

# The Role of Satire in Literature for a Social Reform

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## Abstract

This article covers the areas where Satire has got its prominent impact in Literature. The meaning and the scope of satire has been vividly discussed with historical touches in the beginning and the definition of this term has been widely amplified as per the excellent remarks of different scholars like John Dryden and Dr. Johnson and moreover, How the writers have used satire to have its tremendous value in the society with their literary contributions like Chaucer, Milton, Alexander Pope, George Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, Earnest Hemmingway and etc. In fact, Satire is found in all fields of Literature like Poetry, Drama, Novel and Prose writings and the classical work of Criticism. Attempts have been made to focus on the truth that satire has been accepted and appreciated right from Chaucer's time to this day despite the fact it has a must past origin. In addition to that, it is also discussed here how and where different writers have handled satire to bring correction to drive away follies widely found in the society and have used them as a sharp weapon as in the words of Alexander Pope "O Sacred weapons used for Truth's defense" which means it is a sharp knife to cut off the rotten substance that corrupts the society from family, society, nation and the world as whole. It also explained the circumstances that prompted them to make note of satires in their literary works. There are remarkable touches of satire in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales with an example of "The Pardoner" which has been highlighted here and in Chaucer's observation he was in real need of change in heart, mind and soul. Another example of Hemmingway's advocacy for peace who has really experienced the horrors of war, found in his novel "Farewell to Arms". People's blind beliefs, the negligence of the rulers that affects the common man, and above all the change that is expected to liberate the society have been displayed with sufficient touches from the works of literature. The aim of the article is to make sure that satire is not simply a lampoon or just an agent to ridicule but also an finest tool to bring forth correction and repentance from follies, superstitions and hypocrisy but to promote peace, love, harmony, awareness and gladness in the light of satire in literature.

**Keywords:** Satire, social, reform, pardoner, farewell

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## Introduction

The encyclopedia Britannica defines satire as "the artistic form chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule.....for social reform" [Encyclopedia Britannica on Satire]. From this statement one could have an idea about the nature and scope of satire. In day to life people come across various issues and some would take it seriously and some others would ignore it. Yet a few others would make an attempt to ridicule it with literary senses by way of satirical poems, dramas, novels, short stories or even with their own essays or articles. This research paper attempts to substantiate the powerful exposure of satire which tries to bring out awareness to the public as it is used as a marvelous tool to bring correction. Satire has been used by many literary genius who have proved that the literary provision is the best medium of communication that could very easily catch the attention of the reading public.

## The Origin of the Term Satire

Satire takes its origin from the Italian "Satura Linx" that originally means the offerings of fruits from the agricultural

products. It was well developed by the great Roman writers like Juvenal, Horace and Persius in Italy. [Liberalarts.oregonstate.edu] In fact, the English satirists had a considerable influence from them. Juvenal was harsh in his satirical writings but Horace was mild in his attack with less sarcastic and criticism. Though it is said to have the Roman origin we can find its shades in Greek literature as well despite the fact, Greek Literature has more historical solidarity than that of the Roman literature. There is satire in Homer's presentations as well. There are prominent writers who have taken satire as an amazing tool to reveal hypocrisy profound in society in order to look for a change. Right from the time of Chaucer to current news lines satire plays an important role to that tries to bring social awareness that the society requires for its welfare and uplift.

## The Scope and Meaning of Satire

The definition of satire varies from person to person those who are great genius in their presentation of their critical work. Dr. Johnson defines satire as 'a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured'. Therefore it is pretty clear that satire stands in order to drive out the folly right from

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common man to the society. On the other hand Dryden underlines “the true end of satire is the amendment of vices” (Discourse concerning Satire), and he continues to say that the result of satire is reformation” [A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire, John Dryden, Edited by John Lynch, 1693]

Alexander Pope in his Epilogue to Satire (1738) admires satire “O Sacred weapon left for Truth’s defense” Therefore it is quite evident that satire stands as the weapon for truth that dispels darkness and brings forth the light of truth.

