

# Wit, Humour and Satire in Literature

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HES-II

**Abstract – It has always been a point of exchange of views whether art should purely be for art's sake or there should be a specific aim behind it. Right from the times of Plato to the present times, this controversy still persists. Plato held the view that art serves no useful purpose, that it waters emotions, and that instead of feeding the audience on truth, it takes men away from reality. It is clear that he was motivated by a moral purpose. He regarded imitation as mere mimesis or servile copying; not an expression which is creative. Aristotle his disciple, tried to free poetry from Plato's charge. He said that poetry is not a servile representation of the surface or appearance; but a representation of the passions and emotions of men. In his view, "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened; but what may happen – according to the laws of probability and necessity". Later Horace, a Roman poet, added something more to what Aristotle had said. He said that a poet often uses fiction and mingles facts with fancy. The function of poetry to him was not a servile imitation but an imitation with the purpose of delight and instruct. Thus the concept of art as imitation had, therefore, begun to hold less importance. In the history of literature the change in the concept of art is clearly indicated by the first classic of English criticism The Apologie for Poetry written by Sir Philip Sydney (1554-1586), in 1580s. Sidney also accepted the concept of art as imitation, which was introduced by Aristotle. He does agree with Aristotle that imitation not only means mere copying or a reproduction of facts but also a representation or transmutation of the real and the actual, and sometimes creating something entirely new. But where Aristotle does not clearly express his views about the purpose of art, Sidney affirms that art has a dual purpose to delight and teach. He further says that in order to teach and delight, poets imitate not 'what is, hath been or shall be' but only 'what may be' and should be as that the very objects of imitation become such as to guarantee the moral purpose. Next to Sidney it was Ben Jonson (1573?-1637) who regarded poetry as a great civilizing force. Poetry according to him offers to mankind a certain rule, the pattern of living well and happily.**

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A writer may use a variety of devices - caricature, exaggeration, and parallelism to instruct or to delight. He uses different forms of expression that intentionally deviate from the ordinary mode of speech for the sake of more powerful, pleasing or distinctive effect using wit and organic sensibility. Actually it is very difficult to give any strict definition of the term wit. Derived from the Old English word 'witan' meaning 'to know', its precise boundaries being still too unsettled. In last two centuries, it has passed through a greater variety of significations. Originally, wit signified wisdom; and anciently a man of wit was a wise man. In the Elizabethan period, a man of pungent wit or of great wit was a man of vast judgment. So in the English Renaissance period Bacon (1561-1626), Shakespeare (1564-1616) and John Milton (1608-1674) may have assumed no fundamental difference between 'wit' and 'insight' or 'profound intellect'. In the reign of James-I, wit was used to signify the intellectual faculties or mental powers collectively. In the time of Abraham Cowley (1618-1667) it came to signify a superior understanding, and more particularly a quick and brilliant reason. By John Dryden (1631-1700) it was used as nearly synonymous with talent or ability. Alexander

Pope (1688-1744) defined wit to be a quick conception and an easy delivery; according to which a man of wit or a wit is a man of brilliant fancy; a man of genius. Wit is now most commonly thought of as clever expression whether aggressive or harmless with or without derogatory intent towards someone or something in particular. M.H. Abrams defines wit as, "The human faculty of intelligence, inventiveness and mental acuity" (219). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it came to be used also for ingenuity in literary invention and especially for the ability to develop brilliant, surprising and paradoxical figures of speech. But the recent use of the term is derived from its seventeenth century application that denotes "a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise" (219). From the above definitions we can conclude that wit is an acute perception and cleverly appropriate expression of ideas providing amusement and pleasure. It wholly depends upon apt phrasing. So any poet or short-story writer may reveal himself as a wit when he pleases with appropriate phrasing of language.

Wit is often joined with humour. It often displays itself in the keenest satire. But when it is not kept under control or when it becomes the habitual exercise of the mind, it is apt to impair the nobler powers of understanding, to chill the feelings, to check friendly and social intercourse and to break down those barriers, which have been established by courtesy. Thus wit in the broader sense in my view is a certain dramatic way of thinking. Instead of treating his ideas as mere symbols, the wit sees them, he hears them and above all, makes them converse with one another like persons. He puts them on the stage, and himself, to some extent into the bargain.

