

Make me laugh: Humor as high (and low) art

A humorous glossary

Irony: A mode of expression, through words (verbal irony) or events (irony of situation), conveying a reality different from and usually opposite to appearance or expectation. A writer may say the opposite of what he means, create a reversal between expectation and its fulfillment, or give the audience knowledge that a character lacks, making the character's words have meaning to the audience not perceived by the character. In verbal irony, the writer's meaning or even his attitude may be different from what he says: "Why, no one would dare argue that there could be anything more important in choosing a college than its proximity to the beach." An example of situational irony would occur if a professional pickpocket had his own pocket picked just as he was in the act of picking someone else's pocket. The irony is generated by the surprise recognition by the audience of a reality in contrast with expectation or appearance, while another audience, victim, or character puts confidence in the appearance as reality (in this case, the pickpocket doesn't expect his own pocket to be picked). The surprise recognition by the audience often produces a comic effect, making irony often funny.

To be an effective piece of sustained irony, there must be some sort of audience tip-off, through style, tone, use of clear exaggeration, or other device.*

Lampoon: A crude, coarse, often bitter satire ridiculing the personal appearance or character of a person.*

Satire: A literary mode based on criticism of people and society through ridicule. The satirist aims to reduce the practices attacked by laughing scornfully at them--and being witty enough to allow the reader to laugh, also. Ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and several other techniques are almost always present. The satirist may insert serious statements of value or desired behavior, but most often he relies on an implicit moral code, understood by his audience and paid lip service by them. The satirist's goal is to point out the hypocrisy of his target in the hope that either the target or the audience will return to a real following of the code. Thus, satire is inescapably moral even when no explicit values are promoted in the work, for the satirist works within the framework of a widely spread value system. Many of the techniques of satire are devices of comparison, to show the similarity or contrast between two things. A list of incongruous items, an oxymoron, metaphors, and so forth are examples. See "[The Purpose and Method of Satire](#)" for more information.*

Invective: Speech or writing that abuses, denounces, or attacks. It can be directed against a person, cause, idea, or system. It employs a heavy use of negative emotive language. Example:

"I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." --Swift *

Sarcasm: A form of sneering criticism in which disapproval is often expressed as ironic praise. (Oddly enough, sarcastic remarks are often used between friends, perhaps as a somewhat perverse demonstration of the strength of the bond--only a good friend could say this without hurting the other's feelings, or at least without excessively damaging the relationship, since feelings are often hurt in spite of a close relationship. If you drop your lunch tray and a stranger says, "Well, that was really intelligent," that's sarcasm. If your girlfriend or boyfriend says it, that's love--I think.)*

Gallows/Black humor: Writing that places grotesque elements side by side with humorous ones in an attempt to shock the reader, forcing him or her to laugh at the horrifying reality of a disordered world.**

Schadenfreude: joy/delight at the misfortunes of others.

Verbal wit: primarily intellectual, the perception of similarities in seemingly dissimilar things . . . and is expressed in skillful phraseology, plays on words, surprising contrasts, paradoxes, epigrams, and so forth.***

Burlesque: A work designed to ridicule a style, literary form, or subject matter either by treating the exalted in a trivial way or by discussing the trivial in exalted terms (that is, with mock dignity). Burlesque concentrates on derisive imitation, usually in exaggerated terms. Literary genres (like the tragic drama) can be burlesqued, as can styles of sculpture, philosophical movements, schools of art, and so forth. See **Parody, Travesty**.*

Parody: A satiric imitation of a work or of an author with the idea of ridiculing the author, his ideas, or work. The parodist exploits the peculiarities of an author's expression--his propensity to use too many parentheses, certain favorite words, or whatever. The parody may also be focused on, say, an improbable plot with too many convenient events. Fielding's *Shamela* is, in large part, a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*.*

Travesty: A work that treats a serious subject frivolously-- ridiculing the dignified. Often the tone is mock serious and heavy handed.**

Caricature: Writing that exaggerates certain individual qualities of a person and produces . . . a ridiculous effect.***

Festive contexts and pastimes: The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin argues that "festive humor" acts as a release valve: it releases the pent-up anger of a repressed populace by reversing the political (power) structures, allowing the oppressed to make fun of the oppressor. Thus, in medieval times, the peasants would mock the church, crown, and nobles, by staging mock masses, coronations, etc. As Bakhtin wrote carnivals (the place/time where festive humor took place) "it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed . . . all were considered equal during carnival" (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 10). This type of humor is usually very graphic and often emphasizes the body (i.e. fart/body part jokes). Note, of course, that these outbursts of comedy were controlled by time and officially sanctioned by the very authorities that were being mocked.

Sources

*from Robert Harris's <http://www.virtualsalt.com/litterms.htm>

** from http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/lit_kit/glossary.htm#blackhumor

*** from Harmon William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.
Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. MIT Press, 1968