

Satire

Satire is a literary technique of writing or art which principally ridicules its subject (individuals, organisations, states) often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change. The word satire derives from the Latin *satira*, meaning “medley” or a “dish filled with mixed fruits.” A satire, either in prose or in poetic form, holds prevailing vices or follies up to ridicule: it employs humor and wit to criticize human institutions or humanity itself, in order that they might be remodeled or improved.

Satire arouses laughter or scorn as a means of ridicule and derision, with the avowed intention of correcting human faults. Common targets of satire include individuals (“personal satire”), types of people, social groups, institutions, and human nature. Like tragedy and comedy, satire is often a mode of writing introduced into various literary forms; it is only a genre when it is the governing principle of a work.

Satirists attempt through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling. If attackers 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. As a rule, modern satire spares the individual and follows Addison’s self-imposed rule to “pass over a single foe to charge whole armies.” Most satire deals less with great sinners and criminals than with the general run of fools, knaves, ninnyes, oafs, codgers, and frauds.

Satire is of two major types: formal (direct) satire, in which the satiric voice speaks either directly to the reader or to a character in the satire; and indirect satire, in which the satire is expressed through a narrative and the characters who are the butt are ridiculed by what they themselves say and do.

In direct satire, a first-person speaker addresses either the reader or a character within the work (the *adversarius*) whose conversation helps further the speaker’s purposes, as in Alexander Pope’s “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot” (1735).

Indirect satire uses a fictional narrative in which characters who represent particular points of view are made ridiculous by their own behaviour and thoughts, and by the narrator’s usually ironic commentary. In Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) the hero narrating his own adventures appears ridiculous in taking pride in his Lilliputian title of honour, “Nardac”; by making Gulliver look foolish in this way, Swift indirectly satirizes the pretensions of the English nobility, with its corresponding titles of “Duke” and “Marquess.”

Satire as an English literary form derives in large part from Greek and Roman literature. Aristophanes, Juvenal, Horace, Martial, and Petronius all wrote satires of one kind or another, and the tradition maintained a tenuous existence in England down through the Middle Ages in the form of the *fabliau* (used in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*) and the *Beast-epic*. The eighteenth century, however, in which poetry, drama, essays, and literary criticism were all imbued with the form, was the golden age of English satire. Dryden, Swift, Pope, Addison, Steele, and Johnson were all great satirists, and self-described heirs of the Roman poets Horace and Juvenal. Horatian satire tends to be gentler and more sympathetic than the more biting and bitter Juvenalian satire, in which the author - Swift is the great example - frequently rails savagely against the evil inherent in man and his institutions. Byron and Thackeray, in the nineteenth century, maintained and refined the satiric tradition, as did

T. S. Eliot in the twentieth.

Pope states that satire “has a social function that places it on a level with Religion, Law, and Government. Though its tone may be light, its function is wholly serious; and as for passion, it is actuated by a fierce and strenuous moral and intellectual enthusiasm, the passion for order, justice, and beauty. . . . It keeps the public conscience alert, it exposes absurdity for what it is and makes those inclined to adopt foolish or tasteless fashions aware that they are ridiculous. It shows vice its own feature and makes it odious to others. . . . Satire is an aristocratic art. It is not afraid to tell unpopular truths, but its habit is to tell them with the assurance and detachment of ridicule, and ridicule is the weapon of contempt...”

Animal Farm as a Satire

Written as a “fairy story” (Orwell titled the book Animal Farm: A Fairy Story), the subject of Animal Farm is very much aimed at an adult audience. Orwell paints a vivid picture of a violent political revolution of farm animals against the farmer who owns all, works the animal population hard, sends their offspring to slaughter, and feeds them little. Arguably not critical of revolution itself, Orwell describes an all-to-familiar corruption that undermines the goal of the revolution: in which those leading the revolution rally the masses not so much for the good of the masses, but so that the leaders can assume the role of master, complete with all of the oppressive conduct that goes with an authoritarian regime. Thus, Orwell has created a political satire using the classic animal fable genre.



The characters in Animal Farm were inspired by the Russian Revolution and the events that followed - the pig Napoleon is clearly the farm’s Josef Stalin - but Animal Farm was not simply a satire on the Russian Revolution. Orwell’s message was intended to be broader. In his own words: “I meant the moral to be that revolutions only effect a radical improvement when the masses are alert and know how to chuck out their leaders as soon as the latter have done their job. The turning point of the story was supposed to be when the pigs kept the milk and apples for themselves ... The lesson of Animal Farm is clearly not merely the corrupting effect of power when exercised by Communists, but the corrupting effect of power when exercised by anybody.” Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The satirist Orwell “does not paint an objective picture of the evils he describes, since pure realism would be too oppressive. Instead he offers the reader a travesty of the situation, which at once directs his attention to actuality and permits an escape from it. ... It is written for entertainment, but contains sharp and telling comments on the problems of the world in which we live, offering imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” To do so Orwell must rely on extensive use of the extended metaphor. One reason for using this representation is that it provides Orwell the satirist with absolute freedom to attack his targets through the images he creates which seemingly have no relation with reality. Orwell aims “to deflate false heroes, imposters or charlatans, who claim a respect which is not their due; the vehicle he chooses for this is usually the mock-heroic.” Therefore, in order to operate his attack and mockery towards these so-called heroes who might be leaders of a country or people of prestigiousness, without any restriction he the satirist uses the extended metaphor and personifies his characters. Orwell would not attack Stalin directly; but he is able to make fun of Stalin indirectly through Napoleon.

