

Parody



DEFINITION

What is a parody? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A parody is a work that mimics the style of another work, artist, or genre in an exaggerated way, usually for comic effect. Parodies can take many forms, including fiction, poetry, film, visual art, and more. For instance, *Scary Movie* and its many sequels are films that *parody* the conventions of the horror film genre.

Some additional key details about parodies:

- It probably doesn't make sense to call something a parody unless you can say *what* it parodies. All parodies are "mimetic" or "imitative," meaning they must use an already existing genre, artist, work of literature, or artwork as their source material.
- Parodies don't necessarily have to criticize the thing they parody. Sometimes, parodies provide a more neutral illumination of, or comment upon, the original work without necessarily mocking it.
- A parody does not always need to refer to the entire work it's parodying, but can instead pick and choose aspects of it to satirize, exaggerate, disparage, or mock.
- The word "spoof" is somewhat more commonly used today than "parody," but they're essentially synonyms.

How to Pronounce Parody

Here's how to pronounce parody: **par-uh-dee**

Types of Parody

Parody can range from the lighthearted to deeply satirical. In fact, the Greek word on which parody is based, *parodia*, suggests these two options, as it can be translated to mean either "beside-song" or "counter-song." A parody must always work off of an original source, but it can either work *against* that source, or simply *alongside* it, as a more light-hearted commentary that doesn't necessarily mock or [satirize](#) the original work.

- **Lighthearted parody:** According to Aristotle, the first ever parodist was Hegemony of Thasos, who replaced words in common poems to alter their meaning in funny ways. By altering the source material, Hegemony brought a light-hearted edge to the serious world of writing poetry. A modern equivalent of Hegemony might be Weird Al Yankovic, who parodies pop songs by rerecording them with his own humorous lyrics (check out "[Fat it](#)," which parodies Michael Jackson's "[Beat It](#)"). Hegemony and Weird Al do use parody to poke fun at the self-seriousness of the work they

are parodying, they seem mainly to be going for humor and entertainment.

- **Satirical parody:** One of the earliest examples of satirical parody comes from the 2nd century AD, when a Roman writer named Lucian of Samasota parodied travel tales, such as Homer's [Odyssey](#), in an ironically-titled novel called *True History*. In *True History*, through the use of extreme situations (like flying to the moon), *True History* pointedly mocks the irrationality of the ancient "fantastic voyage" genre, and makes fun of writers who tell tall tales but have barely traveled themselves. While Lucian is going for humor with his parody, he is also arguing against those original works, pointing out their absurdity and hypocrisy. A modern example of satirical parody is *The Colbert Show*, in which Stephen Colbert parodied a right-wing television pundit in order to satirize both the conventions of television and right-wing political positions.

Parody and Familiarity

The success of any parody depends on the audience's familiarity with the work being parodied. To really get the full significance of one of Weird Al Yankovic's videos, for instance, you first have to know about the style and content of the original video it's parodying. In fact, a large part of what makes parodies so popular is the way they make the audience feel intelligent, well-read, or "in on the joke," since their comedic effect depends on the audience understanding the cultural references being made.

Parody and Related Terms

Parody is related to and often confused with three other literary terms: [satire](#), burlesque, and pastiche.

