

An Introduction to Satire

sat.ire *n.*

1. A literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit.
2. Irony, sarcasm, or caustic [bitterly cutting/burning] wit used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity. (dictionary.com)

Ian Johnston, retired instructor at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, offers helpful information in more clearly defining the use and characteristics of satire:

Purpose of Satire: "If we see someone or some group acting in a way we think is morally unacceptable and we wish to correct such behaviour, we have a number of options. We can try to force them to change their ways (through threats of punishment); we can deliver stern moral lectures, seeking to persuade them to change their ways; we can try the Socratic approach of engaging them in a conversation which probes the roots of their beliefs; or, alternatively, we can encourage everyone to see them as ridiculous, to laugh at them, to render them objects of scorn for the group. In doing so we will probably have at least two purposes in mind: first, to effect some changes in the behaviour of the target (so that he or she reforms) and, second, to encourage others not to behave in such a manner."

Morality of Satire: "At the basis of every good traditional satire is a sense of moral outrage or indignation: This conduct is wrong and needs to be exposed. Hence, to adopt a satiric stance requires a sense of what is right, since the target of the satire can only be measured as deficient if one has a sense of what is necessary for a person to be truly moral."

Complications of Satire: "One central challenge to the satirist is to be subtle and varied enough to keep the reader interested in the wit of the piece, while at the same time making it clear (but not obvious) that there is a satiric intent. . . . Since most satires depend upon a certain awareness in the reader (awareness of events, of literary models being satirized, of irony working in the language), skillful satires tend to require a certain sophistication in the readers or viewers. A person insensitive to levels of irony in language will normally find satires difficult to follow (unless the irony is very obvious)." <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Eng200/satire3.htm>

Characteristics of Satire

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| 1. irony | 4. colloquialism | 7. violence |
| 2. paradox | 5. anticlimax | 8. vividness |
| 3. antithesis | 6. obscenity | 9. exaggeration |

The essential attitude in satire is the desire to use precisely clear language to still an audience to protest. The satirist intends to describe painful or absurd situations or foolish or wicked persons or groups as vividly as possible. He believes that most people are blind, insensitive, and perhaps anesthetized by custom and resignation and dullness. The satirist wishes to make them see the truth - at least that part of the truth which they habitually ignore.

SATIRE: (source: Matthew Hodgart's *Satire*, Gilbert Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire*, and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*.)

Satire is set apart from other literature by its fairly limited range of techniques. The essence of satire is wit, the power of giving pleasure by combining or contrasting ideas. Wit was originally defined as "mind," then as "cleverness," but now suggests the speech/writing that delights by its unexpectedness.

Techniques of Satire

Reduction	<p>the degradation or devaluation of a victim by reducing his stature or dignity; belittling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ a change in size ➤ removal of signs of rank and status (usually clothes) ➤ animal imagery which reduces man's purposeful actions, the ambitious aims of which he is proud and the lusts of which he is ashamed, all to the level of brute instinct. ➤ vegetable or mineral imagery ➤ caricature or parody ➤ destruction of the symbol (a satirist who wants to show that an emblem is being used for unjust ends pretends not to understand its symbolic connotations; for example, the flag becomes just a piece of cloth. The person fails to see the symbolic values which society attaches to apparently trivial objects and actions.) <p>The general idea of satire is to reduce everything to simple terms: the appeal is always to common sense, plain reason, simple logic.</p>
Invective	<p>open insult, used occasionally for shock effect.</p> <p>According to Johnston, "It is the least inventive of the satirist's tools. A lengthy invective is sometimes called a diatribe. The danger of pure invective is that one can quickly get tired of it, since it offers limited opportunity for inventive wit."</p>
Irony	<p>systematic use of double meaning; meaning of words is opposite of the literal or expected meaning</p>
Caricature	<p>"refers to the technique of exaggerating for comic and satiric effect one particular feature of the target, to achieve a grotesque or ridiculous effect. The term caricature generally refers more to drawing than it does to writing (e.g., the political cartoon). Almost all satire relies to some extent on the distortion of caricature. In that sense, satire is not concerned with psychological verisimilitude." – Johnston</p>
Burlesque	<p>"refers to ridiculous exaggeration in language, usually one which makes the discrepancy between the words and the situation or the character silly. For example, to have a king speak like an idiot or a workman speak like a king (especially, say, in blank verse) is burlesque. Similarly, a very serious situation can be burlesqued by having the characters in it speak or behave in ridiculously inappropriate ways." – Johnston</p>
Reductio ad absurdum	<p>"is a popular satiric technique (especially in Swift), whereby the author agrees enthusiastically with the basic attitudes or assumptions he wishes to satirize and, by pushing them to a logically ridiculous extreme, exposes the foolishness of the original attitudes and assumptions. Reductios are sometimes dangerous either because the reader does not recognize the satire at work or because the reader fails to identify the target clearly."</p>

Jonathan Swift wrote, "Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it." (*Columbia World of Quotations*, <http://www.bartleby.com/66/93/56793.html>)

Structure of Satire: Three Main "Shapes"

Monologue	<p>The satirist usually is speaking from behind a thinly veiled mask. He states his view of a problem, cites examples, and endeavors to impose his views on the reader/listener.</p>
Parody	<p>The satirist takes an existing work of literature that was created with a serious purpose, or a literary form in which some reputable books and poems have been written. He then makes the work look ridiculous by infusing it with incongruous ideas; he makes the ideas look foolish by putting them into an inappropriate form.</p>
Narrative	<p>Here the author does not appear. (Fiction speaks for him/her.)</p>