

Literary Terminology for Catch 22

Terms are bolded. All definitions come from M.H. Abrams text, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th Edition.

Absurd, Literature of the. The term is applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. Both the mood and dramaturgy of absurdity were anticipated as early as 1896 in Alfred Jarry's French play *Ubu roi* (Ubu the King). The literature has its roots also in the movements of expressionism and surrealism, as well as in the fiction, written in the 1920s, of Franz Kafka (*The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*). The current movement, however, emerged in France after the horrors of World War II, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature. This earlier tradition had included the assumptions that human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in an at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure, and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat. After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency, especially prominent in the existential philosophy of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life—in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. Or as Eugène Ionesco, French author of *The Bald Soprano* (1949), *The Lesson* (1951), and other plays in the theater of the absurd, has put it: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." Ionesco also said, in commenting on the mixture of moods in the literature of the absurd: "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision." Samuel Beckett (1906-89), the most eminent and influential writer in this mode, both in drama and in prose fiction, was an Irishman living in Paris who often wrote in French and then translated his works into English. His plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Endgame* (1958), project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life in dramatic forms that reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving plot. *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they remember that they may have an appointment; as one of them remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Like most works in this mode, the play is absurd in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic and also irrational and nonconsequential; it is a parody not only of the traditional assumptions of Western culture, but of the conventions and generic forms of traditional drama, and even of its own inescapable participation in the dramatic medium. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogue is often funny, and pratfalls and other modes of slapstick are used to project the alienation and tragic anguish of human existence. Beckett's prose fiction, such as *Malone*

Dies (1958) and *The Unnamable* (1960), present an antihero who plays out the absurd moves of the end game of civilization in a nonwork which tends to undermine the coherence of its medium, language itself. But typically Beckett's characters carry on, even if in a life without purpose, trying to make sense of the senseless and to communicate the uncommunicable. Another French playwright of the absurd was Jean Genet (who combined absurdism and diabolism); some of the early dramatic works of the Englishman Harold Pinter and the American Edward Albee are in a similar mode. The plays of Tom Stoppard, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), exploit the devices of absurdist theater more for comic than philosophical ends. There are also affinities with this movement in the numerous recent works which exploit **black comedy or black humor**: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a "tragic farce," in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd. Examples are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and some of the novels by the German Günter Grass and the Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Barth. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* is an example of black comedy in the cinema. More recently, some playwrights living in totalitarian regimes have used absurdist techniques to register social and political protest.

The term **postmodernism** is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-45), when the effects on Western morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation. Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse to the models of "mass culture" in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. Many of the works of postmodern literature—by Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Roland Barthes, and many others—so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics. And these literary anomalies are paralleled in other arts by phenomena like pop art, op art, the musical compositions of John Cage, and the films of Jean-Luc Godard and other directors. An undertaking in some postmodernist writings—prominently in Samuel Beckett and other authors of **the literature of the absurd**—is to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying "abyss," or "void," or "nothingness" on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended. Postmodernism in literature and the arts has parallels with the movement known as poststructuralism in linguistic and literary theory; poststructuralists undertake to subvert the foundations of language in order to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for a rigorous inquirer, into a play of conflicting indeterminacies, or else to show that all forms of cultural discourse are manifestations of the ideology, or of the relations and constructions of power, in contemporary society. (See poststructuralism.) For some postmodernist developments in literature, see literature of the absurd, antihero, antinovel, Beat writers, concrete poetry, metafiction.

Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual (in "personal satire"), or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even (as in the Earl of Rochester's "A Satyr against Mankind," 1675, and much of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, especially Book IV) the entire human race. The distinction between the comic and the satiric, however, is sharp only at its extremes. Shakespeare's Falstaff is a comic creation, presented primarily for our enjoyment; the puritanical Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is for the most part comic but has aspects of satire directed against the type of the fatuous and hypocritical Puritan; Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1607) clearly satirizes the type of person whose cleverness—or stupidity—is put at the service of his cupidity; and John Dryden's *276 SATIRE MacFlecknoe* (1682), while representing a permanent type of the pretentious poetaster, satirized specifically the living author Thomas Shadwell. Satire has usually been justified by those who practice it as a corrective of human vice and folly; Alexander Pope, for example, remarked that "those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous." Its frequent claim (not always borne out in the practice) has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual, and to limit its ridicule to corrigible faults, excluding those for which a person is not responsible. As Swift said, speaking of himself in his ironic "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" (1739): Yet malice never was his aim; He lashed the vice, but spared the name. ... His satire points at no defect, But what all mortals may correct.... He spared a hump, or crooked nose, Whose owners set not up for beaux. Satire occurs as an incidental element within many works whose overall mode is not satiric—in a certain character or situation, or in an interpolated passage of ironic commentary on some aspect of the human condition or of contemporary society. But for some literary writings, verse or prose, the attempt to diminish a subject by ridicule is the primary organizing principle, and these works constitute the formal genre labeled "satires." In discussing such writings the following distinctions are useful. (1) Critics make a broad division between formal (or "direct") satire and indirect satire. In formal satire the satiric persona speaks out in the first person. This "I" may address either the reader (as in Pope's *Moral Essays*, 1731-35), or else a character within the work itself, who is called the *adversarius* and whose major artistic function is to elicit and add credibility to the satiric speaker's comments. (In Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," 1735, Arbuthnot serves as *adversarius*.)

(2) **Indirect satire** is cast in some other literary form than that of direct address to the reader. The most common indirect form is that of a fictional narrative, in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous or obnoxious by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style. One type of indirect satire is Menippean satire, modeled on a Greek form developed by the Cynic philosopher Menippus. It is sometimes called Varronian satire, after a Roman imitator, Varrò; while Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 308-12, suggests an alternative name, the anatomy, after a major English instance of the type, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Such satires are written in prose, usually with interpolations of verse, and constitute a miscellaneous form often held together by a loosely constructed narrative. A major feature is a series of extended dialogues and debates (often conducted at a banquet or party) in which a group of loquacious eccentrics, pedants, literary people, and

representatives of various professions or philosophical points of view serve to make ludicrous the attitudes and viewpoints they typify by the arguments they urge in their support. Examples are Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1564), Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and other satiric fiction, and Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928); in this last novel, as in those of Peacock, the central satiric scenes are discussions and disputes during a weekend at a country manor. Frye also classifies Lewis Carroll's two books about Alice in Wonderland as "perfect Menippean satires." It should be noted that any narrative or other literary vehicle can be adapted to the purposes of indirect satire. John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* turns Old Testament history into a satiric allegory on Restoration political maneuverings. In *Gulliver's Travels* Swift converts to satiric use the early eighteenth-century accounts of voyage and discovery, and his *Modest Proposal* is written in the form of a project in political economy. ...The greatest number of recent satires, however, are written in prose, and especially in novelistic form; for example Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Player Piano* and *Cat's Cradle*. Much of the current vogue of **black humor** occurs in satiric works whose butt is what the author conceives to be the widespread contemporary condition of social cruelty, inanity, or chaos. Effective English satire has been written in every period beginning with the Middle Ages. Pieces in the English *Punch* and the American *New Yorker* demonstrate that formal essayistic satire, like satiric novels and plays, still commands a wide audience; and W. H. Auden is a twentieth-century author who wrote excellent satiric poems. American satire broke free of English in the nineteenth century with the light satiric touch of Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, the deft satiric essays of Oliver Wendell Holmes (*The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*), and above all the satiric essays and novels of Mark Twain.