

Satire



DEFINITION

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

Satire is the use of humor, irony, sarcasm, or ridicule to criticize something or someone. Public figures, such as politicians, are often the subject of satire, but satirists can take aim at other targets as well—from societal conventions to government policies. Satire is an entertaining form of social commentary, and it occurs in many forms: there are satirical novels, poems, and essays, as well as satirical films, shows, and cartoons. Alec Baldwin's impersonation of Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live is an example of satire.

Some additional key details about satire:

- Satire is a bit unusual as a literary term because it can be used to describe both a literary device *and* the specific genre of literature that makes use of the device. Just like a comedy is comedic because it uses comedy, a satire is satirical because it uses satire. For most of this entry, the word "satire" will be used refer to the device, not the genre.
- Satire often coincides with the use of other literary devices, such as [irony](#), malapropism, overstatement, understatement, [juxtaposition](#), or [parody](#).
- Though most satires seek to draw laughter, there are many unfunny or even dark examples of satire, such as George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#) or Bret Easton Ellis's [American Psycho](#), which criticize communist societies and capitalist societies, respectively.

How to Pronounce Satire

Here's how to pronounce satire: **sa-tire**

Satire as Literary Device vs. Satire as Genre

There are many novels, plays, and other works of literature that fall into the genre of satire. These works are all characterized by their consistent and sustained satirical attacks on their various targets. For instance, Mark Twain's [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#) satirizes the hypocrisies of pre-Civil-War society in the American South, especially its traditions of racism and slavery.

But satire is not *only* found in literature that falls into the broader genre of satire. To the contrary, satire is a device that can be used in many types of writing and art. For instance, a 2017 production of Shakespeare's [Julius Caesar](#) in New York City came under criticism for costuming Caesar (who gets assassinated in the play) in a business suit and bright red tie that closely resembled the standard garb of

President Donald Trump. While the play *Julius Caesar* is not itself a satire, this costuming decision added an *element* of satire to the play, since it equated the despotic almost-Roman-emperor with an American president whom some have criticized as having tyrannical impulses of his own.

Satire and Humor

Satirists use humor not only to ridicule their subjects, but also to gain the attention and trust of their readers. While readers might not always respond to a highly-conceptual, nuanced argument for change laid out in a dense manifesto or academic essay, they can easily and enjoyably recognize societal problems targeted by satirical writing. Some scholars have argued that the popular appeal of satire helps in bringing about actual social reform, since the use of humor makes it easier to disseminate political and societal critiques more widely.

However, humor is not a required element of satire. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is one of the more famous satires ever written, but few people find humor in it—and in fact, many people find it to be a deeply unsettling and not-at-all funny book.

Types of Satire

Traditionally, scholars have divided satire into two main categories: *Horatian* and *Juvenalian* satire. These labels are derived from the names of the renowned Roman satirists Horace and Juvenal, who originated each type. A third, less common type of satire is *Menippean* satire, named after Menippus, the Greek cynic and satirist. These labels are more of a classical framework for literary critics rather than a strict set of guidelines that all modern satires must follow, but they are worth reviewing because they can help make clear the wide variety of forms that satire can take.

- **Horatian satire** is a gentler and typically comic form of satire in which the author or narrator takes aim at the common flaws in human beings, with the primary goal of entertaining readers and offering them useful insights into their own behavior. Horatian satire isn't generally written with the intention of bringing about social change.
 - Alexander Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock* is an example of Horatian satire that gently mocks the English upper class for its vanity and dim-wittedness.
- **Juvenalian satire** is often described as dark or tragic rather than comic. It uses [irony](#) to highlight and combat the wrongdoings of public figures and institutions. It is distinguished from Horatian satire by the more hostile tone it takes towards its subjects. For this reason, it's often used in more serious political writing.

- George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#) is a Juvenalian satire that isn't particularly funny. It ridicules communist governments for their total lack of equality.
- Though Alec Baldwin's portrayal of President Trump on *Saturday Night Live* can have its lighter moments, the bulk of his satire pointedly criticizes Trump, perhaps with the intent of shaming the president into altering his course or of mobilizing citizens to work against Trump's goals and policies.
- **Menippean satire** is less common than Juvenalian or Horatian satire, though it's the oldest type of satire. Menippean satires target mindsets or worldviews instead of targeting specific people. There is considerable overlap between Horatian and Menippean satire, since both often target people's stupidity or vices rather than targeting specific people, though the tone of Menippean satire is often harsher, like Juvenalian satire.

