



Included in this workshop:

READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.

5D Demonstrate familiarity with works of fiction by British authors from each major literary period.

6 Analyze the effect of irony and overstatement in literary essays, speeches, and other forms of literary nonfiction.

Satire

Can humor make someone see the serious side of an issue? Since ancient times, writers have used satire to attack injustice, to highlight the absurd, and to show the brutal truth about one topic while seeming to write about another. In their works, satirists have employed every genre to surprise and delight readers with portraits of society that elicit an equal measure of amusement and shock.

A History of Mockery

Satire is a literary technique in which behaviors or institutions are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society. What sets satire apart from other forms of social and political protest is humor. The use of satire began with the ancient Greeks but came into its own in ancient Rome, where the “fathers” of satire, Horace (1st century B.C.) and Juvenal (2nd century A.D.), were inspired by the decadence of the Roman Empire to write scathing critiques of their society.

The next great flourishing of satire began in Europe in the second half of the 17th century and continued throughout the 18th century. In England, this “golden age” of satire encompassed the talents of the Restoration dramatists as well as John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson. The 18th century was dominated by satiric poetry, prose, and drama. Satirists, as guardians of the culture, sought to protect their highly developed civilization from corruption by attacking hypocrisy, arrogance, greed, vanity, and stupidity. “The satirist is to be regarded as our physician, not our enemy,” wrote 18th-century novelist Henry Fielding.

With a few notable exceptions—namely, the writings of Lord Byron, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Samuel Butler in England and Mark Twain in the United States—satirical writing faded in the 19th century. Literary satire in the 20th century has been somewhat scarce, but other forms of media, such as political cartoons and television shows, have shown a resurgence of satire.



This illustration lampoons women's fashions.

Characteristics of Satire

For the most part, a satirist attempts to bring about change by exposing an oddity or a problem in an imaginative, often **humorous**, way. The target is often a social or political one. Typically, satirists use **irony** and **exaggeration** to poke

fun at human faults and foolishness in order to correct human behavior. The two basic types of satire are named after the great Roman writers Horace and Juvenal, who perfected satire in different ways.

Horatian satire is playfully amusing and urbane. It seeks to correct vice or foolishness with gentle laughter and understanding. A famous example of Horatian satire is Alexander Pope's brilliant mock epic *The Rape of the Lock* (page 612). The poem, which satirizes the trivial pursuits of the idle wealthy, echoes the openings of ancient epics in its famous first lines.

What dire offense from amorous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
I sing— . . .

—Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

In the poem, a young lord is so smitten by a lady's beauty that he secretly cuts off a lock of her hair. The lady's offense at this violation takes on epic—or mock epic—proportions.

Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies.
Not louder shrieks to pitying heaven are cast,
When husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last;

— Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

Juvenalian satire provokes a darker kind of laughter. It is often bitter, or even angry, and criticizes corruption or incompetence with scorn and outrage. The most famous example of Juvenalian satire comes from Jonathan Swift, whose savage wit was unequaled among his 18th-century English contemporaries. Swift's fictional *Gulliver's Travels* (page 636) tended toward Juvenalian satire. But it was his famous essay, "A Modest Proposal" (page 622), that shocked and appalled readers. Notice the biting verbal irony in this passage from the essay, which describes certain abilities of young children.

They can very seldom pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive at six years old, except where they are of towardly parts [have a promising talent]; although I confess they learn the rudiments much earlier . . .

—Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"

STRATEGIES FOR READING SATIRE

Use the following strategies when reading a satirical work:

- Determine the object of the satire. The custom or character that provokes laughter is probably the undesirable part of society the writer is criticizing.
- Note what is criticized in order to infer what the satirist believes is right and proper.
- Watch for irony, which often points directly to the object of satire.
- Pay attention to anything that is exaggerated.
- Evaluate whether the satire is Horatian (playful and sympathetic) or Juvenalian (bitter and critical).

Close Read

What is exaggerated in this passage? What is ironic?

Close Read

What is humorous about this passage? What assumption is made that might shock readers?