Poetry and Satire

Satire is a literary technique of writing or art which principally ridicules its subject (individuals, organisations, states) often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change. A poem can also be satirical or use satire to get across its message. One such poem is “The Chimney Sweep” by William Blake.

The Chimney Sweep

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue,
Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curl'd like lambs back, was shav'd, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work,
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm,
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.



The poem is on the surface is about the miserable lives of chimney sweeps. As we read the poem, we realize that Blake describes their lives in the most horrible of terms . He writes “my father sold me while yet my tongue could scarcely cry...” and “when his head ... was shaved.” We understand that boys have been sold as chimney sweeps well before they could even talk and that their job is so filthy that their heads have to be shaven to keep the dirt off. Blake, however, is not just making fun of a society that employs young children to do the most horrible jobs; in the poem he goes on to describe how that society uses the promises of a ‘paradise’ to keep them working and to keep them happy. Little Tom Dacre has a dream (like a vision from Heaven) in which an Angel promises them

a better life if they be good boys and work hard as chimney sweeps . Blake writes “And the Angel told Tom if he’d be a good boy, He’d have God for his father & never want joy.” And so promised a better afterlife, all the boys work hard and “do their duty.” Thus, Blake is not only making fun of a society that uses children to work, but also he is making fun of a society that uses religion to justify that work (if one works hard and doesn’t complain, then one will go to Heaven and live happily ever after). Karl Marx, writing shortly after Blake, complained that “religion was the opiate of the masses” and that religion was used to trick the working class to suffer the most horrible of working conditions.

Through the careful selection of several religious symbols and allusions, Blake is able to develop his satire. Tom Dacre’s dream alludes to several dreams in the Bible - the dreams of the patriarchs, the prophets, Mary, and Christ. The message of the dream is symbolic of God’s promise to Abraham that if he worshipped God he would be given the ‘promised land.’ The opening of the black coffins symbolizes the soul’s release from the body -the end of a life of sin or misery. The green fields and the wash in the river symbolize the journey to paradise (the wash in the river symbolizes baptism the first step to salvation). “God for his father” symbolizes entrance into Heaven as the boys “rise up on clouds” like angelic cherubs. Even the use of contrasting white and black images reinforces the dark world of life and the light world of paradise. However, Blake does not openly criticize organized religion, but he does make fun of those religions that promise salvation if one works hard and doesn’t complain.



Allegory

Allegory is a literary form of an extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus, it represents one thing in the guise of another -an abstraction in that of a concrete image. By a process of double signification, the order of words represents actions and characters, and they, in turn, represent ideas. Allegory often clarifies this process by giving patently meaningful names to persons and places. The characters are usually personifications of abstract qualities, the action and the setting representative of the relationships among these abstractions. Allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and setting presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear. The characters, events, and setting may be historical, fictitious, or fabulous; the test is that these materials be so employed that they represent meanings independent of the action in the surface story. Such meanings may be religious, moral, political, personal, or satiric.

It is important but by no means always easy to distinguish between *allegory* and symbolism, which attempts to suggest other levels of meaning without making a structure of ideas the controlling influence in the work, as it is in *allegory*. The traditional distinction between “symbol” and *allegory* is put forth by Coleridge, whose *Statesman’s Manual* argues that “an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into picture language,” whereas “a Symbol always partakes of the Reality which it makes intelligible.”

Satire can also be developed through the use of the literary form known as allegory. For example, on the surface Animal Farm appears to be about an upheaval on a farm by the local animals lead by the pigs. The novel, however, on a metaphorical level is about the failure of the Russian Revolution. The animals represent different people of the Revolution (Napoleon represents Joseph Stalin while Snowball represents Trotsky); different events in the novel represent events in Russian history (the overthrow of the farmer represents the overthrow of the Tsar while the killing of the hens represents Stalin’s purges of his enemies in the 1930’s).

“The Chimney Sweep” is also an allegory. On the literal level, it is about young boys who work as chimney sweeps and are tricked to be happy. On the metaphorical level it is about the Protestant work ethic prevalent during Blake’s time and the Industrial Revolution that Blake felt was destroying traditional British society. The boys represent the working class found in England at Blake’s time exploited by the capitalists of the Industrial Revolution. People were so poor that some had to sell their children to work at any job no matter how dangerous it was. Blake is criticizing those Protestant religions that expected people to work hard no matter the working conditions with only the promise of a better afterlife. Like Marx, Blake saw religion as a drug that kept the working class unaware of their true dire conditions.

Parody

(A literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule.)

Parody may poke fun at our cultural icons, symbols, public figures and celebrities. Thus, a parody exists when one imitates a serious piece of work, such as literature, music or artwork, for a humorous or satirical effect. Parody, as a method of criticism, has been a very popular means for authors, entertainers and advertisers to communicate a particular message or point of view to the public.

A parody, because it is a method of criticism, must inevitably make use of another creative work. This inherently creates a conflict between the creator of the work that is being parodied (as no one likes to be criticized, made fun of or ridiculed) and the creator of the parody.

The following are parodies in advertisement. What does each one make fun of?



Can you think of any famous song parodies?