

What is satire?

1. Jonathan Swift explains his intentions in writing satire (“satyr”) in two stanzas of a poem imagining his own death, “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (1731):

As with a moral View design’d
To cure the Vices of Mankind:
His vein, ironically grave,
Expos’d the Fool, and lash’d the Knave.

(several stanzas omitted)

Yet, Malice never was his Aim;
He lash’d the Vice but spar’d the Name.
No Individual could resent,
Where Thousands equally were meant.
His Satyr points at no Defect,
But what all Mortals may correct...

2. “General Satire in Times of General Vice has no force and is no Punishment: People have ceas’d to be ashamed of it when so many are join’d with them; and ‘tis only by hunting One or two from the Herd that any Examples can be made. If a man writ all his Life against...Lawyers, would it do the least Good...? But if some are hung up, or pilloried, it may prevent others. And in my low Station, with not other Power than this, I hope to deter, if not to reform.”

-Alexander Pope (1734)

3. “The best satire does not seek to do harm or damage by its ridicule, unless we speak of damage to the structure of vice, but rather it seeks to create a shock of recognition and to make vice repulsive so that the vice will be expunged from the person or society under attack...whenever possible this shock of recognition is to be conveyed through laughter or wit: the formula for satire is one of honey and medicine.”

-Robert Harris, “The Purpose and Method of Satire” (1990)