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the **comic** in that **comedy** evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire “derides”; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself.” That butt may be an individual, or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even the whole race of man.

Satirical pieces are usually short, funny, and entertaining; they are *always* critical and unfair. The satirist purposely disregards extenuating circumstances in deriding a situation, and ignores the favorable attributes of any individual he mocks. But his work must be simplistic and forceful, or he may not get his message across. In taking on the powers that be and Everyman’s disinclination to be criticized, the satirist is often a lonely combatant.

True satirists are conscious of the frailty of institutions of human devising and attempt through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling. If critics simply abuse, they are writing **invective**; if they are personal and splenetic, they are writing **sarcasm**; if they are sad and morose over the state of society, they are writing **irony** or a **jeremiad**.

Types of Satire

Formal (or direct) satire: The satiric voice speaks, usually in the first person, either directly to the reader or to a character in the satire. Two types of formal satire are commonly distinguished, defined by the character of the **persona** of the speaker and by the attitude and **tone** the persona manifests toward his subject matter and audience.

1. **Horatian satire:** The persona is that of an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke a smile at human follies and absurdities -- sometimes including his own.

2. **Juvenalian satire:** The persona is that of a serious moralist who uses a dignified and public style to decry vice and error which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous. The tone is biting, bitter, angry. It points with contempt and moral indignation to the corruption and evil of human beings and institutions.

Indirect satire: The satire is expressed through a narrative instead of direct address, and the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous by what they think, say, and do. A special form of indirect satire is **Menippean satire**, which deals with mental attitudes rather than fully realized characters by presenting speakers who make ludicrous the intellectual attitudes they typify by the arguments they urge in their support.

There is also a distinction between romantic satire and so-called realistic satire (though no satire is ever entirely realistic). **Romantic satire** features otherworldly characters and exotic, far-removed places and eras. **Realistic satire** is heavily laden with true-to-life, down-to-earth minutiae.

Definition of Terms

- Burlesque:** The imitation of people, actions, and literary and dramatic works for comical effect by a ridiculous disparity between its style and subject matter. In **high burlesque**, a ridiculous, trivial subject is treated in a very serious, lofty manner. In **low burlesque**, a serious subject is treated comically, with mock disrespect.
- Caricature:** A picture or verbal description which ridiculously exaggerates the features and characteristics of the person or thing depicted, but which keeps the subject's identity and likeness intact.
- Lampoon:** A satire ridiculing a specific person.
- Mock Epic:** A humorous, tongue-in-cheek depiction of an absurd hero's adventures and glorious deeds (e.g., *Don Quixote de La Mancha*).
- Parody:** A comical imitation of an author's or artist's style.
- Travesty:** A grotesque imitation of a specific literary or dramatic work.

Key Questions About Any Satire

1. What vehicle for satire did the satirist choose? Why is or isn't it effective for getting his message across?
2. Does the satirist speak his own thoughts, in a pretended first-person voice, or through a cast of characters? Are you aware of his presence?
3. What is the tone of the satire -- gentle and amused or scornful and contemptuous?
4. What are the targets and messages of the satire?
5. What satirical elements and techniques are used and how -- e.g., exaggeration, distortion, understatement, irony, twisted cliches, paradoxes, contrasts, surprise, etc.?
6. Is a solution to the problem implied in the satire? What is it?
7. How does the satirist stack the deck in his own favor? What extenuating details of circumstances favorable to his target does he omit?
8. Does the satire's message convince you? Does the satire make you laugh? Why or why not?
9. If you were going to satirize the same subject, how might you go about it?