The Literary in Political Satire: Some Definitions and Methods

“Satire has long been a tool of political criticism. Although the term satire may describe an entire work, a passage, or a tone, its characteristics are shared: among these, it employs comedy or humor; it has a target and an ideal to compare it to; and it describes a folly or vice in detail.

From the Columbia Encyclopedia:

From ancient times satirists have shared a common aim: to expose foolishness in all its guises – vanity, hypocrisy, pedantry, idolatry, bigotry, sentimentality – and to effect reform through such exposure. The many diverse forms their statements have taken reflect the origin of the word satire, which is derived from the Latin *satura*, meaning “dish of mixed fruits,” hence a medley.” (Who’s Laughing Now?)

Basic Forms of Satire Defined

Horatian: light and humorous form of satire. An example of Horatian satire would be Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Juvenalian: dark and bitter form of satire. A notable and famous example of Juvenalian satire would be Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, which suggests eating children to solve the problem of overpopulation and poverty in Ireland.

Satire & Literary Style

Parody: a style, which imitates a subject using humor, highlights flaws or follies requiring change. Parody may imitate a subject, person, or style using humor. See some parodies of Shakespeare’s works to serve as literary examples of parody. [http://www.shakespeare-parodies.com/](http://www.shakespeare-parodies.com/)

Caricature: a literary style focusing on one characteristic, quality, or feature of a person or group of people, exaggerating it to a humorous level. Caricatures are most often and obvious in political cartoons. Some examples of political cartoons from the Library of Congress website: [http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/oliphant/part3.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/oliphant/part3.html)

See also [http://www.politicalcartoons.com](http://www.politicalcartoons.com)

“The Obama Cliff” [http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/b36989ee-a1d6-4397-9b92-152afaef730.html](http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/b36989ee-a1d6-4397-9b92-152afaef730.html)

“Burlesque: a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects. [1] The word derives from the Italian *burlesco*, which itself derives from the Italian *burla* – a joke, ridicule or mockery. [2] Burlesque overlaps in meaning with caricature, parody and travesty, and, in its
theatrical sense, with *extravaganza*, as presented during the *Victorian era*. [3] "Burlesque" has been used in English in this literary and theatrical sense since the late 17th century. It has been applied retrospectively to works of *Chaucer* and *Shakespeare* and to the Graeco-Roman classics. [4]

Contrasting examples of literary burlesque are *Alexander Pope*’s sly *The Rape of the Lock* and *Samuel Butler*’s irreverent *Hudibras*. An example of musical burlesque is *Richard Strauss*’s 1890 *Burleske for piano and orchestra*. Examples of theatrical burlesques include *W. S. Gilbert*’s *Robert the Devil* and the *A. C. Torr – Meyer Lutz* shows, including *Ruy Blas and the Blasé Roué*.

A later use of the term, particularly in the United States, refers to performances in a *variety show* format. These were popular from the 1860s to the 1940s, often in *cabarets* and clubs, as well as theatres, and featured bawdy comedy and female *striptease*. Some Hollywood films attempted to recreate the spirit of these performances from the 1930s to the 1960s, or included burlesque-style scenes within dramatic films, such as 1972’s *Cabaret* and 1979’s *All That Jazz*, among others. There has been a resurgence of interest in this format since the 1990s” (Wikipedia on burlesque).

**Satirical Devices**

Wit: verbal cleverness. Wit suggests intellectual brilliance and delight in its ability to entertain, and requires verbal skill beyond a simple knowledge of words. Wit is often used ironically, or even sarcastically, to ridicule or insult someone.

From Winston Churchill:

If you are going to go through hell, keep going.

You have enemies? Good. That means you’ve stood up for something, sometime in your life.

If you have ten thousand regulations, you destroy all respect for the law.

You can always count on Americans to do the right thing—after they’ve tried everything else.

History will be kind to me for I intend to write it (The Greatest Winston Churchill Quotes).

Epigram: A form of verbal wit expressed as a short, comic remark typically containing a "surprise" at the end, which makes it humorous. While clever, epigrams are often obscene or nasty in nature. Successful epigrams are used to insult another.

The only thing to do with good advice is pass it on; it is never of any use to oneself.
To be modern is the only thing worth being nowadays. – Oscar Wilde

If you tell the truth you don’t have to remember anything. – Mark Twain

A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is just putting on its shoes. – Mark Twain (Winston Churchill is credited with a variation of this quote).

“Sometimes I wonder whether the world is being run by smart people who are putting us on or by imbeciles who really mean it.” – Mark Twain (Hilarious Quotes by Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain).

Sarcasm: a form of irony employed to insult or slight. Most likely, students are already effective at identifying and using sarcasm, but noting that sarcasm is frequently used in satirical works will allow students some access to identifying whether a reading is satirical in nature.

Repartee/Playing the Dozens: a person’s ability to respond to an insult quickly and directly, often using sarcasm or wit in the response. "Your Mama" jokes are a solid example of repartee.

An example from one of a witty American student in Chicago: When told his mama must be a Cubs’ fan because she was a loser, a boy responded, "Well, your mama must be a White Sox fan because every time I see her that's all she's wearin.” **Yes, the student was reprimanded for inappropriateness.

**Literary Terms & Techniques Frequently Used in Literary Satire**

Allusion: a reference to another famous or well-known event, work of literature, person or group of people, film, artwork, etc.

Tone: the author's attitude toward a subject. In satire, tone is often achieved through diction (word choice) and incongruous juxtaposition.

Irony can be divided into three different types: verbal irony, dramatic irony, and irony of situation. **Verbal irony** is when there is an incongruity between what someone says and what is meant. **Dramatic irony** is encountered when a reader or audience member knows something to be true contradicts what a character believes to be true. And **irony of situation** occurs when there is a difference between what one expects to happen and what actually does happen.

While satirical works typically use irony, not every use of irony indicates satire. The use of irony does not mean a literary work is satirical; however, if irony is present, searching for other commonly employed literary devices will help decipher whether an example of irony is or is not being used for satirical purposes.
Language & Satire
In addition to tone, the use of language and word choice factors into deciphering whether a piece of literature is satirical. Note whether the text uses language descriptively and literally, or figuratively.

Notice the use of figurative language such as metaphor, simile, personification, oxymoron, hyperbole, or understatement.

Personal Attitudes Used in Satire (either by the speaker or the object of the satire)
Pessimists: people with a gloomy outlook of the world and always expect the worst to happen.
Misanthropes: those who despise and distrust the human race.
Cynics: people who do not trust the sincerity and/or motives of others.
Optimists: counters the pessimist, those who view the world with hope and expect the best outcomes.
Philanthropists: opposed to misanthropes, people who work to better the world and love the human race.
Pollyanna: those who trust "the sun will come out tomorrow" regardless of how many misfortunes they must endure.
Naïve ordinary folks trying to sort out the mixed messages they are inundated with from the media and from politicians.

While literary terms, definitions, and examples may highlight how to identify satire in literature, cartoons, and media, note that this list does not cover every technique satirists use to convey their message (Yahoo Voices).

Works Cited
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http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/b36989ee-a1d6-4397-9b92-152afae8f730.html


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