Melville Clark presents satire as “It ranges from the extreme of crudity and brutality to the utmost refinement and elegance.....” Moreover, he goes on to say that it includes the tone of satiric spectrum, wit, ridicule, irony, sarcasm, cynicism, the sardonic and the invective’ (Studies in Literary Modes, 1946, p.32) From this one could come to a conclusion that satire is the part and parcel of all genres of literature. In fact, a single person cannot change the superstition and the follies found in the society despite his desire but a satirical author can do this great work. Many of Bernard Shaw’s plays have the tone of satire and well received by the general public. It is not simply a literary form rather it is a literary mode. The satirical writers are more extremely sensitive to moral and spiritual degradation. They think that it is their duty to correct people with their expression of bitter truth which paves way for self-examination.

### **Comedy Vs Satire**

Despite the fact, a writer of comedy exposes the human weakness, follies and superstitions found in the society and culture his attitude is not the same as a satirist. He aims for a humorous atmosphere in the theatre with his witty dialogues and clown centered atmosphere. He would simply present the characters with in order to amuse the audience and he would have less interest to bring admonishment or correction within the audience. The hero in a comedy normally undergoes failures, ups and downs in life and at the end would be successful and would achieve his goal that would end in marriage or reaching the desired position. However, a satirist has a different aim of portraying his message. He would simply display his ideas by mercilessly attacking the vices of the viewers or readers. [Notes explained from Pope’s “Essay on Criticism, 2009] However, the satire would cover Invectives, Lampoons, Verse-satire, Prose-Satire, Satire in novel and Satire in drama. Even though Satire has got an age old history in England taken from Scriptures, it got well shaped and refined right from Chaucer’s age. On the other hand, Milton has a view of satire which is just mingled with wrath and the laughter when he was trying to justify the God’s way to man. In fact, Miltonic Satire brings about the wrath reserved for mankind for the sinful desire, wickedness and debauchery. As a puritan he has spared no one from punishment. [Allegory, Irony and Satire in “Paradise Lost”, Hesiod, 2019]

### **Chaucer’s handling of Satire**

“The Prologue and the Epilogue to the Pardoner’s Tale” displays the corruption that was widely found in the medieval age in the society and how the English public was under the clutches of religious dogma that has made them. Chaucer fully pained by the attitude of such clergy whose aim was just to gain from the public in the name the Almighty God. He did not spare the pardoner’s greed that forces the then peasants to pay him either both in alms and offerings where he would ensure their eternity. In fact, this was the time more than a

century before the reformation in Europe he was bold enough to expose such widely prevalent scam where the pardon and forgiveness got sold just to satisfy the needs of the clergy. There is a great paradox that the Pardoner was preaching on the theme of “Cupidity” which is the root of all evil but with his action that he proved that he himself would repentance in order to get rid of the lust for collection of coins from the poor and needy.

“For to make hem free  
To yeven her pens, and namely unto me  
For my entente is nat but for to winne,  
And nothing for correction of sine” [Canterbury Tales,  
Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Pardoner”]

The pardoner in fact threatens the public with such words, in short that nothing other than the payment alone would bring about remission to their sins. There was a widespread concept that was prevalent that the preaching is just for the listeners and the preacher would normally transgress it. But Chaucer’s whip was so sharp at those hypocrites.

Despite the fact Chaucer was so critical in his satirical view on the pardoner he has never ceased to display present the virtues and goodness in the other characters like the caring parson, smiling nun, graceful prioress and so on. Remember that his judgment is fair in the way what he felt was good but he never left the wicked unpunished despite their religious heritage.

### **Ben Johnson’s use of Satire in His Plays**

Ben Johnson was a great playwright and his comedies are still admired. He has used his plays to ridicule the human greed for wealth and power. In Volpone he has used the human heart that was yearning just to amass gold and wealth where the heart has no humane. [Volpone, Ben Johnson, 1607, He was professionally humorous but never missed the message that he wanted to correct the minds of those audience that the worldly wealth would not fully satisfy the mind rather it would simply take away the peace of mind. Not only did he employ satire in this play but also his satirical view is well established in the plays like “Every Man in His Humor” as well. One could simply observe the man’s mind in the mirror of Johnson’s plays that the poor wants to be rich all the time however, the rich are aiming to become richer and no one is satisfied with what they have at hand. Even though he was witty and humorous and not as emotional as Shakespeare, he made an attempt to censure the folly, lust, envy and hypocrisy present on that age. Everyone likes to become rich but at what cost is the question he has raised in his plays. [Everyman in His humor, Ben Johnson, 1598]

