SATIRE

by Don L. F. Nilsen
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DEFINITION OF “SATIRE”

• The word satire comes from the Latin satura meaning a dish filled with mixed fruits.

• This was the usual dessert tray after a banquet, and an early meaning for the word was “to be well fed” as seen in such cognates as sated, saturated, and satisfied.
ARISTOPHANES TO NICHOLS

• Aristophanes’s antiwar fourth-century B.C. Lysistrata is a classic example of the lighter kind of satire that blends humor with a serious story.

• The story has an antiwar message, with the humor coming from the wives’ refusal to have sex with their husbands until they quit fighting.

• A contemporary example of a satire that includes humor along with serious elements is John Nichols’s The Milagro Beanfield War, in which village farmers in New Mexico are pitted against developers who are coming in to take what water is available for building a golf course and resort.

• (Nilsen & Nilsen 260)
DISTANCE FROM SATIRICAL TARGET

• To be effective, writers or performers must have a detachment from their target.

• Henry Rule confessed, “In truth I don’t ever seem to be in a good enough humor with anything to satirize it; no, I want to stand up before it and curse it, and foam at the mouth—or take a club and pound it to rags and pulp.”

• (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
HORATIAN VS. JUVENALIAN SATIRE

• Gentle and humorous satire is called “Horatian Satire” after the writing style of the Roman poet Horace.

• Heavy or biting satire called “Juvenalian Satire” after the Roman poet Juvenal.
  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
• Lois Lowry’s prize-winning children’s book *The Giver* is of Horatian Satire, as is George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

• These books both have anti-totalitarian messages just as does Orwell’s much heavier and grimmer *1984*.

• But because *Animal Farm* comes closer to being Horatian satire with its nostalgic barnyard and its “lovable” set of farm animals, when it was first submitted to American publishers they missed the point and turned it down saying the prospective market for “animal stories” was too small.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 260)
• One of the characteristics of Horatian satire is that it includes a higher percentage of humor.

• Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels is a Horatian Satire but his “Modest Proposal” is Juvenalian Satire.

• The complete title is, “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick.”

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
• Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is an account of Lemuel Gulliver’s voyages to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the Country of the Houyhnhnms.

• It can be read as adventure stories, even by children.

• Funny images from the stories remain in readers’ minds, such as the picture of Gulliver awakening to find himself pinned down by hundreds of threads placed on him by the tiny people of Lilliput and the image of his putting out the fire that was burning the Queen’s Palace by urinating on it.
  
  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
• In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift suggested that at the age of one year, poor Irish children should be sold as food to be eaten by landlords and other members of the upper class.

• Irish mothers should be encouraged to let their children “suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table.”
• “A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper and Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter.”

• Few people who read Swift’s “Modest Proposal” ever forget it. Because it touches such deep psychic nerves, it illustrates the satirist’s major tool, which is playing with the emotions of readers or listeners.
  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259-260)
• The grimmer a story, the less likely it is that readers will miss the intended satire, but also, with such grim satires as Anthony Burgess’s dystopian _A Clockwork Orange_, William Golding’s anarchic _Lord of the Flies_, and Ray Bradbury’s anticensorship _Fahrenheit 451_, if there is humor, it is black humor or irony.

• Readers shudder at these books if they think they are predicting the future, but Ray Bradbury has made it clear that he is trying to prevent, not predict, the future. It is this call to action that distinguishes satire from black or gallows humor.
  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 260)
INFORMAL VS. FORMAL SATIRE

• Satire can be divided into two basic types: informal and indirect, as in stories, poems, plays, or novels; and explicit or formal, in which the satirist speaks directly to readers or listeners.

• Because explicit satire is more efficient, it is the kind most likely to be presented by comedians.
MENIPPEAN SATIRE

• Because of the extensive accumulation of details in *Gulliver’s Travels* and because Swift is trying to influence mental attitudes as much as actual change, some critics identify Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* as an example of Menippean satire, named after the Greek cynic Menippus.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
RANGE OF SATIRE

• Satire has a long history and occurs across genres ranging from Aesop’s fables and Shel Silverstein’s poetry to Art Buchwald’s newspaper columns and Paul Krassner’s newsletter The Realist.

• It also includes political and social cartoons, such television programs as late-night talk shows and The Colbert Report, such movies as Wag the Dog and The Truman Show, and such novels as C.S. Lewis’s Screwtape Letters and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 258)
SATIRE AND THE SHAMING PROCESS

• Matthew Hodgart in *Satire* wrote that in ancient Eskimo cultures, satirical prose and rhyme were used to shame individuals who had violated community standards.

• The punishment was worse than a physical punishment because the criminal would be made to look foolish while the other villagers watched.
• Hodgart also wrote that when going to war, the ancient Arabs would send a satirist from both sides into battle to see which satirist could be the most clever.

• The morale of the two armies would be determined by the skill of their satirists, and occasionally a humiliated army would simply give up and retreat.

• Today Rap, HipHop and other types of “language play” use satire in similar ways.
  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 260)
• Shaming penalties are also meted out by cartoonists, comedians, and writers who use the mass media to make fun of individuals who have gone against behavioral codes, whether in business, sex, or politics.

