

A Brief History of Satire

Which do you think would go further in getting people to listen to what you say: making them angry, or making them laugh? Riling them up might certainly get people's attention, but humor eases tensions and makes audiences more receptive to what they're hearing. Good thing there's **satire**, a genre of works dedicated to social or literary criticism through the use of comedic elements.

In this lesson, we're going to explore the development of that genre - from its earliest beginnings in the ancient Mediterranean to its present place in homes across the globe. So, come along as we skim the pages of literary history for the funny bits and meet some of the scathingly humorous people who've shaped satire into what it is today!

Ancient Origins & Dark Ages

As early as the 7th century B.C.E., satirical works were already having profound effects on people. The Greek poet Archilochus reportedly shamed an entire family into suicide! He and other Greek authors like Aristophanes helped build the foundations for all of Western comedy. Much of what they produced, though - poems and plays harshly but humorously critiquing society and even certain individuals - would've been considered satire if that name had existed yet.

The Satira

The term 'satire' comes to us from the Latin *satira*, most likely because Latin authors are responsible for adapting the earlier Greek form of the genre into what we're more familiar with today. In fact, many satires are still categorized as **Horatian** or **Juvenalian** to this day by their resemblances to works of these Roman poets writing in the 1st centuries B.C.E. and C.E., respectively. Those resembling the works of Horace are known to be learned and witty, often using subtly sarcastic wordplay even at the author's own expense. Those who imitate Juvenal, on the other hand, are typically considered openly harsh in their mockery and ridicule, occasionally even downright dark.

Out of the Dark

After the Roman satirists, there was no real satire to speak of for about a millennium. As Europe emerged out of the Dark Ages, however, satirical elements began to reappear throughout medieval manuscripts. Chaucer's frequently funny *Canterbury Tales*, for example, are full of satirical sneers toward contemporary English society (late 14th century). And let's not forget Cervantes' classic *Don Quixote* (1605), which satirized the overly romanticized lives and literature of the previous centuries and changed views on formal chivalry forever.

Renaissance & Neoclassical Satire

Cultural criticism generally wasn't the aim of most Shakespearean comedies, but other Renaissance writers were fond of satire's ability to critique while also entertaining. Particularly poets, such as John Donne (1572-1631) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637), found the genre's comically critical features useful in various points of interest - even religion and spirituality (i.e. Donne's 'Satire III'). In just one more generation, though, authors would begin taking the genre even further, but this time by getting back to its roots.

The Next Generation

Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, Molière: each one is a vital member in the next generation of satirists to blossom during the Neoclassical period running between the late 17th and 18th centuries. These giants of **Neoclassicism** - an artistic movement noted for its imitation of Greco-Roman (Classical) styles and genres (especially satire) - fully revived this ancient genre and captured the public's attention with their smartly humorous satires.

Drawing from these antique traditions, Neoclassicists often favored **mock epics** (i.e. Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock'), which use the meter, diction, or other features of traditional heroic poetry to criticize people's trivial preoccupations and literary fantasies. There were also the similarly sarcastic essays, such as Swift's decidedly Juvenalian work, 'A Modest Proposal,' in which he morbidly and mockingly suggests eating poor children as a means of preventing starvation in Ireland.

Modern Satire

After an experience with a work like Swift's, it's easy to see why more modern audiences tend to favor Horatian satires more widely. It might even be a little easier when we think of cleverly 'punny' works like Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which rely on subtle wit and softer humor to make their points. Of course, darker examples - such as George Orwell's political satire, *Animal Farm* (1945), or Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) - still exist, and there's evidence to suggest that Juvenalian satire could be gaining popularity again.

Satire on the Silver Screen

While you still might find satirical literature in print, like others, this genre has also branched-out into other media. Satirized news reports from *The Onion* or Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* have become commonplace, and Hollywood's also been getting in on the action since the beginning. From the black-and-white antics of Charlie Chaplin to the colorfully Juvenalian catastrophes of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, satires have become a wildly popular form of entertainment - especially in those cultures with lots of complaints (i.e. American). Even animated productions like *South Park* or *Family Guy* now cash-in on the opportunity not only to entertain but to educate their audiences on the social and artistic issues facing us today.

Lesson Summary

From as early as the 7th century B.C.E., writers have been developing a genre of works dedicated to social or literary criticism through the use of comedic elements known as **satire**. The Roman authors **Horace** and **Juvenal** (whose names still define the genre today) were instrumental in shaping its early characteristics, as well as in later inspiring its revival during the age of **Neoclassicism** - an artistic movement noted for its imitation of Greco-Roman styles and genres. Neoclassical satirists were particularly fond of **mock epics**, works that use the meter, diction, or other features of traditional heroic poetry to criticize people's trivial preoccupations and literary fantasies. With famous titles such as *Don Quixote*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Animal Farm*, satire has survived over two millennia of changing tastes and opinions. And with those like *Family Guy*, *South Park*, or *The Daily Show*, it's sure to thrive for maybe even a couple more.

History of Satire-Questions

1. Which of these is a satirical production that you could view on television today?

- A) *The Daily Show*
- B) None of the answers are correct
- C) All of the answers are correct
- D) *South Park*
- E) *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*

2. Neoclassicists were fond of what type of satirical work that uses the meter, diction, or other features of traditional heroic poetry to criticize people's trivial preoccupations and literary fantasies?

- A) Tragicomedy
- B) Mock epic
- C) Pseudobiography
- D) Mock essay

3. Satire witnessed a revival of its former self between the late 17th and 18th centuries as part of what artistic movement noted for its imitation of Greco-Roman styles and genres?

- A) Neopaganism
- B) Neoclassicism
- C) Romanticism
- D) Traditionalism

4. Satires are often categorized by their resemblance to the works of which two Roman authors?

- A) Horace and Juvenal
- B) Virgil and Ovid
- C) Seneca and Lucan
- D) Caesar and Cicero

5. Satire is a genre of works dedicated to social or literary criticism through the use of:

- A) Parables
- B) Rhetorical devices
- C) Fables
- D) Comedic elements