

How to analyze a feature film

This analysis is in two parts. The first asks to describe the film itself using several reference points. The second asks you to incorporate the elements of satire you detected in the film and determine whether they worked or not.

You don't need to answer these questions as a bulleted list. They are designed to get you thinking about the film from a more organized perspective. Try to think of the film as a whole and how the elements mentioned below work together to bring out the main message of the film.

PART 1: Describe the film itself using the following guidelines:

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- What aspects of setting are we made aware of?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the film and is related to the main characters.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
 - Is it internal where the character suffers inwardly?
 - Is it external caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters are described.

- through dialogue?
- by the way they speak?
- physical appearance? thoughts and feelings?
- interaction – the way they act towards other characters?
- Are they static characters who do not change?
- Do they develop by the end of the story?
- What type of characters are they?
- What qualities stand out?
- Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Use of Symbols

Semiotic analysis is the analysis of meaning behind signs and symbols, typically involving metaphors, analogies, and symbolism. A typical feature film is full of semiotic meaning. REMEMBER: characters can also be symbols. Continuing in that vein:

- What might you be able to infer about characters from small, or even large, hints?
- How are these hints (signs) used to construct characters? How do they relate to the relative role of those characters, or the relationships between multiple characters?

Symbols also denote concepts (liberty, peace, etc.) and feelings (hate, love, etc.) that they often have nothing to do with. They are used liberally in film, and finding them uses a similar process. Ask yourself:

- What objects or images are repeated in multiple instances?
- In what context do they appear?

Now, think about the deeper meaning behind objects or actions.

- What might these symbols represent?

Context

Think about the culture, time, and place of the film's creation. What might the film say about the culture that created it? What were/are the social and political concerns of the time period?

Some other questions to consider:

- How does the meaning of the film change when seen outside of its culture?
- What characteristics distinguishes the film as being of its particular culture?

As you work through this analyses, look for the elements of satire that drive the narrative and often determine the symbols uses.

PART 2: Satirical analysis encompasses the filmic analysis noted above, but focuses on the real point of this exercise.

With that in mind, work through the following:

1. What type of satire is most present in this film? Note that both may be used, so be specific.

Horatian satire (light satire)—After the Roman satirist Horace: Satire in which the voice is indulgent, tolerant, amused, and witty. The speaker holds up to gentle ridicule the absurdities and follies of human beings, aiming at producing in the reader not the anger of a Juvenal, but a wry smile.

Juvenalian satire (dark, heavy satire)—After the Roman satirist Juvenal: Formal satire in which the speaker attacks vice and error with contempt and indignation. Juvenalian satire in its realism and its harshness is in strong contrast to Horatian satire. Often called invective satire.

2. Summarize the film—That is, describe and/or paraphrase it, briefly.
3. Who is the audience of the satire?
4. Who or what is the intended target of the satire? (a person, a group of people, an organization, an idea)
5. What issues are being exposed?
6. What elements and techniques of satire are found in the film. (see the lists below)

7. What is the overall statement the satirist is making—that is, what does the satirist want reformed?
8. Do you agree or disagree with their approach?.
9. Would you add or subtract anything from the satire to make it more affective?.

The Five Basic Elements of Satire

- **Attack/Aggression:** Satire is an attack, but usually ironic rather than direct. Direct attack, such as ridicule and sarcasm, are seldom part of effective satire. The aggression in satire is one of the reasons that it is sometimes misunderstood and rejected by readers.
- **Judgment:** once a satirist decides that something or someone is annoying or ridiculous, then they judged that person or thing to be less than the ideal and to be worthy of satire. In other words, a satirist has already passed judgment on something when they begin to create the satire. Judgments are often based on ones ideology (their belief system), ethics (how we treat each other), morality (right and wrong).
- **Play (Wit):** *Wit* is the ability to play with words in a creative, often sharp yet funny way. To combine aggression and play is paradoxical, but the two permeate satire as they do games, movies and TV programs. Elements of play animate satire and are evident in its imagery and word choice (diction).
- **Laughter (Humor):** Driven by the satirist's desire to bring about change, satire may not produce laughter as often as farce, slapstick or comedy. Irony, word play, parody and other satiric devices may prompt laughter, but sometimes the serious purpose of satire or its shocking images may not be conducive to laughter.
- **Desire to Instigate Reform (Intent):** What truly separates sarcasm from satire is *intent*. While the quick sarcastic remark might be witty and garner laughter, it may not be satirical unless the intent of the speaker is to change something that is wrong with society. In essence, the satirist does not like the way things are going and uses satire to address the issue in an indirect way yet impactful way. In order for a work to be a satire, there must be (stated) the desired goal and/or reform sought. This desired reform is traditionally expressed ironically as the opposite point of view of the speaker.

SATIRICAL TECHNIQUES

- **Parody**—A composition that imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular work, or the distinctive style of its maker, and applies the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject. Often a parody is more powerful in its influence on affairs of current importance—politics for instance—than its original composition. It is a variety of burlesque.

- **Exaggeration**—To enlarge, increase, or represent something beyond normal bounds so that it becomes ridiculous and its faults can be seen.
- **Irony**—Saying one thing and meaning another.
- **Hyperbole**—To over exaggerate the situation beyond its normal bounds, so it becomes ridiculous. Example: “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”
- **Incongruity**—To present things that are out of place or absurd.
- **Reversal**—To present the opposite of the normal order and/or the order of events, hierarchical order. Example: Fiona saves Shrek (women are supposed to be damsels, not men).
- **Sarcasm**— is stating the opposite of an intended meaning especially in order to sneeringly, slyly, jest or mock a person, situation or thing. Example: Saying “You’re welcome,” after the other person failed to say “Thank you.”
- **Juxtaposition**— an act or instance of placing close together or side by side, esp. for comparison or contrast. Example: Humanitarians—Brittney Spears and Mother Teresa
- **Double Entendre (pun)**—A play on words; a word or expression capable of two interpretations with one usually risqué. Example: In an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Marge was about to board a ship to Skull Island, Smithers said “I think women and seamen don’t mix.”
- **Understatement**—Like hyperbole, this is a type of exaggeration. Can be used to make a situation or idea seem less important than it really is. Example: There is a hurricane at your vacation home and there is most likely severe damage to the house. You say, "At least the plants will get watered."
- **Invective** – harsh, an abusive language directed against a person or a cause.
- **Antithesis** – a figure of speech with strongly contrasting words or ideas. Example: “Love is a temporary insanity curable by marriage.”
- **Caricature** – a person’s features may be caricatured. Caricature in art or in literature is an exaggerated representation of a character.