

Satire



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It's been said that readers expect authors to be more intelligent than they, the readers, are. Indeed, if the common person desires existential meditation, commentary on matters of politics, or critique of high art by an intellectual peer, he or she can spend half an hour in the break room at work armed with only a can of *Sprite*; it may be a delightful conversation, but would likely not be what one seeks from a professional scribe. If authors represent a generic tribe at the summit of human intellect, it may be natural to conclude that they see things from this elevation the rest of us, view variably obscured, may not. Some of the awful things the author sees must tax the author incredibly, for authors are a miserable lot. We are all, surely, somewhat familiar with the unfortunate lives many an icon of the letters has lead. Is this a consequence of the author's survey of the world, and the fatal futility he or she feels subsequently?

If such can be said to be the position of the average writer, what of he or she who willingly plunges to even uglier depths to expose human folly, so that we, the audience, can learn and better ourselves along the way. *Not only better ourselves, but better the entire world.* Those that take such a task upon themselves must be *truly* miserable. So it would seem, according to one vehicle numerous writers have employed to express their indignance. For it can be a writing of such vitriol as to only be conceivably sired by a very miserable person. I'm speaking specifically of the genre, method, and mode known as satire.

In his odd tome on the subject, simply entitled "Satire", Gilbert Cannan professes "Of all literary adventurers there is none who more appeals to my temper or lays a larger call upon my sympathy than the satirist, for he is a poet or soul well-born who has been parlously out of luck." (Cannan 7) I mention this, as I believe it to be a valuable insight into the satirist's world. Is this the root of the satirists discord? The satirist's motivation, in general, has long been a hotly contested topic. The polarizing nature of the strong words the satirist employs are chiefly responsible for such queries. To this extent, the language and images the satirist utilizes are frequently intended to offend. And satirists often succeed in this endeavor, marvelously. Readers sometimes fail to understand what the satirist is trying to accomplish and merely deem the satirist's work vulgar.

If we are able to define what satire is, however, we may be able to chasten such knee-jerk impulses and derive the intended value from the satire. That ostensible value is another topic of debate among even the most learned of satire scholars, however; when is the satire valuable and when is the author hiding behind the cloak of satire to conveniently excuse the abuse to which he or she subjects the reader. It's a topic almost as intensely argued as that of any tidy definition of satire one might attempt to posit. There are as many definitions as there are critics, but through survey of some usual-attribute-suspects, we may be able to come to a somewhat satisfactory conclusion and examine satire's role in the 21st century.

As with every facet of this subject, satire's beginnings are a source of perpetual

speculation. Several centuries misunderstood the etymology of the word, believing it derived from the Greek *Satyr*, a mythological half man-half goat given to rude, derisive, and harsh behavior. This would seem to supplement the vision of satirist as caustic, coarse commentator nicely. Current evidence, or lack thereof, however, suggests that satire as we know it did not exist in Greece, as could be logically concluded from the nature of the old Greek comedies. Gilbert Highet, in his book "The Anatomy of Satire", notes that there is no exact Greek word for satire and really no tradition of satirical writing in ancient Greece. Further he explains, satire is a somewhat natural activity and we can see the impulse - for utilization of what will, in the future, be identified as satiric tenets - emerge in some Greek literature: these impulses served as stimulus to the Romans, who are thought to have originated the genre as it is broadly identified today. (Highet 25)

It is in this light, that we derive the word satire from the Latin *satura* which means "full", and via evolution, "a mixture of different things"; apparently, *satura* existed originally as a term to describe an eclectic food tray. (Highet 18) With this origin in mind, we can see how a perhaps morphological, or maybe orthographic change from *satura* to the similar satire might be a logical progression for a word that would come to describe a method which, at times, utilizes highly disparate elements. From its early Roman beginnings, this is a genre which has confounded readers with its ability to parasitically inhabit other genre's, thereby obscuring itself and making identification difficult.