Meanwhile, the settings portrayed by Johnson normally centered round the cities like London and Venice. In fact, Venice is the city where the luxury, drunkenness, gluttony and debauchery and merry making had a high range of prevalence and he highlighted the need for correction either in the human characters or with the animal characters but his ultimate aim is to whip at the greed of mankind. [Studying Amplified, Spark notes]

### **The Political Satire**

The current age has witnessed that the corrupt politicians cannot simply escape the media and the press. Things can be easily updated with evidence. However those were the gone old days when the education was just confined to the upper class and the peasants’ voice was unheard, the satire still has

played a crucial role. During the Restoration Age, tremendous writers have sprung up to establish the effectiveness and the need for satire to bring amendment in the society. When there was a tussle erupted in England between the crown and parliament, the general public showed a great deal of reading and amazing writers like John Dryden highlighted those political instability and its impact by his powerful display of political satire. Hudibras is the vital example of those days' satire in the character of Butler and that has earned a wonderful readership. In "Absalom and Achitophel" Dryden has presented religion over politics. As mentioned earlier it was the time of great political calamity and he took sides in certain times but his sense of satire has remained unchallenged. [Absalom and Achitophel, John Dryden, 1685] In fact Dryden has made of the Biblical narrative of King David and Absalom and the conspiracy and the wicked counsel offered by the traitor, Achitophel. From this Dryden has made a beautiful analogy at the characters of Duke of Monmouth and his wicked counsellors against the palace. It is in fact a powerful satire with the religious note, and he also vehemently attacked Zimri, "So over violent, or over evil. [Absalom and Achitophel, John Dryden, Poetry Foundation] That everyman with him was God or devil" About the wicked Achitophel he exclaimed, "A fiery soul, which working out its way..... Pigmy body to decay." Dryden has very well explained the tragic end of the evil man who was despised and later committed suicide. In fact, this has become a great lesson for the reader about the final plight of the malicious plotters. Another political satire of Dryden "The Medal" that too had the similar tone of the then political diaspora touching the disloyal Shaftesbury who had at last escaped the gallows. However, it lacked the marvelous energy that was found in Absalom and Achitophel.

In Mac Flecknoe, which is also another political satire where Dryden has personal attack on the Wig party poet Shadwell. The last Satirical work "The hind and the Panther" which is which has a religious note where Dryden put the greedy Roman parish that had subdued and exploited the common public. [Mac Flecknoe, John Dryden, Poetry Foundation, 2023]

### Satire on Social Dogma

A social set up is defined as a group of individuals sharing the same spatial or territorial area with the same cultural values. However, every individual is different in every walk of life. Our Likes, dislikes, tastes, interests, choice, sports, deeds and actions and etc different from each other. But one thing unites all which is the comparison that an individual makes. In order to equate himself with the other person, the mindset prompts a person to involve in various actions that could result in new adventures or achievements as well in dangerous and serious negative actions.

"Satire's my weapon, out I'm to disrepute  
To run amuck, and tilt at all I meet" – [Alexander Pope, Essay on Criticism, 1711]

Alexander Pope has been called as the representative of the Restoration age and known as the typical satirist of the period. He has sensed the pulse beat of the entire society and was trying to first expose their folly first and then to amend their errors. He has suffered with physical deformity and his religious beliefs in his character, as a person of irritable temper and that has made him a sharp satirist. In his "Essay on Criticism", he wrote on selecting the authors, Pope writes:

Authors, like coins grow dear as they grow old

It is the rust we value, not the gold  
His study! With what authors is it stor'd?  
In books, not authors, curious is my lord..... "

The Rape of the Lock is one of his narrative poems where Pope stands as the merciless satirist who was so critical of the then British society who were living to pacify the satisfaction and envy of the others. Later in the eighteenth century, satire has become the must for the reading population because this person has made it with his corrode and gentle exposure, to point out the mistakes with an aim of correction. [Rape of the Lock, Alexander Pope, 1712]

### The Satirical Novels

Gulliver's Travel has proved to be a satirical fiction in which Jonathan Swift has made a great impact on the reading public. In this he has created multiple characters with different shapes and actions and he was clear in his theme that violence should get rid of the society as he was dreaming for a land with peaceful and serene transaction of everything. One thing that the king who was in the novel was not able to accept the discovery of gun powder itself. Thus the peace loving nature of Jonathan Swift is well displayed in the novel, and the travel around the globe and the interaction with various kinds of creatures has made the Gulliver unable to adjust with the society that he had hailed from. By the end of the long travel his words are concluded like this with a direct hit on the crown. [Gulliver's Travels, Swift, Prose Satire – 1726]

"So unmeasurable is the ambition of princes, that he seemed to think of ..... destroying big Indian exiles, and compelling that people to break to break that small end of their eggs, by which he would remain as the sole monarch....."

