

### Satire Annotated Bibliography

Satire is rich with potential for social commentary, and this can largely be attributed to its versatility. It can take many forms, often bringing the issues of an institution or society to the forefront via exaggeration or sarcasm. Satire can be synthesized with several other genres, perhaps the most obvious being comedy, but thrillers and dystopian stories being just two other examples. Integrating satirical devices into another genre can not only provide social commentary, but it can also critique the genre itself. Its indirect method of critique also makes for a more creative manner of commenting on issues rather than direct criticism. For its wide range of manifestations and flexible critical ability, it is one of my favorite literary genres, but its irreverence and dark humor may alienate some readers.

I chose Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* as my canonical work because I find it to be one of the most accessible pieces of satire, and it is also one of my favorites. However, its odd plot and black comedy may still be a chore for some readers. I looked closely at the book's plot, topics of humor, and satirical critiques in order to find similar examples across the worlds of literature and film that could help readers relate to the novel.

*Breakfast of Champions'* plot employs a style of metafiction that is rather unusual, considering especially that the narrator reveals himself to one of his characters as the author of the book. This relationship between real life and that of fiction is explored in a handful of other novels and films which I explored for this connection.



Extremely sensitive topics are among those looked at through a humorous lens in *Breakfast of Champions*, such as racism, psychosis, and rape. However, although there is an air of irreverence to Vonnegut's prose, it is used as a channel for meaningful commentary. For example, Vonnegut strips down definitions of problematic subjects, exposing their absurdity without the context to dress them up as excusable. The sly criticism may sneak by readers who are offended by his direct and comedic address of such issues, however, so I looked for novels and films that use black humor clearly as a medium to make socially aware statements.

Beyond the humor, the critiques themselves may feel foreign to readers. For example, *Breakfast of Champions* uses Dwayne Hoover as a model for the embodiment of capitalistic success pushed past the brink of sanity. He also uses Hoover's literal interpretation of Kilgore Trout's novel's premise that everybody is a robot but the reader to point out the rigid social structure of the typical business workplace. For this, I found works which look satirically at the working middle class.

Satire and meta-narrative are highly effective tools for drawing connections between societal issues and fictional elements, and humor can be a cohesive bridge to provide readers an entry into them. Therefore, I will be focusing my presentation on films and novels which use these methods with great humorous and critical effects.

(\* denotes a novel I have not read)

***Adaptation*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman. Dir. Spike Jonze. Perf. Nicolas Cage, Meryl Streep, Chris Cooper. Columbia Pictures, 2002.**

Summary: Charlie Kaufman, a fictional screenwriter who is a direct projection of real life screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*.



Meanwhile, his brother, Donald Kaufman, moves in with him and pursues escapist, blockbuster screenwriting. This film is based off Charlie Kaufman's own experiences adapting *The Orchid Thief*.

Analysis: This is one of the most obvious uses of metafiction in contemporary storytelling. It satirizes the adaptation process as well as the state of Hollywood filmmaking. The film also shows the link between real life and fiction in its portrayal of real characters, including the screenwriter himself.

***A Clockwork Orange*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Malcolm McDowell. Columbia Pictures, 1964.**

Summary: A delinquent teenage boy rampages throughout dystopian Britain committing heinously violent acts with his friends. He is caught and sent to a rehabilitation center. There, they condition him into being incapable of such acts.

Analysis: *A Clockwork Orange* is a satire of the institutionalized reform placed upon criminals. It makes the statement that morality cannot be forced onto a person. The film's dystopian vision of Britain underlines dystopia as another vehicle for social commentary.

***Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick, Terry Southern and Peter George. Perf. Peter Sellers, George C. Scott, Sterling Hayden. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1971.**

Summary: A deranged general orders a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. Chaos ensues when nuclear apocalypse seems inevitable. The film depicts government officials incompetently trying to stop the attack.



Analysis: This film takes an absurd, somewhat farcical look at political affairs. This allows for commentary on the irresponsibility of governments. It is another response to real life incidents, particularly those of the nuclear scare.