• Although most such jokes have as their immediate target one or two individuals who are involved in current scandals, the goal of the satirist is to capitalize on the public’s interest in a current event to shape society’s long-term attitudes and behaviors.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 260-261)
SATIRE AS A SOCIAL CORRECTIVE

• Edgar Johnson in *The Anatomy of Satire* praises satire as a corrective for bad behavior. “If we ever become civilized,” he writes, “it will probably be satire almost as much as poetry that will have accomplished it.”

• Arthur Pollard in *Satire* says that satirists move readers to criticize and condemn through “various emotions ranging from laughter through ridicule, contempt and anger to hate.” The feelings that are evoked will depend on the seriousness of the faults being attached as well as the author’s view of “the gap between the ideal and reality.”

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
SATIRE VS. GALLOWS HUMOR

• Satirists may use their humor to inspire reform and change, or they may use it to promote the status quo.

• If the creators of satire don’t have a reform or a solution in mind but are simply holding up an aspect of the world as ridiculous, then they are creating irony or gallows humor rather than satire.

• (Nilsen & Nilsen 258)
SOCIAL SATIRE

• Social satirists follow in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers. “The sacrosanct tenets of the Establishment are rings on a dartboard to the socially conscious comedian, whose sole mission is to make you think before you laugh.”

• There are three types of social satirists, the Instigator, The Politico, and The Sage.
• Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Nipsey Russell, Godfrey Cambridge, Dick Gregory, and Richard Pryor are Instigator Satirists.

• Bruce, Sahl, and Gregory were the pioneers working in edgy San Francisco and New York clubs where they challenged the façade of Eisenhower America.

• First branded as “sickniks,” they were often censored, and, in the case of Bruce, arrested for indecency.

• Sahl was the least controversial, not because his satire was less biting, but because he dressed and looked “collegiate” and focused on politics, while Bruce was challenging sexual and religious conventions and Gregory was giving voice to the civil rights movement. Gregory’s work “made it possible for African American entertainers to openly rib Jim Crow” while paving “the way for Richard Pryor’s brazen commentaries on discrimination.”

• (Nilsen & Nilsen 258-259)
• Politico satirists include Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Jack Paar, Jackie Mason, Arsenio Hall, Tom and Dick Smothers, Jay Leno, Pat Paulsen, David Letterman, David Steinberg, Dennis Miller, Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, and Mark Russell.

• Bob Hope has been praised for rattling “Washington like a Gatling gun, skewering the sanctimony of politics and securing a soapbox for topically minded comedians,” while Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In and The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour were praised for blending “critical views with a counter-culture sensibility.”

• Johnny Carson had such a hold on the American public that he “was one of the few personalities who could safely fire one-liners at Capitol Hill.” His cynicism came from the daily news “inspired by the politicians who spoke with at least one foot in their mouths.”

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
• Sages are those who warn us of the pitfalls of everyday life.

• They include Bob Newhart, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, George Carlin, Alan King, Mark Russell, Bill Maher, Dennis Miller, Paul Mooney, Chris Rock, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, and Whoopi Goldberg.

• Carlin, Newhart, and Nichols and May explore the frustrations of bureaucracy and the dehumanizing effects of technology, while King, Maher, and Russell lampoon society’s lack of ethics and its focus on pop culture, and Rock challenges class disparities.

• One of Rock’s funniest skits is about the absurdity of giving surplus cheese to welfare families.

• Robin Williams played with this same idea in a Comic Relief skit where he impersonated a farmer whose land has been taken over by the mortgage company so that he is left pondering how to turn wedges of surplus cheese into all the things needed for daily living.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 259)
UTOPIAS AND DISTOPIAS

• A technique often used in satirical novels is the contrast between utopian and dystopian societies.

• The author usually introduces what at first appears to be a utopian society, but which the reader soon realizes is actually grotesque or dystopian.

  • (Nilsen & Nilsen 260)
!!!Satire or Not?
Satiric Web Sites:

CHIASMUS (MARDY GROTHER):
http://www.chiasmus.com/welcometochiasmus.shtml

CIECOE: COUNCIL TO INVESTIGATE EVERYTHING AND CONSORTIUM TO OFFEND EVERYBODY:
http://www.factsformorons.com

THE COLBERT REPORT (STEPHEN COLBERT):
http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_colbert_report/index.jhtml

THE DAILY SHOW (JON STUART):
http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_daily_show/index.jhtml

HARVARD LAMPOON
http://www.harvardlampoon.com/
MAD MAGAZINE
http://www2.warnerbros.com/web/madmagazine/home.jsp

THE MAD MARTIAN MUSEUM OF MODERN MADNESS:
http://www.madmartian.com

MANAGEMENT HUMOR (RODNEY MARKS):
www.comedian.com.au

THE MOZILLA MUSEUM (TILMAN HAUSHERR):
http://www.snafu.de/~tilman/mozilla

THE NATIONAL LAMPOON:
www.nationallampon.com
THE ONION (CAROL KOLB):
http://www.theonion.com

SATIRE ON ORGANIZED RELIGION:
www.landoverbaptist.com

STUFF WHITE PEOPLE LIKE:
http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/

THANK YOU MASKMAN (LENNY BRUCE):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CebRfSFnWGM

WHITEHOUSE:
http://whitehouse.org/initiatives/posters/

THE WHOLE WORLD TOILET PAPER MUSEUM (RICH TAGYERIT):
http://www.tagyerit.com/tp.htm
References:


Swift: Jonathan. A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents. Dublin, Ireland: S. Harding, 1729.