Many literary scholars believe that the earliest satirical work - as we broadly perceive the method - surviving, albeit in a very fragmented form, is that of Lucilius (180-102 B.C.). Lucilius is a figure we know little about; it is from the aforementioned fragments of his work that academics have attempted to reconstruct his life so that his work might be better understood. Lucilius' disciple Horace believed that the writing of Lucilius "entirely depends on" the old comedy of Athens. This assertion doesn't seem to be widely accepted today.

Satire does share the penchant, established in ancient Greek comedies such as those of Aristophanes, for stories about real people, their wickedness, and the criticism, through mockery, that would follow. The behavior is criticized not out of hatred for a single person, which would be lampoon, but the desire to create a better society. The relationship between the two modes, employing this logic, is their social function. Another school of thought maintains that this point is actually a line of demarcation between the two genres; at least, as we would view them today. Those who subscribe to this view believe it is the treatment of the ridiculous, present in both modes, which distinguishes them. The distinction between comedy and satire may only be sharp at the respective extremes of each method (Abrams 275), but generically comedy can be said to present its ridiculous things as if they have no importance, and satire as if the ridiculous things are potentially harmful or destructive (Guilhamet 7). Pure comedy, then, does not function to criticize a problem, as satire, whatever the satirists motivation, may. Comedy functions merely to make us laugh at the absurdity of its targets.

Literary scholar M.H. Abrams defines satire "as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it seem ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation." (Abrams 275) Unlike comedy, satire does exist to criticize. In addition, such a definition is valuable in the allowance that can be

made for recognition of the myriad types of writing that can be encompassed by the term satire. Such a breath of scope disqualifies any potentially confusing restrictions that can be placed on satire as a method, mode, or genre. While satire may be employed as a tool of rhetoric, it shouldn't strictly be defined in regard to the possible motivations of the satirist in his or her writing (behavioral change, for example). Instead, it is useful to consider satire as a method, mode, or device which is characterized by the qualities enumerated by Abrams.

As such, satire is commonly broken down into two forms at base level. Formal satire, which is a term generally applied to verse satire, like that of the early Roman satirists whose satires were poems and Menippean satire, named after Cynic philosopher Menippus (Abrams 277), which basically has no form at all (Guilhamet 5). Menippean satire is simply regarded as satire that is a mixture of prose and verse (Guilhamet 5). Such a loose definition is, perhaps, responsible for begetting many of the liberal applications of the term, satire, that one views.

Satire is further broken down, somewhat broadly again, into three simple structures: demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial. Demonstrative satire is characterized by a direct attack in the present tense against individuals or specific groups. (Guilhamet 27) A good example of this brand of satire, commonly found today, would be the political cartoons featured in newspapers. Generally, such cartoons absolutely embody the qualities attributed to satire by Abrams. Where demonstrative satire takes aim at the present, deliberative looks at the future. In this form, a course of action is suggested to remedy an undesirable situation. This is primarily the kind of satire we see in the work of early Roman satirists such as Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. Finally, judicial structure describes the commonly occurring satiric setting of the court room. (Guilhamet 27) Here, the satirist is allowed to pass judgment upon those he or she has targeted for their wrongs.

It is with the writings of Horace (65 - 8 B.C.) that satire scholars begin to make the aforementioned distinctions. As mentioned prior, Horace began his career as a satirist a devotee of Lucilius. George Converse Fiske, in his study *Lucilius And Horace A Study In the Classical Theory of Imitation* states that "In the first book of the satires Horace is trying his prentice hand. His dependence on Lucilius is most clearly discernable in theme, thought, tone, and at times even language." (Fiske 26) By the time of his final work, the Epistles, however, he has developed a voice which bears only a slight resemblance to that of Lucilius. (Fiske 26) It is in regard to the fruit bore this evolution that Horace is regarded so highly; indeed, he is likely the most well-known, and probably the most iconic of the classic Roman satirists. Like Lucilius before him, and the Roman satirists that would succeed him, Horace's satire is written in verse, and thus is designated formal satire. Structurally, it is mostly deliberative, though the demonstrative is also experimented with at times.