***Fight Club*. Dir. David Fincher. Screenplay by Jim Uhls. Perf. Edward Norton, Brad Pitt, Helena Bonham Carter. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1999.**

Summary: A white-collar office drone with insomnia starts a "fight club" with Tyler Durden, a soap maker. Several men interested in casual fights join, and the fight clubs become a sensation, though a very secretive one. Durden's unhinged behavior contrasts the reserved nature of the narrator.

Analysis: *Fight Club* is a satire of the working middle class and masculinity. It examines the effect the traditional American trajectory has on the men who follow it. Men feel emasculated by the sterility of their positions, so they chase after masculine behavior that validates them.

***Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Screenplay by Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston, Jennifer Aniston. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1999.**

Summary: Focusing another office drone, *Office Space* takes a particularly sympathetic approach to its working class characters. Peter Gibbons is tired of his repetitive job, so he retaliates by doing no work whatsoever. He suddenly possesses the ability to rebel against his job and pursue his true desires.

Analysis: *Office Space* is hilarious in its depiction of insincere management and the frustrations felt by those subjected to it, which is a great entry point for viewers. It comments on the



reduction of working class citizens by corporations. What Peter seeks is not very far from what the characters of *Fight Club* seek, strengthening the connections between these stories.

**Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966. Print.**

Summary: A woman named Oedipa Maas inherits her ex-boyfriend's inheritance upon his death. Upon seeing what she gains, she attempts to uncover a conspiracy between two different mail companies. She embarks on a convoluted journey of unclear answers.

Analysis: Oedipa never quite figures out if there is any meaning at all in the clues she finds. Therefore, the book is underlining the human tendency to apply meaning to everything that may not have it, organizing a world full of chaos. It has a piece of meta-commentary in its suggestion that both literature and the digestion of literature are often victims of the same behavior.

**Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. N.p.: Simon & Schuster, 1961. Print.**

Summary: Captain John Yossarian and several other men are stuck serving the U.S. army in Europe. Yossarian desperately wants to go home, but several bureaucratic traps keep him there. The novel is humorous, but it gets darker as Yossarian witnesses more tragedy.

Analysis: *Catch-22* works not only as a satire of war but as a satire of bureaucracy. The synthesis of tragedy and humor, with true potency on each side, underlines the effectiveness possible when mixing the two. Also, its nonlinear plot familiarizes readers with unconventional structures.

**\*Jones, Diana Wynne. *Dark Lord of Derkholm*. New York: Greenwillow, 1998. Print.**

Summary: Tourists are able to visit a land in which several cliches of high fantasy stories are on display. One cliched character sets out to stop these tours. She stages a tour she intends to be the final one.



Analysis: The book toys with clichés, tying it in with other critiques of fictional devices such as *Adaptation*. or *The Crying of Lot 49*. It also humanizes these clichéd characters, commenting that these characters are more complex than their stereotypes suggest. Examining the effect predetermined roles have on people is not too unlike *Breakfast of Champions*' portrayal of Dwayne and his frustration with the rigidity of his social environment.

**\*Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. London: Doubleday, 2000. Print.**

Summary: *House of Leaves* is written in an intensely unconventional structure. It bends genres between horror, romance, and satire. The book's bizarre arrangement and excessive use of footnotes is a satirical look at academic criticism.

Analysis: This book outdoes *Breakfast of Champions* in its experimentation with form. However, this packs it with plenty of clear parodying of institutions the reader may recognize. Its relationship with other writing calls to mind the literary criticism I have mentioned in meta-stories like *The Crying of Lot 49* or cinematic criticism of *Adaptation*.

**Adams, Douglas. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. N.p.: Pan, 1979. Print.**

Summary: This book depicts Arthur Dent being forced by contractors out of his house. He and his friend Ford Prefect then escape alien invasion by being sent up into the galaxy. There, they meet the president of the galaxy and other eccentric characters.

Analysis: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, like *Catch-22*, satirizes the bureaucracy. Arthur Dent's removal from his home symbolizes this, likening him to Yossarian's being trapped in the war. Its use of a science fiction premise to build satire will familiarize Vonnegut's methods.



### Works Cited

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Youtube *Adaptation* links:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_HpQA3rLWw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_HpQA3rLWw)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHVqxD8PNq8>