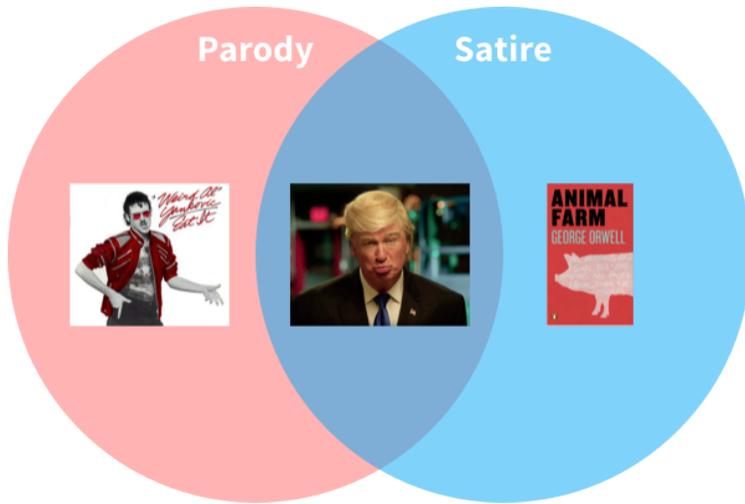
Parody vs. Satire

Parody and satire share a few fundamental elements. Both often use exaggeration to illuminate the flaws and absurdities of a figure or social entity. However, there are also important differences between them:

- Parody is always based on an original work, genre, artist, or figure. Satire can involve such mimicry, but it does not have to.
- Often a parody exists purely for entertainment, and doesn't seek to make any negative judgement about its subject matter. Satire always involves at least some degree (and often a great degree) of social commentary and criticism.

As such, parody can sometimes be satirical, and satires can sometimes utilize parodies, but they are separate things that do not always overlap. Alec Baldwin's impression of Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live* is an example of both parody and satire. Weird Al

Yankovic's song "Eat it" is an example of parody but *not* satire. And George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#) is an example of satire but not parody.



Parody and Burlesque

The definitions of parody and burlesque overlap considerably, with both often listed as synonyms for the other. A burlesque is a theatrical or literary caricature that mocks or spoofs a more serious subject, bringing the high-brow down to the realm of the low-brow. Like parody, burlesque often uses exaggeration, absurdity, and imitation. However, there are important differences between the two:

- While a parody is strictly a work of imitation, and is therefore beholden to the style and structure of a referent work, a burlesque is a looser term that does not necessitate mimicry or imitation.
- While certain parodies *often* caricature their subjects, some parody doesn't aim to ridicule or mock, but simply to *imitate* the original work. Burlesque always ridicules.
- Burlesque is always a more low-brow form of mockery, emphasizing the ridiculous, lewd, and vulgar. Parody, by contrast, is more concerned with the imitation of style and form, so it can be finely crafted and highly intellectual, and can provide more neutral commentary on the work being parodied.

Parody and Pastiche

Pastiche is also often used as a synonym for parody. And like parody, pastiche is a type of art based on imitation. A pastiche is a piece of art composed in the style or manner of another era, aesthetic movement, or artist. But, again, there are key differences between the two:

- Parody typically mimics a specific work or works, while pastiche refers less to a specific work and more to the general style of art from a specific era or place.
- Parody is almost always done for comedic effect. Pastiche is much more rarely comedic.

- Parody can be satirical (though it isn't always). Pastiche is usually composed without the aim of satirizing its subject.

For instance, the recent film *La La Land* could be described as a pastiche of classic Hollywood musical styles—but the film celebrates the musical tradition rather than making fun of or satirizing it. And while *La La Land* has its humorous moments, it doesn't get that humor from its imitation of the original material.



EXAMPLES

In the literary arts, parody is everywhere. The following examples parody poems, novels, and entire genres.

Parody of a Poem

Kenneth Koch's "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" is a poem that parodies the ultra-minimalist style of Williams by co-opting the style for a more bizarre subject matter. First see the reference poem, "This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams, and note how the ceremoniousness of the poem creates a pleasing [juxtaposition](#) with the relatively minor transgression being confessed:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

And here's the parody by Kenneth Koch:

I chopped down the house that you had been
saving to live in next summer.
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had
nothing to do
and its wooden beams were so inviting.

By changing the crime from "eating your plums" to "chopping down your house," Koch seems to be commenting on the preciousness and melodrama of William's poem.

