



# The role of satire in literature for a social reform

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Received 13 March 2026; Accepted 22 Apr 2026; Published 18 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.5.S2.61-63>

## Abstract

This research paper covers those areas of English Literature where Satire has become the prominent feature and amazing tool to reveal hypocrisy profound in society in order to look for a change. Different prominent writers like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, George Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, Ernest Hemingway and moreover have used satire in their literary contribution with the purpose to have its tremendous value in the society. Satire is developed in all different kinds of English literature like Poetry, Drama, Novel and Prose Writings and the classical work of criticism. Attempts have been made to focus on the truth that from Geoffrey Chaucer's time in 14<sup>th</sup> century who is known as the "Father Of English Satire" to till date, satire has been accepted, developed and appreciated by many important writers, poets, novelists and dramatists. In addition to that, this paper also explores here how and where different good satirists play the role of critics whose aim is to reform or correct human weaknesses, vices or follies and they have used satire as a sharp weapon which they use for their purposes is that of laughter. Their aim is to laugh at human folly, hypocrisy, vanity etc. and so to scorn it into shame. They rarely attack directly but clothes their attack in different forms like allegory, fable, mock heroic, parody or burlesque. It also reveals those circumstances that motivated them to use of satires in their famous literary works. There are many remarkable extents of satire in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" where he satirizes human weaknesses through a diverse cast of characters and their tales. Another example of Alexander Pope's "The Rape Of Lock". It is a mock epic. It is a mocking poem to which Pope mocks not only at the 'little unguarded follies' of the fair sex, but at the artificial life of 18<sup>th</sup> century London as a whole. The aim of the article is to throw light on the concept of use of satire in English literature by many scholars and to explore the author's views that the function of literature is not merely entertain but also to reform the contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Satire, Reform, Hypocrisy, Mock epic

## Introduction

Long defines satire as "a literary work which searches out the faults of men or institutions in order to help them up to ridicule." From the above definition one could have an idea about the nature of satire. Every day in life people of society face many issues surrounding them in the society and some person would take it seriously and some others would ignore it. Yet a few others would think and make an attempt to refine it by mocking and ridicule it. For this purpose literary genius use their literary senses and with the satirical writing like poems, dramas, novels, short stories, essays and articles they exposes the bitter truth of society. This research paper delves the power exposure of satire and through their satirical works scholars in entertaining and challenging readers, informing public conversation, leading to change and warning of misapplication.

## Objective of the study

The aim of the study is to examine the role of satire in literature by different writers and scholars for social reforms.

## Research methodology

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as books, articles, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

## The origin of the term satire

The word Satire is of classical origin. This word 'satire' has been derived from the Latin word 'Satura Lanks' that originally means the offering of fruits from the agriculture products. Some great Roman writers like, Horace, Juvenal and Persius developed the satire form in literature and these writers set a considerable influence on the upcoming Elizabethan and Augustan literature. The different kinds of satire can be seen that are developed by different authors. harshness can be seen in satirical writings of Juvenal but Horace was mild in his attack with less sarcasm and criticism. It can be personal or impersonal too. Right from Chaucer's period to current time, satire is used as an amazing tool to reveal the vices and follies of contemporary society and to bring social awareness among the people's welfare and uplift.

## Meaning of satire

Different writers define the satire in different ways. Dr. Johnson defines satire as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured."

According to Dryden, "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction."

Alexander Pope in his Epilogue To Satire (1738) admires satire, "O sacred weapon left for Truth's defense" So from the

above definitions, it is pretty clear that various writers in different ages use the satire in their literary works to improve the manners and morals of the people of the contemporary society. The satire may be inspired by either a personal grievance or a passion for reform.

### **Comedy v/s satire**

It can be said that the function of comedy is to expose, amuse, entertain, and often provoke “thoughtful laughter” by highlighting the follies, absurdities, incongruities of human life. The writer of comedy creates a humorous atmosphere in the theatre with the witty dialogues and clown centred atmosphere. The purpose of comedian writer is to amuse the audience by the different characters and the relatable situations or character flaws. The writer may not have an ulterior goal other than creating laughter. However, a satirist aims to expose and criticize the existing stereotypes and prejudices in society. Satire not only creates laughter in the society but the real goal of satire is to raise public awareness about the prevailing state of affairs and challenge perspectives through the use of irony, wit, euphemism, exaggeration, and understatement.

### **Satire as a mirror of the society**

From the Chaucerian period till today, different literary genius in their literary works attack and condemn follies and foibles found in the contemporary society. In 14<sup>th</sup> century, Chaucer’s ‘The Prologue and the Epilogue to The Pardoner’s Tale’ examines and attacks the character of Pardoner, this character is often seen preaching against greed while indulging in it himself. Chaucer exposes hypocrisy and moral failings within religious institutions of such clergy whose aim was just to gain from the common men in the name of the Almighty God. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Canterbury Tales”, the characters of Merchant, the Wife of Bath and Miller satires on the middle class of the contemporary society. For instance, The Merchant reflects the social shifts of Chaucer’s time. The Merchant is portrayed as a shrewd businessman who is concerned merely with wealth, social status, and reflects the materialistic approach of his social stratum. The Wife of Bath through her boldness of speech, wealth and multiple marriages challenges traditional gender roles and norms. Likewise, with their many literary works, Geoffrey Chaucer exposes the corruption of the church in his age, hypocrisy in the Nobility and Feudal System, greed and rise of the middle class, gender roles, marriage and patriarchy and academic and legal fraud by the appropriate use of satire.

