



Satire, Parody, or Spoof: Types of Humorous Writing

Lesson Transcript

Learn about how writers use satire, parody and spoof to make their readers laugh and think. Explore how these forms mock the conventions of specific literary works and genres.

Satire, Parody or Spoof?

If I learned anything from my time as a wannabe humor writer, it is that writing something truly funny is hard work. Every time I tried to set up potentially funny lines or put people in humorous situations, it just wasn't that funny. What I should have done was look to the humor writers of the past and present for inspiration and much-needed guidance. By looking at how they used forms like satire, parody and spoof to great effect, I learned how humor writing works, if not how to write it myself.

Parody

One type of humor writing, **parody**, is all around us, from a fake commercial on *Saturday Night Live* to the comedian-musician Weird Al's version of the song 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll,' titled 'I Love Rocky Road.' It is no surprise then that the word parody comes from the Greek words 'side-by-side' and 'song,' with the parody intended to be compared side-by-side with the original.

In literature, a parody takes a specific work and uses the conventions it is known for to poke fun at them. Just as a parody of a commercial exaggerates the language and images of a specific commercial to advertise a fake (and often silly) product, a literary parody exaggerates the language and tone of a well-known work for humorous effect.

So if the work being parodied is an action-adventure story where the hero has a short temper, the hero in the parody might try to fight everyone he encounters, from bad guys to old ladies.

One of my favorite literary parodies is Erica-Lynn Huberty's take on the poem 'This Is Just to Say,' by William Carlos Williams. Both are quick notes of apology with short lines and simple language:

'This Is Just to Say,' by William Carlos Williams (1934)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold.

Using a very similar structure and tone as Williams, Huberty writes:

'This is Just to Say (for William Carlos William),' by Erica-Lynn Huberty (1991)

I have just

asked you to

get out of my

apartment

even though

you never

thought

I would

Forgive me

you were

driving

me insane

Huberty's parody is funny because it uses the simple style of the Williams poem, but to kick someone out of her house instead of sweetly apologizing for eating the last of the plums.

Spoof

Parody is often confused with **spoof**, which is also mocking in nature, but spoofs mock a general genre rather than a specific work of art.

For example, the 1605 novel *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, by Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, is a parody of romance novels of the time, so it's actually a spoof.

Don Quixote is a man who, inspired by books describing the chivalrous deeds of knights, decides to start protecting the helpless and taking down bad guys. This sounds nice, but Don Quixote is a bit of a fool, as we can see from this exchange with his partner, Sancho Panza:

'Look there, Sancho Panza, my friend, and see those thirty or so wild giants, with whom I intend to do battle and kill each and all of them, so with their stolen booty we can begin to enrich ourselves. This is noble, righteous warfare, for it is wonderfully useful to God to have such an evil race wiped from the face of the earth.'

'What giants?' asked Sancho Panza.

'The ones you can see over there,' answered his master, 'with the huge arms, some of which are very nearly two leagues long.'

'Now look, your grace,' said Sancho, 'what you see over there aren't giants, but windmills, and what seems to be arms are just their sails, that go around in the wind and turn the millstone.'

'Obviously,' replied Don Quixote, 'you don't know much about adventures.'

Don Quixote is so blinded by his attempts to be chivalrous that he sees danger everywhere, even windmills. With the line, 'This is noble, righteous warfare, for it is wonderfully useful to God to have such an evil race wiped from the face of the earth,' Cervantes wants his audience to see that warfare, especially in God's name, is not generally 'noble,' 'righteous' nor 'useful.'

Satire

Probably the most complex of the three types of humor writing featured here is **satire**. Satire relies on humor to criticize political, religious or moral beliefs and social mores.

The mock news program *The Daily Show* uses tools like irony and ridicule to make fun of (and even shame) both the news media and the events covered.

Satire spans a spectrum in its tone, from good-humored to withering and pointed. The 1895 play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde, is a light-hearted take on the social codes around marriage and courtship during the Victorian period. It is also considered a spoof on other comedies of manners, some of which were also written by Wilde.

Everything about the play is exaggerated and focused on appearances. One of the main characters, Jack Worthing, leads a double-life in London as a man named Ernest. Of course, Jack's superficial lady love, Gwendolyn Fairfax, is convinced she can only love a man named Ernest and he fears telling her the truth. Identities are mixed-up and misunderstandings are had, but nothing so bad it isn't wrapped up in a neat and happy bow at the end of the play.

Lesson Summary

Parody, spoof and satire are three types of humor writing that rely on literary conventions to mock those same conventions. **Parody** takes a specific literary work and exaggerates its form and language, often replacing serious subjects with silly ones. **Spoof** is where a writer takes the conventions of a well-known genre and pokes fun at them. Finally, **satire** uses ridicule,