

Understanding Satire

SATIRE: A term used to describe any form of literature that blends ironic humor and wit with criticism for the purpose of ridiculing folly, vice, stupidity and other failings in individuals and institutions. Satire differs from comedy in that satire seeks to correct, improve, or reform through ridicule, while humor aims simply to amuse. The most common type of modern satire is called “indirect satire.” In indirect satire, the writer creates a world peopled by characters who speak and act in such a manner that they themselves are the targets of the satirist. *Huckleberry Finn* is an example of indirect satire as are many of the modern examples, such as *The Onion*.

THE SATIRIST’S TOOLBOX:

- Irony:** the recognition of the incongruity that exists between appearance and reality
 - Verbal Irony** – a figure of speech in which there is a contrast between what is said and what is meant (for example: saying, “This is just GREAT!” when something terrible happens)
 - Situational Irony** – refers to the contrast between what is intended or expected and what actually occurs (for example: if someone who hates animals loses his/her vision and must rely on a seeing eye dog)
 - Dramatic Irony** – when the audience/reader becomes aware of a character’s real situation before the character is (for example: if a character steals a diamond necklace and begins making plans to sell it when the audience knows it is a fake)
- The naïve hero:** In several important satirical works (including *Huckleberry Finn*) the author uses an ignorant or innocent story teller, called a naïve hero. The narrator’s innocent view of things leads him to misinterpret the people and events around him. Meanwhile, the knowing reader sees through the narrator’s mistakes to the author’s true view and continuously corrects the hero’s version of what s/he sees and experiences. With a “naïve hero” like Huck, much that happens in the novel becomes ironic. There is almost always a contrast between the way things appear to Huck and the real truth that only the reader understands.
- Understatement:** when something is purposely represented as being far less important than it actually is (for example: “After the tornado destroyed the barn, the farmer looked at it and commented, ‘Looks like I may need to fix the place up a bit’”).
- Hyperbole** – obvious exaggeration or overstatement not meant to be taken literally (for example: Huck says, “I reckon he must be ‘bout a thousand years old”).
- Caricature** – ludicrous distortion of personal characteristics (for example: the character of Barney on the *Simpsons*, who is drunk at all times and in all places, is a caricature ridiculing alcoholics).

6. **Parody** – mimicking something to ridicule it (for example: a mock talk show on which the host blatantly encourages the guests to beat each other up would be a satirical parody because the writer would be implying that talk show hosts are in it for the ratings and should be more sensitive to their guests as human beings).

REMEMBER: THESE TOOLS ARE ONLY SATIRICAL IF THEY ARE USED TO IMPROVE, CORRECT, OR REFORM! OTHERWISE, THEY'RE JUST COMEDY, DESIGNED SIMPLY TO AMUSE.

Based on Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch's *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*, NTC Publishing Group, Inc. 1991.