
Satire: A Definition

Defining satire is about as difficult as defining humor itself. For not only does it occur in many different forms of humor (literary humor, stand-up comedy, political cartoons, comics, and so on) but it also has many roles to play, depending upon what culture and society one is looking at. Going by George A. Test (1991:12), who to date provides the most complete treatment of the subject yet available, defines satire in this way:

Satire may more easily be explained and understood as a bent possessed by many human beings but more highly developed in some individuals and expressing itself in an almost endless variety of ways. The aptitude may reveal itself in a mock nursery rhyme or a mock office memo, in a takeoff on a film genre, in graffiti, poetry or fiction, in mock opera, in newspaper cartoons, in a seemingly endless number of ways. The faculty, if that is the best word for it, will in its essence manifest itself in an expression or act that in various ways combines aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. Each of these acts or expressions is a complicated form of behavior particular to an individual but also influenced by a person's social environment and ultimately by that persons culture.

Satire, then, is the permutation to varying degrees, depending upon the nature of the satiric work or satiric expression, of four basic elements: (a) aggression, (b) play, (c) laughter and (d) judgment. Satire involves verbal aggression. To elaborate:

(a) The satirist employs satire in order to give vent to his/her anger, dislike, frustration, intolerance, hatred, indignation and the like at or about someone or something via verbal *aggression*. As Test (1991:260) aptly puts it:

> Whenever and wherever there have been differences among persons and groups--personal, social, religious, philosophical, political--there have been strong emotions aroused that have expended themselves in verbal aggression. Kings, dictators, and presidents, wars and revolutions, racial antagonism, social movements--Socrates, Lewis Phillipe, Richard Nixon, the Revolution of 1688, various phases of the women's movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Reformation --whenever the social structure has been threatened or fragmented, various expressions of satire have erupted.

The verbal aggression can be of the direct kind (as in name-calling) or as is more often the case in public, indirect (as in a play or a mythical story involving anthropomorphic animals), but the overall objective remains the same: at the immediate level to make the targeted person(s) or group(s) appear foolish or stupid or less important or lowly or satanic, etc. The level of directness of aggression is inversely proportional to the degree of fictionality involved in the satiric story or

expression. That is the greater the degree of use of fictional elements, in a satiric story for example, the less direct will the verbal aggression be perceived.

At the same time, the level of directness is inversely proportional to the status and power held by the target of the satire--that is, the more powerful the person(s) being targeted by the satirist, the more likely that the satiric story or expression will be clothed by the satirist (unless he/she is suicidally inclined) with fictional elements in order to make the verbal aggression embodied by the satiric attack indirect. Obviously, satire is not without risks to its practitioners. Angered targets may retaliate, and in fact throughout history there are examples of satirists who have been persecuted (Voltaire, Daumier, Defoe, the editors of the magazine *private Eye*, etc.). The more recent example, as Test (1991:11-12) reminds us, is that of the Palestinian political cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who suffered not only deportation from Lebanon and Kuwait, but was also a target of an assassination attempt while in exile in London; he died a month after he was shot on July 29, 1987.

(b) Linked together with verbal aggression in satire is the paradoxical element of *play*. Hence even as the satirist attacks his/her victim he/she often does it in the context of playfulness. The playfulness is usually there to temper the verbal aggression. Two examples will illustrate this point: the court jester in the royal households of Europe of yesteryear and the celebrity 'roaster' of today in the U.S.; they both engage in satire, but it is acted out in the context of playful merrymaking. Play does not only take this concrete form in satire; it can also take the form of an imaginary kind--as when fables, fantasies and allegories are constructed. Whatever form play takes in satire, its central role remains the same: to permit satiric expression without offending its target to the point of inviting retaliation. Play, in other words, helps (like fictionality) to render the verbal aggression of the satire indirect.

(c) *Laughter*, of course, is an essential element of satire since satire is a form of humor. In fact, there is no such thing as humorless satire. However, it should be noted that laughter is to be understood here in its broadest sense--referring to any degree of amusement; ranging from a sly grin to a roar of thunderous laughter. Satirists will incorporate whatever technique of inducing laughter they may be comfortable with in their satire: farce, parody, burlesque, exaggeration, etc. From the perspective of the satirist, laughter is absolutely crucial to his/her enterprise; for it serves as the hook to pull in the audience--the greater the potential for laughter present in the satire, the greater its popularity, and consequently the larger the potential audience (leaving aside those who are the targets of the satire) for the work of the satirist. Besides providing obvious pleasure of entertainment to those who choose to sample the satire, laughter has another function too: it acts to serve the role of adding insult to injury from the perspective of the person(s) or group(s) targeted. That is, in linking laughter with verbal aggression the satirist renders his/her satire even more potent and devastating--with sometimes negative consequences for the satirist if the target happens to be powerful and intolerant. Yet, on the other hand, laughter can also serve the role in satire of weakening the sting of the verbal aggression. This would be especially the case if the target of the satire joins in with the laughter--as in the case of court jesting or celebrity roasting for example. In such a situation laughter serves to sugarcoat the aggression of the satirist.