In comparison with wit, humour is less obviously mental in its approach to the weakness, foibles and absurd ideas and actions of people generally. Derived from a Latin word, '*humor*' the term became very famous during the Renaissance period. During this period it was held that the relative amounts or balance between the four main fluids (humours) of the body – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile – determined an individual's state of health and even general personality. The four humours were also associated with the four elements: blood with air (hot and moist), phlegm with water (cold and moist), yellow bile with fire (hot and dry) and black bile with earth (cold and dry) temperament. As long as the humours were in balance, the individual supposedly exhibited a perfect temperament, but an imbalance affected behaviour in a specific way. That is an excess of blood produced a sanguine personality, phlegm a phlegmatic or cowardly personality, yellow bile a choleric or argumentative personality and black bile a bilious or melancholy one. Many works of literature relied on this theory for characterization and provide convincing motivation for characters' actions. Presently this meaning of humour is not our chief concern. During recent times the humours are developed as symbolic stances through which the characters are seen to react to the values of the world they inhabit rather than as simple flaws or biases in their nature. Thus humour involves a sympathetic recognition of humanity and its incongruities.

According to M.H. Abrams, "The word '*humor*' may be ascribed to a comic utterance or to a comic appearance or mode of behaviour" (220). Here I would like to differentiate between a witty utterance and a humorous utterance. Firstly a witty utterance is always intended by the speaker to be comic but humour may arise from a comic as well as a serious situation. Secondly a humorous saying is not cast in epigrammatic form of a witty saying. But without wit, humour is impossible. It is achieved with the use of wit. Humour evokes sympathetic laughter, a laughter, which is an end in itself. Here it also becomes imperative to differentiate between the terms '*Humour*' and '*Affectation*'. In this connection it can be safely said that humour is concerned with an individual while affectation deals with a society

whose members have a particular way of saying or doing things.

A literary composition in which humour, sarcasm and ridicule are used to expose a folly or a vice is called a satire. I.R.F. Gordon explains the term more explicitly when he says, "the word '*satire*' as it is used today describes a mode of writing rather than a form." According to him, "satire attacks human evil and stupidity by making fun of it from a standpoint that at least implies, if it does not state, a consistent moral position" (103). In the same way, satire as defined by M.H. Abrams, is the "literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn" (187). It is clear from these definitions that there are three basic elements involved in satire – object of criticism, laughter and moral. The satirist tends to attack his object of criticism in an amusing manner and conveys a moral, which is implied if not explicitly stated. A satirist is always acutely conscious of the difference between what things are and what they ought to be. He is often a minority figure, he cannot, however, afford to be a declared outcast. For him to be successful his society should at least pay lip service to the ideals he upholds. If he does he is placed in a subtler and potentially more effective position than of simple denouncer of vice. He is then able to exploit more fully the differences between appearance and reality and especially to expose hypocrisy. Such a man, we may feel deserves exposure. To this extent the satirist is performing a socially and morally useful task of universal validity.

In England 18th century is particularly pre-occupied with satire and developed numerous varieties of it. John Dryden, Alexander Pope Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Richardson, they all possessed ratiocinative wit, the art of developing a plausibly outrageous argument and a vigorous, lively style. Satire continued to be written in 20th century too. Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Evelyn Waugh and nearly every notable writer used it. Among Indian English authors who centrally preoccupied with satire are Salman Rushdie, V.S.Naipaul, Nirad Chaudhary, Shashi Tharoor, Nissaim Ezekiel, R.K.Narayan etc. R.K. Narayan satirises greedy businessmen, moneylenders, extorting house-owners, black marketers, fake *sadhus*, credulous simpletons and so many. But his satire is so mild and gentle that it is often difficult to decide whether Narayan is being satiric or is merely exposing and ridiculing for the amusement of his readers in his novels and short stories. As Shiv K.Gilra quotes Dr. Iyengar, "...Narayan has no axes of any kind: he is that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple" (358). Actually this basic trademark of his creative art and vision has saved his writings from rancour anger

and bitterness, which would cloud the vision of a writer with avowed purpose or a satirical intent.

In conclusion, it can be said that the object of satire may be a person, a type of character, a particular social order or system, a certain weakness or habit or certain traditions. Moreover satire ranges in intensity from very mild to what is known as genial corrosive or caustic. The genial kind of satire may contain comic elements and may be written in bantering colloquial style. Here we should make some immediate distinctions, distinctions between the satiric and comic and the satiric and ironic. Irony is one of the means to achieve satire. Actually satire in my view is not in itself a pure and exclusive form. There are also comedy and irony that are not satiric, comedy is more generous and irony is more serious than satire. If comedy is kindly; it makes fun but accepts it, criticizes but appreciates it, laughs at but also laughs with its butt. Such is the comedy of Shakespeare's Falstaff. Irony is marked by ferocity and gloom. Such is the irony of Swift's "Modest Proposal" to cure the poverty and over population of Ireland by the systematic rearing of its living children as meat for tables of the wealthy. Such is Hardy's fierce indictment of ironic disposition after the execution of Tess, the 'pure woman'; "Justice was done. The President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess."

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