

# Tartuffe and the concept of satire essay sample



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Satire is one of the oldest tools in the literary world. This tool is designed to use slight of words to attack popular culture, politicians or royalty in an indirect way. The first golden age of satire occurred during the age of Enlightenment. It was during this time that “ people viewed the satire and saw their faults magnified in a distorted reflection; they could see how ridiculous their behavior was and then correct that tendency in themselves”. (Wheeler) This paper will examine the use of satire through language and action in Moliere’s play. The literary device was not only used to gain audience applause, but also to aid in progressing the plot in an often times socially witty or politically intriguing manner. The use of satire is the main element Moliere used in Tartuffe, and it is this literary device which will be used to analyze the play.

Though the concept reached such heights in the Enlightenment, the power of satire is not lost in today’s literary world. In most any American newspaper, one can find the presence of political satire – poking fun or alluding to contempt of the current state of the political landscape. While most satire maintains a good-natured and playful tone, it has been known to cross lines of acceptability.

Moliere’s play, written during the rule of King Louis XIV, was intended to bring attention to the forms of Christianity which Moliere himself saw as insane. Within the play, the character named Tartuffe seizes upon the desires of the character Orgon – who is seen as a traditional Christian.

The setting of Orgon’s home is an image of the idea of original sin. The way in which the home life is constructed, as well as the “ subjects” – Orgon’s

family – follow Orgon. In the Puritan view, as many in this age of France were aware of, “ original sin forced mankind to become totally depraved, and therefore subject to total authoritarian rule”. (Baker)

The first appearance of Tartuffe in the play comes in an exchange between Orgon and Dorine maid to Orgon’s daughter Mariane. In this exchange, Dorine explains to Tartuffe that her mistress has been sick with fever for several days. During this time, Tartuffe has been “ watching over her”. However his bedside manner is very unconventional; as the audience learns through the discourse. When Mariane could not eat, Tartuffe ate two portions, when she could not sleep; he slept undisturbed the entire night, and finally, when she was bled as treatment for her fever, Tartuffe “ drank four large draughts of wine at breakfast, to make up for the blood that the mistress had lost”. (I. 3)

Throughout the play, Tartuffe is placed in the position of authority figure, and respected. However, as the audience sees, his actions are meticulous and plotting. His reactions are often planned and prepared in order that other characters perceive him as he wishes. In Act III scene 2, Tartuffe notices Dorine approaching, and quickly begins speaking loudly to his servant. His dialogue is filled with religious hope for his servant – however it seems to the audience to be very insincere.

Because of the ways in which Tartuffe’s character is shown, and his implied position in the play, the audience gains insight into Moliere’s opinion on organized Christianity. As Dorine tells Tartuffe she would not be led into temptation, even at the sight of his entire naked body, while he shuttered at

the sight of her slightly exposed cleavage, it is shown that strength of personal character comes from the character itself – not religion. The satire that Moliere ends with is one that is socially revealing at the times, (the naked breast of a woman as opposed to the entire nudity of the man). Thus, the literary device of Satire is used by Moliere to prove the ridiculous nature of certain societal rules, in the face of basic human emotions, and it is this juxtaposition which reveals to the audience how unfortunate an event it is that leads human nature to be denied arousal because of the claims society has on the psyche.

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