Horace does not seek to repel the audience, but rather cure the audience of its ignorance, as he believes the audience to be somewhat blind and foolish. Horace could be described as an optimist. As such, Horace likely does not believe evil to be innate, but believes, rather, that evil is something developed, and that it can be healed or corrected with the proper attention. To correct the evil, the evil must first be identified. If his writings are any indication, Horace sought to make people aware of the problems he saw, thus allowing them to correct the behavior and live better. This model has

proven to be an enduring one for future writers working from the same, or similar, palettes.

Another model, which would become something of a template for future generations is established later by Juvenal (55-127 A.D.), who is also Roman. Juvenal is perhaps the second truly monolithic figure in the genre; like Horace, a specter who will forever hover over subsequent works of satire. Juvenal could be characterized as the anti-Horace; he is a writer who seemingly seeks to punish with his words. The writing of Juvenal is much darker than that of Horace. Juvenal's perspective would seem to be that evil is inherent in man and woman, and cannot be eradicated.

Examination of the historical context of any literature for clues as to the objectives or motivation of the author can easily lead to faulty conclusions; however, it is interesting to take into account the respective times during which Horace and Juvenal wrote. Horace wrote during the reign of the emperor Augustus (63 B.C - 14 A.D.), who brought peace to Rome after decades of civil war. Juvenal lived during the reigns of Nero (37 A.D. - 68 A.D.) and Domitian (51 A.D. - 96 A.D.), and experienced the notorious oppression borne of the policies those emperors created. While problematic, it is logical to conclude that the tenors of the poems these two satirists composed were influenced profoundly by the times during which they lived.

The harsh character of Juvenal's satire, in fact, can reasonably be validated by inspection of the times during which he lived and wrote. It could be argued that the viciousness of Juvenal was not only warranted but demanded. The extant poems of Juvenal weren't published until he was 45 (Highet 35), which would seem to indicate that much of his invective was aimed at the things he had experienced in the past during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. Juvenal likely had no desire to live the life he had under those emperors again and may have employed the scathing tone he did to shock his readers out of any complacency he felt to be affecting them.

Likewise, it would have been strange for Horace to have written in the manner of Juvenal in light of the relatively socially prosperous time during which Horace lived. That's not to say that each individual doesn't experience things which have a more idiosyncratic resonance which are thought to be of such great injustice or importance, in general, that they must be addressed in a caustic manner, but one should have some sense of propriety, and it seems that satire's founding father's did. Juvenal lived during an understandably unstable time: the succession of emperors during his formative years abused their powers to such an extent that their reigns were generally ended by their assassinations. Juvenal's writing seems to be a reflection of the strife that could produce such a great number of violent solutions. Horace's criticism seems to be apropos of the time during which he lived, as well. Horace's time was more stable and prosperous, and his lighter disposition seems to be informed by those times.

While this theory is reasonable it may be telling to note that it doesn't work so logically for many of the satirists who follow Horace and Juvenal. For a singular allegiance to either of these poets is not very prevalent. Often satirists will compose in the style of Horace for one satire, and in the style of Juvenal for another, or the satirist will compose in said styles at different points within the same piece of literature. This only serves to make the satirist a yet more suspicious figure to the average reader. The juxtaposition of the two styles can be quite jarring.

This phenomenon could be explained by the natural evolution of the genre over

the centuries. It's only natural for any kind of form to mature and for the practitioners of said form to possess a confidence unknown to the progenitors of the form. The bar is in some way raised, or the bar is different altogether, but still a bar. The pairing of the Juvenalian and the Horatian may be a consequence of this type of evolution.

It's also possible that erratic application of a Horatian or Juvenalian mode is an effect of how the satirist feels at different times. It may not be the kind of radically pronounced difference seen in the time periods during which Horace and Juvenal lived, but rather, say, the kind of shift in a satirist's tone that might accompany changes in U.S. Presidents (like Bill Clinton to George W. Bush). There are problems to be dealt with at all times, but some problems are greater than others, and such problems are often addressed accordingly.

