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4 DEFINITION OF SATIRE AND IRONY: REFUSING TO STRUGGLE WITH PROTEUS

There is a long tradition in the field of satire studies to liken the act of defining satire to Menelaus's struggle to capture the ever-changing god Proteus. As Homer's *Odyssey* tells us, without pinning down the old god, Menelaus would not be able to start his journey home. Similarly, literary scholars who do not pin down the term cannot start their own explorations. Defining satire is hence a task which I myself need to perform before proceeding further. Yet, despite the fact that the simile is accurate—that proposing a universally acceptable definition of satire is as probable as exhausting the sea god of *Odyssey*—I do not intend to join the ranks of those who replicate the actions of Menelaus and make satire an unconfined and unpinnable notion. Instead, I want to side with Proteus and emulate his routine, for I believe that the act of defining satire should not be more taxing than the act of counting seals. Akin to Proteus, who tells a seal from a rock by noting familiar features, even literary scholars can follow the same routine in distinguishing satire. In this chapter, I therefore focus on the familiar features of satire as they appear in Reed's oeuvre – a critical step before attempting to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this study.

It is almost customary for satire scholars to struggle briefly with the protean simile. Leonard Feinberg, a seminal figure among them, claims that “Satire is such a protean species of art that no two scholars use the same definition or the same outline of ingredients” (vii). An equally well-respected researcher, Robert C. Elliot, uses the same idea to open his definition of satire in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in which he says that “‘Satire’ is a protean term” (qtd. in Bohnert 151). He even goes as far as to refuse to define satire in his monograph *The Power of Satire* (1960) by providing the following justification: “Satire is notoriously a slippery term, designating, as it does, a form of art and a spirit, a purpose and a tone,” which

leads him to the decision that his “use of satire throughout will be pragmatic rather than normative; that is, I will comprehend responsible uses of the term as I encounter them” (viii-ix). Similarly, Kirk Combe likens satire to “a living, omnivorous organism” which “ceaselessly moves and feeds in whatever cultural waters it swims” (“The New Voice of Political Dissent” 91). Arthur Pollard supports this notion by claiming that “the variety of satire is almost infinite” (*Satire* 3). These ideas all have in common the belief in the unbounded nature of satire. It might therefore seem that the protean simile is justified. At the same time, however, such an understanding is perhaps unnecessarily defeatist.

Given the infinite varieties of satire, it seems reasonable to go the other way and look for a more generalized definition which would not encompass just one type of fossilised satire but instead accommodate most of its living forms. Naturally, such a definition would have to be rather broad. This might be a disadvantage when defining a different term; yet, in the case of satire, I take it to be a boon. Hence, the starting point for my research is the definition by Northrop Frye, which has been used so widely that it has almost become commonly accepted:

Two things, then, are essential to satire: one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. Attack without humor, or pure denunciation, forms one of the boundaries of satire. It is a very hazy boundary, because invective is one of the most readable forms of literary art. (“The Mythos of Winter” 155-6)

Yet, unlike Frye, I’m examining here the politicised and postmodern works of a multicultural writer. I therefore do not feel constrained if the humour in Reed’s novels is not based on fantasy or the grotesque. Instead, I’m content with “humor of the widest possible variety” (Petro 8) and once it is coupled with attack, I perceive both as necessary features of satire.

Nonetheless, not even this common understanding of satire as attack plus humour is fully appropriate in the case of Reed’s oeuvre, as there are some examples which I take to be satirical yet which include no humour. I therefore need to rely on a tradition of satire which allows such occurrences still to be taken as satirical: a case in point would be Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, which very few would find humorous, but many satirical. Feinberg’s writings are also most helpful in this situation as he suggests that strict accordance to a set of rules is not necessary:

If the work we are considering has a reasonable number of resemblances to accepted satires, we are justified in calling it a satiric work. But we should never demand complete conformity to a particular type, and we should accept numerous deviations from familiar practice. (*Introduction to Satire* 18)

Bearing the above in mind, I would like to outline my definition of satire as follows: satire is a by and large a combination of any variety of humour and attack, though at times humour might be missing. Nonetheless, those examples of satire which few or none would find humorous are always accompanied with conflicting scripts. Once this definition is combined with Feinberg's notion of non-conformity to strict definitions, I believe it is suitable for a description of the evolution of Reed's satire.

This minimalist approach is based on the research of Peter Petro, who is in favour of clear and lucid definitions of satire and its subtypes. Since I find his stance on the matter essential, I quote it in full:

I do think we are dealing with a genre whose definition should be no more problematic than a definition of, say, "mathematics." In other words, both are "umbrella" terms that subsume various kinds: "mathematics" includes algebra, arithmetic, and geometry: "satire" a number of subgenres, or small genres, types, or kinds in verse or prose. Certainly, there is no problem in defining a sub-genre such as "anti-utopian" satire, and so on. The fact that it is not possible to define "satire" in a manner that would satisfy everybody would indeed seem strange to a mathematician who realizes that "mathematics" is an umbrella term. (8)

It is my conviction that Frye's modified definition of satire is the least problematic and, therefore, the one most suitable for the needs of this book.