Satire is the prominent theme in the works of Alexander Pope. Some of his famous and remarkable poetry are ‘The Rape of The Lock’, ‘The Dunciad’, some renowned moral Essays, Satires and Epistles of Horace Imitated reveal that the major part of it consists of satire or is satiric in spirit. There were various factors and circumstances of the age that gave a satiric turn to the genius of Pope.

“The Rape Of the Lock” is Pope’s first satire. In this remarkable mock-epic, Alexander Pope exposes the artificiality, the fashion, the vanity and frivolity of the age and

ridicules with the unflinching grasp of a master. “The piece sparkles in every line, the touch is never too heavy, an air of gay and humour is preserved throughout.”

Ben Johnson was a great playwright and his comedies are still admired. He observed the human greed for wealth and power, corruption, and the moral decay of society and he used his plays to ridicule on these issues. In the play “Volpone”, he directed comments on the materialistic, money-obsessed atmosphere of 17<sup>th</sup> century London.

In fact, ‘Volpone’ is a powerful satire and gives a warning against the dehumanizing effect of unchecked human greed and criticizes the materialistic thinking of society. In addition to addressing human follies, Ben Johnson also highlights his satirical view in the plays like “Every Man in His Humour” as well. In the mirror of Johnson’s play everyone could simply observe person’s mind that no one is satisfied with what they have in hand, poor wants to be rich and rich person thinks about more and more money all the time. He critiques the values and conventions of the contemporary time, exploring the clash between individual desires and societal expectations.

John Dryden is one of greatest English satirists, known as “Father of Augustan Satire”. During the Restoration period amazing writers like John Dryden used the different style of satire to highlight the political instability and its impact on society. John Dryden’s major political satire work is “Absalom and Achitophel”. Through the characters of Absalom and Achitophel he criticizes the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Duke of Manmouth for opposing the monarchy.

Dryden’s another satire work is “Mac Flecknoe”. It is a personal attack on the Wig Party poet Shedwell. Dryden portrays Shedwell as the heir to the kingdom of ‘dullness’ using elevated and grand language to mock his lack of wit.

### **The satirical novels**

Gulliver’s Travel a satirical famous novel that is written by a great satirist Jonathan Swift. In this satirical fiction Swift has made a great impact on reading public. Beside the leading character, Lemuel Gulliver who was a ship surgeon, Swift has created multiple characters to make intense criticism of the British government, party politics and European society. Swift uses satire to condemn some vices of contemporary society like iniquities, vices and foibles of human nature, human corruption, the senseless violence of religious disputes and the brutal and hypocritical nature of European imperialism through his landmark work Gulliver’s Travels.

‘A Tale Of A Tub’ is another satire of Swift. It is a religious allegory. By portraying three men, Peter, who stands for the Roman Catholic church, Jack symbolizes the Dissenters and Martin, the personification of the Anglican and Lutheran churches, Swift attacks on the ‘enthusiasm’ of Roman Catholics and culminates in a fierce attack upon Jack.

Jane Austen is a satirist as well as a moralist. “Miss Austen is never angry with her character”, says Walter Allen, “but contempt for the silly and stupid is constantly affected in her work, and she found them less funny and older she grew, for the tone of contempt becomes drier in each, succeeding book”.

In her satirical novel ‘Pride and Prejudice’, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine are figures of fun, monstrous puppets of silliness and snobbery to be elaborated and laughed at.

Jane Austen’s “Northanger Abbey” and “Sense and Sensibility” satirise “that romantic philosophy which was sweeping the world in the early nineteenth century”.

### **Conclusion**

No doubt, we can observe that in literature, satire has used as a tool that is by the powerless against the powerful by many more famous writers from Chaucer. We can say that satire is a double-edged sword, serving as both entertainment and a tool for social critique. By their satirical literary works, many other prominent writers have the power to expose societal flaws and challenge the status quo. It is also proved that the true and common goal of these satirists is to advocate for reformation in the families, societies, working places, institutions and in the debating clubs. We find a sort of variety in different forms of satirical works. Each and Every has its own method of satire. Most of the writers sharply and directly hit at the head. Some others are modest and mild in their attack on the hypocrisy that has ruined the life of common men. Some writers use the humorous witty expressions to highlight the folly of the society. To achieve this purpose, they employ their word power. The truth is that the main object has never been abandoned to Satirists that by this literary genre they intend to compel one think about the virtue to have a perfect domain and vice departed from the society for the benefit and welfare.

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