The emotional state theory mentioned above somewhat discounts the professional discipline that the writer should possess, however. Does the satirist release unrepresentative work composed during one of his or her emotional dips just because he or she can? It's important to remember that satire is art, in this case. The satirist may have chosen the vocation because of strong beliefs but the fact that he or she is ultimately an artist is likely something not lost on the satirist. If the work is good, in general, the satirist may feel justified in publishing work that could be confusing to those familiar with prior work, or work that is confusing because it is schizophrenic in tone. Such a thing could be artistically rewarding and if the technique is successful in getting the point across as well then so much the better.

Another possible explanation for the aforementioned inconsistency is the notion of persona. It's all too easy to assume that the narrative voice of the satire is the author's own: that the author is the person speaking in the satire. But such is not always the case. It's entirely possible that the satirist has adopted a façade to make his or her point. The statements of the characters the satirist has created may be in diametrical opposition to the satirist's own beliefs. Or the statements could be utterly congruous with the satirist's own beliefs. In either scenario, it's worth noting that we can not presume narrator and author to be one and the same.

There is no definitive conclusion that can be drawn about the motivation of the satirist. No statement from the author, no discovered journals after the author has passed, can ever irrefutably reveal where the satirist is coming from. Be that as it may, idealists/prospective satirists may wonder if there is a point in composing satire for rhetorical purposes; if we are to make a distinction between comedy and satire. Because one can write comedy and make people laugh without the responsibility that the satirist has. If no one takes satire seriously because the satirist seems disingenuous what is the point?

The satirist is smarter than that, however. The satirist understands the worth of his or her bile as a tool of conversion. Win some, lose some. But winning some is still winning some. And for one possessed of great conviction, any number of such transformations are things of value. In addition, satire is generally comic. First, there is general gratification to be had in the knowledge that one has temporarily offered one's audience a respite from their problems through laughter, however uneasy it may be, and regardless of whether or not the audience gets the point of the satire. And as a possibly shallow corollary to that prospect is the fact that funny things are profitable. Such a thing cannot be entirely dismissed. Financial security allows the satirist to continue his or her

crusades.

In fact, the satirist has an even greater ability to influence people today. Television, film, and music became so culturally pervasive throughout the latter half of the twentieth century that it would have been a mistake for the satirist not to take advantage of the new massive audience that was established. And take advantage satire has. The aforementioned mediums are today responsible for the greatest exposure of satire. And that satire likely has a greater effect on more people than books ever have.

What about the prevalence of Juvenalian or Horatian satire in the early 21st century? I can only speak as a young adult living in the United States (well, and one who has seen reports on global violence and general tension), but there seems to be great discontent today. Such an observation certainly jibes with the historical contextual theory as to whose model is demanded at what points in time. How critical is this juncture in time? That's really something which can only accurately be judged in reflection, but much of today's satire is as bitter as European extra dark chocolate.

Despite this observation, I feel the conclusion to be a gray area. Today's Horatian stylings might be closer to the Juvenal of yore, in terms of what is offensive: what will shock; what will affect. I would conclude that there is ample evidence to suggest that both models have survived to be used by the satirist today. Something like Comedy Central's nightly news spoof *The Daily Show* I view to be predominantly Horatian in execution. It contains such Horatian hallmarks as the witty, urbane host (narrator) - the great Jon Stewart - and multiple objects of ridicule. Something like the serial comic strip *Get Your War On*, on the other hand, may be working from more of a Juvenalian perspective, with its ridicule of attitudes toward the Iraq War. It is more focused in its criticism and even a little shocking, and probably even more affecting, if not better than *The Daily Show*, as a result. And of course, there are numerous other programs, songs, and books which blur the lines.

Satire will always have a place in society. While not a certainty, it's fairly safe to assume that people will continue to have something to be unhappy about until the end of time. Institutional problems, personal problems: there will always be a place for the individual who rails against such things and rallies people to affect change or at least consider change. Satire, regardless of one's definition has been around for a very long time. Now, in the early 21st century, satire continues to play largely the same role that it has since its inception. We're perhaps a little more jaded for various reasons, and not so willing to accept what we read or see, regardless of how convincing it may be, but we can still be influenced by satire. And we should be thankful for satire's influence. It's passion makes the audience passionate, and passion can bring positive change.

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