Finally, I should also specify why such a relatively simple and clear definition was preferred over more complex ones, such as Hume's theory of family resemblance.²² As my main aim is to attempt to describe the evolution of Reed's satire, I need to be able to recognise different subtypes of satire in Reed's work. This in itself is a slippery task and I believe that Hume's definition of nine features of satire would complicate it more than necessary while not being in any way significantly better than Frye's definition, which relies on only two. As for the subtypes, I have chosen Feinberg's taxonomy of 22 subtypes of satire which he proposes in his *Introduction to Satire* (1967). This decision was made because Feinberg's system is, to my knowledge, the most thorough taxonomy of satirical sub-types in existence. Feinberg distinguishes four major techniques of satire (pretence, surprise, incongruity, and superiority) which he elaborates in further subtypes, as can be seen in the following figure.

22 Hume lists nine features whose presence in a fictional text hints at satire being at play. These are: (1) an attack on historically specific target or general human problems; (2) humour or wit which modifies the attack; (3) the author's enjoyment— or "glorying" (305)—in their literary performance; (4) a keenness for exaggeration, "extrapolation of present patterns to a more extreme future version" (305); (5) a hard kernel of moral or existential truth that readers are asked to recognise; (6) authorial malice, disgust, or righteous indignation which promotes (7) inquiry rather than condemnation; (8) the presence of a moral standard; and (9) the rhetorical aim of reforming the audience's behaviour. Hume suggests that when most of these features are present in a literary work, most readers identify the work as satire or satiric (305).

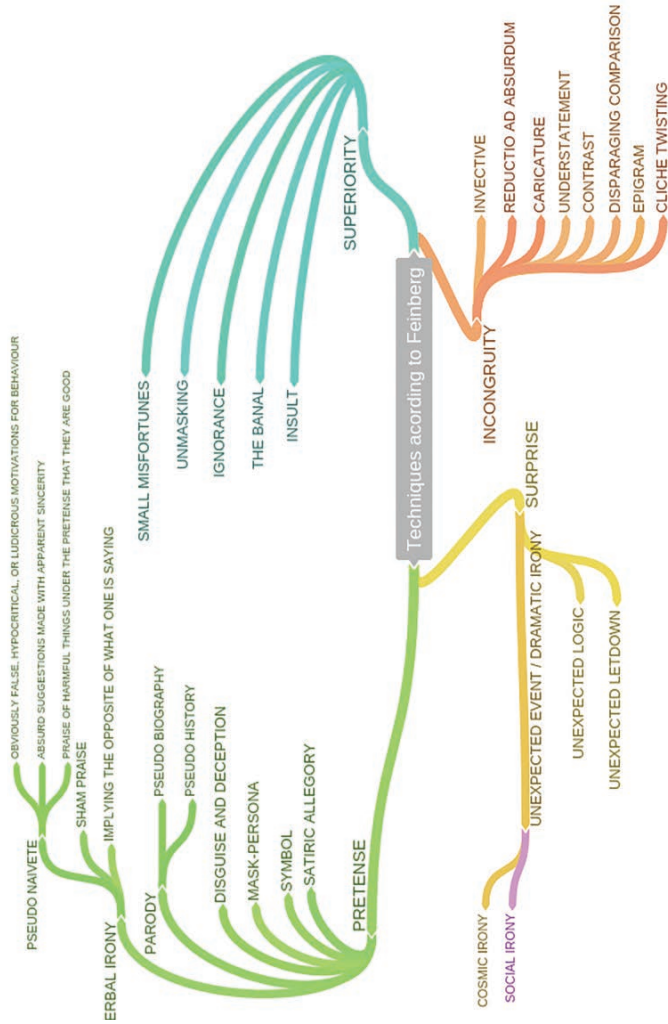


Fig. 1. Satirical Techniques according to Feinberg's *Introduction to Satire*.

Since not all of these subtypes appear in Reed's oeuvre, I will only provide definitions of those that do and I will do so chronologically as they appear in the examined novels. I would also like to clarify that this process is only applied to so-called referential episodes, i.e., to such satirical episodes that "are based exclusively on the meaning of the text and do not make any reference to the phonetic or syntactic realization of the lexical items which make up the joke" (Canestrari 328), as satire based on phonetics is rare in the examined oeuvre. Having introduced the definition of satire used in the analysis of Reed's novelistic corpus, let us now proceed to the exploration of its findings.