

Ouch! How Satire Hurts (and Makes Us Laugh) in Order to Heal

The definition... Satire is a kind of literature that ridicules human folly or vice with the purpose of bringing about reform or keeping others from falling into similar follies or vices.

Shorter definition...the particular use of humor for overtly moral purposes.

It seeks to use laughter, not just to remind us of our common, often ridiculous, humanity, but rather to expose those moral excesses, those corrigible sorts of behavior which transgress what the writer sees as the limits of acceptable moral behavior.

The challenge...to put across serious matters in humorous ways and to keep the jokes consistent so that the reader/watcher doesn't get overwhelmed with the moral message: "the target must be close enough to the real thing for us to recognize what is going on, but sufficiently distorted to be a funny exaggeration, often a grotesque departure from normality."

The central concerns...that people recognize the society, the text or the person for what it really is and to correct behavior by showing something as ridiculous, laughing at it, rendering it an object of scorn.

What satire makes fun of...Satire can refer directly to people and events known to the readers from their immediate context or may focus upon more general human characteristics or upon both.

The difference between parody and satire...In satire there is usually a clear and overt intent to teach a clear moral lesson...at the basis of every traditional satire is the sense of moral outrage or indignation: the conduct is wrong and needs to be exposed....Satire can come in many forms from savage to gentle, but it remains satire so long as we feel that the writer's main purpose is making us laugh at conduct he believes ought to be corrected.

How do we do it?

- * Have a clear target.
- * Exaggerate and distort the target...in order to emphasize the characteristics you wish to attack.
- * Provide recurring sources of humor...an unrelenting attack.
- * Set up a certain distance between the character and the audience. Do not consider the inner feelings of the target or speculate on why he behaves the way he does.
- * Confront the audience with the difference between what the characters say and do and what we fully understand by their actions.
- * Push the boundaries of what people think is acceptable, touch a nerve.

You have failed to make satire if your audience thinks it's unclear, stupid or offensive--or chooses, instead, to embrace the trait or person being satirized as admirable. If they say, "That offends me," or "Life's not like that so I don't get the point," or "Hey...maybe we should all be more like that," you haven't made an effective satire.

Remember as well...*If it is to be funny, then that sense of shared moral meaning must exist in the audience as well – it can't be just something that enrages you...it must enrage your audience as well.*

From *Brief Introduction to Restoration and Eighteenth Cent. Satire* by Ian Johnston, 1998.

Can you think of any examples in pop culture where satire is present?