Parody of a Novel

In 2009, the writer Seth Grahame-Smith published a parody of Jane Austen's [Pride and Prejudice](#) that is a mash-up of Austen's classic novel about entangled lovers and the popular zombie horror genre,

entitled *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. The parody is successful because Grahame-Smith mimics Austen's style of writing but applies this style to the unlikely subject of zombies. His parody, especially in the opening sentences, closely follows the form and style of *Pride and Prejudice* as a specific model. Overall, the text relies heavily on the strength of the original work to create a dissonance between style and content that makes his novel humorous and entertaining. Consider the first sentence of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

And the first sentence from Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.

As you can see, Grahame-Smith takes Austen's exact wording but subverts our expectations by transposing her style onto the content of modern zombie fiction. The parody may be funny to any reader, but it's bound to be *more* funny to readers who are familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*. This example underscores a basic fact about parodies: their success hinges on a shared understanding of the source material, and the resulting upheaval of a set expectation.

Parody of a Genre

Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is perhaps the ultimate example of genre parody. Cervantes' epic novel is a parody of the medieval romance genre of literature, in which a chivalrous knight goes on a heroic quest, often to win the heart of an impossibly beautiful maiden. The protagonist of Cervantes novel, Don Quixote de la Mancha, however, is a madman who battles with windmills he thinks are giants, confuse peasants for princesses, and gets himself into all sorts of absurd situations because he can't tell the difference between his fantasy world of knights and chivalry and the real world in which he lives. *Don Quixote* is a parody because it mocks the sentimental and overblown style of the romance, and exposes the genre's conventions. For instance, when Don Quixote mistakes an inn for a castle, the knight (along with the whole genre of medieval romance) is being cast as a subject of mockery:

And since whatever our adventurer thought, saw, or imagined seemed to him to be as it was in the books he'd read, as soon as he saw the inn he took it for a castle with its four towers and their spires of shining silver.

Parody in Film and Television

Parody films and parody television shows are a staple of Western comedy culture. The film parody relies, as most parodies do, on the audience's expectations. The director Mel Brooks, a master parodist, spoofed the genre of monster movies with his film *Young Frankenstein* (1974), the entire Western film genre with *Blazing*

Saddles (1974), and the *Star Wars* franchise with *Space Balls* (1987). More recently, there's been a string of film franchises that spoof more contemporary genres, such as *Scary Movie*, which absurdly tweaks scenes from famous horror movies in order to highlight the audience's familiarity with the plot devices that constitute the genre.

The "Weekend Update" portion of *Saturday Night Live*, meanwhile, mocks the look and structure of primetime news shows, making a parody of television broadcast networks themselves. More generally, nearly every sketch comedy show on television includes parodies of famous politicians and cultural figures as a part of the entertainment.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers can choose to write parodies for light-hearted reasons or because they want to use them to make more pointed satirical commentary. Regardless, parody is always meant to be entertaining. A parody of a public persona—like a politician, for example—might serve to ridicule his personality, or hold him to account for criminal behavior, but the audience is *still* meant to laugh at the parody. A parody of a great writer, on the other hand, might exist purely to pay homage to his style, providing no social commentary at all—but again, the reader is meant to find it amusing or entertaining when they read a passage that imitates a work they're familiar with. Enjoyment of the parody signals that the audience recognizes the reference, while also recognizing the gap between the source material and the parody version.

Whether a parody serves to ridicule a facet of pop culture, expose the falsehoods of a social institution, pay homage to a great artist, or simply poke fun with a pitch-perfect spoof, the parody is an important device that entertains the audience by imitating something familiar from culture and putting a new spin on it.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [Parody Wikipedia Page](#): The Wikipedia page on Parody, which provides an extensive amount of history, background, and examples of parodies.
- [Excerpt from The Oxford Book of Parodies by John Gross](#): An excerpt from the respected book on parodies by John Gross, reprinted in the *Wall Street Journal*.
- [YouTube Video on Parody & Satire](#): A helpful YouTube video outlining the difference between the two often conflated terms of parody and satire.
- [New Yorker Article, 2010, "Parodies Lost"](#): This article is a fascinating investigation of parody that covers the human inclination to make parodies, the difference between parody and burlesque, and parody in poetry.

HOW TO CITE

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