

# The Role of Satire in 18th-Century European Literature

A

The 18th century in Europe marked a period of profound transformation in politics, philosophy, and society. This Age of Enlightenment fostered rational thought and critical inquiry, and literature responded accordingly. Among the most potent literary tools of the time was satire—a form of writing that used wit, irony, and exaggeration to expose and criticize societal flaws. Satire flourished during this era, particularly in Britain and France, where authors employed it to scrutinize institutions, mock human follies, and champion reform. Its popularity reflected a broader cultural appetite for commentary that was both entertaining and intellectually stimulating.

B

One of the most renowned satirists of the period was Jonathan Swift, an Anglo-Irish writer whose works exemplify the satirical genre. His most famous piece, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), operates on multiple levels—as an adventure tale, a parody of travel literature, and a scathing critique of political and social institutions. In particular, Swift used exaggeration and absurdity to ridicule contemporary politics and the pettiness of human pride. In another of his works, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), he employed shocking irony—suggesting that impoverished Irish families sell their children as food—as a biting indictment of British indifference to Irish suffering. Swift's mastery of satire lies in his ability to provoke discomfort while simultaneously entertaining his readers.

C

Across the English Channel, French literature also embraced satire, particularly through the work of Voltaire. In his novella *Candide* (1759),

Voltaire lampooned the optimism espoused by philosophers such as Leibniz, who famously claimed that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Through the misadventures of his naive protagonist, Voltaire exposed the absurdity of this worldview in the face of widespread suffering and injustice. His wit and brevity made satire a powerful vehicle for Enlightenment critique, reinforcing the idea that literature could challenge dominant ideologies.

## D

Satirical literature of the 18th century often took aim at figures of authority, including monarchs, religious leaders, and academics. In Britain, Alexander Pope used verse to satirize both literary pretension and political corruption. His poem *The Dunciad* skewered the rise of mediocrity in literary culture, while his *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* provided pointed character sketches of his contemporaries. The willingness of writers to mock those in power reflected a shifting attitude toward authority, in line with Enlightenment values of skepticism and free expression.

## E

Periodicals also played a significant role in the dissemination of satire. Magazines such as *The Spectator*, founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, blended humor with social critique. These publications reached a growing middle-class readership and helped normalize satire as a mode of public discourse. They frequently commented on manners, fashion, and urban life, often using fictional personas to disguise sharp commentary. The use of satire in journalism created a space for reflection and criticism outside traditional academic or ecclesiastical settings.

## F

Despite its critical tone, satire was not necessarily revolutionary. While many writers called for reform, they often did so from within established social structures. Satirical authors sometimes reinforced elite perspectives, mocking the lower classes or presenting reform as a return to traditional values rather than a radical overhaul. Additionally, censorship laws and social expectations sometimes forced writers to use coded language or allegory to avoid punishment, which limited the extent of their critique. Even so, satire allowed for the expression of dissent in an era when direct criticism could be dangerous.

## G

The legacy of 18th-century satire remains significant. It shaped the development of modern journalism, comedy, and political commentary. By blending literary artistry with social engagement, satirists of this period expanded the scope of what literature could do. In giving voice to discontent and poking holes in dominant narratives, satire became a means of intellectual empowerment and social reflection. While its tone varied from playful to scathing, its purpose was clear: to hold a mirror to society, exposing its flaws in the hope of inspiring change.

# Questions

## Questions 1–5

Which paragraph contains the following information?

Write the correct letter, A–G, in boxes 1–5 on your answer sheet.

1. A description of how satire used fictional personas to disguise criticism
  2. The idea that satire sometimes supported the views of elites
  3. An example of a poem that attacked poor-quality writers
  4. A famous satirical response to philosophical optimism
  5. Mention of a satirical magazine aimed at a middle-class readership
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## Questions 6–10

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the reading passage?

Write YES if the statement agrees with the views of the writer.

Write NO if the statement contradicts the views of the writer.

Write NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

6. Jonathan Swift's satire was more popular in France than in Britain.
7. Voltaire criticized the idea that suffering in the world could be justified.
8. Periodicals allowed writers to avoid censorship entirely.
9. Satirical authors never wrote about themselves.

10. Satire contributed to a broader cultural trend of questioning authority.
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### Questions 11–12

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C, or D.

Write your answers in boxes 11–12 on your answer sheet.

11. Why is *A Modest Proposal* considered shocking?
- A. It attacks the British monarchy directly.
  - B. It proposes a literal solution to famine.
  - C. It suggests an outrageous idea to make a serious point.
  - D. It mocks religion openly.
12. According to the text, what made satire a useful tool during the Enlightenment?
- A. It helped authors avoid censorship.
  - B. It made political ideas easier to understand.
  - C. It allowed writers to hide their true identities.
  - D. It combined entertainment with social criticism.
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### Question 13

What is the writer's main conclusion in this article?

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C, or D.

Write the correct letter in box 13 on your answer sheet.

- A. Satire was only a literary fashion during the Enlightenment.
- B. Satirical writing was largely misunderstood by its readers.

- C. Satire was a powerful and lasting means of critiquing society.
- D. Satirical writers were mainly concerned with humor and parody.

## Answer Key

1. E
2. F
3. D
4. C
5. E
6. NO
7. YES
8. NO
9. NOT GIVEN
10. YES
11. C
12. D
13. C