(d) The fourth major element on which satire rests, according to Test (1991), is *judgment*. That is until the satirist makes a judgment on who or what should be the target of his/her satire (whether it is a person or a group of people, whether it is an institution or an organization, whether it is a society or a culture, whether it is a style of life or a fashion of dress, whether it is religion or politics, whether it is a work of art or music, whether it is a book or an article, whether it is a

profession or a vocation, or whatever else it may be) it remains a neutral artistic expression. As he puts it: "It is aggression waiting for a target; it is laughter waiting for a stimulant; it is play waiting for a game." (p. 27) In other words, once the satirist has taken hold of satire it ceases to be neutral, it is transformed into a weapon; and the purpose to which it is put is varied indeed: it has been used for the best of intentions and the worst of intentions, and in support of the best of causes and the worst of causes. "It has been used by malicious, envious, and spiteful persons and it has been used by idealistic and moral persons. It has been used by person in all walks of life, all kinds of cultures and systems of government in countries all over the world. It has been used to attack governments and to bolster governments, it has been used to attack and to defend religion." (p. 28)

Having looked at the key elements that make up satire, it remains to look at a special problem that afflicts almost all satire: that of communication. In order for satire to succeed it must be perceived by the audience as satire and nothing else. Satire is both highly localized humor (bound to a specific time and place) and highly demanding. The audience must not only be conversant with the context out of which a particular piece of satire has emerged (be it political, religious, social, economic, etc.), but must also be in sympathy with the motivations of the satirist (unless the audience itself is the target of the satire) to the point where it can appreciate the unique elements that make up the satire: verbal aggression, play, laughter and judgment. Under the circumstances, the potential for communication failure is considerable--for satire makes a great deal of demand on the knowledge, intellect and tolerance of the audience. In fact, as Test (1991:253) puts it, "[t]he demands of satire and its irony for special knowledge and choosing among values gives satire a unique capacity for alienating an audience, quite apart from any individual irony blindness--inability to pay attention, lack of practice, incapacity for attaining the appropriate emotional state... "

Parody

From the perspective of humor, parody is the imitation of any behavior, event, speech, writing, etc. with the intention of producing amusement, or sometimes even derision. Parody may have aggression and certainly has play and laughter in it (see the section satire), but usually lacks judgment. Parody appears to be most successful when the subject of the parody, says Feinberg (1967:185), has "sufficient individuality of style or content to be distinguished." "That individuality," he further explains, "may consist of significant originality or mere eccentricity." Since parody depends on first imitation and then exaggerating certain features of the style, behavior, affectation, etc. that is being imitated, parody can be considered a form of caricature--except it operates in either the literary or theatrical (including film and television) mode. (Three common examples of media that indulge in parodies in the U.S. are the magazines *National Lampoon* and *Mad,* and the television program on NBC, *Saturday Night Live*.)

The purpose of the parody may include criticism, or it may simply be there to elicit laughter. A common example of harmless parody is when a stand-up comic imitates a U.S. president--and the humor will be found not so much in what the comic says while pretending to be the president, but how well he carries off the parody. Another example of parody, though in reality it is not parody because it is done by animal, is when an ape imitates human visitors at a zoo, and in the process provoking much amusement among the humans. Why parody--especially the innocent harmless kind--generates humor, is another one of those mysteries of humor that remains to be explained.

Needless to say, the success of a parody is dependent not only on the person doing the parody but also on the audience viewing the parody. For unless the audience has prior knowledge of the subject of the parody then the failure of the parody is almost assured. When parody is imbued with the elements of aggression and judgment, then it of course becomes transformed into satire. Three good examples from literature that illustrate this point: Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22,* George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. While in all three literary works parody abounds, the authors' infusion of their work with the elements of aggression and judgment render the work satirical.

Ironical Allegory

An important ingredient of satire is irony. Irony refers to the production of double meanings via any one or more of several devices: contrast, contradiction, incongruity, etc. Irony is especially present in satire made up of indirect aggression. A well known ironic device used by literary satirists is the irony of allegory. An allegory is an entire story created and presented for the purpose of producing two different levels of meanings. One level is immediately perceivable and it is one that is not intended by the allegorist, and the other is hidden and which constitutes the real meaning that the allegorist wishes his/her audience to take away with them. "Allegory presents its messages in terms of something else, a literal set of events, persons, conditions, or images having a corresponding level of existence involving meaning, conceptions, values, or qualities." (Test, 1991:187)

The important point, however, is that in satiric allegories, the two different levels of meanings are set in opposition to each other producing thereby irony. A classic allegorical tale is George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* as is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The film *Planet of the Apes* is another example of allegory, but in cinematic form. In both these instances the story itself comprises an entirely imaginary or fictitious world, but possessing all the characteristic features of the human world, and it is presented in order to contrast with the real world for judgmental reasons. Such fictitious worlds created for this purpose have been variously labeled as utopias, dystopias, beast fables, and science fiction. Often writers will produce combinations of these different worlds rather than rely on one specific type. In allegorical satire, it may be noted, the irony is not only inherent in the creation of the parallel (but contrasting and oppositional) worlds of the real and imaginary, but the irony itself also serves to act as satire. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is both ironical and satirical.