"The Battle of the Books" is another satire of Swift with an ironic theme. "Moreover, "The Tale of a Tub" that tells the story of the father who left his coat to his three sons which was unfashionable but with a great secret to reveal. It's portrayal is for moral amendment that needed for the society to remember the past and rich traditions. [Battle of the Books, Jonathan Swift, 1704]

"A Farewell to Arms" is a great novel that reveals the horrors and brutality of the war. Earnest Hemmingway, the Nobel Laureate, who himself had taken part in the "First World War" has widely expressed his autobiographical experience. the stupidity of over ambition, the sufferings of the citizens, the separation from the families, the imposed poverty on the people, the plight of the captured and the treatment of the wounded soldiers, the importance of the ambulance services, the need for medication and the medical workers and etc., are very well explained in the novel. Despite the fact, it does not directly hit anyone, the title itself has shown the tragic irony of war and the need for peace treaties between nations and the necessity for love and concern between the peace beyond any racial or color disputes. [Farewell to Arms, Ernest Hemmingway, 1929]

The simple but the loveliest message highlighted in the novel is that "One should recognize the brevity of time and take advantages of life's joys while it is still possible."

### Satire for the Society's Awareness

Addison and Steel were the prominent writers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and their contributions were effective at the form of satire. They really helped to educate their own generation and

kindled morals and revolutions with their powerful ideas. In the Spectator (461) they both were admired as follows: “Your writings have made learning more necessary part of good reading than it was before you appeared.” “The Coffee Houses in London” used to have long debate at their Satires in the prominent newspaper The Spectator because not only did they present just the news with a ridicule but also they have created an excellent lobby of words that was chewed and tasted by the readers and debated.

In the recent past George Bernard Shaw was very much critical of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century society and he has taken satire as a strong rod to expose and to vindicate the modernized world that has changed the face of the cities after the Industrial revolution. In Pygmalion he has used satire to mock the rigidity and the hierarchy of the British culture. He has also pictured the poor plight of the poor people living on streets as in the case of one his famous characters Eliza. [Pygmalion, Bernard Shaw, 1914]

Not only in his plays but also he has made mockery of the English spelling set up and advocate for a change because unlike many other languages, English spellings and the pronunciation would not match well.

### **Animal Farm, an Empathetic Satire**

George Orwell, who was working as a British Police Officer in Burma, has made fun of British Imperialism that has dominated many countries in Asian and Africa also his strong criticism on Communist ideology that had subdued all liberty from the mankind and muffled their mouth like that of the animals in the farm. Despite the fact, Orwell was not harsh in his satire, his gentle and the empathy for the sufferers either under British Colonies as well the iron curtain that has curtailed all sort of human values in the Soviet and its satellite countries with its powerful dictatorial regime. “Shooting of An Elephant” is a vital example of his mindset when he was to carry out the work assigned to him as the Police Officer. His confession was that finally he had to kill the elephant even when it was calm just to satisfy the people against his own will. [Shooting of an Elephant, George Orwell, 1936]

### **Conclusion**

An attempt has been made to see the prominent use of satire in Literature that in all fields by the famous writers from Chaucer. Many other prominent writers have also expressed their satire in their work and it is continuing. It is a proven truth that substantiates that all the satirists have the common goal that advocates for reformation in the families, societies, working places, institutions, and in the debating clubs. Most of the writers were directly sharp and hit at the head, some others were gentle and modest in their attack on the hypocrisy that has spoiled the smooth running of the livelihood. Yet a few others like Swift have made use of strange creatures in order to provide the futility of mankind with over ambition with vain results. Some have employed word power with witty and humorous expressions to show the folly of the society and the corruptions widely found in the society. Though people don't like to be criticized they like to criticize or listen to criticism and therefore satire has got a great grip on the human mind that looks for a virtue in the social platform. The main object has never been abandoned to satirists that they all have pleaded for justice and virtue to have a perfect domain and vice departed from the society for its benefit and welfare.

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