

2022

Juvenal Essay

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Recommended Citation

Largey, Aidan (2022) "Juvenal Essay," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 8, Article 6.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol8/iss1/6>

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Juvenal (55 AD -130 AD) was a Roman satirist and polemicist. His style of satire is characterized by aggressiveness and combativeness, and these qualities can be plainly seen in Juvenal's book of polemical poems, the *Satires*. The aggressive style of the *Satires* serves as a medium through which Juvenal critiques his many targets.

A common target for Juvenal is the wealth inequality that existed in Rome at the time. Juvenal lived during the apex of the Roman Empire's power, with its territory stretching from Britain to the eastern Mediterranean. During this time, the population of the city of Rome numbered one million, the largest population a European city would attain for centuries, and the empire's wealth reached new heights. It is in this context that Juvenal published his *Satires*. In Book 1, he begins his endeavor by lamenting the dreariness of epic poetry. "Why should I always be a listener?" he asks and bemoans the various epic poems which he considers dull. He explains that, because Rome has become depraved in his eyes, he strongly believes he should produce a work that sheds light on this depravity. He writes that it's impossible for him *not* to write satire when the elites are so wealthy that "their fingers cannot endure any more jewels."¹ This obscene wealth enrages Juvenal to such an extent that it sickens him. He describes his rage "burning" his insides, and rhetorically asks "what is a disgrace if their money is safe?"² Here, Juvenal is criticizing the double standard for morality that existed in Rome. The elite and the wealthy are guilty of outrageous acts, but they do not receive proper punishment because their wealth allows them to avoid it. For Juvenal, excessive wealth goes hand in hand with immorality and corruption. The more wealth an individual has, the more immoral he is.

One of the main reasons that Juvenal abhors excessive wealth is that it deprives the poor of basic needs. In his characteristically aggressive manner, Juvenal denounces the rich as wanton gamblers who view Rome's poor with contempt. He questions whether there was ever a time in which people were greedier or more obsessed with gambling, and claims that gamblers are so wealthy that they are betting not from wallets but treasure chests. He questions, "Is it not madness to lose a hundred thousand sesterces and not give a tunic to a shivering slave?"³ A hundred thousand sesterces could give clothing, food, and shelter to great numbers of Romans in poverty, and these men are instead choosing to gamble it away. This grotesque image comprises a major motivation for the *Satires* and is one of the reasons behind the anger and the polemical

¹ Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45.

² Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 46.

³ Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 47.

style of Juvenal. His imagery, coupled with the polemic, is highly persuasive, thus demonstrating Juvenal's success as a satirist.

Juvenal's first satire is highly passionate and sets the tone for the rest of the work. According to Michael Coffey, "In a series of rhetorical questions and insistent expressions of anger Juvenal incites the audience to share his indignation ... Juvenal's listeners are appealed to as if present at the scene."⁴ It is not enough to simply express his opinion; he also wants his audience to agree with him and paints a convincing case for them to do so. The highly emotive aspect renders the polemic more convincing because it appeals to human's basic instincts. Juvenal appeals to justice by presenting Rome's wealthy as taking advantage of the lower classes by their extravagance and wantonness.

The polemical style of the *Satires* is also highly influenced by the historical context. Many of the themes Juvenal discusses relate to Domitian, the emperor considered to be an autocratic and severe tyrant. No satires were published about Domitian because the emperor controlled the Roman press. The *Satires* were published during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, two of the 'good emperors' who allowed for a freer press. Because of this, according to Kirk Freudenburg, "Juvenal, now that the terror has passed, seizes the moment ... this is satire in a time warp, making up for all the satires never written in the last twenty years or more."⁵ The satirist, by writing these satires, is bringing justice to those who were never punished during their lifetimes. The poet is punishing Domitian and his associates for the crime of corrupting Rome and desecrating the institutions important to it, such as the Senate. The polemical style of writing serves to disgrace those responsible for Rome's moral failings.

Another key argument in Juvenal's criticism of Rome under Domitian is the precedence of wealth over the gods. He says, "For we consider the greatness of wealthy most holy, even though deadly Money does not yet have a temple to live in."⁶ Here, Juvenal is attacking the materialism of the Roman elite. In prioritizing wealth over worship, they are earning disapproval and condemnation from the gods. This adds another dimension to Juvenal's diatribe against the elites. Not only is what they are doing wrong in the eyes of Juvenal, but it is also wrong in the eyes of the gods, who have much more power than a single satirist. Juvenal adds another layer of

⁴ Michael Coffey, *Roman Satire* (London, Methuen & Co Ltd., 1976), 124-125.

⁵ Kirk Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome: Threatening poses from Lucilius to Juvenal* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 214-215.

⁶ Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

gravity to the wrongdoings of Domitian and his associates by using righteous anger to criticize them.

Along with the elites, there are many other groups of people in Rome that Juvenal considers immoral. The groups that Juvenal targets in the first satire include eunuchs who marry, women who fight as hunters in the arena, teenage adulterers, and Egyptians. The commonality between them is their abnormality in Juvenal's estimation. According to Amy Richlin, "They all act in the same way and annoy the poet for the same reason: each has acted contrary to the way he or she is supposed to act. Through his bitter critique, the satirist reassures himself and his audience that they themselves are not abnormal or vicious, and are not deceived by those who are."⁷ In this way, the targets of the satire encompass two types of people: the upper class and the marginalized in Roman society. Both groups do not find into Juvenal's notions of proper Roman morality and thus are targeted with polemical satire, with the intention that the offenders will correct their behavior accordingly.

The third satire gives the reader an in-depth, inside look at urban life, and the satirist brims with anger as he relates the injustices. Among the many injustices that ordinary Romans faced is the decrepit state of the tenements and the laziness of the *vilicus*, or estate manager. Juvenal explains, "We live in a city supported for the most part by thin props. Once he covers a gaping old crack, he orders us to not worry and sleep in a collapsing building."⁸ Working class Romans are forced to live in homes that could collapse on them at any moment, and the *vilicus* is either incompetent and doesn't realize this or is simply apathetic about it. On top of this, the wealthiest of Romans are holding extravagant parties and living in the highest luxury while thousands of Romans suffer. The circumstances that Juvenal describes are enough to make anyone seethe with anger.

Juvenal's *Satires* critique the poet's main targets, excessive wealth and those who transgress his conception of morality, with a bitter and aggressive style that helps convey his message.

⁷ Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), 199.

⁸ Susanna Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 60.

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