

HUMOROUS PURPOSES, SOURCES, AND METHODS

Humorous Purposes in Literature:

- Satire: “a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn”
- Parody: “a literary or musical work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule”

The distinction between satire and parody is usually seen as being *instructional*. While both have a humorous goal, only satire intends also to promote improvement in the nature or behavior of individuals (or mankind as a whole) by holding up to scrutiny those aspects of human behavior that reasonable people should avoid, yet frequently do not. Satire and parody are often referred to as literary genres or types.

Humorous Sources or Subject Matter:

- Bawdy or Ribald Humor – Plot material relating to *human sexual activity*
Bawdy – “boisterously or humorously indecent; obscene, lewd”
Ribald – “characterized by or using coarse indecent humor”
- Scatological Humor – Plot material relating to *human excretory activities*
Scatology: 1. “interest in, or treatment of, obscene matters”
2. “the biologically oriented study of excrement”

Humorous Methods or Devices in Literature:

Irony: The use of ironic devices is the dominant method for writers to create humor in serious as well as popular literature. Irony is generated in **three basic ways** (with several variations), all used to *elicit surprise* in the reader for comic effect.

- **Situational** – An “incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected results”
In other words, the *plot events* in a work of fiction are contrary to reader expectations, and thus humorous.
 1. Farce – an extreme form of situational irony “marked by slapstick humor and wild improbabilities” (*American Heritage Dictionary*)
- **Rhetorical** – “the use of words to express something other than and esp. the opposite of the literal meaning” of the words
With rhetorical irony, the **narrator’s** words or manner of expressing his ideas are contrary to the reader’s expectations, and thus humorous.

- **Verbal** – A **character's** words are contrary to reader's expectations, and thus humorous.

Variations of Rhetorical and/or Verbal Irony:

1. Hyperbole – deliberate *exaggeration* of some event or behavior for comic effect
2. Understatement – deliberate *understatement* of some event or behavior for comic effect (the opposite of hyperbole, obviously)
3. Sarcasm – an extreme form of rhetorical/verbal irony, with the humor coming at the expense of a particular target (usually a person or group of people); “a mocking or ironic remark” (*American Heritage Dictionary*)
4. Puns – “the usu. humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more of its meanings or the meaning of another word similar in sound” (*aka* a play on words)

NOTE: Unless indicated, all definitions are quoted from *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster Inc., 1987)

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