Literary Devices Used in Satire

Satire often depends on other literary devices to help it achieve its effect. Below is a list of some of the most common devices that satirists employ when mocking their subjects. Keep in mind that these devices are not specific *types* of satire—they're just devices that are commonly used *as a part* of satire (the device), or *in* satire (the genre).

- **Verbal irony** refers to the use of words to express something other than their literal meaning. This type of irony depends on a disconnect between what is said and what is meant or what is true—so satirists often use irony to suggest that a speaker is too much of a fool to understand a situation or, worse, a liar. Imagine if a public official told a group of citizens, "There's nothing to worry about!" right after a dam had broken before their very eyes. This would make for an effective satire of a government's careless response to a natural disaster.
- **An anachronism** is a person or thing that belongs to a time period other than the one during which a piece of writing is set. Satirists might use anachronism to demonstrate how out of touch a subject is with his or her society. For example, if the same public official in the example above told a 21st-century crowd not to worry because steamboats would come to rescue them, readers would understand that the implication was that officials were either too incompetent or too clueless to resolve the problem.
- **Parody** is the imitation of a literary style for humorous effect. Satirical authors use parody to attack literary conventions and traditional forms of rhetoric, often by exaggerating the key characteristics of the genre until they seem ridiculous or nonsensical. For example, in the prologue to Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel, [Don Quixote](#), Cervantes satirizes the pompous literary conventions in his contemporary Spain by creating his own over-the-top imitations of the elaborate poems that other authors commonly cited in the prologues to their works. Other writers of the time cited such poems to impress readers and

project a sense of authority, but Cervantes' parodies make clear that those other writers are merely pretentious and ridiculous.

- **Understatement** is downplaying something's size, significance, or quality. This device is useful to satirists because, like irony, it can often be used to portray a speaker as deceptive or foolish. If a politician understates the severity of his or her actions (e.g., "I don't think starting a war we couldn't win was the best decision"), it underscores just how ineffective and uncritical someone in a position of power can be.
- **Overstatement** is the exaggeration of something's size, significance, or quality. This device can also be used to underscore a speaker's shaky grasp on the reality of any given situation. A politician might overstate the extent of his or her achievements ("This was the best bill ever passed"), so satirists use the device to expose the disconnect between what someone says and the reality of the situation.
- **Juxtaposition** is a literary device in which an author places two things next to each other to highlight the contrast between them. In satirical writing, juxtaposition is especially effective when the combination is unexpected. For example, Seth Grahame-Smith's popular parody novel, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, inserts zombies into the genteel world of Jane Austen's 19th-century England. Grahame-Smith could be said to be using juxtaposition to satirize either the propriety of Bennet's society, the ubiquity of zombies in American popular culture, or both.
- **Malapropism** is the humorous and usually unintentional use of a word in the place of a similar-sounding one. Because these speech errors have the potential to be embarrassing, satirists may portray people as fools by giving them malapropistic lines.



EXAMPLES

You can find examples of satire in most art forms, because artists who are critical of their societies may wish to bring about reform or simply to entertain their audiences by mocking familiar people or institutions.

Satire in Literature

There has been a long tradition of satirical novels that criticize and poke fun at all aspects of both society and humanity more generally.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

In this example from Chapter Four of [Gulliver's Travels](#), Swift satirizes the historically troubled relationship between Catholics and Protestants in England, recreating the conflict as a battle over the correct way to eat eggs:

It began upon the following Occasion. It is allowed on all Hands, that the primitive way of breaking Eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger End: But his present Majesty's

Grand-father, while he was a Boy, going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his Father published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penaltys, to break the smaller End of their Eggs.

The People so highly resented this Law, that our Histories tell us there have been six Rebellions raised on that account; wherein one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed, that eleven thousand Persons have, at several times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End.

While the battle between the two types of egg-eaters is clearly ridiculous—those who fight in it would rather die than eat their eggs "incorrectly"—Swift here is actually taking a jab at the religious quarrels that have played a major role in English politics for hundreds of years by recasting these disputes as frivolous and arbitrary. Swift makes it clear that he's satirizing religious conflicts in England with an **allusion** to the religious revolts that claimed the life of King Charles I in 1625 and caused his heir, James II, to flee to France. By **juxtaposing** the king's dramatic escape with the trivial law that led to it, Swift is mocking the seriousness of the ongoing feud.

Satire in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

In the Third Canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope satirizes the vanity of his fellow Englishmen, describing a minor incident (in which a woman loses a lock of hair) as an epic event.

Sudden he view'd, in spite of all her art,
 An earthly lover lurking at her heart.
 Amazed, confused, he found his power expired,
 Resign'd to fate, and with a sigh retired.
 The peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide,
 To enclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.
 E'en then, before the fatal engine closed,
 A wretched Sylph too fondly interposed;
 Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain
 (But airy substance soon unites again),
 The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
 From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!

Here Pope alludes to a real-life episode in which Robert Petre stole a lock of hair from his love interest, Arabella Fermor. Pope satirizes the minor event by inflating its importance to epic proportions: he makes reference to Sylphs, which are mythological creatures who intervene in moments of crisis. Additionally, Pope **overstates** the male lover's frustration and the extent to which Fate played a role in the incident (the minor theft of a single curl). The repetition of "for ever" in the final line only heightens the humor of the situation: the hair will

obviously grow back in a short amount of time. These lines are gentle jabs at his peers' fixation on appearances.

Additional Works of Satire in Literature

Some additional famous satirical works of literature, and their targets, are:

- [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#) (Pre-civil-war Southern society, in particular its racism)
- [American Psycho](#) (Consumer capitalist American society of the 1980s)
- [Animal Farm](#) (Communist in general and the Soviet Union in particular)
- [Arms and the Man](#) (Romantic ideals, particularly about love and war)
- [Candide](#) (Every powerful institution, from the Church to the military, of 18th century Europe)
- [Catch-22](#) (The U.S. military)
- [Don Quixote](#) (Among many other things, fictional books about chivalrous heroes that were popular when Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*)
- [Gulliver's Travels](#) (English society, and humans in general)
- [A Modest Proposal](#) (English society, particularly in its dealings with Ireland, which at the time was under English control)

Satire in Film and Television

Satire is popular on television, especially on late-night talk shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Late Night Show with Stephen Colbert*, where hosts regularly target politicians and celebrities who have been in the news recently. Some famous satirical movies and their targets are:

- ***Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*** (the Cold War, American geopolitics, the military industrial complex, and nuclear proliferation)
- ***Deadpool*** (Marvel superheroes, particularly their straight-laced style)
- ***The Wolf of Wall Street*** (American capitalists, in particular their lavish lifestyles and prodigious hedonism)
- ***Happiness*** (American suburban life, particularly its treatment of sexuality)
- ***Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*** (English society, particularly its propriety and religious convictions)
- ***Zoolander*** (The fashion industry)
- **M*A*S*H** (The U.S. Military)

Satire in Political Cartoons

For centuries, cartoonists have used satire to raise awareness of political issues and to belittle people in positions of power. Often, they present extremely unflattering portraits of public figures, with exaggerated facial features and outrageous outfits to emphasize how loathsome they are in the eyes of the artist and readers.

Satire in James Gillray's *The Plumb-pudding in Danger*

Published in 1805, this cartoon depicts the French emperor and British prime minister battling for bigger portions of a globe-shaped dessert. Gillray satirizes French and British political ambitions by recasting the two leaders' competition for global dominance as a fight at the dinner table. While leaders often present their expansion efforts as being for the good of the nation, Gillray links their desire for new territory to their endless appetite for personal fame and power.



James Gillray's *The Plumb-pudding in danger*, 1805 | © Eubuildes/
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- To bring attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked.
- To advocate for social reform.
- To provide insight into human weaknesses.
- To amuse readers by bringing powerful figures down a notch.
- To invite readers to reflect on their own weaknesses and shortcomings.
- To mock literary or stylistic conventions.
- To recast strongly-held convictions as harmful and/or meaningless.
- To make light of, or quell anxiety about, unpleasant situations by making them fun.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Satire](#): A discussion of satire that focuses primarily on the genre's classical origins and role in politics.
- [Canyon Crest Academy's List of Satire and Satirical Devices](#): Though some of the devices aren't fully fleshed out, this is a concise list of the most common literary devices used in satirical writing.
- [Culture Trip's List of The 15 Most Influential Political Cartoons of All Time](#): While Culture Trip doesn't specifically refer to these cartoons as satire, that's what many of these political cartoons are — the cartoons make light of public figures or societal norms.
- [List of Satirical Novels](#): An extensive list of satirical novels from Wikipedia.

HOW TO CITE

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WHY WRITERS USE IT

Some authors write satire to raise awareness of social problems and apply pressure on the individuals or institutions responsible for creating them. However, satires don't have to explicitly call for social change—they may just be poking fun at human nature for the sake of entertainment. Writers can use satire for a variety of reasons: